On Schools and Cell Phones

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*Mobile devices represent a growing and complex challenge for schools.
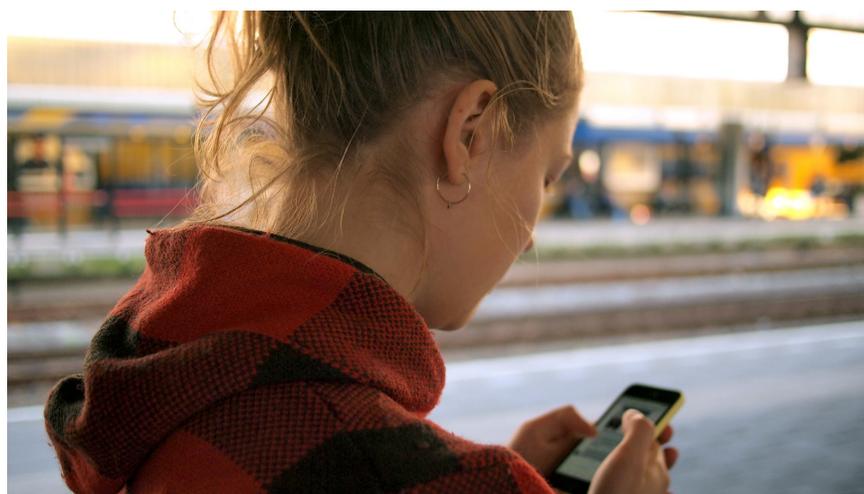What's the right approach? Here's my take.*

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A Moral Problem and Ethical Dilemma

A moral problem that confronts the middle school where I currently
teach is that of cell phone use. Despite clear rules governing their place
in the life of the school, phones occasionally distract students from
learning activities. More seriously, mobile devices have been used to
post harassing content about classmates on social media platforms,
making school spaces less safe for learners. It is this point about
student safety in particular that makes the issue morally problematic.

As France, the Canadian province of Ontario, and other jurisdictions
move to completely **ban** mobile devices from schools, teachers and
administrators at both our middle and high schools wrestle with this
question: how can we craft policies around phone use that support
learning while also protecting students? Issues of learning, privacy, and
safety all weigh heavily in this conversation.

Phones in My Context

Current guidelines at my **middle school** stipulate that students are not allowed to operate cell phones at their desks or within the school building at any time between the first and last bells of the school day. Phone use is permitted before and after the school day, but only in lobby areas or outside of the building.

It is, however, important to note that **exceptions** to the no-phones policy can be made by teachers at their discretion in reference to specific learning activities. Not surprisingly, as exceptions to the no-phones policy have increased, it has grown more difficult for administrators and other teachers to call out phone offenders during the day. As a result, phone policy enforcement in the middle school has become messier than it once was, and off-task misbehaviors involving mobile devices slowly become more commonplace.

Students at our neighboring **high school** enjoy much more phone freedom than their counterparts in the middle school. They are allowed to take their phones out during the school day, both in and out of class. Of course, teachers are still the proverbial lords of their domains and may require that all phones be put away at any time during instruction or other learning activities, but there is no universal rule that mandates their complete removal. Predictably, and like thousands of other high schools, some of our high school teachers have felt frustration over rampant phone distractions and misuse during class times.

Different Angles: Students, Parents, Teachers, and Administrators

Students, parents, and educators view these policies and issues from different perspectives. Although it would be inaccurate to paint all students with one brush, learners in middle and high school generally prefer more **phone freedom** than less. Students will point out quite rightly that phones can be powerful computing devices that can serve them well in terms of accessing information or representing learning. But it also seems clear that students appreciate the quick access to the social and entertainment features that phones provide: text messaging, social media, music, videos, and gaming.

Adding nuance and refreshing diversity to the conversation around phones this year has been a group of high school students who have

initiated their own **put-down-the-phone campaign** in an attempt to push back against screen time during lunch breaks and other social times of the day. Their efforts remind us that—despite culturally reinforced stereotypes about teenagers—high school students adopt a spectrum of positions and attitudes when it comes to this conversation.

Parent perspectives also vary on questions around student use of mobile devices. Some parents enjoy having their children within virtual reach, messaging or calling them during the school day. Others prevent their children from having phones at all. By far the most common arguments one hears from parents relates to communication needs around transportation. For children who need to stay late at the school for athletic practices or travel home by bus, many parents understandably prefer that their child have the means to communicate with them remotely.

Teacher positions vary regarding student phone use as well, ranging from senses of outrage to resigned acceptance to cautious engagement. Although many middle and high school teachers view the presence of phones in the classroom as more of a detriment than an advantage, many teachers also appreciate the access to resources and multimedia creation tools that phones contribute to the learning process. Phones facilitate representations of learning by allowing students to take pictures, record video, record voices for student podcasting, or use tools like calculators, dictionaries, language apps, math apps, the iPhone Measure app, and so on.

One question that gives teachers cause for concern around phone policies relates to **student privacy**. In contexts of phone bans and regulations, it falls naturally to teachers to do the difficult and often adversarial work of enforcement and device confiscation. Teachers who hold these expensive devices in their possession—even for short times—become vulnerable to accusations of snooping, tampering, and the like. Just as concerning, any device that is broken or goes missing while in a teacher's care may become the teacher's responsibility—a level of financial liability that could give any educator pause.

This wide range of perspectives on the part of students, parents, teachers, and administrators underscores the complexity of the cell phone problem, and a majority of schools around the globe wrestle with similar questions. As school leaders relate the factors of learning,

privacy, and safety to their core mission and values, they must decide whether some factors outweigh others. For example, as educators consider their fiduciary duty to act *in loco parentis*, should their fundamental responsibility to protect and care for the safety and wellbeing of children tilt cell phone policies inevitably toward complete bans? Broadly speaking, schools can chart **three courses** in response to this moral problem.

Option 1: Universal Bans

The first course is a universal ban on cell phones and mobile devices. Schools move to this mandate thoughtfully in some cases, swiftly in others. In some cases, a complete ban is made after careful consideration of pedagogical research pointing to the cognitive benefits of device-free learning environments. In others, bans are introduced after cyberbullying and online harassment reach such epidemic proportions that the safety of students becomes a desperate priority for the school community. Sometimes, bans are introduced in the form of a knee-jerk response intended to prove to students and parents that the school is in fact doing something and takes the learning and safety of its students seriously. At other times, bans are mandated by the governmental powers that be, leaving constituents at the local level out of the decision-making process entirely. In all cases, universal phone bans—much like zero tolerance policies around bullying—are intended to be rigid, blind, and unthinking, **eliminating shades of grey**, empowering enforcement, and clarifying compliance.

Approaches along these lines face strikingly difficult challenges. An increasing number of parents may oppose the ban on grounds of **safety and communication**, claiming that their child *must* have a phone or mobile device with which to communicate home. These are difficult claims to discount, particularly in cases where students must travel to and from school alone or at unusual hours.

From a pedagogical perspective, one might also question whether a return to the classroom of the 1980s does in fact serve and prepare today's learners in the best ways possible. Put another way, if device distraction and misuse are indeed significant issues, perhaps schools should serve as the spaces in which adolescents and young adults best learn to address them. Universal bans that prevent students from even bringing mobile devices to school appear to try to **dodge this responsibility** of teaching digital citizenship, seeking to offload the

risk and obligation to the colleges, universities, and workplaces that learners will inhabit after graduation.

Universal bans on phones may also test the climate and culture of schools, setting staff members in the place of technology police officers. If learning thrives in environments where educators are free to connect with learners in genuine, relaxed relationships, **adversarial acts** of enforcement and device confiscation may complicate these relationships considerably. Of course, levels of such antagonism would depend in large part on student buy-in, parent support, and in turn, on strong and consistent messaging from the school.

Option 2: Leave it to the Teachers

There is a second course that schools may take in response to the moral problem of cell phone use in schools. That is to officially ignore the positive and negative issues around cell phones completely, or rather to leave the matter entirely in the hands of individual teachers. In these schools, the omnipresence of technology is loosely regarded as an inevitability of the twenty-first century, and mobile phones are **ubiquitous** throughout corridors and classrooms. Teachers are free to try to enforce phone policies within the confines of their own classroom, but do so without explicit support from school leadership.

With inconsistent phone policies from classroom to classroom, teachers who wish to enforce tighter approaches to cell phone use in such schools may face hostile resistance from students accustomed to more freedom in other classrooms. Conversely, teachers who choose to allow students to use mobile devices to access resources, represent their learning, or even just listen to music may face the frustration of colleagues who see them as enablers, as merely complicating their own classroom policies. **Fractured approaches** to these contentious issues can weaken school climate and culture, encouraging divisions between colleagues and sending contradictory messages about the proper place of technology in the learning process.

Option 3: The Messy Middle Ground

A third possible course of action regarding the moral problem of cell phones may be the most challenging, but I believe it is also the most sensible and rewarding option for all involved. That is for schools to resist the implementation of a universal ban on mobile devices while

articulating an **intentional, well-reasoned, and flexible** approach to phone possession and use. Approaches in this stream of thought allow schools to clearly regulate the presence of phones in their buildings and classrooms while granting teachers and students the breathing room to realize the benefits of these powerful devices.

Yes, adopting a median position on cell phone use comes at a cost. It requires constant awareness, conversations, and **active cultivation of relationships** between students, staff, and parents. It requires a consistent articulation of the school's mission and vision as it relates to the place and roles of technology. It requires the navigation of shades of grey: circumstances and situations that demand wisdom and discretion to decipher and respond to appropriately.

It will be messy at times. Students will ignore the rules, be distracted by phones during work times, harass each other, and perhaps engage in cyberbullying. Freedoms and privileges may require renegotiation for students who fail to respect other members of the school community and demonstrate strong digital citizenship. The **safety of our learners** must remain our top priority when destructive activities appear, and the health and climate of our community will rely on our vigilance, timeliness, and the appropriateness of our responses as educators.

Mistakes on the part of students are inevitable in this middle approach to the moral problem of cell phone use, yet mistakes by students are inevitable in any situation and under any policy. **Such is the nature of education**. In our school buildings we strive to create spaces of safety: safety from abuse, bullying, discrimination, and the safety to make mistakes. If failure is feedback, if we are to learn from mistakes, surely schools must form the environments in which mistakes of all kinds can safely be made, analyzed together, and learned from. This is what growth looks like, after all.

We know that the work of educating well is challenging. There are no shortcuts or workarounds; for students to build skills, demonstrate competencies, and acquire content, we must make those **daily investments** of time and energy that are required. As schools seek to balance the priorities of student learning and safety, the conversation around these devices represents a daunting moral problem. It will require education leaders of courage and conviction to articulate a clear and balanced path forward: one that is mindful of student

welfare, protects student safety, teaches self-regulation from distraction, and capitalizes on the powerful opportunities that phones offer in terms of accessing resources and representing learning.

As my middle school confronts the moral problem that mobile devices represent, there will be calls from many sides. Tired of the perceived tensions between distraction and productivity or between harassment and collaboration, some will call for a blanket ban on phones in school. Yet this path does not serve learners best, nor does it actually represent a positive signal for the climate and culture of the school. Instead, we must keep to the middle approach: a phone policy that is intentional and flexible, one that supports ongoing awareness, engagement, and learning. It is in this messy middle space that our students will develop the digital skills and competencies to navigate **life, play, and work** at home and beyond school.

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This was an opinion piece completed for an ethics course as part of my MEdL program at Vancouver Island University.