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DEVICE POLICIES AS A TOOL TO HELP SHAPE SCHOOL CULTURE

Device Policies as a Tool to Help Shape School Culture

Spring 2025**By Eileen Fenn Bouffard, Jeremy LaCasse**

This article is part of a collection of pieces on cellphone policy and titled "Student Agency" in the Spring 2025 issue of Independent School.

The joy found in frequent in-person connections with students and faculty is part of what drew us both to working in residential boarding school environments. Community happens at meals, in classrooms, on game days, in performances, and during quick hallway conversations or when grabbing a cup of coffee in the dining hall. But since the post-COVID return to "normalcy," we noticed that the quality of these interactions was markedly eroding. And we knew smartphones had something to do with it.

At The Taft School (CT), we had limited guidelines around smartphone use. Students were expected to leave their phones by the door in a designated bin or hanging holder upon entering a classroom. There was no clear guidance about smartphones during transition times and at meals. When students could have some agency during their day, they were immediately choosing to turn to their smartphones. Students even told us that they knew their smartphone use was problematic, but many of them felt trapped by their need to be constantly connected. We realized we weren't doing enough to change course.

We were well aware of all the research showing how devices are not only distracting but damaging, and many of our peer schools had used smartphone bans to what they reported was good effect. Students who have experience with bans or device limits say they appreciate being set free from the lock smartphones and social media have on their lives. When everyone is released simultaneously, the break from the virtual connection offers an opportunity to create meaningful real-world connections. With this knowledge, we wanted to come up with a plan that would empower students to reconsider how smartphones impacted our communal spaces and experiences. Our school's smartphone policy has become a key lever for changing the interactive dynamic within the school community and for underscoring the power of collective action.

Managing Change

In fall 2024, we rolled out a policy that requires boarding students to leave their smartphones in their rooms and day students to leave them in their lockers for the full academic day. If faculty

members observe any student on a smartphone during this period, they will take the device to the Office of Student Life for the student to pick up at the end of the school day.

This has been a big shift for our school community. As any leader knows, a dictate is often met with resistance, and we thought a lot about how we could build a collaborative sense about the need for change across colleagues, students, and families. How quickly could we change and bring as much of the community along as possible?

We took to heart the words of Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu who said, "To lead people, walk beside them. As for the best leaders, the people do not notice their existence. The next best, the people honor and praise. The next, the people fear; and the next, the people hate. When the best leader's work is done, the people say, 'We did it ourselves!'"

We worked to figure out how we could "walk beside them" to determine what each group needs and, ultimately, to help create leaders of each group so that the group feels that the work and the outcomes are theirs. As part of our initial launch, a few student leaders put together a marketing campaign and talked about the policy and how they hoped it would positively impact the experience of all students. Their actions moved the nexus of the implementation in many ways from adults to students.

At the same time, faculty engagement with this policy has been high; at faculty orientation, we practiced having challenging conversations with students, and the new smartphone policy was addressed during this time. In this way, the policy feels like a real community endeavor. Since we enacted it, no more than 10 students per day have violated the rule.

We have also observed productive shifts in how students use their time as well as communal spaces. Students in our Media and Identity course, a senior English elective, confirmed these impressions. This essential question guides the course: "How does my digital device use shape my experience and perspective?" Students reported that this year they have noticed longer and better conversations over lunch as well as more of their peers using common spaces in dorms. Friend groups have volunteered to give up their phones for longer stretches of time by opting to leave their devices for multiple days in the Office of Student Life. We've observed that students seem to be more willing to engage in face-to-face interactions with like-minded peers during their free time—and we've seen a significant jump in the number of clubs formed on campus.

Empowering Students

After the first semester with this new policy, we realize that we have to further engage students in becoming agents in their own experience. We must empower them to ask what they want to do with this newfound understanding, time, and space. We need to help students learn to re-create the pre-digital types of interactions where they get to make decisions with reasonable downsides and learning opportunities. In fact, on a recent Saturday night, students were given the option to leave their smartphones with the administrator on duty; this was well-received by students, and we will continue these efforts into the spring term.

Education and social media have very different goals, but each seeks to engage student attention through an intentionally designed experience. As educators, we are charged with bringing students to experiences where their attention is invested in durable and meaningful learning and not just in the dopamine rush that follows hours of scrolling. While removing

smartphones from the school day is a start, we must also consider how we will evolve the educational experience of all students to enhance learning and best direct their attention.

Time and attention, even more than money and facilities, are our most valuable resources for student learning.

Eileen Fenn Bouffard

Eileen Fenn Bouffard, Ed.D., is the director of teaching and learning and chair of the English department at The Taft School in Watertown, Connecticut.

Jeremy LaCasse

Jeremy LaCasse is executive director of The Gardner Carney Leadership Institute and is currently assistant head of school for student life at The Taft School.

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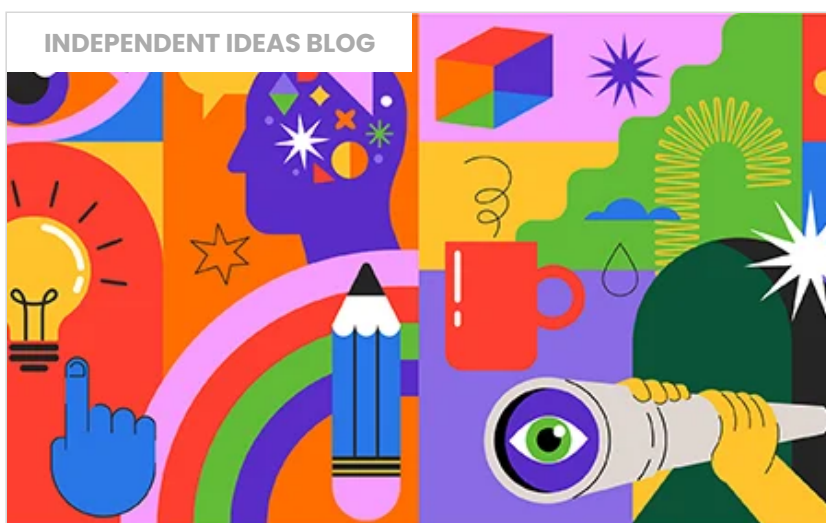
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