

ED-TECH POLICY

What Schools Look Like Without the Cellphone Distraction



By [Olina Banerji](#) — February 04, 2025 | Corrected: February 05, 2025 ⌚ 7 min read



— Dobrila Vignjevic/E+

Corrected: A previous version of this article incorrectly identified where Middleburgh Jr./Sr. High School is located. It is in New York.

Timothy Callahan knew his colleagues at the North Adams school district in Massachusetts were nervous about banning cellphone use in their schools. But Callahan, an assistant superintendent at the district, was confident there'd be a “reasonable” improvement in student discipline if they implemented the ban well.

But even Callahan couldn't have predicted what the data showed.

“A 10 percent reduction would've been a win,” he said. “We saw a 75 percent drop in referrals in the last quarter of the 2024 school year, compared to the same quarter the previous year. It's almost completely attributable to the cellphone ban and [the use of] pouches,” which hold students' devices during the school day.

Issues such as students skipping class or detention, or being out of class without permission, have also reduced “massively,” Callahan said. So have safety violations, like roughhousing and verbal altercations that escalate into fights.

Callahan credits this improvement in behavior to students spending far less time on their phones, sharing plans to cut class or meet in the hallways. They're also less distracted and more tuned into what teachers are saying, he said.

“Teachers report that they are getting through their material quicker and able to incorporate more long-term assignments in their classes,” Callahan said.

Nationwide, educators and mental health experts have largely deemed cellphones a threat to student mental health and safety. Some teachers have even quit the profession because of their students' overreliance on the devices. Unmitigated access to social media and emerging technology—like “deepfakes” generated by artificial intelligence—raise concerns, too, about how students can use these tools against their peers and educators.

These concerns haven't gone unheard. At least 19 states have laws or policies that ban or restrict students' use of cellphones in schools statewide or recommend local districts enact their own bans or restrictive policies, according to an Education Week analysis.

About a half-dozen district and school leaders told Education Week that the initial student-discipline data recorded after these bans or restrictions were put in place is encouraging. Administrators have reported reductions in cellphone infractions (where students are caught using their phones during instructional periods), instances of verbal and physical aggression, and other disciplinary issues.

An informal poll of school leaders in Education Week's Savvy Principal newsletter indicated that 62 percent believe student behavior has improved after their school put cellphone restrictions in place.

Many leaders said their students, albeit grudgingly, agree they are less distracted and more engaged in their classes without cellphones.

“They get less riled up about things,” Callahan said. “They’re less obsessed about what everybody else is doing. And they’ve articulated that they don’t feel like they’re as much under attack as they were when they had cellphones in their pockets.”

Parents have gotten on board, too. Often, parents tend to oppose cellphone restrictions in schools, [citing safety concerns](#). The leaders interviewed for this story faced similar concerns but were able to convince parents that no cellphones meant a “distraction-free environment” where students would thrive. Sharing the positive data on discipline and engagement with parents has helped.

Educators see fewer disciplinary issues after cellphone bans are put in place

Better behavior in and out of classrooms can be a gateway to other positive changes.

The Bentonville district in Arkansas piloted a cellphone ban in one of its high schools in 2023. At the end of the pilot, a survey of teachers showed that 86 percent perceived an improvement in student engagement from the 2022-23 to the 2023-24 school year, 75 percent perceived increased socialization within the classroom, and there was a 57 percent reduction in verbal- and physical-aggression offenses, said Superintendent Debbie Jones.

Jones also pointed to a 51 percent decrease in drug-related offenses, which she believes is a direct result of the cellphone ban. Students used to coordinate exchanging drugs over the phone, she said.

“Almost every disciplinary infraction begins with the phone,” she said.

After the pilot’s results, Jones enacted a districtwide policy banning cellphones across all schools: From kindergarten through 8th grade, students aren’t allowed to take their cellphones out during the school day; from grades 9 through 12, they have to keep the phones switched off and stored away. The phone is taken away if a student uses it during instructional time.

David Moore, the superintendent of the Indian River County district in Florida, said the most significant impact of a districtwide cellphone ban has been felt in his middle schools. Moore

implemented the ban—which prohibits elementary and middle school students from using their phones at all and high school students from using their phones during class—at the beginning of the 2023-24 school year.

Cellphone bans can lead to improvements in student behavior

School and district leaders who have implemented cellphone bans and restrictions shared their student discipline data.

NAME OF SCHOOL DISTRICT	INCREASE	DECREASE
Bentonville School District, Arkansas (Time period: Changes observed between the 22-23 and 23-24 SY)		
Teachers' perceptions of student engagement	86%	
Drug-related offenses		51%
Verbal or physical aggression offenses		57%
Indian River County School District, Florida (Time period: Changes observed between the 22-23 and 23-24 SY)		
Fights and violent altercations		14%
Disciplinary issues (middle school)		9%
Cellphone infractions		31%
North Adams Public Schools, Massachusetts (Time period: Changes observed between April-June quarter of the 22-23 SY and April-June quarter of the 23-24 SY)		
Disciplinary referrals		75%
Ridley School District, Pennsylvania (Time period: Changes observed since Nov. 1, 2024)		
Disciplinary referrals (high school)		35%
Suspensions (high school)		30%

SOURCE: Education Week reporting



“Middle school [cellphone use] was our biggest problem,” Moore said. “There was a 14 percent decrease in fights from this exact time this year in comparison to last year.”

Before the cellphone ban, students would cyberbully each other, take teachers’ pictures without permission, and manipulate those images by putting their heads on a different body. All that activity within the confines of the school has stopped, Moore said.

In the first year of the ban, 42 students were sent to an alternative school because they couldn't comply with the district's cellphone policies after at least four warnings and other consequences. So far this school year, Moore said, no students have been sent to the alternative school.

That statistic, Moore said, shows "how bad it was in terms of certain students being so addicted to being on their phone that despite the consequences, they just continued to take it out."

Middleburgh Jr./Sr. High School in New York implemented its restrictions on cellphones two years ago. As principal, Matthew Sloane initially faced pushback from some students who got straight As but felt they were being punished by the new cellphone ban.

"I asked those same students, 'How do you feel every time a teacher has to stop your class to tell your classmates to put their phone away?'" Sloane said. That logic worked with the students.

In addition to fewer cyberbullying and disciplinary issues in school, Sloane noticed something else: As students started to pay more attention in class, teachers had to redo their lessons to make them more interactive. Students now express if they're bored and want the lesson to be more engaging, he said.

Cellphone bans can be a leap of faith. Educators say they're worth the jump.

The best way to get a ban or a policy to stick is to implement it districtwide and have clear consequences etched out, said Jones of the Bentonville, Ark., district. It can't be left up to individual schools or teachers to implement their own cellphone policies, she added.

Bentonville has set up a strict code of conduct around cellphones: Once students are at school, they must either store their cellphones in Yondr pouches or have them on silent mode in their bags.

If a student is found violating the policy, a series of consequences kick in that range from confiscating the phone to an in-school suspension. Educators must strictly adhere to that plan so students know exactly what they're in for if they continue to take out their cellphones, Jones said.



Almost every disciplinary infraction begins with the phone.

Debbie Jones, superintendent of the Bentonville, Ark., school district

Without a clear districtwide policy in place, dealing with cellphones is an uphill battle for teachers. The North Adams district, for example, initially only asked students to put their phones away during their classes; they could still use them in the hallways or during lunch. That often led to a “power struggle” between teachers and students, Callahan said.

Some teachers would be stricter about students pulling out their phone and demand they hand it over, while others would be more lenient—which meant there was no consistent deterrent. Callahan said the district even tried an “intermediate” step of giving each teacher a set of lockers for their classrooms. If they found a student using their phone, they could confiscate it till the end of the period.

“We probably spent \$5,000 on them. Ended up having no impact at all,” Callahan said. Teachers still had to get involved and enforce the policy on their own.

Now, according to the new rules, teachers can just alert a dean or the principal if they spot a student using a cellphone. The phone will be taken away until the end of the day.

If a student refuses to comply, they’re escorted out of class. In case of a second-time violation, parents must sign a document to get the phone back.

Callahan said since the policy of no cellphones during the school day went into effect, cellphone infractions have risen marginally to four or five offenses per day, but he expects those to drop over time as students get used to the new rules.

Leaders hope these initial changes in students behavior stick. Some are keen to see kids build on the “freedom” they have from texting and being hooked to social media.

Jones said cellphones in school bred too much dependence on parents, inhibiting students from independent thinking and figuring stuff out on their own.

“You forgot your lunch? Well, go ask someone what you can do about that,” she said. “[They need] to have the ability to solve problems. That’s critical.”



Olina Banerji

Staff Writer, Education Week

Olina Banerji is a reporter for Education Week who covers school leadership.

Reprints, Photocopies and Licensing of Content

All content on Education Week's websites is protected by copyright. No part of this publication shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic or otherwise, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Readers may make up to 5 print copies of this publication at no cost for personal, non-commercial use, provided that each includes a full citation of the source. For additional print copies, or for permission for other uses of the content, visit www.edweek.org/help/reprints-photocopies-and-licensing-of-content or email reprints@educationweek.org and include information on how you would like to use the content. Want to seamlessly share more EdWeek content with your colleagues? Contact us today at pages.edweek.org/ew-for-districts-learn-more.html to learn about how group online subscriptions can complement professional learning in your district or organization.



Copyright © 2025 by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc. All rights reserved.