

Lock 'em up

Storing cellphones in classrooms is a smart way to improve performance.

Educators and researchers say there's an inverse relationship between students' grades and cellphones in the classroom. The easier it is for students to access their phones during class, the lower their grades tend to be. It's only logical that any distractions introduced into a learning environment yield less learning. During exams, cellphones are an invitation to cheat.

School administrators absolutely should take a hard line on any cell-phone use during class time and empower teachers to discipline students who violate a strict no-access code. Class time must be for learning, not playing video games, texting, posting on social media or watching lurid videos.

That said, compassionate solutions are available that stop short of confiscating phones and citing students for repeated infractions. As the Post-Dispatch's Blythe Bernhard reported, a Hazelwood high school teacher has devised a way to help students break the cellphone habit while protecting schools and teachers from many of the aggravations and potential liabilities associated with confiscating phones.

Some St. Louis-area schools have been reluctant to empower teachers to seize contraband cellphones for fear of liability claims when phones are broken or lost. Some students, such as those from poor families living in violent neighborhoods, say they need to be within easy contact with parents in case emergencies arise.

But teachers say unfettered access during class time produces nothing but

distractions. Rules that allow phones to be stored inside a purse or backpack tend to be useless. A student inevitably pulls out a phone for a sneak peak when the teacher isn't looking. Surrounding students tend to direct their attention away from the teacher and toward the student with the phone. Other students will stop what they're doing and gather around the one with the phone, or they'll pull out their own phones to visit the same site. Teachers must spend valuable time trying to get students back under control.

Hazelwood high school art teacher Bill Henricks developed a cellphone locker system, which allows students to lock up their phones in clear plastic boxes that can only be unlocked by a remote under the teacher's control. Students he talked to described their phones as having almost irresistible, addictive qualities. When a phone buzzes or vibrates, they feel they have to look if it's in their possession. When they know it's out of their control and they cannot access it, the temptation dissipates and focus returns to the lesson at hand.

University City High School, which ranks among the lowest in the region for academic proficiency, is the first to put Henricks' invention to the test in classrooms teaching core subjects. Administrators are watching to see if classroom performance ticks upward as a result. If it yields the positive results we think it will, phone lockers should be expanded beyond core-subject classrooms so all teachers, regardless of subject, can have their students' undivided attention.



University City High junior Kenwyn Jones locks his cell phone at the beginning of AP language class on Sept. 19.

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CELLPHONES DOWN, ATTENTION UP



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Students at University City High retrieve their cellphones after their AP English class on Sept. 19. Teacher Christina Sneed unlocked them using a remote. The school installed 250 Phone Locker devices in 13 classrooms, and will track whether the lockers make a difference on test scores and grades.

BY BLYTHE BERNHARD
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

UNIVERSITY CITY — High school art teacher Bill Henricks says cell phones have caused the biggest disruption in classrooms in his 24 years in education.

His students at Hazelwood East High School could not stop looking at their phones, even if they were in their backpacks or pockets. The lure of the

Schools try to balance students' learning and technology

beep or the buzz was too strong.

In 2017, Henricks taped a box to each of the seven tables in his classroom for students to put away their phones during class time.

"If they cannot touch their phone, they don't think about it that much," Henricks said. After a year and a half of using the boxes, students' grades went

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Phones

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up, and discipline actions went down. "My students did a 180. I had their attention."

Along with two engineers, Henricks started a company and developed a more high-tech version of his box. This fall, University City High School became the first school to purchase and install the Phone Locker.

About 80% of U.S. schools have some type of cellphone policy, according to a national survey of 1,200 teachers released earlier this year by the nonprofit Common Sense Media. But as more students carry their own phones, the percentage of school districts with total bans has dropped from more than 90% in 2010 to about 66% in 2016, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Cellphone policies have been a "work in progress," said Trisha Crenshaw, associate principal for student affairs at Nerinx Hall. This year, the all-girls Catholic high school loosened its rules when it found students were sneaking onto their phones in class under a total ban during school hours. Teachers' class time increasingly was spent scolding students caught with their phones.

Now students can use their phones before school, after school, in a 9:40 to 10:15 a.m. activity time and in the cafeteria during lunch.

There have been fewer detentions this year because of cellphone violations, Crenshaw said. Students have been happier with the increased access to phones.

"We want to protect the academic time but also have balance," she said.

Playing cards

Aside from the discipline issue, cellphone rules have been in flux because parents want to be able to contact their children at all times. School officials don't want to be held liable for confiscated phones. And some classes have incorporated phone apps into their lessons, like making movies or tracking homework.

A decadelong ban on cellphones was lifted in 2015 for New York City's 1.1 million public school students. The ban had been unevenly enforced, with punishment more likely for students in schools with metal detectors. Now principals can determine their own policies.

Still, some schools are moving the other way. In the last few years, middle schools in Highland



Junior Kenwyn Jones locks his cellphone at the beginning of AP English class at University City High School on Sept. 19.

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and Collinsville banned cellphone use on campus. The U46 School District in Chicago's northwest suburbs instituted a ban on cellphones this year and installed \$15 phone holders in 1,000 classrooms.

Under a new rule this year at Westminster Christian Academy in Town and Country, students are allowed to carry phones but cannot turn them on during school hours.

Barrett Mosbacher, Westminster's head of school, said the difficulty in enforcing a cellphone ban should not be a reason to drop it.

There were three reasons for enacting the new ban, Mosbacher said — to encourage deep thinking in classrooms with minimal distractions, to promote personal connections and to help students develop healthy relationships with technology.

The response has been overwhelmingly positive, at least from teachers and parents, Mosbacher said. Students are less enthralled with the ban, he said, but understanding the benefits.

"When I walk in the cafe now,

they're talking, laughing, playing cards and board games," Mosbacher said. "The entire school culture has been elevated and is much more positive."

As more schools outfit their students with laptops or tablets, the academic argument for cellphones in class has weakened. Research showed college students whose cellphones were taken away performed better on a test compared to those who could use or keep their cellphones, according to a 2017 study in the journal *Applied Cognitive Psychology*. Another study found that overall cellphone use, not just while in school, corresponded to lower grade-point averages.

Reduced distractions

Before the lockers were installed at University City High, cellphone use in class was the leading complaint from teachers. This year, student discipline referrals by mid-September dropped to 29 from 188.

The University City School District paid Henricks' company

Jordiam LLC \$40,000 to install 250 devices in 13 classrooms. The money came from a \$400,000 federal grant to the high school to improve academic outcomes. The school also will collect data to try to determine whether the lockers make a difference on test scores and grades. English and math classrooms were prioritized, because those subjects are part of most standardized tests. If the pilot project is successful, the school hopes to expand the lockers to every classroom.

English teacher Christina Sneed said that before the lockers, she tried to collect students' phones in a desk drawer during class. But students worried the phones would get cracked, mixed up or stolen and often wouldn't turn them in.

"Last year it was a tug of war, a power struggle with students who aren't able to regulate their actions," Sneed said.

Now, Sneed can control the individual lockers by remote control. Students know their phones are safe, and they're better able to

concentrate, she said.

Tiffanie Thomas, whose son is a sophomore at University City High, bought him an iPhone this year so they could stay in touch about after-school activities. Her main concern with the phone was about the potential distraction in class.

"He's an easily distracted kid, and with the cell phone locker I really think it's helping," she said.

Principal Mike Peoples said he also hopes the cellphone lockers help students develop their "soft skills" — making eye contact, and having face to face conversations and meaningful interactions with other students and staff.

Last year, sophomore Victoria Trice perked up every time she heard her phone vibrate in her backpack. The cellphone lockers have helped break that automatic response, she said.

"Now I don't know if I get any alerts, so I just focus on my work."

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