

## American parents want their children to have phones in schools

“It’s like they don’t trust us,” says Eva King, a 14-year-old pupil at Alice Deal Middle School in Washington, dc. She is standing outside the school during dismissal with two others who nod their heads and laugh in agreement. Deal’s administration has banned mobile phones during the entire school day. Pupils must store their devices inside Yondr pouches, grey padded cases that supposedly can be opened only with a special tool. The adults unlock the pouches with special magnets as pupils leave for the day.

Unsurprisingly, pupils have hacked the system. (...) The girls recite a list of workarounds. (...) The girls say that since phones have become a forbidden fruit, pupils only crave them more. They hope their school will reverse course after the summer break.

Debates about teenagers’ access to phones and their use in schools have heated up lately. Some state legislatures in America are passing laws to stop phones from being used in classrooms, without removing them from schools altogether. A popular book published in March, *The Anxious Generation*, by Jonathan Haidt, has called fresh attention to evidence that social media, mostly accessed through smartphones, may be to blame for a sharp rise in anxiety, depression and self-harm among young people today.

Some researchers are unconvinced that phones are causing mental illness. Although America and Britain have reported a rise in problems as social-media use has surged, not all rich countries have had similarly correlated increases. (...)

Most parents want their children to have phones available at school. In February the National Parents Union, an advocacy group, polled 1,506 public-school parents and found that a majority think that pupils should be allowed to use phones during free time. Larry McEwen, a parent at Deal and the school’s basketball coach, agrees. He thinks pupils should have phones for emergencies. He and Eva King cited a lockdown last year at a nearby school because of a gun scare. That was when having phones came in handy.

The devices are plainly disruptive. Pupils can receive more than 50 notifications during a school day, according to a study of 203 children by Common Sense Media, a non-profit group based in San Francisco. Teachers complain that pupils watch YouTube and use other apps in class. Phones can be instruments of bullying, and pupils have been secretly recorded while using the toilets or undressing in locker rooms. These days, the notorious schoolyard fight can be organised by phone.

It is also clear that mobile phones can undermine learning. Several studies have found that their use decreases concentration in school, and the phones do not only affect the user. (...)

An all-day ban is one way to avoid this, but as Deal’s pupils can testify, it is also difficult to enforce. (...)

New state laws seek to enforce phone-free classrooms while also keeping pupils and parents connected. Florida’s governor, Ron DeSantis, signed a law last year that bans the use of mobile phones by pupils in class, and a similar law in Indiana is due to go into effect in July. Other states are considering bills along the same lines. These moves are distinct from the more ubiquitous push for legislation aimed at protecting children from social media (according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 30 states and Puerto Rico are debating laws designed to protect children on the internet). (...)