

New York City Students Welcome End of Cellphone Ban in Schools

By Leslie Brody and Sonja Sharp

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New York City students welcomed Wednesday's announcement of the demise of a long-standing ban on cellphones in schools—while admitting many had ignored the rules anyway.

Outside Brooklyn Technical High School, several students said they carried phones so their parents could contact them in emergencies, and that some teachers were tolerant as long as they kept them tucked away and silent.

Anii Hossain, a junior with a Minnie Mouse phone, said she has gotten in trouble for having it out in the hallway and texting friends. "Everybody has their cellphones," she said. "You'll see cellphones getting taken away at least three or four times a day."

Mayor Bill de Blasio said he was fulfilling his campaign promise to lift the ban by having all public schools allow students to bring phones—with some restrictions—as of March 2. He said the prohibition was out of touch with the realities of modern child-rearing, and parents have a right to reach their children by phone.

Chancellor Carmen Fariña said principals will work with faculty and parents to develop rules for appropriate use and storage of phones in school, along with warnings that abusing the devices could lead to their confiscation.

"Our challenge is to make sure students understand that this is a privilege and not a God-given right," she said. "They use it properly, or else."

Some principals have been leery of allowing cellphones in schools because of the risk they might be stolen or used for cheating, inappropriate photo snapping and cyberbullying.

New York City Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña. Keith Bedford for *The Wall Street Journal*
Ernest Logan, president of the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators, said principals' priority was educating students in a safe and secure environment. "We hope these new policies do not undermine that goal," he said by email.

Some teachers say phones should be kept outside of school because they are so distracting. One Manhattan high-school teacher, who declined to be identified by name, said her school hadn't enforced the ban for years and it was very hard to police phones' proper use.

"The kids are constantly texting on them under their desks," she said. "We have to be like the FBI... Teachers are very frustrated over it."

Chancellor's regulations first banned electronic devices in 1988 and former Mayor Michael Bloomberg bolstered them in 2005. At the time, police authorities worried that having access to phones during school hours would make it easier for gang members to coordinate.

On Wednesday, some parents said it took too long to eliminate the ban. For years, districts of all sizes across the country—from Anchorage, Alaska, to Detroit to Orlando, Fla.—have allowed students to bring cellphones, in some cases even encouraging them with a “BYOD” slogan for “Bring Your Own Device.”

Many teachers embrace using phones in class to conduct quick surveys, serve as calculators or access the Internet. Now there are phone apps that let students connect with interactive whiteboards at front of the classroom.

To some critics, the phone ban had become an equity issue. While children in high-violence areas faced metal detectors that found their phones, students in more affluent areas could easily skirt the rules. Businesses cropped up in poor areas for storing devices near campus, often for about a dollar a day.

Melvin Brown, 15, is a sophomore at Boys and Girls High School in Brooklyn. Every day, he pays to have his phone stored at a nearby deli grocery to avoid having it confiscated by his school’s administration. At Boys and Girls High School, a chronically low-performing school in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, each of the building’s academies handled the ban a bit differently.

Outside Boys and Girls, Carrie Holmes, a 19-year-old senior, gave her cellphone a last furtive glance outside the neon green doors of the school before heading to class Wednesday. She said the administration collected student phones daily upon arrival and returned them at dismissal.

Ms. Holmes said barring phones during the day had been largely positive because “it helps the kids focus more.”

Yin Cherd, a mother in Jamaica, Queens, said she would worry about her children if they didn’t have phones.

“When my daughter gets off of school I want to text her and she texts me,” she said. “High-school students should have cellphones, as long as they don’t call during class.”

Department of Education officials said if the Panel for Educational Policy approves lifting the ban as expected on Feb. 25, cellphones will be allowed in all schools beginning March 2. As part of the change, officials said, schools will increase training to prevent cyberbullying, including a “Misuse It, You Lose It” policy.

The chancellor said schools, in drafting their own rules, could allow students to use phones only during certain times and in certain locations. If schools don’t devise a system, the default policy would let students bring cellphones into the building, but require them to be stored out of sight during the academic day. All cellphones will be prohibited during exams.

Lucia Paz, a 14-year-old freshman at Brooklyn Tech, said some students will likely break whatever limits are set. “At lunch I’ll just play music,” she said. “It’s like a relaxer for me sometimes.”