

With School Ban Nearing End, New York City Works on How and When to Allow Cell Phones

By Motoko Rich and Kate Taylor

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As New York prepares to lift its longstanding ban on cellphones carried by students in schools, it joins an increasing number of cities, including Chicago and Miami, where school leaders are yielding to the ubiquity of mobile phones and the futility of trying to keep them out of the classroom.

In an era when many parents want constant access to their children and students live in a digital social milieu, banning cellphones from schools is increasingly seen as counterproductive. And teachers are experimenting with technology and finding that the miniature computers many students carry in their pockets can be valuable classroom tools.

Schools are trying out various policies, with some permitting students to use their phones only during breaks or at lunch. Others are encouraging students to bring cellphones to school, where teachers invite them to conduct web searches or view educational videos. Even in districts with bans in place, educators realize they cannot stop students from using their phones.

“I don’t think it’s going to be very long before it becomes very standard” for schools to allow all students to carry cellphones, said Daniel A. Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators. “I think the horse is pretty much out of the barn in general.”

In New York, after years of tolerating a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy in some schools while practicing strict enforcement in others, the Education Department is working out the details of how and when to allow phones in schools.

Mayor Bill de Blasio made a campaign promise to roll back the ban and affirmed it this fall. “It is, for parents, very, very important to know how to reach their kids,” he said, noting that his own son, Dante, is allowed to carry a cellphone at Brooklyn Technical High School. “And we have to come up with a universal way to make sure that that opportunity is there for our young people.”

Schools that let students use cellphones face many challenges. Many parents are concerned about a rise in cyberbullying. Policing the use of cellphones can become another pesky task for teachers. And schools fear that students will use their phones to cheat, as was the case in a scandal at Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan two years ago.

Children and teenagers are also easily sidetracked by texting, games, and social media. Cellphones “could serve as a distraction, and I think that’s what a lot of educators worry about,” said Seung Yu, principal at the Academy of Software Engineering, one of several schools housed in the Washington Irving High School building near Gramercy Park in Manhattan.

The Education Department was ready to lift the ban a month ago, but the principals' union, the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators, pushed back with concerns that cellphones would be lost or stolen. It was also concerned about students' using the phones to arrange fights, or to record videos of students or teachers and post them on social media. Department officials decided to postpone the change until they could work out more details.

Some education experts say schools have a responsibility to help students learn self-control over devices that will be integral to the rest of their lives.

"Did kids never doodle in the columns of their textbooks and always pay rapt attention to their teachers?" said Sylvia Martinez, former president of Generation YES, a nonprofit group that helps schools integrate technology, and co-author of "Invent to Learn: Making, Tinkering, and Engineering in the Classroom." "Blaming the cellphone or laptop for kids being distracted is kind of silly."

Administrators acknowledge that banning cellphones can actually create discipline problems. In Chicago, where individual principals set cellphone policies, the district changed its citywide policy regarding suspension this year to differentiate between social and disruptive uses of mobile phones. Before the policy change, a student who used a mobile phone at all in school could be suspended. In New York, Ron Gorsky, who recently retired as the principal of Concord High School on Staten Island, said trying to enforce the ban caused more conflict than having phones openly in schools would.

"I've seen the stress when we take phones away from students," he said. "They'd rather leave school than give up their phones."

The haphazard enforcement of the cellphone ban in New York also disproportionately affects low-income minority students, who tend to be the majority in high schools with metal detectors at the entrances, where mobile phones are confiscated.

A cottage industry of small trucks parked outside such schools charges students \$1 a day to store their cellphones. On an afternoon last week, students emerging from the Washington Irving High School building swarmed around a truck parked on the street, jostling one another to reach the windows where they could exchange numbered tickets for their phones.

Cache Terry, 15, a junior at the Academy for Software Engineering, where three-quarters of the students are Hispanic and close to three-quarters are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, said that in middle school, she had been allowed to bring her phone into the school. "Why don't they trust me with it in high school?" she asked.

Educators are concerned that cellphone policies may reinforce inequality. "Why would you limit kids from having access to technology that could perhaps enhance their learning?" said Jose L. Vilson, an eighth-grade math teacher at a middle school in Washington Heights and the author of *This Is Not a Test*:

A New Narrative on Race, Class and Education. He said he often asked his students to use their cellphones to search the web for class projects.

Banning cellphones, he said, “just keeps pushing the disparity forward.”

By high school, some parents believe, students should have the responsibility of figuring out when phone use is appropriate.

“Part of becoming an adult is learning how to use your time wisely and making good choices,” said Julia Talbot, a manager at the Chicago Department of Family and Support Services who has two children in two public high schools.

Many school districts have updated cellphone policies as they have incorporated laptops and tablets into classrooms. Some rollouts have been rockier than others. In Los Angeles, for example, students hacked iPads after 640,000 of them were distributed, using them to play games or use social media instead of following the digital curriculum. (The Los Angeles schools allow students to bring cellphones to school, but the devices must be stored in lockers or backpacks.)

In Miami, as part of a “bring your own device” policy put in effect two years ago, the district began actively encouraging students to bring cellphones to class. Alberto M. Carvalho, superintendent of schools in Miami-Dade County, said teachers asked students to use phone apps that allowed them to answer quiz questions, take surveys or snap pictures of class notes.

Some teachers say that though they are open to using technology in class, they are skeptical of those who grow too enamored of it.

“Your responsibility is to figure out ways to get kids engaged in the content,” said Ben Wides, a history teacher at East Side Community High School in Manhattan, which allows students to bring in cellphones, although teachers do not permit them to be used during class.

“Your means of engagement should not rely on kids’ excitement on being able to whip their phones out.”