

AOW #1 Cellphones

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A California high school found students' cellphones too distracting, so they're locking the devices up

Some experts say taking away the students' devices creates its own kind of distraction — and anxiety — for students

It wasn't enough to just tell students at San Mateo High School to put their phones away during class, now, officials at the California school have told them to lock them away.

And while their familiar companions may still be near, the high-schoolers are now required to keep their devices in a magnetically sealed pouch during school hours.

Mounting frustration over student attentiveness led administrators at the school, which is about 20 miles south of San Francisco, to institute the new policy this school year, which kicked off earlier this month.

"We could walk into a variety of classrooms, and kids would be on their cellphones anywhere from 5 seconds, checking a text, to 30 to 45 minutes at a time," Adam Gelb, assistant principal of San Mateo High School, told NBC Bay Area. "You're here to learn. You are here to work with your teachers and students, and we started getting away from that because of these devices and how addictive they can be."

Each school day, nearly 1,700 students place their devices in a Yondr pouch that closes with a proprietary lock. School administrators unlock them at the end of the day.

While administrators and teachers say they have already noticed a positive effect on students, the policy has elicited mixed reactions from researchers who argue its long-term effectiveness.

Devices remain in the student's possession, but they aren't able to access them, the school said. The program was funded with a \$20,000 grant. The pouches have been assigned to students at no cost, but losing one will cost the high-schoolers a \$25 replacement fee.

Some technology experts feel the new policy is a step in the right direction and will curb distraction in the classroom.

"Taking cellphones out of the classroom is a no-brainer," said Calvin Newport, a professor of computer science at Georgetown University.

Students tend to perform worse when they have access to network connectivity in the classroom, he said.

"The ability to be free of distraction and concentrate on things is increasingly valuable, so it's a good general function of our schools to be a place where our students get trained to keeping their concentration on one thing at a time," he added.

Many students at the school have embraced the idea after initially hesitating.

"Last year, a lot of people spent lunches looking at the phone, not talking with each other, but this year, there is nothing else to do but talk," said Michael Picchi, a San Mateo High School student.

"It helped me a lot. ... I'm like a typical teenager, you know? Like I'm always on my phone," said Polina Tu'ipuloto, another student. "Before I would usually just like curl over in the side of my desk and like check my phone and text everyone. But now there's no other thing for us to look at or do except for talk to our teacher or pay attention."

There is a real lag to switching your brain from a calculus teacher to SnapChat, and that effects memory concentration and critical thinking, Newport said. When you shift your focus back and forth between a teacher and a cellphone, your brain performance pays a "switching cost," Newport added.

A study from Rutgers University found that students who had cellphones or laptops during lessons scored 5 percent, or half a letter grade, lower on exams than students who weren't using electronics.

A no-cellphone policy improves the educational experience, said Arnold Glass, a professor of psychology at Rutgers University, who lead the study. "Cellphones have negative consequences on learning, and if you're there to learn, it defeats the purpose of showing up if you're on a phone."

While many researchers have focused on the benefits of cutting out devices from the classroom, others worry about taking away something young people depend on.

Larry Rosen, a research psychologist at California State University, said young people constantly check their phones to alleviate anxiety. They are anxious about staying on top of things, and that anxiety will build up if they are forced to ditch the devices cold turkey, he added. Taking away phones doesn't work for everyone, he argues.

Instead, he believes "technology breaks" are a much happier medium.

Giving students a few minutes between lessons to check their phones helps dispel a lot of the anxiety, he said. If a student is focused on what he's missing out on, then he's not going to be focusing on the teacher, Rosen said.

"I would caution this school that one of the ramifications of this policy is that you're activating anxiety in your students, which may backfire," he said.

Some students argue that the policy should be more balanced.

"I think lunchtime it should be allowed," said Kaveela Blackwell, a student told NBC Bay Area. "It's your free time to do what you want."

Removing cellphones won't curb students' distractions, instead, people will just be distracted by other things, said Jesse Stommel, executive director of the division of teaching and learning technology at the University of Mary Washington.

Cellphones are deeply entrenched in our lives, which can't be ignored, he said. Students will respond better by implementing cellphones in a more effective way in the classroom.

"It's better to help students figure out how to manage distractions instead of trying to eliminate it. It's better to harness it and help make it productive."

Possible Response Questions:

1. What do you think of banning cellphones in schools? Explain.
2. Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.