

[MEMBER SERVICES](#) [ADVOCACY](#) [TRAINING AND EVENTS](#)[NEWSROOM](#)[ABOUT](#)

Banning cellphones seen as balm by districts that have tried it

On Board Online • April 8, 2024

By Robin L. Flanigan
Special Correspondent

"Off and away during the school day."

That's the slogan behind Albion Central School District's cellphone policy as of September 2023.

The Orleans County district does not allow elementary or middle school students to bring cellphones to school, and high school students are not allowed to bring them into classrooms.

"We felt that we really needed to put something in writing because what happens on social media outside of school carries over into school hours," said Superintendent Mickey Edwards.

Nationally, 77% of schools had some form of cellphone ban in place during 2020, according to the latest figures available from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics.

Albion's prohibition was planned shortly after U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued a grim warning in May 2023 about the harmful effects of social media on adolescent mental health. The 25-page advisory noted that 95% of 13- to 17-year-old Americans use a social media platform, and more than a third say they do so "almost constantly."

Research has tied mobile phone addiction to poorer academic performance as well as higher levels of anxiety and depression.

In a recent survey, NYSSBA asked its members if they thought legislation or regulation was the answer: "Should NYSSBA support/oppose/be neutral on efforts to require use of devices that prohibit the student use of cell phones during the school day?"

Among 564 respondents, 43% said NYSSBA should support such efforts, 20% said oppose and 37% said "be neutral."

"Now they're socializing more"

School districts throughout New York State have tried different strategies to limit student use of cellphones during the school day. For instance, the Enlarged City School District of Middletown in Orange County tried the honor system in 2022-23. It asked students to stow their cell phones in backpacks during school hours. But administrators didn't get the desired results, especially among high schoolers.

"We didn't think we were doing our young people justice," said Superintendent Amy Creeden. "We said 'Just put it away,' but you

have to have a lot of willpower not to pull it out if it's right there in your pocket."

Added Associate Principal William Donohue:
"If I'm trying to lose 20 pounds and I consistently keep nachos in my house, that's probably not going to work."

While searching for other solutions, the district discovered fabric pouches that automatically lock when closed and can be unlocked when the pouch's circular magnet gets tapped on an unlocking base. The pouches are made by Yondr Education, which saw a 150-percent increase in business in 2023. The California company partners with more than 2,000 schools in the U.S. and, in a recent survey of more than 370 administrators, 86 percent said they saw a positive impact in student wellness and safety.

The Middletown school board used Every Student Succeeds Act funding - targeting mental health support and learning loss - to purchase Yondr pouches for Middletown High School. The total investment was \$46,000. Administrators plan to introduce pouches for mandatory use in the district's two middle schools beginning this spring.

Meanwhile, high school student council scholars helped redesign their cafeteria. It is now flush with arcade systems, old-school jukeboxes and games.

"We wanted their input about how we could change the physical environment to support them and their needs, so they didn't feel like something was taken away without something being given in return," explained Executive Principal Lynnette Williams.

"Now they're socializing more, and you feel that energy when you walk through the building," Dr. Williams said.

Expect some disgruntled parents

The Newburgh Enlarged City School District, also in Orange County, has used Yondr pouches for six years at its Newburgh Free Academy West campus, and at the Academy's Main campus since fall 2023.

School districts that take a similar path should be prepared to hear from some disgruntled parents, initially, said Susan Valentino, co-principal of Newburgh Free Academy.

"I think some were just as apprehensive as the kids were about not having access all day," Valentino said.

Sometimes there can be accommodations. In Newburgh, students with diabetes who need their phones to monitor blood-glucose levels seal their pouches using Velcro.

According to Newburgh administrators, it's helpful to explain the rationale to students and faculty prior to implementation. At Newburgh's North campus, a behavioral health specialist organized student- and teacher-led restorative circles. Discussions focused on the role of distractions in our lives, and how fewer distractions lead to better communication and success, both personally and professionally. In addition, all classes during a 45-minute class period one afternoon focused exclusively on the link between electronic devices and addiction.

Parents in Albion expressed concerns about cellphone restrictions at a school board meeting, Edwards noted. The superintendent followed up personally with every parent who spoke. His message: "I hear you."

School board veterans know that some amount of blowback will accompany any significant policy change. "You're never going

to please everybody," said John C. Williams, president of Middletown's school board.

Outreach and pacing can ease implementation

Six months before instituting its policy in fall 2023 that banned carrying cellphones for students in grades 6 to 12, the Wellsville Central School District in Allegany County formed a committee comprised of parents, students, faculty and administrators. The committee surveyed stakeholders about their thoughts on a more restrictive cell phone policy. They also consulted with schools in the region who had instituted similar policies, sponsored parent nights attended by a school physician, and combed through educational research on the topic published by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Journal of Adolescent Health and the Pew Research Center, among others.

"The fact that the policy worked out so well was largely due to the amount of time we spent ahead of the actual implementation of the policy," said Superintendent David Foster.

Data shows that bullying and disciplinary referrals have dropped significantly since the new policy.

Also, there is evidence that social interaction has skyrocketed.

"We're actually worried about the sound in the cafeteria again," said Foster. "That's not something we've even thought about for six or seven years now. I'm glad to see that back."

One academic with a strong interest in cellphone policies is social psychologist Jonathan Haidt of New York University, author of the 2018 bestseller *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation*

for *Failure* and a forthcoming book called *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*.

"The most common mistake is believing that a ban on phone use during class time is a ban," he told *On Board*. "It is not. Students are expert at checking their phones and hiding it. Plus, if you prevent them from texting [only] during class, then they will use every moment between classes to text and check social media. They will not talk as much with each other."

That's why Haidt recommends that school boards require their campuses to be entirely phone-free during school hours. While there is no magic bullet in education, Haidt and others believe that banning cellphones might be as close as one can come.

Haidt has published a trove of "collaborative review docs" at bit.ly/3TXr9WD .

Contact Us

New York State School Boards Association

24 Century Hill Drive, Suite 200

Latham, New York 12110-2125

518.783.0200 phone

518.783.0211 fax

[Contact Us](#)

Quicklinks

Advertising with
NYSSBA

District Vacancies

New Member
Resources

Policy Services

Running for School
Board

Staff Directory

Get Social



©2024 New York State School Boards Association. All Rights Reserved. [Privacy Policy](#) | [Website by Accrisoft](#)