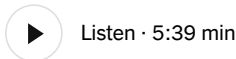


GUEST ESSAY

It's Still Demoralizing to Teach a Classroom of Scrolling Students

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In the past several years, about three dozen states have instituted phone bans in schools, and more are likely to follow. These bans have been trumpeted as game changers. Anecdotal reporting points to more books being checked out from school libraries and more students engaging with one another in the hallway. “How the Phone Ban Saved High School,” reads one headline. At the same time, respected academics have suggested that the arrival of phones in schools is linked to large test score declines in countries around the world.

It was, therefore, surprising to many people when a paper this week showed that phone bans had a very minimal impact on student behavior and academics in a nationwide sample of schools. Phone usage went down, and teachers liked the policy (all good), but test scores didn’t change much, disciplinary infractions increased in the short term and there was no demonstrable effect on bullying or student attention. Basically, not much changed.

This finding should not have been as surprising as it was. Based on what we know about phones and education, it is not realistic to expect phone bans to have enormous impacts on academic outcomes. But that doesn’t mean that they are a bad idea, or that they should be walked back. Instead, we need to approach this topic with more realistic expectations, a richer approach to what counts as a positive outcome and more help for families and schools.

The expectations for phone bans were poorly calibrated, largely because the data on which some of the more extreme claims about phones is based is subject to considerable biases. For example, a paper published last fall argued that increases in phone usage were tied to large reductions in test scores in many countries between 2012 and 2022. The study found bigger drops in test scores in countries with greater smartphone adoption. But it turns out that those were *also* the countries that had longer school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic. Phones may have played a role in driving test scores down, but since we know school closings mattered for

academic progress, too, the emphasis on phones overstates their role.

There is also plenty of data showing that children who spend more time on social media do worse in school, but they tend to come from households with fewer resources. It may also be that problems in school are contributing to social media use, rather than the other way around. Finally, given that a lot of phone usage is outside of school, it's unclear if these results would really apply to phone bans in school.

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The paper out this week takes a better approach, looking at how test scores and behavior varied over time as schools restricted phone use by introducing Yondr pouches that lock away phones during the day. An earlier paper, which looked at variation across school districts in Florida as some introduced phone bans earlier than others, found similarly small effects on test scores. These are the studies we should be focusing on.

Over the next several years, we will get more data exploring these questions. I expect a cottage industry of papers on school phone bans — and we'll probably also start to see results from school districts that change technology in other ways (for example, taking computers out of early childhood classrooms). We should expect to see similar results.

It would be a mistake to interpret these findings as a sign that we should forget about phone bans altogether. There are no magic bullets in education. Improving student learning is a game of inches, not miles. There is no clear positive reason for students to have phones in the classroom. No phones should be the default, and to introduce phones, we'd want to see evidence that they meaningfully improve learning or help in another way. None of that appears in the data. On the flip side, I think the knee-jerk reaction to also remove all computers and tech is an overstatement and unrealistic.

Instead, we need to alter our expectations. Phone bans may be helpful in some ways, but they aren't a cure-all, and that shouldn't be the bar for success.

Second, we have to get better data. Test scores are easy to measure, but a lot of the discussion around phone bans focuses on the experiences of students, how they interact with one another and whether the classroom feels engaging to both students and teachers. We should be measuring those outcomes systematically. I do not allow my students to have phones or laptops in my classroom, because screens affect their participation and, quite honestly, it's demoralizing to look out at a classroom of kids scrolling on their phones. I'm guessing other teachers feel similarly; we should figure out how to measure and evaluate this, too.

Finally, we need to find a more helpful approach for schools and parents to manage technology. We've sent parents and schools messages that are simultaneously fear-inducing ("phones are ruining your children") and overly optimistic ("phone bans will make it better"). Neither of these is true, and it's time to move to something that promises less, but delivers more.

For schools, that may mean keeping phone bans and making additional changes, like modifying laptop use in some classrooms, while recognizing that technology is part of modern life and not the enemy. It could also mean focusing on resources and instructional support that will actually move the needle on test scores.

On the parental side, we need fewer blanket warnings about the dangers of technology and more help drawing appropriate boundaries for our kids. Teenagers absolutely need rules and restrictions on their phone use, and they need their parents to set those — and parents need help doing that. Phone bans promised an easy fix, but they aren't magic. The faster we realize that, the faster we can make realistic progress.

Emily Oster is the founder and chief executive of ParentData and a professor of economics at Brown University.

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