



B.C. struggles toward province-wide policy on phone use in schools

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Director of Student Life at Shawinigan Lake School Matt Clinton-Baker with a cellphone in a classroom on campus in Shawinigan Lake, B.C., on March 15. CHAD HIPOLITO/THE GLOBE AND MAIL.

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At Shawinigan Lake School, a prestigious boarding school on Vancouver Island, students from Grades 8 to 11 are required to leave their cellphones in their rooms during the school day. At night, the phones are locked in a cabinet.

Only those in Grade 12 are allowed to carry their phones into class, but they must keep them turned off. Repeat offenders can have their phones taken away.

It's an arrangement the school reached after months of talks with teachers, parents and a hired consultant aimed at finding a balance between the reality that cellphones have become a crucial form of communication and community for teenagers, but can also be instruments of distraction at best, and harm at worst.

School administrators anticipated some resistance from parents and guardians but received overwhelmingly positive and supportive feedback. While students initially grumbled about losing their prized possession, they eventually came to appreciate the academic benefits of fewer distractions in class, said Tom Lupton, Shawinigan's director of teaching and learning.

In recent months, the premiers of Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia have weighed in with requirements to limit students' use of cellphones in class. This move by politicians to do something official about an issue that has been around as long as the phones themselves comes amidst mounting evidence of their detrimental effects on learning.

But teachers, school officials and academics who study technology in education say schools have been struggling with this issue for years. Blanket policies are unrealistic, they say, given the differences from school to school and the difficulties of enforcing an outright ban. And even if school boards, districts and individual schools manage to come up with a uniform policy, academics say overly restrictive rules would not improve academic performance and would hamper efforts to help students to learn to self-regulate their cellphone use.

Cellphone ban in schools cuts off support, experts say

Ontario's ban, implemented since 2019, has become a "losing battle" because of the lack of enforcement, said Karen Littlewood, president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation. It spurred the Toronto District School Board to reassess the policy, culminating in a decision in January to develop a new one. The province's Education Minister Stephen Lecce said in December that his government is willing to work with school boards to further strengthen any policy in place that keeps kids focused.

In British Columbia, Premier David Eby, who wants schools to have guidelines by the start of the next school year in September, has said the development of the policy will be directed by the school boards – and in partnership with teachers – to make sure "this is actually effective".

B.C.'s Ministry of Education and Child Care held a roundtable March 7 with the BC Teachers' Federation. Few details have yet been worked out, but the union's president, Clint Johnston, said each district will retain some control and autonomy over its specific policy details, but broader "elements" determined by the ministry will be included in the policies across all the province.

"There will remain some flexibility within there obviously for schools and for teachers to make their autonomous professional choices," he said.

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He said he expects it will be up to districts – not individual classroom teachers – to create policies on how to enforce the rules.

The ministry didn't explain what those elements were specifically but noted in a statement that limiting cellphone use during instructional time while balancing accessibility, accommodation and safety needs for students would be among the many factors considered as school districts develop these policies.

But the new government push for a province-wide strategy comes years after many teachers and administrators began implementing strategies to manage the use of cellphones in classrooms. Elementary schools tend to have tougher restrictions such as phones must be turned off or put on silent mode and stored in students' bags during the school day, including lunch and recess. Some schools even discourage parents from sending their kids to school with a device at all.

In higher grades, policies vary from keeping cellphones in a pouch provided at the front of the class to requiring students to turn them off during instructional time, or conveying that such gadgets are not encouraged on school property.

"The feedback from teachers is they like the flexibility of using cellphones, or not, depending on the class. Some teachers have no cellphone use in their class and they have not reported any issues with this," said Ilda Turcotte, president for the Greater Victoria Teachers' Association.

Cellphone use in schools should be restricted, not banned, educators say

Some schools said they have seen positive results after placing restrictions around the use of cellphones. Matt Clinton-Baker, director of student life at Shawinigan, said limiting the use of cellphones helped cultivate and protect the sense of the community that his school values. School counsellor Tulani Pierce of Chateleux Secondary School on B.C.'s Sunshine Coast told The Canadian Press last year that the school saw improved mental health, decreased bullying among students and more engagement in class months after implementing a ban.

But some educators and experts don't believe outright bans work.

"From an academic viewpoint, bans never work," said Jesse Miller, a social-media literacy expert who lectures at the University of Victoria and talks to teens in school districts around the province.

"I have not heard from any principals in Ontario or Quebec who have said that there's been more engaging in the classroom. What we do hear is that there's better senses of control when it comes to the classroom."

He referenced a failed policy enacted by New York, which was rescinded in 2015. For nearly 10 years, the city had strict rules prohibiting students from bringing their cellphones to school. As a result, students would pay for storage trucks parked outside their schools to safeguard their devices.

New York City schools said they didn't have improved literacy or better student engagement, but there was more anxiety and frustration when it comes to the safety of the device, Mr. Miller said.

In his view, the B.C. government is raising the issue for purely political reasons.

"We already have a lot of regulations around cellphone use in our schools, given from the districts, and those districts aren't going to change those policies. They're just going to reflect them with a provincial regulation or ban as it's been presented," he said.

But Sachin Maharaj, an assistant professor of educational leadership, policy and program evaluation at the University of Ottawa, said there is increasing evidence globally that smartphone and social-media use are harming the academic, social and emotional development of children.

Last year, the U.S. Surgeon-General issued an advisory on the negative effects of social-media use on youth mental health. A UNESCO report from July cited studies in Belgium, Spain and Britain that students' learning outcomes improved when phones were removed from the classroom, especially for students who were already struggling.

Smartphones can support learning in some contexts, "but not when it is overused or inappropriately used," the UNESCO report said.

A "balanced approach is important," said Jillian Roberts, an educational psychology professor at the University of Victoria.

She said perhaps at the beginning of class, teachers can ask students to turn off their phones, but at the end of class, students may be able to turn on their phones to take a picture of the board or whatever.

"What's important is that we think about guidelines, like successful guidelines for the use of cellphones. So we come up with guidelines where we still can access the benefit of the technology that reduce the risk of the technology," she said.

Nicola Baker, president for the Central Okanagan Parent Advisory Council, said she has heard varying perspectives on the implementation of a cellphone policy from both parents and teachers. In her view, the most crucial aspect is to engage in these discussions.

"We're trying to find the way that our kids can both learn how to be responsible digital citizens, but also how to keep them safe while they're using that technology."

How are you managing your kids' phone use?

What are your current approaches to cellphone screen time? Do you have any rules or time limits? Are there specific tips and tricks that have made a difference? Share your thoughts, concerns and ideas below.

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