

How young is too young for cellphones in school?

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By Donna St. George

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It's been a long time since mobile phones arrived in the nation's schools, but educators are still grappling with what to do about them.

Should they be allowed in elementary schools? What about middle-schoolers using them at lunch? Which limits make the most sense for devices so ubiquitous?

What has become a more settled matter for high school students is sparking questions and controversy in lower grades, some two decades after portable phones became an inescapable part of the cultural landscape.

The debate has emerged in Maryland's biggest school system - in suburban Montgomery County - where some of the rules have been relaxed in recent months.

It used to be that students through fifth grade could carry cellphones only with special permission. But over the years, an increasing number of parents wanted their elementary-age children to take phones to school, often believing kids would be safer - walking home or in an emergency - with the device at the ready.

As the Maryland district recently moved to do away with the old rule, other parents objected - shocked that children as young as 6 or 7 would be permitted to bring smartphones to school. One father recalled his child's school banning fidget spinners and Pokémon cards. Why allow cellphones?

"A phone would be more of a distraction," said Art Bennett, who has three children in school. "Unless there's a demonstrated need, I don't see why there ought to be phones in elementary school at all."

The change in district rules, which took effect this fall, also allows middle school students to use cellphones during lunch if principals give the OK - an idea that has conjured images of children bent over phones in the cafeteria and left parents, already worried about the hours their children spend on screens, dismayed.

"We all know the phone is a blessing and a curse," Lisa Cline, co-chair of a safe technology subcommittee of the countywide council of PTAs. "I don't see why we want to make these children into little adults."

While there is little national data on how school systems handle such issues, it appears that approaches vary widely. Some schools ban smartphones, while others allow them in hallways or during lunch periods, or actively incorporate them into instruction.

"I really don't see a consensus," said Elizabeth Englander, a professor at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts. "Nobody really knows what to do. I think everybody's trying out different things and seeing how they work."

Englander recently found that 40 percent of third-graders surveyed in five states had a cellphone, a number that doubled from 2013 to 2017. Among the third-graders who had a phone, more than 80 percent said they brought them to school daily, according to a preliminary analysis.

In the Washington, D.C., region, rules often vary by school.

In Fairfax County, Virginia, some middle schools allow cellphones during lunch, and some don't. In Prince George's, Maryland, they are allowed with principal approval. In the District, public schools also develop cellphone policies at the school level. At least one middle school - gives phones back to students at lunch.

In Montgomery, school system officials say they are changing with the times, in an increasingly digital world where more parents buy their children phones and more children tuck them into backpacks, pockets and lockers. Students in all grades are responsible for using them appropriately.

"Five or 10 years ago, many elementary school students didn't have cellphones," said Pete Cevenini, chief technology officer for the school system. "Now, many of them do."

But some parents voice concern that the end of a requirement to get a waiver will mean more devices in elementary school. Children are not allowed to use phones during school hours, unless a teacher blends them into instruction. They may use them after dismissal and on school buses under the new rules.

A recent report by Common Sense Media, a nonprofit group that helps families navigate issues related to media and technology, showed mobile screen time on the rise for children 8 and younger.

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Nationally, as more phones have gone to school in the past decade, educators have turned their focus from the mere fact of having a device to any inappropriate behavior, said Ann Flynn, of the National School Boards Association.

As middle schools consider the issue, many parents worry about the broader phenomenon of screen time. They say students need face-to-face contact to develop social skills, expand friendships and learn to navigate uncomfortable situations; they don't need another place where phones take over their attention.

Angie Melton, a mother of four, said two of her children reported near-silence at lunch when their middle school allowed phones for a week.

"They get in their virtual worlds, and I want them in the real world," she said.

Others question whether cellphones at lunch may add to the gap between the haves and have-nots. "Does that mean some kids get locked out of what's happening socially at lunch?" wondered Cathy Stocker, a mother of two and PTA volunteer.

Justus Swan, a sixth-grader, said he is in no hurry to bring cellphones into the day's largest stretch of free time. Lunch is about socializing, he said, and with phones in hand, students would be less tuned in to conversation.

"It defeats the point," the 11-year-old said.

But the phone-friendly lunch has supporters.

Matthew Post, the student member of Takoma Park Middle School's school board, said that he backs a school-by-school approach but that phone privileges at lunch would give students the chance to learn about responsible use and get ready for the world beyond middle school. As he has visited schools, he said, he has found the lunches where phones are allowed no less social. "There was the same chatter and bustle that I saw in every middle school lunch," he said.

At Westland Middle School in Bethesda, Maryland, 14-year-old Gray Rager worked with another student government leader last year to make the case for phones during lunch. Kids can text parents, check grades online, play music, watch videos, he said.

"It's a nice freedom to have," he said.

Westland Principal Alison Serino said a survey showed that students overwhelmingly favored the idea - but that parents overwhelmingly did not. As a middle ground, Serino has allowed cellphones at Friday lunches this year, under ground rules: No Snapchat or Instagram. No violent games or taking photos or videos. Ear buds for playing music.

It means another 30 minutes of screen time in a week, Serino acknowledged, but she has found that students are still social at lunch. "I'm seeing the vast majority of kids are still interacting with each other," she said.

At a middle school in Silver Spring, Maryland, Principal Nicole Sosik allows cellphones at lunch five days a week but says she's made clear the privilege will end if students are not responsible. Those who lack phones may use the school's Chromebook laptops at lunch.

It's a change from the past, she said, when "a lot of time was spent monitoring electronic devices and confiscating them."

In recent years, students in some Montgomery classrooms also have used phones as part of learning, under "bring your own device" initiatives.

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Donna St. George writes about education, with an emphasis on Montgomery County schools. Recent stories have examined widespread failure on final exams in a high-performing school district; discipline policies and zero-tolerance approaches in in Maryland and Virginia schools; accountability practices in sexual misconduct cases; and the leadership crisis at the University of Virginia.

She has also worked on the Post's local projects staff, written about the toll of the 2001 terrorist attacks, followed a class of 9-11 Marines from bootcamp into the war on terror and woven together narratives about domestic violence, the economic downturn, military women and modern family life. She grew up near Chicago and has been a reporter at The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times and the Philadelphia Inquirer.