

Nationalist Pistorius, left, is a math teacher at Illing Middle School in Manchester, Conn. Michael Wilson, right, is a student. Wilson's phone, center, is placed in a locked pouch during school. (Tony Luong for The Washington Post)

When Raymond Dolphin became assistant principal of a middle school in Connecticut two years ago, it was clear to him that the kids were not all right. The problem was cellphones.

May 1, 2024



By [Joanna Slater](#)

MANCHESTER, Conn. — When Raymond Dolphin became assistant principal of a middle school in Connecticut two years ago, it was clear to him that the kids were not all right.

The problem was cellphones. Students were using the devices in class, despite a rule against it. Social media was exacerbating nearly every conflict among students. When Dolphin walked the hallways or surveyed the cafeteria, he invariably saw heads bent over screens.

So in December, Dolphin did something unusual: He banned them.

The experiment at Illing Middle School sparked objections from students and some parents, but it has already generated profound and unexpected results.

Dolphin likened prohibiting cellphones to curbing consumption of sugary foods. “In a matter of months, you start feeling better,” he said.

What unfolded at the school reflects a broader struggle underway in education as some administrators turn to increasingly drastic measures to limit the reach of a technology that is both ubiquitous and endlessly distracting.

Scores of schools across the country — from California to Indiana to Pennsylvania — have taken similar steps to remove cellphones altogether rather than rely on rules around their use.

Those decisions come amid rising bipartisan alarm over the ways cellphones and social media may be harming children, concerns that have led to warnings from the U.S. surgeon general and the health commissioner of New York City. About a third of U.S. teens report that they use a social media site “almost constantly.”

Dolphin, 45, wears rectangular glasses and carries a walkie-talkie in his belt. He became a teacher right out of college, made a detour into banking, then returned to education a decade ago. It’s only in recent years that the presence of phones at school has become “overwhelming,” he said. When a fellow educator in nearby Hartford recommended a way to blunt their impact, Dolphin jumped at it.

At 7:50 on a March morning, Dolphin hustled toward his usual spot near the school entrance to make sure the system was working. Moments later, more than 800 middle school students — some boisterous, some sleepy — began flowing through the doors in a river of bulky backpacks and puffy jackets.

Those who had cellphones in their hands slipped them into individual gray pouches made of synthetic rubber. They clicked the magnetic lock at the top of their pouches shut, then placed them into their backpacks or held them up to show teachers. The pouches would stay with them, locked, until dismissal at 2:45 p.m.

Introducing the pouches — made by a California-based company called Yondr — was no cakewalk. Many students arriving that morning said they were still sore. “I cried,” said Michael Wilson, 14, about when he learned his phone would become inaccessible during the school day. He signed a last-ditch petition posted on the cafeteria wall urging the administration to reconsider.

Chioma Brown, in a gray sweatsuit and Crocs, slid her cellphone with a glittery cover into her pouch and locked it. She, too, was mad at first. As time passed, her feelings have shifted. “You can focus more” on classes, she said. These days she sometimes forgets that she has her phone with her.

Teachers who were initially skeptical that the pouches would work say they’ve been transformative. Dan Connolly, an eighth-grade science teacher, said he used to repeat the same reminder at the start of each period, six times a day: Put away your cellphones and take out your headphones.

“Now the first thing I say is, ‘Good morning,’ not ‘Take your AirPods out,’” Connolly said.

It’s not as though Illing had allowed cellphones in class previously. Like three-quarters of all U.S. schools, it didn’t. But such policies rely on individual teachers to carry them out, making them effectively an “unenforceable wish,” in the words of Jonathan Haidt, a psychologist at New York University who has called for banning phones from schools.

Justin Pistorius, a math teacher at Illing, said that enforcing the prior no-cellphone policy led to power struggles with students, who frequently complained. They would say, “Why are you the dude that’s doing this? The lady last year let us use them. You’re the jerk,” Pistorius said (at first using a word other than “jerk”).

Enter Yondr, a company founded in 2014 whose magnetically locking pouches are also used to store cellphones during concerts, theatrical events and professional exams. Lately, though, its sales to schools have exploded.

Last year, the number of U.S. schools using the pouches rose to 2,000, said company spokesperson Sarah Leader, more than double the figure in 2022.

Schools from Manhattan to rural Texas have bought the pouches and distributed them to students. In Providence, R.I., all six of the city’s middle schools and two of its high schools — a total of 4,500 students — are now using them.

Some educators turned to the pouches out of desperation. When students returned to school full time after learning remotely during the pandemic, their relationship to their phones had changed dramatically, said Carol Kruser, who was then principal at Chicopee High School in Massachusetts.

Instead of checking their phones at lunch, they were watching YouTube videos in class and refusing to put away the devices, Kruser said. Teachers were begging for help. Kruser introduced Yondr pouches at her high school in the spring of 2021.

“I really wasn’t sure if it was going to be career suicide,” said Kruser, 55, who is now an assistant superintendent in Chicopee. “I just thought it was that important.”

Fast-forward three years: The use of the pouches has spread to neighboring school districts. This past fall, Massachusetts even launched a grant program to pay for them.

“We have these devices which we know are at best habit-forming and at worst addictive that are increasingly linked to depression and loneliness,” said Susan Linn, a psychologist, lecturer at Harvard Medical School and author of “Who’s Raising the Kids?”

“So why would we have them in schools?”

At Illing, Dolphin presented the idea to the principal and the district leadership this past fall. Both were enthusiastic, and the school spent \$31,000 to buy the equipment. Parents and students proved harder to persuade.

Objections from parents fell into three main categories. Some worried about reaching their children in an emergency. A small number had children struggling with anxiety who used their cellphones to listen to music or access meditation apps. Others just liked the convenience of being in touch with their children during the day.

The school reminded parents that there is at least one landline phone in every classroom — and in many cases two. Teachers also still have their cellphones in case they need to call 911 (the pouches also are not “bank vaults,” Dolphin added, and can be cut open in an emergency).

In the worst-case scenario — a school shooting — students should focus on hiding and staying quiet, Dolphin said. “The whole idea that you want every kid to be taking out a phone and calling parents is the exact opposite of the safety protocols,” he said.

For the handful of children who relied on their cellphones to manage anxiety, Illing created a weaning-off plan. Those students could come to a school office where administrators would unlock their pouches. Within weeks, it was no longer necessary.

As for parents who relied on the cellphone to make last-minute changes to pickups, for instance — they “just had to get over it,” Dolphin said. Parents can call the office any time to have a message relayed to a student. Likewise, students can go to the office if they need to reach their parents. For some, it has been their first time using a landline.

Illing administrators said some of the changes among students have surprised them.

Group vaping sessions where students would coordinate to meet in restrooms to smoke prohibited electronic cigarettes? Finished.

Using AirDrop to share inappropriate photos during class? No more.

Social-media-fueled arguments during school? Over.

Pistorius, the math teacher, observed that students are even taking shorter restroom breaks because the trip is no longer an opportunity to spend time on their phones.

Meanwhile, four months into the pilot, most parents seem reconciled to the pouches or appreciate them. So long as there are plans in case of an emergency — a school phone that is readily accessible, for instance — the pouches are “totally fine with me,” said Donaree Brown, whose daughter Chioma is in eighth grade.

At the end of the school day, the students file out through the lime-green hallways toward waiting buses. Near every exit is a wall-mounted unlocking station where kids can click open their individual pouches (a staff member needs to attach a magnet each day before dismissal for it to work). On a recent sunny afternoon, about half of the kids were using the unlocking stations.

The school is under no illusion that the system is foolproof, Dolphin said. “Do some kids keep phones secretly in their backpack? Of course. We’re not naive,” he said. But the students also know that taking out their phones leads to an automatic detention.

When students are in groups, the peer pressure to dislike Yondr remains strong, Dolphin said with a laugh. In one-on-one conversations, though, it’s different. Multiple students have told him they feel like they are making more friends. His gut also tells him that “the angsty intensity kids are living under” — he mimicked a person with head down, lost in a screen — has diminished.

Students confirmed that the disappearance of cellphones has, in turn, stimulated something old-fashioned. Serenity Erazo, 14, said that she used to watch TikTok or listen to music after completing her class work. Free time is a little duller now, she said, but the students have adapted: “We’ll just find conversation, we figure it out.”

Gabe Silver, another eighth-grader, echoed that sentiment. When the pouches first arrived, “everyone was miserable and no one was talking to each other,” he said. Now he can hear the difference at lunch and in the hallways. It’s louder. Students are chatting more “face to face, in person,” Gabe said. “And that’s a crucial part of growing up.”

Some students hadn’t realized how much their phones diverted their focus. Nicole Gwiazdowski, 14, followed the earlier rule not to use her cellphone in class. But even in her pocket, it was still a distraction. Her phone would buzz five to 10 times a day with notifications, she said, prompting her to take it out and check it.

Everyone is paying more attention in class these days, she said. And it turns out that being separated from your phone for the day isn't as big a deal as some students feared.

"People thought, 'Oh my God, I'm going to miss so much,'" Nicole said. "You don't miss anything. Nothing important is happening outside school."

What readers are saying

The comments reflect a strong consensus that removing cell phones from schools is beneficial for students' focus, social interaction, and overall learning environment. Many commenters share personal experiences or observations from their own school days, emphasizing the positive... [Show more](#)

This summary is AI-generated. AI can make mistakes and this summary is not a replacement for reading the comments.