



**OPINION // EDITORIALS**

# Cell phones hinder classroom learning. Texas should tell school districts to lock them up | Editorial

By **The Editorial Board**, *Opinions from the Houston Chronicle Editorial Board*

March 2, 2025

 **Gift Article**







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ARLINGTON, VA - OCTOBER 17, 2024: A school safety coordinator holds a handheld unlocking station as students unlock their cellphones after school dismissal at Wakefield High School in Arlington, Virginia on October 17, 2024. (Photo by Valerie Plesch for The Washington Post via Getty Images)

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Every morning at Robert T. Hill Middle School in Dallas, a line snakes outside the front entrance. Students file into the building and pull out a gray and green nylon pouch, each personalized with his or her name. An administrator wields a special magnet that pops open the pouches, allowing students to slide in their cell phones, seal the contraptions shut and drop them in their bags. So begins an entire school day of smart phone-free learning.

Principal Candice Ruiz instituted the cell phone ban five years ago, making Hill one of the first schools in the state to do so. The policy has paid dividends: Ruiz reports a 75% decrease in incidents of bullying and a 13-point gain in the number of students meeting expectations on STAAR tests.

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evidence showing that phones are not just correlated with this crisis but have driven it.

In September, Texas Education Agency Commissioner [Mike Morath](#) urged state lawmakers to pass a bill giving him the power to enforce a statewide ban. At least four bills [have already been filed in the Legislature](#) to do so. Polling data show that cell phone bans are popular. An October [Pew Research Center survey](#) found that 68% of U.S. adults support a ban on middle and high school students using cell phones during class.

Yet the support breaks down among specific demographics. Majorities of Republicans (74%) and Democrats (64%) favor the broad concept of a ban, yet only 42% of Republicans and 31% of Democrats believe it should span the entire school day. Young adults are less likely to support any ban; older groups generally approve. Roughly [72% of high school teachers](#) say cell phones in their classroom are a major problem, compared with only 33% of middle school teachers.

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Many parents believe it should be left up to individual teachers, but teachers don't want to shoulder that burden on their own. Policing phone usage in the classroom is exhausting, distracts from learning, and often devolves into a cat-and-mouse game. Robin Mackie, a former high school English teacher in Conroe ISD, told us attempting to motivate passive students while they have a "drug on their desk" is nearly impossible.

"One of the reasons I resigned from my teaching position after 33 years in education was due to the school phone policy," Mackie wrote. "Each teacher needed to enforce their own rules regarding phones, but there was heavy pushback by the students for the teachers like me who wanted them kept completely stored away in backpacks."

Of course, the most immediate and visceral objection to phone bans is sadly understandable. In this age of gun violence and mass shootings, parents fear not being able to communicate with their child. Students want the ability to reassure their parents, and themselves, with a simple text.

"When I had a school shooting threat at my school, my phone was my main comfort, as I kept connected to my family and any other updates on situations," wrote Penny Cotado, a Houston ISD junior.

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We agree. It's paramount for districts implementing a cell phone ban to clearly communicate to parents, teachers and administrators what the protocol is during an emergency.

Ruiz, the Hill middle school principal, told us that students can easily open their pouches with a pair of scissors if they needed to and that the magnetic locks can even be pried open with their hands with enough force. Graham Dugoni, CEO of Yondr, which makes the pouches, told us he encourages partner schools to equip teachers with "go bags" that include the unlocking mechanisms for pouches. The idea is that when students are safely evacuated from an emergency, they'll be able

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That's a hefty sum, to be sure, and no doubt, there are other perhaps cheaper ways of policing cell phones. Passing a law is only half the battle. The other half is enforcing it. Given the success that a handful of schools and school districts have had with the Yondr solution, lawmakers should feel relatively sure appropriating funding for it won't be in vain.

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Even with state funding, we favor flexibility. A one-size-fits-all approach won't work in a vast state with more than 1,200 public school districts spanning urban, suburban and rural communities. Any new law should allow school districts to

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even healthy conflict and disagreement — socialization that our kids need every bit as much as algebra and history to make it in this world. Texas students deserve an education grounded in reality, not social avatars, virtual eye candy and dopamine-dispensing screens that are about as wholesome and conducive to learning as cocaine in a plastic case. Lawmakers should act to protect Texas kids. Many schools simply can't do it alone.

March 2, 2025



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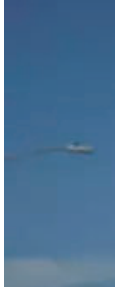
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