

Cellphones in schools: Does safety outweigh distraction?

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.20.17

Word Count **738**

Level **800L**



Students Jack Doyle, Ryan Ward, Aiden Franz, and Gray Rager use their cell phones during lunch at Westland Middle School in Bethesda, Maryland. Photo by: Washington Post by Michael Robinson Chavez.

It's been many years since kids started bringing cellphones to school. But educators still don't agree on what to do about them.

Should mobile phones be allowed in elementary schools? What about middle-schoolers using them at lunch? Which limits make the most sense?

Now, Maryland's biggest school system is arguing about the issue.

Montgomery County Public Schools just changed its rules on cell phones. Before, students through fifth grade could carry cellphones only with special permission. But over the years, an increasing number of parents wanted their kids to take phones to school. Many believed kids would be safer walking home or in an emergency if they had a phone on them.

Some parents have objected, though. They are shocked that children as young as 6 or 7 years old are allowed to bring smartphones to school.

Phones Are A Distraction

"A phone would be more of a distraction," said Art Bennett, who has three children in school. He said that unless there's a real need, there shouldn't be phones in elementary school at all.

The new rules also let middle school students use cellphones during lunch if principals give the OK. Some parents are not very happy about this change. They are already worried their kids spend too much time on screens.

"We all know the phone is a blessing and a curse," said Lisa Cline. She is part of the PTA, or Parent Teacher Association. She helps run a safe technology committee for a group of PTAs.

"I don't see why we want to make these children into little adults," Cline said.

There is not much information on how different schools across the country handle cell phones. Some schools ban smartphones completely. Others allow them in hallways or during lunch periods. There are schools that include them in classroom activities, too.



"Nobody Really Knows What To Do"

Elizabeth Englander is a professor at Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts. "Nobody really knows what to do," she said.

Englander recently did a survey of third-graders in five states. She found that 4 out of 10 of them had a cellphone. That number doubled from 2013 to 2017. Among the third-graders who had a phone, more than eight out of 10 said they brought their phone to school every day.

In Montgomery, school system officials say they are changing with the times. More parents buy their children phones and more children take them to school.

But some parents are worried that there will be more devices in elementary school. Children are not allowed to use phones during school hours, unless a teacher uses them in class learning. Still, they may use them after school is over and on school buses.

Common Sense Media is a nonprofit group that helps families make decisions related to media and technology. This group says that mobile screen time is going up for children 8 and younger.

Students Need Face-To-Face Contact

Many parents say students need face-to-face contact with other people. It helps them to develop social skills, make friendships and learn to deal with uncomfortable situations.

Angie Melton has two children in middle school. Her kids told her that their school allowed phones for a week, but almost no one talked at lunch.

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

Justus Swan is 11 years old and in sixth grade. He said he is in no hurry to bring cellphones to the cafeteria. Lunch is about talking with other kids.

"It defeats the point," Justus said.

But the phone-friendly lunch has supporters.

Gary Rager is 14 and goes to Westland Middle School. He argued that phones at lunch is a good thing. Kids can text parents, check grades online, play music and watch videos, he said.

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

Finding A Middle Ground

The school took a survey. Most students like the idea. Most parents did not, said Westland Principal Alison Serino.

As a middle ground, Serino has allowed cellphones at Friday lunches this year. There are some ground rules, though. No Snapchat or Instagram. No violent games. No taking photos or videos. Also, kids have to wear ear buds if they are playing music.