

IDEAS

The Schools That Ban Smartphones

Phones can be addictive and distracting, and take a toll on teen mental health. Some schools are pushing back.

By Mark Oppenheimer



Matt Chase / The Atlantic. Source: Getty

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Last October, I accepted an invitation to speak (for—full disclosure—an honorarium) at St. Andrew's, a small Episcopal boarding school in Middletown, Delaware. It was

beautiful in the expected ways: the lake on which the school's champion crew teams practice, the mid-autumn foliage, the redbrick buildings. But it was also beautiful in one unexpected way, which revealed itself slowly.

My first experience of St. Andrew's was dinner, served family style, with all 317 students at tables presided over by faculty members. After dinner, the student-body co-presidents, Ford Chapman and Trinity Smith, stood up, rang a bell for attention, and began evening announcements. They marched through a list of upcoming events, including a football game and assorted club meetings. They wished a happy birthday to three students, each of whom got their own ovation. After announcements, everyone processed silently into the chapel—entering chapel silently is a school tradition—for evening service, during which I spoke for 15 minutes to an attentive audience, one noticeably less distracted than the typical high-school, or even adult, crowd.

That evening, as I sat with the head of school, Joy McGrath, in the living room of her on-campus house, I remarked that St. Andrew's seemed different from other high schools. In just a few hours, I had seen students eat comfortably with their teachers; heard announcements delivered in person rather than via email; watched as chapel was treated unironically, with reverence, or at least respect; and seen not one person glance down at a smartphone. In fact, I said to McGrath, I not *seen* a smartphone since arriving on campus, or heard one buzz.

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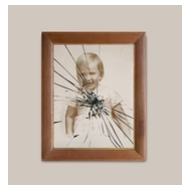
My children, who now range from preschool to 11th grade, have attended a mix of public schools, secular private schools, and Jewish schools, and I've seen how smartphone usage has become the norm, at least on school buses, during free periods, and in the lunchroom. In my experience, smartphone usage, for students in junior

high or above, is the rare thing that schools with different educational philosophies, and different racial and income demographics, have in common. One school (which we took our daughter out of) made no pretense of trying to control phone usage, and absurdly tried to make a virtue of being aggressively tech-forward by requiring phones for trivial tasks: At the beginning of the term, you had to scan a QR code to add or drop a course.

So how was it possible that phones were invisible at St. Andrew's? By design, McGrath said. The school had not banned smartphones, she said, but it had put them in their place. At St. Andrew's, where all students board, they may have phones, but only in their rooms. Since mobile phones came into widespread use 20 years ago, the school has never allowed them in public. "The only exception is working out in the gym," McGrath said. At night, students store their phones in over-the-door shoe organizers in the dorm common areas. "A funny side effect" of this policy, she said, "is when we write to families about moving into the school, we emphasize in all caps 'YOU HAVE TO BUY AN ALARM CLOCK.' Because they can't have their phones in their rooms overnight."

Given the abundant research that we now have on what phones do to teenagers—how addictive they are, their costs to mental health, how they impede attention—this tech resistance seems like common sense. And in the past year, we have begun to see a reconsideration of, even a resistance to, phones in schools. The new thinking takes different forms. This year, the Buxton School, in

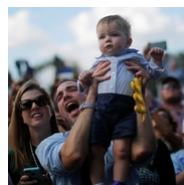
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Williamstown, Massachusetts, banned smartphones, but they still allow the lower-tech Light Phones, which don't support apps; according to an administrator quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*, "The idea wasn't to cut off students entirely from the outside world, but to make it harder to have online drama accessible at all times from their pockets." The Midland School, in Los Olivos, California, does not allow students to bring phones of any kind to campus. Deerfield Academy, in Deerfield, Massachusetts, adopted a new policy this year: No phones may be taken out during the school day, before 3 p.m.



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DEREK THOMPSON

Some of the great success stories of pushing back against smartphones have been at boarding schools, where administrations have more control over student culture. But these schools still hold lessons for the rest of us. As the case of St. Andrew's shows, when it comes to changing school culture, the students matter as much as the faculty. Young people have never been in denial about the dark side of mobile-phone usage—in 2016, a survey showed that half of all teens believed they were addicted to their phones—and at every school I've visited, I've met students who opt out of phone culture (like the ones *The New York Times* just reported on) or who use phones but reject social media. We need not be surprised, then, that at St. Andrew's, students come to believe in the school's rule—which they see not as a diktat from above but as a collective choice for a certain way of life, one that they even agree to help enforce.

“Coming into St. Andrew’s, I was like any middle-school kid,” Ford Chapman, the co-president, told me. “My phone was a big part of my life, racking up a lot of hours on social media.” When he arrived as a freshman, he was “pretty ticked off by the phone rule.” But he quickly became a convert. “Walking around on the front lawn, seeing everybody living in the moment, not stuck on their Instagram trying to communicate with friends from home—that is very alluring.”



Ford Chapman and Trinity Smith, student-body co-presidents at St. Andrews School in Delaware (Joshua Meier)

But no sooner had Chapman grown to love the phone rule than COVID came along and undermined it. Numerous students and teachers told me that the phone rule was much less enforced during the era of social distancing. Last fall, when Chapman and his co-president, Trinity Smith, were elected, they agreed that putting phones back in their place should be a top priority for their presidency.

“We talked about how we’re seeing a lot of ‘bold phone usage,’ as we called it—in the dining hall, on front lawns, people whipping out their phones,” Chapman said. “And no one was batting an eye, because the phone policy hadn’t been a strong part of our culture for two years.”

So at a senior-class meeting in September, the two asked their classmates to step up. “We said to all the seniors, ‘The faculty are willing to take phones, and as seniors, you also have the power to enforce this rule, and take a phone and hand it in to the dean,’” Chapman said. Once their fellow seniors agreed to help enforce the rule, the next step was to let the whole school know that things were going to change. So Chapman and Smith got up at an all-school meeting to declare that the policy was going to be strictly enforced again.

At first, there was stunned silence, Smith told me. Her first thought was that the students believed that the faculty had put them up to this. So they asked seniors to raise their hands if they were willing to take phones. “Once the seniors all raised their hands to show the student body we were all serious about the phone policy,” Smith said, “applause began.”

Smith said that this “heartwarming moment” helped reset the school’s attitude toward phones. She thinks the student body understands that phones are not the necessity

the outside world thinks they are. “St. Andrew’s students know how to make their own fun,” Smith told me.

As a result, the seniors have had to confiscate very few phones. Compliance is high, in part because there is so much discussion about the pros and cons of smartphones; it’s a live conversation. There are resisters, of course—and not just students. Will Robinson, a longtime St. Andrew’s administrator and teacher, and himself an alumnus of the school, has on rare occasions seen new, young teachers peeking at phones. “I have gone up to faculty members to say, ‘We don’t do that here, in the same way we don’t smoke marijuana or drink in the dining hall.’” But, he said, “that is only three percent of faculty,” give or take.

Robinson has been a major proponent of the St. Andrew’s phone rule, and has spoken about it at national conferences. In 2018, when he was dean of residential life, he decided to make an example of himself. He stood up at a St. Andrew’s all-school meeting and said, “I am the chief enforcer on this rule, and I am going to put my money where my mouth is.” He told the student body he was trading in his smartphone for a flip phone. “Everybody was like, ‘This guy is nuts.’ But it was probably the best three to four years of my adult life since mobile phones had come into existence.” Two years ago, when his father was in the hospital with COVID, he caved and got a smartphone. “I wasn’t getting all the texts from my siblings,” he said. “I was missing information.”

Robinson’s action achieved a kind of legendary status, and in the years since, students have occasionally taken up the flip-phone challenge. “Mr. Robinson had this catch phrase, ‘Join the revolution,’” the senior John Teti, who along with two friends had switched to a flip phone, told me. He was dismayed by his smartphone addiction, but rather than just delete apps on the smartphone, he decided to “go cold turkey, and strip everything down to nothing.” When he returned to a smartphone last fall, he

added as few apps as possible—“a shockingly short list,” he boasted, of just Spotify, Google Maps, voice memos, a banking app, and a guitar-chords app.

St. Andrew’s is not alone in its pushback against phones. Schools of all kinds are experimenting with phone restrictions. But the bigger the school, and the more diverse the constituency, the harder it is to change policy. Some public-school districts have had to walk back phone restrictions after parents revolted. Still, it’s hardly impossible for public schools to clamp down on smartphones; one can imagine a compromise by which students can have their phones the moment school ends and on the bus home, but never during class hours. Or students could be required to leave their phone at home, and parents could rest assured that, should an emergency arise, they could do what they did in my day: Call the school office.


Whatever path they take, schools will eventually reclaim their learning time. Cultural expectations shift, sometimes quite quickly (gay marriage, electric cars, sometimes only after decades of public education). As David Sax, who has written shrewdly in *The Revenge of Analog* about the enduring value of old-fashioned items such as books, reminded me, “Once upon a time, teachers smoked in classrooms.” There’s no reason we can’t get to a place where sneaking a look at a smartphone would be like sneaking a smoke at school—shameful for adults, a disciplinary offense for students.

Meanwhile, private schools, which can select for students (and parents who opt into the schools’ rules, are leading the way. At St. Andrew’s, students put off by the restrictions don’t apply. Last summer, Robinson gave a campus tour to two girls from the same junior-high school. Both were impressed, until they saw, on a door, the shoe holder to store phones at night. “One girl was like, ‘That’s amazing.’ She could see

and visualize what that would feel like”—to be with her phone less. “The other girl did too—and she had this look on her face like, *You’ve got to be kidding me. This is a complete waste of my time.*”

The second girl never applied, which is okay by St. Andrew’s. “I am very clear in admissions about who we are and what we do,” Robinson said. “If they do come, they understand what they are signing up for. And when they get here and everyone is doing it, it feels great.”

Mark Oppenheimer is the author of *Squirrel Hill: The Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting and the Soul of a Neighborhood* and the host of the podcast Gatecrashers, about the history of Jews at Ivy League schools.

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