

AWAY FOR THE DAY

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Survey Reveals That The Majority of US Middle Schools Allow Students to Carry Cell Phones Throughout the School Day

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Abstract

Smartphone use among middle-school-aged youth is increasing with the average age that a child gets a smartphone at 10.3 years old. Studies have shown that cell phones in schools can have a negative impact on students' academic performance and emotional wellbeing. However, there is no national data on what percentage of middle schools require phones to be put away for the day versus those that permit students to carry them all day. In this study, 1200 middle school parents were surveyed about cell phone policies in private and public middle schools and their preferences regarding such policies. The survey revealed that 56% of middle schools allow students to carry their cell phones with them all day, while 82% of parents do not want their middle schoolers to use their phones during the school day. Public schools are twice as likely to allow middle schoolers to carry phones all day than are private schools. These results highlight a concerning gap between the predominant permissive middle school cell phone policies on the one hand, and research on the impact of phones in schools on academics and wellbeing along with parental preferences for away-for-the-day policies on the other.

Introduction

Over the past few years, cell phone ownership has become increasingly prevalent among young people. The average age that children get their first smartphones is now 10.3 years old, and the majority of middle schoolers have smartphones. (Ref. 1) A 2015 survey of 2,658 8- to 18-year-olds shows that they are on screens 6.5 hours day, which does not include screen time in school or screen time for homework. (Ref. 2) Meanwhile, studies have shown that cell phones in schools can have a negative impact on students' academic performance and emotional wellbeing. (Ref. 3-13) The ubiquity of cell phone ownership among pre-teens and teens, the large amount of time spent on screens during non-school hours, along with data on downsides of phone access in schools, makes the question of cell phones policies in middle schools of increasing importance.

There is no national data on current cell phone policies in U.S. middle schools. To learn more about such policies, we conducted a survey focused on two primary questions: 1) what are current middle schools' cell phone policies and 2) what policies would parents prefer.

Methods

The study was conducted by Dr. Delaney Ruston and team using email contacts collected by Ruston's company, MyDoc Productions, creator of the documentary "Screenagers: Growing Up in the Digital Age." These emails were from people who had seen the documentary, were interested in seeing it, had signed up to receive Dr. Ruston's weekly blog or the "Screenagers" newsletter. Between May 30th and June 15th, 2017, 52,000 emails were sent asking recipients to fill out an online survey. An average of three reminder emails were sent to non-responders over the ensuing two months. Data from this survey was collected and analyzed using SPSS and Excel.

Results

Among survey participants, 1,421 had at least one child in middle school and 1,200 of these were usable for analysis. The following are the major findings from the analysis:

- 91.4% of parents were either extremely (49.8%) or very (24%) sure of their children's school policy on cell phones. (Table 1)
- A majority (56%) of middle schools allow students to carry phones all day. These policies include the following (Table 2):

Phones can be kept with students all day but are not used in class or during passing periods, breaks or lunch (20.5%)

Phones are allowed to be used during breaks, passing periods, and lunch but never in classes (10.8%)

Phones are allowed to be used during breaks, passing periods, and lunch but never in classes (21.6%)

Phones allowed during class by most teachers at students' discretion. Phones can be used during hall breaks and lunch (2.6%)

- Public schools (64%) are over twice as likely to allow students to carry phones all day compared to private schools (31%). (Table 3)
- 82% of respondents reported that they do not want their children using cellphones at middle school and prefer policies that either require that cell phones be left in lockers all day (58.9%), not using used during breaks, passing periods or lunches (20%), or left at home (2.9%). (Table 4)
- Of the 56% of schools that allow students to carry phones all day, roughly one-third of them have a policy stating that students are not to use their phones during breaks and lunch. However, how well the policy is implemented could not be ascertained.

Discussion

These results indicate that a majority of middle schools allow students to carry phones all day. Research shows that cell phones can be distracting in classroom settings and can affect students in multiple ways. Cell phone use among students, including the mere presence of a phone, can negatively impact academic performance. (Ref. 3-9) Also, with phone use in school, issues related to social media, such as cyberbullying, can negatively affect emotional wellbeing of students. (Ref. 10-13) Studies have shown a significant increase in teen depression since 2012, with the highest increase among middle school-aged teens. (Ref. 14) The possibility that increasing the percentage of middle schools with away for the day policies could help to mitigate this rise in depression is an idea worthy of investigation.

Why would some middle schools have certain phone policies and not others? Extensive interviews with public and private school principals, teachers and other staff, provide the following rationale. Schools that permit students to carry phones all day give these top reasons for doing so; concerns of enforcing other policies, phone as potential academic tool and a belief that most parents want students to carry phones to facilitate student-parent communication. Schools that have away for the day policies give these top reasons; the viewpoint that the negative aspects of phones outweigh any academic benefits of phones, enforcement is doable, they want students to communicate together face to face, and that office phones are used for student-parent communication.

More than 8 in 10 parents would prefer that phones not be used by students at all during the school day. The percent of middle schools with policies that correlate to these parental preferences differ between public and private schools with two times as many public schools permitting students to carry phones than private schools. It may be that private schools are more likely to implement these policies as a selling point to attract parents because they believe, as our study suggests, that more parents prefer stricter policies. It could also be that private schools are more likely to have the reasons given above related to why certain schools choose away for the day policies. Other reasons are possible as well.

Among the schools that allow phones to be carried all day, 20% have a policy stating that students are not to use their phones during hall breaks and at lunch. However, our discussions with and visits to schools reveal that, even when this is the stated policy, students will often use their phones during times when use is supposed to be restricted, such as during class time. This behavior illustrates that expecting all students to be able to resist the urge to use their phones is not realistic.

The most significant limitation of our survey was that our sample was a convenience sample. Data was collected from parents who were interested enough in the issues of screen time and children that they saw a documentary about the topic, subscribed to a blog on the issues, and/or subscribed to the documentary's newsletter. Had the cohort been taken from a random sample of parents our findings may have changed. For example, parents whose children go to schools that allow students to carry phones all day could be more likely to be frustrated by such policy, and thus more likely to respond to the survey. If this is the case, then the overall percentage of middle schools with the more lenient policies would be overrepresented in our survey. This limitation should be taken into account when considering the conclusions of the study.

Conclusion

Responses from our survey indicate that, among both public and private middle schools, a total of 56% of schools allow students keep their phones with them all day. At the same time, 82% of parents want kids not to use their cell phones during the school day showing strong support for a change in middle school cell phone policies. Public schools were more than twice as likely to permit students to carry phones all day compared to private schools. Meanwhile, studies point to negative academic and emotional risks when cell phones are carried by middle schoolers during the school day. The gap between middle school policies, parental preferences, and science should be addressed through policies that ensure that students are not distracted by their phones throughout the school day. We believe that away-for-the-day policies, in which cell phones must be left in lockers for the day, or other places such as backpacks, would substantially meet this goal.

Data Tables

Table 1. Parents' certainty of child's school's cell phone policy		
Level of certainty	Number of responses	Percent of total
Extremely sure	598	49.8%
Very sure	288	24.0%
Moderately sure	211	17.6%
Slightly sure	52	4.3%
Not sure at all	52	4.3%
TOTAL	1,201	100%

Table 2: School cell phone policies		
School Policy	Number of responses	Percent of total
Phone turned in or left at home	45	3.9%
Phone left in locker	465	40.6%
Phone with student, but no use allowed	235	20.5%
Phone with student, allowed during breaks and lunch	124	10.8%
Phone with student, allowed at teacher's discretion	247	21.6%
Phone with student, allowed at student's discretion	30	2.6%
TOTAL	1,146	100%

Table 3: School Policies, Public vs. Private				
School Policy	School Type			
	Public		Private	
	Number of responses	% of group	Number of responses	% of group
No phones at school	2	0.3%	6	1.8%
Phones are turned in for the day	5	0.6%	27	8.1%
Phones must be left in student's lockers all day, turned in, or kept at home	260	32.8%	187	56.3%
Phones can be kept with students all day, but are not to be used in class and cannot be used in passing periods, breaks or lunch.	179	22.6%	47	14.2%
Phones are allowed for use used during breaks, passing periods, and lunch, but never in classes.	98	12.4%	22	6.6%
Phones are allowed for use in class when a teacher permits it, such as for a lesson or during free time. Phones can be used during hall breaks and lunch time.	210	26.5%	31	9.3%
Most teachers allow students to use their phones during class at student's discretion. Phones can be used during hall breaks and lunch time.	26	3.3%	4	1.2%
Other, please specify:	13	1.6%	8	2.4%
TOTAL	793	100%	332	100%

Table 4: Parents' Preferred Policies		
Policy	Number of responses	% of group
Phone turned in or left at home	33	2.9%
Phone left in locker	679	58.9%
Phone with student, but no use allowed	230	19.9%
Phone with student, allowed during breaks and lunch	101	8.8%
Phone with student, allowed at teacher's discretion	101	8.8%
Phone with student, allowed at student's discretion	9	0.8%
TOTAL	1153	100%

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