

Scroll, Swipe, Sleep?

In August 2024, Vigo County School District in Indiana implemented a policy requiring students to keep their cell phones in Yondr pouches that remain locked throughout the school day. According to administrators, the decision was made in response to teachers' reports that students were not only using their phones for TikTok consumption during classes but also that they came to school tired due to their nighttime social media activities. In a few weeks, staff noticed fewer disruptions in classes and a small increase in homework completion, but at the same time, a large group of students was campaigning against the policy, calling it unfair and inconvenient.

The decision by Vigo County is only part of an ongoing national debate. A Pew Research Center survey in 2023 reported that 95 percent of teenagers in the U.S. use YouTube, and more than 60 percent of them use TikTok or Instagram every day. While these platforms allow adolescents to keep in touch with their friends and even discover new hobbies and interests, parents and educators are of the opinion that persistent phone use causes sleep deprivation, which in turn leads to lower academic performance and increased anxiety. The American Academy of Pediatrics has warned that sleep-deprived teenagers suffer from declining academic performance and are at an increased risk of depression and other health problems.

The advocates of school regulations on phone locking think that restrictions on devices will protect students' health and learning and will also lead to teens forming better self-discipline. They say that the responsibility to prevent harm exceeds the right of unrestricted choice during school hours.

The opposition argues that these restrictions violate teen autonomy. They say that there are many teenagers in high school who are mature enough to drive a car, have their own job, or are even capable of enlisting in the army, yet they are told that they are not able to manage their usage of a mobile phone. Moreover, some also use their phones for translation, as digital calendars, or as emergency contacts. Therefore, the opponents contend that a total ban can be injurious.

Another point of view is that of equity. Teenagers of immigrant or marginalized families have most likely become so reliant on their mobile devices over the years that they must be allowed to use them to stay in touch with relatives who live in other countries or to access social support networks. In the view of the opponents, access shutdown will increase social isolation among the most vulnerable students, those who are already isolated.

Some ethicists who support students' access to phones also say that the issue should not be understood as a conflict solely between students and schools. They argue that many social media platforms are equipped with user-unfriendly addictive features like infinite scroll and push notifications that are meant to keep users hooked for as long as possible. From this point of view,

tech companies and lawmakers shoulder some of the moral blame for youth overconsumption and putting all the burden on students' self-control overlooks the systemic problem.

Discussion Questions

1. Should schools and communities regulate teen phone use in order to protect their health and learning even if doing so restricts their individual freedom?
2. How can communities best manage the tradeoff between short term enjoyment (social connection and entertainment) and long-term wellbeing (healthy sleep, concentration, and mental health)?
3. In cases where teenagers are trusted to drive or hold jobs, should they also be trusted with regulating their screen time?
4. Should districts such as the Vigo County be given the authority to regulate student phone use during school hours or is that an infringement on students' personal liberty?
5. Who is most responsible for teen screen overuse: individuals, parents, schools, or tech companies that produce the platforms?

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