

Teenage hangups: the drastic plans to keep high schoolers off their phones

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10 Put your cellphone away. Stop texting. Stop using the camera as a mirror. Stop looking at Instagram. They're the familiar commands of teachers and educators in the age of the smartphone.

15 Most teenagers today have grown up never knowing a world without smartphones, with the Pew Research Center reporting that 95% of all teens currently have access to or own a smartphone, and 45% are online almost constantly. That leaves educators the daunting challenge of teaching those whose attentions are – at least partially – attached to the devices in their pockets.

Most schools have put in place policies banning or regulating phone usage during school hours, and teachers now routinely find themselves confiscating devices or writing up students for being on their phones.

20 Educators are now exploring more drastic measures. This school year, more than 1,000 schools nationwide will be using Yondr, a pouch system that allows students to lock away their phones while they're in class.

25 Each morning when students arrive at school, they magnetically lock their devices into their own personal green and gray pouches. They maintain possession of their pouches and devices, but they cannot unlock it until the end of the day, when they tap it on an unlocking magnet station located throughout the school.

30 The concept is not new. Musicians and performers have been using Yondr to prevent people from filming their gigs since the San Francisco-based company launched in 2014. But in recent years, more and more schools have begun using the pouches to keep kids off their phones during school hours, with dozens in the Bay Area alone. "Demand has tripled this year," the Yondr spokeswoman Kelly Taylor said.

Allison Silvestri, the former principal of San Lorenzo high school east of San Francisco, implemented the tool three years ago. The results "were tremendous", she said. The students were paying attention more in class.

35 The school saw a decrease in referrals for defiance and disrespect. "It was just so powerful to hear students interacting with each other and interacting with adults on campus," she said.

40 Edward Huang, 16, was part of a pilot program that tested Yondr at San Mateo high school before launching it this school year. He has mixed feelings about Yondr. He's noticed a difference in his peers. "People aren't distracted," he said. "Even people who were on their phones in minor ways, like checking the time and checking notifications, those minor ways add up and have an effect on how engaged you are.

Socially, it has improved us. Even if it's all of us talking about how much we hate it, having something to hate is a conversation topic."

45 But he's already heard about issues some kids have had because they couldn't check their phones. Employers have tried to get in touch with students during the day, and couldn't.

Students have also figured out ways to hack the pouch. A few days ago, someone started an Instagram account that showcased ways to break the Yondr, said Audrey
50 Morganstern, a 16-year-old junior at San Mateo high school. "There was footage of them breaking the pin in the Yondr that controls the bag's magnet" she said.

Morganstern is a fan, however, likening Yondr to "training wheels for people that want to get off their phone".

55 "There are some people that I might not have been as close to that I've had some pretty cool conversations with because before I might have had my phone as a crutch to avoid awkward situations," she said.

Leadership high school in San Francisco started using Yondr this year, but allows students the opportunity to unlock their pouches at lunchtime, said Beth Silbergeld, the school's principal. She liked the concept of Yondr because the responsibility for
60 the phones remained on the students. "We are not in education to confiscate and manage property," she said. "Even some schools that use a system that checks the phones into a box, it becomes a huge responsibility for the teachers."

Some teachers have struggled to implement Yondr, just as some students have struggled to adhere by it and have found ways to hack the magnet lock, Silbergeld
65 said.

"Our sophomores believe (this program) is because of them," she said. "They say, 'We were so bad so you did this.' But this was a decade of noticing that something wasn't working and the efforts we were making of asking students to put their phones away and taking some of their phones away weren't working."

70 At Berkeley high school, the freshman class is trying a Yondr pilot program this year, but the rest of the school is still operating as usual. School policy states that students cannot have their phones out during class, and Angela Coppola, who teaches 10th and 11th grade history, confiscated up to six phones a class last year.

75 "Adults struggle with the addictive nature of this technology, so you have to have compassion for children who have grown up with this technology," she said.

Coppola would support an effort to get students to go device free for the day. In her 11 years teaching, she said she's seen the toll constant communication has taken on her students. "If you talk to any teacher, we've all noticed in the past five years, we've definitely seen a spike in anxiety," she said.

80 "The technology is so persuasive," Coppola said. "How can we expect people who are still developing to have stronger willpower than actual adults? We can't."

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Vivian Ho in San Francisco
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