

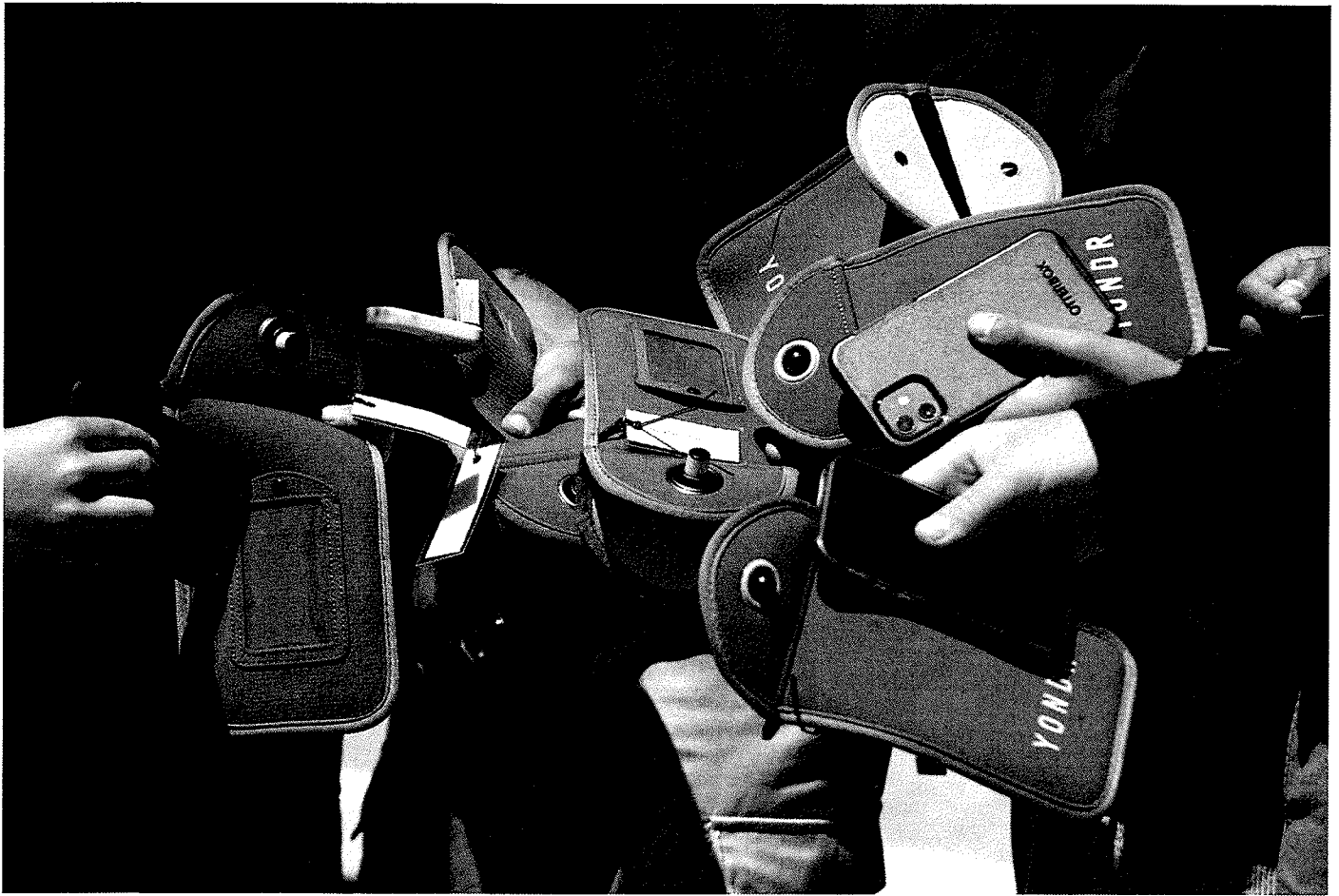
**OPINION**

# How cellphone-free schools can work for everyone

Time away from devices during the school day offers young minds the rare room to breathe — space for deeper thinking, social connection, and a daily digital detox.

**By Jhilam Biswas** Updated July 14, 2025, 3:00 a.m.

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A student used a cellphone after unlocking the pouch that secured it from use during the school day at a school in San Mateo, Calif., on Aug. 16, 2024. LEA SUZUKI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

*Dr. Jhilam Biswas is president of the Massachusetts Psychiatric Society and director of the psychiatry, law, and society program at Brigham and Women's Hospital.*

A quiet revolution is unfolding in the Newton middle schools. In the 2023-24 school year, F.A. Day Middle School piloted a program using magnetically locking pouches that kept students' phones and smartwatches secured during the school day. The results from the pilot were striking: Incidents of negative

student interactions around cellphones plummeted from more than 400 in the period from November 2022 through May 2023 to just 14 in September 2023 through March 2024.

Vandalism, social media-related bullying, and incidents of kids leaving class all decreased, and students got more opportunities to spend time outdoors and engage in face-to-face interactions. Teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the program, describing it as a “game changer,” according to Day principal Jackie Mann.

The success of this pilot led the Newton Public Schools to extend the phone lockaway program to all middle schools in the city this past school year. This initiative — part of a broader cellphone-free classroom policy in Newton — reflects a growing realization that the issue is not whether smartphones should be allowed in schools but how to manage removing phones so everyone still feels safe and connected to the community.

While critics have expressed concerns about safety and communication loss for students and families, Newton middle schools have found solutions like creating accessible phone

stations in the front office that allow students to contact home when necessary, and they have accommodations for students with specialized needs.

The national “Wait Until 8th” movement, started by Massachusetts psychiatrist Allison Baker, in which parents delay giving their kids smartphones until at least the end of eighth grade, is another way for communities to manage children’s cellphone use together. Some parents in places like Arlington, Concord, and Hingham are delaying smartphone use until after eighth grade, reducing peer pressure and parental pressure to have to get phones for their kids.

These approaches are increasingly supported by medical research. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, in his book “The Anxious Generation,” highlights a sharp increase in adolescent mental health issues coinciding with the rise of smartphones and social media around 2012. He notes that rates of depression among teen girls doubled between 2010 and 2019, with significant increases in self-harm and suicide attempts, particularly among younger adolescents.

Psychiatrists have seen a growing number of young people struggling with attention problems, insomnia, loneliness, and mood issues, symptoms that are often tied to excessive smartphone use.

Smartphones affect attention and sleep, two essential components for a healthy developing brain. The constant stimulation of smartphones rewires attention networks in the brain, making it harder for young people to focus on tasks that require sustained effort. Over time, this impairs not only their ability to concentrate, but also their emotional regulation, impulse control, and capacity for deep learning — all of which are foundational for academic success, healthy relationships, and long-term mental well-being.

In a 2023 advisory, Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy also declared an “epidemic of loneliness and isolation,” warning that social disconnection is as dangerous to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and stating that excessive social media use can lead to feelings of disconnection from others. In schools, constant attachment to phones can erode relationships, as scrolling and texting take the place of conversation and the building of self-esteem through socializing.

Creating smartphone-free school environments is not about punishment or control; it's about providing a supportive space where students can focus, connect, and recharge. Even if students continue to use smartphones at home, time away from devices during the school day offers young minds the rare room to breathe — space for deeper thinking, social connection, and a daily digital detox in a world where digital input rarely takes a pause.

As schools with smartphone policies are showing, it's possible to set healthy boundaries around smartphone use. Their solutions demonstrate that we don't have to choose between connection and protection — we can achieve both with careful planning and community partnership.

A Massachusetts school cellphone ban is now getting closer to becoming a reality. Last week, Senate members of the Massachusetts Joint Committee on Education voted to advance such a bill, which Senate President Karen Spilka supports. Governor Maura Healey voiced her support for a cellphone ban in public schools, with options for parents to reach their kids during the day.

Attorney General Andrea Joy Campbell and the Massachusetts Psychiatric Society have both also supported “bell-to-bell” limits on personal smart devices in Massachusetts schools.

Such changes do not require major funding, but they require thoughtful planning and community support. With clear policies and open communication and education, schools can create environments that put learning and social engagement first.

It is time to move past the debate over whether smartphones belong in schools and focus on how to manage them wisely in a world where they are here to stay. If we do, we can help students thrive — academically, socially, and emotionally.

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