

# Akron Beacon Journal

## students question plans to lock up cellphones

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Ahead of having their cellphones locked up during the school day starting this week, high school students from East Community Learning Center had the chance to grill Akron School Board Vice President Diana Autry about the district's plans to pull them away from technology.

In a meeting room at the University of Akron last week, a group of about 25 students pushed Autry on why the sudden ban on cellphones was happening, how it would be enforced and ideas for ways to possibly meet in the middle.

In return, Autry responded to each question by telling students she heard their concern, recapped what she heard from them and then explained the context behind the board's decision.

"You guys deserve to be able to focus fully in class," Autry told them.

The district is locking up phones in a pilot program at three campuses — Ellet, Buchtel and East. The pilot started Thursday with Ellet. East middle and high schools and Buchtel middle will follow on Wednesday.

The district has contacted with Yondr Inc. to lease almost 2,500 pouches that lock a cellphone inside. A special magnet on a docking base is required to unlock them.

The board voted 6-1 on Feb. 13 to pilot the program for the rest of the school year as a way of combatting disruptions in class as well as violence that breaks out in schools.

Autry explained that board members were listening to concerns of teachers that cellphones pose a distraction and have been used to organize and record fights during the school day.

But students participating in a leadership symposium last week through a program called the Locker Room Experience through Love Akron had the opportunity to bring their concerns about the cellphone issue directly to a school board member who just happened to be there.

# Akron Beacon Journal

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Addressing violence is one of the issues the symposium tackled. As the 200 students broke into small groups by schools, the students from East had a chance to come together and debate the merits of the cellphone ban as a solution to school violence.

Cochise Griffin, an East junior, said he didn't think locking up students' phones was necessary — at least at East. Many students listen to music while they do their work, he said, and he was worried if students who were bored in class didn't have their phones, they might cause distractions for other kids.

"I think (cellphones) help more than teachers actually understand," he said.

Cochise, a member of the district's student school board, said he would like to see teachers in each classroom have an unlocking station for the bags, so they could let students have their phones if they are done with their work.

"I feel like we were heard," Cochise said following the meeting. "But they want to please the teachers first and not the kids."

One of the biggest problems students said they had with locking up their phones was their parents. Some said their parents didn't want the district to take kids' phone, although each student will carry the locked back with them during the day and will maintain possession of their phones.

But other students said they were concerned about an emergency situation, or their parent needing to get them a message.

"The phone is a need," one student said.

Another said his parents wouldn't want to share family information with the main office if there was an emergency and he didn't have access to his phone.

Unlocking the phones at least during lunch was a popular suggestion, one Autry said she understood and would take back to the board to consider. Current policy allows students to use their phones before and after school and during lunch, but they are to be turned off and put away the rest of the day. Autry said she thought the policy was good but needed enforcement.

# Akron Beacon Journal

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there are lulls during the class during which they don't have work to do and often spend that time on their phones.

"We weren't talking about that before," Autry said. "Now we're having the conversation."

Kemp Boyd, executive director of Love Akron, said conversations are what last week's event was all about.

"We need to hear from them, so that's the biggest thing," he said.

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