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EDUCATION

'Like going back in time': Ellet staff, students react to first days with no cellphones

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It was unmistakable, that sound coming from the classroom at the end of the hall at Ellet Community Learning Center.

It sounded like laughing. It sounded like talking. It sounded like kids being kids — without cellphones.

Ellet was one of three Akron Public Schools campuses to launch a pilot program over the last week to lock students cellphones in pouches, called Yondr bags, during the school day. Several days into the experience, Ellet staff gave it a resounding thumbs-up, noticing the life breathed into the school and into students, who are socializing more, willing to go outside at lunch and more focused in the classroom.

"It's like going back in time," instructional coach Anne Harmon said. Teachers told her the first day without phones was "their best day of instruction in five years." They also noticed so many kids, whose social lives were put on hold for a year for the pandemic, laughing again.

Marketing teacher Katie Pancoast, a first-year teacher, said she hadn't built the kind of relationships with students where she had the confidence to ask a student with their phone out to put it away without fear of any pushback.

"The fact that I don't have to have that conversation anymore is great," she said.

Students, however, are still giving the cellphone lockdown mixed reviews, with many seeing the benefits just a week into the program, but others finding ways around it or pushing back on the program writ large.

"Actually, I kind of enjoy it," senior Duane Brown said of having his phone locked all day. He's not as distracted, he said, and has been more social with his peers.

Junior Allie Hixon said she thought it was going to be "like the world was going to end" to give up her phone all day, but she has grown somewhat used to it already. She's on it more at night now, she said, trying to catch up from the day.

Many students want their phones during downtime in class, she said. But largely, "the people that I talk to, they don't really care."

Wednesday afternoon during some downtime, her language arts teacher Emily Lees showed her and another student a school pastime of yesteryear: paper football.

Hixon said she'd seen it before but never learned how to play. She found it challenging — "the extra points were pretty hard" — and a way to keep her hands busy instead of texting.

Several students now fidget with other small items like stress balls. Principal Kim Sabetta's office has a basket full of them, along with other sensory-based knick-knacks.

Locking up students' phones during the day was aimed to combat two problems: distractions during class and student safety. Students have used their phones to arrange and film fights, and social media drama spills over into classrooms during the school day, even though students were supposed to have their phones off and put away except for at lunch.

Without her phone during the day, Hixon said, "I didn't have to deal with all the drama."

"I feel like I'm more engaged in my classes," she said.

But senior Demye Barnes said without students being able to access their phones, she was worried they would end up in more arguments, not fewer.

She had been considering purchasing an iPad, and the decision to ban phones but not iPads made the decision for her. During downtime after a class project, she was using her iPad to watch an episode of "Scandal." She said she's seen other kids using their iPads in place of their locked up phones.

Junior Takaya Anderson said being without her phone the first day did not help improve her mood, but instead made her frustrated. She was considering buying an iPad as well.

Students have Chromebook laptops with them throughout the day, but they have limited access to social media and websites like YouTube or music streaming platforms. Students are allowed to have headphones and watches that receive text messages, as long as they are not a distraction.

Numerous students have already broken their bags, which are not meant to be indestructible, and had to pay a \$20 fee to receive a replacement.

Marcelino Yanzanny, a sophomore, is on the school's newspaper staff and said he usually uses his phone during the day to reach out to students about being interviewed for stories and to record those interviews. It was hard to work around not having his phone all day, he said, and having to do those things after hours.

Yanzanny had interviewed students and staff about the phone issue, and said he had heard several concerns from students. He has concerns of his own as well, particularly in a worst-case scenario of a shooting at school. Yanzanny's generation has grown up doing lockdown drills and hearing about their peers across the country gunned down in their classrooms.

"How am I supposed to text my mom, 'I love you, Mom'?" he asked.

Sabetta, the principal, said students' safety in such a situation is always the priority, and noted the bags are not impossible to open if there is a true emergency.

Some parents have raised concerns, she said, particularly ones with children with anxiety who are used to being able to text their parents during the day if they need. The school has worked with those kids to find supports for them, Sabetta said. The goal, she said, is not for this to be a punishment or to hurt students with it.

Sabetta said the increased academic engagement she was seeing was enough to convince her this is the best route for the district in the long run. It was also refreshing not to see students walking down the hall with their head in their phone.

"It's just fun to see kids be kids," she said.

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