

Embracing a phone-free future for Walla Walla's middle schools

GUEST OPINION



Courtesy photo, Yondr
A Yondr cellphone pouch and locking base.

WADE SMITH -SPECIAL TO THE WALLA WALLA UNION-BULLETIN

In today's rapidly evolving digital landscape, the ubiquity of smartphones has fundamentally transformed the way our children interact with the world around them.

As the superintendent of Walla Walla Public Schools, I have witnessed

firsthand the profound impact these devices have on our students' lives.

While technology undoubtedly offers numerous benefits, it also presents significant challenges, particularly in the context of our students' mental health and well-being.

While the use of cell phones has historically been restricted during the school day at both Walla Walla middle school campuses, the current practice of keeping phones in pockets and backpacks does not address the overwhelming impact they have on our students.

When the average number of notifications on young people's phones is now 192 per day (about one every five waking minutes), it's no surprise that our children struggle to resist the constant lure.

To help protect and support our students, starting next year, Walla Walla's middle schools will be going "cell phone free."

This decision, supported by a wealth of research and driven by our commitment to the holistic development of our students, aims to create an environment where learning and personal growth can flourish unimpeded by the distractions and pressures of constant connectivity.

To facilitate this transition, we will be utilizing Yondr pouches, a simple yet effective tool that allows students to securely store their phones during school hours.

These pouches will ensure that phones are normally accessible only outside of school hours, helping students to focus on their studies, engage more meaningfully with their peers, and participate actively in the classroom.

Over 3,000 schools have implemented Yondr and their results speak for themselves — better social connection between students, improved mental health, increased student engagement, fewer behavior issues and improved academic performance.

Our decision to go phone-free at the middle school level is rooted in a growing body of evidence that highlights the negative impact of smartphones and social media on young people's mental health.

Renowned social scientists like Jean Twenge and Jonathan Haidt have extensively researched this issue, revealing troubling correlations between

smartphone use and declines in mental wellbeing among adolescents.

Data from our own Walla Walla middle school children reveal that one in three are “anxious or on edge” regularly, nearly half of our eighth graders are on social media over four hours per day, and more than a third of all middle schoolers report that they are sometimes or often distracted by the technology in their pockets and packs.

The data and conclusions drawn by research paint a sobering picture of the challenges our young people face in the digital age. As educators and community leaders, it is our responsibility to address these issues proactively. By creating phone-free environments in our middle schools, we aim to mitigate some of the negative impacts of excessive smartphone use and provide our students with a healthier, more balanced school experience.

We understand that this initiative may be met with some resistance. After all, smartphones have become an integral part of daily life for many students and their families. However, we firmly believe that the benefits of a phone-free school middle school environment far outweigh the inconveniences. By limiting distractions, we aim to foster a culture of deeper learning and genuine human connection.

Moreover, this initiative aligns with our broader goals of promoting mental health and well-being within our school community. By reducing the constant presence of smartphones, we can create spaces where students feel more present, engaged, and supported. We also encourage parents to support this initiative by fostering healthy phone habits at home and promoting open discussions about the responsible use of technology.

Helpful information is available on our website at: www.wwps.org/cellphonefree.

As we embark on this initiative, we are committed to monitoring its impact closely, engaging and communicating with parents, faculty and students along the way. We invite the Walla Walla community to join us in this endeavor. Together, we can create a supportive, nurturing environment where our young people can thrive, free from the constant distractions and pressures of the digital world during the school day. Let us embrace this opportunity to foster a healthier, more connected future for our children.

- Wade Smith is superintendent of Walla Walla Public Schools.