



How Schools Can Help End The Phone-Based Childhood

Five lessons for secular schools, from our experience in Jewish Day Schools.



CAROLINE BRYK

JUN 27, 2024

Intro from Zach Rausch and Jon Haidt:

The tide is turning. Since the launch of *The Anxious Generation*, [parents around the country \(and overseas\)](#) have been banding together to push back against the phone-based childhood. The Surgeon General has [called for a warning label](#) on social media platforms, governors from [New York to California](#) are taking action, and [schools across the United States](#) are committing to going phone-free (bell to bell). In fact, on June 18, the second largest school district in the United States, Los Angeles Unified School District, [pledged to go entirely](#) phone-free beginning as early as Fall 2024.

Although there has been enormous progress over the last few months, we have found that parents and schools sometimes feel stuck trying to change the norms at their schools and in their homes. The concerns often sound like this:

1. We want to go phone-free, but we are not sure of the best way to implement it.
2. We already have a classroom ban. Do we really need a bell-to-bell policy?
3. How do we get parental support for this? Some are worried about not being in touch with their children throughout the school day and feel we are stepping on parental freedom. How do we deal with this?

Jon has addressed some of these concerns in his Atlantic essay, [Get Phones Out of](#)

Schools Now (free version [here](#)). However, because we do not work in K-12 schools, we understood that we needed to find allies within school systems who understand the dynamics between parents and teachers and can help guide schools that want to go phone-free.

Enter [Caroline Bryk](#). In 2022, Jon met Caroline through their mutual associations with various Jewish philanthropies. Caroline runs the [Jewish Parents Forum](#), a series of programs for parents committed to raising Jewish and American citizens with moral courage and civic purpose. Caroline is passionate about preserving the health of local Jewish communities and is deeply involved in her children's Jewish day school and synagogue in Westchester County, NY.

Caroline invited Jon to give a lecture to the leaders of dozens of Jewish day schools through the Jewish Parents Forum. After turning in the manuscript for *The Anxious Generation* in the fall of 2023, Jon finally gave the lecture in December 2023. You can watch the talk [here](#).



Jon's message was that schools are the best places to organize collective action among parents and across a community. A *network* of schools working together with similar values and policies takes collective action to a new level, potentially helping vast numbers of families.

Caroline deeply understands the collective action problems faced by parents, educators, schools, and teens. She also understands that change must happen collectively, with coordination among parents, schools, camps, and local leaders.

This post is a guide for schools—both religious and secular—on how to go phone-free and help create new communal norms.

– **Zach and Jon**

American parents feel trapped between two threats to their children. On one side, they envision their children disappearing into their screens. On the other, they imagine something equally distressing – their children becoming excluded and isolated if they are the “only one” among their friends who do not have a phone and social media accounts.

American school leaders feel trapped as well. They, too, have witnessed the developmental and academic disruption that smartphones and other devices have caused students. At the same time, they foresee the complexity and challenge of imposing sweeping new norms on students and their parents, who have grown accustomed to the ubiquity of phones.

Yet, a group of institutions has emerged from this predicament with clarity and courage: a network of Jewish Day Schools.

Over the past 6 months, Jewish day schools have tackled this collective crisis with collective action. Through inter-day school events, discussion, and the sharing of resources, school leaders and parents have coordinated across state lines to write the communal roadmap they each desperately needed.

I write this post to share what I have learned through my work with parents and leaders at these schools. I hope public and independent school leaders learn from this network of Jewish schools and feel inspired to take action.

Here are 5 steps we took to set new communal norms:

Step 1. Schools Must Come Together

This past April, the [Jewish Parents Forum](#) hosted the first-ever Jewish Schools & Technology summit in New York City. Two hundred school leaders and board members from over 50 Jewish schools across the United States and Canada convened for two days of learning and workshops (one of which was [led by Zach Rausch](#)). The purpose of the gathering was clear: to introduce participants to experts (in medicine, psychology, and education) on this issue and to begin to reassess and formulate new tech policies in schools.



Image. Jewish day school leaders and board members gather at the Jewish Schools & Technology Summit in New York City. Here, Rabbi Daniel Alter, Rabbi Rafi Cashman, and Rabbi Yoni Fein discuss the latest tech initiatives they launched in their schools.

Very rarely do Jewish schools collaborate in person around a shared crisis, and board members and lay leaders are even rarer to join in the discussion. **However, an unprecedented challenge calls for an unprecedented response. Schools and parents need to think creatively about new ways to collaborate.**

What you can do: Compile a list of your school's peer institutions (these can be local competitors or schools across the U.S. that share key characteristics, i.e., mission, parent demographics, or educational philosophy). Reach out to these schools and propose a joint lecture and discussion on this topic (in person or on Zoom).


Following the discussion, form working groups for heads of schools to encourage ongoing discussion and strategic planning around this new initiative. In parallel, give parents the opportunity to sign up to lead this charge in their own schools and to connect with parents from others.

Step 2. Schools Must Go Phone Free

School leaders must get their “homes” in order before getting the community in order – this means ensuring that schools are truly phone-free spaces for students. Many schools consider themselves phone-free since they forbid the use of phones during class time. What this means, in practice, is that students find clever ways to hide their phone use (often behind laptop screens, desks, or books) and that the use of phones depends on the teacher’s commitment to policing. But even a perfectly enforced rule does not solve the problem – the moment class ends, students whip out their phones, obsessively check updates they missed, and withdraw from their peers. For this reason, a phone ban limited to class time is, in practice, useless. Instead, schools must go phone-free all day, requiring students to check phones into phone lockers or Yondr pouches, which remain inaccessible until dismissal.

Jewish day schools were quick to go phone-free for the entirety of the day. In a school-wide email introducing new guidelines around tech, Dr. Pesha Kletenik, head of Manhattan Day School (elementary school), announced that MDS would maintain a cell-free environment for all students and faculty during the school day. Additionally, students who use devices for learning will not have access to them outside of class – instead, they will be collected when no longer needed. Dr. Kletenik explained, “we are committed to providing an environment at school...that is wholesome and nurtures the natural physical, emotional, and psychological growth of our students.”

Rabbi Rafi Cashman explained what motivated his decision to ban all smart devices (including watches) during the school day at Netivot (K-8 school in Toronto):

 The world is surely filled with many stimuli that call for our children’s attention.

Some ideas are growth-oriented while others hold the potential for distraction and harmful negative influence that draw the minds of our students away from the Torah values that we seek to foster and develop. Netivot ought to be the place where the negative forces are rendered quiet.

Even more exciting is the number of Jewish *high schools* committed to going phone-free for the entire school day. For high school leaders in particular, this decision can feel particularly complex since students rely on phones for independent travel, scheduling, and time spent off campus during the day. In the last couple of weeks, Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School (a K-12 school in Rockville, MD) announced that their high school campus will be phone-free from arrival at 8 a.m. through dismissal at 3:45 p.m.

YULA (high school in Los Angeles) recently announced that their campus would become a cell phone and personal device-free campus (smartphones, smartwatches, and all mobile devices, including flip phones and iPads). Starting this fall, students will deposit their devices in pre-assigned cubbies upon arrival. Students with off-campus lunch privileges will be able to retrieve their devices before leaving and will check them back in upon their return. Rabbi Aryeh Sufrin (Head of School) wrote enthusiastically to his parent body,

Our administration and staff wholeheartedly believe this new policy will lead to improved academic performance, interpersonal and social growth, and better mental health and wellness. While we acknowledge that this decision may not be immediately popular among students, we are confident that they will come to understand and appreciate its value over time.

What you can do: If you are a school leader, commit to going phone-free for the fall of 2024. If the logistical challenges feel intimidating, connect with peer institutions that have gone phone-free or form a working group with other school leaders planning to make this change. If you are a parent, connect with other parents in your school and meet with your school leaders to make the case for going phone-free. In

crafting a presentation, reference Chapter 11 in The Anxious Generation, Jon's [Atlantic essay](#) on the case for phone-free schools ([free version](#)), and The Anxious Generation [resources](#) for educators.

Step 3. Parents Must Be Part of The Solution Too

The key takeaway from the summit was that screen use outside of school impacts outcomes inside of school. This requires schools to think creatively about how to encourage healthier tech choices off campus. Another major takeaway was that school leaders cannot do this work alone—***they need parent buy-in.***

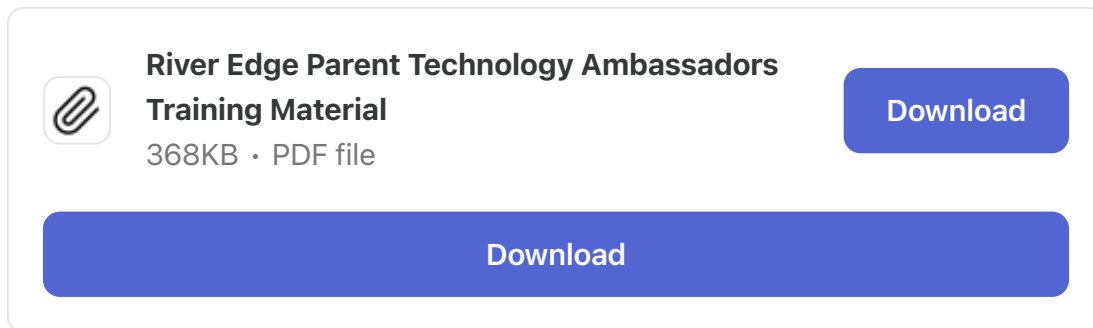
Recognizing this reality, one of the schools, Brauser Maimonides Academy (BMA) in Hollywood, Florida, launched a “Parent Ambassador” initiative.

In this program, several *parents* per grade form an ambassador committee with the school's full support. Grade by grade, the committee mobilizes parents to sign Wait Past 8th Pledges (i.e. to delay the adoption of a smartphone until high school). Ambassadors educate parents on the latest data, train one another to engage sensitively yet confidently with peers, and plan regular parlor meetings. Schools publicize and encourage attendance through regular communication and publicly celebrate communal wins. (See an example of a pledge [here](#)).

“As a follow up to the tech summit, Rabbi Fein (Head of School) designated Alissa Kashani (BMA mother) and me as the co-liaisons of the BMA Wait Past 8th Initiative,” explained Jillian Gliksberg, a mother at BMA. “In May, we divided parent ambassadors into three committees: Education, Marketing, and Parent Outreach and designated committee heads.” Since May, Jillian and the ambassadors have been developing a promotional video, website, and a calling campaign to encourage parents to sign the pledge.

The parent-led tech ambassador program has spread to Jewish day schools across the U.S. and Canada. Two weeks ago, Tamar Kahn, Shira Donath, and Michah Epstein,

tech ambassadors with children at Rosenbaum Yeshiva (N-8 school) in River Edge, NJ, shared their training materials with parent ambassadors in Boca Raton, Aventura, Atlanta, DC, Manhattan, and Westchester.



Dr. Nava Krohn, co-chair of the Parent Tech Committee at Yavneh Academy (K-8 school in Paramus, NJ) explained to *The Jewish Link* (a popular Jewish magazine) that in the past few months, the committee has “shared research with Yavneh parents, worked with Yavneh to bring in two world-renowned speakers and now *are the first Bergen County yeshiva to officially launch a voluntary parent pledge to delay smartphones and social media.*” In the weeks following the launch, most Yavneh grades have approached or exceeded 50% participation in the pledge, a major victory for the community and credit to this program.

The beauty of the ambassador program is that it does not require heads of school to mandate how parents conduct themselves in their homes – something they are deeply uncomfortable with. **Instead, by celebrating and encouraging this parent-led initiative, schools send a clear message to parents: we support this and we are your partners in this effort.**

What you can do: Identify 5-10 parents in your child’s school representing a cross-section of grades and communities (if your children attend a commuter school). As a group, meet with school leadership to express that, in the spirit of partnership and to protect the well-being of students, you are asking the school to support a parent-led initiative. Propose that your school launch a Parent Ambassador Program and volunteer as a group to be founding members.

Step 4. Leaders Must Step Up

When asked why he devotes tremendous time and resources to the tech crisis despite countless competing priorities, Rabbi Yoni Fein, head of BMA, shared,

My mission isn't just to teach children but to help guide them to become the best versions of themselves and to make a difference in the world. Part of that responsibility is to protect them from harm and guide them to successfully navigate the complexities of their world.

Rabbi Jonathan Knapp, Head of Yavneh, also understands his moral responsibility to take part in shifting communal norms. In a recent school-wide email, he wrote,

One of the main takeaways of the research is that the overall challenge of today's childhood is not an individual challenge but rather a communal challenge. There is strength in the power of community—of our community! The time for collective action regarding smartphones and social media is now. Our children are counting on us.

Rabbi Rafi Cashman, who led the tech initiative as Head of Netivot HaTorah in Toronto, shared with summit participants why he took this on: “Ten years from now, I want to be able to look myself in the mirror and feel I truly did everything I could to protect my students and set them up to succeed.”

Image. School leaders and parents convene at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun on the Upper East Side of New York City for a lecture with Dr. Jonathan Haidt. Together, they explore how Jewish day schools and parents can partner to help students flourish in a digital age. Watch Jon's talk [here](#).

Courageous leadership has never been more important than at this moment of consequence. Parents and lay leaders must encourage school leaders to take on this work and celebrate those who have.

Step 5. We Must Think Beyond The School and Build Healthier Communal Norms

For this network of schools, elevating this issue in the greater Jewish community –

beyond homes and schools – is key to setting new norms.

Rabbi Daniel Alter, head of The Moriah School in Englewood, NJ, participated in a panel at the tech summit and shared why he devoted ample time to one-on-one discussions with parents: **“This is not a school challenge – this is a community challenge.”**

Since the tech summit, the Rabbinical Council of America, an umbrella organization of hundreds of pulpit rabbis across the United States, has devoted its keynote session at its annual convention in Stamford, CT, to this issue. The call to action is clear: As spiritual and moral leaders, rabbis need to use their platforms to encourage local families and leaders to make healthy changes in their homes and institutions.

Another key node of influence in the lives of these Jewish families – the network of *Jewish sleepaway camps* – is getting involved as well. While most Jewish sleepaway camps have been device-free for campers for years, there has been significant discussion around making camp device-free for counselors in the past months.

Jeremy Jozsef, head of Camp Morasha, one of the largest Modern Orthodox sleepaway camps in the country, boldly shared new norms with families. In a recent email, he announced that counselors.

“will no longer be permitted to carry personal cell phones during working hours. Their sole focus needs to be on providing for their campers, and, unfortunately (yet not surprisingly), carrying a cell phone has proven too distracting.

Anticipating the logistical challenges of going phone-free, Jozsef shared that the camp purchased 240 16-channel radios. Jozsef also committed to reassessing the camp’s social media presence and the role of staff as “camp photographers.” Jozsef concluded his email with a commitment to families to “be fully present to care for our campers” to “protect those we care about most.”

What you can do: Ask yourselves: who beyond school leadership holds communal

influence where I live? Church leaders? City council members? Local business leaders? Reach out to them and ask for a meeting with several other parents. Make the case for why their voice is needed in this emergency and provide concrete next steps for action, for example, ask them to present at a local conference or board meeting or to write an article on this topic to their constituents.

Extracting Ourselves from the Trap

Millions of parents, teachers, and heads of schools across the country must make a choice: wait another decade for the scientific community to reach a complete consensus on this issue at devastating costs to children, or, as advised by the U.S. Surgeon General this past week, take bold action now to protect our children.

This moment demands courage, confidence, and faith from parents, school leaders and communal leaders that this crisis is surmountable and that the reclamation of healthy childhood lies on the other side.

The Jewish educational world is making progress, but this work is just starting. We are all facing collective action problems, and the most powerful solutions are collective or community-based. We hope that our progress and our discoveries will be of help to other communities to bring about the transformative change our children deserve.

Subscribe

Caroline Update August 26th 2024:

Since writing this post in June, many more Jewish schools have gone phone-free, announced serious new initiatives, and addressed even more layers of this complicated crisis (I created a website to help school leaders take action by sharing

emails and initiatives of peer institutions).

***Image.** Jewish day schools that have communicated new tech guidelines.*

With the new academic year quickly approaching, I spent the month connecting with dozens of heads of school and reading dozens of “New Tech Policy” emails. Below, I highlight the most exciting developments since writing in June:

Development 1: Regional Collective Action

Following participation in our tech summit, three Jewish schools located in Brooklyn (Barkai Yeshivah, Magen David Yeshivah and Yeshiva of Flatbush) participated in another communal discussion (this time in Deal, NJ) led by Jon on the perils of the screen-saturated childhood and the urgent need for collective action. A week later,

these three schools sent a joint letter to their parent bodies, the subject:

Technology: A Community Mission. The heads of these three schools opened by recognizing that they were reaching out in a “truly exceptional and unified fashion, as our collective experience persistently indicates to us that these are exceptional times.” They continued to articulate the negative impact technology has had on their students and their resolve to help their collective communities reclaim childhood. Specifically, they pledge their commitment to the 4 norms Jon laid out in the Anxious Generation:

- *Children should not have smartphones before high school*
- *Children should not have access to social media before age 16 (ideally 18)*
- *Children should not have access to phones in school*
- *Children should have more opportunities for free play, independence and responsibility.*

Their powerful letter concludes on a hopeful note:

As mentioned above, these guidelines are just the beginning. Each school will be following up with our school communities to present our plans to support and actualize these norms. We must commit ourselves to being active partners in support of these norms. Our children are counting on us!

Often, collective action is easier to execute when done regionally. While it is daunting to galvanize networks of schools across the country to embrace new norms, it is easier to do so with institutions in close proximity to one another. With this in mind, we are excited to run our second tech summit for Jewish day schools this spring in Bal Harbor!

Development #2: Bus-to-Bus is the new Bell-Bell

An exciting new trend within Jewish day schools is the policy that students cannot

have access to smartphones on bus rides to and from school, recognizing that smartphones reduce healthy socializing and the unstructured bus time presents critical opportunities for social development.

Rabbi Jonathan Knapp, head of Yavneh Academy in Paramus, NJ explained in a recent school-wide letter:

As part of our continued effort to provide the most appropriate learning environment for our students, Yavneh is adjusting our school smartphone and cellphone policy as follows:

*Smartphones and smartwatches are **not** permitted in school or on the bus. Any such device must be left at home. For parents who want to be able to communicate with their child on the bus, use of smartphone alternatives like the Gizmo watch, Gabb phone, and **voice and text only** flip phones will be permitted.*

He continues by troubleshooting questions he anticipates receiving from parents and announcing upcoming conversations they plan to hold with middle school students upon their return to school.

He concludes with a confident, positive sentiment:

It is our firm belief that these adjustments to our cell phone policy, which align well with our core values and beliefs, will help us further develop the academic, spiritual and emotional growth of every child in our care.

Development #3: No Social Media Accounts and Group Chats. Period.

Several Jewish schools have taken more active stances in setting new communal norms (for the record, I do not like the word “resetting” since I do not believe we consciously set the norm of kids having screen-based childhoods – it crept up on us).

Schools in Miami, Long Island and Pittsburgh implemented bold new rules for their students bodies:

1. Children in K-8 cannot have access to their own social media accounts
2. Children in K-6 cannot take part in group chats

In explaining his rationale, Rabbi Sam Weinberg, head of Hillel Academy (Pittsburgh) shared with parents that, historically, Hillel has “never established rules or norms that affect our students or families lives outside of Hillel. However, we have determined that now is the time to establish certain core beliefs and guidelines relating to technology and social media.” In announcing a similar policy, heads of the Lanaar School in Aventura, FL affirmed that their “ priority is to love and care for your child—our student. As a school community, we have made this decision to further demonstrate our commitment to the health and wellbeing of our students.”

Development #4: Parent Tech Ambassadors take on Bar and Bat Mitzvah Norms

As more parent ambassador groups convene, a major topic of discussion, especially among 5th and 6th grade parents relates to setting norms for Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. For this network of schools, these milestones are celebrated by all 6th and 7th grade students and typically, the entire grade is invited. These celebrations therefore make up a significant portion of the 6th and 7th grade experience. At several parent ambassador meetings, parents are committing as groups to host “tech free” bar and bat mitzvahs. While a group of parents in Long Island created a traveling “tech box” for kids to deposit phones, another group of parents decided that kids will not bring phones at all. Instead, included on the Paperless Post invitation is the name and number of a designated parent who can be reached during the event should a parent need to contact his or her child. Likewise, the child in attendance can ask that designated adult to contact their parents should they need to. What they found: both kids and parents rarely involve the designated parent!



142 Likes · 11 Restacks

← Previous

Next →



A guest post by

Caroline Bryk

Caroline serves as Executive Director of Tikvah's Jewish Parents Forum, a series of programs for parents committed to raising morally courageous Jewish and American citizens.

34 Comments



Write a comment...



Mike G The Math Lab Jun 27

I'm a K-12 guy so read ~40 articles a week. This is best thing I've read in ages.

Step 3, the "Parent Ambassador," that's a killer app for the phone crisis. Allows school to unleash new out-of-school norms without the heavy-handedness of a school-created policy. If you've got enough Ambassador parents, threads the needle.

Step 5, the phone free experience of sleep-away camp, we need more of that built into a typical day, week, month, year. Yes.

I design new schools sometimes (private, charter), so this approach is a Must Have for my next one. I'd concede that it's harder to flip existing schools.

♡ LIKE (10) 💬 REPLY ↗ SHARE



Jim Collinsworth Jun 27

Another critical factor, parents need to stop using their phones all the time in front of their kids. The use starts there.

♡ LIKE (9) 💬 REPLY ↗ SHARE



2 replies

32 more comments...

