

Helping Students Thrive in a World That's Always On



By Alana Winnick

We are not preparing students for the world they're entering if all we do is take their phones away. With the push for bell-to-bell cellphone ban gaining momentum in New York, the conversation around student device use is at the forefront. And while removing personal devices during the school day may be a necessary step, it can't be the only one. A ban without explanation is a rule, not a lesson. And what our students need right now isn't just restriction. It's understanding, guidance, and support.

This generation is growing up in a world we didn't. The challenges they face are not the ones we faced. Their devices shape their social lives, their sleep cycles, their sense of self. And when we treat phone use like a discipline issue instead of a developmental one, we miss the bigger picture entirely.

They don't just need limits, they need tools. They need to learn why boundaries exist, how to manage their devices outside of school hours, and what to do when the constant pull of technology begins to affect their focus, motivation, or mental health. Because it's not just students who are suffering from the constant scroll, we all are. We need to teach self-regulation, not just compliance.

That means helping students understand how phones — and many of the apps they use — are designed to hijack their attention through fast feedback and dopamine hits. It means shifting the narrative from banning to “we're teaching you how to use this in a way that supports your well-being.” When students feel part of the

conversation rather than controlled by it, they're more likely to develop real agency.

But schools can't do this alone. We need families to be part of this work. If students are told to unplug at school and then spend six hours at home glued to a screen, the message doesn't hold. Balance isn't something students learn through enforcement — it's something they learn through modeling and consistency. That means parents have to be willing to take a look at their own habits, too.

And in the classroom, we need to critically examine how we're using technology ourselves. Not all screen time is equal. There's a big difference between students creating original work — expressing their voices, ideas, and innovations — and passively completing skill-and-drill activities. When we rely on gamified platforms that deliver quick rewards, we're reinforcing the same attention loops we're trying to interrupt.

In an AI-powered world, originality is currency. The students who will thrive are the ones who know how to

think deeply, create meaningfully, and manage their attention. That doesn't happen by accident. It happens by design.

So let's ask ourselves:

- Are students using tech to create or consume?
- Does this tool deepen thinking, or just speed things up?
- Are we building focus and resilience, or undermining them?

This isn't about banning phones forever. It's about teaching students how to live with them — without letting them take over. It's about giving them the lifelong skills they need to navigate a world that will never again be unplugged.

Because our job isn't to control devices — it's to empower the humans holding them.

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