

EDUCATION

Thetford Academy forum focuses on cell phone bans in schools



by **Haley Clough** Valley News Correspondent
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A phone holder hangs in a classroom at Delta High School, Friday, Feb. 23, 2024, in Delta, Utah. At the rural Utah school, there is a strict policy requiring students to check their phones at the door when entering every class. Each of the school's 30 or so classrooms has a cellphone storage unit that looks like an over-the-door shoe bag with three dozen smartphone-sized slots. (AP Photo/Rick Bowmer)

THETFORD — Upper Valley proponents of a national movement to keep kids from using cell phones while in school made their case during a community forum Tuesday at Thetford Academy.

Panelists at the forum, hosted by the Vermont Phone-Free Schools Community Group, cited a National Institutes of Health **study** that indicated young adults whose screen time surpasses two hours a day were at a greater risk for mental illness and suicide.

“I live this and breathe this all day long,” said pediatrician Rebecca Yukica, who has offices in Bradford, Vt., and Thetford. “I see damage from cell phone use every day.”

Child psychologist Ray Chin, of Thetford, referenced neuroimaging studies that show similarities when comparing the brains of young adults who use screens for more than five hours a day with those of people who struggle with alcoholism.

“The idea I want to leave with you today is that (cell phone use) is an addiction,” Chin told the audience, which included Thetford teachers and staff, along with representatives from several other Upper Valley schools.

Nationally, the potential harm caused by kids overusing cell phones is spurring elected officials and school districts to take action.

In Los Angeles, the board overseeing the country’s second-largest school district voted this week to ban students from using their cell phones during the school day, effective by early 2025.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom recently **called for** bans on cell phone use in all state schools. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb have done so in their states as well.

In tandem with some state governments moving to phone-free schools, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy **told Congress** on Monday that he thinks social media apps should carry a warning label, similar to those required on cigarette boxes.

People should be made aware of the adverse effects that social media use can have on an individual’s mental health, Vivek testified.

According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted last fall, 72% of teachers who responded said that students being distracted by cell phones was a major problem in their classroom. The survey also showed that 30% of teachers whose schools or districts have cell phone policies said the rules are “very or somewhat difficult to enforce.”

At Hartford Memorial Middle School, Dean of Students Patrick Lincoln said he'd seen phone use and social media become an equity and justice issue. "The most vulnerable students are most impacted (by phones in schools)," said Lincoln, who served on the forum's panel.

In this year's Vermont legislative session, leaders of the phone-free schools movement urged lawmakers to support a bill that would have prohibited students from using cell phones and accessing social media on school property.

The bill failed to get the support of the Vermont Principals' Association and the Vermont Superintendents Association.

Vermont Health Commissioner Mark Levine testified against the bill. While he supports reducing kids exposure to social media, Levine said the bill seemed "unrealistic" and a bit "heavy handed," VtDigger reported.

The state Senate rejected **S.B.284**, but asked the Agency of Education to come up with a model policy that schools might use.

A similar bill is expected to be introduced during the 2025 legislative session.

More and more U.S. schools are giving students so-called locked pouches to store their cellphones during the school day. Yondr pouches, made by a California company, feature a magnetic lock. Students keep their phones in the pouches until school administrators unlock them at the end of the school day.

Attempts to turn schools into phone-free zones can prove divisive in communities.

Some parents argue that cell phones are a useful tool that allows them to contact their children during emergencies or make changes in family plans that crop up during a school day.

At Tuesday's forum, a Thetford Academy teacher said she gave her students a writing prompt at the beginning of the school year, asking what their reaction would be if the Grade 7-12 school banned cell phone use. Students were resoundingly against it, she said.

Thetford Academy student Stone Riegler said at the forum that he doesn't have a cellphone. He told the audience that he sees students "struggle through 41 minutes of class, just to have 3 minutes after class on their phones."

It's a distraction for students without phones and has caused difficulty when it comes to schoolwork, Riegler said.

School-issued electronic devices, such as Chromebooks, are supposed to bridge gaps in resource inequity, but phones widen that gap, he said. Some teachers require students to utilize social media or phones to submit or create assignments, which isn't possible for Riegler.

In Vermont, cellphone-free advocates also support initiatives that would allow students to "opt out" of using electronic devices for schoolwork or activities. Teachers should also be able choose not to use various digital learning strategies, if they prefer non-tech alternatives, advocates argue.

A parent asked panelists at the forum when students would be "included in the conversation" on phone policies in schools.

Pushback is to be expected, but students still need to have their voices heard, panelists said.

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