

Bad Reception

Students not fans of phone bans

Story By: Davin Yakey

Phones have taken a central role in the modern era, especially within the academic setting. As of 2024, school policies on cell phones have been revisited, and some are implementing further steps on limitations.

Usage of personal cell phones has been restricted while in academic settings for years for a variety of reasons. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation (or KFF), a San Francisco-based, non-profit organization focused on health policy, 91% of phones were banned in schools back in 2009, with that number falling to 66% in 2015, then rising to 76% in 2021. Currently, West's policy on cell phones is that their use is not permitted in classrooms unless permission is given by that teacher.

"I think overall our society, students, probably adults as well, all have a different degree of dependence on our phones, and I think depending on how we use them there are a wide range of consequences for that," principal Jeb Steckbauer said.

The Pew research center cited that, as of 2024, 98% of Americans own a cellphone of some kind. This was an exact match to data from a school wide survey sent out to West students in November that stated 98.4% owned a cell phone.

"In an ideal world it would be great to have everyone leave their phones at home," Steckbauer said. "They come to school and essentially have a phone ban at school. I truly think that we would probably see some great benefits from that. I think that we would engage with one another a little bit more than we have been instead of sitting in the commons and looking at our phones, maybe we would be talking to each other."

Most phones are banned in open labs during unstructured mods, but the commons are still a place for students to use their phones in various ways.

Only 17.3% of students agreed that there could be benefits associated with a total ban, but when asked if they thought a ban might improve student grades, 53% said they might improve "a bit." The same number thought social interactions might improve.

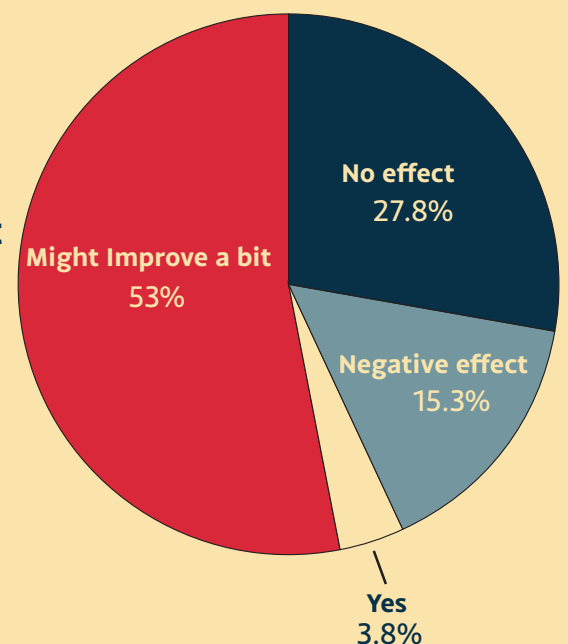
"I don't think that [a total phone ban] is a reality. We need that communication tool for a lot of different things, safety being one, rides after school, communication with parents, there are so many different things," Steckbauer said.

There are pros and cons to each side, however the individuals most heavily affected by the issue are the students themselves.

"I know what I use it for, but I do not know what other people do." junior Thalia Bickford said. "Sometimes, I use it to take a minute from school, or use it to help with my schoolwork. I know other students use it for not paying attention in class."

There are 1,477 students at West, but not all of them use their phones for the same things. According to the survey results, 91.1% of students use their cell phones for school-related functions like checking Canvas, Infinite Campus, or their schedule. But 84.7% also said they use their phones for texting. Social media was used on phones by 65.2% of students, while 42.2% used them for games.

Do you think restrictions on phone usage at school would improve students' grades overall?



“I can understand having little cubbies for phones in classrooms, because I have seen online where they have those weird bag things [to lock away] your phone,” junior Lily Ryan said. “But I personally would be pretty upset, I do constantly check on my phone for my schedule, and also just to check in with my family members and stuff. A lot can happen in a day, and school is a stressful environment so it’s nice to just have a phone so I can reach out when I need to.”

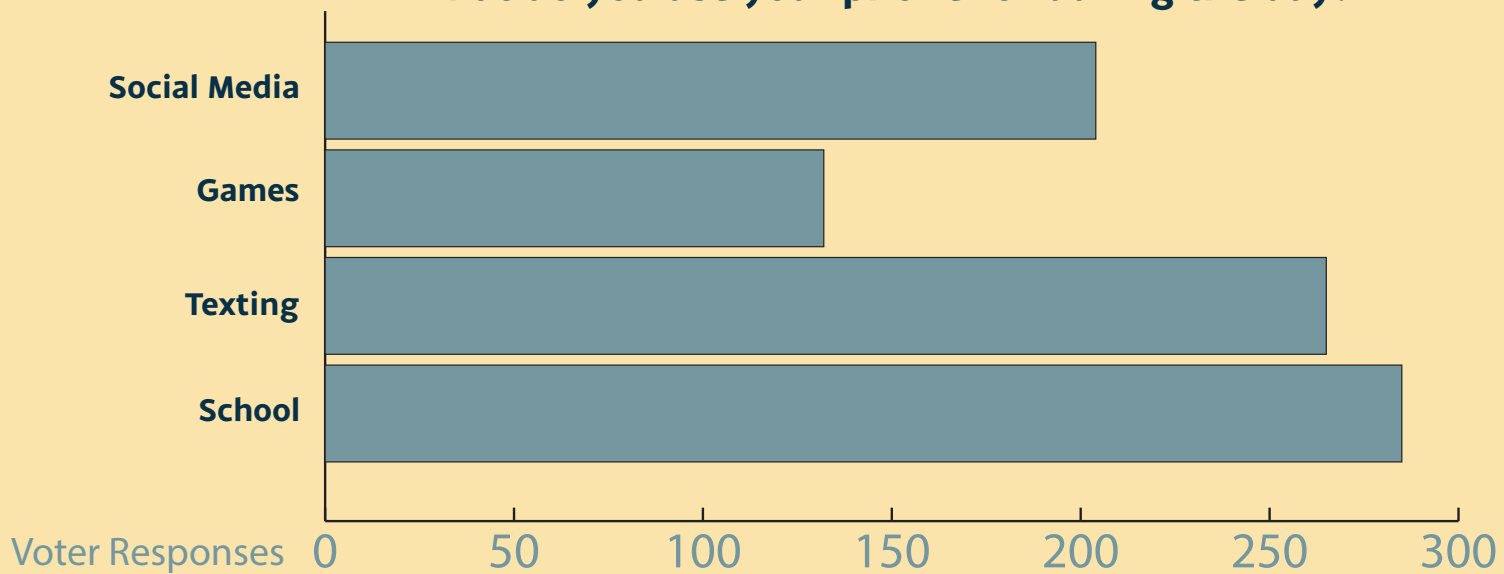
It is important to note that the school provides families ways to contact their students through the office, as was the case before cell phones were around.

“I think the important thing with phone behavior is to realize that there are varying levels of dependence for adults and students,” Steckbauer said. “Each of our brains are different, and sometimes, a one size fits all for everyone, I don’t think, is the right approach.”

Even if a more aggressive phone ban was preferred, it would be difficult to enforce due to West’s flex-mod schedule, where students have class and unstructured times that are different each day and different from their fellow students. West also has an open campus system for upperclassmen and second semester sophomores who meet the academic criteria, creating a steady flow of students in and out of the building during certain times of day. Additional challenges would include costs of equipment or workforce to execute the ban, approval from the school board, push back from parents and dealing with medical and other exceptions. As a result, West’s current rules around cell phones will remain in place for students.

“Don’t take it out unless the teacher says you can,” Bickford said. “Which is kind of already the rule, but no one actually follows it.”

What do you use your phone for during the day?



Working Hard or Hardly Working

With his textbook open, senior Grant Russell plays a mobile game during unstructured time in the commons.

Students at West use their phones during the day for a variety of reasons including checking their schedule, social media, music, and games.

Photo by Davin Yakey



To see the full survey results scan this QR code or type in this link.

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