

NINA MOINI: For generations of students, passing notes was a classic way to get distracted at school. Then, came cell phones. And suddenly, that distraction could fit in a student's pocket, connecting students to friends and the entire internet at any moment of the day. Minnesota schools are now entering their first full year under a state mandate to have policies governing students' use of cell phones. The mandate went into effect in March.

So in preparation for this year, we wanted to ask some school leaders what they've learned so far about getting phones out of the classroom. We're joined now by three Minnesota high school principals, all who are navigating different phases of cell phone policies at their schools. We're happy to have principal Rob Reetz, who leads Mounds View High School. Welcome, Principal Reetz.

ROB REETZ: Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: And we're happy to have principal Robert Bach, who leads Stillwater Area High School. Thank you for being here as well, Principal Bach.

ROB BACH: Absolutely, you're welcome. Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: And we're thrilled to have Principal Michelle Koch, who leads Menahga High School. That's in Northwestern Minnesota. Thank you for being here as well, Principal Koch.

MICHELLE KOCH: Thanks, Nina. It's an honor.

NINA MOINI: So, Principal Reetz, I'd love to start with you. Mounds View, I understand it's entering its fourth year with a cell phone policy that involves students placing their device into a pocket at the front of the classroom during each period. Would you tell me a little bit more about that method and what you're seeing that made you want to give this type of method a try and then maybe stick with it for now?

ROB REETZ: Sure. We surveyed parents a while ago now. And honestly, it was the most responded survey that I've ever given. Over 1,000 responses indicating wide support for restricting use of cell phones in classrooms but also support for allowing students to have their phones on them in unstructured times-- before and after school and during passing time. We tried a couple different things.

We landed on the phone and caddies and an entry routine that compels students to put their phone in the caddy as part of how we take attendance. That is important because it ensures consistency from classroom to classroom. We have a really high rate of compliance among our teaching staff. They want these phones out of students' hands. They can't compete with the amount of entertainment that students derive from these devices. And we've had a ton of success. We've seen increased achievement and decreased concerns with behavior.

NINA MOINI: OK. Principal Koch, I want to learn a little bit more about Menahga's cell phone policy. I understand you're kicking off an away for the day, the entire day policy for this fall. Would you tell us a little bit about your school's rules around cell phones? What they were like maybe in the past or last year and what led you to make this change for this year?

MICHELLE

KOCH:

Absolutely. I just want to say, thank you to the two gentlemen you have on this call in this interview with me because I have certainly learned an awful lot from both of them as leaders through this. In Menahga, we are a pre-K-12 building. Our high school is 7-12. And we're about, I don't know, 460 students.

We've always believed if you take something away, we don't give our kids an opportunity to learn how to use it appropriately. So when we started looking at our cell phones and the changes it was making in our learning day, we kind of tiptoed into it. We asked students to put it away during learning time. We left it to each teacher to allow how much use-- because a cell phone, a lot of times, is a more stable tool than some of the older Chromebooks. And so we left it up to the teachers at that point.

And we found there were inconsistencies. And so we then transitioned to our seventh and eighth graders were just not going to have them at all. But our 9th through 12th graders, again learning how to use them in the real world, they were going to have to keep them put away, bell to bell. So the time the teacher started the class to the time the teacher ended the class, kids' phones were to be put away. We had the pocket charts in classrooms.

And again, we said to teachers, if you see a need for that tool, go ahead and use it. A lot of teachers had great success with that. But we had phones during passing time and phones during our lunch hours. And as we have seen more research coming to us on the distractions of cell phones and teachers have had more pushback from kids, our school board went ahead this fall. And our board is 100%, we're going to put him away for the day. So our kids will be putting their phones away before school starts in the morning and getting them when they leave.

We're going to see how it goes. But it keeps everybody on the level playing field. Those kids that have some medical issues will get to have their phones on them, obviously. But we are going to have our kids put their phones away for the day.

NINA MOINI:

Yeah, Principal Bach, I hear Principal Koch talking about this journey, year to year, trying to engage with everybody and figure it out along the way. I wonder if there, in Stillwater, it sounds like you've taken a similar approach with this bell-to-bell kind of phone-free school day. What types of pushback do you receive on that? And do you feel, like, pressure to get this right? Or are people understanding of the fact that this is such a changing landscape?

ROB BACH:

Yeah, I appreciate the question. I think overall, on the whole, reception in our community has been very favorable and very positive. Certainly, there is some pushback. And the pushback that we have centers around the idea of safety. Parents are concerned, when it comes to school safety. And as an aside, I mean, how sad is it that that's even a part of our culture and something that we have to talk about. But parents are concerned that if something were to happen at school, they want to wait to get a hold of their students. And that's where their concern lies.

But our school board did a fantastic job leading a process that literally lasted the better part of a year. And they engaged the community in conversation. They led a book study on *The Anxious Generation*. And for us, it came down to two things. One was the student engagement piece, obviously during the school day. But secondly, and maybe even larger than that was mental health. And I think our parents and our community understood that.

And they were willing to get behind that. And for the most part, the reaction in our community has been supportive. And so our students understand that it cannot be a part of the school day, period. So it needs to go away before the first bell of the day and not come out until the very last bell of the day. And our kids have done a fantastic job with it.

NINA MOINI: And Principal Reetz, there in Mounds View, you've had a few years, it sounds like, to adjust the policy at your school. I know you talked a little bit about actually being able to see and, in some instances, perhaps gauge or quantify positive changes that may come. Principal Bach was talking about mental health. Principal Reetz, what are some of the positive changes that you see? How are you able to actually track that?

ROB REETZ: Well, we track, first and foremost, through our learning walks to measure engagement. We see that students are asking questions, answering questions. They're working in partnership or small groups with each other in ways that feel more authentic than previously when one or more of the group would be on a device. And we're really not just talking about cell phones. I think our teachers use of Chromebooks, the school issues to students, has declined in the last couple of years. Our cost of paper has increased.

And this too is in part because we want to make sure that students are, not only engaged, but that the learning and the thinking is their own. We're concerned with the increasing use of AI and the increasing sophistication of what AI produces that part of the reason these devices have to be restricted during classroom time is because students can abdicate their thinking in ways that does not develop them for post-secondary readiness.

And it's very important that we all understand the conversation about phones is still very relevant and important. But we've got to start talking more specifically about what schools and districts are doing in regard to artificial intelligence.

NINA MOINI: Principal Reetz, what would you add to that, just in terms of all the different ways that technology and access to technology can be troubling in the classroom?

ROB REETZ: Well, I use AI myself. So I agree too that we do need to prepare students for things that are actual real-world types of challenges. At the same time, in order to use AI effectively, you have to know things. And my concern is that what's happening is we're abdicating the gaining of knowledge in ways that will not allow for us to use what we know to build something meaningful with AI as co-intelligence.

And so I think it's really important that we're ensuring kids k-12 are gaining knowledge that becomes intelligence through application. And it's the application part of thinking and learning that is, right now, at risk of being outsourced to AI.

NINA MOINI: Principal Koch, what would you add to that just in terms of how much technology and being on social media or being on phones and getting answers quickly through AI and through just looking at a device, how much do you think schools can realistically accomplish by limiting that access, I mean, at least during the school day?

MICHELLE KOCH: Well, I think it's a huge task. And I echo a lot of what Mr. Reetz said that it's coming so fast. I just think we were getting caught up with helping our kids get through social media and talking about the mental health impact of technology and social media. That wave just kept coming. And now, we've got the AI coming. And we need to look at ways to allow kids to learn how to use their brain and their knowledge in a way to safely connect with these tools to learn and grow.

AI can't learn for you. AI can't problem solve a lot of ways for you. It can help you. And again, our staff is looking at ways to put the technology away, put the Chromebooks away. How do we go back to old school researching? How many of us are going to put sets of encyclopedias back in our media centers? I'm smiling as I say that because it's kind of an exciting thought.

But it's hard. And it's a difficult concept when society, home life, work life for our kids is also-- it's not in support of that. I mean, our kids are struggling at home with social media. The number of instances of online bullying that take place outside of our school walls, it's terrifying. And if we can do anything to limit it and teach kids how to succeed without it, it's going to be so much better for their mental health, their future, their problem solving, their career, and post-secondary readiness. But it's these waves are coming really fast.

NINA MOINI: Principal Bach, I'd love to give you the last question here. What more support or what types of support do you think would be helpful for districts across Minnesota to be receiving around implementing these types of policies? So the rule now is you have to have a policy. And I'm assuming that can change. And you can adjust that over time. But what else would be helpful in making these policies, I guess, work?

ROB BACH: You know, the biggest thing that helped us, honestly, I mentioned it earlier, was the pre-work that our board did with our community. Our community understood the process that we were going through. They understood the why behind the decision that was going to get made and the idea that there was going to be a decision that was going to be made at a certain point in time.

And so when we rolled it out in the fall of 2025, I think it's fair to say that our staff, myself included, was nervous about the implementation and how that was going to get executed. As educators, we believe firmly in relationships, right? It's one of the most important ways that we get students to learn. Students are more apt to learn-- research shows all the time, kids are more apt to learn if they have a trusting relationship that's in place with the educators.

And so our teachers were very conscious of that and our administrative staff. And no one wants to play bad cop throughout the course of the day. And so there was some concern over the idea that, gosh, this is going to cause conflict and just kind put us at odds with kids. And I just have to say that that really hasn't materialized to nearly the grand degree that we were concerned about. And I think it's in large part because of the communication that we had with our community throughout the course of the summer.

We were very upfront with families about this is how it's going to work. These are the ways that your students have to make sure that their phone is away during the course of the day. Please don't put us in that position because it's going to be uncomfortable for all involved if it comes to a point where the phone gets confiscated or whatnot. And the number of issues that we have on any given day is very, very small.

I think our students just understood it from day one. Our families understood it coming in from day one. And that was the biggest possible way to support us going into making that kind of a change.

NINA MOINI: Well, I want to thank all three of you for sharing your unique perspectives and your similarities across the state of Minnesota. It's really important for our listeners to hear about just navigating all of these changes. We appreciate your time and wishing you all the best on this school year ahead. Thank you.

MICHELLE KOCH: Thank you.

ROB REETZ: You're very welcome. Thanks for having us.

NINA MOINI: Those were three Minnesota high school principals talking about their school cell phone policies going into this year. Principal Rob Reetz leads Mounds View High School. Principal Robert Bach leads Stillwater Area High School. And principal Michelle Koch leads Menahga High School.