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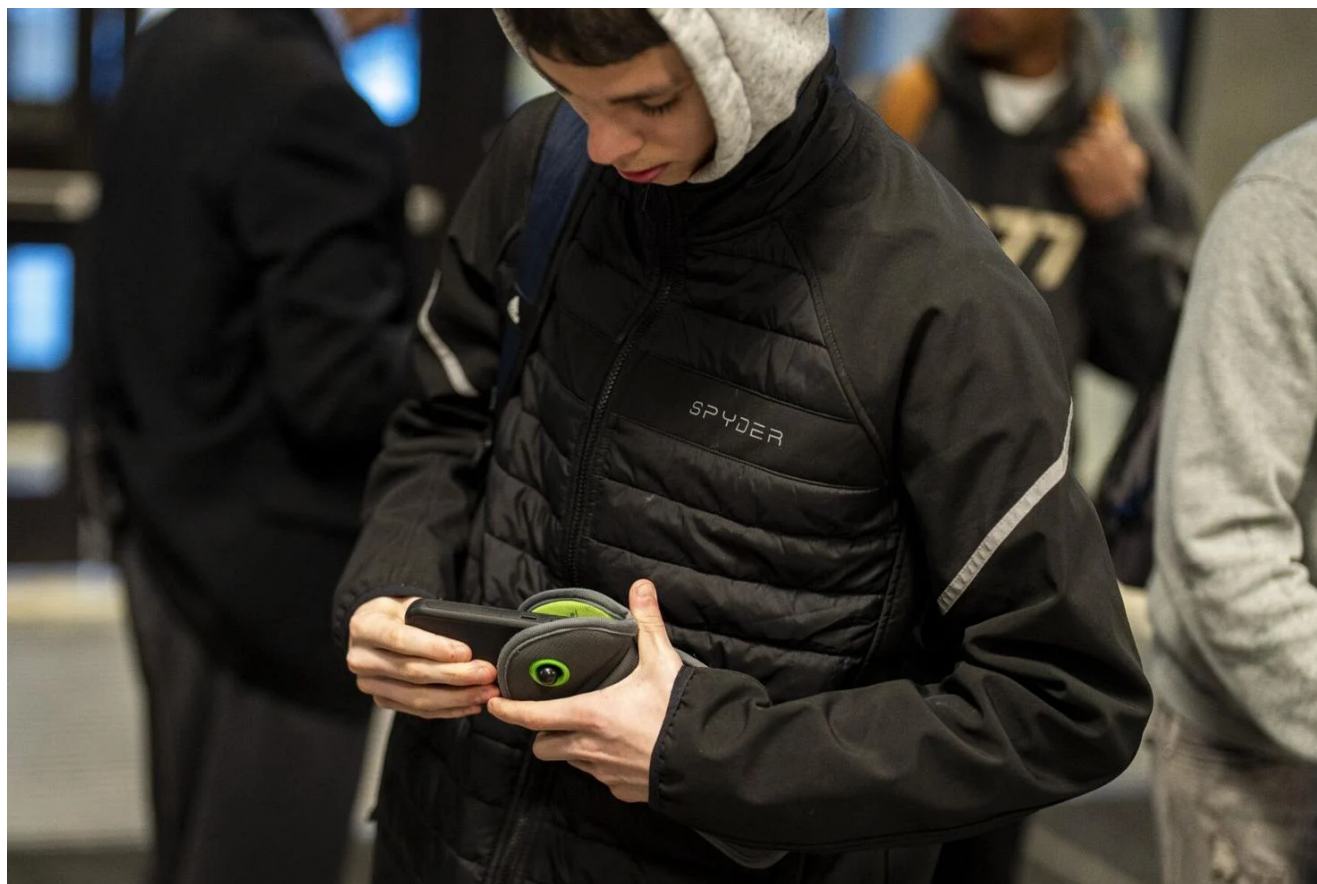
## **Distraction-free learning is welcomed. But can WNY schools enforce bell-to-bell cellphone ban?**

**Ben Tsujimoto , Stephen T. Watson**

Aug 31, 2025

Gov. Kathy Hochul has called the new state law to ban cellphones from students during the school day as “**transformational.**”

But passing the prohibition in this year’s budget was the easy part.

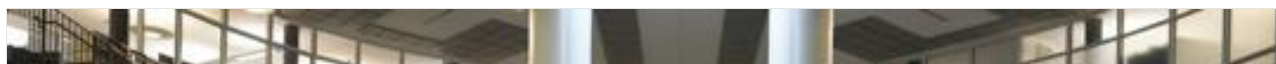


Gov. Kathy Hochul’s bell-to-bell ban on cellphones for students in New York goes into effect this week. Are Western New York schools ready?

Joshua Bessex, News file photo

This week, when public school students across New York return to classrooms, the majority must do so without cellphones. Only students who require devices for special needs, health concerns or legal reasons are exempt.

If students choose not to leave their devices at home, school personnel will collect cellphones as they enter the building or homerooms, where they will be held until the bell rings to end classes for the day.





## Hochul extols no cellphones in schools policy during visit to Niagara Falls High School

The premise seems simple: Students learn better if they're not distracted by a device that, **research has shown**, can be addictive and adversely affect mental health.

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It's been **cheered consistently** by New York State United Teachers, the union that held widespread forums to recommend the ban before its passage.

Pressing questions linger, however, about whether local districts are ready, and

how they will wield flexibility to carry out the plan.

Who will enforce the law? How difficult will the transition be for schools with previously lax regulations? Can students be trusted not to use phones stored in their lockers? And, looking ahead, how soon will school leaders see measurable improvements in discipline and academic achievement?



Gov. Kathy Hochul, center, holds a roundtable discussion at Niagara Falls High School on Monday with school officials to discuss the new state law banning cellphone use during school hours.

Derek Gee, Buffalo News

The Buffalo News asked school leaders, a union president, a student and a pediatrician for impressions on how the new law will be put into practice.

“The law was just passed in April,” said Stephanie Fredrick, associate director for the University at Buffalo’s Alberti Center, “so it didn’t allow schools much time to intentionally and thoughtfully process this new policy, like how it would fit in what they’re doing already.”

## 'Covid all over again'

At a Ken-Ton School Board meeting in August, Superintendent Sabatino Cimato said the cellphone ban, like pandemic-era policies, likely would inspire “strong opinions” from some in the community.

“Please trust me when I tell you this is Covid all over again. We will get people coming up to you and screaming about phones, just like we did about masks,” Cimato said.

He said his baseline recommendation to families is to keep phones at home.



**School absenteeism reached 'crisis' levels after Covid-19. Districts are working on solutions**

“It is the easiest way to make sure that there are no problems with devices,” Cimato said.

For devices that do come into schools, the district will use different procedures at

different grade levels. In elementary school, students will keep them in cellphone lockers in their rooms. In middle school, students will keep them inside their lockers in building hallways, a pre-existing policy that has worked well, Cimato said.

High school, however, “is where a huge change will take place,” he said.



Social studies teacher Sean Viola greets Ayham Alomar and checks his phone-locking pouch at Lackawanna High School on Feb. 27. The district already had a bell-to-bell ban on student cellphone use last school year.

Joshua Bessex, News file photos

Students in first-period homeroom will put devices into a sealable bag for storage in a lockable cabinet, Cimato said. The devices will remain, powered down, in the cabinets until students return at the end of the day to retrieve them.

To create the additional time needed, Cimato said, high schools are eliminating the daily announcement period and trimming one minute from every period.

“Procedures have been established for BOCES students, late arrivals and early departures. Our administrators are working on those. Those continue to be tweaked,” Cimato said. “But we want the least disruption to classroom instructional time for our students.”

## Change for older students

On Grand Island, in prior years, elementary and middle school students kept devices in lockers all day, Superintendent Brian Graham said in an interview, but high school students could use phones between classes and during lunch.

“So, this is going to be a shift for them,” Graham said, “because they got to experience a little bit more freedom in the hallways and in the cafeterias last year and in years past.”



**'It had to be done': Lackawanna principal reflects on bell-to-bell cellphone ban**

Now, middle and high school students will leave their devices in locked classroom cabinets while elementary students will keep them in their lockers.

Graham said he expects some older students will try to test boundaries early on.


“The broken phone in the kitchen drawer goes in the cabinet,” while the working phone is hidden away, he said, offering an example of teenage subterfuge.

Graham said the district hired two new clerks, one for middle school and one for high school. The device clerks will field incoming messages from parents that previously would have gone to a student’s cellphone, for example, or help students make calls from the office, Graham said. They also will handle devices for students who arrive late to, or leave early from, school.

Grand Island received \$14,500 from the state to help cover ban-related expenses and will put this money toward the \$27,000 cost of buying the device cabinets.

Graham, also president of the Erie-Niagara School Superintendents Association, said a few local districts plan to use lockable cabinets or, like Niagara Falls, Yondr cellphone pouches. But he said most are directing students to stow phones in their lockers.





Principal Jennifer Springer demonstrates how to unlock a phone-locking bag in her office at Lackawanna High School on Feb. 27.

Joshua Bessex, News file photo

As is the case elsewhere, Grand Island parents can use an app on an education-technology platform to communicate directly with their children on school-provided devices. Graham said he expects higher initial use of this service before parents adjust to children being offline for the school day.

“I think most of our parents, teachers, administrators, board members all subscribe to that thinking that the classroom should be distraction-free,” Graham said.

## Teachers' phone responsibilities

Representing Buffalo Schools' 3,800 teachers, Buffalo Teachers Federation President Rich Nigro said he's glad the law passed.

“As a teacher, you've got a responsibility to execute the lesson, to teach the curriculum to your kids, to get them prepared for whatever – commencement, examinations or tests – to advance them to the next level,” he said. “That's hard to do if they are not paying attention.”





## 'Learn, listen and lead': New Buffalo Schools superintendent charts first 100 days

After skimming cellphone plans submitted to the state, Nigro said **Buffalo's**, which gives its 60 schools \$800 each and significant freedom for crafting phone-storage policies, mimics other urban districts.

"You need folks to be able to work together," Nigro said. "And I think there will be some schools that do this pretty successfully. There will be other schools that fail miserably."

His biggest concern is that teachers could bear too much enforcement responsibility. If teachers take cellphones from students each morning and are required to handle discipline – especially when students know they **cannot be suspended for cellphone usage** – the potential for disruptive behavior rises.

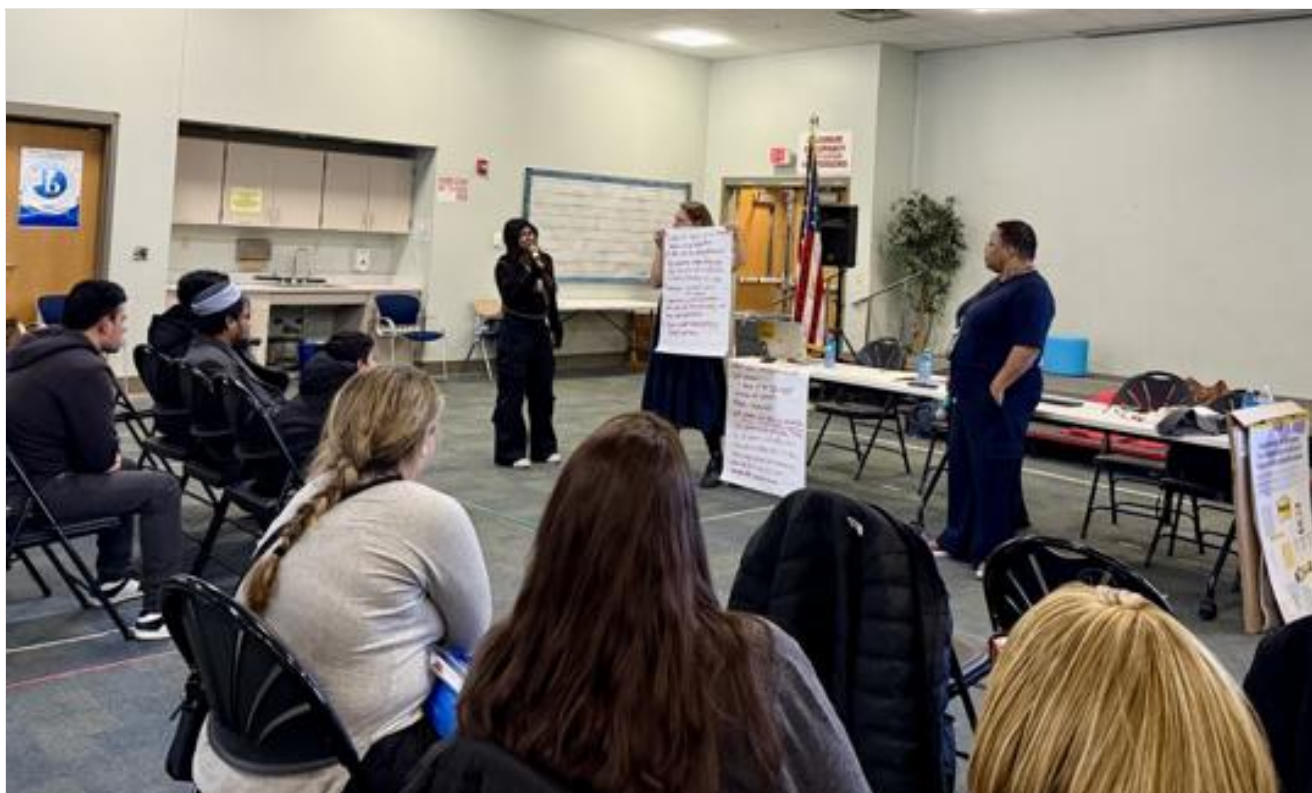
Nigro described an effective strategy: Students walk through security scanners and store cellphones in a tote or locker immediately upon entering the building. He's watching closely the application of the law.

"People are unpredictable," he said. "That's why things look great on paper, but as soon as you add the human factor into it – that's the giant question mark."

## 'Not going to go well'

Aluail Bom doesn't know yet what Frederick Law Olmsted's approach will be for storing phones during the school day. But the sophomore anticipates an adjustment from last year, when students kept their phones with them. Sometimes they served an educational purpose when laptops malfunctioned, she said.

"We're very used to having our phones on us all the time," Bom said. "It's going to impact us a lot."



### **Cellphones, suspending youngest students, vague language among key topics in Buffalo Schools' Code of Conduct review**

Olmsted, a top-performing Buffalo high school, had already outlawed personal phone use during classes, said Bom, also a student Community Health Worker. But checking phones at lunch helped students decompress.

“We already have little to no breaks – just lunch – so taking our phones,” said Bom, “is not going to go well, especially for teenagers.”

Bom acknowledged the magnetic pull of Instagram and TikTok, but stressed that not everyone is addicted.

Without phones this year, she’s worried behavior could worsen.





### Are school suspensions effective? Advocates press Buffalo schools to find a better way

“Students are going to be so bored without their phones,” she said. “They’re going to try to find any form of entertainment.”

Fredrick, the UB expert, elaborated.

“A couple schools who started to implement stricter strategies, not even bell-to-bell, saw student behavior problems increase at first,” she said. “They might engage in more outwardly disruptive behaviors instead of sinking into their phones.”

## Exemption requests expected

Pediatricians are bracing for requests for a doctor’s note to help students win exemptions from the cellphone ban. Dr. Sarah J. Ventre, a pediatrician with **UBMD Pediatrics**, said she hadn’t fielded any such appeals as of Tuesday, but she expected this to change with the start of the school year.

“I’m sure that they’ll be coming,” said Ventre, a UB clinical assistant professor of pediatrics.

Ventre said the **state chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics** has helped put together guidance for physicians and parents on what qualifies as a medical exemption under the cellphone ban.

“They’re rare, and they only apply to really significant health needs, in particular, when a personal device is essential,” Ventre said.

She said two examples are diabetes, when it requires constant glucose monitoring through a smartphone app, and hearing loss, where an app controls a cochlear implant or bone conduction device.

Ventre said parents will wonder about supporting students with anxiety, ADHD or depression without cellphones.

Those diagnoses generally won't qualify for exemptions, Ventre said, and guidelines recommend providing access to alternatives such as a mindfulness app on a school tablet.

"Cellphones actually can worsen anxiety and distract from building healthy coping strategies," she said. "So I think there's definitely a recognition that mental health is going to be a concern. But I think part of the focus is that the cellphones are making mental health concerns worse, instead of helping."

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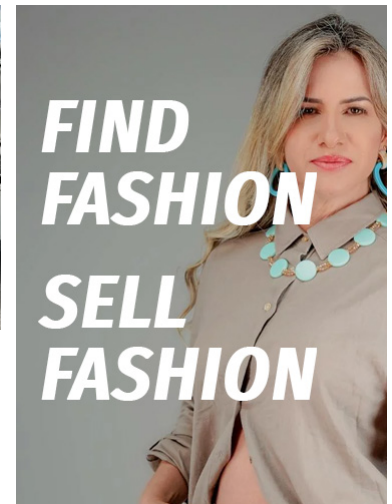
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