

OP EDs

Opinion: Parents, we need your help with Quebec's school cellphone ban

By James Watts *Special to the Montreal Gazette*

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Summer offers a rare opportunity to begin resetting our children's relationship with screens — not through rigid rules, but with thoughtful, gradual shifts, writes principal James Watts. Emilio Morenatti *THE ASSOCIATED PRESS*

Parents, We Need Your Help

As a teacher, I'm fortunate that cell phones don't usually disrupt my classes. Most students respect the boundaries we set together. Still, that doesn't mean it's easy to hold their attention. In an age of endless digital stimulation, keeping students engaged in deep learning takes more intention, creativity, and energy than ever before.

That's why I felt conflicted when I heard about the Ministry of Education's new regulation banning cell phones on Quebec school property this fall. On the one hand, this policy offers long-overdue support to educators who have been fighting a losing battle against distraction. It acknowledges what many of us have long known: meaningful learning requires attention — and attention is nearly impossible when phones are constantly buzzing in pockets and desks.

On the other hand, I worry we may be framing technology as the enemy rather than the tool it can be. I've seen phones used in remarkable ways — for creative projects, collaborative research, and spontaneous curiosity. Tech can enrich a lesson when used well and under the right guidance. The challenge isn't just banning devices. It's about teaching balance, discernment, and intentional use.

Today's students are growing up in a culture of constant connectivity. Their devices aren't just phones — they're social spaces, entertainment centers, and sometimes, emotional lifelines. They are dopamine delivery systems, expertly designed to keep young minds scrolling, swiping, and disconnected from the world around them. For many, phones have become emotional crutches, default entertainment, and even sleep companions.

Research links excessive screen time to increased anxiety, poor sleep, and difficulty with emotional regulation. In schools, we're seeing more students struggle to concentrate, collaborate, and connect in meaningful ways. The new regulation isn't a magic fix but a chance to reclaim our classrooms as spaces for focus, reflection, and deep learning.

If we expect students to adjust to a phone-free school day, we can't treat it like a sudden cut-off. We need to prepare them — and that preparation starts at home. Summer offers a rare opportunity to begin resetting our children's relationship with screens — not through rigid rules, but with thoughtful, gradual shifts.

Start by creating small windows of tech-free time each day: during meals, before bed, while reading, or playing outside. Encourage unstructured boredom and real-world experiences that challenge and delight the senses. These moments help rebuild attention spans, spark imagination, and strengthen emotional resilience.

As hard as it may be to admit, parents and teachers must model the behaviour we expect. If children observe us reaching for our phones at every lull or prioritizing screens over presence, they internalize that this is normal. We can't expect them to embrace new boundaries if we're unwilling to draw them ourselves.

Still, this policy won't succeed in isolation. If students spend the summer tethered to their devices, no school rule will undo those habits overnight. We need a collective effort — a shared cultural shift — where school and home work together to rebuild a healthy balance.

This fall, teachers will be ready to teach in a new environment. We need students to show up prepared to learn — present, grounded, and open. That readiness begins with what we do now. Let this summer be the bridge. Let it be the season when we gently nudge our children toward presence — not by banning tech, but by making space for everything else: nature, stories, movement, and connection.

We, as teachers, are doing our part. Please help us!

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