

Rather than a full ban, some teachers embrace smartphones as learning tools

"I want to model proper use," says one teacher who allows tech breaks to check texts and messages. Not everyone agrees with his philosophy.

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Across Montreal and throughout the province, teachers continue to grapple with the issue of cellphones in the classroom. *JOHN MAHONEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

In the science classes that Akim Munro teaches at Rosemount High School, students can sometimes use cellphones to watch PowerPoint presentations, review class notes or check Google to find the answer to a question during a class discussion.

On other occasions, Munro and his colleagues at the public high school allow some students to have a brief technology break to check texts and messages before getting back to work.

"I want to model what a proper use and improper use is," Munro said during an interview.

During a recent discussion about the immune system, Munro said he was unable to answer a student's question about the pancreas. Within seconds, a student whipped out his cellphone and found the answer for the class.

"I think it's important to teach them that there are times it's acceptable to use them," he said.

The debate over the role of cellphones in classrooms resurfaced last week after the Ontario government announced that it would ban mobile phones from all public elementary and high schools starting in September.



Ramzi Sadok watches a video on his phone while on a technology break during Secondary 2 history class at Rosemount High School in Montreal March 19, 2019. *JOHN MAHONEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

Across Montreal and throughout the province, teachers continue to grapple with the issue of cellphones in the classroom.

Some teachers insist that phones remain in schoolbags and confiscate them if they're used in class. Others want to use educational apps on smartphones, tablets or laptops.

"The learner has changed and education is changing," said Marco Gagliardi, principal at Rosemount High School.

"I have teachers who make educational videos that the students can watch on their devices. When they run into a problem in their everyday lives, they will look at a YouTube video to solve a problem. So why not in education?"

If students fail to follow the rules around in-class cellphone use, their privileges are taken away, he added.

Quebec has no plan to follow [Ontario in banning cellphones](https://montrealgazette.com/news/politics/cp-exclusive-ontario-to-ban-cellphones-from-)
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[classrooms/wcm/b09da133-7b59-4337-aef2-9e255a19fa3d](#)) from the classroom and Dan Maag, a math teacher at Macdonald High School in Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue, said that's a wise decision.

"It would be counterproductive and would seriously limit learning opportunities for our students," Maag said.

Macdonald is one of several Lester B. Pearson board schools that allow students to bring cellphones and other mobile devices to class.

In the board's "Bring Your Own Device" schools, students can access their work and resources on a platform called Google Classroom or check progress on a math problem by looking at the steps online. "I think the educational use of technology is appropriate," Maag said.

It's up to teachers to ensure that mobile devices are used as an educational tool and are not a distraction. That requires teachers to walk around the classroom and make themselves visible so they can see what students are up to, he said.

Often a simple nod from a teacher is enough to persuade a bored student to refrain from using social media and get back on track. "The kids are aware what a privilege it is to use this technology and they don't want to mess with that," he said. "They don't want to go back to the way it was."

At the Commission scolaire de Montréal and the Commission scolaire Marguerite-Bourgeoys, cellphones are only allowed in class if they're being used for pedagogical projects.

But not all Montreal schools are ready to welcome cellphones in the classroom, saying that students already have too much screen time.



Susana Moreira, left, and Melena Nini watch videos on a phone while on a technology break at Rosemount High School in Montreal March 19, 2019. *JOHN MAHONEY / MONTREAL GAZETTE*

At [Westmount High School \(https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/watch-westmount-high-students-reflect-on-kamala-harriss-legacy-at-school\)](https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/watch-westmount-high-students-reflect-on-kamala-harriss-legacy-at-school), teacher Robert Green said the use of cellphones at his school “has been an evolving story and continues to evolve” as teachers try to deal with cellphone use during school hours.

“The rule for this year is that they’re allowed to text and look at their phone in the hallways, but not make phone calls or film anyone,” said Green, adding that he often confiscates phones being used in class. “It’s a very tough issue to deal with.”

The school’s staff council is debating whether to impose a complete ban on cellphones and insist that students keep their phones in their locker throughout the day, Green said.

Research showing that excessive screen time can lead to mental health issues has many teachers alarmed, he said. “I have questions about whether the school should be adding to those hours,” he said.

For his part, Munro said he isn’t 100 per cent certain that the decision to allow cellphones in class is the right one, but said he is open to changing his policy if it proves to be unsuccessful. “Right now, this is the reality of the world we live in.”

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