

Study Finds That Cellphone Bans Lead to Higher Test Scores

By Jordan Moeny on May 20, 2015 9:00 AM

Many schools have become more permissive with regards to cellphones recently, with New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio even [lifting the citywide ban on in-school cellphones](#) earlier this year. A new study, however, finds that [keeping phones out of the classroom](#) could have a positive academic impact.

The study, conducted by two researchers from the London School of Economics and Political Science, looked at the test scores of 16-year-olds in four British cities before and after schools instituted cellphone bans. The researchers focused specifically on complete bans, where students were either not permitted to bring their phones on campus or were required to turn them over to the school every morning.

After controlling for demographic factors and previous performance, the study found that test scores rose following the implementation of the bans, with the overall effect of the ban being equal to adding an hour of instructional time every week, or about five days each year. The effect was especially strong for low-achieving and at-risk students. "The results suggest that low-achieving students are more likely to be distracted by the presence of mobile phones, while high achievers can focus in the classroom regardless of whether phones are present," write the authors.

While the study was conducted in the United Kingdom, the authors say that the results are "likely to be significant" in the United States as well.

The study is already getting pushback from ed-tech proponents. For example, school technology expert Scott McLeod writes on his blog [Dangerously Irrelevant](#) that the findings only matter if you think test scores are the best measure of learning:

Is that all you care about or do you have a bigger, more complex vision for student learning? For instance, creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving are difficult to assess with a standardized test. Most schools I know didn't adopt their learning technology initiatives for the sole purpose of test score improvement.

McLeod argues out that phones—smartphones in particular—can be useful tools to have in the classroom by helping educators incorporate "higher-level learning" objectives into instruction. As many educators [have pointed out in the past](#), smartphones can also help students connect with each other and access information more easily, and [Bring Your Own Device](#) programs are one option for schools looking to expand their technology programs on a budget.

A [2012 study](#) (funded by the arguably biased telecom company Qualcomm) found that the test scores of low-income students actually *increased* by up to 30 percent when the students received cellphones, though that may have been in part due to the students having access to the Internet outside of school.

The U.K. study acknowledges that "mobile phones could be a useful learning tool if their use is properly structured," but argues that schools need first to take into consideration the potential for phones to be a distraction from, rather than an enhancement to, the learning experience.

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