Burlington County Alternative School using new technology to keep students off cellphones

By Lisa Ryan

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Durable, locking cellphone pouches are keeping Burlington County Alternative School students attentive, connected and productive, according to Principal Joan Barbagiovanni.

MOUNT LAUREL — Since the start of the school year, Burlington County Alternative School students have followed a new no-phone policy with the help of a resource to keep them accountable.

Every morning, all 90 students' cellphones go into durable, lockable phone pouches from a company called Yondr, which only staff can unlock using a special sensor. Burlington County Special Services School District officials say the alternative school is the first school in the county to use Yondr, and so far, they're happy with the results.

"I think, for October, I couldn't be happier," said Principal Joan Barbagiovanni. "Teachers are like, 'This is great!'"

Barbagiovanni said the pouches are used to prevent distractions and avoid dependency that cellphones can cause. In an emergency, or if a lesson requires phones, it's easy to unlock the pouch.

Without technological distractions, students are learning more about engaging socially offline, whether they're dealing with camaraderie or conflict, the principal said. Students are getting more out of classes now, too.

Research by Rutgers University Cognitive Psychology Professor Arnold Glass, who is not affiliated with the alternative school, shows the drawbacks of technology in the classroom.

Glass compared undergraduates' test scores and lesson retention when one group could use devices during class, and one that couldn't. The latter group better retained lessons, and scored 7 percent better on the final exam than those students who had access to devices during class.

"Absolutely, without a doubt, you would get the same result with high-school students," Glass said.

The problem for students is splitting their attention between the classroom and the world online, Glass said. Devices can be useful in the classroom, but only if they're used solely toward the lesson at hand.

At the alternative school, students have resources to meet their individualized needs, and the environment allows them to complete their education at their own pace. Barbagiovanni said that her students are more productive when they are not distracted by text messages or trying to find the perfect song to listen to while they work independently.

Student Nasheem Williams-Moore, 17, agreed.

"At first it was annoying, we want to use our phones," the Philadelphia resident said. "But my work is getting done a lot faster."

Text messages and even seemingly academic phone use can get distracting, Nasheem added.

"You feel as though you have to Google everything, so you use that," he said. "But then you get distracted."

Glass' research also showed that Googling answers keeps students from learning by guessing, another way technology can hurt education. Glass' research also found that rising cellphone use was lowering human interaction, which is the best tool for most learners.

Without their phones, however, Barbagiovanni's students have to socialize more. She said there has been slightly more conflict without the buffer of cellphones, but the impact has been positive overall. As students start lunchtime card games or notice and include someone who is sitting alone with nothing to do, they're building interpersonal skills they'll use for the rest of their lives, said Barbagiovanni.

Classes on mindfulness and yoga, socialization, empowerment and more might help students adjust to the phone-free school day, which comes easier to some than it does to others.

Collingswood, Camden County, resident Hannah Long, 18, and Delran resident Zoe Merget, 16, said they despise the pouches. Early in the morning, it can be difficult to come up with good topics of conversation as one tries to wake up, and Hannah and Zoe said that makes them wish they could check their phones.

"They're used to being on it, using it as a crutch to avoid socializing," Barbagiovanni said.

Barbagiovanni said it isn't just her students who use technology to avoid real-life conversation — she said adults are guilty of the same behavior, and that as the people who put technology into the hands of young people, adults have to teach and model responsible, healthy use.

Dale Horner, of Delran, didn't feel overly attached to his phone before the Yondr pouches, and he uses the phone even less outside of school hours now that he is used to going without it.

"To be honest, I kind of hated it (at first), I thought it was completely wrong and unfair," the 17-year-old said. "But that was because I wasn't used to it yet."