



## St. Andrew's: Cell Phone Free Since 1929

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*Harvard University's Harvard Thinking podcast featured Head of School Joy McGrath '92 in a conversation about phones in U.S. schools*

Head of School Joy McGrath '92 recently sat down with *Harvard Thinking*, a podcast produced by her alma mater Harvard University, to speak about something deeply significant to the St. Andrew's community: the SAS phone culture, which has inspired St. Andrew's students to intentionally leave their phones locked in their dorm rooms since the era of the flip phone in the late '90s.

In a conversation facilitated by Harvard Thinking host Samantha Laine Perfas, McGrath spoke about the origins of St. Andrew's view on phones.

"I'm the beneficiary [as a student] at St. Andrew's of a school where we did not impose [phone] restrictions," McGrath said. "My predecessor [Head of School Tad Roach] was very slow to put Wi-Fi in our dorms. Students started out with flip phones and they weren't very interesting, so they didn't carry them around. What happened was there was a rule that flip phones should stay in the rooms. And then ... the rule never changed. But the rule never changed because of a discussion among the students of continuing to embrace this policy. So we have what I would say is a student-led phone culture. It's led by the kids, and every year, our seniors—who do a lot of leadership in the school—rearticulate to the younger students why this matters, and why this is so important at St. Andrew's."

Almost thirty years after St. Andrew's "out-of-step" approach to phones, the rest of the nation is now wrestling with this question: *Should schools ban cell phones?*

The episode, "Why School Cellphone Bans are Spreading," included guests Dr. Laurie Santos, a professor of psychology at Yale and host of The Happiness Lab podcast; and Susan Linn, a lecturer in psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and author of *Who's Raising The Kids? Big Tech, Big Business, and the Lives of Children*.

The trio discussed the hard numbers: 97 percent of U.S. students have a phone, and, according to the National Education Association, 83 percent of teachers think that schools should ban cell phones. Also, according to data from Common Sense Media, an agency that researches kids' use of technology, over 50 percent of tweens and almost 70 percent of

teens say that their phones distract them from schoolwork during the school day.

It's not just the intersection of classrooms and phones at the crux of the issue for McGrath—it's the other communal spaces where students are supposed to be enjoying the last fleeting years of childhood and creating authentic connections.

"If you think about your cafeteria or your dining hall, that is a really important place to preserve for kids that human interaction time around meals," McGrath says. "That is an ancient human way of forming relationships and overcoming the boundaries we may draw between ourselves and what today we would call polarization in society. I think we think about classrooms as a knee-jerk for a quote-unquote ban, but I always advocate for if you're going to do it in one place, also think about that dining hall or the cafeteria, the hallways."

By all accounts, not only does the phone culture work for SAS students, McGrath noted, it lives on in them.

"[Our alumni] are thankful for it, and they're innovating solutions in their college context that are making that situation better," she said. "One student, a young woman, told me that she took an Amazon box very early in her time in college, decorated it, put it in her room, and when kids come to hang out, all the cellphones go in it and they put them under the bed for that hangout time. Everybody's happier and she feels really good about that. My hope, of course, as an educator, is that students who've had those experiences are able to go on to their next context and maybe share some of these tactics or skills that help other people put their phones down and have some meaningful connection."

The conversation, which you can listen to and read the full transcript of [here](#), is an ongoing one which the school has engaged in with all faculty and staff with our all-community summer 2024 read, Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation: How The Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. The school will have this conversation with parents, too, who are important stakeholders in upholding school phone culture. On October 1, St. Andrew's will host a virtual book talk to discuss the book with parents. (If you are a parent but missed the RSVP window, please click [here](#) if you'd like to attend, we may have room for a few more.)