9/18/24 / Put your phone away, fellow kids

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): By now just about every kid in America has gone back to school. But there’s something different about our American schools this year. Maybe you’ve heard about it? They’re banning cell phones!

SCORING IN – <wayward willy>

*<CLIP> WKYC OHIO: A bill cracking down on cell phone use in schools is set to move forward today….”*

SEAN: They’re doing it in red states.

*<CLIP> Fox 4 Dallas: The banning of cell phones in Texas schools, that’s the issue for our discussion..”*

SEAN: They’re doing it in blue states.

*<CLIP> More than 30 school districts in Maine have opted to ban or restrict cell phones in schools…*

SEAN: They’re doing it in Florida states.

*<CLIP> CBS MIAMI: Tonight at 11, Broward County public schools are banning students from using cell phones in classrooms and hallways this fall…*

SEAN: On *Today, Explained*: why schools are finally banning cell phones. And how do the kids feel about it? Phirst stop: Philadelphia – the birthplace of the United States!

[THEME]

SEAN: Miles Bryan, Philadelphia bureau chief at *Today, Explained*. You also report it for the show. So I ordered you out into the world a few weeks back to see what these cell phone bands look like in our schools. What did you find, Miles?

MILES: Aye sir, I took your orders and I called around to a bunch of schools and I ended up going to Science Leadership Academy High School.

SCHOOL AMBI IN

MILES: The principal here is named Chris Lehmann.

CHRIS LEHMANN (high school principal): So SLA is a public school here in the school district, Philadelphia. We are a magnet school….

MILES: Lehman Help found the school in the early 2000s. And he's not a Luddite. He's not anti-tech. He's he's very into technology personally. He's got 32,000 Twitter followers.

SEAN: Wow.

MILES: Which, sad to say is is more than our show.

SEAN: Hey! Hey, now.

MILES: <laughs> And his school SLA is a technology high school like every kid gets issued a laptop for their studies. So all that's to say Lehman has been managing the benefits and drawbacks of tech in the classroom for a very long time.

SCORING IN—Unicycle Flips

LEHMANN: When we started SLA, what I remember is less about the cell phones and more about AOL Instant Messenger.

<CLIP> AOL SOUND.

SEAN: Wow.

LEHMANN: We had to be like, Guys, you can't be on AOL chat during the middle of the day, right? Like, and on some level, I think that the early sort of moments of this, it was not horribly different than kids passing notes in class, which has happened since the dawn of time.

SEAN: <laughs> I remember. I remember reading about it in the Bible. So? So what changed?

MILES: Yeah. So Lehman pointed me to two things. First, unsurprisingly, was the disruption caused by the pandemic and the abrupt switch to online school.

LEHMANN: Kids were in their bedrooms. Nobody was teaching them how to manage their cell phone use.

MILES: The second factor is how kids use their phones now less texting, less instant messaging, more TikTok

<CLIP> TIK TOK SOUND

MILES: Instagram Reel, short form video

LEHMANN: with notifications. I think with video that has made it much, much, much harder for all of us, right? To stay off our phones.

SCORING OUT

MILES: But, you know, this is one school. It’s a small sample size. So I ran all this by someone who has been studying the effect of cell phones on teenagers more broadly— Zach Rausch. He was the lead researcher on a recent book by the social scientist Jonathan Haidt, called *The Anxious Generation*.

SEAN: Ohhh, yeah, yeah, yeah. That book was making the case that, like, phones are destroying our children. I saw when it came out. There is like a little piece about it everywhere.

*<CLIP> THE DAILY SHOW: HOST: Jonathan, I see people walking all over Brooklyn holding this book. It’s talking about the great rewiring.   
HAIDT: So umm, something happened to young people born after 1995…”*

MILES: It argues that Generation Z and younger kids, kids in high school, they have much higher rates of anxiety and depression than previous generations. And that has largely been driven by the phones, by smartphone use.

RAUSCH: On average, kids are spending about five hours on social media, about 8 to 9 hours a day just on entertainment screen use. So on their phones and essentially teenage social life migrated onto these platforms. And what happens when you get a mass of kids onto these platforms is that it becomes very hard to opt out.

MILES: So Rausch and Haidt call for phone free schools as a solution to that opt out problem. You know, schools can force kids to go offline together and they've been really influential in driving this national movement for schools to restrict cell phone use.

SEAN: And now there are cell phone bans being placed in schools all over the country, red states and blue. But tell us what's happening in your purple state. What did your your principal in Philly do? Did he ban phones entirely?

MILES: Right. So at Science Leadership Academy, kids can still use their phone in the hallway and at lunch. But this year, the school has banned phones in classrooms, so kids have to put them in a special pouch when they get to class.

CLASS AMBI UP

MILES: I caught the end of one class where kids are grabbing their phones out of the pouch. A lot of them call it phone jail.

SEAN: <laughs> And they do this at, like, comedy shows sometimes!

MILES ON TAPE: Cell phone back! How does it feel?  
 KIDS: Great. Great. Really good man, glad I have it back.

MILES: Re Gade teaches ninth and 10th grade biochemistry here. I talked to her just a couple of weeks into the school year and she said the benefits of the change were already pretty obvious. You know, kids are paying closer attention to her and to each other…

RE GADE (teacher): Even when, you know, it might not be exactly related to the topic. They're making those connections socially that are really, really important.  
MILES: And that's a moment where before they might have gone to scroll.  
GADE Yeah, yeah, it feels a little tense. So I'm going to just go into my phone or, you know, try to distract by scrolling. And because that's not an option, they're making more connections.

MILES: Gade actually told me the biggest challenge has been getting the parents on board.

SEAN: Mmm.

GADE: Most of the time when I addressed a kid like, Hey, you should get off your phone, it's their parents that are reaching out throughout the day, and sometimes it's something urgent. You know, something is going on with the family, but sometimes it's really just like, remember to tie your shoes. Remember to do this after school and it doesn't need to be full contact all day.  
MILES: Right, maybe they need cell phone jail, too.  
GADE: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

SEAN: <laughs> Amazing. Remember to tie your shoes. I hope it's not that. But when I did reading about this initially, Miles, this is something I saw over and over again that parents want to be in touch with their kids, especially in the era of school shootings, etc.. but how do kids feel about it? I mean, you're one kid was very happy to be reunited with their phone. Are they are they protesting?

MILES: Yeah. So I talked to a bunch of kids at this school and a couple, you know, were unhappy about their cell phone restrictions. Here’s Gabriel Solano. He’s a senior.

SOLANO: I would take a lot of pictures of the board to having my phone to look back or if I like forgot the topic during class or if I wasn't able to fully write something down. That's been a bit of a downside. And then. Also being able to take like pictures of funny moments in class, like just recording the memories throughout the year and just being able to look back at them. I feel like once the year's over, I'm going to want to do that, but not be able to because I wouldn't be able to be on my phone as much.

SEAN: Okay. Two things. Gabe. I'm sorry. One, just take better notes. Two could always get a disposable camera like we did back in the, I don't know, the 90s, the late 20th century. <laughs at his own joke>

MILES: You know, I actually heard that from a couple of kids. They were worried. They couldn't remember because their memory is so interconnected with their photo roll, which I thought was so interesting and surprising. But you know, Sean, I’d say most of the kids I talked to thought the ban, though annoying, was kind of a good thing. And I want to play you tape from two freshmen I talked to together.

SEAN: Okay!

RAHMA: I get 179 notifications in class weekly. It's about like 602,000 notifications.

SEAN: <laughs in a dying way> It's hurting my brain. Those numbers are hurting my brain.

MILES: That's a Rahma Elgizar.

LEV: In a week I probably get like up to 1000 notifications.

MILES: And that's Lev Zitcer.

LEV: The other day I like turn on the United States and I had like 901 day or something like that you know because it's just sometimes you're in something with like ten people and, you know, two of them are in there. Yeah...

SCORING IN—KITTENS ON THE KEYS

MILES ON TAPE: So what do you think about the cell phone policy—put your cell phone in the box or whatever at the beginning of class?   
LEV: Like at first I thought I was going to be really annoying, but it's actually not that bad. Like, this is a good balance between just like I think taking your phone people somewhere all day that's too far. But like we're still able to have it during my lunch and in the hallway. So if we need to text my mom about something or want to say something funny to a friend, like I can still do that. But like during class we get a little bit more, get to be a little more attentive about things.  
RAHMA: I thought it was like I thought it was going to be dumb at first, but at like when it's like you put your phone on the poach, like I made like a lot of new friends because I thought I was going to be like, on my phone all the time and not like getting along with others. So I think it's I think it's pretty cool.  
MILES: Nice, Yeah. Tell me about your new friends or like what that process has been like meeting people without your phone.  
RAHMA: Sometimes, like you get like paired up into a group and knowing that, like, you don't have your phone on you and it's just like you take all that, you put all that back and you're just like finding new friends, making new bonds. I think it's pretty cool because I made a lot of new friends at the school for my middle school because it was a hard transition going from middle school to high school. So I think it's I think it's nice.  
MILES: Have you had a similar experience or not really?  
LEV: I mean, yeah, no, I definitely made a lot of friends. Even on just day one. But I think there's like a different level of communication that comes with like being bored almost, and you have to make up funny stuff and, you know, it's just it can be good sometimes.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: <laughs probably too much> I know these kids are completely making the case of every governor and administrator who wants to ban cell phones. I hope they know what they're doing!

MILES: Yeah. I mean, I thought that was profound, that being bored can be worthwhile sometimes, that having moments that you can't just, you know, fill up with scrolling on your phone is a way to force yourself to have new experiences, to talk to new people, to put yourself out there and, you know, when is the more appropriate time to be doing that than in high school. So I thought that was that really spoke to me and reminded me of a lot of boring moments when I was in high school back in the the mid 2000s.

SEAN: Oooh, good for you. So, okay, one thing I wonder, though, because whenever I put my cell phone in the penalty box for a timeout during a movie, when I just don't want to look at it for a few hours, then I have to come back and do I have to come up with a crafty name for it? For basically, you know, like my penance where I have to go through all my things. If you want to stay on top of your things, right, you have to like sit down for 30 minutes and just deal with all your texts the way we used to do with email or whatever. Are all these kids just coming out of class, getting their phone out of purgatory, and then spending like 30 minutes scrolling through all their junk?

MILES: Yeah, this is a this is actually a very big question right now in that conversation about cell phone restrictions. You know, politicians and educators around the country are split. Some schools think they should do a total ban, you know, make it impossible to do that. Catching up at the school day. Some, like Science Leadership Academy, are taking a more moderate approach. And I put the question to Principal Lehmann at the beginning of the day, you know, why not just ban phones altogether.

LEHMANN: Learning how to manage our attention and learning how to deal with these devices is going to be a fundamental part of what it means to be human. If you just say these have no role we don't like, I never want to see it. You're creating a little bit of an unreal space in school.

SEAN: Hm! Yeah, I can see that.

MILES: Yeah, that argument made sense to me, but I was kind of surprised to hear that Zach Roush, you know, the researcher who's been so influential on this stuff, he totally disagrees with this. He used soda as an analogy.  
  
SEAN: Huouh!

RAUSCH: Is the idea of school that we should have soda fountains all over the place so kids can learn how to manage soda? Because soda exists, you know, in the world? Well, no, we don't teach that in school. You know, sometimes there's a place for boundaries and structure, and then, yes, kids will go home. They might drink soda. And we do need to teach those skills. But there are other ways to do it than just bombarding kids with products that are designed to hook them.

SEAN: I mean, I mean, with all due respect, Zach. Kids have phones. Not all kids drink soda.

MILES: Fair point. But they're both addictive. They're both addictive.

SEAN: Okay, but what did you see it? Science Leadership Academy. Miles, did you see kids, you know, mainlining their cell phones between classes? Was it sad? Was it a sad sight or were they still enjoying themselves and and making memories, man?

MILES: Yeah, I was there for half a day and I wandered around during lunch hour, which was at 10:30 in the morning FYI…

LUNCH AMBI IN

MILES: I did see lots of kids goofing off and chatting and flirting.

SEAN: Oh!

MILES: It all looked very reminiscent of when I was in high school. Like most kids had their phone out and a few were scrolling, but but very few were just kind of lost in their phone sitting alone. And that's the way that everyone thinks is, you know, problematic. So I walked up to this one group of kids that there like having a grand old time.

MILES ON TAPE: What’s up?

MILES And I asked them.

MILES ON TAPE: Sorry to bother you. I'm a reporter. I'm writing about your school because I'm doing a story about cell phones and schools. And I know you guys have a new policy where you can't have them in class, but you can have them at lunch. So my big question was like, do you use them a lot of lunch or do you chat with each other? What do you do?

CASEY: There’s no service down here. Yeah, we don't really have service on here, so we like to enjoy the experience together.

SEAN: <laughs>

SCORING IN—DUST OFF THE HOVERBOARD>

SEAN: So no service. That's that's a that's a plus. I bet Zack would love that.

MILES: Yeah clearly a point in Zach Roush’s favor there. After that conversation I figured I should let the students get back to being with their fellow students and I left Science Leadership Academy. After that I talked to other principals and students and I read a lot about this. And I think it's pretty clear, pretty hard to argue with the fact that kids benefit from being offline at school to some extent, right? There is still, though, this open question how offline should they be? Should this cell phone ban extend to non classroom time, too, or should it be something closer to Science Leadership Academy’s policy? So for the second half of the show, I set up an interview for you, Sean, with someone who has taken the opposite position, who's fighting hard for a full cell phone ban: New York Governor Kathy Hochul.

SEAN: Of congestion pricing?

MILES: The very same.

SEAN: Can't wait to speak to the governor of New York, the Empire State, on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> LCD SOUNDSYSTEM’s “New York, I Love You But You’re Bringing Me Down”  
JAMES MURPHY: New York, I love you but you’re bringing me –*

SEAN: Governor Kathy Hochul, in the first half of the show, our reporter at *Today, Explained*, Miles Bryan, spoke to the principal of Science Leadership Academy, which is a high school in Philadelphia. The principal there restricted cell phone use in classrooms, but importantly, he let kids use their phones in the hallways at lunch. It was kind of, you know, you put your phone in little purgatory, get it back at the end of class. And his argument in doing that was that smartphones are a fact of life now, and we need to help kids learn how to manage using them, not just how to not use them. What do you think of that approach? Would you advocate at this point for something similar for New York?

HOCHUL: You know, who don't, you know? The people who don't want that approach are the teachers who have to be the enforcers.

SEAN: huh!

HOCHUL: It is. It is easier to have a lock them up at the beginning of the school day, get them out at the end of the school day instead of, who's going to make sure they have them locked up again when they come back from recess? Who's going to make sure they're locked up after lunch? They go to the restroom. Who's going to be the teachers don't want to be the phone police. They want to teach. They want to get these kids back. And the other observation I'll have is this. One of the school districts that implemented a full ban said they heard something that was so unique they hadn't heard in the longest time when they did that young people talking to each other in the hallways, kids communicating during lunch, talking during physical education class. So you're denying them because they're going to get all caught up in the stresses that this puts kids under, like the the FOMO feeling, the the, you know, the people that are being bullied and mocked out online and teased because they're wearing something funny or the kids are trying out for drama class and someone videoed it and posted it and now they're all embarrassed. So they're not trying out for drama class. I heard that from the drama teacher. They're not going to be any better off if it's still available throughout the day. Let's let them be students, which is their number one purpose of sitting in school, letting me absorb the information, let them learn how to have person to person human contact. So eventually when they graduate, it won't be strange for them to make eye contact with someone or to collaborate on a project in the workplace. This is…  
  
SEAN: Yeah.   
  
HOCHUL: …also building the next generation of workers and adults. Our job is not to raise kids, it's to raise adults and letting them be kids again when they're supposed to be letting them. Being a learning environment, I think, is going to go a long way toward their own mental health because their mental health is not in a good place right now.

SEAN: An unfortunate fact of school life in the United States, as we just saw in Georgia, is that we have shootings in our schools, right? And I can see this becoming a very emotional issue for you in New York State. And, you know, it's hard to argue with a parent who's scared they won't be able to connect with their child during a school shooting. Do you think that might end up leading to some sort of compromise here, where, yeah, the phone somewhere in the classroom. But, you know, we are putting the burden on teachers to to get the phones at the beginning of class and give them back at the end of class. Do you think that might be the middle ground where you end up in in New York on this issue?

HOCHUL: I'm willing to have conversations about any angle of this. I just know what I've seen. I've done every corner state. I've done roundtables, pulling together people who have differences of opinions on this and listening to the superintendents, the teachers, the New York State Association that represents teachers wants this to happen because they want to get the kids back and have some influence on them again. I know that. I know the opposition what they're going to say. They're going to tell me that they need to be able to reach their children if there's a crisis, a school shooting. And I'll tell you right now, that was my first reaction, like, well, okay, they may not need to have access to the Internet, social media during the day, but they certainly need a cell phone to contact their parents if there's a mass shooting or every parent's nightmare.

SEAN: Mm-hmm

HOCHUL: But what I heard from law enforcement disabuse me of that notion

SEAN: Okay.

HOCHUL: Because they said if there is a crisis on campus, no matter what it is, the last thing you want are your kids reaching for their cell phone, trying to communicate with them, take pictures, getting video of it. You want them to pay attention to the head of the classroom, their teacher to lead them to safety. And I was persuaded the second I heard that from law enforcement.

SEAN: Mmm. Where do you think we'll end up as a country? I mean, it, it, it seems sort of surprising that we're we're just now figuring out that this is an issue. But we heard in the first half of the show that the pandemic really changed kids' relationships to the classroom, to their phones, to each other. But, um, do you think we'll end up in a place where, where every school will be doing some version of this?

HOCHUL: My view is, is that if we never start out with an expectation that they're allowed in schools, this will be the first generation we liberate from that. I'm trying to help these kids get help, get support now before they end up with a lifetime of needing professional help. That's how urgent this is right now. It's all about listening to the kids. They want us to save them. And I'm the adult who's going to be willing to do that.

SCORING IN <In Flight Oxygen>

SEAN: New York Governor Kathy Hochul. Adult. Of course, banning phones in school is not the issue she’s best known for. At least not yet. She’s most associated with congestion pricing. About a year ago, we made an episode titled “Taxing traffic” at *Today, Explained* all about New York City’s first-in-the-nation plan to charge cars $15 bucks to drive through the city during peak hours. But then, in the 11th hour, the governor put that plan on ice this June. So we had to ask her why.

SCORING OUT

HOCHUL: It is still alive, except I had to be the one who acknowledged the fact that at this moment, $15 is a hard hit for working families in New York and particularly New York City.We can fund the subway system. We can reduce congestion pricing. We can find a path through congestion pricing. But $15 right now is just too much.

SCORING BACK IN <traffic jam in the kitchen (APM)>

SEAN: Our show today was produced *and* reported by Miles Bryan.

We were edited by Amina Al-Sadi. Fact checked by Laura “The Pump” Bullard. Mixed by Andrea Kristinsdottir and Patrick Boyd.  
  
Shout outs to our colleague Kevin T. Dugan who wrote about Governor Hochul’s plan to ban phones in schools for *Intelligencer* at *New York* magazine. Read and subscribe at N Y mag dot com.  
  
I’m Sean Rameswaram. And this is *Today, Explained* from Vox dot com.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]