

What Happens When Students Put Their Phones Down?

We asked students and educators using The Commons.

What students in three very different school districts are telling us about The Commons.

Student Perspective Case Study created by:

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3 schools • 3 communities • 1 pattern

Students and Educators from across Ohio • Montana • Minnesota

We intentionally sought feedback from students and educators in very different school contexts, not just schools where implementation was going smoothly.

Different sizes, regions and communities. When we asked students and staff what has changed, we heard similar stories:

Mt Healthy City Schools, Ohio

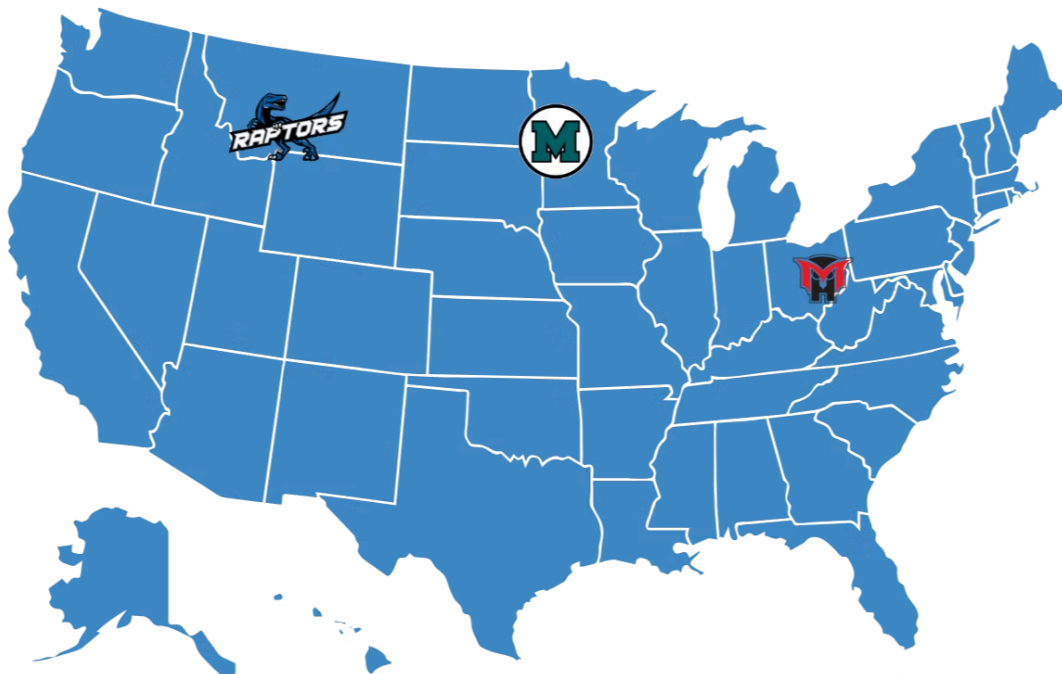
Urban, 1,100 Students,
Title I, tried policy-only
& pouches before The
Commons

Gallatin High School, Bozeman School District 7, Montana

Rural, 1,700 students,
teacher collection before
The Commons

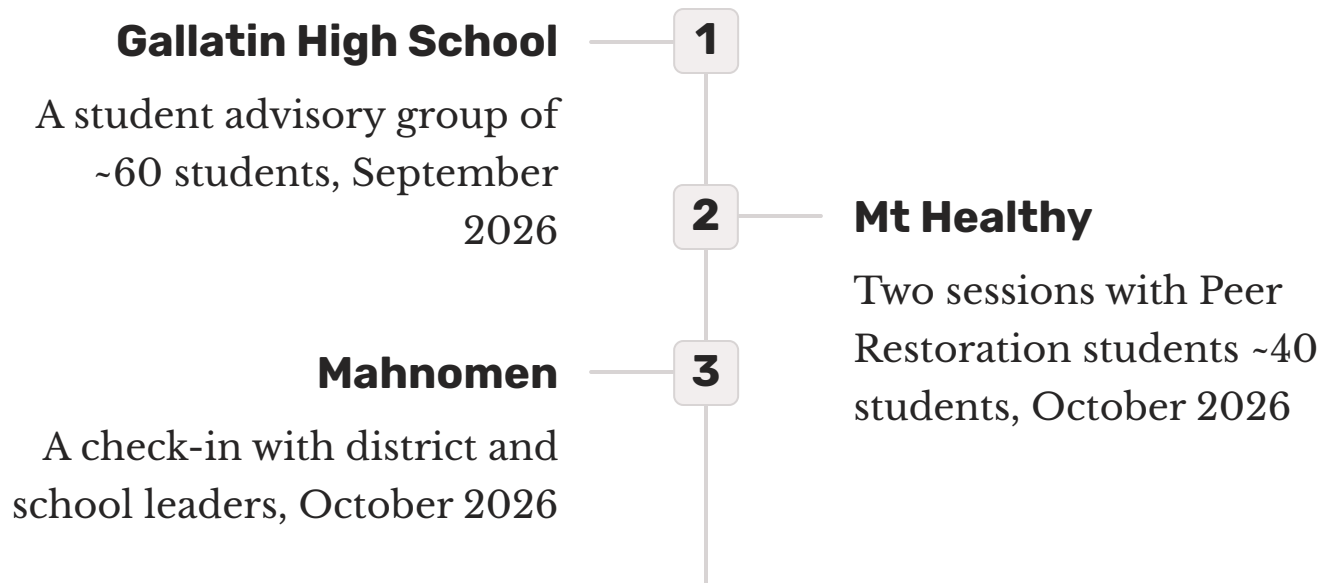
Mahnomen Public Schools, Minnesota

Rural, 345 students,
policy-only before The
Commons



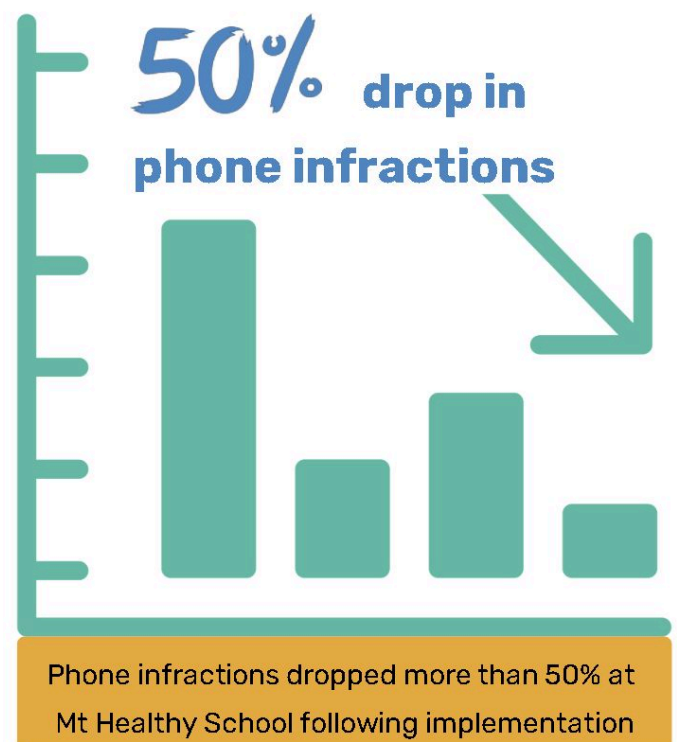
How we listened

This fall, The Commons founders sat down with students and school leaders and asked three questions: What's working? What's frustrating? What would you change?



We didn't ask students to promote The Commons. We asked them to tell us the truth, including what isn't working yet.

Two major themes they discussed were wanting better balance between reducing distraction and preserving useful functions of their phones, and wanting to feel more bought into the program so they could better embrace the positives they were noticing.



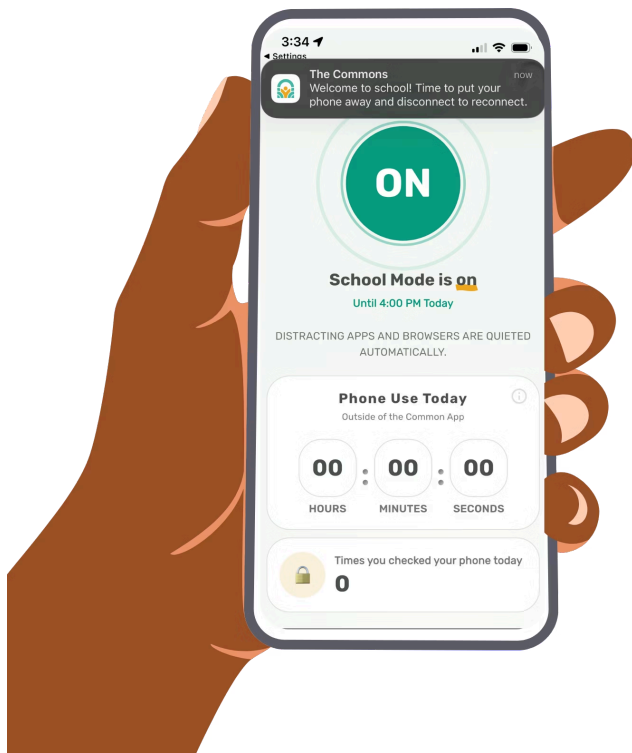
Students start noticing their own habits

The Commons shows students how much time they spend on their phones during the school day and how often they pick them up.

At two of the schools, students named this as the feature they value most, without being asked.

"Seeing my daily screen time and pickups has helped me build personal awareness." Student, Mt Healthy

For students, seeing their own behavior can make the problem feel real.



"I really like the feature where it shows you how much time you've spent on your phone, specifically in school, how many times you've picked up your phone. I think it helps a lot of people realize how much of their lives stay on this tiny little box and just not in their world."

Eden, Grade 12, Gallatin High School

Phones down, people up

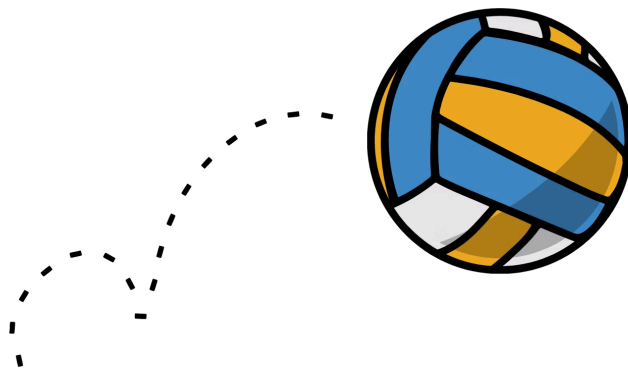
At Mahnomen, staff noticed something else happening when phones weren't occupying students' attention.

About 80 Mahnomen junior high students now play volleyball and other games in the gym at lunch.

Mahnomen staff see more students checking out library books and reading in spots that used to be phone hiding places.

"More students are asking about library books and reading in places they used to hide on their phones." - Dr. Andrea Simon, Superintendent, Mahnomen Public Schools

"Lunchtime gym has filled up with students playing volleyball and other games. It started with just a few girls bumping the volleyball and now the gym is filled with boys and girls playing." - John Clark, Assistant Principal, Mahnomen Public Schools





Students at Mt Healthy discussed how when distractions were reduced, it was easier for in-person connection.

"The Commons limits distractions and encourages in-person conversation." - Student, Mt Healthy

Students at Mt Healthy High School have started bringing their own games into lunch to play.

More focus on the work

Students noticed the difference in class, not just at lunch.

"I noticed that students complete their work more often and on time." - Student, Mt Healthy

"Because social media is restricted, it helps us engage with school projects. Which is important for the type of work we do." - Student, Mt Healthy

① At Mahanomen, teachers report fewer phones out during class.

Order of implementation matters

At Gallatin, an email announced the app before students heard why. Privacy rumors spread quickly. When students met the people behind The Commons and heard the school's vision, the conversation changed.

"I wish we would have met you before the email was sent out... I feel like that's when rumors started flying around..."

"It's nice to have a human face to put behind the app that we're all downloading... and now knowing our principal's vision, it makes it feel less restrictive and shares more of a hopeful point of view."

- Jane, Grade 12, Gallatin High School

❗ What we took from it: launch with students, not at them. Share the why and the people behind it before the download instructions.

Students want a reason to stay engaged

Across all conversations, students expressed interest in making participation more rewarding. They shared ideas for recognizing progress, celebrating consistency, and creating incentives that drive healthier habits.

Students are also thinking beyond graduation.

"Once I'm in college... I'm going to have to figure out how to manage my time so it's not always being taken over by things on my phone." - June, Grade 12, Gallatin High School

Their ideas are shaping what The Commons builds next, how we engage students, and our rollouts alongside school partners.

What we learned

1 Explain the why before asking students to download anything.

Sharing your vision for how this will improve the school helps create student trust and buy-in.

2 Give students a role in the conversation.

Meet with student leaders before the announcement email, and lead with your vision, not the rules.

3 Plan for what fills the space.

Gym time, library access and lunchtime games provide fun when phones go quiet.

4 Students will notice their own habits.

Make the awareness tools part of the conversation from day one.

i Across these conversations, we're hearing early signs of stronger social connection, greater awareness of phone habits, and more opportunities to focus. We're also learning that successful implementation requires student voice, clear communication, and ongoing support.

How would your students lead the conversation?

Strong guardrails matter. So does agency. That's why The Commons partners with students and schools to help build strong environments where students can focus, connect and develop healthier relationships with technology.

Get in Touch

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