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Strengthening K-12 Cellphone Policies to Support Student Learning and Well-Being:
Research-Based Guidance for U.S. Education Leaders

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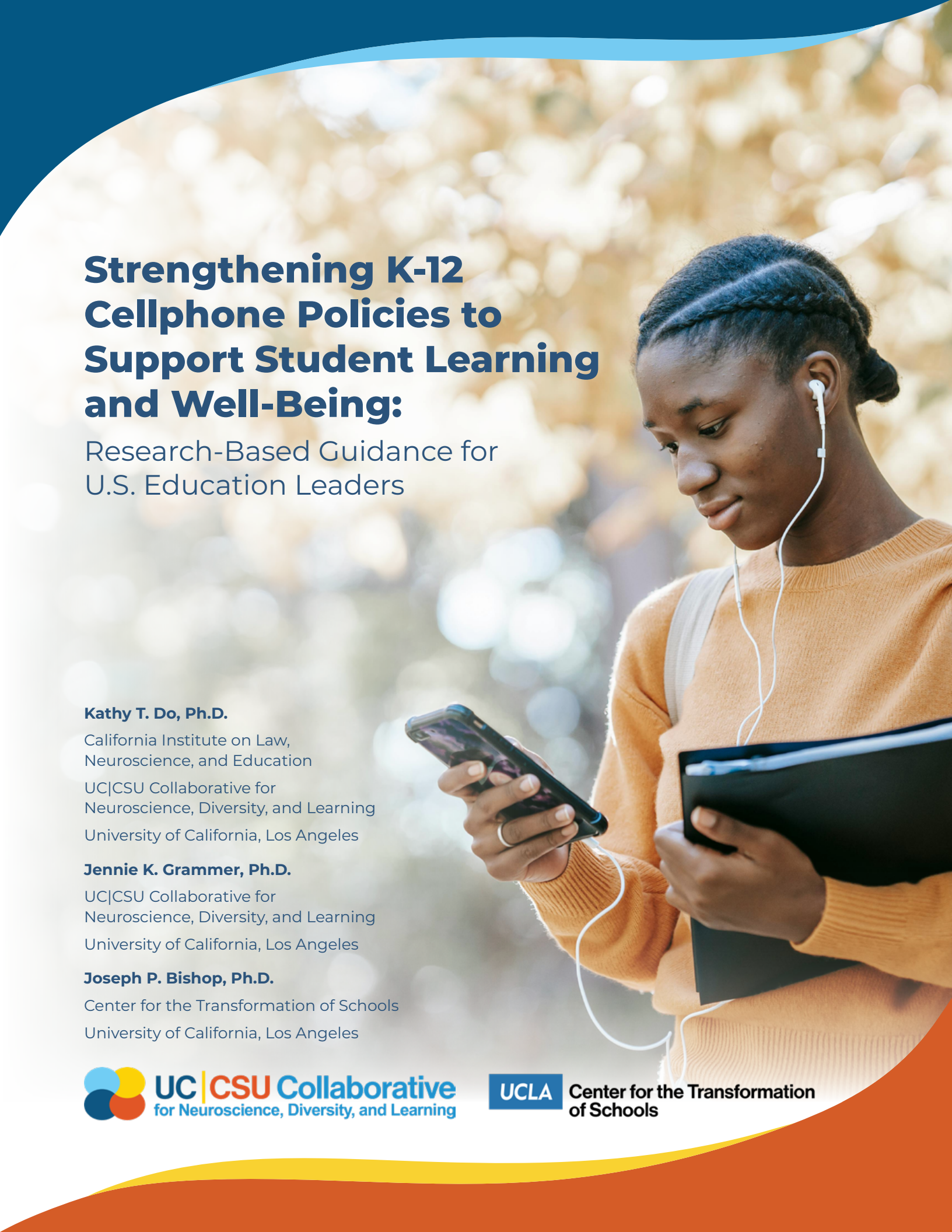
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Publication Date

2025-10-20

Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0c66s7m4#supplemental>



Strengthening K-12 Cellphone Policies to Support Student Learning and Well-Being:

Research-Based Guidance for
U.S. Education Leaders

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Acknowledgments

Preparation of this research brief was supported by the UC|CSU Collaborative for Neuroscience, Diversity, and Learning, California Institute on Law, Neuroscience, and Education, and the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools, School of Education & Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles. We thank Chuting Wang, Julie Rinker, and Megan Valladao Thomas for assistance with the research literature and policy review. We also thank our UC|CSU Collaborative colleagues Dr. Alison Yoshimoto-Towery, Dr. Julie Schneider, Dr. Cristina Whyte, Zoe Mao, and Kyle Hay for their helpful comments, as well as Katie Bellman for design assistance on early drafts.

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Suggested Citation: Do, K. T., Grammer, J. K., and Bishop, J. P. (2025). Strengthening K-12 cellphone policies to support student learning and well-being: Research-based guidance for U.S. education leaders. UC|CSU Collaborative for Neuroscience, Diversity, and Learning; Center for the Transformation of Schools, School of Education & Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles.

Executive Summary

Overview

Cellphones have become a constant companion in the lives of young people. While cellphones offer valuable opportunities for learning and connection, the pressure to manage online and offline social interactions has led to excessive use. This, in turn, has disrupted learning, impacted youth well-being, and intensified challenges like bullying, distractions, and device addiction. Research suggests adolescents may be particularly susceptible to these cellphone-related risks compared to children or adults. During adolescence, brain and behavioral changes heighten sensitivity to peer influence and social rejection, while at the same time, underdeveloped impulse control makes it difficult to resist short-term rewards, despite negative longer-term consequences.

As a new school year begins, 42 U.S. states have passed laws or recommendations to limit student cellphone use in schools to address concerns about cellphone use and its impact on youth learning, health, and well-being. Yet, balancing cellphone policies that support learning, safety, and fair enforcement has remained a critical challenge for frontline school leaders and administrators, educators, and other school personnel. Understanding the variations in national and local policies restricting cellphone use and the rationale behind them offers valuable insight into how schools are responding to the growing body of research linking screen time, adolescent development, and academic success.

The current brief serves two goals. First, the brief summarizes the latest research on the effects of cellphone use on learning and well-being. We examine the effect of cellphone use on four major issues facing today's techno-centric youth: (1) Divided attention in learning environments; (2) Health and well-being of young cellphone users; (3) Social and emotional development in the digital age; and (4) Safety across online and offline environments. Second, the brief explores how national and local school cellphone policies vary across the U.S.—ranging from total bans to restricted or instructional-use-only guidelines—and highlights key implementation differences. To help all students benefit from technology while minimizing harm, school systems need thoughtful, research-informed policies. We provide research-based recommendations for K-12 education system leaders, including district leaders, superintendents, and school boards, for developing and implementing age-appropriate, inclusive, and equitable school cellphone policies.





Major Conclusions of the Brief

What the Research Shows

- **Cellphones in classrooms can be both distracting and valuable.** While the presence and intermittent use of cellphones often reduce attention and learning, they can also serve as important instructional tools—especially among neurodiverse students and in under-resourced schools with limited technology access. Because students are still developing focus and self-regulation skills, schools should balance minimizing distractions with creating equitable opportunities to use cellphones to support learning.
- **Youth need support building healthy digital habits.** Balance is key to healthy digital habits, but children and adolescents need guidance and practice to manage cellphone use, since their self-regulation skills and brains are still developing. While heavy use isn't always addiction, it can interfere with learning and well-being. Students learn from adults, so model healthy phone habits. Be mindful, and show empathy—phones often help students cope with stress, boredom, or feel connected.
- **The impact of phone and social media use on mental health depends on how it's used.** Research linking phones and social media use and mental health is mixed: studies say phone use harms mental health, while others say mental health issues lead to more phone use (Orben, 2020; Nesi et al., 2022). *How* phones are used matters: positive content and supportive interactions online can actually boost mental well-being, especially for marginalized youth (Price et al., 2025; Radesky et al., 2023).
- **Risks and benefits of cellphone use are not uniform.** Cellphones can support student social connection and learning (digital tools, accessibility, family communication), and for some students—such as those with medical needs, language access needs, or who rely on phones for safety or family contact—access is essential. School policies that ignore these differences risk deepening inequities.

Core Policy Elements for K-12 Education Leaders

- **Involve interest holders in policy decision-making.** Students, educators, staff, school leaders, families, and researchers each bring critical perspectives. Without their input, cellphone policies can inadvertently limit effective teaching, hinder student learning and well-being, or raise safety and trust concerns among families. Involving interest holders ensures policies are practical, clearly communicated, and regularly evaluated for improvement.
- **Center learning and development.** Younger grades (elementary school) generally benefit from stricter limits during the entire school day; middle/high schools may need granular rules that distinguish instructional vs. non-instructional time and create flexibility to develop responsible cellphone use.
- **Design for equity and accessibility.** Build explicit exemptions and support for students with individualized education programs/504 plans, multilingual learners, students who rely on devices for health/safety, and those without reliable technology access. Prioritize supportive over punitive responses to cellphone violations, recognizing that overuse often reflects mental health needs or developing self-regulation skills rather than intentional rule-breaking.
- **Be evidence-informed and pragmatic.** Use a harm-reduction approach: limit non-instructional phone use (e.g., social media) and multitasking during lessons while enabling purposeful, teacher-led instructional uses. Pair cellphone restrictions with instruction about digital citizenship and self-regulation.
- **Clarity + consistency = credibility.** Clear cellphone use rules (what, when, where), transparent exemptions, and consistent, restorative enforcement reduce confusion and legal risk. Train staff and communicate to families before policy enforcement.

Key Recommendations

- **Move beyond restriction—invest in digital readiness.** Pair cellphone policies with digital literacy education and training to explain *why* restrictions matter and equip students, families, and staff with strategies to build and reinforce healthy digital habits at school and home.
- **Establish district policies for cell phone use in schools with students, families, educators, and union leaders.** Co-designed, schoolwide policies build stronger buy-in, ease implementation, and ensure responsibility is shared across the district and school rather than falling solely to teachers.
- **Avoid one-size-fits-all policies.** Effective cellphone policies are flexible, age-appropriate, and equity-focused, balancing state or district guidance with school needs. Tailored approaches should align with students' developmental stages, account for differences in technology access, and reflect the mixed scientific evidence on mental health impacts—moving beyond assumptions that highlight only the harms of cellphone use while overlooking its benefits like connection and activism.
- **Survey students, families, and educators on cellphone policies.** Gathering feedback on how policies affect teaching, learning, and well-being helps districts assess impact and reinforces that policymaking is an iterative, community-building process (Bishop, 2023).



The Shifting National Landscape on Cellphone Use in Schools

Cellphones have become a constant companion in the lives of teenagers. 43% of 8 to 12-year-olds own a cellphone, as do 88% of 13 to 18-year-olds (Rideout et al., 2021). A recent Common Sense Media survey showed that teenagers use their cellphones for an average of 4.5 hours per day, although daily cellphone use ranged from only a few minutes for some users to over 16 hours among others. While cellphones offer valuable opportunities for learning and connection, the pressure to manage online and offline social interactions has led to excessive use. This, in turn, has disrupted learning, impacted youth well-being, and intensified challenges like bullying, distractions, and device addiction (Radesky et al., 2023; Viner et al., 2019).

Research suggests adolescents are particularly susceptible to these cellphone-based vulnerabilities compared to children or adults. During adolescence, brain and behavioral changes heighten sensitivity to peer influence and social rejection (Do et al., 2020; van Hoorn et al., 2018), while at the same time, underdeveloped impulse control makes it difficult to resist short-term rewards, despite negative longer-term consequences (Hartley & Somerville, 2015). Although experts recommend limiting screen time for school-aged youth to 2 hours daily (Council on Communications and Media, 2016), excessive cellphone use has persisted and even escalated since the shift to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students who became used to relying on cellphones for both school and social life now face the challenge of re-engaging in person, rebuilding face-to-face social skills, and developing healthier digital habits that reduce distractions and multitasking.

As a new school year begins, 42 states have passed laws or recommendations to limit student cellphone use in schools to address harmful cellphone use and its impact on youth learning and health (Associated Press, 2025) (See Figure 1). The remaining eight

states currently do not have established standards but are considering similar measures to curb device addiction, bullying, and distractions. However, balancing cellphone policies that support student learning and safety while ensuring compliance and enforcement has remained a critical challenge for frontline school leaders and administrators, teachers, and other school personnel. School cellphone restrictions and exemptions differ as each state or district sets policies in response to evolving mandates and research (Table 1). At the same time, limited guidance on enforcement can leave students navigating inconsistent rules across classrooms and schools, with cellphone use during school hours remaining fairly widespread (Burnell et al., 2025; Radesky et al., 2023). Moreover, adults' decisions on managing cellphone use in schools often fail to consider young people's developmental needs in a hyperconnected world, shaping their long-term educational success, health, and ability to navigate technology responsibly.

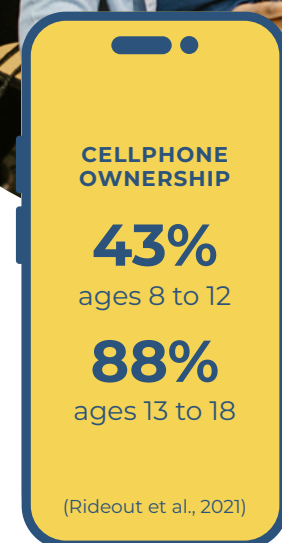
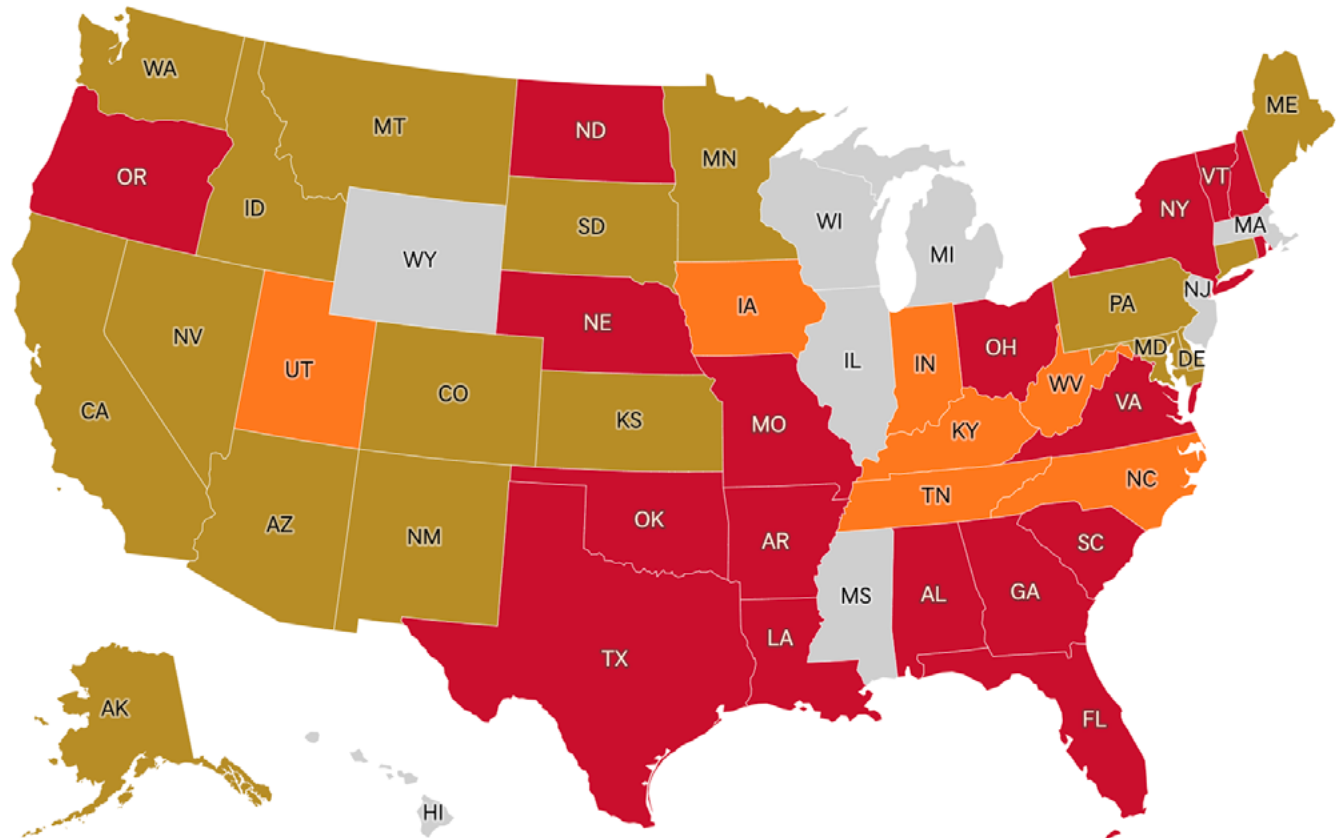


Figure 1. State Policies on Phones in Schools

■ School day ban ■ Instructional time ban ■ Requires/recommends local policy ■ None



(Source: AP reports; KFF)

This brief summarizes the current research on the effects of cellphone use on major issues facing today's techno-centric youth. We provide research-based recommendations to guide K-12 education system leaders, including district leaders, superintendents, and school boards, across the U.S. in developing and implementing age-appropriate cellphone policies, with clear exceptions for students with disabilities and safeguards to prevent inequitable implementation. To match language in K-12 cellphone policies across the U.S. (Houston Independent School District, 2024; Los Angeles Unified School District, 2017; New York City Department of Education, 2015; Orange County Public

Schools, 2024; San Mateo Union High School District, 2021), we use the term "cellphones" in this brief to broadly refer to personal mobile devices with or without internet access, and distinguish these physical devices from the Internet-based applications (e.g., social media) that may be accessed on them. We recognize that schools often use terms such as cellphones, phones, smartphones, personal devices, or technology interchangeably. "Phone-free" school policies also vary widely—from full-day bans to restricted use during specific times or settings—and may extend to other personal devices beyond cellphones.

Perspectives from Key Interest Holders on School Phone Restrictions

There are several interest holders with unique perspectives on phone restrictions in schools. These include educators and school leaders directly implementing these policies, as well as researchers who have studied youth outcomes associated with cellphone use. Insights from interest holders involved in K-12 education and developmental science are crucial for understanding how recent school cellphone policies affect the education, health, and well-being of young people. Drawing on printed articles and conversations with school leadership and teacher organizations, this section presents a snapshot of perspectives from students, educators, district officials, and researchers on the perceived benefits and drawbacks of school cellphone restrictions that have emerged in the literature and conversations and warrant further exploration.

Students



Distraction-Free Learning. Students expressed appreciation for having classroom learning free from cellphone distractions so they can focus more and multitask less. Elena, a student interviewed in Harvard Education Magazine, noted that her school's policy seemed aligned with research on the effect of cellphones on attention and learning:

"I felt an increase in focus because I don't have to worry about my phone at all... I read a study once on using phones during class, that it takes up to 20 minutes to focus back on the subject you're doing in class. I feel like that is true."

(McArdle, 2024)

Benefits of Phone-Free Interactions. While some students regretted missing opportunities to take photos of key high school moments, others felt being phone-free encouraged more personal connections.

A student from Washington, Aniya, shared that the policy helped push her outside of her usual social circles at school:

"It's pushing me to reach out more to my peers instead of relying more on my phone, like I did in middle school. I have a bit of social anxiety so [sic] don't like connecting with people. But the friends I've made are great, so I'm kind of glad we have that cellphone policy and we're encouraged to talk to each other."

(McArdle, 2024)

Lack of Trust and Autonomy. Many students see benefits to cellphone-free schools, but older students expressed a desire for more autonomy in managing phone use at school, noting that a blanket cellphone ban can signal a lack of trust from school leaders. Katrina's experience reveals how cellphone bans can unintentionally interfere with building responsible digital habits:

"I think [a lockable cellphone pouch] is really unnecessary because I'm pretty sure students are capable of staying off their phones... Since I'm not allowed to use my phone as much in school, it makes me want to go on my phone more after [school] to see everything."

(Zucker, 2024)

Families



Support and Concerns for

Implementation. Only 30% of parents/caregivers say that their child's school asked them for input when developing their cellphone policies (Echelon Insights, 2024).

While parents generally supported cellphone bans during school hours, some expressed concerns about safety and communication, especially during emergencies, and enforcement. A parent of a high school junior in California said:

"The first thing I thought was, how are they going to enforce that? They're going to get a lot of backlash from students and parents... I'm for it ... Humans right now can't get off their phone, so I mean, we've got to start somewhere."

(Lake & Li, 2024)

Educators, School Staff, and Administrators



Safety and Emergency

Communication. School administrators and staff stressed the need for more support in managing cellphone use, especially during crises when caregiver expectations may differ. A school principal shared:

"...In an emergency, students need to be able to listen to the adult giving directions instead of texting and not paying attention to what's happening. Once everyone is safe, teachers can [unlock cellphone pouches], and students can communicate with their parents."

(Zucker, 2024)

Schoolwide Responsibility. Districts and teacher associations emphasize the importance of schoolwide coordination and responsibility in implementing cellphone policies, rather than leaving enforcement first or solely to teachers. Some, like the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, compensate teachers who assist with implementation, fostering collective responsibility among school administrators, educators, and staff.

"Cellphones have proven to be a significant distraction in the classroom. [Cleveland Metropolitan School District's] new contract language outlines, 'To maintain a secure and orderly learning environment, students who choose to bring a personal cellphone or electronic device to school will have their phone/device subject to collection and/or storage during the student school day' and pays teachers who volunteer to assist administrators with implementation. This important policy change has significant impact on student learning since cellphones became a constant in our students' lives."

-Shari Obrenski, president, Cleveland Teachers Union

Reduced Burden from Enforcing Cellphone Policies.

Educators in districts with lockable pouches for students' cellphones (compared to less restrictive policies; see Table 2) appreciated that it relieved them from enforcing bans or handling students' property, allowing them to focus on teaching without straining student relationships.

"It's been a relief for all of us teachers to have students keep their phones [in lockable pouches in their backpacks all day] and be responsible for them... I'm not the 'keeper of the phone' now, so it keeps the relationship in the classroom more positive."

(Zucker, 2024)



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(Echelon Insights, 2024)

Phones as Pedagogical Resources. Educators and teacher organizations highlighted that phone restriction policies should include pedagogical exceptions, as phones can support teaching and learning for all students, particularly in areas where other technology is scarce, when teachers control when and how they are used in the classroom.

*“Cell phones’ internal sensors—from speedometers to sonometers to accelerometers—[can] help students without science labs conduct experiments. Imagine several students opening [an] app on one phone to measure and graph the speed at which different objects drop. It’s fun, it brings the formulas student[s] learn during direct instruction to life, it’s experiential, and it’s accessible to most every student in the country. **This is just one of many ways phones can boost learning if used well and strictly for pedagogical purposes, particularly for neurodivergent students or in environments with little access to technology.**”*

—Rebecca Winthrop, Director of the Center for Universal Education, Brookings Institution

Researchers

Do Phones Help or Harm Student Learning and Well-Being?

Researchers studying cellphone use continue to debate its impact on youth

development. Dr. Jonathan Haidt argues that cellphones are to blame for distracting students and harming both learning and social connections, and that strict phone-free policies in schools are necessary to improve focus, academic performance, and mental health:

“As long as some kids are posting and texting during the school day, that raises the pressure on everyone else to check their phones during the school day. Nobody wants to be the last person to know the thing that everyone else is texting about.”
(Haidt, 2023)

On the other hand, Drs. Candice Odgers, Lucy Foulkes, and others have questioned Dr. Haidt’s interpretation of existing studies on youth mental health, where findings are mixed, whereas evidence on the effects of cellphones on attention and other outcomes is somewhat clearer. They emphasize that research on the mental health impacts posed by cellphones remains inconclusive and suggest adults’ narrative of the “phone-addicted teenager” overlooks how cellphones can support age-appropriate goals, like building peer connections.

Dr. Odgers writes:

“...That digital technologies are rewiring our children’s brains and causing an epidemic of mental illness is not supported by science [and] might distract us from effectively responding to the real causes of the current mental-health crisis in young people.”
(Odgers, 2024)

Dr. Foulkes writes:

“It might also help if adults reframed what they thought about phones. The sight of a teenager glued to their screen should be interpreted not as a sign of them being ensnared by a new digital “addiction”, but rather a visible manifestation of them caring about what young people have always cared about: their peers.”
(Foulkes, 2024)

These examples illustrate that cellphones and social media are not inherently harmful to young people, and adults should not assume behaviors, like frequent scrolling, are signs of cellphone addiction. Instead, these behaviors may reflect age-appropriate ways to meaningfully connect with peers or stay informed about current issues and events. Creating opportunities for young people, especially older adolescents, to practice setting boundaries and using cellphones responsibly can support healthy digital habits in and outside the classroom. Equipping educators and families with the skills to model and foster safe, responsible use of technology and online behavior can enhance classroom management and promote engaged learning in today’s increasingly digital world.



The Science on How Cellphone Use Impacts Student Learning and Well-Being

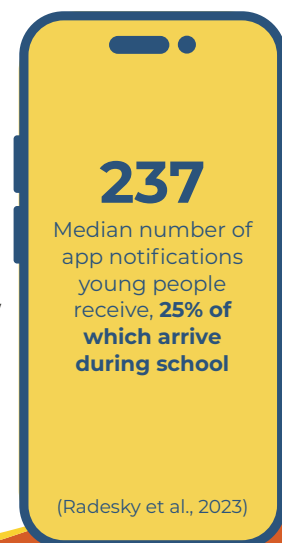
As adolescents become increasingly immersed in technology, ongoing brain and behavioral development—particularly heightened peer sensitivity and still-developing impulse control—makes them more sensitive to short-term rewards despite long-term risks (Do et al., 2020; Hartley & Somerville, 2015; van Hoorn et al., 2018). This ongoing exposure to technology during adolescence, especially in the wake of post-COVID school disruptions, has contributed to four key issues impacting students' academic success, health, and well-being today: (1) Divided attention in learning environments; (2) Health and well-being of young cellphone users; (3) Social and emotional development in the digital age; and (4) Safety across online and offline environments.

Below, we summarize research on how cellphone use shapes the diverse ways young people navigate the opportunities and risks these four modern issues present. We also share research-based approaches that school administrators, leaders, educators, and staff can use to foster balanced cellphone policies and practices that accommodate all students' diverse learning and health needs.

Issue 1: Divided Attention in Learning Environments

In our conversations with educators, many express concern about keeping students engaged and attentive in the classroom. The ability to tune out distractions and stay focused on important tasks relies on prefrontal brain regions that continue to mature from childhood to adulthood (Gogtay et al., 2004; Rubia et al., 2006) and is a skill shaped through everyday experiences at home and school (Grammer et al., 2021; Morrison et al., 2019; Murty et al., 2016; Raab & Hartley, 2018). Crucially, digital habits outside of school can spill over to the classroom (Amez & Baert, 2020), affecting students' attention, learning, and academic performance. Cellphones frequently compete for attention with calls, texts, and

notifications (Chen & Yan, 2016), making it difficult for young people to resist the instant gratification of checking their cellphones and re-engage after interruptions to effectively learn. On a typical day, young people receive a median of 237 notifications from the apps on their phones, 25% of which arrive during the school day, and 5% at night (Radesky et al., 2023). Despite school policies restricting cellphone use being implemented across many U.S. states, students still find ways to use their cellphones during school hours primarily for social media, YouTube, and gaming (Burnell et al., 2025; Radesky et al., 2023). The pressure to manage what they get notified of, and when, can divide, shorten, or interrupt their attention in school. This is especially amplified for students who experience learning or attentional differences—including those with identified developmental disabilities such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)—an estimated 1 in 5 students currently in PK-12 schools (Horowitz et al., 2017; Panagiotidi & Overton, 2022).



Key Finding 1.1: Multitasking between learning and off-task cellphone use hurts learning and can affect the development of key cognitive skills.

Students often overestimate their ability to multitask and underestimate how much it can negatively affect their learning (Mrazek et al., 2021). Cellphones can impair learning by drawing youths' attention away from focal tasks and disrupting the development of cognitive and impulse control skills. Research has shown that the presence of a cellphone, and high awareness of it, can reduce a person's ability to focus, learn, and remember information (Tanil & Yong, 2020; Ward et al., 2017). Simply having a cellphone in class divides students' attention from what they are learning, leading to imperfect information processing (Shanmugasundaram & Tamilarasu, 2023). Constantly switching their attention between what is happening in the classroom and on the cellphone is also mentally draining and causes students to miss information (Chen & Yan, 2016). For example, one study found that when tasks are interrupted by messages or notifications, people still complete them just as well and even faster than without interruptions, but experience increased stress, frustration, and mental effort when doing so (Mark et al., 2008). Moreover, heavier media use in adolescence is associated with greater attentional difficulties and ADHD-related behaviors (Nikkelen et al., 2014; Ra et al., 2018), highlighting the need to teach strategies for managing technology use and staying focused in the classroom. Attention is effortful, and sustained attention requires time and practice to improve from childhood to adulthood because it is a skill that is learned with experience and practice (Dawson & Guare, 2014; van de Weijer-Bergsma et al., 2012). For students with attentional difficulties or ADHD symptoms, tailored support from educators and school staff may be especially important to ensure digital habits do not interfere with academic and social learning.

The habit of constantly engaging in multitasking activities can affect the development of key cognitive skills (Ophir et al., 2009; Rothbart & Posner, 2015; Sanbonmatsu et al., 2013). Multitasking between learning and an off-task cellphone may not

immediately reduce comprehension of instruction, but can impair reading speed and long-term retention, leading to lower exam performance (Bowman et al., 2010; Glass & Kang, 2019; Kuznekoff & Titsworth, 2013). Research has also shown that test performance is impacted by cellphone use. For example, in one study, students who were in a phone-free classroom, compared to those who studied in environments with a less restrictive cellphone policy, performed better on the test (Lee et al., 2017). This is in part due to the learning strategies students use when they are not on their phones—students not using their cellphones during lectures take more detailed notes, recall more lecture details, and, in turn, do better on tests (Kuznekoff & Titsworth, 2013). It is important for students to build attention and self-regulation skills by putting away the cellphone, allowing them to actively learn how to complete multiple tasks efficiently instead of constantly dividing their focus across various tasks.



Implementation Tips for School Administrators



- Restrict Wi-Fi access to non-educational apps and messages during the school day to minimize distractions.
- Share research with students on how phone-free learning environments can enhance focus, memory, and academic performance, helping them understand the benefits of reducing distractions for their overall success.
- Establish school policies around intentional breaks to support classroom learning and reduce involuntary distractions.
- Help students work the “muscle” of attention by adjusting task expectations to match their developing capacity to focus—tasks that are just beyond their limits, but that they are motivated to do.
- Promote collaborative conversations between educators and students to identify strategies for enhancing attention and focus, while discussing the benefits they each observe in teaching and learning (e.g., reduced time to study with more test-related gains).
- Train staff on developmentally appropriate levels of student engagement. Children can stay engaged and on-task even if they are not visually focused on the teacher. By middle and high school, students know what it looks like to “pay attention”, but we know that sometimes students look like they are very engaged and attentive when their mind is elsewhere. The opposite is also true: when they are working in groups or on things they are motivated to pursue, they can look less quiet and focused. This does not mean they are not engaged, so it is important for educators and caregivers to rethink how we interpret attention behaviors.
- Ensure that individualized education plans (IEP) or 504 plan meetings clearly address how cellphones and other personal devices will be used as assistive technology, including any boundaries around their use.

Implementation Tips for Educators and School Staff



- Establish classroom cellphone rules and norms. Hold the firmest boundaries during instructional time, especially for younger students or students with attentional differences that may need more support with monitoring phone use.
- Support student learning by aligning strategies with developmental goals. For example, middle schoolers may benefit from collaborative, peer-driven activities both in the classroom and during unstructured time.
- Model and teach self-awareness with cellphone habits at school. Provide students with the evidence base underlying policy recommendations so they understand the “why” behind new rules. Help build the skills they need to monitor the impact of cell phone use on their own thinking and learning. Encourage students to ask: “Do I feel distracted while looking at this?” Help students build self-awareness about their own phone habits by discussing how media multitasking, like checking notifications while working, can make it harder to concentrate.
- Demonstrate empathy by acknowledging the reasons behind excessive phone use, such as stress or the desire for distraction. Ask: “Does watching funny videos help with school stress?”

Issue 2: The Health and Well-Being of Young Cellphone Users

The stressors of the technology and social media of modern times are thought to contribute to the worsening mental health crisis and declines in happiness and well-being of young people under age 30 in the U.S. (Helliwell et al., 2024). Widespread social media use among younger adolescents and adults may heighten awareness of the weight of climate change, social inequities, and polarization—issues less immediately apparent to older generations. Rates of anxiety, depression, and attempted deaths by suicide have increased over the past decade (Burstein et al., 2019; Twenge et al., 2019), with children and adolescents who spend more than 3 hours a day on social media at twice the risk of experiencing mental health problems, including symptoms of depression and anxiety (Riehm et al., 2019). Mental health plays a critical role in our ability to stay connected with family, friends, and communities, as well as to thrive in school and at work. For example, youth with mental health conditions are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion, discrimination, educational difficulties, risk-taking behaviors, and physical illnesses (Filia et al., 2025; World Health Organization, 2024). The consequences of failing to address adolescent mental and physical health conditions can extend to adulthood, impairing long-term health outcomes and limiting opportunities for personal success.

Key Finding 2.1: Cellphones pose both significant risks and benefits to youths' health and well-being.

There is, as yet, no clear scientific consensus on how cellphone use affects youth mental health and well-being (Jensen et al., 2019; Orben, 2020). Youths' cellphone use has both positive and negative implications for learning, brain development, relationships, identity exploration, daily behaviors, and psychological symptoms (Nesi et al., 2022). Excessive screen time (>two to three hours daily) has



been shown to affect brain development in adolescents and young adults (Maza et al., 2023), negatively impact attention, learning and memory, emotion regulation and social functioning, physical health, and is associated with increased risk of mental disorders and substance use (Manwell et al., 2022). Some researchers suggest depression and anxiety contribute to problematic cellphone use, while others argue that higher cellphone use is associated with depressive and anxiety symptoms. At the same time, some studies report no link between adolescents' technology use and mental health. For example, one study found that adolescents' technology use did not predict future mental health symptoms, and their mental health did not worsen on days with more vs. less technology use, even for those at higher risk for experiencing mental health issues (Jensen et al., 2019). More research is needed to fully understand how cellphone use impacts youth mental health, and which young people are most vulnerable.

Crucially, screen time alone does not fully explain the effects of cellphone use on device addiction, bullying, or distraction (Radesky et al., 2023). Students' daily cellphone use is shaped by school and parental rules, and factors like their own maturity level and socioeconomic access (Mollborn et al., 2022; Wang & Xing, 2018). More importantly, *how* young people use their cellphones matters—while passive scrolling can be harmful, texting friends or connecting with hard-to-reach peers, especially among underrepresented communities (e.g., LGBTQIA+), can meet important social and emotional needs (Price et al., 2025; Radesky et al., 2023).

What is clear is that there is still more to learn about what protects youth from the potential risks posed by excessive cellphone use. Are older students less impacted? Are there aspects of a young person's lived experience that are protective? With so many new apps and ways to use phones, and as youth are exposed to more diverse content from childhood to adolescence, more research is needed to understand when and for whom higher cellphone use is helpful or harmful.



Key Finding 2.2: Young cellphone users need adult support to build and maintain healthy cellphone habits. Like sleep or exercise, healthy tech habits fall on a continuum that takes time, support, and practice to build and sustain for both youth and adults. During adolescence, ongoing brain development heightens sensitivity to social feedback while impulse control skills are still developing. This, combined with an increased reliance on peer versus parent approval, makes adolescents more likely to use cellphones in ways that seek attention or trigger strong emotional reactions from peers (American Psychological Association, 2024a). Research shows that frequent checking of social media in early adolescence is associated with changes in the brain's sensitivity to social rewards and punishments (Maza et al., 2023), and problematic cellphone use in adolescence often continues into emerging adulthood (Coyne et al., 2019). These findings highlight the importance of early intervention to promote digital balance and prevent problematic digital habits that are harder to break later in life.

Young people are still developing digital habits and need guidance and practice to use cellphones in ways that promote—rather than interfere with—their health and well-being. How can you tell that cellphone use is interfering with everyday activities? An early sign that cellphone use has shifted from a helpful tool into a harmful habit is when it starts displacing other responsibilities or behaviors that have a positive impact on mental and physical health. Some cellphone apps expose youth to overstimulating content or duration-prolonging algorithms that heighten stress, delay bedtime, and disrupt sleep, exercise, and leisure activities. For example, one study finds that the negative effects of frequent social media use on mental health and well-being observed in girls were explained by disrupted sleep and lack of exercise (Viner et al., 2019). On a typical school night, 11 to 17-year-olds average twenty minutes of cellphone use (ranging from under a minute to five hours), yet over two-thirds reported struggling to unplug, relying on technology to cope with negative feelings, and losing sleep from late-night cellphone use (Radesky et al., 2023). To help safeguard against these developmental vulnerabilities, adults should monitor and set limits on cellphone use during early adolescence (ages 10–14), when young people are still forming healthy cellphone habits.

Implementation Tips for School Administrators

- Help students and staff differentiate between unproven myths and research-based findings, promoting a balanced understanding of technology's role in youths' mental health. For example, while it is a common myth that higher screen time directly causes mental health issues, research shows that the impact depends on *how* technology is used, with positive content and meaningful connections potentially supporting mental well-being.
- Implement cellphone policies that are aligned with students' developmental stages. For middle and high school, policies could gradually offer less structure, helping older students build autonomy and balance in phone habits.
- Provide structured access to phones for approved purposes to help ease anxiety and support student well-being in the classroom.
- Teach educators and parents to spot phone addiction signs, like distress at being without the phone, thinking about the phone when not using it, or frequently interrupting activities to check the phone. Instead of using exclusionary discipline for repeated violations of cellphone policies, consider referrals to mental health professionals within or outside of school settings, when needed.
- Establish clear phone-use policies and model healthy phone habits in school.
- Promote the integration of digital citizenship curricula in the classroom to promote healthy use of digital and social media.
- Incorporate intentional breaks, physical activities, and opportunities for in-person social connections and active learning into students' daily routines.



Implementation Tips for Educators and School Staff



- Teach students to recognize signs of phone addiction, such as constant checking or distress when disconnected.
- Help students balance their lives through on-device strategies (e.g., turning off push notifications) and off-device strategies (e.g., scheduling screen-free time) to reduce the risks of excessive screen time.
- Encourage students to be mindful of their phone use so it doesn't interfere with important activities that support their health and well-being, like exercise, in-person socializing, and hobbies.
- Organize schoolwide workshops involving staff and community partners to educate families on sleep hygiene and screen time limits at home, highlighting how phone-linked sleep issues affect learning and attention in class (Baumgartner, 2022; Chen & Shi, 2018; Mireku et al., 2019).
- Encourage educators and caregivers alike to actively manage students' screen time and media risks using mediation techniques (Chen & Shi, 2018), such as creating rules that limit time and content, explaining and discussing media content with children to guide their choices, and using media together with children. In fact, many youth report being in favor of monitoring practices that support their autonomy or support collaboration between parent and child (Tiches, 2023).

Issue 3: Social and Emotional Development in the Digital Age

Belonging to peer groups enables young people to develop their sense of identity, form support networks, learn social norms and share knowledge, resolve conflict in friendships and relationships, and achieve goals that would be harder if they worked alone (Do et al., 2024). Yet, cellphones and social media have transformed the landscape of adolescent peer relationships (Nesi et al., 2018a, 2018b), increasing the immediacy of experiences, amplifying social pressures online and offline, and altering the nature of peer interactions. In 2024, the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, released a health advisory to mitigate social media's risks for children and adolescents (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023b)—while also sounding the alarm on a growing epidemic of loneliness and isolation, especially among young people (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023a). This highlights a modern paradox that while young people are more connected through technology than ever, they are also feeling increasingly isolated and lonely.

Whether face-to-face or online, bullying remains a concern for students, with about one in five reporting exclusionary experiences that can be amplified through digital platforms (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). Certain types of bullying, such as relational vs. verbal, are particularly harmful to children's social development and mental health. Neurodiverse students, including those with autism or other special education needs, report feeling more socially excluded and isolated due to behavioral and social challenges (Bossaert et al., 2012; Kwan et al., 2020) and often exhibit lower social competence and friendship quality (Deckers et al., 2017; Mazurek & Kanne, 2010). Taken together, these findings suggest cellphones can both support and constrain opportunities for youth to develop the social-emotional skills essential for adulthood, with exaggerated effects among students with learning differences.

Victoria Handy, an advocate with a nonprofit autism organization, shares how growing up as an autistic teenager in the digital age made bullying feel constant and harmful to her health:

“As someone with autism, I was bullied all the time while I was in school, and as I got older, it became more severe with cyberbullying occurring on social media. People at school would plan attacks—or what they called pranks—on me, record my humiliation, and then spread it all over the internet. It got to the point where the bullying led to unhealthy eating habits, depression, suicide attempts, and struggles with addiction.”

(Palumbo, 2024)

Key Finding 3.1: Cellphones support age-appropriate goals, while also stifling meaningful in-person interaction and fueling cyberbullying for certain youth.

Contrary to common adult concerns about cellphone addiction, young people use cellphones in purposeful ways to support age-appropriate goals. Youth use cellphones to stay informed about current events, discover new information, cope with stress or unwind through entertainment, and explore their identities—all while building independence in their daily lives (Mazurek et al., 2012; Radesky et al., 2023; Shi et al., 2023). Moreover, face-to-face interactions with peers help youth develop social skills important for adult social functioning, such as reading nonverbal cues, interpreting tone, and navigating cooperation and conflict resolution (Do et al., 2024). For autistic adolescents, online social platforms may offer more accessible ways to connect with others, as they reduce the demands of interpreting physical and conversational cues often required in person (Mazurek et al., 2012; Mazurek & Kanne, 2010).

Despite supporting developmental goals and social skill building, cellphones can sometimes stifle in-person interactions and open the door to cyberbullying—often hurting the most vulnerable youth the hardest. Research shows that the mere presence of cellphones during in-person interactions hinders trust, closeness, and the quality of conversations, and can lead to higher social isolation and lower friendship satisfaction (Przybylski

& Weinstein, 2013; Stevic & Matthes, 2023). Reduced face-to-face interactions in favor of online exchanges or one-sided connections with media figures can also limit opportunities for social skill development and make real-world interactions more challenging to navigate. Moreover, frequent online interactions can open the door to cyberbullying, where harassment or exclusion often spills into in-person settings. This is because cellphones and social media can make bullying experiences more public, anonymous, and harder to report or respond effectively (Cowie, 2013), taking a toll on youths’ mental health over time (Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Li et al., 2024). To support healthy social and emotional development, it is critical to balance the benefits of cellphone use with safeguards that protect youth from social harms and promote meaningful, real-world connections.

Implementation Tips for School Administrators

- Highlight to students that phone-free policies help students focus on face-to-face interactions and hands-on, in-person activities.
- Create inclusive spaces where students with learning and attention challenges can build social skills through structured peer, supportive interactions.
- Provide teachers with training to help students, especially those with learning challenges, develop resilience and self-advocacy in both social and academic settings.
- Collaborate with mental health professionals to create resources for families on identifying and addressing digital drama and cyberbullying (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008), such as talking about online boundaries, monitoring phone use, or seeking counseling.



Implementation Tips for Educators and School Staff



- Emphasize the importance of face-to-face interactions for building social skills and close friendships, as online interactions can make it difficult to interpret social cues, and parasocial (one-sided) relationships with influencers or celebrities lack reciprocity.
- As today's digital youth use apps for peer connection, recognize and address students' fears about missing out or not staying constantly updated on their peers' activities. Ask them, "What do you feel you are missing out on?" to open a supportive conversation about the role of cellphones in their daily interactions.
- Encourage students to develop curiosity and critical thinking by solving problems independently, making skills like creativity and exerting effort more appealing than relying on cellphones for immediate answers (Aru & Rozgonjuk, 2022).
- Model healthy phone habits during breaks and after school, as students often observe and are influenced by your actions even outside the classroom.

Issue 4: Safety across Online and Offline Environments

Today's fast-changing digital landscape presents both new opportunities and serious challenges for student safety. On the positive side, technological advances have expanded access to assistive tools for students with health or learning needs—reaching more students at younger ages—and helped many stay socially connected with caregivers and peers. At

the same time, social media platforms use algorithms that shape what posts students see online, often prioritizing attention-grabbing or emotionally intense content over privacy or well-being. These algorithms can expose students to harmful or misleading information, including cyberbullying or content that promotes risky or illegal behavior (Nawaz et al., 2024). Digital literacy skills do not always match a student's age or grade level, leaving many youth vulnerable to using harmful or inaccurate content as a guide for how to act offline. As a result, it is becoming harder not only to protect students online but also to help schools manage the impact of students' wide-ranging online experiences in the classroom and beyond.

Key Finding 4.1: We cannot conclude that higher cellphone use is universally safe for all children and adolescents. While higher cellphone use can offer some benefits, its impact on student safety during the school day is particularly complex—posing challenges for crisis response, legal risks, and equity in learning environments. Cellphones enable real-time communication between students and caregivers during emergencies, a key reason why many caregivers want their child to have one at school (Echelon Insights, 2024). However, cellphone use during school hours can disrupt schools' coordinated crisis response efforts, interfere with attention and learning, and hinder students' development of personal responsibility. Schools also face legal concerns around student cellphone use both on and off campus, ranging from free speech and privacy concerns to ensuring equitable access for students with health or learning accommodations. High device use can be transformative for students with learning or health needs—for example, auto-transcription apps for deaf or hard-of-hearing students. But it raises key questions: while cellphones can empower some, are they always safe or appropriate for other uses, or for peers around them who may not use them in the same way?

High cellphone use often brings online experiences into the school environment, yet students are largely left to navigate algorithm-driven content without much adult guidance. Adaptive algorithms in

cellphone apps are designed to maximize screen time by tapping into the adolescent brain's sensitivity to short-term rewards, such as likes or comments on a post or endless access to quick, novel videos. Crucially, previous research has shown that many students do not receive guidance on building healthy digital habits to recognize and regulate when their cellphone use becomes problematic (Weinstein & James, 2022). Without adult guidance, daily social media experiences can repeatedly expose youth to harmful peer comparisons that lower self-esteem (Fardouly et al., 2015), risky content glorifying behaviors like disordered eating or suicide (Nawaz et al., 2024), and online bullying that spills into school interactions. It is important that adults help youth build the digital skills to think critically about online content, protect their privacy, and manage interpersonal conflict before it escalates offline.



Implementation Tips for School Administrators



- Host local town hall events to discuss phone-free policies with parents/caregivers.
- Communicate with parents/caregivers extensively via emails and calls during drills and emergencies.
- In emergencies, remind students to follow adult instructions and avoid texting. Once safe, unlock phone pouches so students can contact families.
- Prepare school leaders and staff to use supportive language when communicating phone restriction policies with students and families, emphasizing the intent is to help with safety, learning, and well-being, not to punish.
- Ensure cellphone policies include exceptions for students with accommodations, like an individualized education program (IEP) or 504 plan.

Implementation Tips for Educators and School Staff



- Incorporate digital citizenship curricula and resources to address common topics relevant to healthy digital media use and individual well-being (e.g., misinformation, news literacy) (American Psychological Association, 2024a; Weinstein & James, 2022).
- Encourage students to reflect on the urgency of notifications (e.g., breaking news or social media updates), while teaching strategies to manage notifications and protect their personal data to reduce distractions and stay safe online.
- Encourage critical thinking about phone and social media use—help students question why they should limit their screen time and understand the impact of algorithms on their behavior.

Educational Policy on Phones in Schools

Cellphones can enhance learning and social connectivity but also pose distractions to learning, risks to mental and behavioral health, and challenges for classroom management. Despite growing federal, state, and local district policies limiting student cellphone use during class, schools still wrestle to balance the benefits of cellphones with their potential harms.



Federal and International Policies

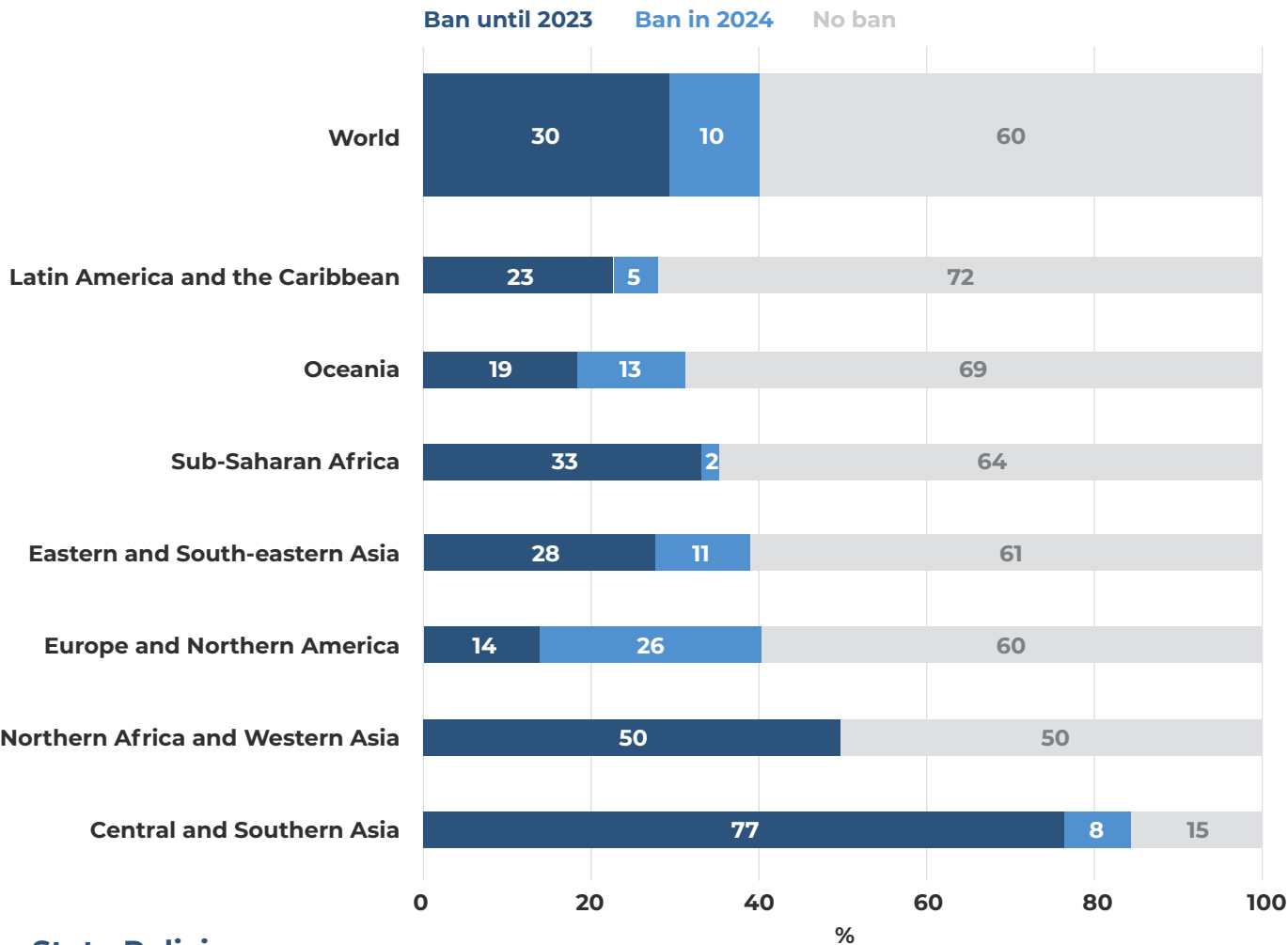
Over 79 countries (or 40%) ban cellphones in classrooms by law or policy (Technology in Education, 2023) (Figure 2), but approaches vary, with countries in Asia favoring total bans and other countries like Canada adopting more trauma-informed practices for limiting cellphones (Camerron, 2024). In the U.S., no federal policies have been adopted to ban student cellphones and other personal devices in schools, though there are related warnings about the risks of social media for youth health and well-being. However, cellphone restrictions in schools alone will not address the root causes of distraction, loneliness, and other challenges associated with excessive screen time in students. There is growing pressure on federal officials and policymakers to hold social media companies, gaming platforms, and app developers responsible for making meaningful changes that curb the addictive design features keeping young people glued to their screens. Dr. Mary Ann McCabe, co-chair of the American Psychological Association's report on social media use in adolescence, explained further:

"Delegating responsibility to parents, to app stores or to youth themselves does not address the vulnerabilities and harms built into the platforms... That responsibility sits with the creators and purveyors of these technologies—the platform developers themselves."

(American Psychological Association, 2024b)

Experts have issued health advisories warning that certain content and features on digital media platforms can be unsafe for youth, introducing psychological threats and exploiting developmental vulnerabilities since these platforms were originally designed for adults (American Psychological Association, 2024a; Office of the Surgeon General, 2023b). Federal legislation, such as the Kids Online Safety Act (Kids Online Safety Act, 2024), is still needed to hold social media companies accountable for making fundamental changes to their platforms to mitigate harm and strengthen data privacy protections for minors. Moreover, congressional action is needed to implement nationwide public health campaigns addressing problematic cellphone use. One potential measure is a Surgeon General's warning label on social media platforms to highlight the significant mental health risks for adolescents. Research on tobacco warning labels suggest such warning labels can increase awareness and change behavior (Do & Galván, 2015; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). In fact, a 2023 survey found that 76% of Latinx parents reported a warning label would encourage them to limit or monitor their children's social media use (Omidyar Network, 2023).

Figure 2. International Policies Restricting Cellphone Use in Schools
(GEM Report PEER profiles, www.education-profiles.org)



State Policies

As of August 2025, 42 states have enacted laws restricting students' use of cellphones in schools or recommend local districts enact their own restrictive policies (Table 1; see Supplemental Table S1 in the Appendix with rows in white for detailed breakdown). Among them, 18 states ban student cellphone use in schools (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia and Vermont) and 7 during instructional hours (Iowa, Indiana, Kentucky,

North Carolina, Tennessee, Utah and West Virginia). Seventeen (Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, Kansas, Maryland, Maine, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, South Dakota and Washington) or one third of states have adopted requirements around restricted use of cellphones in school settings based on locally developed district policies. The remaining 8 states currently have no established standards around cell phone use in schools. They are at various stages of the legislative process for restricting student cellphone use in schools (Table 1; see Supplemental Table S1 in the Appendix with rows highlighted in blue for detailed breakdown).

42

states have enacted cellphone restriction policies (as of August 2025)

Table 1. State-Level Actions on Student Cellphone Use in U.S. Schools (as of August 2025)

Category	States	Total	% of States
Full bans in schools	AL, AR, FL, GA, LA, MO, ND, NE, NH, NY, OH, OK, OR, RI, SC, TX, VA, VT	18	36%
Instructional time bans	IA, IN, KY, NC, TN, UT, WV	7	14%
Require local policies	AK, AZ, CA, CO, CT, DE, ID, KS, MD, ME, MN, MT, NV, NM, PA, SD, WA	17	34%
No statewide policy	HI, IL, MA, MI, MS, NJ, WI, WY	8	16%

As shown in Table 2, cellphone policies in schools range from minimal to strict restrictions and generally define appropriate use based on the following factors (Senechal, 2022):

- **Grade Level:** Elementary students have stricter rules, while secondary students get more cellphone privileges.
- **Location-Based Use:** Some policies specify use broadly to school grounds, others specify areas like school buses.
- **Time of Day:** More restrictions during school hours, with leniency after school.
- **Prohibited Uses:** Prohibited uses of cellphones commonly include recording staff/students, unlawful activities, and use during tests.
- **Educational vs. Non-Educational Use:** Some policies allow cellphones for learning activities (e.g., quizzes, educational apps, research), while others ban them entirely during instructional time.

Which cellphone restrictions have the most impact in and beyond the classroom? While it is too early to draw definitive conclusions about the impacts of school cellphone policies on student outcomes (Goodyear et al., 2025), Table 2 summarizes the research evidence for, and early implementation challenges of, different cellphone restriction policies in schools. In the classroom, digital media and other technology can be used when they support learning, with a focus on ensuring practices are appropriate, equitable, scalable, and sustainable to meet the learner’s needs. Outside the classroom, parents/ caregivers can help set boundaries, monitor and limit digital media use, ensure it does not disrupt sleep, model responsible behavior, and discuss potential dangers with youth.



Table 2. Evidence for, and Implementation Challenges of, Different Cellphone Restrictions in Schools

Phone Restriction Policy (1=less restrictive, 5=more restrictive)	What Does Implementation Look Like?	Alignment with Research	Challenges of Implementation
Level 1: Cellphones for learning only. Students can use cellphones during class for learning only.	Instructional time: Cellphones stored in students' pockets/ backpacks, unless authorized by the teacher Breaks: No restrictions After school: No restrictions	Allows breaks but may lead to excessive use during non-instructional time Provides flexibility but risks inconsistent enforcement and behavioral management outcomes Supports research showing students often use cellphones as a tool for self-regulation, such as reducing anxiety	Policies for appropriate cellphone use can vary across classes, making it difficult to monitor and manage non-educational use Enforcement can vary across classrooms, with differences in student compliance, parental engagement, and levels of administrative support Implementing confiscation protocols may present challenges related to staff safety and policy enforcement Some staff may find it challenging to address cyberbullying that spills over into in-person interactions during breaks
Level 2: Cellphones stored in pockets/backpacks. Students keep cellphones in pockets/backpacks and do not use them during class.	Instructional time: Cellphones stored in students' pockets/ backpacks Breaks: No restrictions After school: No restrictions	Supports learning by reducing distractions and academic dishonesty and improving focus	Enforcement can vary across classrooms, with differences in student compliance, parental engagement, and levels of administrative support Implementing confiscation protocols may present challenges related to staff safety and policy enforcement Some students may attempt to avoid restrictions by accessing devices during unsupervised times or through creative workarounds Some staff may find it challenging to address cyberbullying that spills over into in-person interactions during breaks
Level 3: Cellphone caddies in classrooms. Students store cellphones in a wall pocket or storage unit at the start of class and retrieve them at the end of that class.	Instructional time: Cellphones are stored away from students in a storage unit in each classroom Breaks: No restrictions After school: No restrictions	Supports learning by reducing distractions, academic dishonesty, and improving focus	Using physical storage units can be costly, hard to implement in limited spaces, and may raise concerns about theft Families may have safety concerns about how to maintain communication with children

Phone Restriction Policy (1=less restrictive, 5=more restrictive)	What Does Implementation Look Like?	Alignment with Research	Challenges of Implementation
Level 4: Lockable pouches all day. Students place cellphones in personal pouches upon school arrival, which are locked and kept with them until the end of the day when they can unlock them.	Instructional time: Devices—including smartwatches—are stored in lockable pouches upon school arrival and kept with students Breaks: Cellphones remain in lockable pouches with students After school: Students provided a magnetic device to unlock pouches	Supports learning by reducing distractions, academic dishonesty, and improving focus Reduces screen time and encourages in-person interactions and activities that promote health	Monitoring ongoing student compliance with phone restrictions may require sustained supervision and consistent enforcement Families may have safety concerns about how to maintain communication with children Policies may lack clear guidance on exemptions, making it hard for staff to support students who use cellphones for medical conditions, disabilities, or assistive technology needs
Level 5: Cellphone lockers all day. Students lock cellphones in a secure unit upon school arrival and retrieve them with their key when leaving school.	Instructional time: Cellphones are stored in lockers upon school arrival, away from students Breaks: Remain in lockers away from students After school: Provided the key to unlock lockers	Supports learning by reducing distractions, academic dishonesty, and improving focus Reduces screen time and encourages in-person interactions and activities that promote health	Using physical storage units can be costly, hard to implement in limited spaces, and may raise concerns about theft Families may have safety concerns about how to maintain communication with their children Policies may lack clear guidance on exemptions, making it hard for staff to support students who use cellphones for medical conditions, disabilities, or assistive technology needs



School District Policies on Cellphone Use Across the U.S.

Local school boards play a critical role in establishing parameters around the appropriate and healthy use of cell phones. Many of these policies are the result of limited federal and state efforts to manage a growing challenge for schools (Smale et al., 2021). These policies—ranging from total bans to restricted or instructional-use-only guidelines—reflect a balance between fostering engagement and respecting student autonomy. Importantly, such decisions are often made at the local level, placing school boards at the forefront of navigating this complex issue. Their policies not only influence student behavior (Goodyear et al., 2025; Smale et al., 2021) but also signal community values around technology, discipline, and developmental support. Understanding the variations in these approaches and the rationale behind them offers valuable insight into how schools are responding to the growing body of research linking screen time, adolescent development, and academic success (Kates et al., 2018; Orben, 2020).

Table 3 summarizes common elements found in school district cellphone policies, based on a review of publicly available documents from major U.S.

districts, including Los Angeles Unified School District, New York City Department of Education, Orange County Public Schools, Houston Independent School District, and San Mateo Union High School District (Houston Independent School District, 2024; Los Angeles Unified School District, 2017; New York City Department of Education, 2015; Orange County Public Schools, 2024; San Mateo Union High School District, 2021). While these policies are not an exhaustive list, they represent a window into the types of approaches local leaders are pursuing around cellphone use.

Table 3. Common Policy Elements Across School Districts

Element	Variations
Use Restrictions	Total bans, restricted to lunch/breaks, or teacher discretion
Grade-Level Differences	Stricter rules in K–8 than in high school
Instructional Exceptions	Allowed when used under teacher direction for academic purposes, with exceptions for students with disabilities or individualized learning, or medical needs
Enforcement Tools	Confiscation, parent contact, locked pouches, digital monitoring apps



Recommendations for School and School System Leaders

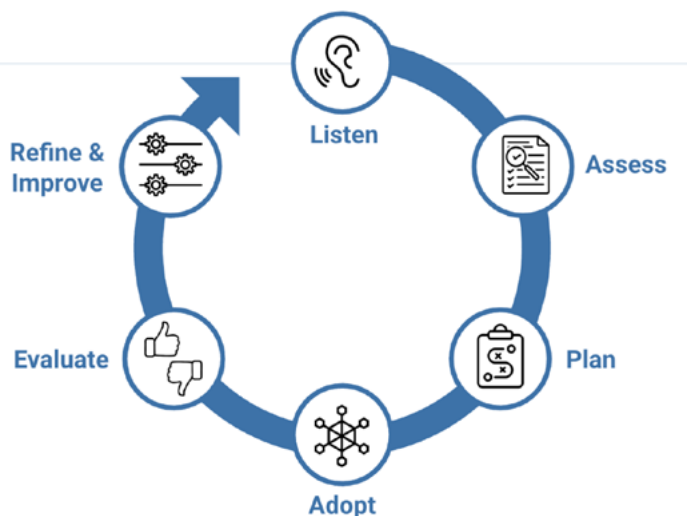
Cellphones shape students' lives in vastly different ways—offering support, connection, and learning, but also distraction, exclusion, and risk. To help all students benefit from technology while minimizing harm, school systems need thoughtful, research-informed policies. In this section, we translate key insights from developmental science into actionable recommendations for school and school system leaders—recognizing that there is no “one size fits all” approach to cellphone use in diverse communities.

Additionally, state parameters established around local implementation must be considered by local leaders and educators. For example, states that require cell phone bans in school, which represent roughly one third of states, have to consider how to implement the law in a fair fashion to young people. For those that fall into the category of bans during instructional hours, local districts have to consider how laws can be interpreted by the school, grade level, and student needs. For states that require locally adopted policies, there is more leeway for local leaders to partner with students, educators, and community members to co-develop developmentally appropriate and grade-specific guidance for the use of cellphones in schools.

Developing local policies around cell phone use in schools is as much about the policy-making process as it is about policy adoption (Bishop, 2023). Local boards, unions, and district leaders should consider a process (Figure 3) of listening to key interest holders (e.g. students, families, educators), assessing the current policy landscape, evaluating implementation, and adopting and refining approaches in an iterative fashion. As illustrated in Table 4, we offer a process roadmap for K-12 education system leaders

that outlines recommended action steps, guiding questions, and examples of how districts across the U.S. have developed and implemented school cellphone policies. Too often, policies are adopted quickly, and implemented poorly, without evaluating their impact or abandoning the original policy altogether. Local cellphone policies present a unique opportunity to model co-designed, collaborative and policy making processes that consider the needs of all learners and promote equitable access and impact.

Figure 3. Justice & Youth-Centered Policy Process
(Bishop, 2023)



Exceptions for Students with Disabilities

As more schools across the U.S. adopt restrictions on cellphones and other personal devices, it is important for districts to consider how these policies may impact students with disabilities, including those with IEPs, 504 plans and/or medical conditions who rely on assistive technology for learning and daily functioning. Students with disabilities often rely on cellphones to assist them with communication, notetaking, calming, and other support. They have a legal right to access needed assistive technology under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. However, these rights can be put at risk if policymakers and schools do not carefully consider how device restrictions at school are developed and implemented.

While most state-level actions on student cellphone use in U.S. schools allow exceptions for students with disabilities, some states still lack clear language to ensure that restrictions do not interfere with students' right to access educational tools and support (Table S1). District policies often include exceptions for students with disabilities, IEPs, and 504 plans to use cellphones for educational support, medical needs, or health and safety emergencies. **As many statewide and local policies are newly enacted or pending implementation, district policies should clearly outline how student exceptions for medical and other specific needs will be assessed and communicated to school staff. Without such safeguards, cellphone restrictions may unintentionally limit access to essential assistive technologies.**

Questions remain about how broadly and consistently exceptions to school cellphone restrictions are applied. For example, while device use during school hours to accommodate students with visual or sensory differences is common to support learning, should exceptions also extend to cellphone apps that aid students with anxiety or emotion regulation needs?

How can schools accommodate students with medical or health exemptions or age-appropriate privileges to use cellphones, without distracting the many students who are not permitted to use them during school hours? How can schools enforce cellphone restrictions while protecting themselves against legal risks related to student privacy, free speech, and due process—especially when confiscating devices that may contain personal or explicit content or that are needed for health and educational accommodations? District leaders should consider these questions carefully to ensure equitable access and avoid unintentionally limiting support for students who rely on these devices.

Balancing Equity and Access in School Cellphone Policies

Without thoughtful implementation and built-in equity measures, blanket cellphone bans or confiscation policies may risk disproportionately impacting students from marginalized communities. Emerging research has found that banning cellphones in classrooms can improve standardized test scores, particularly among lower-achieving students, suggesting the potential to reduce educational inequality for students from different backgrounds (Beland & Murphy, 2016). However, strict policies can unintentionally penalize students from under-resourced communities who rely on cellphones as their only internet access or assistive technology. As one school superintendent explains, cellphone bans raise serious equity concerns because students' access to digital tools for learning varies widely:

"The biggest way that I look at this is the equity piece, and what I mean by that is you have kids of various backgrounds coming to your school... They might only have a cell phone in their household. It might be a tablet. They might not have an updated laptop... whatever it may be. So when the teacher sends the student home with homework, they might not have the accessibility of all these different apps and programs [that we are using]. So that's a part that I'm a little concerned about."

(Millington, 2024)

In addition, research shows that certain groups of students are more likely to face subjective enforcement and harsher discipline for similar school infractions, including students of color, students receiving special education services, students from low-income families, LGBTQIA+ students, and males (Hilberth & Slate, 2014; Losen et al., 2014). While many educators have moved away from zero-tolerance approaches, it is critical for school leaders to ensure that new cellphone policies do

not lead to disproportionate discipline or unfairly affect certain student groups. For example, repeated cellphone violations should prompt mental health support rather than exclusionary discipline, as youths' cellphone overuse may reflect underlying mental health needs or challenges with developing self-regulation skills, not simply rule-breaking. Ultimately, equitable and flexible cellphone policies are needed to support students' diverse educational needs and reduce disparities in implementation and impact.

Table 4. Developing and Implementing a School District Cellphone Policy

Action Steps	Guiding Questions	Example District Policy
1. Review State Requirements Check for applicable state laws on requirements for local district policies related to cellphone use, including exceptions, funding to support implementation, and implementation deadlines.	- Do available state or district funds make it feasible to implement more restrictive cellphone policies with storage systems across all schools? How can the policy be scaled in areas with limited resources? - How can districts balance state mandates with local flexibility to meet the needs of their specific communities? - If state timelines are short, how can the rollout incorporate data collection to support ongoing refinement of local policy?	- Georgia's "Distraction-Free Education Act" (HB 340, 2026) prohibits personal devices in grades K–8 during school hours, requiring existing local policies be amended to align with the state's minimum threshold while leaving implementation to districts and schools (Lewis, 2025). - New York's Distraction-Free Schools initiative, announced in January 2025, requires K-12 districts to publish bell-to-bell cellphone policies with exemptions for students with IEPs or medical plans, by the 2025-26 school year, ensure parent-student contact options, allow schools flexibility in storage plans, and provides \$13.5M for phone storage solutions (New York State Office of the Governor, 2025).
2. Define Clear Use Guidelines and Protocols Specify when and where cellphones may be used, outline exceptions (e.g., IEPs, medical needs), define consequences for misuse, and set emergency protocols.	- Are rules for educational, emergency, and personal use clear, age appropriate, and equitable? - Will the rules be easy for students and staff to understand and apply consistently? - When and how will exceptions for learning or medical needs be determined, documented, and communicated to staff (e.g., through IEP meetings or another process)? - Are consequences for misuse age-appropriate and mindful of students' mental health and developmental needs? - What alternatives ensure students can access help or communicate with families if an emergency should occur?	- Many local education agencies across California have adapted the sample board policies on mobile devices from California School Board Association (California School Board Association, 2012): - BP 4040 Employee Use of Technology - BP 6163.4 Student Use of Technology - BP 5131.8 Mobile Communication Devices - San Diego Unified School District's enforcement uses a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports and Restorative Justice Practices approach, including verbal reminders, counselor referrals, family outreach, and phone confiscation if necessary (San Diego Unified School District, 2025b). - The Texas Education Agency issued a "To the Administrator Addressed" letter and a model policy outlining required elements per Texas HB 1481 (device definitions, storage options, IEP/504 and medical exceptions) and explicitly instructed superintendents to disseminate guidance to staff (Texas Education Agency, 2025).

Action Steps	Guiding Questions	Example District Policy
3. Engage Interest Holders Involve students, families, teachers, school staff, and other interest holders in policy development.	- Were students given opportunities to share input or help co-create policy solutions that support focused learning and in-person interactions in school? - Did teachers provide input on how different phone restrictions could impact teaching and learning?	The superintendent of San Diego Unified School District collaborated with members of their student advisory board and parent-teacher association leaders across the district to develop and seek feedback on a district cellphone policy draft before presenting it for Board of Education approval (San Diego Unified School District, 2025a).
4. Educate and Communicate Educate students, families, and staff on the new policy, including the benefits and potential drawbacks of cellphone use.	- Was the policy communicated clearly, promptly, and in accessible formats to all interest holders, with opportunities for feedback? - How will interest holders who may disagree with the policy be engaged constructively (e.g., student council meetings, town halls, staff meetings)? - How are family concerns about safety and emergency communication addressed, and what strategies or tools help manage them?	At Luxemburg-Casco Middle School in Wisconsin, leaders began building buy-in the summer before fall implementation of its policy by engaging staff and families, hosting info sessions and film screenings on tech balance, and orienting students through school presentations and class discussions about expectations around cellphone use (Tutt, 2024).
5. Implement Practical Solutions Use tools or strategies (e.g., phone pouches, collection systems) to support enforcement, address teaching and learning needs, and foster shared responsibility among staff.	- How can school leaders foster a culture of shared responsibility, where administrators, teachers, and staff work together to monitor and enforce appropriate phone use among students? - How can school leaders give teachers flexibility to integrate cellphone use where it adds value to teaching or learning experiences (e.g., video editing apps in project-based learning)? - If phones are restricted schoolwide, what alternative tools or strategies can support learning activities that previously relied on them? - How can implementation remain aligned districtwide while allowing flexibility for each school's unique context and needs?	- At San Mateo High School, students use one of three cards to signal to staff exceptions to the locked phone policy: "No Phone on Campus", "Consideration", and "Cell Phone Confiscation", with custom expiration dates to fit student needs (Zucker, 2024). - In Cleveland Metropolitan School District, school administrators—not teachers—are responsible for securing student phones to prevent conflict, with teachers compensated when supporting implementation (Indriolo, 2024).



Action Steps	Guiding Questions	Example District Policy
6. Promote Digital Citizenship and Literacy Educate students on responsible, balanced phone habits and provide guidance and support for staff to teach and model healthy phone habits for students.	- How are students and school staff educated on safe, balanced cellphone use and the importance of focused learning and in-person interactions? - What district-level resources or training can help school staff and families promote digital citizenship and model healthy cellphone habits to support student learning and well-being?	- United Independent School District in Texas launched a districtwide task force involving district leaders, law enforcement, community groups and nonprofits to deliver classroom presentations and expand outreach to educate students and families on navigating technology risks, like online safety and cyberbullying (De La Rosa, 2025). - Alongside school phone restriction policies, Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction is partnering with educators to integrate media literacy and digital citizenship into the state's learning standards for English language arts (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2024).
7. Refine and Improve Collect data on learning, behavior, and well-being impacts, assess and communicate outcomes to interest holders and gather feedback, and adjust policies as needed based on evidence and feedback.	- What data will be collected and how often to assess the policy's impact on student learning, behavior, and well-being? - Which indicators will signal the need for policy changes, and how will adjustments be implemented consistently? - How will policy outcomes and effectiveness be communicated to interest holders, and how will their feedback inform adjustments? - How might differences in implementation, enforcement, or outcomes across schools reveal unmet needs, and what adjustments are needed to make district policies more flexible and equitable? - What lessons can be learned from other districts with similar demographics regarding policy development and implementation?	- Virginia schools are revising phone policies and enforcement for the 2025-26 school year based on Hanover County data showing over 1,600 phone confiscations during the 2024-25 school year (Harlow, 2025), as well as surveys and focus groups with school staff, families, and students on the impact of phone restrictions on well-being (Fairfax County Public Schools, 2024; Pacheco, 2025). - In 2023, Bentonville school district in Arkansas piloted a high school cellphone ban. A survey of teachers later reported better student engagement, greater, classroom socialization, and decreased drug-related offenses and verbal and physical aggression problems compared to the prior school year without a phone ban, which informed the 2024-25 districtwide school restriction policy (Banerji, 2025).



Research-Based Recommendations for District Policies

Identify existing policies around technology use that may conflict with district guidance or intent around cell phone use policies.

For example, laptops, smart watches, and other device usage might increase or present new instructional challenges as a result of more strict cell phone policies.

Establish district policies for cell phone use in schools with key local partners, including students, caregivers, educators, and union leaders.

Modeling co-designed policies can support stronger fidelity in implementation and can have lasting benefits for local decision making that extend far beyond cell phone policies (Blomkamp, 2018).

Tailor local school policies on personal device use to the developmental needs of students.

Consider implementing stricter cellphone restrictions earlier in middle school to support students' limited media experience and developing self-regulation skills. Adjust no-phone policies as needed for older high school students to create opportunities to build agency, such as responsibly using their cellphones for executive functioning tasks like calendaring (McArdle, 2024; Zucker, 2024).

Improve timely communication between schools and families during school emergencies.

School administrators should include students, educators, and parents/caregivers in the process of developing local policy on personal device use in schools. Provide an electronic notification system for schoolwide emergencies.

Focus on flexibility, considering equitable access to technology and balancing top-down enforcement with school-level needs for school-level cell phone bans.

Inequities in internet access in lower-income schools restrict the use of cutting-edge educational technologies, with over 40% of Title I teachers avoiding internet-based assignments due to concerns over digital access and inequality in student learning (Clark et al., 2022; Fazlullah & Ong, 2019). How do restricted digital rights—such as those in under-resourced communities and the juvenile justice system—impact young people's learning and well-being? In response, some countries have prioritized developing students' digital skills over solely restricting cellphone use or expanding school infrastructure to better support student success (Technology in Education, 2023).

Pair restrictive policies regarding cellphone use with psychoeducational resources and training for students, school staff, and families to explain why restrictions matter and how to build healthy digital habits.

One important component of cellphone policy is supporting young people in 1) understanding why a reduction in cell phone use is being required (e.g., the impact it has on attention and social factors) and 2) developing strategies and tools to support their own attention and learning. We recommend restrictive policies be accompanied by a districtwide requirement for psychoeducational information and training that teach healthy habits and equip students, families, and staff to support and reinforce these habits at home and school.

40%

of Title I teachers avoid internet-based assignments due to concerns over digital access and inequality in student learning.

(Clark et al., 2022; Fazlullah & Ong, 2019)



Revise state curricular frameworks to include digital citizenship and literacy training for K-12 educators.

The use of state curricular resources, such as the Health Education Framework for California Public Schools (California Department of Education, 2019), presents an opportunity to integrate digital citizenship and literacy training within the curricula for K-12 educators and administrators. One state that has addressed this in their policy efforts is Washington, where digital literacy instruction has been incorporated into English Language Arts instruction (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2024). Equipping educators and families with the skills to model and foster safe, responsible use of technology and online behavior can promote engaged learning in today's digital world.

Recommend future research and evaluation to understand the impacts of cellphone restrictions in states, districts, and schools using standardized methods, examining both potential harms and benefits on youth outcomes.

Policy decisions should balance the need for distraction-free learning environments with equitable implementation across schools while remaining flexibility to local needs and priorities. Early surveys and reports in the U.S. and England on cellphone restriction policies have largely measured “success” through staff perceptions, enforcement data (e.g., phone confiscations, disciplinary referrals), or narrow student outcomes like academic performance and engagement (Banerji, 2025; Beland & Murphy, 2016). To better assess impact, districts should also systematically collect data on school climate and whole-child outcomes (e.g., California Department of Education, 2025)—including academic performance, learning engagement/motivation, peer belonging and support, school safety, and social-emotional and mental well-being—to ensure school phone restriction policies support both learning and healthy social development.

Survey key policy partners (e.g., students, caregivers, educators, union leaders) on the impact of cell phone policies and all district level policies on teaching and learning conditions at the school site.

Doing so can help determine the health and well-being of the learning community and remind students and staff that policymaking can be an iterative, community building process (Bishop, 2023).

Guiding Questions to Evaluate District Policies on Phones in Schools

1. What are existing local, state and federal policies around technology use in schools?
2. Who establishes policies for technology use broadly in schools, especially cell phone use?
3. What data do we have on attitudes towards cell phone use from key groups, including students, caregivers and educators?
4. When are students and staff running into hurdles around cell phone use in schools?
5. Are there particular grades or times of the day when cell phone use is becoming a challenge for learning or school climate?
6. Have key interest holders recommended actions and/or policies that will help protect the health and well-being of staff around cell phone use?
7. What are other districts or communities doing to curb unhealthy use of cell phone use in schools?
8. What do we know about the impact of those policies?
9. What policy or policies would support healthy and appropriate use of cell phones in schools?
10. What can our community accomplish together around cell phone use absent of official policy?

Conclusion

As school and state leaders continue to navigate how best to manage student cellphone use, the stakes remain high—not only for academic engagement and school safety, but for the long-term cultivation of healthy digital habits among children and adolescents. While 42 states have taken steps to regulate cellphone use in schools, with others considering similar action, a lack of clear, developmentally grounded implementation guidance at the federal, state, and local levels risks undermining the intended impact of these policies. To truly promote student well-being, safety, and learning, cellphone policies must go beyond restriction—they must educate, support, and evolve. This means meaningfully engaging students in the policymaking process, addressing the underlying drivers of cellphone overuse, and ensuring

consistent, equitable practices across classrooms and campuses. Grounding school cellphone policies in developmental science, student voice, and inclusive strategies offers a powerful opportunity to reframe technology use—from a source of distraction to a tool for cultivating focus, connection, and digital well-being. The current disconnect between cellphone use in schools and research on ideal conditions for student learning and health must be addressed with urgency. It will require the collective efforts of students, families, educators, and policymakers to reshape the national landscape around school cellphone use in new and innovative ways.



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Appendix

Supplemental Table 1. Overview of Statewide Policies Restricting Cellphone Use in Schools as of August 2025

Note: States highlighted in blue have policies either in development or at various stages of the legislative process.

State	State Policy Type	Name of Policy	Effective Date	Summary of Policy	Exceptions
Alabama	School day ban	Freeing our Classrooms of Unnecessary Screens for Safety (FOCUS) Act	Signed into law 5/14/2025; Effective 2025-2026 School Year	The Freeing Our Classrooms of Unnecessary Screens for Safety (FOCUS) Act prohibits students from using or operating wireless communication devices on public elementary and secondary school grounds during the instructional day, beginning with the 2025-2026 school year. The Act also requires each local board of education to adopt an Internet safety policy and directs the State Department of Education to develop and approve a course addressing the risks of social media use.	Students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs); educational use under supervision; Emergencies
Alaska	Local policy required/ recommended	AK House Bill 57	Vetoed by Governor Dunleavy 5/19/25, Override vote passed 5/20/2025; Effective 7/1/2025	This bill requires Alaska school districts to adopt policies regulating student use of wireless communication devices during school hours. Alongside this, it sets maximum class sizes, revises charter school application procedures, increases the base student allocation, and creates a Task Force on Education Funding, with some provisions tied to a separate tax measure.	Medical conditions; emergencies; educational use under supervision
Arizona	Local policy required/ recommended	House Bill 2484	Signed into law 4/14/2025; Effective 2025-2026 School Year	HB 2484 requires schools to adopt policies limiting student internet and wireless device use during the school day. Schools must also establish procedures for parent-student communication during school hours and provide families, teachers, and students with an annual copy of these policies. Districts with existing policies that already meet these requirements do not need to create new ones.	Educational purposes; emergencies; medical conditions
Arkansas	School day ban	Bell to Bell, No Cell Act (SB142)	Signed into law on 2/20/2025 (effective begin in 2025-2026 school year)	The act mandates that public school districts implement policies prohibiting students from using personal electronic devices, such as smartphones and smartwatches, during school hours.	Emergencies; health-related situations; students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs); after-school extracurricular activities

State	State Policy Type	Name of Policy	Effective Date	Summary of Policy	Exceptions
California	Local policy required/ recommended	Assembly Bill 3216 Phone-Free Schools Act	7/1/2026	The bill requires all public schools in the state to develop and adopt a policy by July 1, 2026, to restrict students' cellphone use during the school day. The law requires that districts develop the policy with input from students, parents, and educators and that the policy be updated every five years.	Individualized instruction, medical necessity; Emergencies; Teacher or administrator permission
Colorado	Local policy required/ recommended	Colorado House Bill 25-1135 (HB 25-1135)	Signed into law 5/1/2025; Effective 7/1/2026	The bill required all school districts to establish policies limiting student cellphone and smartwatch use during school hours. Each district develop its own policy by July 2026, tailored to its specific needs and challenges, aiming to reduce classroom distractions and address mental health concerns linked to excessive device use among students. Notably, the bill empowers local districts to create policies that best suit their communities.	These policies must include exceptions for health emergencies, safety concerns, and accommodations for students with disabilities who rely on devices for medical purposes.
Connecticut	Local policy required/ recommended	Policy Guidance: Personal Technology Use in Schools	8/21/2024	The guidelines recommend developing age-appropriate restrictions that remove cellphones and other electronic communication devices such as smartwatches from all elementary and middle school classrooms. At the high school level, districts are encouraged to develop policies that limit cellphone distractions, such as allowing students to keep their cellphones but turn them off during instructional time.	Health and Safety Needs, Educational Purpose, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 Plans, Emergency Situations
Delaware	Local policy required/ recommended	Senate Bill 326 ; Senate Bill 106	6/30/2024-6/30/2025;	SB 326 provided one-time state funding through June 2025 for a pilot program providing voluntary cellphone pouches in grades 6-12 to reduce distractions during learning. The SB 106 Act would require each school district and charter school to adopt a policy, with educator input, about cell phone use by students during school hours.	Emergencies; medical accommodations; educational accommodations

State	State Policy Type	Name of Policy	Effective Date	Summary of Policy	Exceptions
Florida	School day ban	CS/HB 379 Technology in K-12 Public Schools	Pending	The law bars students from using “wireless communication devices” such as cellphones during instructional time. The law also targets students’ social media use, banning them from accessing it on school internet and requiring schools to teach students in grades 6-12 about the social, emotional, and physical effects of using social media.	Teachers have the discretion to permit the use for educational purpose. Students are still allowed to possess wireless communication devices on school property or during school functions, provided they adhere to the school’s policies.
Georgia	School day ban	Distraction-Free Education Act (House Bill 340)	7/1/2023	By January 1, 2026, each local school system and public school in Georgia must adopt policies and procedures that, at a minimum, prohibit the use of personal electronic devices by students in kindergarten through eighth grade during the entire school day (“bell-to-bell”). These policies must be fully implemented by July 1, 2026. Exceptions are allowed for school-issued devices and for students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), Section 504 plan, or medical plan that requires device use. The Georgia Department of Education is authorized to provide guidance and technical assistance to support effective implementation of the Act.	Education Program (IEP), Section 504 Plan, medical plan, educational purpose
Hawaii	No statewide policy	Senate Bill 1544	Signed into law 5/9/2025; Effective: 8/1/2025	Requires each public school beginning with the 2025-2026 school year, each public school shall adopt and implement a wireless communication device policy that prohibits students from using wireless communication devices while in school during student hours	For educational purposes authorized by a teacher; If an emergency occurs; To manage a student’s health care; Individualized education program; In accordance with a plan developed under section 504

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Idaho	Local policy required/ recommended	Executive Order No. 2024-11 Phone Free Learning Act	10/31/2024	Gov. Brad Little and Superintendent of Public Instruction Debbie Critchfield issued an executive order encouraging school districts to adopt a policy that restricts cellphone use by the end of the 2024-25 school year. Districts that adopt such a policy are eligible for a \$5,000 award.	N.A.
Illinois	No statewide policy	House Bill 2975 (HB2975)	Introduced 2/6/2025	Requires a school board to prohibit a student from using a cellular telephone in a school or on school property. Repeals provisions allowing a school board to establish rules and disciplinary procedures governing the use or possession of cellular radio telecommunication devices by a student.	The restriction shall not apply during lunch, recess, passing periods, or emergency situations.
Indiana	Instructional time ban	Wireless Communication Device Policy	7/1/2024	The law requires districts and charter schools to adopt policies prohibiting students from using “any portable wireless device”, including cellphones, tablets, and laptops, during instructional time. Each school corporation and charter school shall publish on its website the wireless communication device policy established under subsection	Educational purposes, as authorized by a teacher; Emergencies; Managing a student’s health care; Provisions outlined in a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 Plan
Iowa	Instructional time ban	House File 782	Signed 4/30/2025; Effective 2025-2026 School Year	HF 782 mandates that Iowa K–12 schools implement policies limiting student use of personal electronic devices during instructional time beginning the 2025–2026 school year. The Department of Education will provide model policies, but schools can exceed them in strictness. The law includes clear guidelines on communication, storage, disciplinary actions, and exemptions for special needs students. It also requires emergency plans to be updated in coordination with state safety officials.	Emergency communication procedures for parents; A petition process to request student access to a personal device for medical or mental health reasons; Exemptions for students with an IEP or 504 Plan requiring device access.

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Kansas	Local policy required/ recommended	Blue-Ribbon Task Force on Student Screen Time	12/10/2024	The task force recommends districts implement a “bell-to-bell” policy, meaning personal devices should be off and away during the school day. The task force also recommends that districts provide ways for students and families to contact each other that isn't dependent on personal devices.	Health-related need, Educational Purpose, Emergency situations
Kentucky	Instructional time ban	House Bill 208	Signed 3/26/2025; Fully implemented 2026-2027 School Year	HB 208 requires local school boards to adopt policies that prohibit student use of personal telecommunications devices during instructional time, with certain exceptions. Devices that students are legally authorized to use under federal law are not considered personal devices under this rule. The bill also mandates that school technology systems block access to social media platforms, expanding restrictions on harmful or distracting online content.	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, or the Rehabilitation Act of 1973
Louisiana	School day ban	Senate Bill 207 Act No. 313	5/28/2024	Students are prohibited from possessing electronic telecommunication devices on their person throughout the instructional day. If a student brings such a device to school, it must be turned off and properly stowed away for the duration of the instructional day, or the device is prohibited from being turned on and used during this time.	The law has exceptions for students whose Individualized Education Plan, or IEP, requires the use of an electronic telecommunication device.
Maine	Local policy required/ recommended	An Act To Restrict Cell Phone Use by Students While in School (HP 720/LD 965)	Introduced in 2019 and did not put into effect	The bill aimed to have the Department of Education establish rules prohibiting student cellphone use during classroom time, lunch breaks, and transitions between classes, while allowing use in the main office during emergencies.	Allows use in the main office during emergencies

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Maryland	Local policy required/ recommended	House Bill 192 No Distracted Learning Act	Introduced 1/8/2025 (intended effective on 7/1/2025) and failed.	Elementary and Middle Schools: Prohibits the use or display of cellular phones during instructional time, lunch periods, and passing periods between classes. High Schools: Prohibits the use or display of cellular phones during instructional time and passing periods but allows use during lunch periods.	Students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or documented health issues that require the use of an electronic device are exempt from these prohibitions.
Massachusetts	STUDY Act, S.2561	House Bill 192 No Distracted Learning Act	5/28/2024	The STUDY Act aims to enforce a "bell-to-bell" prohibition on student access to cellphones and personal electronic devices throughout the school day. It mandates that all public schools implement policies preventing student access to personal electronic devices. It requires schools to educate students about the social, emotional, and physical harms associated with social media use.	Provisions are included to accommodate students with individualized education programs (IEPs) or specific health plans that necessitate device usage during school hours.
Michigan	No statewide policy	House Bill 5921	Introduced 9/11/2024 and failed.	The bill aims to establish uniform policies across all public schools in Michigan regarding student use of wireless communication devices during school hours. K-5 Students: Completely banned from possessing cellphones on school grounds. 6-8 Students: Prohibited from using cellphones during instructional time, breaks, lunch, and recess. 9-12 Students: Prohibited from using cellphones during instructional time.	The bill does not explicitly outline exceptions within its text

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Minnesota	Local policy required/ recommended	<u>HF3782/SF3567</u>	5/18/2024	This law requires every school district and charter school to implement its own policy on students' possession and use of cellphones in school by March 2025. The provision also requires the state's school principal associations to create best practices to minimize the impact of cellphones on student behavior, mental health, and academic achievement.	N.A.
Mississippi	No statewide policy	<u>HB 673</u>	HB 673 failed in committee on 2/4/ 2025	The bill aimed to mandate that local school boards develop and implement age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate policies regarding student cellphone possession and use on school property during the academic day, from bell to bell. The bill required school districts to establish procedures for off-site events and to prominently post the policies on their websites.	The bill allowed for exceptions in specific circumstances, such as medical needs, emergencies, or instructional purposes.
Missouri	School day ban	<u>SB 68</u>	Signed July 9, 2025; Effective 2025-2026 School Year	All Missouri school districts and charter schools must adopt a policy that prohibits students from using or displaying personal electronic communication devices during the entire school day—including class time, meals, breaks, and transitions.	Emergencies; students' with IEP or Section 504 plans; medical related; authorized use
Montana	Local policy required/ recommended	<u>Cell Phone-Free Initiative</u>	5/18/2024	Governor Greg Gianforte encouraged superintendents and school board trustees to adopt "cell phone-free" policies to minimize classroom distractions and enhance academic performance. To support this initiative, the governor's budget allocated \$1 million in one-time incentives for school districts that implement such policies.	N.A.

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Nebraska	School day ban	Legislative Bill 140 (LB140)	Signed by Governor 5/20/2025; Effective 2025-2026 School Year	School boards must establish the policy before the 2025-26 academic year, incorporating input from students, parents, and educators to address community-specific needs. The policy prohibit student use of electronic communication devices on school grounds or at school events.	Individualized education program (IEP) or Section 504 plan; authorized by a teacher for educational purposes; emergencies or perceived threats; health care management; Other situations deemed appropriate by the school board or staff
Nevada	Local policy required/ recommended	Senate Bill 444	Signed by governor 5/28/2025; Effective 2025-2026 School Year	SB 444 requires every school district to adopt a policy regulating students' possession and use of electronic communication devices during class time. While the law doesn't outright ban device use statewide, it empowers districts to impose limitations aligned with their local needs and stipulates that disciplinary measures for violations must be included.	Emergencies; authorized use by teacher; devices provided by school district
New Hampshire	School day ban	Senate Bill 206 (SB 206)	Introduced 1/28/2025 and failed	School boards shall develop and adopt a policy governing student cellphone use in schools. Such policy shall prohibit personal device use by students during the school day and be implemented schoolwide. Such policy shall be developed in collaboration with any applicable local educator associations and school district parents and shall be reviewed and updated annually.	Individualized education program (IEP), plan developed under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C 794, or when required to support emergent multilingual students with appropriate
New Jersey	No statewide policy	Senate Bill 3695 (S3695)	Amended 3/10/2025	Mandates the Commissioner of Education to develop a comprehensive policy for students in grades K-12 regarding cellphone and social media use during school hours, on school buses, and during school-sanctioned events. Prohibit non-academic use of cellphones and social media during classroom instruction. Offer guidance on device storage solutions.	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act," or section 504 of the "Rehabilitation Act of 1973"

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New Mexico	Local policy required/recommended	Senate Bill 11	Signed 4/10/2025; Effective August 1, 2025	Every public school district and charter school must adopt and implement a policy restricting students' use of personal wireless communication devices—such as cell phones, smartwatches, tablets, laptops, and gaming devices—during instructional hours.	Teacher-approved use, emergencies, medical/IEP accommodations, accessibility needs.
New York	School day ban	FY 2026 Budget Bill	Effective 2025-2026 School Year	Beginning in the 2025–26 school year, New York will implement a statewide “bell-to-bell” restriction on student cell phone use, requiring public school districts, charter schools, and Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) to adopt policies that prohibit the use of internet-enabled devices on school grounds throughout the school day, with certain exceptions. Enacted as part of the state's 2026 budget agreement, the policy is intended to minimize distractions, promote student focus, and support improved academic outcomes.	Authorized classroom use; Devices provided by the school district for instructional purposes are exempt from this restriction.
North Carolina	Instructional time ban	House Bill 959	Signed 7/1/2025; Effective 2025-2026 School Year	HB 959 requires North Carolina public schools to adopt policies that restrict student use of personal wireless communication devices during instructional time. The law also mandates the creation of internet safety policies and adds social media and digital literacy education to the K–12 curriculum.	Educational purpose, medical reasons, individualized education programs, emergency, authorized by teacher
North Dakota	School day ban	House Bill 1160	Signed 7/30/2025	HB 1160 requires all North Dakota school districts and governing bodies to adopt and implement policies regulating student use of personal electronic communication devices during instructional time. The policy must ensure that such devices are silenced or turned off, securely locked away, and kept inaccessible to students throughout instructional periods.	Educational purpose, medical reasons, individualized education programs, emergency, authorized by teacher

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Ohio	School day ban	House Bill 250	7/1/2024	All districts must create policies governing students' cellphone use during the school hours with the goal of limiting cellphone use.	Exceptions for students who need their cellphones to monitor a health issue or for special education services.
Oklahoma	School day ban	Okla. Senate Bill 139 (2025-2026)	Signed 5/6/2025; Effective 2025-2026 School Year	SB 139 requires school district boards of education to adopt a policy prohibiting use of personal electronic devices while on campus during the entirety of the school day.	Emergencies; medical necessity
Oregon	School day ban	Executive Order No. 25-09 Personal Electronic Device Policy for School Districts	7/2/2025; Policy adopted by October 31, 2025; Effective January 1, 2026	Executive Order 25-09 mandates that Oregon K-12 public schools ban student use of personal electronic devices during the school day. The order requires restorative enforcement, ensures policies are publicly accessible, and tasks the Oregon Department of Education with oversight. Its purpose is to foster better student focus, mental health, and overall educational outcomes.	Medical necessity; individualized education program; individual circumstance related to educational needs
Pennsylvania	Local policy required/ recommended	Act 55 of 2024	7/11/2024	Pennsylvania Act 55 of 2024 includes provisions aimed at limiting student smartphone use during the school day. The Act allows schools to use dedicated school safety funding to purchase secure, lockable smartphone bags. Students are required to deposit their mobile devices into these bags until the end of the school day.	N.A.
Rhode Island	School day ban	2025-S 0771A, 2025-H 5598A	Signed 7/1/2025; Effective August 1, 2026	The legislation mandates that all public schools establish a policy governing the use of personal electronic devices on campus and during school-sponsored events, including restrictions on physical access throughout the instructional day.	Medical necessity; individualized education programs/plans; multilingual learners for language access; other education assistance; emergencies

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South Carolina	School day ban	Free to Focus	1/1/2025	State Board of Education should adopt a model policy that “prohibits access to personal electronic communication devices by students during the school day” for districts to implement by January 2025. At the very least, districts must require students to keep their cellphones and connected devices turned off and in their backpacks or lockers during the school day, according to the model policy the state board passed in September.	The model policy has exceptions for students whose IEPs or 504 plans require access to a personal device. Districts can decide whether to enact stricter rules, as well as the consequences for violating them.
South Dakota	Local policy required/ recommended	House Concurrent Resolution 6005	Introduced 1/30/2025; Adopted 2/4/2025	House Concurrent Resolution encourages South Dakota school districts to develop and implement policies limiting the use of cellphones and other electronic communication devices during instructional time.	N.A.
Tennessee	Instructional time ban	House Bill 932	7/1/2025	Each local board of education and public charter school governing body must adopt and enforce a policy on wireless communication devices that prohibits student use during instructional time. The policy may permit teachers to authorize student use of such devices when necessary for educational purposes.	Emergencies; individualized education program/plan
Texas	School day ban	House Bill 1481	9/1/2025	HB 1481 relates to school district and open-enrollment charter school policies concerning student use of personal communication devices. The bill requires the board of trustees of each school district and the governing body of each open-enrollment charter school to adopt policies that prohibit students from using personal wireless communication devices during instructional time.	N.A.
Utah	Instructional time ban	Senate Bill 178 Devices in Public Schools	Intended effective: 7/1/2025 (As of 3/4/2025 Senate/ enrolled bill to Printing in Senate Secretary)	SB 178 seeks to prohibit the use of cell phones, smartwatches, and similar devices during classroom hours across all public schools, excluding transitions between classes, lunch periods, and recess.	Local education agencies (LEAs) are authorized to create exemptions, allowing flexibility to accommodate specific needs or within their schools.

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Vermont	School day ban	House Bill 48 (Act 72)	Effective 2026-2027 School Year	HB 48 (Act 72) introduces a statewide “phone-free” policy requiring all Vermont schools to adopt rules that prohibit students from using cell phones and other personal electronic devices during the entire school day, from arrival to dismissal. The legislation directs the Agency of Education to develop a model policy, which all school policies must meet or exceed in terms of restrictiveness. In addition, schools are no longer permitted to use social media platforms to communicate directly with students, a provision that has already gone into effect.	Medical necessities; individualized education program (IEP) or 504 plan accommodations; academic purposes or participation in extracurricular activities
Virginia	School day ban	Executive Order 33 establishing cell phone-free education in K-12 public schools	7/9/2024	The order directs the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to develop comprehensive guidance for school divisions to establish and enforce policies that prohibit student use of cellphones and personal electronic devices during instructional periods.	N.A.
Washington	Local policy required/ recommended	Guidance: Cell Phone and Smart Device Use in Schools	8/28/2024	Washington state Superintendent of Public Instruction Chris Reykdal published a brief encouraging districts to create their own policies restricting student cellphone use by the start of the 2025-26 school year. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction guidance includes policy considerations districts should think about as they develop their policies.	N.A.
West Virginia	Instructional time ban	W.Va. House Bill 2003 (2025)	7/30/2025	HB 2003 (2025) addresses the use of personal electronic devices in classrooms by establishing clear limits on student cell phone use during instructional time. It also sets minimum standards for policies that must be adopted by each County Board of Education. A severability clause ensures the rest of the law remains in effect even if parts are challenged.	Medical exception; individualized education program, 504 plan; written accommodation

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Wisconsin	No statewide policy	2025 Assembly Bill 2	Introduced 2/3/2025	This bill requires each school board to adopt, by July 1, 2026, a policy that generally prohibits pupils from using wireless communication devices during instructional time. "Wireless communication device" is defined as a portable wireless device that is capable of providing voice, messaging, or other data communication between two or more parties	For emergencies and perceived threats; to manage a pupil's health care; for a use included in an individualized education program or 504 plan, for a use authorized by a teacher for educational purposes
Wyoming	No statewide policy	Senate File No. SF0021	Failed to pass during the Committee of the Whole (COW) session on 1/21/2025	The bill mandated that each school district's board of trustees adopt and enforce policies prohibiting student use of cellphones and smartwatches during instructional time.	In case of emergency or perceived threat; authorized by an employee of school district; under individualized education plan or plan under section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973; healthcare