

Banning Smartphones in Schools

Review of the Literature Shows Positive Impact

By David T. Marshall and Tim Pressley

Over the past decade, smartphones have become more pervasive in the lives of adolescents.¹ According to recent national surveys, over 95 percent of U.S. teens own or have access to a smartphone, and nearly half report spending “too much time on social media.”² As phone access and social media use have grown, educators and families have raised concerns about student concentration, classroom behavior, and mental health. In a spring 2024 national survey, more than 90 percent of educators reported that student mental health is a serious issue in their schools, and large majorities said cell phones and social media contribute to these concerns.³ These perceptions have intensified since the pandemic as schools work to support academic recovery and student well-being while managing the day-to-day realities of device-saturated classrooms.⁴

Smartphones’ pervasiveness in schools has introduced a range of instructional and social challenges. Constant access to devices filled with notifications and vibrations makes it difficult for students to sustain attention. These distractions, whether in a student’s hand or in one’s pocket, can reduce concentration and cognitive capacity.⁵ Students frequently take advantage of free periods or class time to browse social media instead of concentrating on lessons, participating in discussions, reviewing notes, or doing homework. Over time, this shifts how students spend unstructured time at school away from in-person

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Smartphones have become pervasive distractions in schools. More than 95 percent of U.S. teens own devices, with nearly half reporting excessive social media use.

Research shows that cell phone bans can improve academic achievement. Evidence on mental health benefits remains mixed, though schools have reported fewer behavioral problems, reduced bullying, and improved classroom engagement.

U.S. states and districts are increasingly adopting cell phone restrictions with varying policy approaches, each with different benefits and challenges. Bell-to-bell bans offer the most comprehensive restrictions but require substantial infrastructure investment, while instructional-time bans are easier to implement but may provide more limited benefits and face enforcement challenges.

Support for limiting cell phone use in schools is growing, but some parents and teachers raise concerns that policymakers should address. Successful implementation requires community input from students, parents, teachers, and administrators, clear policy goals with specific expectations, commitment to consistent enforcement with well-defined rules and guidelines, and support for teachers through professional development and practical tools for enforcement.

connection and more toward digital engagement that may heighten social comparison and anxiety.⁶

For teachers, constant phone use creates daily competition for students' attention. Notifications pull students away from instruction, forcing teachers to work harder to redirect focus and maintain classroom engagement. In schools that have implemented phone restrictions, educators describe a renewed sense of instructional freedom, more time spent teaching, and less time policing devices.⁷ Students also report relief from constant notification pressure, noting greater concentration and increased face-to-face interaction.⁸ Together, these findings underscore why policymakers and educators are increasingly turning to phone restrictions as one lever to restore attention, social connection, and well-being in schools.

To remedy these issues, policymakers and school leaders have increasingly turned to restrictions on student phone use — often referred to as “cell phone bans” — to reduce distractions and promote engagement. Although approaches vary, these policies typically limit or prohibit student phone use during class or throughout the school day. Public opinion has generally favored such steps: A 2024 Pew Research Center survey found that 68 percent of U.S. adults support banning cell phone use during class in middle and high schools.⁹

Policy adoption has accelerated quickly. As of October 2025, 31 states and the District of Columbia had required districts to limit or ban cell phone use in K–12 classrooms, with most of those actions occurring in 2025.¹⁰ When broader statewide actions are counted — such as requiring districts to adopt a policy without specifying the level of restriction, or resolutions encouraging limiting cell phones — the total rises to at least 34 states plus Washington, D.C.¹¹ As more U.S. states and districts adopt or consider such policies, there is a critical need to

synthesize what is known about their impacts, understand variations in policy design, and identify the conditions under which they are most likely to succeed. In doing so, we aim to support educators and policymakers in striking a practical balance between leveraging technology for learning and protecting classroom focus, safety, and student mental health.

Results from Previous Studies

Impact on Academic Achievement

Research across multiple contexts suggests that banning cell phones in schools can lead to measurable academic and behavioral benefits, though results vary by setting. In the United Kingdom, prohibiting phones throughout the school day was associated with a 6.4 percent increase in national exam scores, with the greatest gains among low-achieving students.¹² Similarly, a scoping review¹³ found that schoolwide phone bans were linked to significant improvements in student performance, particularly for low-achieving or disadvantaged students.¹⁴ The researchers reviewed seven studies examining the effects of mobile phone bans on academic achievement, which measured outcomes through standardized tests, grade point average, and teacher-awarded grades. Results were mixed across contexts, but several quasi-experimental studies reported subject-specific gains. For example, one study found improvements in mathematics and English exam scores for lower-achieving and lower-socioeconomic status students following schoolwide bans,¹⁵ while another observed higher scores in mathematics and science in Spanish regions that adopted phone bans.¹⁶ Conversely, three studies found no evidence of change in academic performance, suggesting that

outcomes may depend on the specific limits and the implementation of the policy.¹⁷

In addition, the sample used to reach these conclusions is important to note. For instance, one study collected data from all ninth graders in Sweden,¹⁸ while another collected data only from students in compulsory school (ages 11–16) from four English cities.¹⁹ A study of Florida’s cell phone policy found that test scores improved in the second year of implementation after an initial adjustment year.²⁰

Impact on Student Mental Health and Student Engagement

With increased time spent on social media and the rise of mental health issues,²¹ it is important to understand if and how cell phone bans support student mental health. One study in Australia compared a group of students subjected to a phone ban to a comparison group with free access to smartphones. The results indicated no significant differences in problematic phone use, school belonging, or academic engagement at follow-up. Bullying decreased over time in both groups, but the “ban” group did not show a clear advantage.²² A similar study conducted in England reported that although restrictive phone policies were linked to less electronic communication during the school day, they did not translate into better outcomes in anxiety, depression, sleep, physical activity, behavior, or academic performance compared with more permissive schools. The authors conclude that school-time bans likely need to be part of a larger ecosystem of support and guidance that extends beyond school hours.²³

A 2019 systematic review and meta-analysis found that there was not necessarily a relationship between student phone use and

grades in school.²⁴ However, *how* students were using their phones mattered. Students who frequently engaged in multitasking as well as excessive texting and social media use tended to perform worse academically.²⁵ Students who spent more than three hours per day on social media were more than twice as likely to report clinical levels of depression,²⁶ elevated levels of anxiety, and increased loneliness.²⁷

In a scoping review of studies focused on the impact of cell phone bans in schools, some studies showed that these policies were associated with fewer behavior problems or bullying, while other researchers found little to no change. A key reason for the inconsistency is that “bans” looked very different across studies (e.g., all day vs. in-class only, use of pouches/lockers, various exceptions), and the studies also used different methods and measures. Together, these differences make it hard to draw firm conclusions about the mental health effects of phone bans.²⁸

Though we may not be able to make causal claims about student mental health and cell phone bans, there may be indirect benefits. These benefits may include a reduction in immediate social comparison stressors, conflict triggers, or recording incidents that can produce acute distress for some students. Recording incidents refer to instances in which students film events at school—such as fights, arguments, or embarrassing moments—and then share the footage on social media platforms. These recordings can lead to public humiliation, peer conflict, and heightened emotional distress for those involved.

Although there is little direct evidence so far of a relationship between cell phone bans and student well-being, early results from New York City charter schools are promising. When KIPP NYC

College Prep High School banned cell phones in 2024, the early implementation was rough. However, as weeks passed, they found gains in student learning, stronger engagement, and improved mental health.²⁹ What is perhaps most interesting is not what happened during the school day when phones were banned but what happened after school, when the daily prohibition was over. KIPP reported student attendance at after-school and sporting events increased by 50 percent. Renewed social habits during the school day led to increased social activity after school — even when students were no longer prohibited from using their phones. Similar findings were also reported at a charter high school in the Bronx.³⁰

Impact on Behavioral Problems

School cell phone bans are often linked to fewer behavior problems, especially bullying and in-class disruptions. Several studies report declines in bullying or cyberbullying after bans — consistent with the idea that removing phones reduces opportunities for real-time messaging, social comparison, and recording/sharing incidents that can escalate conflict.³¹ Teachers also commonly describe smoother classroom management, fewer side conversations, less off-task scrolling, and improved attention when phones are stored during lessons.³² However, one study in Florida found a rise in suspensions during the first year of implementation, although the initial spike subsided in year two.³³

In April 2025, we collected data from teachers in a southeastern Virginia school division regarding the state’s newly implemented K-12 cell phone ban. Our results aligned with previous research. Most teachers (78 percent) supported the policy, with 62 percent reporting improved student behavior. In focus groups, teachers described increased student engagement and stronger peer

interaction due to reduced phone distractions as well. Teachers also noted fewer classroom disruptions and better focus among students.³⁴

What Should the Policy Be?

Across the United States, policymakers at the state and district levels have increasingly adopted restrictions on student cell phone use. These policies range from “bell-to-bell” bans that prohibit cell phone use from arrival to dismissal; to “instructional-time only” bans that prohibit cell phone use during class time; to targeted restrictions focused on bans in specific contexts. Examining these variations provides insight into what approaches are most effective and the challenges that accompany them.

Bell-to-Bell Ban

The most comprehensive restrictions are bell-to-bell bans that prohibit phone use from the start of the day until dismissal. Several states, including Indiana and Virginia, have passed statewide mandates requiring bell-to-bell bans. Indiana requires phones to be stored in lockers or locked pouches unless explicitly approved for educational purposes,³⁵ whereas Virginia gives school districts autonomy and flexibility in implementing the bell-to-bell ban.

The implementation of bell-to-bell bans may vary. For instance, some schools use pouches such as the Yondr system, which lock devices until the end of the day, reducing theft but requiring financial investment and staff oversight.³⁶ Others may simply have students store their phones in their lockers, while others may implement an “off-and-away” policy, where phones remain in students’ possession but must be powered off and kept in their backpacks throughout the day.

Although effective at reducing classroom distractions, improving student engagement, and limiting opportunities for off-task phone use, bell-to-bell bans often require substantial infrastructure and financial support to implement consistently.³⁷ For instance, a pouch system costs, on average, \$25–\$30 per student.³⁸ An off-and-away policy is a much more affordable alternative, but it also puts much more pressure on teachers to enforce the policy in their classrooms, hallways, and lunchrooms³⁹ and requires consistent support at the school-building level of administration. This may lead to inconsistency in the enforcement of the policy, which can jeopardize the effectiveness of—as well as teacher support for—cell phone bans.⁴⁰

Instructional Time Ban

A less restrictive model is an instructional time ban. Under this model, students are permitted to use devices before school, between classes, and at lunch, but not during class periods. This approach is currently used in North Carolina, which “eliminates or strongly restricts” student phone use during class time.⁴¹ This policy is easier to implement logistically, as it does not require the infrastructure of pouches or lockers, but the benefits may be more limited. Students may still rely heavily on devices during unstructured times, and the responsibility for enforcement often falls disproportionately on teachers. Similar to the off-and-away approach, the instructional time ban may lead to inconsistency in the enforcement of the policy.⁴² It also still allows for online and social-media-driven distractions to disrupt what is happening in the physical school building.⁴³

Targeted Restrictions

Some schools and districts also address specific outcomes. Targeted bans prohibit phones only in

certain contexts, such as during physical education, recess, or standardized testing.

For instance, Danish schools have implemented cell phone bans during recess to encourage outdoor play, finding that such restrictions can promote higher levels of physical activity.⁴⁴ This result suggests that partial restrictions can yield positive social outcomes even without full-day prohibitions. Similarly, schools might collect phones during testing to reduce academic dishonesty. Nearly all U.S. states restrict phones during standardized testing to maintain test security and academic integrity.⁴⁵

Local Flexibility

The least specific policy that has been implemented at the state level is one that requires local districts to adopt policies related to phone use but does not specify the level of strictness.⁴⁶ For example, in the Boulder Valley School District in Colorado, a bell-to-bell ban prohibits phone use for high school students throughout the day,⁴⁷ while Mesa County Valley SD 51 prohibits phones in K–8 but bans them at the high school level only in classrooms.⁴⁸ School principals have the option to ban cell phones in the hallway or in the lunchroom, but this is decided at the school level.⁴⁹ By contrast, Jefferson County Public Schools allows individual sites and teachers to define rules, resulting in more variation.⁵⁰ These variations illustrate how districts interpret the state requirement quite differently.

Implementation Challenges and Parent Concerns

A recent national survey from Pew Research Center found broad support for instructional time bans: 74 percent of parents support prohibiting cell phone use during class in middle and high

school, compared to 19 percent who oppose such restrictions. Support among parents drops for bell-to-bell bans, with 44 percent in favor and 46 percent opposed, though support is increasing: One year ago, 36 percent of adults said they would support an all-day ban, while 53 percent were opposed. When asked about the potential impacts of all-day bans, roughly two-thirds of parents believed such policies would improve students' social skills (67 percent), academic performance (66 percent), and behavior (64 percent).⁵¹

Support for limiting students' cell phone use in school is growing, yet implementation remains contested. Districts and policymakers face some objections related to student safety, communication, instructional logistics, and the practical challenges of enforcing restrictions. Many of these concerns have reasonable counters. Parents can contact the front office in emergencies, and bell-to-bell bans still allow communication once school ends. While implementation may take time during the initial transition, texting students during class also disrupts learning — an issue bans aim to reduce.

Safety and Emergency Communication Concerns

One of the most prominent objections centers on safety and emergency communication. Parents and students often express concerns that bans may hinder their ability to call for help during active shooter events, medical emergencies, or severe weather situations. When asked about physical safety in the Pew Research Center survey, 37 percent believed safety would improve, 23 percent thought it would worsen, and 39 percent said it would make no difference.⁵²

Although these worries are understandable, research suggests that they often reflect fear rather than evidence. Experts caution that using

phones during an active shooter event can endanger students by drawing attention to their location, overloading communication networks, and distracting them from following safety protocols.⁵³ Moreover, while tragic events do occur, they remain statistically rare — far rarer than adolescent suicide attempts, which have increased sharply in the smartphone era.⁵⁴

Day-to-Day Parent-Child Communication

Parents also expressed concerns about losing the convenience of direct communication. Texting is widely used to coordinate transportation, after-school activities, or urgent family matters. Although schools generally have procedures for relaying messages, some families view bans as an unnecessary barrier. According to a 2024 EdChoice/Morning Consult poll, more than one-third of parents believed that their children should be allowed to have cell phones during class time.⁵⁵

However, in practice, many bans do not eliminate access entirely. A national survey of principals found that 95 percent of schools with cell phone policies still allow students to bring phones but restrict their use during school hours.⁵⁶ This approach preserves the ability for families to communicate before and after school while limiting disruptions during the instructional day.

Costs, Logistical Burdens, and the Sustainability of Storage Systems

Parents have raised questions about the long-term sustainability and cost of expensive systems such as pouches. These systems typically require students to place phones into locking pouches upon arrival and keep them sealed until dismissal. This requires teachers or designated staff to monitor the locking process each morning, verify compliance throughout the day, and supervise dismissal areas where hundreds or even

thousands of students must have their pouches unlocked. Schools often need additional personnel at arrival and dismissal to keep lines moving, and administrators report lost instructional time when students forget, damage, or tamper with their pouches.⁵⁷ Because every student must pass through a limited number of unlocking stations, the system can create bottlenecks and add daily supervision duties that extend beyond teachers' contractual responsibilities.

Given these challenges, some parents prefer lower-cost approaches, such as locker storage or teacher-managed confiscation. These approaches avoid substantial financial outlays and eliminate the need for centralized locking and unlocking procedures. However, schools that rely on locker storage or teacher confiscation often experience inconsistent enforcement across classrooms, more frequent disputes between students and teachers, and difficulty preventing discreet use in hallways, bathrooms, or lunchrooms—challenges that pouch systems were designed to reduce.⁵⁸ Even so, the ongoing oversight demands and daily time requirements of pouch systems raise legitimate questions about whether these investments represent the most efficient use of limited school resources.

Concerns About Student Stress and “Separation Anxiety”

Ironically, policies intended to improve youth mental health can spark short-term distress. Some parents report that limiting access to devices causes acute stress or “separation anxiety.”⁵⁹ A systematic review of 142 studies found that this separation anxiety negatively impacts academic performance, anxiety, stress, and self-esteem in adolescents.⁶⁰ Although this anxiety is often cited as a reason to oppose bans,

leading scholars—including Jean Twenge and Jonathan Haidt—argue that such reactions demonstrate the need for healthier boundaries around device use. In other words, these outcomes demonstrate that policies such as cell phone bans are necessary interventions in schools.

Student Concerns

Researchers at the University of Arkansas recently led focus groups with students from 10 school districts. In these focus groups, researchers got to hear concerns students had in regard to the cell phone ban. Students expressed a range of concerns about the implementation and fairness of school cell phone bans. One of the most common frustrations centered on inconsistent or overly harsh consequences for policy violations. Because enforcement procedures varied widely across schools and sometimes even between teachers, students reported uncertainty about what constituted a violation and resentment when punishments felt disproportionate to the offense.⁶¹

Another area of concern for students was the effectiveness of tools such as Yondr pouches. Students shared doubts that they reduced distractions or improved learning.⁶² Students also expressed a desire for less intrusive solutions rather than blanket prohibitions, and wished they could have provided feedback about the policy before it was put into place. A 2025 survey of youth conducted by RAND Corporation yielded similar findings.⁶³ While these findings are unsurprising, they are worth noting given that few studies have sought student perspectives on these policies.

Teacher Concerns

Some teachers also voice concerns about implementing cell phone bans in their schools.

Many educators integrate student-owned devices into lessons for quick research, formative assessment, or collaborative projects. In some cases, cell phones serve as a practical workaround when school internet connections are slow or when district firewalls block educational websites and tools.⁶⁴ Furthermore, some teachers may view cell phones as tools for promoting digital literacy instruction, which is going to be critical for the next generation of students. Thus, cell phone bans could limit instructional flexibility and reduce opportunities for digital literacy instruction.

Practical enforcement poses additional challenges. Teachers frequently report that students find ways to circumvent policies, such as using smartwatches, using phones in the bathroom, or accessing social media on school-issued devices.⁶⁵

Recommendations for Policymakers

- **Include community input.** Policymakers should seek input from all members of the community, including students, parents, teachers, and school administrators. These members can provide insight into challenges that might arise during the implementation process or the type of ban they believe will work best for their schools. Engaging all school members early in the process also helps ensure that the rationale and policy details are well understood and broadly supported.
- **Define a clear reason and rationale.** Policymakers should explicitly identify the primary goals of cell phone bans, such as improving academic focus, reducing behavioral incidents, promoting face-to-face social interaction, or supporting

mental health. To support these goals, policies should articulate precise rules and expectations. Policies should specify when and where phones are prohibited, what exceptions exist, and the consequences for violations. Students are quick to identify loopholes or inconsistencies, so clarity and consistency are essential.⁶⁶

- **Commit to consistent enforcement.** Once a policy is in place, it must be communicated with all teachers, students, and parents. Policies should define when and where phones must be stored, the consequences for violating the rules, and who is responsible for enforcement. School leaders need to get buy-in from all teachers and staff members to ensure consistency throughout the school environment.
- **Provide support to teachers.** School and district leaders should provide the necessary resources to teachers to enable robust enforcement. This might include dedicated professional development time going over new routines, teacher scripts, and the consequences students should face in every classroom for violating the phone ban policy. They should also equip teachers with practical tools that save time and ensure consistency, including parent-contact templates, a quick way to note students having their phones out, or reliable extra support staff during peak unlock periods.

Conclusion

Cell phone bans have emerged as a policy solution to reduce classroom distractions and improve student well-being, focus, and learning. Between

2024 and 2025, almost two-thirds of states have adopted a policy to restrict cell phone use during the school day. Early evidence suggests that the policy is associated with gains in academic achievement, which are especially pronounced among low-income learners. While some studies show indirect benefits for student well-being, the evidence of direct benefits for student mental health is mixed. The successful implementation of these policies includes clear expectations for students, parents, and teachers, consistent enforcement, and steadfast administrative support. When thoughtfully crafted and implemented, cell phone bans can contribute meaningfully to a healthier, more focused learning environment.

About the Authors

David T. Marshall, Ph.D., began his career in education as a middle and high school social studies teacher, where he taught in both traditional public schools and public charter schools in Philadelphia, PA. He has since worked with teacher residency programs in Virginia for seven years, serving in several capacities. In terms of professional service, Dr. Marshall serves on three editorial boards for peer-reviewed journals.

He previously served as the Program Chair of the Charters and School Choice SIG for AERA. He recently served two terms as the Chair of the Alabama Public Charter School Commission.

Tim Pressley, Ph.D., is an associate professor of psychology at Christopher Newport University and is a faculty member for the university's master's in teaching program and the Center for Education Research and Policy. He received his Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from Florida State University and has a background in elementary education. Before receiving his Ph.D., Dr. Pressley was an elementary school teacher, a driving force behind his research. His current research focuses on teachers' lives, specifically the impact of COVID-19 on teachers, teacher effectiveness, and teacher well-being. His work has been published in *Educational Researcher*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *School Psychology*, and *The Teacher Educator*. He has also co-authored two books, *Pandemic Lessons: Disruption, Innovation, and What Schools Need to Move Forward* and the most recent edition of *Reading Instruction that Works: The Case for Balanced Teaching*. He hopes his research gives teachers a voice on aspects impacting teachers' lives.

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