

Cell Phone Policies in Schools: A Science and Policy Update on the Effects of Students' Non- Academic Screen Use



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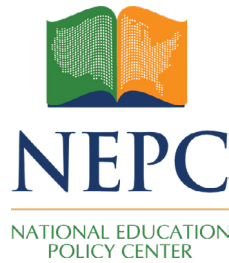
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I. Executive Summary

Concerns about non-academic screen use in schools are compounded by screens' seeming ubiquity. Students use their personal smart devices (e.g., smartphones and smartwatches) along with now-common school-issued devices (e.g., laptops and tablets). Most recently, debates have led to restrictions on smartphones and other personal smart-device use, with dramatic changes to the policy landscape in a remarkably short period of time. As recently as 2018, smartphone restrictions in US schools were largely a matter of individual teacher discretion; by late 2025, 35 states and the District of Columbia had enacted laws or policies addressing student cell phone use in K-12 schools, with 22 of those passed during 2025 alone.

While a great deal of attention has focused on schools' increasing use of ed tech, this brief takes on an equally important issue, reviewing what is known about the effects of non-academic screen use in schools and the emerging evidence on policies that restrict it. The brief draws upon the broader literature on non-academic screen use related to four areas: developmental neuroscience, adolescent mental health, classroom behavior, and academic performance. Also included is initial evidence from early evaluations of smartphone-restriction policies in the United States and abroad.

Several conclusions can be drawn with reasonable confidence. Adolescents spend substantial time in school on smartphones and other personal devices (perhaps as much as one-third of the school day), most often to access social media and enter-

tainment platforms. Non-academic screen use on personal or school-issued devices during class is associated with lower academic performance not only for the student using the device but also for classmates seated nearby, a “secondhand” effect that carries classroom-level implications. Adolescents’ neurodevelopmental profile, marked by heightened social sensitivity paired with still-developing impulse control, likely makes it especially difficult for youth to disengage voluntarily. Moreover, meta-analyses concerning digital-detox studies suggests that even brief periods without social media are associated with reductions in depression, anxiety, and loneliness. Preliminary evidence also links heavy screen use with disrupted sleep and with differences in adolescent brain structure and function, though these findings require replication and long-term follow-up.

Evidence on the effects of smartphone restrictions themselves is more limited. Most policies have been enacted only within the last two to three years, few studies use rigorous designs, and no published study has evaluated a personal smart-device restriction while also systematically limiting access to non-academic content on school-issued devices. Available evidence nonetheless suggests small but meaningful improvements in academic performance following restrictions, often appearing one to two years after implementation, with effects concentrated in schools that, prior to reform, had policies that were least restrictive. Disciplinary incidents tend to spike in the short term as enforcement begins, then abate. Current evidence offers little insight into the comparative effectiveness of different policy designs: bell-to-bell versus instructional-time-only restrictions; storage in pouches versus classroom caddies versus student-carried but powered off; and phone-only versus all-smart-device bans. The effects of restrictions on students’ social and psychological functioning are also largely unstudied.

The evidence reviewed here establishes that non-academic phone use in school is associated with a range of academic, cognitive, and psychological impacts. Where the evidence of impact is substantial and the cost of inaction is borne by students, policymakers can reasonably act on the best available evidence while building the record needed to evaluate their choices. The recommendations below are offered in that spirit and can be taken individually, piecemeal, or collectively to improve outcomes.

State Legislators:

- Specify what the restriction is intended to accomplish—protecting instructional time, reducing social conflict and disciplinary incidents, supporting student mental health, or some combination—and select a design suited to those aims. Restrictions limited to instructional time address learning-related harms; bell-to-bell restrictions target a broader set of social, emotional, and behavioral harms that extend beyond the classroom.

- Include clearly defined policy exceptions for documented medical needs, learning accommodations under an IEP or Section 504 plan, emergencies, and verified family-communication needs.
- Authorize and fund independent evaluation of the policy's effects, and require that the evaluation address academic, psychological, social, and behavioral outcomes.

State Education Agencies:

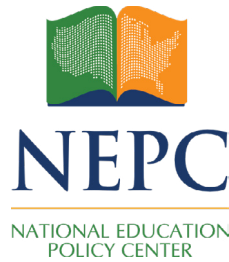
- Issue implementation guidance that anticipates predictable first-year enforcement challenges, incorporates equity safeguards, and requires annual public reporting of disciplinary actions taken under the policy, disaggregated by race, gender, and disability status.
- Support the collection of data on the academic, psychological, social, and behavioral effects of any restriction implemented, providing the information necessary to evaluate policy choices going forward.
- Partner with federal research agencies such as the Institute of Education Sciences, the National Institutes of Health, and the National Science Foundation to fund and coordinate research and to support cross-state sharing of de-identified implementation and outcome data, so that evidence accumulates faster than any single state could achieve alone.

District Leaders:

- Extend any personal-device restriction to non-academic use of school-issued laptops and tablets, including by blocking social media, gaming, entertainment, and general-purpose AI platforms on school-provided networks and devices. A restriction on phones alone leaves the same content available through a second channel.
- Choose storage and enforcement designs deliberately, recognizing that the evidence does not yet identify an optimal approach and that designs leaving phones on students' persons—including lockable pouches—do not eliminate the distraction associated with a device's proximity.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of any digital-literacy curriculum adopted alongside a restriction, since no commercially available program has been tested for effects on student attitudes or behavior.

School Leaders:

- Provide teachers and staff with training and ongoing support for consistent, equitable enforcement; communicate policy clearly to families, including channels for legitimate midday contact.
- Preserve documented individual accommodations and ensure due-process protections for disciplinary actions.
- Attend to the social climate of phone-free settings rather than assuming that restriction alone will improve student connection or well-being. For example, ensure that landline phones or email access is possible to ensure students have contact with others when safe and appropriate.



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II. Introduction

Jurisdictions around the world are grappling with how to understand the effects of young people's use of personal digital devices. Adolescents' use of such devices, particularly smartphones, is nearly universal. In the United States, 95% of teens ages 13 to 17 report having access to a smartphone, and nearly half (46%) describe themselves as online "almost constantly"—a share that has roughly doubled in the past decade.¹ This includes substantial phone use during the school day (approximately 1/6 to 1/3 of the day), with most time spent on social media and entertainment platforms. In addition, roughly three-quarters of US teens report having used an AI companion—a virtual friend—at least once, and more than half describe themselves as regular users.² Comparable rates of smart-device and social media use have been documented among youth in Europe, Asia, Australia, and the global south, though specific country-level figures vary.³

Undoubtedly, this issue also was affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic as youth increased non-academic screen time on personal devices while in isolation. Many schools moved to remote learning and provided school-issued devices to their students, not only increasing students' academic screen time but also providing greater access to social media, entertainment, and AI platforms throughout the school day. Such extensive use has been associated with drops in students' academic achievement and increases in teachers' stress.⁴

How exactly the exponential amount of non-academic screen time has affected children's behavior and development has led to any number of opinions as well as a good bit of research. Scientific findings on youths' engagement with technology—broadly defined—have been available for decades. However, studies on the effects of social media began appearing only after the introduction of Facebook, and then the iPhone (2004-2007). In the subsequent 20 years, a rapid proliferation of research on the possible effects of screens on youths' social, psychological, and cognitive development has triggered a powerful grassroots response. Globally, the result has been a striking number of federal, state/provincial, and local policies regarding smart-device, social media, and/or AI use.

This policy brief focuses specifically on evidence most relevant for policies addressing students' use of personal smart devices in schools, with implications also for the youths' non-academic screen time on school-issued devices. Personal smart devices may include smartwatches and earbuds, but both research and enacted policies primarily concern smartphones. Most school technology policies have been implemented only within the past two to three years, and reliable trials of their effectiveness are not yet widely available. Nevertheless, a wide range of existing research on the effects of technology use on youth well-being can inform contemporary global conversations and policies. For this reason, we report these varied findings in addition to preliminary research on the effects of personal smart-device use and their restrictions in schools in particular.

A wide range of existing research on the effects of technology use on youth well-being can inform contemporary global policies.

In discussing the types of personal, student-owned, smart devices (cell phones, smart watches, or other wearable devices) or their possible personal uses (such as engaging with social media, playing games, or watching videos for entertainment or companionship), we will be as specific in our language as a particular study or policy allows. For the sake of simplicity and because cell phones are the most common type of personal, student-owned, smart digital devices, however, we use “cell phones” or “phones” to refer to the overarching category of these devices. In addition to such personal devices, most students now also have school-issued “1:1” laptops or tablets. As we will see, these school-issued devices allow for personal as well as academic use, and complicate efforts to limit the effects of phones in schools.

The sections that follow summarize and discuss literature on the associations between phone use and child development, as well as emerging findings regarding the effects of phone use in classrooms, the effectiveness of policies restricting phones in school, and the current policy context in the US and abroad. Our analysis of this research feeds into a set of policy recommendations for state, district, and school leaders regarding restrictions on phones in schools. Restrictions, often referred to as “phone bans,” take a variety of different forms.

III. Review of the Literature

Challenges Finding Simple Answers

Does non-academic screen time among youth (e.g., social media usage, for instance) cause cognitive delay, influence social behavior, predict academic deficits, and/or increase risk for mental health difficulties? This deceptively simple question is critical to a discussion of potential personal device restrictions but has been challenging to answer for at least three reasons. First, most research from the past two decades has focused on poorly operationalized variables that make it difficult to offer simple or broad conclusions. For instance, until recently most investigations examining mental health correlates of social media use have relied on broad assessments of “screen time.” For example, the number of hours youth spent on any specific social media platform (e.g., Instagram or TikTok) might have served as a predictor of later depression, anxiety, or other mental health conditions. For years findings were mixed, generating notable debate and rancor among scientists⁵ and fueling policy debates about whether social media is (or is not) reliably linked to mental health outcomes. But these early mixed findings are due in part to the ambiguous nature of screen time as a predictor variable. In these studies, an hour of screen time might refer to an hour of viewing an “infinite scroll” that youth struggled to turn away from, or an hour of messaging with friends, or more recently, an hour of exposure to AI-recommended content promoting dangerous behavior. Each likely affects well-being differently, but most studies in the late 2010s and early 2020s could not capture such nuance. However, more recent research has isolated specific aspects of various platforms’ content and features that are more clearly associated with risk—the influence of “likes,” for example, or notifications, autoplay, endless scroll, beauty filters, and so on.⁶

A second issue pertains to questions regarding the “cause and effect” relationship between screen or social media use and well-being, and the different ways that scientists vs. policymakers conceptualize the concept of causality. Among investigators, causal conclusions typically are discussed only in the context of prospective, randomized controlled trials,⁷ particularly if theoretically-grounded mechanisms of cause and effect can be identified. Yet, in studies on social media, these types of experiments are ethically prohibited; in other words, it is not possible to randomly compel some kids to use social media more than others and see if it may affect long-term well-being. Note that this limitation has been addressed in more recent “digital detox” designs (i.e., randomly selecting a subset of youth to refrain from screen or social media use) or “digital delay” designs (i.e., randomly selecting a subset of youth to wait before receiving their first device) and measuring later adjustment outcomes. Recent meta-analyses of digital detox studies generally suggest that youth have lower depression, anxiety, and loneliness after only one to two weeks off social media.⁸

These bodies of literature suggest that, based on the available evidence to date, it is more likely than not that screen and social media use contributes to youths' adjustment difficulties.

Finally, technology and digital media use has become so infused into young people's lives that it becomes increasingly difficult to determine how any single policy may contribute to long-term trajectories of development. Youth often interact with multiple screens at once, have various experiences within a platform in any given session (for example, messaging friends while scrolling their feeds) and are highly skilled at evading restrictions. Additionally, research on policies that limit personal device use is typically undermined by students' continued use of the laptops or tablets that most of their schools provide to them. Students can continue to do many of the same things on a school-issued device as they would have done on their smartphones.

Emerging Answers

Despite these methodological limitations, psychological research offers findings on smartphone use in school, on brain development, and on the effects of non-academic screen use that can inform discussions of school technology policies. First, as noted above, studies have consistently demonstrated that students use phones in school remarkably frequently, with initial estimates ranging from one hour within each school day to more recent estimates suggesting 20 minutes within each hour of school (or one-third of the school day). Rather than for any academic purpose, students most commonly use their phones to engage with social media, and for entertainment (e.g. watching videos or gaming) and communication.⁹

Frequent screen use for non-academic purposes in school is not surprising in light of what is known about brain development among youth. Most obtain their first personal smart device (perhaps following a period of intense pleading) when puberty begins at the neural level¹⁰—notably one of the most important times of brain growth and reorganization. At this time, preteens are hyperfocused on what peers think or like; at the same time, they lack the impulse control of adults and so feel driven to seek more and more social feedback.¹¹ School schedules have aligned with this brain anatomy in the past, offering high peer contact during the school day, satisfying the need for interaction with others; having few peers nearby after school and evenings has allowed for better focus on homework and other tasks. Now, this pattern has changed dramatically: Personal smart devices and school-issued technology allow students to remain attuned to peer feedback all day and night. This constitutes a mismatch between adolescents' biological predispositions and their current environment. That is, adolescents' neural development likely makes it very difficult for them to refrain from using their devices for non-academic purposes during the school day.

Not surprisingly, then, recent data suggest that a remarkably high proportion of

youth report excessive, uncontrolled social media use—what scientists refer to as “problematic social media use.” In research using tools designed to measure clinical dependency on illegal substances or gambling, samples from around the world suggest that at least 50% of youth report excessive, uncontrolled use of social media; withdrawal symptoms (such as irritability or sleeplessness) if exposure is limited; and/or tolerance symptoms (such as a constant need for more and more exposure). The addiction disrupts their ability to engage in normal daily roles and routines.¹² Recent research has focused specifically on problematic social media use as an area of heightened clinical concern, with some recent data indicating that youth are experiencing a clinical dependency on their devices, on social media, or perhaps on AI chatbots, and possibly a greater risk for depression and suicide.¹³ We do not have a history of assessing or treating clinical dependencies on technology among youth, but it is arguably an issue that makes access to social media in school a public health issue.

Researchers have also begun exploring the ways that brain development may be affected. Although such research is preliminary and replication of findings is sorely needed, initial evidence suggests that excessive use of screens, most commonly to engage with social media platforms, may be affecting how adolescent brains develop during a critical period of neural development. There is some evidence suggesting that social media and other screen use may be related to both the size/structure of the brain and its effectiveness over time, with perhaps the most robust findings related to the effects of screen use on sleep. Meta-analyses reveal that adolescents’ use of screens at nighttime is affecting sleep duration, sleep quality, and the number of wake-up events overnight¹⁴; each of these outcomes in turn is associated with stunted growth of white matter in the adolescent brain during the pubertal transition.¹⁵

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Recent studies also suggest that high levels of screen use (i.e., at home and in school) is associated with less growth in the cerebral cortex during adolescent development, perhaps particularly in areas associated with behavioral inhibition.¹⁶ Other studies further suggest that adolescents’ habitual use of their cell phones is likely associated with differences in how the brain responds to social feedback. In simplest terms, while most adolescents show a gradual decrease in social sensitivity over time,¹⁷ those who use their phones excessively show the opposite pattern of brain response, suggesting that phone use may be linked with growing hypersensitivity to social cues.¹⁸ While these studies are preliminary, requiring replication and long-term follow-up, they collectively offer initial evidence that heavy phone use may be associated with changes in both brain structure and function—negatively affecting both the physical growth of the brain and normal brain activity.

In addition to associations with neural development, data suggest that non-academ-

ic screen time also may be associated with at least two changes in youths' classroom behavior and academic performance. First, it is probably not surprising that research has revealed that students who are scrolling non-academic material on a phone or computer screen during class time demonstrate poor academic competence and lower school grades than their peers. What may be more surprising is that similar outcomes are revealed for classmates sitting behind a student who is using their screen for non-academic purposes.¹⁹ These "bystander" or "secondhand screen effects" suggest classroom level implications of screen use on academic performance; one student's use of screens for non-academic purposes may affect many other students' development. Second, some of this effect may be due to the misperception that it is possible to "multitask" by effectively attending to two separate sources of information simultaneously. Research reveals that multitasking is more accurately rapid *task shifting*, a process that is more challenging for children and adolescents than for adults.²⁰

Several recent studies additionally suggest that phone use in school is frequent and may have implications for learning and for cognitive development more broadly. Based on tracking data measured within phones themselves, a recent investigation suggested that youth spend an average of 20 minutes of each hour during the school day on their phones. The majority of this time is spent on apps categorized as social media or entertainment, which includes social media platforms as well as streaming entertainment platforms.²¹ Social media use during class time may be higher among students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds.²² Higher levels of phone use during the school day are associated cross-sectionally with lower levels of cognitive control²³—for example, the ability to ignore distractions.²⁴ Recent analysis of data from a large multi-site national study of adolescent cognitive development revealed that as compared to their peers, children and adolescents with high levels of social media use demonstrated significant deficits in a wide range of cognitive and academic tasks years later, including lower sustained attention, poor memory, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.²⁵

Students are not alone in experiencing potential negative effects of their pervasive non-academic online activity. Recent research suggests that teachers' well-being may also be a concern. A Canadian study found that teachers perceived significant reductions in their stress, and significant increases in their desire to remain in the classroom, following the removal of K-12 student cell phones.²⁶

Research on School Phone Restrictions

Given the aforementioned research suggesting non-academic screen use may have negative social, behavioral, academic, and psychological effects, it is not surprising that many communities began restricting smartphone use in various ways. Because many such policies were enacted in only the last two to three years, however, long-

term data revealing their outcomes is scant. Moreover, communities have used a variety of strategies. For example, policies differ in the devices they cover. Some include the full range of personal smart devices, including smartwatches and earbuds, as in Walla Walla, Washington, and St. Paul, Minnesota,²⁷ while others restrict phones alone. They differ, too, in scope across the school day. “Bell-to-bell” policies prohibit use from arrival to dismissal, as in New York’s statewide K-12 restriction,²⁸ whereas other jurisdictions, such as Florida, limit use only during instructional time and leave passing periods and lunch to local discretion.²⁹ Many policies additionally designate phone-free zones such as restrooms and locker rooms.³⁰ Finally, communities vary in how devices are stored: Some encourage students to leave phones at home or require storage in a hallway locker (as in Racine, Wisconsin)³¹; some collect devices in classroom bins or cubbies kept out of reach (as in Jamesville-DeWitt, New York)³²; some require phones to be powered off and stowed in a backpack (as in Arlington, Virginia’s “Away for the Day” policy)³³; and—currently the most widely adopted enforcement tool—a growing number seal phones in magnetic pouches carried by the student (as in Los Angeles Unified and Yonkers, New York).³⁴ These considerable differences have introduced methodological challenges in scientifically measuring the efficacy of phone-free policies.

Unfortunately, no known studies have rigorously examined the impact of smartphone restrictions while also systematically considering access to school-issued devices.

This is an emerging literature with findings often involving small samples, sometimes using only subjective data, and/or sometimes lacking comparative or control samples. Most studies have examined the impacts of phone restrictions on academ-

ic outcomes; few have robustly examined the effects of phone restrictions on other measures of social or psychological functioning.³⁵ Most examine school-wide effects without examining individual student variability within schools to determine whether subgroups of students may have heightened risks or benefits. Unfortunately, no known studies have rigorously examined the impact of smartphone restrictions while also systematically considering access to school-issued devices. This is a critical flaw in prior research: The effects of smartphone restrictions on child development outcomes are difficult to determine unless considered in the context of students’ easy access to non-academic activities on school-issued devices, including watching videos, playing games, and chatting with friends or AI chatbots.

The available literature suggests that phone restrictions likely have small yet meaningful effects on test scores and academic achievement. Initial studies (most with smaller samples) were conducted in Europe where bans were generally implemented earlier than in the US. Most, if not all, of these studies report increases in test scores and school achievement following phone bans. These findings have been replicated in several countries outside of Europe as well.³⁶

In the US, several larger-scale studies have been published. For example, a highly

referenced large-scale study³⁷ examined the efficacy of lockable smartphone pouches. Pouch use in US schools has notably increased. While students carry the pouches, they can't access their devices; pouches are then unlocked at the end of the day.³⁸ However, prior research suggests that students who have their phones near them—even if they can't use them—are significantly distracted by the smartphones' mere presence.³⁹ This suggests that perhaps a policy allowing students to keep smartphones with them may be less effective than one requiring greater distance between students and their devices.

Nevertheless, this study compared over 1,700 schools using lockable pouches in 2023-2025 to over 42,000 schools that did not. Findings from this study revealed that pouch use was associated with short-term increases in discipline issues, perhaps in part due to the violation of smartphone use policies. Neither school-wide attendance nor school-wide well-being scores improved. Schools that used pouches did have slight increases in high school math scores, particularly among schools that were recent adoptors or that had greater levels of poverty—and especially in comparison to control schools with less stringent phone-free policies. However, pouch use was associated with small decreases in middle school math scores.

A second large-scale study examined statewide effects of a Florida device and social media restriction policy enacted in 2023.⁴⁰ The bill restricted students' use of any devices with wireless capabilities (phones, headphones, earbuds, watches) during instructional time, with several urban school districts enacting “bell-to-bell” restrictions—from admission to dismissal. It mandated blocking access to social media platforms on school-provided internet service and further prohibited all access to TikTok as well as its use for any school-related activity. The study used location-specific data on internet access and usage (which has the benefit of capturing data even as students may have evaded policy restrictions) to compare high- and low-usage districts. Not surprisingly, usage fell after the restrictions were implemented. But in addition, district-wide data collected by the school and from standardized testing revealed three patterns: First, as in the pouch study, discipline issues resulting from the restriction itself spiked first spiked, but later abated. Second, attendance improved. Third, about one to two years after restriction implementation, test scores improved for students, particularly within schools that had especially high phone use prior to the policy implementation. Although access to school-issued devices was not systematically varied in the study, this analysis provides some opportunity to understand a more comprehensive restriction of non-academic platforms that typically capture students' attention.

Overall, these early data suggest that phone restrictions may be associated with small but perhaps meaningful improvements in academic achievement, although this may depend greatly on the nature and enforcement of the policies adopted. Findings also suggest that results often lag, evolving more than one year after implementation.

More data are needed to confirm if restrictions are more powerful when students are physically separated from devices, and whether findings depend on the removal of students' access to social media platforms not only on their smartphones, but more comprehensively during the school day. Far more research is needed to understand whether restrictions are associated with other changes in youths' social and psychological functioning.

IV. Recent Developments

Between 2018 and 2024, smartphone restrictions in schools became a defining feature of education policy debates around the world, with new laws, executive orders, ministerial directives, and district-level rules emerging on a near-monthly basis. What follows is a summary of this rapidly evolving context, beginning with the international and federal developments that helped catalyze the policy shift, followed by a review of state and district activity within the United States.

The Federal and International Context

A series of high-profile reports in 2023 marked an inflection point in the public and policy conversation about youth screen use. In May 2023, the American Psychological Association issued its first Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence, summarizing the available evidence on harms and benefits and offering 10 recommendations to parents, policymakers, and platforms.⁴¹ Two weeks later, US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy released an advisory on social media and youth mental health, characterizing the issue as a significant public health challenge and noting that the great majority of adolescents reported using social media, with a substantial minority doing so nearly constantly.⁴² In July of the same year, UNESCO released its 2023 Global Education Monitoring Report arguing that classroom technology should be used only when it demonstrably supports learning and recommending that countries reconsider permissive policies on smartphones in schools.⁴³ None of these documents introduced new empirical findings on classroom phone use specifically. Their near-simultaneous release, however, together with public attention generated by Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation* the following spring,⁴⁴ appears to have substantially shifted the political feasibility of restrictive policies in many jurisdictions.

International precedents predated this discursive shift by several years. France passed legislation in August 2018 prohibiting cell phone use in kindergartens, elementary schools, and middle schools, extending a more limited 2010 class hours restriction to a comprehensive ban covering breaks and mealtimes for students under 15.⁴⁵ Italy extended its phone restrictions, originally adopted in 2007 before smartphones, during the 2023–2024 school year. The Netherlands implemented a phased

restriction beginning January 2024 for secondary schools, expanding to all school levels by the 2024–2025 academic year.⁴⁶ Notably, the Dutch policy operates as an agreement among the Ministry of Education, schools, teachers, parents, and students rather than as a statutory mandate, with the government reserving the option to enact legislation if compliance proves inadequate.⁴⁷ England issued non-statutory guidance in February 2024, with revised guidance released in January 2026 directing the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills to assess school phone policies during inspections.⁴⁸ Every Australian state and territory restricts student personal phone use in public schools, though the rules vary by jurisdiction and grade level, and only some extend the restriction to smartwatches and other wearables. In December 2024, Australia became the first country to enact statutory age limits on social media accounts, restricting use for those under 16. Ontario implemented classroom restrictions for Grades 7–12 in November 2019, strengthened them in 2024, and as of April 2026 was actively considering an outright ban on personal phones anywhere on school property.⁴⁹

These examples also illustrate markedly different enforcement models. Some jurisdictions, such as France, rely on statutory mandates imposed at the national level; others, such as the Netherlands, work through negotiated agreements among ministries, schools, parents, and students, holding legislation in reserve only if voluntary compliance falters; and England links enforcement to its school-inspection regime. These differences reflect broader variation in governance culture and in the relationship between central authorities and local schools. They caution against reading a policy’s presence on the books as evidence of uniform implementation, or against transferring conclusions from one national context directly to another. Several of these jurisdictions have been operating under restrictions for years, but rigorous evaluation of effects remains sparse; most available evidence consists of teacher and administrator reports, with formal impact assessments still pending in most cases.

State and District Policy Activity in the United States

Within the United States, the pace of policy change has accelerated rapidly since 2023. In May of that year, Florida became the first US state to legislatively enact a statewide cell phone restriction when Governor Ron DeSantis signed House Bill 379 prohibiting student use of personal communication devices during instructional time.⁵¹ California followed in September 2024 with the Phone-Free Schools Act, requiring every district to develop and adopt a policy limiting or prohibiting smartphone use by July 2026. New York’s FY 2026 state budget incorporated a bell-to-bell K-12 restriction in April 2025. As of late 2025, 35 states and the District of Columbia had enacted laws or policies regarding student phone use in K-12 schools, with 22 laws passed during 2025 alone—more cell phone restriction legislation in a single year than during the entire previous decade.⁵³

The justifications embedded in these statutes echo the arguments introduced above, most commonly the protection of instructional time and concern for student mental health. The concern that some students have legitimate needs for personal communication has been addressed through specific carve-outs described below and have not impeded implementation. As evidenced above, state policies vary considerably in stringency and design. The most restrictive frameworks are bell-to-bell restrictions, as in New York, Virginia, Louisiana, Alabama, and Nebraska. A second category restricts use only during instructional time, leaving lunch periods and passing periods to local discretion, as in Arizona, California, and Ohio. A third category includes states that provide only resolutions or guidance encouraging local districts to adopt policies without mandating a particular design, as in Idaho, Kansas, Connecticut, Maine, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Washington.⁶⁹ Common design features across statutes include exceptions for medical needs and learning accommodations covered by an IEP or 504 plan; emergency carve-outs; tiered restrictions by grade level; and, in some cases, parental notification requirements.⁷⁰ Public and teacher support for such measures has continued to grow. A Pew Research Center survey conducted in June 2025 found that 74% of US adults supported banning middle and high school students from using their phones during class, up from 68% in fall 2024.¹⁰⁹ A National Education Association report indicated that a majority of public school teachers cited social media use in class as a serious concern, and 79% report that personal devices are very disruptive when used during classtime.¹¹¹

Enforcement mechanisms vary widely in cost and in the burden they place on teachers and administrative staff. As discussed above, some districts have adopted lockable magnetic pouches. One major vendor reports that approximately 2.5 million students currently use such pouches in schools across all 50 states, with per-pouch costs of roughly \$30 and district contracts ranging from approximately \$26,000 to over \$5 million, depending on enrollment.¹¹³ Other districts rely on classroom storage caddies, signage and progressive discipline schedules, school-day lockers, or “keep with student but powered off” approaches. It is important to note that new policies still vary widely in how well policy is enforced and in whether policies address school-issued devices as well as personal devices.

V. Discussion and Analysis

The literature reviewed above, considered alongside the rapid policy diffusion described in Section IV, supports several reasonable conclusions pertinent to non-academic screen use in schools. Each of these is discussed below, followed by several areas that require more consideration before firm conclusions can be offered.

- 1. Device use distracts students in school, deleteriously affecting not only youth who use devices in class, but also bystanders who witness others engaged in non-academic use.** Importantly, this is relevant

not only to personal devices, such as smartphones and smartwatches, but also for school-issued devices when used for noninstructional purposes. Literature also indicates biological vulnerabilities resulting from asynchronous development of brain regions across puberty—leading to immature impulse control yet heightened sensitivity to others—that likely make it especially challenging for youth to resist social interactions on their screens. In addition, teens are less capable than adults of rapid task-shifting between academic and personal/entertainment tasks. Perhaps therefore unsurprisingly, data indicate that youth are spending up to a third of the school day using their personal smart devices on social media and entertainment platforms, and often covertly using their school-issued devices for non-academic purposes.^{123,124} Policies to restrict access to screens during the school day are warranted and needed.

- 2. Phone restrictions are unlikely to achieve their full effect while school-issued devices remain unrestricted.** Most students now carry or have access to a school-issued laptop, and much of what they would otherwise do on a phone, such as messaging, streaming, gaming, and chatting with AI companions, remains available on that device. No known studies have examined the effects of smartphone restrictions while also limiting school-issued devices that afford many of the same distractions. The published effect sizes should therefore be read as estimates of what phone restrictions accomplish in the presence of an unaddressed second channel, not as estimates of what restricting non-academic screen use in school would accomplish overall.

Nevertheless, several insights are nevertheless clear from extant studies. Removing personal devices from instructional time is associated with improved academic performance, though benefits may take a year or more to appear. These gains accrue not only to students who would otherwise have been on their phones but also to classmates who experienced “secondhand” distraction.

- 3. Enforcement of phone restrictions is challenging, uneven, and likely leads to increases in disciplinary issues within the short-term.** It is important to ensure that policies are enforced equitably.¹³⁸ Legislative policies likely require implementation decisions among superintendents and principals that may vary within communities and add additional stress for teachers who enforce new restrictions at the local level. Data suggest that students are likely to challenge phone restrictions and require additional disciplinary actions for several months or even a year after the policy is enacted before new habits are formed. Substantial coordination is needed to ensure that phone restrictions are enforced consistently, with teamwork among school administrators, educators, and families.¹⁴⁰
- 4. Important individual differences must be considered as not all youth are likely to react the same way to the presence of a phone or**

to phone restrictions. Although potential benefits of personal smart-device use in classrooms rarely have been examined, anecdotal reports suggest possible issues to include in future policies. For example, policy exceptions may be warranted for students who rely on personal device apps that are required for monitoring medical conditions, or for providing assistance to student students with special educational or emotional needs.¹⁴² Several states have written corresponding exceptions into their statutes, but the clarity and consistency of implementation guidance varies considerably across jurisdictions.

Unresolved Issues

Several additional issues deserve urgent attention, but likely will require more research investment to successfully guide policy. First, phone use in schools likely displaces social, face-to-face, emotionally intimate interactions with peers at school, and this displacement may subsequently be associated with increased risk of school disconnection, loneliness, or other symptoms of psychological distress. Some students, however, may use their phones to seek and receive social support or companionship from peers outside of school. And while getting that support by phone during the school day may help students who don't fit in socially in their schools, it may also foreclose opportunities for them to discover possible friends. These are complex questions that have not been adequately tested within the school environment specifically.

Second, it is unclear which restriction designs are most effective, and the debate is complicated by the conflation of two separate questions: when during the day a restriction is in force, and how that restriction is implemented. These are independent choices, and evidence bearing on one does not settle the other.

The “when” question distinguishes restrictions limited to instructional time from bell-to-bell policies covering the full school day. The two reflect different theories of harm. Instructional-time restrictions treat the problem as primarily cognitive: Phones divide attention during learning, and removing them during class recovers instructional time. Bell-to-bell policies rest on a broader set of concerns. Proponents argue that phone use during lunch and passing periods displaces the face-to-face interaction through which peer relationships are built, that social conflict originating on phones during the school day migrates into classrooms, and that partial restrictions are harder to enforce than complete ones because they require staff to adjudicate boundaries throughout the day. Advocates also cite the enforcement burden that partial policies place on teachers, and the associated staffing cost, as a reason to prefer a single clear rule.¹⁴⁷ The available evidence does not adjudicate between these positions, but the theories are distinct and lead to different designs.

The “how” question concerns implementation: whether devices are left at home, stored in hallway lockers, collected in classroom caddies, sealed in pouches carried

by the student, or simply required to be powered off in a backpack. These designs vary in the physical distance they place between student and device, and that distance may matter. Research suggests that mere proximity to a phone imposes a measurable cognitive cost even when the device is not used. This raises a specific question about lockable pouches: Because the pouch remains on the student's person, notifications may still be felt or heard and the device remains within reach in a way that a hallway locker does not permit. This may help explain why the large pouch study found smaller and less consistent effects than the Florida analysis, though the two studies differ in enough other respects that the comparison is suggestive rather than conclusive.

Third, and closely related, the field lacks any rigorous evaluation of a phone restriction implemented alongside meaningful limits on non-academic use of school-issued devices. This is arguably the largest single gap in the evidence base. So long as students retain unrestricted access to a school-issued laptop, the measured effects of any phone policy will understate what a comprehensive restriction on non-academic screen use might achieve. Districts have generally treated these as separate policy domains—phones as a matter of student discipline, laptops as a matter of instructional technology—and the research has largely followed suit.

Finally, digital media literacy programs may help students understand both the benefits and risks of online interactions, and could serve as a useful supplement to smartphone restriction policies. However, while numerous commercial curriculum options are available, none has been adequately tested, and therefore it is unclear whether they can change in fact impact students' attitudes or behaviors. Since voluntary cooperation with restricted use seems highly desirable, identification of an effective digital media literacy program is a critical need. Related, without attention to the social climate of newly phone-free settings, restrictions by themselves may not improve student connection or well-being. If bullying has been a problem over social media, for example, addressing it likely requires specific attention in addition to removing social media access. Schools can also provide landline phones or email access for students to contact with others when safe and appropriate.

These gaps demonstrate a need for flexibility in specific design choices, but not inaction. The evidence that non-academic phone use in school carries academic and psychological costs is considerably stronger than the evidence identifying which restriction works best. The more defensible course is to act on the harms the evidence does establish, to be explicit about what a given restriction is meant to accomplish, and to build evaluation into the policy so that the design can be revised as the record develops.

VI. Recommendations

The evidence reviewed here establishes that non-academic phone use in school is associated with a range of academic, cognitive, and psychological impacts. It does not yet establish which restriction design works best. These are separate questions. Where the evidence of impact is substantial and the cost of inaction is borne by students, policymakers can reasonably act on the best available evidence while building the record needed to evaluate their choices. The recommendations below are offered in that spirit.

State Legislators:

- Specify what the restriction is intended to accomplish—protecting instructional time, reducing social conflict and disciplinary incidents, supporting student mental health, or some combination—and select a design suited to those aims. Restrictions limited to instructional time address learning-related harms; bell-to-bell restrictions target a broader set of social, emotional, and behavioral harms that extend beyond the classroom.
- Include clearly defined policy exceptions for documented medical needs, learning accommodations under an IEP or Section 504 plan, emergencies, and verified family-communication needs.
- Authorize and fund independent evaluation of the policy's effects, and require that the evaluation address academic, psychological, social, and behavioral outcomes.

State Education Agencies:

- Issue implementation guidance that anticipates predictable first-year enforcement challenges, incorporates equity safeguards, and requires annual public reporting of disciplinary actions taken under the policy, disaggregated by race, gender, and disability status.
- Support the collection of data on the academic, psychological, social, and behavioral effects of any restriction implemented, providing the information necessary to evaluate policy choices going forward.
- Partner with federal research agencies such as the Institute of Education Sciences, the National Institutes of Health, and the National Science Foundation to fund and coordinate research and to support cross-state sharing of de-identified implementation and outcome data, so that evidence accumulates faster than any single state could achieve alone.

District Leaders:

- Extend any personal-device restriction to non-academic use of school-issued laptops and tablets, including by blocking social media, gaming, entertainment, and general-purpose AI platforms on school-provided networks and devices. A restriction on phones alone leaves the same content available through a second channel.
- Choose storage and enforcement designs deliberately, recognizing that the evidence does not yet identify an optimal approach and that designs leaving phones on students' persons—including lockable pouches—do not eliminate the distraction associated with a device's proximity.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of any digital-literacy curriculum adopted alongside a restriction, since no commercially available program has been tested for effects on student attitudes or behavior.

School Leaders:

- Provide teachers and staff with training and ongoing support for consistent, equitable enforcement; communicate policy clearly to families, including channels for legitimate midday contact.
- Preserve documented individual accommodations and ensure due-process protections for disciplinary actions.
- Attend to the social climate of phone-free settings rather than assuming that restriction alone will improve student connection or well-being. For example, ensure that landline phones or email access is possible to ensure students have contact with others when safe and appropriate.

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