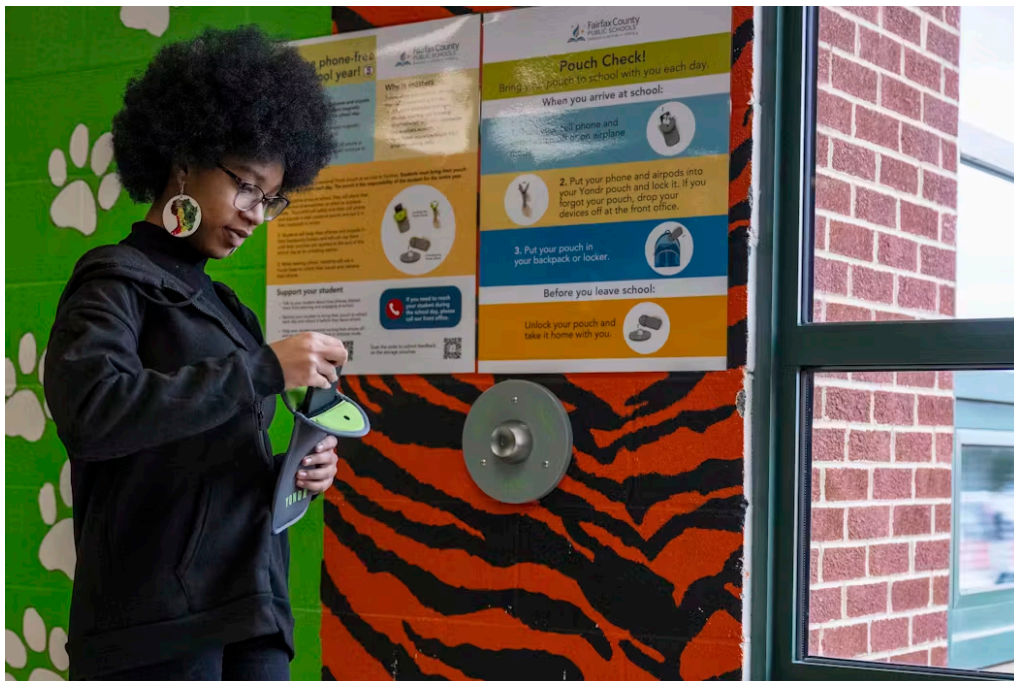


# Cellphones in schools – more states are taking action to reduce student distraction without eliminating tech access

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States including Michigan and Colorado are restricting the ways students can use digital devices in school.

*Jim Watson/AFP via Getty Images*

Across the United States, more schools are implementing policies restricting cellphones as concerns about digital distraction, mental health and academic performance rise.

The scale of the issue is significant. According to a 2023 report from Common Sense Media, 97% of students between the ages of 11 and 17 use their cellphones at least once during the school day. These students spend a median of 43 minutes online each day during school hours. Social media, YouTube and gaming were the students' top cellphone uses.

Schools have already begun taking action. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics published in 2025 shows that 77% of public schools ban cellphones during classes. Thirty-eight percent of schools have cellphone policies that restrict use outside of class as well – including during free periods, between classes or during extracurricular activities.

Policymakers in different states and educators in school districts across the country are putting into place a variety of solutions. Some rely on partial restrictions, while others enforce complete bans.

Many are still searching for the balance between technology access and minimizing distraction.

What is clear, however, is that cellphones have become one of the central issues shaping today's classroom environment.

## **The role of technology in the classroom**

As researchers and professors who study the integration of technology for teaching and learning – and who are also parents of school-aged children – we firmly believe that digital technologies are no longer optional add-ons. They have become indispensable in modern classrooms, acting as versatile instruments for instruction, collaboration and student engagement.

Take, for example, the ongoing shift from traditional paper textbooks to digital ones. This transformation has broadened access and created new opportunities for interactive, personalized learning. Abundant evidence demonstrates the positive effects of technology in supporting students' engagement in class and their academic performance.

Students' access to digital devices has improved significantly as schools across the United States continue investing in technology infrastructure. A 2023 report from the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that 94% to 95% of public schools now provide devices to students who need them – although disparities exist between states.

A growing number of districts are adopting 1:1 initiatives, ensuring that every student has access to a personal device such as a laptop or tablet. These initiatives accelerated after the COVID-19 pandemic made clear the need for reliable access to learning technologies in schools for all students. They highlight the central role technology now plays in shaping everyday classroom instruction.

These technologies hold great educational potential. Yet, when not integrated thoughtfully and regulated effectively, they can inadvertently reduce focus and undermine learning.

Our recent systematic review on digital distraction in classrooms, which synthesized 26 empirical studies, finds three main drivers of distraction among students:

- **Technology-related factors** included constant social networking, texting and cellphone addiction. These accounted for over half of the reported distractions.
- **Personal needs**, such as entertainment, made up more than one-third.
- **Instructional environment**, including classroom instruction that isn't engaging, poor classroom management and difficult course content, accounted for the rest.

To address these challenges, the authors of the papers we reviewed suggested strategies such as teaching students how to control their own behavior and focus, silencing notifications, issuing clear device policies or banning devices.

The studies in our review also drew a clear distinction between school-provided and personally owned mobile devices. Devices provided by schools are typically equipped for instructional purposes, enhanced with stronger security and designed to restrict distracting uses. Personal devices are far less regulated and more prone to off-task use.

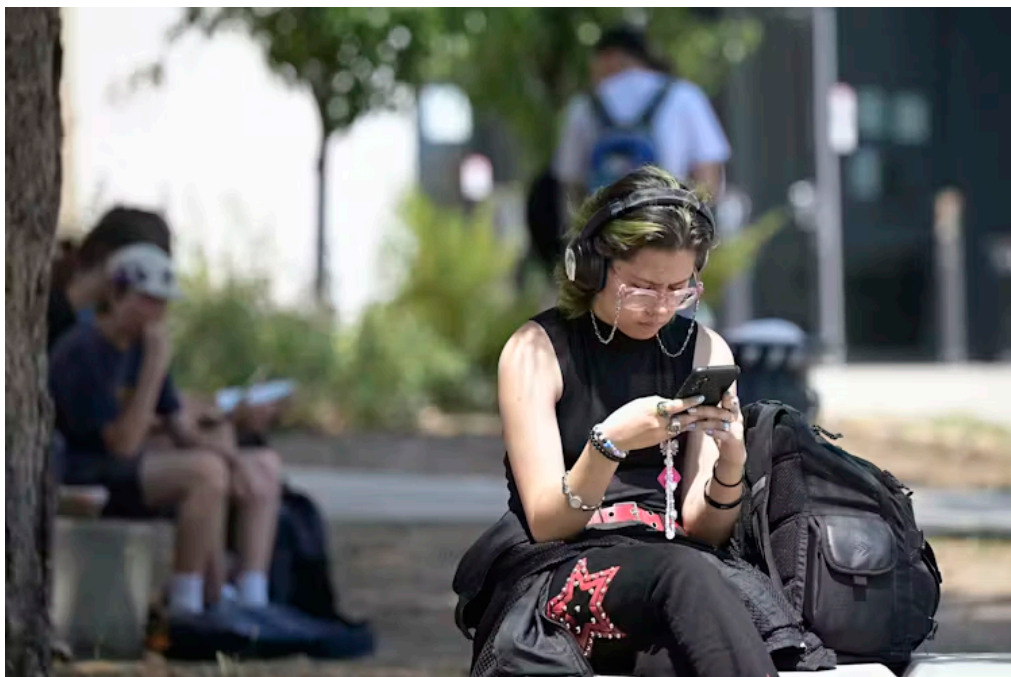
As schools increasingly provide devices designed for learning, the role of personal cellphones in classrooms becomes harder to justify as they present more risks of distraction than educational benefits.

## **Laws and policies regarding cellphone use**

Several states in the U.S. have passed laws banning or restricting cellphone use in schools, with some notable differences.

States vary in how they define wireless communication devices. In Michigan, Senate Bill 234, passed in May 2025, describes a wireless communication device as an “electronic device capable of, but not limited to, text messaging, voice communication, entertainment, navigation, accessing the internet, or producing email.”

While most of the states have several technology types listed under wireless communication devices, a Colorado bill passed in May 2025 clearly identified that laptops and tablets did not fall under the list of restricted wireless communication devices.



A high school student in Lafayette, Colo., checks her phone.

*Hyoung Chang/The Denver Post via Getty Images*

Most state laws don't specify whether the bans apply to both personally owned devices and school-owned devices. One exception is the bill Missouri passed in July 2025, which clearly specifies its ban refers only to personal devices.

North Carolina made exceptions in a bill approved in July 2025, allowing students to use wireless communication devices for instructional purposes. Other exceptions in the North Carolina bill include an emergency, when students' individual education programs call for it, and a documented medical condition.

In their bills, most states provide recommendations for school districts to create cellphone use policy for their students. To take one typical example, the policy for Wake County in North Carolina, one of the state's largest school districts, specifically refers to personal wireless communication devices. For elementary and middle school students, they must be silenced and put away between morning and afternoon bells, either in a backpack or locker. For high school students, teachers may allow them to be used for lessons, but they must otherwise be silenced and put away during instructional time. They can be used on school buses with low volume and headphones.

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