

Smartphone Use in K-12 Schools

Cellphone use in school has been widely debated throughout the last twenty years. This topic has been gaining more attention recently in today's digital age. The ability for students to use personal devices for educational purposes compared to the potential distraction that prevents students from focusing in class is a complicated issue. As smartphone use in schools continues to increase, schools have struggled to find policies that balance educational benefits with classroom control. This widespread debate has prompted strong opinions from all sides of the school system. The use of smartphones in K–12 schools has a wide range of effects, as seen from the perspectives of teachers, students, parents, and administrators.

Many teachers argue that banning phones in the classroom has made it easier for students to focus during class and work better in groups. Some schools have even seen a drop in bullying and fights tied to phone use. From a teacher's perspective, phone policies are especially important because teachers are the ones responsible for enforcing them daily. Smartphones create constant temptation for a student which creates distraction for them while making it difficult for teachers to maintain students' attention. Research shows that this burden is linked to increased depression symptoms in teachers and lower levels of positive mental health, especially when teachers feel unequipped to manage student phone use (Brailovskaia et al.). In fact, teachers with higher confidence and competence in handling phone misuse report better mental health

outcomes. Sarah Rose, a senior lecturer in psychology and child development at Staffordshire University, emphasizes the importance of involving educators in these conversations since they are the ones who are constantly making sure those policies work. In her research, she found that simply banning cellphone use would be “missing an opportunity to educate children about responsible mobile device use” (Beland et al.) and through collaboration with parents and students on making the policy has the potential to “increase the extent to which these policies are followed and enforced” (Beland et al.). Enabling students to know how to use their phones appropriately gives them life skills outside the classroom instead of strict measures that only temporarily avoid the inevitable. A little honesty and responsibility go a long way to make the learning environment better for everyone involved in the educational process.

Students hold an interesting perspective on smartphone bans in schools since they have to deal with it daily. Firstly, many students recognize the temptation and distraction smartphones create during school day. In a New York Times survey asking students for their views on school cellphone bans, several admitted that these restrictions helped them focus. One student wrote, “I found myself less distracted and more engaged with the lesson” (“What Students Are Saying”). Other students noted that the restrictions took away the anxiety that comes with constant access to social media. However, not all students have the same perspective on smartphone restrictions. One student argued they use their phone to learn “since [they] work better when [they] research and take notes and most of [their] teachers just lecture” (“What Students Are Saying”). Additionally, others argued that phones are a vital connection to parents or emergency services, especially in a time where school safety is a major concern. Another student argued that “We

should be trusted to manage our devices responsibly” (“What Students Are Saying”). For many students, the issue isn’t simply about distraction, for many it is about autonomy and trust. They feel like they should be trusted enough to withhold from smartphone use during class. These differing opinions show that while phone bans may improve focus for some, they may also create frustration and remove learning resources for students.

For many parents, their top priority is ensuring their child's safety and being reachable in times of need. When schools implement phone bans, it can leave parents feeling anxious or powerless, especially in the face of ongoing concerns like school shootings. Larry McEwen, a high school basketball coach and parent, believes that students “should have phones for emergencies,” as he experienced a gun-related incident that made him realize “having phones came in handy” (“American Parents”). Furthermore, some parents argue with rising depression and anxiety rates, a cell-phone break can be beneficial for the student and can help them in their studies. In fact, in February 2024 the National Parents Union conducted a poll where 1,506 public-school parents and found that a majority of parents believed that students “should be allowed to use phones during free time” (“American Parents”). Meanwhile, not every parent seems to agree with the majority. Some parents argue that it is a gateway to bullying as they can easily be “secretly recorded while using the toilets or undressing in locker rooms” and fights be “organized by phone” (“American Parents”). Additionally, Kim Whitman of the Phone-Free Schools Movement, argues that parents can use different methods to track their kids and that people “survived for a very long time” while functioning “absolutely fine without having a phone” and “instant access to our parents” (“American Parents”). As a result, the parent

perspective is far from one-sided—while some advocate for access as a necessity for safety and emotional health, others push for restrictions and bans to protect students from harm and preserve the school’s learning environment.

From an administrative perspective, managing smartphone use by students in schools requires them to find a solution that maintains order while supporting student needs. All over the country, administrators have taken various strategies. For example, “some schools have issued outright bans that prohibit students from bringing any electronic devices,” while some partial bans where smartphone use is only permitted during lunches or at a teachers' discretion (“Cell Phones in Schools”). Students who violate use by using their phones during an inappropriate time may get detention or even in some extreme cases get fined (“Cell Phones in Schools”). By the 2022-2023 school year, many school districts were reinstating cellphone bans or testing new options like Yondr. Yondr is a service where students put their phones in pouches, which are lockable, meaning that students can keep the devices in school but not have access to them all day. A survey of schools using Yondr found that “84 percent reported improved student engagement, 72 percent reported improved student behavior, and 68 percent reported improved academic performance” (“Cell Phones in Schools”). In addition, “86 percent reported an improvement in student safety and wellness” (“Cell Phones in Schools”). Therefore, this shows the benefits of restricting phone use without entirely banning phones. On a broader scale, states are now reassessing smartphone use policies. Florida became the first state to assess that students cannot have smartphones during class instruction, while Indiana, Ohio, and Virginia follow with similar policies and executive orders to limit in-school cellphone use (“Cell Phones in Schools”).

In fact, more than 70 percent of high school teachers say student phone distraction is a “major problem,” according to a 2024 Pew Research survey (Singer). These policy efforts show how serious school administrators and policymakers are to reduce smartphone reliance because now, even legislatures believe that a better environment is one with more focus and quality work. For administrators, the goal is not just discipline, but creating a space where students can focus, behave appropriately, and feel safe.

Overall, the use of smartphones in K–12 schools continues to raise important questions on how to balance technology, learning, and responsibility with a classroom. While teachers, students, parents and administrators all offer various perspectives, they all reflect on the difficulty of creating a positive learning environment that promotes academic success and emotional stability.

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