



Leading Education Innovation

Student Cell Phones | November 2024

Navigating Student Cell Phone Use in Schools

Current Insights for U.S. K-12 Educators & Leaders

About CoSN – The Consortium for School Networking

CoSN, the world-class professional association for K-12 EdTech leaders, stands at the forefront of education innovation. We are driven by a mission to equip current and aspiring K-12 education technology leaders, their teams, and school districts with the community, knowledge, and professional development they need to cultivate engaging learning environments. Our vision is rooted in a future where every learner reaches their unique potential, guided by our community. CoSN represents over 14 million students and continues to grow as a powerful and influential voice in K-12 education. CoSN also provides opportunities for companies that support the K-12 EdTech community to participate as corporate members.

CoSN is vendor neutral and does not endorse products or services. Any mention of a specific solution is for contextual purposes.

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About EdTech Innovation Committee

CoSN's EdTech Innovation Initiative develops primarily resources on the Driving K-12 Topics, and other timely topics as they arise, that have the potential to significantly impact K-12 education.

Introduction

Smartphones and social media have transformed modern life, offering new ways to communicate and learn but also sparking debate on their downsides, especially for today's K-12 students.

Concerns over [screen time](#), [mental health](#), and [concentration](#) have led to calls for stricter regulations in schools. Proponents of cell phone bans argue that reduced screen time can improve focus and well-being, citing links between excessive smartphone use and issues like anxiety and sleep disturbances. Others, however, see technology as vital to education, socialization, and inclusivity, warning that bans could limit learning and connection.

Striking a balanced approach to cell phone use remains a complex, yet essential, goal. This resource, which was created during CoSN's EdTech Innovation Committee monthly meetings, can serve as a guide when determining what to consider when it comes to student cell phone use in schools.

What is this guide?

A concise, user-friendly resource for EdTech leaders to use when thinking about cell phone bans, grounded in the current moment-in-time. It provides perspectives, definitions, considerations, and current resources to help leaders explore the complexities and consider the topic within their specific context.

What is this NOT?

- *"The answer"* to this complex topic. It is neither the end-all-be-all, the comprehensive solution, nor a one-size-fits-all recommendation.
- An evergreen or regularly-updated resource. It is a moment-in-time document based on conversations and content created in Fall 2024.

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Digital Equity

As schools consider policies on student cell phone use, issues of equity and fair treatment emerge at the forefront. Smartphones can enhance learning and connect students to resources, but they also reveal disparities in access, support, and outcomes. For some, a personal device may be a primary tool for research, communication, and even safety, while for others, it may present distractions and barriers.

Educators face a unique challenge: to craft policies that uphold equity of treatment, balancing the benefits of connectivity with the need for focus and impartiality, ensuring all students have equitable access to learning opportunities.

It's also worth noting that the current discussion should focus not on "screen time" — a term more relevant to the era of passive technologies like television — but on "learning time." This is the designated period when students engage in structured educational activities that are aimed at achieving specific academic outcomes, including both in-class instruction and independent study.

When implemented effectively, technology can enhance student engagement, offer tailored learning experiences, improve accessibility for all students, especially those with disabilities, facilitate accelerated learning for both educators and students, extend educational opportunities beyond traditional classroom settings, and enhance the overall educational environment.

A Few Considerations:

- **Access:** Broad access to smartphones across socioeconomic levels — provides opportunity to engage with (create, explore, share, etc.) digital resources for most students.
- **Distraction vs. Learning Tool:** While cell phones can be powerful tools for research, organization, and engagement, they can also become distractions, particularly for students who may have less self-regulation or those with learning differences. Some students might benefit more from structured use of technology, while others could be negatively impacted, reinforcing existing inequalities in academic performance.

- **Cultural Differences:** Students from different backgrounds may have varying experiences and expectations around cell phone use. In some households, cell phones are seen as essential tools for staying connected to family responsibilities, while in others, they may be considered purely recreational. Policies that are sensitive to these differences can promote fairness by recognizing diverse needs and responsibilities that may influence when and how students use their phones.
- **Inconsistent Enforcement:** Cell phone bans enforcement can vary significantly from school to school and even from classroom to classroom. Studies have shown that schools vary significantly in how lenient their cell phone bans are, often related to the economic status of the families they serve. This disparity can lead to perceptions of unfairness and disproportionately affect students based on their socio-economic status. Students have also expressed confusion when policies are set and then inconsistently followed by different teachers.
- **Community and Equity:** The community aspect of equity also needs to be considered — and smartphones can/do play a major role here. See, for instance, initiatives like the [Arizona IDIA](#) (Institute for Digital Inclusion Acceleration) and how they interact with this topic.

Current Resources & Research to Consider

- Pew Research, [Mobile Fact Sheet](#)
- Harvard Graduate School of Education, [Weighing the Cost and Benefits of Cellphones in Schools](#)
- [Win Elements. The Unaddressed Equity Issues of Cellphone Usage in Schools: Ignoring the Roots of Future Helplessness](#)
- BERA, [Mobile phone bans in schools: Impact on achievement](#)
- KFF, [A Look at State Efforts to Ban Cellphones in Schools and Implications for Youth Mental Health](#)
- [Arizona IDIA](#) (Institute for Digital Inclusion Acceleration)

Digital Wellness

Digital Wellness is the practice of being in, or developing, a healthy relationship with technology, digital tools, and the internet, with a focus on how these affect physical and mental well-being. This approach involves self-regulation skills, where students learn to balance screen time, prioritize offline activities, and use digital tools mindfully.

Digital Wellness may look different at various stages of maturity and growth, reflecting students' evolving capacities to manage their digital lives responsibly and healthily. By fostering Digital Wellness, schools can support students in developing lifelong habits that promote balance, focus, and personal well-being in an increasingly connected world.

A Few Considerations

- **Public Narrative:** The public narrative around youth and cell phone use often emphasizes risks, overlooking the positive aspects of digital engagement. Educators can help shift this view by supporting balanced discussions on technology's role in students' lives.
- **Finding Community and Identity Online:** For some students, online spaces are essential for finding acceptance and community. Acknowledge these supportive digital connections -- whether that be through social media or video games/virtual reality they play and connect with others who are like them -- while guiding students toward balanced and healthy online engagement.
- **Student Perspectives on Digital Wellness:** Understanding learners' views on digital wellness, self-image, and health online can bridge generational gaps and provide insights into their actual needs, aligning school support with their experiences.
- **Cell Phones, Cyberbullying, and Inappropriate Communication:** While cell phones foster connection, they can also enable cyberbullying and inappropriate interactions. Teaching responsible use and conflict resolution can help foster a safe and respectful digital environment.
- **Screen Time, Social Media, and Mental Health:** Excessive screen time, especially on social media, can increase risk of mental health challenges. Schools can promote self-regulation and balanced technology use, helping students manage their digital lives in healthy ways (even when it's difficult for adults to do, as well).

- **Device Use vs. Social Media Impact:** The challenges of cell phones often stem from social media's effects on mental health. Teaching students mindful phone use encourages a healthier relationship with technology focused on positive, intentional use.
- **Digital Wellness for All:** Digital addiction and connectivity challenges affect not only students but also adults. Schools can support all stakeholders by creating broader awareness of digital media's effects and promoting healthier digital habits throughout the community.

Current Resources & Research to Consider

- NBC New York, [Generation Text: NBC survey of principals reveals deep concern about the impact of phones in schools](#)
- Innovative Learning, [Digital For Good](#)
- Common Sense Media, [Should Your School Have a Cellphone Ban?](#)
- The Harvard Gazette, [Do phones belong in schools?](#)
- Care, [Should Cell phones be allowed in school? Let's talk about the pros and cons](#)
- Substack.com, [Risks vs. Harms: Youth & Social Media](#)
- CBS News, [TikTok sued by attorneys general alleging its app is harming children's mental health](#)

Digital Skills & Literacy

In today's digital age, the ability to navigate virtual environments — often referred to as "digital literacy" — is essential for students. Digital literacy encompasses more than just knowing how to operate devices; it includes understanding where to find reliable information and discerning what is appropriate for a given situation.

This literacy rests on three pillars: responsible use (respecting privacy, ensuring security), effective use (identifying truth and validating content), and mindfulness (balancing time spent online with engagement in the "here and now").

For educators, fostering digital literacy is a vital step in preparing students to thrive responsibly in an interconnected world.

A Few Considerations

- **Online Safety:** Teaching students about online safety — including privacy, secure communication, and respectful digital interactions — equips them to navigate digital spaces responsibly and with confidence.
- **Using Cell Phones for Productivity and Growth:** By modeling real-world cell phone uses like organization, research, and communication, educators can show students how their devices can support academic and personal goals.
- **Expanding Possibilities with Classroom Cell Phone Integration:** Integrating cell phones as tools — for research, collaboration, and creation in the classroom — expands learning opportunities and engages students in new, meaningful ways.
- **The Importance of Teaching Responsible Digital Citizenship:** Introducing responsible digital citizenship from an early age helps students build habits of respectful and mindful technology use, while reducing the need for restrictive policies later on.
- **Safeguarding Against the Overreach of EdTech Bans:** While some restrictions are beneficial, a focus on digital citizenship and digital and media literacy can help students self-regulate without limiting valuable educational tools.
- **Emphasize Active Learning Through Technology:** Using technology for interactive projects and critical thinking engages students more deeply, fosters essential skills like collaboration, and maximizes the use of technology beyond mere content delivery.

Current Resources & Research to Consider

- Springer, [The impact of smartphone use on learning effectiveness: A case study of primary school students](#)
 - That paper (and others like it) [can be used as seeds for further research using Google Scholar.](#)
- United Nations, [UNESCO education report advises appropriate use of technology in schools](#)
- OECD, [Students, digital devices and success](#)

Accessibility

Cell phones can act as a powerful assistive technology, providing students with tools like screen readers, voice commands, and specialized apps that aid students with vision, hearing, or cognitive challenges.

Assistive technology includes any device, equipment, or product system — whether commercially available, modified, or customized — that enhances the functional capabilities of a child with a disability, though it excludes surgically implanted medical devices.

[\(Authority: 20 U.S.C. 1401\(1\)\)](#)

By integrating cell phones as assistive tools, schools can create more inclusive learning environments, helping students of all abilities to engage, participate, and thrive in their educational experience.

A Few Considerations

- **Encouraging Student Ownership with Personal Devices:** Allowing students to use accessibility features on their personal devices empowers them to take ownership of their learning needs, fostering independence that extends beyond school settings.
- **Supporting Students with 504 Plans or IEPs:** For students on 504 Plans or IEPs, cell phones can be essential tools for meeting their learning goals and fulfilling specific accommodations, helping to ensure equitable access to education.
- **Partner with Student Services for Family Training:** Collaborating with Student Services teams to offer training on assistive technology, either at Open House or through virtual events, can equip families to better support students' use of these tools at home and school.
- **Preparing for Advanced Voice Modes and Gen AI Integration:** As advanced voice technologies Gen AI become more ubiquitous, students will increasingly rely on their phones to listen, interact, and manage digital tasks, highlighting the need to prepare them for seamless integration of these tools into their lives.

Current Resources & Research to Consider

- ADA, [Guidance on Web Accessibility and the ADA](#)
- CAST, The UDL Schoolwide Implementation Criteria
- Siteimprove, [Overview of website accessibility laws](#):
- Office of the Law Revision Counsel, United States Code, [CHAPTER 33—EDUCATION OF INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES](#):
<https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title20/chapter33&edition=prelim>

State/Federal Policy

Developing effective policies around cell phone use in schools requires alignment across teachers, administrators, and families to ensure consistent expectations and equitable practices. Rather than rigid, static policies, schools might benefit from a flexible position or approach that adapts to the rapid evolution of technology. This approach allows for a more fluid response to changing digital needs at different grade levels and in diverse classroom settings.

Clear guidelines modeled by teachers can foster an environment where students and families understand the purpose and expectations around cell phone use, building unified support across the school community.

Example Policies:

- School Board Policies (Illinois)
- 7:310 Restrictions on Publications: Elementary Schools
- 7:315 Restrictions on Publications; High Schools
- 6:235 Access to Electronic Networks
- South Carolina State Board of Education
- *Proviso 1.103 – Banning of personal electronic devices

A Few Considerations

- **Distinguishing Cell Phone Bans from Screen Time Limits:** Cell phone bans are often conflated with screen time limits, but the two address different concerns. While a phone ban restricts device use entirely, screen time limits focus on managing the duration and context of usage, aiming for a balanced approach.
- **Navigating Policy Challenges with State Authorities:** In states where influential leaders, like the Texas Education Agency Commissioner, push for strict cell phone bans, schools may face limited flexibility. Understanding these rigid positions can help educators and administrators prepare for potential shifts and advocate for nuanced policies that consider student needs.
- **Adjusting Instructional Approaches Amid Cell Phone Restrictions:** As statewide cell phone bans become more common, schools will need to re-evaluate current

teaching methods that rely on cell phones. Educators can explore alternative tools and instructional strategies to ensure continued access to technology's educational benefits even in restrictive environments.

- **Differing Views on Cell Phones Between Schools and Families:** Schools and families often have different perspectives on cell phones, as they serve distinct roles in each context. Policies should consider these varied functions to foster a balanced approach that respects both educational and personal needs.
- **Quality of Screen Time Over Quantity:** Not all screen time is equal; it's how technology is used, not just its duration, that matters. Policymakers often focus on limiting screen time, as seen in the 2024 legislation on minors' social media use, but these measures may overlook the need for nuanced approaches that address quality and purpose in digital engagement.

Current Resources & Research to Consider

- The Education Commission of the States, [How Are States Approaching Cell Phone Use in Schools?](#)
- The Texas Tribune, [Texas education commissioner calls for student cellphone ban in schools](#)
- The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, [Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#)
- EdWeek, [Which States Ban or Restrict Cellphones in Schools?](#)
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, [Surgeon General Issues New Advisory About Effects Social Media Use Has on Youth Mental Health](#)

Limited Resources

The use of cell phones in K-12 schools presents a complex challenge, as they offer educational benefits but can also disrupt the learning environment. Balancing these advantages and drawbacks requires careful planning and substantial resources, particularly when enforcing cell phone bans.

Monitoring and managing device use can be time-intensive for school staff, often diverting attention and resources from other essential responsibilities. Schools must consider how to allocate resources effectively to maintain a conducive learning environment while addressing the demands of cell phone regulation.

A Few Considerations

- **Funding Needs for Alternative Devices:** Some districts rely on cell phones for instructional purposes, such as translation in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. New regulations banning cell phones may necessitate funding for alternative devices to meet these needs without disruption
- **Privacy Concerns in Using Cell Phones for Translation:** While cell phones can assist with translation, using personal devices for this purpose raises concerns around privacy and data security, especially if personally identifiable information (PII) is involved, requiring careful consideration of risks.
- **Consistency in Cell Phone Policies Among Staff:** Ensuring that staff are aligned on cell phone policies is essential to set consistent expectations. Without this alignment, students may experience inequity and confusion, undermining the policy's effectiveness.
- **Staff Capacity for Managing Cell Phone Use:** Schools often lack the staff members needed to consistently enforce cell phone policies and address related behavioral issues. Limited resources mean that teachers may struggle to teach digital responsibility while managing other instructional demands.
- **Costs to Prohibit Student Cell Phones at School:** K-12 schools are increasingly incurring costs to purchase specialized devices, such as locking pouches and signal-blocking storage units, designed to secure student cell phones during school hours. These investments, while intended to minimize distractions and improve

focus, place additional financial burden on schools, especially those already operating with limited budgets.

Current Resources & Research to Consider

- HUB, [What's behind the ban on cell phones in K-12 schools?](#)

Tips for Small & Under-Resourced Districts:

- **Draft a strong policy** on cell phone usage that provides teachers and students with clear guidelines for in-classroom use, helping to set consistent expectations across the district.
- **Regularly check in** with teachers, students, and parents to gather feedback on what aspects of cell phone use are effective or need improvement, fostering a collaborative approach to policy adjustments
- **Include a cell phone policy acknowledgment** section in the annual student information update to ensure all families are aware of and agree to the guidelines.
- **Set clear expectations with parents and guardians** regarding the cell phone policy to encourage family support and understanding.
- **Establish accountability** for students: Outline specific, reasonable accountability measures to help students adhere to the cell phone policy, promoting responsible use and reinforcing expectations.

Emergency & Crisis

In emergency situations — such as fires, medical crises, natural disasters, or the presence of a threat — student safety is the highest priority. Cell phones can play a vital role in these moments, allowing students to quickly reach parents, emergency services, or school officials in real time, enhancing communication and response efforts.

As schools evaluate cell phone policies, they must consider how these devices can serve as crucial tools for student protection, ensuring that policies balance safety needs with other educational considerations.

A Few Considerations

- **Immediate Communication During Emergencies:** Cell phones enable parents and their students to connect quickly, allowing students to make contact with parents, emergency services, or school officials, which can be crucial in rapidly evolving situations.
- **Quick Incident Reporting:** Students with cell phones can quickly report incidents as they occur, potentially alerting authorities or staff in real time to situations requiring immediate attention.
- **Location Sharing:** Cell phones allow students to share their location with parents or emergency personnel, adding an additional layer of safety by facilitating rapid response.
- **Communication System Overload Risk:** During a crisis, too many students using their phones simultaneously could overload communication systems, potentially slowing response times and disrupting emergency coordination.
- **Single Platform for School Communication:** Some districts use an approved, unified student and family platform, like StudentSquare and ParentSquare, which allows seamless updates for athletics, emergencies, and school events, consolidating communication channels.
- **First Responder Preferences:** First responders often prefer that students focus on instructions from adults during emergencies rather than texting, as attention to directives is vital for coordinated safety efforts

Current Resources & Research to Consider

- Care.com, [Should cell phones be allowed in school? Let's talk about the pros and cons](#)
- National School Safety and Security Services, [Cellphones and Safety](#)
- Ohio Department of Education, [Cell Phones in Schools: School Safety](#)

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