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## Tech Talk

### Balancing Benefits and Barriers: Exploring the Impact of School Cellphone Bans on Student Engagement, Well-Being, and Learning

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#### Abstract

Students in 2025 classrooms represent some of the first individuals to grow up entirely in the smartphone era, never knowing a world without apps, notifications, and constant online access. In response to concerns about student academic performance, engagement, and mental health, many U.S. states and school districts have implemented restrictions or bans on the use of cellphones during the school day. This article examines the emerging evidence on the benefits and challenges of such policies on students, parents, and teachers. Reported advantages include more time spent reading for pleasure, increased physical activity, more free play, and reduced classroom distractions and cyberbullying. At the same time, obstacles arise: parents express safety concerns, students rely on phones for academic functions such as multifactor authentication for dual enrollment courses, and teachers face the strain of enforcing bans. Importantly, some scholars argue that there is insufficient evidence to suggest that banning cell phones will achieve all that is hoped.

#### Where Are We Now?

Students sitting in classrooms in the year 2025 were born between 2008 and 2020. This means that these students have grown up in the era of smartphones, without ever knowing a world before apps, notifications, and the internet at their fingertips. In the book *Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt (2024) explores the impact of smartphones on children by examining what he deems “underprotection in the virtual world” (Loc. 207). Through the claim that students are underprotected, Haidt encourages schools to remove smartphones from the classroom and from the school day. As his work and that of others have gained attention in schools and homes across the nation, states are considering the impact that phones have on the classroom and are actively engaged in legislation to ban them (Panchal & Zitter, 2024; Zapien, 2025).

As of 2025, 35 states have policies or legislation around cellphone use. So far, 11 states have statewide bans or restrictions, 17 states have introduced statewide legislation, and seven states have Department of Education policies or pilot programs (Panchal & Zitter, 2024, with updates in 2025; Zapien, 2025). The following map, cited by Panachal and Zitter as sourced from KFF, depicts the states with statewide cellphone bans, statewide cellphone legislation, and State Department of Education-issued cellphone policy recommendations or pilot programs.

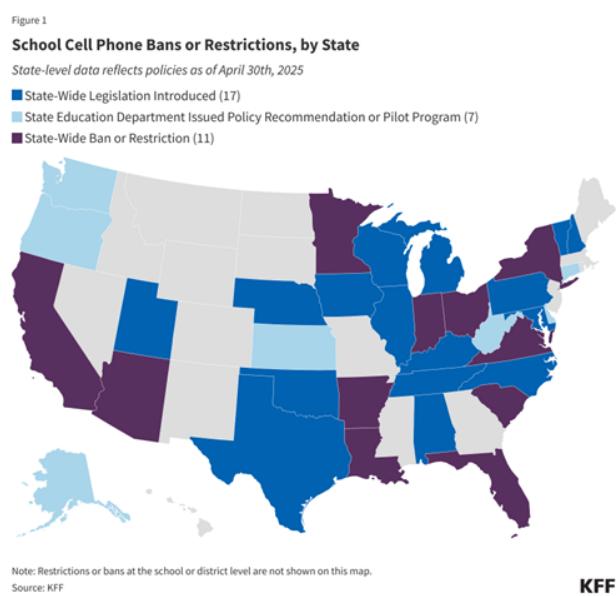


Image from: <https://www.kff.org/affordable-care-act/a-look-at-state-efforts-to-ban-cellphones-in-schools-and-implications-for-youth-mental-health/>

With the shift in policy and legislation surrounding cellphones, surprising benefits and potential opportunities are emerging.

### Benefits of Cellphone Ban Policies

Schools anticipated some natural benefits of the elimination of cellphones. Assumed in advance of the removal and shown in some schools were increased student engagement, decreased cyberbullying, easing of loneliness, reduction in student mental health issues, and decreased texting at school; and a more equitable learning environment (Carrillo, 2025; NCES, 2025; Panchal & Zitter, 2024; Twenge, 2025; Zapien, 2025).

With new policies restricting phone use in schools, some states have banned phones altogether, while others have restricted their use during instructional time. As a result, students are adjusting their use of free time at school. In September 2025, *Newsweek* (Miller, 2025) published an article that highlighted a clear benefit of decreased use: increased book circulation. Miller (2025) notes that in one Kentucky school, library circulation has already increased by 39% from last year. With restrictions on cellphones, students may now turn to books for pleasure. It has already been documented that increased technology use, including the use of cellphones, decreases the time spent reading, exercising, and engaging in other activities (Alotaibi, et al., Arundel, 2025; 2020; Caukin, 2024).

Additionally, with mandates that keep phones out of recess time, students are likely to engage in more exercise and free play. Pawlowski et al. (2021) conducted a study that preceded some of the legislation in United States schools, using a trial ban on cellphones in schools in Denmark. Through the trial ban, it was shown that these students had a decrease in sedentary behavior and an increase in their self-reported physical activity. In this case, taking away phones led to an increase in physical activity among students when they are given time in recess. Haidt (2024) proposes that time spent in free play is a factor in raising children who have lower instances of anxiety and depression. When given the choice between using a cellphone, reading, or exercising, students typically choose the cellphone. However, when that option is removed, they may be more likely to engage in one of the other positive forms of entertainment.

### **Potential Obstacles in Removing Cellphones**

Even with the best of intentions, challenges can arise from banning or changing cellphone policies. Parents and students rely on the ability to communicate throughout the school day. Some parents express safety concerns when cellphones are not readily available during the day, such as during school emergencies and the ability to record what is happening at school (Mediaer, 2024; Parents, Television, and Media Counsel, 2025).

Teachers note that the shift in cellphone bans has presented challenges. Students sometimes rely on apps on their cellphones for classroom activities, and some use apps for homework and for organizational purposes (Carrillo, 2025; Mediaer, 2024). Additionally, when students in high school classes attempt to connect to dual enrollment Learning Management Systems (LMS), they are frequently required to authenticate into their LMS using a cellphone. Teachers in these situations still need to allow students access to their phones in order for this to successfully occur. Some students prefer to use their phones to listen to music while working independently (Amy, 2025). Others welcome the reduced stress of not being video recorded by other students (Carrillo, 2025).

Schools have different approaches to managing student cellphones. Some schools opt for boxes or locked pouches for cellphones, which can be costly; for instance, one state spent \$250,000. Students have been known to use dummy phones as decoys for their real phones, which presents additional challenges to schools (Torchia, 2025). Some schools have banned all personal electronic devices, such as smartwatches, electronic games, wireless earbuds, and similar devices (Arundel, 2025).

Teacher morale is impacted when teachers spend their days policing cellphone usage (Twenge, 2025). Additionally, teachers in a school may not enforce the policy similarly or consistently (Carrillo, 2025). Although teachers generally support cellphone restrictions more than students (Carrillo, 2025; Walker, 2024), perhaps overlooked is how younger teachers have grown up in the era where smartphones are integral to daily life. These teachers don't necessarily oppose cellphone bans, but they value access to their devices during breaks and planning periods when they're not supervising students. The specific implementation of cellphone policies, therefore, can affect these younger teachers' work experience and satisfaction (Booth, 2025).

### **Inconclusive Evidence for Cellphone Bans**

Some argue that there is insufficient evidence of the benefits of banning cellphones. For example, Lumanlan (2025) disagrees with Haidt's (2024) argument that dropping test NAEP scores are due to cellphone use. Additionally, she argues that countries with continued cellphone use should see a decline in test scores, but points out that Norway and Singapore, countries that allow cellphones in schools, have maintained or improved test scores, while Hong Kong, the UK, Israel, and Sweden had flat, rebounded, or improving trends in scores. Campbell et al. (2024) reviewed 22 relevant articles from an initial list of over 1,300 published articles between 2007 and 2023. Due to the highly variable study criteria and inability to make generalizations, they found no conclusive evidence to ban cellphones. Goodyear et al. (2025) found in their UK study of 30 schools (20 with restrictions for recreational cellphone use in schools and 10 without restrictions for recreational use of cellphones in schools) that involved 1,227 students ages 12–17, that there was no difference in mental well-being or social media use between the group with cellphones. Note that the study did not involve a complete ban on cellphones in schools.

### **Conclusion**

While evidence suggests that restricting cellphone use can enhance student engagement, reduce distractions, and promote healthier behaviors, the concerns of parents, the practical needs of students, and the enforcement burden on teachers cannot be ignored. The debate is further complicated by inconclusive evidence regarding the overall impact of such bans on academic performance and mental well-being.

The challenges and concerns associated with removing cellphones from classrooms may be addressed when schools prepare for the needs of their students. Some examples include providing students with agendas to keep track of assignments when cellphones are not available; ensuring mechanisms are in place to enhance school communication with parents regarding school safety and any concerns that may arise; and implementing policies that reduce the burden on teachers. Additionally, providing alternatives, such as increased library time, may ensure that students have ways to engage with texts and materials when they previously turned to their cellphones.

If cellphone bans demonstrate, through evidence, one or more of the following: that students learn how to better interact with their peers, reduce cyberconflict at school, become more active, read more books, and become more engaged in instruction, then these bans will have proven to be successful. As educational institutions continue to navigate these challenges and opportunities, an approach that considers the diverse needs of all stakeholders is crucial. Future

policies should consider banning cellphones in a way that supports educational goals while minimizing potential drawbacks, ensuring that the evolving landscape of learning is both practical and beneficial.

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