

Phones Down, Focus Up

A Justification for Reducing Phone Use on School Campus

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Understanding Cell Phone Use and Its Impact on Students

Unlike many adults, our students have never known a life without cell phones. This new reality can mean not only that students are becoming largely dependent on phones, but it may also be difficult to keep students off devices during classroom instruction. However, with new legislation being enacted in states across the country to limit or ban cell phones from the classroom, it is essential for you to not only learn ways to reduce or eliminate cell phone use in the classroom, but also to understand the potential negative consequences of excessive phone use among your students. This brief article will summarize some justifications for reducing or eliminating phone usage on campuses, affirming the rationale lawmakers across the country are using when passing cell phone ban legislation on campuses.

According to the Pew Research Center article “Parenting Children in the Age of Screens” (<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/07/28/parenting-children-in-the-age-of-screens/>), the majority of parents believe that screen time, like cell phone usage, poses a significant hindrance to a child’s well-being and development. With most parents expressing concern that their children spend so much time on their devices, the consensus is that parents fear devices like phones interfere with a child’s sleep, focus, and mental health.

Academically, increased access to technology has the potential to affect memory and cognitive development. The “Google Effect”, a term by scientists that theorizes our brains might not retain information as well since a google search is so easily accessible in every day life, could point to our society having reduced memory and recall because of technology usage. A 2024 meta-analytical review (<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/public-health/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1332030/full>) delved into this idea further, and also found that the Google Effect was stronger for individuals in North America compared to other countries, and was more prevalent for those that frequently used Google on mobile devices.

Attention span is an additional concern for all individuals. In short, studies are beginning to show that increased addition to the internet is negatively and strongly correlated with attention span (<https://www.psychopediajournals.com/index.php/ijiap/article/view/873>). As screen addiction increases, the cognitive function of those addicted individuals decreases, even for pre-school aged children (<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12357703/>).

The studies pointing to risks associated with frequent cell phone usage are numerous, and the above are only a fraction of the work that points to a concerning trend in screen-time usage for all individuals: addiction to phones is on the rise, and this addiction is fueling attention span issues, memory problems, unhappiness, social issues, and more. All of these concerns play out in your classroom. You no doubt have noticed that students are increasingly distracted and have shorter attention spans, that they are preoccupied with social media, or that there are increased risks to students' well-being in the form of cyberbullying, for example. Phones are a gift to the world: information is at your fingertips, and we can connect with the world now like never before, but for a developing child, there are concerning implications we simply cannot ignore.

As phones are beginning to be banned across the country in classrooms, surprisingly, there isn't yet conclusive evidence that a sweeping phone ban in schools improves the concerns noted above (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/20556365241270394>). In other words, a causal relationship isn't necessarily evident yet in the current literature, and further studies will likely be needed to confirm that a ban does improve student outcomes in many areas. It is reasonable to assume that as these bans take place in classrooms across the country and over a number of years, the benefits of these bans will most likely be proven to be evident. Our opinion is that since there is clear evidence on the use of technology and phones that increases addiction and negative outcomes in a variety of aspects of life, a phone ban or limitation in the classroom will certainly not harm students.

The Importance of Managing Cell Phone Use in the Classroom

The impact on academic performance is real. According to a recent press release by the National Center for Education Statistics (https://nces.ed.gov/whatsnew/press_releases/2_19_2025.asp) over half of public school leaders report that cell phone use in classrooms is harming academic achievement. You likely see this yourselves in the school: students who might otherwise engage deeply with a discussion or show insight in writing assignments often get derailed when their attention is fragmented. One day, you might assign a group project, and while they are physically

present, half of the group is actually interacting with the screen rather than with their peers. Technology is not bad in itself, but without boundaries, technology tools will control our studies instead of the other way around! So, setting clear, enforceable expectations about when and how phones can be used gives our students the structure they need to focus, engage, and develop both academically and socially.

Limiting Phone Usage in your Classroom: The Challenges

We know cell phone management is important, but putting it into practice is far from simple. We face several challenges in the process, and it's not just about taking devices away.

- **Lack of Clear Guidelines:** Too often, the rules about phone use are inconsistent. If your state, district, or school does not have some kind of cell phone ban in place, it might be difficult to successfully implement restrictions in your own classroom, when each class or campus may have different policies. And, even for schools that do have clear policies and bans, sometimes opinions on how to manage students who break those rules may vary, leading to poor implementation of policies on your campus.
- **Student and Parent Resistance:** Many of your students likely have had access to devices since their early years. As your students get older, they rely on their phones and other devices for communication and connection to their social world. And, with the prevalence of phone addiction gripping our entire society, requiring students to not be able to access their phones all day will include some resistance. That resistance may also be felt from parents: as smartphones have become a ubiquitous part of our lives for decades now, parents increasingly view smartphone access as necessary, too, in order to reach their children.
- **Enforcement Challenges:** As a teacher, your primary role is in educating your students. You spend countless hours planning lessons and activities, and within your classroom, you are simultaneously managing your students' behavior, building rapport and community, and ensuring all students are learning content for their academic success. Adding cell phone enforcement into your classroom is another layer of responsibility that may feel daunting.

Setting Clear Expectations and Establishing Classroom Policies

If you do not yet have clear policies established at the campus level to reduce or ban phone usage on campus, consider some of these ideas below to help you reflect on how you might structure your classroom to limit opportunities for phone access.

- **Policies & Place:** First, you need to know and enforce your school's classroom policies. Does your school have a clear policy in place already? If so, you want to meet or exceed that policy. If not, you will want to discuss with your campus administrator your ideas for creating a phone policy in your classroom so you can abide by your campus's expectations. Three straightforward methods for reducing phone usage are listed below, but you may need to work with your administrator for a plan that works for you.
 - Complete campus ban of phones. Some schools do not allow phones on campus at all. In a case like this, the presence of a phone is breaking the rules, and typically parents are called or the phone is confiscated by the office until a parent picks it up. These strategies could potentially have legal or other ramifications, so it is important that your school creates a clear plan and expectations for you to follow if this is their strategy.
 - Placing phones into a phone locker (https://www.lockeremporium.com/cell-phone-storage-locker-with-front-access-panel-7-door-high-unit-8-inch-deep-compartments-20-a-doors-19-usable-and-4-b-doors-surface-mounted-master-keyed-locks/?sku=19178-24ASK&gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=22694752972&gbraid=0AAAAADGpt6JcCqBp1pN4AnjzUSH1YQWCA&gclid=Cj0KCQjw5onGBhDeARIsAFK6QJYS7fEqT4R4k5H_Lkq00_XTcORFTp4z8mujU20gpS_tYqq2fqe-a0MaAl2kEALw_wcB) or caddy (https://www.officedepot.com/a/products/8827946/Office-Depot-Brand-Hanging-36-Pocket/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=sag?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc®ion_id=001127&utm_campaign=pla_cor_ev_g_furniture_general_unid_prch_non-match&mediacampaignid=71700000119141374&utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&gclid=Cj0KCQjw5onGBhDeARIsAFK6QJYINLm2k9Nz00i9-ftJS3OkW3RTY594wS-IIPV30AyySSEv9oFsABkaAvIYEALw_wcB). Some schools will provide you with a place that phones can be stored during the classroom when the cost may be prohibitive to you. If your school does provide this, then you may still find resistance from students that do not wish

to give up their phones at all. If collecting all phones may seem daunting to you, more flexible options can also exist.

- Place phones into a designated pouch, bag, or backpack. Some teachers do not wish to risk the liability of a phone being lost or stolen. Consider requiring students who take their phones out to place them in a paper bag (that you staple shut) on their desk. You can also provide students a pencil case that they place their phones into (some teachers have reported zip-tying each pencil case to the student's desk to ensure it is not lost or stolen), or simply require students to keep their phones in their backpacks.
- Hold your Students Accountable. What are your school's plans for phone use violations, and how can you structure rules and policies in your classroom to ensure all students abide by your rules? Like any classroom management plan, you must carefully consider your non-negotiable policies and be sure to implement consequences swiftly and consistently for all students. Establishing strong expectations on day 1 can greatly reduce issues throughout the school year. After establishing your classroom expectations, structure your consequences in a way that escalates if the phone behavior escalates. You should clearly communicate this to your students. A simple example of tiered consequences is as follows, but be sure to create rules and consequences that align with your classroom management plan and teaching style:
 - **First violation:** Warning and reminder of the rules
 - **Second violation:** Phone confiscation/ placing in a sealed bag/ phone call home to parents
 - **Third violation:** Referral to an administrator for further consequences

The key to addressing phone violations and holding your students accountable for their actions is your school and administrator support. Your administration must back up your efforts. One suggestion to ensure this can happen is to request a verbal or written agreement from your administrator on how they will support you if your students violate your expectations. Clear and consistent rules and consequences, like any other classroom rule, is what will ensure your limit or ban on phones can be successful in your classroom.

- Nurture Respect and Model Behaviors: Technology is an inevitable aspect of all of our lives. Phone usage is more ubiquitous than ever before, and with children getting phones at younger and younger ages, it may feel to both you and your students and their caregivers that they must be a necessary aspect of school life. You might hear objections from parents that “they must be able to reach their child during the day,” or a student may comment on your own phone usage, saying “you shouldn’t be able to access a phone during the school day, either”. Be mindful of how you can

successfully limit phone usage in your students throughout the day. Showing respect for their learning and also modeling phone usage expectations yourself can go a long way to maintaining order in your classroom. Keep your phone put away at all times, too. Reinforce to students when technology has a place in social situations and in learning and when it does not. Acknowledge parent and student concerns while also modeling the behaviors and expectations you wish to see in your students, as well. By limiting your own phone usage, you might be surprised that your own happiness, motivation, and attention is improved too, just like what you'd like to see in your students!

A Final Reflection

Cell phones, screen time, and electronic devices in general can harm learning and disrupt your classroom environment. With adolescents now on their phones an average of 8.5 hours a day, with 1.5 hours of that time in school (<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/article-abstract/2829879>), it is clear that taking measures to reduce unauthorized and unnecessary screentime in students is important. While the incorporation of technology into your classroom can have some benefits for your students, and technology should be integrated purposefully and with academic intention, blanket allowance of cell phone usage in your classroom is more likely to do harm than good. Enforcement of any cell phone bans or limits in your classroom can certainly be messy at times. Plan to communicate regularly with your students' parents, both on the rationale for the ban and the steps you are taking to ensure their children are learning in class. Plan to communicate regularly with your administrative team to ensure that everyone is on the same page and that you can receive the support necessary to achieve your goal of improving the classroom environment. Reflect on your own cell phone usage and consider how you model appropriate use to your students. Over time, students will hopefully respect and follow your classroom rules, and your classroom can be a place where technology is respected, learning is valued, while phones take a backseat during your lesson.