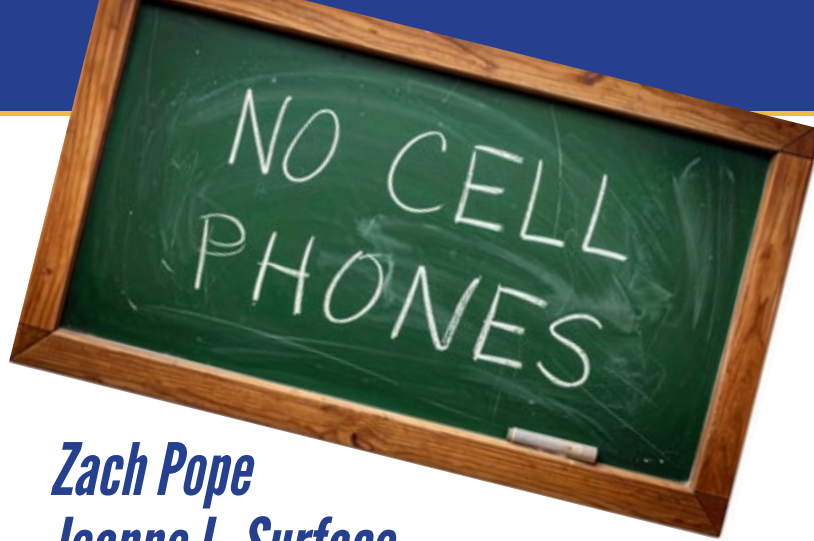


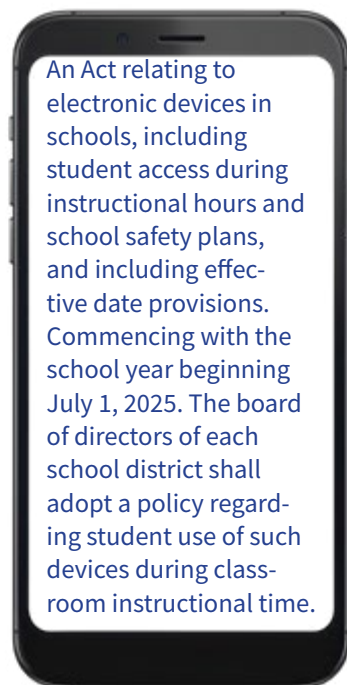
Crafting Quality Public School Cell Phone Policies that Support Student Learning Environments



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Will these policies disrupt a phone-based childhood?

Earlier this year, Iowa enacted a new law regulating the use of personal electronic devices in schools, prompting districts across the state to review and update their policies.



Since its passage, that law has had a noticeable impact on classroom practices across Iowa. Districts have been required to clarify expectations around student cell phone usage, resulting in more consistent expectations during instructional time and fewer distractions in classrooms.

Supporters point to increased student focus and strong in-person interactions, while critics have raised concerns about limiting communication and flexibility in how technology can be used during the instructional day. These differing perspectives reflect an ongoing tension between creating focused learning environments and maintaining student autonomy.

To better understand how this law plays out in practice, the following example highlights how one Iowa school district has implemented the requirements at the elementary and secondary levels. Students may not use personal electronic devices such as cell phones, tablets, headphones, or wearable devices during instructional time. In preschool through grade five, instructional time encompasses the entire school day. Devices must be turned off or set to silent and kept out of sight, although wearable devices may remain visible if set to “do not disturb.” Exceptions are allowed only for teacher-approved instructional purposes, emergencies, or if a device is specifically authorized under an Individualized Education Program (IEP), Section 504 plan, or Individual Health Plan. Students also have access to district-owned devices for learning, ensuring technology is available when it genuinely supports instruction. In grades six through twelve,

the requirement extends from the bell to the end of each class period.

Parents were informed early to help reinforce expectations at home, and staff have helped students build predictable routines for storing devices at the beginning of the day. The new law is more than a restriction; it is an opportunity to create focused learning environments, teach responsible use, and reinforce positive habits that support students both academically and socially. At the elementary level, thoughtful implementation, consistent routines, and clear communication have helped students adjust smoothly while allowing staff to maintain supportive, structured classrooms.

Beyond legal compliance, cell phone policies shape the daily rhythm and culture of a classroom. When consistently implemented, these policies contribute to increased student engagement, stronger peer interaction, and more authentic face-to-face communication, reinforcing the social norms foundational to collaborative learning environments.

According to a press release on September 16, 2025, the National Association of State Boards of Education notes that varied measures are necessary to curb cell phone use in classrooms. In response, thirty-one states and the District of Columbia have either banned or restricted

phone use during the school day. Restrictions typically limit use during instructional time, requiring phones to be put away from bell-to-bell.

School authorities have broad power to regulate student cell phone use during school hours, supported by state laws and the doctrine of *in loco parentis*. Policies are increasingly restrictive, with more than thirty states requiring some form of ban or restriction. School districts implement cell phone policies to reduce distractions, improve student mental health, and ensure a safe and orderly learning environment.

Judicial Precedent Related to Cell Phone Policies

Courts have consistently upheld school authority to regulate or prohibit student cell phone use during the school day when such policies serve legitimate educational purposes.

- *Price v. New York City Bd. of Educ.*, 51 A.D. 3d 277 (2008): New York City Public Schools’ ban on student cell phones was a lawful educational policy decision and did not infringe on parents’ fundamental rights regarding the care, custody, and control of their children, as it was specific to the school setting.
- *Koch v. Adams*, 210 Ark. (2010): The Arkansas school district did not engage in an unconstitutional taking of property without due process when a teacher confiscated students’ cell phones for two weeks pursuant to district policy, as students had no legal right to possess phones while attending school.

Together, these cases reinforce that when cell phone policies are clearly written, consistently enforced, and directly tied to educational purposes, courts overwhelm-

ingly support a school district’s authority to regulate device use.

Types of Policies

- **Total ban:** No devices are allowed in school.
- **Bell-to-bell bans:** All devices are prohibited from the first bell to the last bell but may be kept in a locker or backpack.
- **Instructional time bans:** Use is prohibited during class time but allowed during lunch or passing periods.

Enforcement: Written policies must be clear and consistently enforced and communicated proactively to students, staff, and parents. Some schools use secure storage solutions, such as lockable pouches, to manage devices. Implementing these policies is not without complexity. Students accustomed to constant connectivity may initially resist, and staff must navigate consistent enforcement while maintaining trust-centered relationships. Successful schools emphasize teaching expectations, modeling appropriate behavior, and reinforcing routines with clarity and compassion.

Exceptions: Most policies include exceptions for specific circumstances, such as:

- Medical necessity or health monitoring (e.g., glucose monitoring)
- Requirements specified in a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 plan
- Teacher-authorized use for specific educational purposes
- Emergency communication

Legal Issues

While schools have significant authority, policies and enforcement actions must comply with constitutional and statutory requirements.

- **Fourth Amendment (Searches and Seizures):** School officials can

search a student’s cell phone with “reasonable suspicion” that the search will uncover evidence of wrongdoing. The search’s scope must be related to the initial suspicion and not excessively intrusive. Schools acquire authority from federal and state law, which guide student conduct. FERPA protects student education records, while the Fourth Amendment guards against unreasonable searches. Courts generally allow schools more leeway in search procedures if reasonable, as in *New Jersey v. T.L.O.*

School officials do not need a warrant or probable cause to search students—only “reasonable suspicion.”

- **First Amendment (Freedom of Expression):** Policies can impose reasonable, content-neutral restrictions on speech (including social media posts) to prevent disruption. Overly broad policies may face legal challenges, but courts generally uphold restrictions serving a legitimate educational purpose. Schools’ authority to regulate behavior, including smartphone use, is based upon *in loco parentis*, allowing teachers and leaders to act as parents during school hours. The U.S. Supreme Court has upheld this authority in cases like *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*.

“Students do not shed their constitutional rights to free speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.”

- **Discrimination and Equity:** Policies must not disproportionately affect students with disabilities or those from low-income families who rely on phones for specific needs or as their primary internet access.

- **Parental Rights:** Schools must balance regulation during school hours with parents’ rights to communicate with their children, particularly during emergencies. Clear policies

outlining emergency contact procedures can mitigate this concern.

- **Signal Jamming:** Use of a phone jammer or signal-jamming devices in school is a federal violation.

Under these laws, schools, in general, have the legal authority to enact and enforce policies that:

- Prohibit illegal and/or harassing/cyberbullying activity.
- Prohibit accessing district networks for non-instructional purposes;
- Prohibit the use of phones during instructional time;
- Require students to disable phones
- Authorize school officials to confiscate phones;
- Require students to check phones at the “office”
- Impose disciplinary consequences for policy violations;
- Prohibit students from bringing phones to school at all.

Why Have Cell Phone Policies Become Necessary?

Cell phones have been part of students’ lives for over a decade. Only in the past two or three years have schools and legislatures recognized their deep impact on learning, behavior, and well-being. What was once an occasional distraction has evolved into a systemic challenge, as phone use is now normalized and socially reinforced. Peer norms shifted, making ownership and constant access feel essential for social belonging.

This shift accelerated in the post-pandemic era, where increased screen dependency, social isolation, and disrupted routines intensified student reliance on digital devices academically and socially.

Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist, has raised awareness about the dangers of what he calls “the phone-based childhood.” In the 2010s, children’s mental health declined sharply: anxiety and depression rose,

self-harm among teen girls increased, and suicide rates rose by fifty percent. Haidt identifies two central problems:

- 1. Loss of a play-based childhood:** Children need opportunities for play and manageable risks. Without these, they cannot develop skills to navigate challenges safely. Highly controlled environments leave fewer opportunities for unstructured outdoor play.
- 2. Greater need for virtual protection:** Children are now on phones for around nine hours a day. They are not engaging in real-world play, which diminishes interest in social, emotional, and cognitive experiences essential for development.

Four Foundational Harms of Excessive Phone Use

Social deprivation: Teens moved from real-life friendships to Instagram, Snapchat, and online video games followers/friends. Teens who spend more time using social media are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and other disorders, while teens who spend more time with groups of young people, such as team sports and clubs, have better mental health.

- **Sleep deprivation:** Smartphones interfere with natural sleep patterns during puberty, essential for brain development, attention, and mood. Thirty-six studies we reviewed show a significant correlation between high media use and poor sleep.
- **Attention fragmentation:** The average teen receives about eleven notifications per waking hour—roughly one every five minutes. Older teens using texting and social media apps may experience interruptions every minute, highlighting the importance of phone-free school days.
- **Addiction:** Repetition of small pleasures, like notifications or app interactions, triggers dopamine release, reinforcing the behavior and creating

dependency similar to video games, social media, or online shopping.

Finally, Haidt argues that phone-free school policies support both mental health and academic outcomes. Governments at all levels can aid this transition through policy and simple interventions.

Conclusion

Thoughtful, consistently enforced cell phone policies create safe, structured, and engaging learning environments. They help students build healthy habits, encourage real-world interactions, and support both academic success and social-emotional development.

References

Haidt, J. (2024). *The anxious generation: How the great rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness*. Penguin Press.



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