Children and Screens
Institute of Digital Media and Child Development

Research at a GLANCE

Digital Devices in Schools | 2025

Public and educator support for classroom cellphone bans is strong, and staff generally report positive impacts in schools. School-issued devices can risk child data privacy and are rarely vetted for efficacy in learning. Research indicates mixed results for improvements in student learning and achievement from their use.

Adolescents spend an average of 1.5 hours of a 6.5 hour school day on smartphones, with additional time spent on school-issued "1:1" devices.
(Christakis et al., 2025)

PHONE BANS - IMPACTS

Student Impacts

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE *and* CLASSROOM USE

Research summary: *Early data suggest phone bans/restrictions may improve student performance. These effects are more evident in lower-performing students.*

- Roughly 30% of students worldwide get distracted by digital devices during math lessons.
- Students rely on smartphones for "extended cognition" (external support that assists with finding information, resources, and improving memory).
- Students use phones for non-educational purposes during lessons more often when teachers ban phones (compared to if their teachers allow phone use).

Phone bans associated with:

- Improved learning outcomes, mostly observed in lower-performing students
- More detailed note-taking, better recall from lectures, better test performance
- Academic performance improvement equivalent to up to a year of math and science
- Higher GPA and increased likelihood of attending academic high school

MENTAL HEALTH/WELL-BEING

Research summary: *There is insufficient and mixed evidence on the effects of school phone policies on student mental health and well-being. Impact is dependent on the type of ban, where the ban takes place, how students use their phones during the school day, and their level of attachment to their phones.*

Phone bans associated with:

- Decrease in bullying and cyberbullying in some studies but not in others
- Modest effect on overall well-being measures
- Increased student-reported anxiety on phone-free days compared to "regular" days (risk of anxiety was higher for those who rely on their phones as a "safe haven" or for frequent social networking)
- Small decreases in psychological distress and negative affect
- More body movement during the school day in schools with both phone bans and movement programs

(Abrahamsson, 2024; Baggio et al., 2018; Beneito & Vicente-Chirivella, 2022; Böttger & Zierer, 2024; Campbell et al., 2024; Cherif et al., 2024; Gajdics & Jagodics, 2021; Kuznekoff & Titsworth, 2012; Nyberg et al., 2021; OECD, 2024; Rahali et al., 2024; UNESCO Report, 2023; Webster & Paquette, 2023)

School Climate Impacts

Research summary: *There is strong evidence that school phone bans improve school and classroom climate. There are consistent reports of fewer conflicts, increased attention and participation, and reduced stress on school staff.*

Phone bans associated with:

- Lower conflict between students, higher student satisfaction, greater conflict resolution, and lower social comparison
- Fewer behavioral issues, violence, and peer conflicts
- Improvements in learning and student well-being
- Fewer device-related incidents

Student behavior:

- Older high school students who are frequent social media users are least likely to comply with school ban policies.
- Youth unable to use phones during school express boredom and feelings of having nothing to do, despite having access to school activities.

(Cakirpaloglu et al., 2020; Cross, 2024; King et al., 2024; Kopecký et al., 2021)

Types of School Phone Restrictions

Schools and districts implement different types of personal phone restrictions:

- **Bell-to-bell** - no phone during the entire school day
- **Instructional time** - no phone during class
- **Off and away** - phones allowed on the person, but must be turned off and stowed
- **Securely stored** - phones inaccessible to students (often in secured pouches)

PHONE BANS
The Educator Perspective

Research summary: *Educators in schools with phone bans perceive benefits to students, as well as themselves, when devices are removed from classrooms.*

90% of educators support a phone ban during instructional time and 83% support a bell-to-bell phone ban.

RESEARCH FROM AUSTRALIA

% of school leaders in Australia reporting positive impacts from phone bans:

- Decreased staff time following up issues with phones/social media **(93%)**
- More positive break time activities **(83%)**
- Increased focus and engagement during learning time **(76%)**
- Lower frequency of critical incidents involving devices happening at school **(75%)**
- Learning improvement since school ban **(81%)**
- Students were less distracted in the classroom since mobile phones were banned **(87%)**
- Improved student socializing **(86%)**

RESEARCH FROM THE U.S.

Teachers feel stricter mobile device policies reduce distractions and protect students' well-being from challenges posed by digital interruptions and social media.

Teachers working in schools with stricter bans:

- Strongly support bans more than teachers in less restrictive schools
- See more positive effects compared to teachers working in schools with more flexible policies (i.e., once a strict ban is in place, teachers experience the benefits)
- Perceive increased safety and attentiveness in the classroom

(Mecom & Lehtinen-Vela, 2024; National Education Association, 2024; New South Wales Education Department, 2024; South Australia Department for Education,

Do School-Issued Devices Benefit Youth Learning?

Research summary: *School technologies, including laptops and tablets, are rarely vetted for learning efficacy. School-issued devices may provide modest educational benefits, primarily for lower socioeconomic students, but only if provided on a 1:1 (device to child) basis and implemented thoughtfully.*

Nearly all evidence suggests human instruction is as good or better than any tech-assisted learning.

Evidence for Benefit:

- Quality mobile learning was associated with improved early literacy skills in kindergartners compared to print learning.
- 1:1 school-issued devices showed small positive effects on student achievement, especially for low socioeconomic students.

Evidence for Detriment:

- Using social media to teach literature to high school students had an overall negative effect on student achievement - particularly for previously high-achieving students.

1:1 Device Programs in Schools:

- Increased inequality in education gaps in mathematics
- Did not result in significant improvements in secondary school students' academic performance in math or language
- Decreased math skills for students from low-income families compared to students from high-income families

(Andriono et al., 2025; Barbetta et al., 2023; Hall et al., 2019; Harper & Milman, 2016; Netland et al., 2025; Randolph & Liu, 2022; Yeung et al., 2021)

SCHOOL-ISSUED DEVICES
Risks to Privacy

- Monitoring software is widely used on school-issued devices to "watch" student activity.
- Students censor themselves when monitored:
  - » 60% don't share their true thoughts or ideas
  - » 80% are more careful about what they search online
- Lower income youth, who often only have school-issued devices, are at a disadvantage for privacy risks.
- Some educators have students use unsanctioned applications (e.g., ChatGPT), which can put youth privacy at risk.
- Educational software may collect student data such as email addresses, passwords, online activity, biometric data, religion, heritage, date of birth, sexual orientation, ability/disabilities, family income range.

(Center for Democracy & Technology, 2021; Kelso et al., 2025; O'Daffer et al., 2025)