

Schools Should Set Their Own Smartphone Policies

Jared Rhoads

Abstract

Evidence is mounting that smartphones are harmful to the mental health, educational attainment, and overall well-being of adolescents. Some schools and school districts have gone “phone-free” by instituting bans on cell phone use during the school day, spurring state legislatures to propose (and in some cases pass) statutes enacting bans legislatively. Although the goal of phone-free schools is praiseworthy, there are good reasons to prefer that the details of school smartphone policy be left to schools and school districts rather than codified into law by state legislatures.

Keywords

smartphone, school, ban, adolescents, mental health, anxiety, social media

Smartphones have become almost ubiquitous in society, including in the hands of school-aged children. While these devices offer benefits, including easy access to information and enhanced connectivity, their presence in schools has raised serious concerns about the harm they cause to students’ academic performance, mental health, and social development.¹

Approximately 77 percent of public middle schools and 43 percent of public high schools report that they have at least some limitations on cell phone use during school hours by students.² However, student compliance with many of these policies is poor and educator enforcement is imperfect.

In response, some schools have gone fully “smartphone-free,” instituting outright bans on smartphones during the school day. Results from early experiences among schools in the U.S. and other countries have been positive.

Until recently, these stronger bans generally have been designed and implemented at the individual school or school district level. However, state legislators have now become interested in joining the movement pushing for phone-free schools. As of September 2024, 26 states have taken at least some action to study, limit, or ban cell phone

use in public schools, or to allocate funding to purchase products (such as lockable pouches) designed to curtail smartphone usage.³

Schools and school districts should be commended for recognizing the hazards and costs that smartphones present to students, and smartphone bans in schools likely are an appropriate policy response, but there are reasons to be wary of encouraging state legislators to pass laws with the functional details of these bans fully specified. There is reason to believe that an approach led by schools and school districts is likely to better serve students, families, and educators than an approach led by state legislators.

The Downsides to Smartphones in Schools

There are numerous negative consequences to equipping young people with a smartphone too early in life. These include: distraction from learning, diminished mental health, and negative effects on social development. It is worth reviewing each.

Distraction from Learning

A primary concern about smartphones in schools is the distraction they pose to students. When

smartphones are present, they become the object of student attention. According to one study of over 200 11-17 year olds in the U.S., 97 percent of students used their phones during the school day, with a median of 43 minutes spent on the device during the school day.⁴ Research indicates that the mere presence of a smartphone can reduce cognitive capacity and impair concentration. Even when phones are turned off and are stored out of sight, their presence still significantly diminishes students' ability to focus on tasks and learning.⁵

When students use smartphones to text, browse social media, or play games during class, their attention is divided, making it difficult for them to retain information and engage meaningfully with course material. This lack of focus can lead to poorer academic performance.

Diminished Mental Health and Increased Anxiety

In addition to academic concerns, smartphones have been linked to increased levels of anxiety and mental health issues among adolescents.⁶ The constant connection to social media and messaging platforms creates a pressure to stay updated and respond to peers, leading to “FOMO” (fear of missing out) and heightened social comparison. Researchers have found strong correlations between increased screen time and higher levels of anxiety and depression among teens.⁷

Smartphones in schools can also increase the opportunities for cyberbullying. Adolescents, who are particularly vulnerable to issues of self-esteem and identity formation, can experience significant anxiety as a result of this constant social exposure.

Negative Effects on Social Development

Smartphones also hinder social development. Schools are peer-rich environments that are well-suited for developing face-to-face communication skills, fostering interpersonal relationships, and working through ordinary low-stakes interpersonal conflicts.

When students are captured by their devices, they miss out on opportunities to engage with their peers in meaningful ways. Social psychologist

Jonathan Haidt has dubbed smartphones “experience blockers” for the way that they block users from having more meaningful experiences in the real world. The presence of smartphones in schools can stunt the development of important skills such as empathy, conflict resolution, and collaboration—skills that are essential for success in personal and professional contexts.

Problems With the State Legislature Approach

The evidence in favor of restricting smartphone use in schools is strong, however the decision to implement such bans should be left to individual schools and school districts rather than determined by state legislators. Four main reasons include:

1. We do not yet know what the “best” policy is.

Schools and communities differ greatly in terms of student demographics, socioeconomic factors, and the specific challenges they face. Although the evidence is mounting that a) smartphones are detrimental to learning, mental health, and social development, and b) bans on smartphones in schools work, it is nevertheless true that we do not yet know *exactly* what the best policy design is. For example, a key policy parameter in this issue is the grade level at which to place the ban. Perhaps smartphones in schools should be banned up until 8th grade. Perhaps they should be banned up until 10th grade. Perhaps all the way through 12th grade.

At present it is not clear what the optimal policy is, or even if there *is* a single optimal policy for everyone. By allowing schools to make their own smartphone policy decisions locally, we will get the variety of experiences needed in order to learn more about which approach is best. That data collection effort will be hindered if states converge too early on a single policy approach.

2. State legislatures are too slow to respond.

Given that everyone is still learning about how best to minimize the negative effects of smartphones in schools, it is important for schools to have the ability

to change course quickly if it becomes necessary to do so. Smartphone use among adolescents is a rapidly shifting issue, and what might seem like a sensible policy today could become outdated or ineffective in a short period. State legislatures act too slowly for issues that are this volatile.

Once a state legislature enacts a policy, extensive time and effort is typically needed to amend or repeal that policy, often involving multiple rounds of committee reviews, debates, and votes. Legislators who drafted and advocated for the original bill are likely to resist the idea of revisiting their own decisions and risk paying a political cost associated with admitting that their legislative accomplishment needs fixing—likely delaying a fix to at least the next legislative session, and possibly longer. The slow speed of the legislative process makes it difficult for states to respond quickly to the evolving needs of schools and students.

Schools and school districts, on the other hand, operate with more agility and can adapt their policies to new developments or community feedback. If a school-imposed policy is found to be too restrictive or ineffective, it can be abandoned or changed much more quickly. State-level bans risk locking schools into rigid frameworks.

3. The state-level approach runs a greater risk of policymakers “picking winners.”

Some approaches to banning smartphones in schools involve the use of specially-designed products such as phone lockers, phone cabinets, and magnetic pouches. When policy is set by state legislatures, there is greater risk of the government “picking winners” in these categories by favoring specific products or vendors. State governments may unintentionally (or even deliberately) endorse certain products, apps, or monitoring systems, resulting in windfall contracts for certain companies that are selected as the preferred solution. In extreme cases, states risk creating a near monopoly or oligopoly in a product category, reducing competition and leading potentially to higher prices for schools (and taxpayers) and lower-quality solutions for students.

Keeping the policy decision decentralized at the level of individual schools and school districts

allows for greater variety and reduces the incentive for companies to lobby decision makers to adopt their particular solution. It also preserves freedom for local leaders to explore a wider range of products and vendors, fostering an open marketplace with better, more innovative solutions.

4. State-level efforts pose a greater risk of blowback.

A locally driven approach allows for greater community involvement in the decision-making process. School administrators can engage parents, teachers, and students in discussions about smartphone use, building consensus around the best approach for their particular context. Students and parents are more likely to support policies they have had a role in shaping.

By contrast, encouraging state legislators to pass laws on this issue could cause students and parents to push back against bans on the grounds that the legislators are out of touch with local concerns. Worse, should the issue of school smartphone bans become politicized and one side of the debate become associated with one political party or the other, the entire issue of smartphone bans in school and the goal of phone-free schools will become needlessly contentious.

Relevance to Individual Rights

Unlike some bans, smartphone bans in public schools are not violations of individual rights. They lie within the range of reasonable restrictions that organizations and businesses must decide upon all the time. In a society without publicly funded education, taxpaying families with school-aged children would not be steered into public schools by the financial trap created by such a system, and would instead be able to choose from a set of private options, which would be incentivized to cater to a fuller range of preferences on all sorts of matters, including smartphone policy.

Given the current context, it is appropriate to advocate for policies that best serve the students who attend school for the purpose of learning and growing. Smartphone access is not critical to those

purposes—indeed, as research increasingly suggests, it is arguably detrimental.

Policy Recommendations for State Legislators

State legislators who are motivated to act in favor of creating phone-free schools can help by encouraging schools and school districts to adopt clear policies on student cell phone use and possession, or by passing legislation that is at most limited in scope to instructing schools and school districts to come up with guidelines by a certain date. However, state legislators should resist the temptation to specify the details of how these policies should work.

Examples of states that have followed the former approach include Minnesota and Ohio, both of which instruct school districts to create and implement policies but leave the details up to school districts and do not require that all districts implement the same policy. This is in contrast to the approach taken by Louisiana, which fully specifies a policy that prohibits the use and possession of cell phones by students during the school day, without any localized decision making.

Conclusion

Given the deleterious effects of smartphones on learning, mental health, and social development of school-aged children, it is a sensible goal for schools to adopt policies to become phone-free. The details of these policies, however, should be designed and implemented by schools and school districts, not by state legislatures. This avoids foreseeable limitations and problems with having state legislators decide policy details, and puts decision making power closer to students, families, and educators, where it is more likely to result in better outcomes.

References

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About the Author

Jared Rhoads is Director of the Center for Modern Health. Email address: jared.rhoads@centerformodernhealth.org.

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