

# The Impact of Cell Phones in Public Schools on Student Learning and Outcomes

National trends show cell phones in the classroom affect student learning and outcomes. Several Texas school districts have already designed phone usage policies with positive results. How can the Texas legislature help all public schools with this growing issue, so all students succeed?

Cell phones in public schools are reshaping education. ~50% of U.S. children receive their first smartphone by age 11.<sup>1</sup>

While studies show these devices can be tools that foster research and communication, others studies say they distract students and cause negative social interactions. To harness the benefits of this technology, we must minimize the drawbacks.

98% of 15- to 17-year-olds and 91% of 13- to 14-year-olds have access to a smartphone. Of this age group, **46% consider themselves as 'almost constantly' online.**<sup>2</sup>

## Decreased Focus

Cell phones can lead to increased off-task behavior, decreased attention spans, and lower academic performance. Notifications, social media, and texting often distract students from their work.

Cell phone usage and similar technologies lead to depressed academic performance on standardized testing and an increased prevalence of academic dishonesty and online

### Policy in Action

#### Temple ISD

After Temple ISD implemented a cell phone locker policy in 2024, the district reported a decrease of over **1,000 student discipline referrals**, an increase in student attendance of approximately 1.5%, and an overall reduction in academic failure rate.<sup>5</sup>

bullying. These effects are even more pronounced on students who are already performing poorly.<sup>3</sup>

72% of U.S. high school teachers note student cell phone usage as a major barrier to teaching in the classroom.<sup>4</sup>

## Reduced Social Skills and Relationship Building

Excessive reliance on cell phones can hinder face-to-face communication skills and negatively affect peer relationships. This can lead to feelings of isolation.

Studies suggest a link between increased screen time and mental health issues, including anxiety and depression.

### Policy in Action

#### Killeen ISD

Killeen ISD declared 2024 a 'cell phone free school year' to reduce distraction and disruption to students' social development. Students keep their phones in a pouch throughout the school day. Staff notes that **students talk to each other** more at lunch and engage more in the classroom.<sup>6</sup>

## Diminished Equity and Access

Disparities in cell phone access can heighten socioeconomic differences. Students without devices may feel marginalized or struggle to engage in digital learning.

1 Radesky, J., Weeks, H.M., Schaller, A., Robb, M., Mann, S., and Lenhart, A. (2023). Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense.

2 Pew Research Center. (2022) Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022.

3 Smale, W., Hutcheson, R., & Russo, C. (2021). Cell Phones, Student Rights, and School Safety: Finding the Right Balance. Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy 195: 49-64.

4 Hatfield, J. (2024). 72% of U.S. high school teachers say cellphone distraction is a major problem in the classroom. Pew Research Center.

5 Love, E. and Dishon, S. (2024). 'Cafeterias are noisier, students are talking to each other' | Cell phone bans in local Central Texas school districts. KCENTV.

6 Love, E. and Dishon, S. (2024). 'Cafeterias are noisier, students are talking to each other' | Cell phone bans in local Central Texas school districts. KCENTV.

# Harness the Benefits and Minimize the Drawbacks

## Policy Development

Schools nationwide are adopting cell phone usage policies. They range from complete bans to regulated usage at certain times of the day. The value of these policies often depends on school culture and individual student needs.

As of 2021, 76.1% of U.S. public schools prohibited non-academic use of cell phones during school hours. This number rose sharply from the prevalence of cell phone restriction at 65.8% in 2015.<sup>7</sup>

### Policy in Action

#### Nationwide

As of 2024, a variety of other states have enacted restrictions on cell phone usage through the legislative process, including a statewide ban (Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Virginia), limits on cell phone usage in classrooms (California and Ohio), a requirement to establish cell phone policies (Minnesota), and encouragement for districts to limit cell phone usage in classrooms (Alabama and Connecticut).<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

The impact of cell phones in public schools is multifaceted, with potential benefits and drawbacks on student learning and outcomes. Ongoing research and adaptive policies will help wield the positive aspects of mobile devices while mitigating negative effects. Schools must stay proactive in setting rules that support effective learning while promoting responsible tech use.

### Policy in Action

#### State of Texas

In Texas, many school districts have adopted cell phone usage restrictions, including:

- Austin ISD
- Belton ISD
- Grapevine-Colleyville ISD
- Houston ISD
- Keller ISD
- Killeen ISD
- Lake Travis ISD
- Richardson ISD
- Temple ISD<sup>8,9</sup>

## Recommendations

Texas school districts would benefit from statewide guidelines to help set safety measures and rules on cell phone usage. They need the support of the state to enforce policies that are best for a productive learning environment.

## Digital Citizenship Education

Blending lessons on responsible cell phone use and digital citizenship into the curriculum is emerging as a best practice. Educators are teaching students how to balance mobile usage with academic duties.

## Promoting Engaging Alternatives

Schools are encouraged to apply engaging teaching methods that reduce student reliance on cell phones.

## E3 Alliance

**E3 Alliance** is a nationally recognized, data-driven education collaborative based in Central Texas. We work across the state to transform education systems through data and collaboration so all students succeed. We also work to increase economic mobility and the overall quality of life for our community through education system alignment from pre-K to the workforce.

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999–2000, 2003–04, 2005–06, 2007–08, 2009–10, 2015–16, 2017–18, 2019–20, and 2021–22 School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2000, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022; and Fast Response Survey System (FRSS), “School Safety and Discipline: 2013–14,” FRSS 106, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Malenfant, M. (2024). Several Texas school districts adopt cellphone bans in classroom. Here’s a list. Austin American Statesman.

<sup>9</sup> Love, E. and Dishon, S. (2024). ‘Cafeterias are noisier, students are talking to each other’ | Cell phone bans in local Central Texas school districts. KCENTV.

<sup>10</sup> Ballotpedia. State policies on cellphone use in K-12 public schools.