



SMART DEVICES IN TEXAS SCHOOLS

IMPACT OF PERSONAL DEVICES IN SCHOOLS

The widespread use of personal devices—including smartphones, smartwatches, tablets, laptops, and gaming devices—has become a significant challenge in schools. While technology plays an essential role in education, personal devices often serve as a distraction rather than a learning tool. Studies indicate that students check their phones more than 100 times per day on average, reducing their ability to focus on classroom instruction (Common Sense Media, 2023).

The research on personal device use demonstrates a significant impact on student performance and educational outcomes. For example, a 2020 study found that students who kept their cell phones during class and checked periodically performed worse on competency quizzes and tests than their peers who did not use their phones (Mendoza et al., 2020). Findings indicate that having cell phones in a short lecture has its largest impact on attention and learning 10-15 minutes into the lecture. This is important because students with nomophobia—the fear of not being able to access one's cell phone—will tend to act on the urge to check their phones early on in the lecture to get another dose of dopamine.

Other studies conclude that cell phone use decreases student outcomes. For example, Felisoni and Godoi (2018) found that for every 100 minutes that a student spent using their phone day, they drop 6.3 places in terms of academic school ranking. This effect doubles when students use their phones during class. Furthermore, Glass and Kang (2017) divided students into two groups: both had the same classes, except for half the students, electronics were permitted, and for the other half, they were not. In the class where electronics were allowed, students performed 5% worse on their exams, meaning a half-letter grade worse in performance (InnerDrive, n.d.).

Furthermore, according to U.S. Department of Education data, nearly 40% of public schools report personal devices negatively impact student learning and teacher and staff morale (Panchal & Zitter, 2024).

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Beyond academic performance, personal devices contribute to cyberbullying, social anxiety, sleep deprivation, and other harms. For example, special needs students in Hays ISD (south of Austin) were terrorized by bullies who posted derogatory and demeaning videos of them on TikTok (Heath, 2023). Several teenage girls in Aledo ISD (west of Fort Worth) were the victims of AI nudification images made and spread by male classmates (Jargon, 2024). Personal devices also hinder face-to-face communication skills, increase disciplinary issues in classrooms, and fuel violence against other students and staff (National Criminal Justice Association, 2024).

PUBLIC OPINION

Personal device restrictions in schools have varied over time: "In 2009, 91% of public schools prohibited cellphone use, which fell to 66% in 2015 before rising again to 76% in 2021" (Panchal & Zitter, 2024, para. 2). Recent surveys indicate strong public support for restricting personal devices in schools. According to an October 2024 Pew Research Center survey, 68% of adults support banning personal devices during class, while 24% oppose (Anderson et al., 2024). Furthermore, 36% support a ban during the entire school day (or bell-to-bell), while 53% oppose (Anderson et al., 2024).

The Pew survey notes that the primary reasons parents and educators support these policies because they could minimize distractions, improve student engagement, help students develop better social skills, reduce cheating, and reduce bullying. On the other hand, opponents of personal device limits in schools argue that parents should be able to reach their kids whenever they need, that bans are too difficult for teachers to enforce, that cell phones are a useful tool to teach students, and that parents should be able to decide whether their child should be allowed to use a device in class.

WHAT OTHER SCHOOL DISTRICTS, STATES, AND COUNTRIES ARE DOING

At the district level, "76 percent of public schools prohibit non-academic use of cell phones or smartphones during school hours" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024, para. 1). As of December 2024, eight states have enacted policies restricting personal device use in schools (Panchal & Zitter, 2024). Furthermore, as of January 2025, fifteen states have introduced bills relating to personal device limits in schools and five states are considering agency action or pilot programs (Demillo, 2025).



For states and countries that have already implemented bans, research demonstrates positive outcomes such as improved classroom behavior and higher academic performance. This research is not new. For example, in 2015, British researchers found that banning mobile phones in schools led to an increase in student test scores, particularly among low-achieving students (Beland & Murphy, 2015). Furthermore, Norwegian research found that banning smart devices in schools decreased mental health challenges, decreased bullying, and increased GPAs (Abrahamsson, 2024). Stateside, researchers at the University of Connecticut have studied the issue, and research released by the governor's office found that "Connecticut schools have reported dips in behavioral issues, violence and peer conflicts after restricting phone use during the school day through Yondr pouches, phone lockers and other programs" (Cross, 2024, para. 4).

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Due to the harms identified and research on the benefits of limiting devices during school time, Texas lawmakers should consider a statewide uniform policy prohibiting personal device use during school. There are several ways to legislatively craft such a policy.

First, it is important to distinguish between limits on personal devices versus school-issued devices. This research does not take a position on the benefits or drawbacks of the use of school-issued technologies such as laptops and tablets. Furthermore, Texas law already speaks to this. Article 3 of HB 18 (2023), also known as the SCOPE Act, requires the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to adopt standards for permissible use of electronic devices and software in schools.

Accordingly, lawmakers should focus on limiting the use of personal electronic devices. The term "personal electronic device" should be defined broadly, not just to capture cell phones, but all smartphones, smartwatches, tablets, laptops, gaming systems, and other devices capable of transmitting and receiving data.

Second, lawmakers must consider when to limit personal device use. There are several options. The strictest option is to prohibit personal devices while on school grounds, including pre- and post-school activities, such as sports or band practice. A second option is to prohibit personal devices during school hours, also known as a bell-to-bell policy. A third option is to prohibit the use of devices during classroom instructional time but allow devices to be used in the hallway between classes and during lunch, recess, PE, study hall, or sports or band practice, for example.



Third, policymakers must consider where devices should be stored. Having a device within eyesight or reach is too tempting, and as noted above, nomophobia—the fear of not being able to access one’s cell phone—has a negative impact on student outcomes. A laissez-faire policy of putting a device in one’s pocket or backpack is no longer enough. Instead, devices should be stored in a designated secure, out-of-sight area. This could look a number of ways, and could even be as simple as putting devices in a five-gallon bucket stored in a closet. More secure options include a secure storage drawer, cabinet, or locker in each classroom. Another option is putting devices in commercially available storage pouches which can be locked or unlocked. Lawmakers must balance practicality with costs, as some options can come with a significant and unneeded price tag.

Fourth, lawmakers must consider how to enforce such a policy and what exemptions should be allowed. School districts pawning off the responsibility to teachers to enforce arbitrary or ill-defined policies is unfair to teachers, students, and parents. Accordingly, lawmakers should provide school districts with the framework for a “floor” to prohibit personal device use in schools while still giving schools the latitude to decide what the most practical, cost-effective means to do so are. This could include rules on enforcing violations, confiscating and securing devices from offenders, fines and fees, and the like. The law should also consider any exemptions from the policy for students or staff with disabilities or medical needs. It is also important to remember that in whatever form a personal device prohibition takes, parents or students can still call or visit the school office to connect during the school day.

Finally, lawmakers should consider data collection or conducting studies on the impact of the policy on student educational outcomes, reports of discipline, mental health impacts, student and teacher opinions, and the like.



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