Fairness and Focus: Teens Weigh in on School Phone Policies

Date of Release: May 2025

Boston Children's Digital Wellness Lab

PULSE SURVEY

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INTRODUCTION

School Cell Phone Policies Are Moving Fast, But Are Students Being Heard?

Over the past two years, cell phone policies have rapidly proliferated in schools across the United States. In 2023, Florida enacted a statewide policy, requiring phones to be put away during class time in all public schools. In 2024, Indiana followed, mandating that districts adopt policies limiting student phone access during the day. Massachusetts recently proposed a "bell-to-bell" restriction in which students' phones are stored upon arrival and retrieved at the end of the school day. Similar efforts are being considered in school districts from California to New Jersey.

These policies have been enforced by educational administrators with goals of improving school environments and student mental health, reducing classroom distractions, improving learning outcomes, and curbing social conflicts. While debates about these policies have included the voices and opinions of educators, parents, and policy-makers, the perspectives of students—who are most affected—can often be underrepresented in policy discussions and decision-making.

To address this gap, the Digital Wellness Lab surveyed a diverse group of more than 1,500 teens (ages 13–18) from across the United States. The survey explored how students use their phones during the school day, what policies exist in their schools, how they perceive the fairness and impact of the policies, and whether or not they were consulted in the creation of these policies. We also examined students' thoughts on the broader effects of phone restrictions on learning, social interaction, safety, and independence.

The findings from this survey are intended to help inform the development of school phone policies that better reflect students' experiences and needs. This report also builds on insights from the Lab's prior publications, *What the Science Says: Smartphones in Schools* and *Are Cell Phone Bans in Schools the Answer?*, to provide a broader context for understanding the role of phones in students' academic and social lives.

Common Types of School Cell Phone Policies

The majority of students surveyed (83%) reported having a school-wide phone policy in place, 12% said their school left it up to individual teachers or classrooms, and only 2% reported having no rules at all. Among students with a school-wide policy, most fell into one of three main categories*: bell-to-bell (20%), off and away (23%), or limited use (28%).

Bell-to-Bell

Students cannot access their personal devices during any part of the school day—they are stored (often in a locked pouch or designated location) upon arrival and remain inaccessible until dismissal.

Off and Away

Students keep possession of their phones, but they must be powered off and kept out of sight throughout the school day, including during class, lunch, and transitions.

Limited Use

Students keep possession of their phones—they must be off and away during instructional time, but can be used during lunch, breaks, or passing periods.

Classroom-Specific Policies

Individual teachers set their own phone policies.

In addition to the described policies, 12% reported that phones are not allowed on school premises, and the remainder were unsure or unclear on the specific policy.

1.
Students see phones in school as a distraction, and many are setting their own limits

Key Findings

The teens in this study recognize that phone use can present academic and personal challenges. A majority of respondents (63%) reported that they use their phones more than they'd like to, and more than half (56%) see phones as a moderate to major source of distraction at school.

Nearly half of the students (47%) reported that they are already using tools designed to help them manage their screen habits, such as screen time limits, focus mode, and do not disturb. Girls (51%) were more likely than Boys (41%) to use these tools.

63%	**56%**	**47%**
said they use their phones "a little too much" or "way too much"	said phones are a moderate to major distraction at school	reported using tools or apps to manage phone use

Implications

The results of this survey suggest a broad alignment between students and adults about excessive phone use and its potential to distract in school settings. This shared recognition implies a promising foundation for involving students in the shaping of cell phone policies and digital wellbeing initiatives.

The fact that nearly half of students are already attempting to manage their usage through apps and built-in tools further indicates an opportunity to enhance support through more accessible resources and targeted wellbeing education.

> **IN THEIR WORDS**
>
> *Allowing autonomy for students forces them to face the consequences of their own cell phone usage and learn how to manage their own screen time.*
>
> Response to "If it were up to you, what kind of phone policy would you create for your school?"

2.
Phone policies may improve the academic environment for some students

Key Findings

Students were largely split regarding whether or not their schools' cell phone policy improved the academic environment, or whether the policy had little effect. In considering the impacts of their school's policy on three key aspects of the school environment, improvements to the learning environment (e.g., a reduction in disruptions or noise levels in the classroom) fared best, with 45% of students stating that the policy improves this, while 34% said that it neither worsened nor improved the learning environment. Students indicated moderate improvements to their ability to pay attention (35%) and to academic integrity (42%).

On the other hand, a smaller group of students reported that their schools' phone policies made their ability to focus and pay attention in class (18%) and the learning environment (17%) worse.

45%	**34%**	**35%**	**18%**
said their school's phone policy **improved** the learning environment	reported that policies neither **worsened** nor **improved** the learning environment	said policies **improved** their ability to pay attention	said policies **worsened** their ability to pay attention

Implications

Despite representing a minority of respondents, nearly one-fifth of students reported that their schools' cell phone policy negatively affects the learning environment and/or their ability to focus in class. This suggests that certain policy implementations may inadvertently introduce new distractions, whether through enforcement logistics, disciplinary actions, or impacts on students' perceived sense of connection and psychological safety. These findings point to the need for further investigation into the underlying drivers of this perception.

> **IN THEIR WORDS**
>
> *On the positive side, limiting device use during class helps students stay focused and reduces distractions, leading to a more engaged learning environment. On the negative side, some students feel disconnected from useful digital tools that could enhance their learning, especially when it comes to researching or collaborating on projects during class time.*
>
> Response to "Have you noticed any additional impact of your school's device policies, either positive or negative, on yourself and/or other students?"

3.
Students are more likely to support policies when they have input

Key Findings

More than a third of students (36%) said that having input into their school's phone policy was very or completely important, yet over half (58%) reported that students had little to no involvement in the development of these policies at their school.

Notably, students' level of input into policies was significantly related to how they perceive the reasonableness of those policies. One-fifth (20%) of students who reported that they had zero involvement said that their school's policy was not at all reasonable, compared to only 5% who reported that it was "completely" reasonable. Conversely, 65% of participants who reported that students had been completely involved said that their school's policy was very or completely reasonable (9% reported that it was "not at all" reasonable).

36%
said having input on their school's phone policy was "very" or "completely" important

58%
reported having students had little to no role in shaping their school's phone policy

65%
of participants from schools where students were "completely" involved in the design said their school's policy was very or completely reasonable

Implications

While students express a desire to be meaningfully involved in the development of school phone policies, such opportunities are rarely offered. The strong association between student involvement and perceptions of policy reasonableness implies that exclusion from the design process may undermine students' acceptance and support of the rules. This suggests that policy legitimacy may hinge in part on more participatory approaches.

IN THEIR WORDS

Many students want to drop dead at school now that their autonomy is taken away without even asking us first or considering our feelings and the consequences.

Response to "Have you noticed any additional impact of your school's device policies, either positive or negative, on yourself and/or other students?"

4.
Enforcement of phone policies can impact learning and school culture

Key Findings

The most common punishments students reported for violating their schools' cell phone policies were verbal warnings (69%), parental notification (67%), and phone confiscation (64% during class, 63% for the full school day). Half of students (50%) in schools with phone policies said severe disciplinary action—like detention or even suspension—is used at their school to enforce the rules.

Generally, students' feelings about the "fairness" of the punishments for breaking a phone policy rule was significantly related to how they felt their school's phone policy impacted student-teacher relationships. When students reported feeling that the punishments are "completely fair," they were more likely to believe that the cell phone policies improve their relationships with teachers (49%), but when they feel the punishments are "not at all fair," they reported that the policy has worsened students' relationships with teachers (41%).

50%	**49%**	**41%**
of students said their school uses detention or suspension to enforce the school's phone policies	of students who feel punishments are fair say the policies **improve** their relationships with teachers	of students who feel punishments are not fair say the policies **worsen** their relationships with teachers

Implications

Findings suggest that enforcement of cell phone policies affects students' relationships with teachers—an essential component of school culture. The significance of perceived fairness in shaping these relationships implies that the design of regulatory approaches may need to involve students and be responsive to broader indicators of school climate.

Furthermore, if the intended purpose for cell phone policies is to reduce distractions during learning time, it may be ineffective—and even consequential—to remove students from their classes (e.g., detention, suspension) as a disciplinary action for bypassing school rules. When implementing policies, it's imperative to ensure that teens aren't penalized by being taken out of the classroom.

IN THEIR WORDS

"

Sometimes when people get their phones taken away they get really mad and I don't think that's helping the relationship between teachers and students. I get that it is probably the right thing to do but it feels condescending to be 18 and have an adult take away your property and scold you as if you're a child.

Response to "Have you noticed any additional impact of your school's device policies, either positive or negative, on yourself and/or other students?"

5.
Strict phone policies may undermine students' sense of safety

Key Findings

Overall, almost one-third of students (29%) reported that their school's cell phone policy worsens their sense of safety, while closer to one-quarter (26%) reported that it improves their sense of safety. The policy neither worsens nor improves the perceived safety for 40% of respondents.

Phone restrictions may have unintended negative consequences on certain students' perceived sense of safety. While nearly half of boys (45%) had a neutral feeling about this issue, over one-third of girls (36%) reported that their school's cell phone policy worsens their sense of safety (37% reported that it has little impact).

Similarly, nearly half of students who identify as non-binary or transgender (45%) reported that rules limiting cell phone access in school make them feel less safe. Only 9% of students in this group reported that the policies improve their sense of safety (with 33% reporting that it neither improves nor worsens their perceived safety).

36%
of girls report that their school's cell phone policy **worsens** their sense of safety

45%
of non-binary and transgender students report that their school's cell phone policy **worsens** their sense of safety

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Implications

Nearly one-third of students (32%) reported that their school lacks clear exceptions to phone policies during emergencies or that they are unsure if such exceptions exist, indicating a notable gap for students' perceived safety. This uncertainty, coupled with heightened concerns among girls, transgender, and non-binary students about the impact of phone restrictions on their sense of safety, suggests that current policies may not adequately account for vulnerable students' needs in threatening or even dangerous situations. These findings imply that perceptions of safety should be a central consideration in the design and communication of school cell phone policies.

IN THEIR WORDS

"

There is a safety concern [around] a lack of communication in this day and age. Having our cell phones confiscated is a factor that could raise anxiety in a dangerous situation.

Response to "If your school were to implement this cell phone policy, what positive or negative effects do you think it would have on yourself, other students, or interactions/relationships with faculty?"

6.
Media literacy education does not adequately address healthy device use

Key Findings

Most students (94%) report using school-issued laptops or tablets and 73% report using cell phones for schoolwork. While most students (62%) have received some form of media literacy education, there appears to be minimal focus on digital wellbeing habits. **Less than half of students (42%) reported being taught how to manage personal phone use, set boundaries on tech and media, or build self-regulation strategies.**

Notably, while just over one-third (38%) of students reported that their school's policy improved their responsible device use habits, 40% reported that their school's phone policy leads them to use their phone more outside of school time. Students' involvement in education on balanced and healthy screen use was significantly related to how they felt phone policies impacted their device use outside of school—one-fifth (21%) of students who received this education reported using their phones less outside of school, compared to 14% of students who did not receive this education.

62%	42%
received formal digital literacy education on internet safety and/or critical evaluation of information	received formal education on screen time management, digital wellbeing, or self-regulation

Implications

At first glance, it may seem counterintuitive, but as schools restrict cell phone access, the need for skills that support balanced, healthy device use becomes more pressing. Survey findings suggest that school policies may influence students' out-of-school habits, implying that these rules extend beyond the classroom and shape broader patterns of digital behavior. This underscores the importance of equipping students with media literacy and digital wellness tools that support long-term wellbeing.

> **IN THEIR WORDS**
>
> 66
>
> *It would be beneficial for our school to provide more comprehensive education on responsible phone usage. While there are some discussions about this topic, a more in-depth focus on managing screen time would greatly help students develop healthier habits.*
>
> Response to "If it were up to you, what kind of phone policy would you create for your school?"

CONCLUSION

Effective Policies Start With Students

Students understand the benefits of policies, but want a say

This Pulse Survey indicates that students are not passive participants in their digital lives. They are thoughtful, self-aware, and increasingly proactive in managing their phone use—especially when it comes to learning. Many recognize that phones can be distracting in the classroom, and nearly half are already using tools to limit their screen time, both in and out of school.

Students also want a voice in shaping the policies that affect them. When student input is not considered, even well-intentioned policies may fall short, not because the rules themselves are flawed, but because they lack buy-in. Referring to these policies broadly as "bans" can further complicate the conversation. The term oversimplifies the diverse range of approaches schools are taking and can feel punitive to students, fueling resistance instead of encouraging thoughtful discussion about learning and wellbeing.

There are tradeoffs between different policy approaches

While cell phone policies can help students stay focused and reduce classroom distractions, overly strict rules can have unintended consequences. The Massachusetts Attorney General's 2025 Report on cell phones and social media in schools acknowledges the potential benefits and drawbacks of different approaches (including emphasizing the need for student input and clear communication around phone policies). For example, while "bell-to-bell" policies may be more consistent to implement and enforce, they also offer less opportunity for high school students to demonstrate autonomy and practice using their phones responsibly.

Approaches that restrict use during instructional time, but still allow for devices to be within reach, may strike a better balance, supporting academic outcomes while respecting students' need for autonomy, safety, and connection.

Media literacy education needs to evolve

Importantly, while most students receive some form of media literacy education, it often focuses on online safety or media analysis, and not on personal habit formation. As policies evolve, education about healthy device use must evolve with them. Giving students the tools to navigate their digital lives with intention is just as important as setting limits.

Policies may fall short if not developed collaboratively

Before creating or enforcing any policy, it's critical for schools to work with teachers, students, and families to first define what they hope to achieve and align policies with the desired outcomes. For example, while many students agreed that limiting phone use in the classroom was helpful for learning, this did not necessarily extend to improving social interactions or a building a greater sense of community, and many students even reported feeling less safe without their phones. Without a shared goal, even well-meaning policies may fall short or generate unintended consequences. Once goals are defined, they should be clearly communicated to educators, students, and parents, and be open to feedback.

The goal is not to eliminate technology from schools, but to support students in building the lifelong skills to use it thoughtfully, safely, and meaningfully. That means moving beyond control and toward collaboration by creating consistent, inclusive expectations that balance structure with student agency.
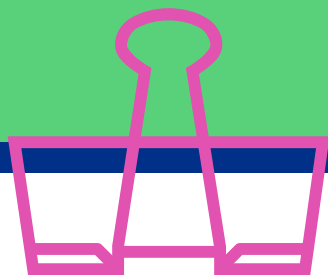
More Research Needed

It's unclear which policies are most effective in practice

There is some evidence that restricting cell phone use during class time may have some positive effects on the academic achievement of students, particularly students who are already struggling with academic grades or who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Digital Wellness Lab).

72% of high school teachers said phones are "a major problem" in the classroom and 60% said that policies were "somewhat or very difficult to enforce" (Pew Research Center). There's limited research on what a successful policy implementation actually looks like, how school staff is navigating enforcement, or how students are experiencing the process. Without clearer insights into day-to-day realities, even well-designed policies may fall short in practice.

Factors other than policies may impact outcomes

A review of existing studies in April, 2024 (Digital Wellness Lab) suggests that cell phone policies are only one piece of the puzzle, with many other school environmental factors—such as classroom climate or policy enforcement—playing a role in outcomes. There are also some initial indicators that restrictive in-school phone policies may lead to more "bingeing" behavior after school.

Teens use phones to manage life, too

Young people often use phones the same way adults do—to manage their schedule, access information, and communicate with friends and family. While bans are often assumed to support learning and prosocial behavior, more research is needed to understand how phones may support academic management or daily functioning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Research-Informed Guidance for Stakeholders

EDUCATORS

- Align policies with clearly defined goals.
- Model and reinforce healthy tech habits and expectations in the classroom.
- Involve a diverse range of students in designing and refining policies.
- Pair policies with ongoing digital wellbeing education.
- Ensure policies account for equity and accessibility.
- Actively support peer connection beyond screen limits.

TECH DEVELOPERS

- Design features that promote intentional use and mindful engagement.
- Support healthy, prosocial interaction and emotional expression.
- Build "school focus" modes and other customizable tools.
- Ensure emergency communication is prominent even in restricted modes.
- Embed reflection tools and digital literacy prompts in everyday apps.
- Co-design content and features with both students and teachers.

PEDIATRIC CLINICIANS

- Explore when, how, and why devices are used, including for sense of connection and self-esteem.
- Ask how screen use affects health, learning, and stress.
- Watch for social stress from screen limits, especially in girls and LGBTQ+ youth.
- Support families in setting collaborative, purpose-driven screen norms.
- Treat digital skills as essential and share trusted resources with families.

PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

- Model healthy phone habits at home.
- Maintain open, ongoing conversations about tech and media use.
- Help your child balance online and offline relationships.
- Encourage respectful dialogue about school policies and help your child navigate discipline constructively.
- Talk with your child about how phone rules affect their stress and connections with others.

Methodology

To better understand how students are experiencing shifting norms around cell phone and device bans in schools, the Digital Wellness Lab conducted a nationwide survey from March 9-24, 2025 of 1,506 U.S. teens, ages 13–18, representing a diverse range of identities, backgrounds, and school settings. (View the full list of survey questions here.)

Prior to the main data collection phase, a preliminary survey was conducted from March 9-11 to assess completion rates and response patterns. This pilot test involved 106 respondents, whose data were subsequently excluded from the final analysis for any questions that were altered (questions 2, 10, 22, 23, 44, and 56) to reflect adjustments made after the soft launch.

Although a majority of participants in our sample were 11th and 12th graders (ages 17-18), we did not find any significant differences in responses between older and younger students.

Note on Terminology

Most school phone policies apply to any phone capable of accessing the internet or cellular networks. In this survey, we used the term "smartphone" when referring specifically to app-related usage, but otherwise used "cell phone," "phone," or "device" to reflect the broader scope of school policies.

Participant Demographics

Age
13: 6% (N = 90)
14: 10.4% (N = 157)
15: 13.4% (N = 202)
16: 17% (N = 256)
17: 24.1% (N = 363)
18: 29.1% (N = 438)

Grade Level
5th: 0.4% (N = 6)
6th: 0.5% (N = 8)
7th: 3.5% (N = 53)
8th: 9.6% (N = 145)
9th: 12.5% (N = 189)
10th: 14.7% (N = 221)
11th: 19.5% (N = 293)
12th: 39.2% (N = 591)

Gender Identity
Girl: 45.1% (N = 679)
Boy: 51.5% (N = 775)
Non-binary and/or transgender:
    4.2% (N = 64)
Prefer not to answer: 0.8% (N = 12)

Race/Ethnicity*
White: 45.8% (N = 689)
Hispanic/Latino: 21.4% (N = 323)
Black/African American: 13.9% (N = 209)
Multi-racial: 7.3% (N = 110)
Asian: 6.2% (N = 93)
American Indian/Alaskan Native: 1.5% (N = 22)
Middle Eastern/North African: 0.5% (N = 8)
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander: 0.4% (N = 6)
Other: 1.5% (N = 22)
Prefer not to answer: 1.6% (N = 24)

Type of School
Traditional public school: 74.9% (N = 1,128)
Magnet school: 4.2% (N = 64)
Charter school: 7.5% (N = 113)
Religious private school: 5.4% (N = 82)
Secular private school: 1.1% (N = 17)
Private boarding school: 1.4% (N = 21)
Other: 3.0% (N = 45)
Prefer not to answer: 2.4% (N = 36)

Respondents could choose as many categories as they wanted; in order to avoid counting participants twice, those who selected multiple choices are included in the "Multi-racial" category. Any respondent who selected "Hispanic/Latino" was included only in the Hispanic/Latino category regardless of other race/ethnicity selections they made. This approach results in the above-listed mutually exclusive categories.

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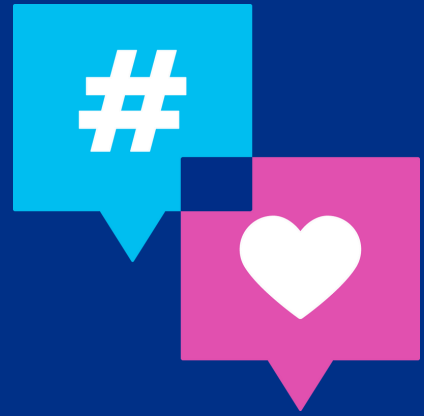
The Digital Wellness Lab at Boston Children's Hospital seeks to understand and promote positive and healthy digital media experiences for young people, from birth through young adulthood.