

Interpretation: No Phones in Schools...Sometimes

Kamdon Bailey

School of Education: Concordia University Irvine

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Dr. Mona Montgomery

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Phone Free Zones

We used to offer District Writing Assessments (DWAs) with the controversial argumentative topic of whether cell phones should be allowed in schools. Students were surprisingly honest about the benefits and drawbacks of cell phone use. While some argued that cell phones could be used as tools for learning, and teachers suggested using cell phones as part of their instruction, others acknowledged the distractions and learning loss they cause. In the pendulum of education, we are beginning to see a shift away from technology and back to traditional learning, perhaps in response to the rapid advancements the technology industry continues to make. In the early 2020s, districts invested heavily in ensuring that every student had access to a Chromebook and encouraged teachers to use applications that integrated with students' Chromebooks and phones to “extend” learning.

Now, with AI running rampant and “doom scrolling and “brain rot,” parents, educators, and legislators are trying to find ways to rescue students from the internet. The emergence of “Doom Scrolling” and the continuous consumption of short-form videos have resulted in “difficulties in concentration and information retention and a preference for instant gratification”(Arora & Hastings, 2024, p.2). Educators cannot compete with the unrelenting assault on students' minds from the plethora of applications and videos fighting for their attention. Now, however, distraction is not the only obstacle.

The use of generative AI to complete assignments and classwork, while efficient and at times acceptable, is providing a crutch for students that will eventually lead to cognitive atrophy. An MIT study on brain function highlighted problems that arise from the use of AI. Importantly, they found that AI tools “may unintentionally hinder deep cognitive processing, retention, and authentic engagement with written material” (Kosmyna & Hauptmann et. al., 2025, p.138).

Students who use AI will have a superficial understanding of the information and will have difficulty retaining what they have learned. One way stakeholders have tried to mitigate the impacts of technology is by creating laws and policies that restrict and regulate cell phone use during school hours.

Source of Authority

Youth continue to struggle with mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. All of these problems are exacerbated by the amount of time children spend on phones and the internet. A survey conducted by the Boston Children's Digital Wellness Lab found that 83% of adolescents admitted to being at least slightly addicted to social media, with 47.5% stating they check their phones every 15 minutes or less (Bickham et al., 2022). What began as a means of communication has become an addictive distraction that demands constant attention and complicates already complex social pressures and dynamics.

Out of a desire to support school districts and protect children, in 2019, Governor Newsom signed AB 272 (Muratsuchi) into law, which authorized school districts to regulate the use of smartphones during school hours. The law added section 48901.7 to the Education Code, which also provided clarifications on protected uses such as emergencies, as defined by an IEP or medical necessity, or when a school staff member grants permission (Muratsuchi, Pupils: use of smartphones, AB-272, 2019). This was a crucial first step in efforts to minimize distractions and foster a more conducive learning environment for our students. In 2024, the state of California moved beyond permitting districts to restrict cell-phone use and chose to mandate it. The Phone-Free School Act (AB 3216), signed into law in September 2024, requires all California school districts, charter schools, and county offices of education to adopt a policy limiting or prohibiting student smartphone use by July 1, 2026. Understandably, the California

Legislature did not dictate how this was to be done and left it up to the discretion of Local Education Agencies (LEAs).

While some districts have instituted district-wide policies, others have passed the responsibility to school sites. The Los Angeles Unified School District board voted to approve a “bell-to-bell” cell phone restriction applying to all schools. Of course, supporting a policy of this scale comes with challenges: financial, logistical, and political. Santa Ana Unified School District asked sites to determine their own plan, at least for now. At Santa Ana High School, the administration decided to prohibit cell phone use in class without the teacher's permission for academic purposes and to allow cell phone use during passing periods and at lunch. The administration chose not to create a standardized approach for restricting students' cell phone use during class. In instructional leadership team (ILT) meetings and in discussions with parents, they were unable to reach a consensus on a plan that was both logistically feasible and financially viable to implement this year. As a result, some teachers collect phones at the beginning of each class using pocket charts, others ask students to keep them in backpacks, and others use a unique strategy.

People Affected

No group is more directly affected by the policy than students. As with any addiction, withdrawals are strong, and emotions run high when you first break the connection. Over time, you establish new habits and routines, and appreciate the clarity of mind that detoxing brings. The group holding the line on the policy is the teachers. It is up to the teachers to communicate, document, and monitor compliance in their classrooms. They bear the brunt of the student frustration and reactions. Administrators are ultimately responsible for enforcing the policy. When a teacher documents that a student is not complying, it is the administration's

responsibility to follow through on the consequences and explain them to parents. In most cases, the parents own the cell phone each student is using and have a vested interest in what happens to it. When the assembly bill was introduced, parents were among the strongest opponents, citing security risks and property rights. Language was added to address these concerns, but parents still struggle with the need for constant contact with their child.

Enforcement and Due Process Procedures

At Santa Ana High School, the cell phone policy has been integrated into the behavior expectations and school-wide PBIS, the “Way of the Saints.” At the beginning of the school year, parents and students were made aware of the new policy through emails, assemblies, and hard-copy contracts signed at registration. Teachers are primarily responsible for asking students to put away their phones during class and for recording cell phone violations in the online monitoring system AXIOM. The discipline follows a tiered approach, with each violation carrying progressively severe consequences. Because violations are recorded in AXIOM, all stakeholders can view how many times a student has been out of compliance. Additionally, violations are cumulative rather than class-by-class.

The first violation is a warning. Most teachers will also offer a verbal warning before adding a point to the student's record. The second time a student receives a point AXIOM sends a parent text message. With the third violation, an administrator confiscates the student's phone until the end of the day. The fourth violation leads to a parent phone call in addition to the previous consequences. The fifth violation results in a parent conference to return the phone. If a student continues to violate the policy, the parent and student are required to sign a cell phone behavior contract. To remove points from their accounts, students can complete community service or participate in AIRR campaigns to earn digital currency and buy back the points. This

process of allowing students to remove points incentivizes good behaviors and encourages improved academic performance.

Personal Perspective

While I strongly support the policy based on current relevant research and evidence mentioned previously, its implementation at our school site has been ineffective. The communication of expectations and the reasoning behind the change were robust, but the enforcement plan was incomplete. Leaving teachers to determine how they will restrict cell phone use creates inequities. Some teachers physically collect phones, some ask students not to use them, and some teachers allow cell phone use without recording violations. Similarly to the inequities we see in grading, students are forced to learn their teacher's style, and students with certain teachers are held to higher standards than others. In interviews with students, only 20% of teachers collect phones or report violations.

Asking teachers to create a classroom policy for phone collection and to spend their own money on supplies to implement it is unacceptable. There should be a standardized procedure that all teachers follow, so they are not forced to explain to a parent why they collect phones while their colleague does not. Collecting phones in an unsecure location also puts staff at financial risk if a phone is stolen or lost, and the student or parent tries to hold them liable. There are also social privacy issues involved in displaying students' phones in a pocket chart. A student who cannot afford a phone or has an old, broken one may be embarrassed to have his or her device seen by other students. This can lead to bullying or insecurity.

The administration is being proactive about collecting phones from students who have reached the three-point threshold, but even that has been inconsistent due to the limited time they have to visit classrooms, given their already busy schedules. Enforcing the progressive discipline

requires constantly running queries or checking for alerts while also attending to IEPs, attendance, counseling, and other more pressing behavior issues. This creates frustration between teachers and administrators because teachers are being asked to document something that administrators have very little bandwidth to address.

Analysis and Reflection

It is difficult to measure the impact on student achievement and well-being when so few teachers enforce the policy with fidelity. On the surface, the policy strives to ensure effective teaching and learning by reducing distractions in the learning environment. Some teachers have built phone collection into their routines, and their students have expressed that even though they do not enjoy being restricted from their phones, they understand the intent. Observations have shown that students spend more time talking and interacting with each other and are more engaged in classroom discussions and activities when not on phones. First-semester reporting showed a slight reduction in Ds and Fs across all grade levels, despite limited buy-in.

Socially and culturally, this policy emerged in response to recent legislation and current international trends aimed at holding social media companies accountable and protecting adolescents from the dangers of the internet. Educators have a responsibility to create safe learning environments for students that are free of distractions, including those arising from technology use. However well-intentioned, the district failed to provide the necessary guidance or financial support to ensure successful implementation. As a soft opening, the current policy does well to highlight areas for improvement and the need for continued development. To be successful, the district and school sites need to choose a strategy, invest in it, and adapt it based on outcomes. The LAUSD policy has drawn mixed reactions, but I admire their willingness to draw a line in the sand and put weight behind their decision.

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