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2022

## Cell Phones and Schools: A MERC Research Brief

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### Recommended Citation

Senechal, J. (2022). Cell Phones and Schools: A MERC Research Brief. Richmond, VA: Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium.

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# **CELL PHONES AND SCHOOLS**

*a MERC research brief*

# CELL PHONES AND SCHOOLS: A MERC RESEARCH BRIEF

Jesse Senechal - MERC Director

August 2022

Over the past two decades the number of youth with cell phones has grown rapidly. A [report](#) based on a [2015 survey](#) found that 53% of 4th and 5th graders, 66% of middle schoolers, and 82% of high school students regularly used a cell phone, and it is certain that these numbers are higher now. The presence and use of cell phones within PK12 schools has had significant impacts on school culture, and altered the landscape of teaching and learning. While some educators have embraced the cell phone and integrated it into the curriculum, there are also a range of concerns that have emerged. Cell phones have been framed as a tool for cheating, a distraction to learning, and a potential catalyst for cyber bullying and other antisocial behavior. For this reason, policies have been developed across the nation to regulate the possession and use of cell phones within schools ([Tandon, et al. 2020](#)). This brief presents a synthesis of information collected about cell phones in PK12 schools, with a focus on three key questions:

- What are examples of district-level cell phone policies?
- What are the arguments and evidence for and against restrictive cell phone policies?
- What are the legal issues connected to student cell phone use?

## What are examples of district-level cell phone policies?

Policy related to the possession and use of cell phones within PK12 schools can occur at several levels of the system. In certain cases, [states have attempted to enact legislation](#) governing the use of cell phones in schools, however only in a couple cases have these efforts been successful. Generally, cell phone policies are developed at the district-level and included as part of the code of student conduct. Based on a review of local district policies, we have created the table below to illustrate the general components of district-level policies and provide insights into variations in approach.

Policy element	Discussion of element and variation across policies
<b>Shifting of policy authority</b>	In some cases, district-level policy passes the authority of setting up procedures for cell phone possession and use to schools and school administrators. This creates the potential for variation in approach across schools in the same district. While there are advantages to having policy adapted to local context, this creates the potential for inequities in policy design and enforcement.
<b>Guidelines on possession of cell phones on school property.</b>	Generally, the reviewed policies do not prohibit the possession of cell phones on school property, however, some include statements that require that cell phones are turned off and stored out of sight. There are exceptions. For example, some policies prohibit possession in alternative schools with stricter codes of conduct.

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**Guidelines on the use of cell phones on school property.**

All reviewed policies define appropriate use of cell phones. While policies vary in specificity, the guidelines around the use of cell phones include the following points:

- **Use according to grade level.** Certain policies have different guidelines for elementary versus secondary school students, with secondary students having more cell phone privileges.
- **Use in relation to location.** Some policies just specify use on school property, while others were more specific, for example, mentioning use on the school bus.
- **Use in relation to time of day.** Some policies specify differences in use between school-time and after-school time, with after-school time having more lenience.
- **Specific language about prohibited use of cell phones.** Certain policies include specific language about prohibited uses. These include (1) no video or audio recording of staff or students, (2) “unlawful activity,” and (3) no use during testing situations.
- **Educational versus non-educational uses.** Certain policies make explicit statements that cell phones could be used for educational purposes during school time (e.g., for quizzes, educational apps, research, etc). Others strictly prohibit any school time use.

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**Consequences for violations of cell phone possession and use guidelines**

All reviewed policies include statements about the consequences for violations of cell phone guidelines. This includes mentions of the confiscation of cell phones, the loss of cell phone privileges, and the potential for exclusionary discipline (e.g., out-of-school suspension). With violations during testing situations, there is also mention of having test scores invalidated. Some policies lay out procedures for the storage and retrieval of confiscated cell phones. All policies include a statement relieving the school district from responsibility for a lost or stolen cell phone.

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**What are the arguments and evidence for and against restrictive cell phone policies?**

Across PK12 policy discussions related to the possession and use of cell phones within schools, there are a range of arguments for and against more restrictive policies. In certain cases these arguments are based on empirical research into the impact of cell phone use within schools. In other cases, they presented as normative arguments (e.g., arguments connected to the purposes of education). Below is a summary of these arguments with links to key studies.

## Arguments for more restrictive cell phone policies

- **Cell phones are a digital distraction from teaching and learning.** One of the primary arguments against cell phones in schools suggests that cell phones disrupt school operations ([Maphalala, et al. 2014](#), [Ott, et al. 2018](#)), are a distraction from teaching and learning, and have negative impacts on student academic achievement ([Beland, et al. 2014](#), [Kuznekoff, et al 2015](#), [Kessel, et al. 2020](#), [Beneito et al. 2022](#)).
- **Cell phones have negative behavioral and social emotional impacts on students.** Excessive screen time has raised concerns about [negative effects for students, especially younger students, and encouragement of antisocial behavior.](#) Research has shown the relationship between cell phone use and increased levels of anxiety ([Gajdics et al. 2021](#)). A key concern here is the use of the social networking functions of cell phones to bully other students ([Beneito et al. 2022](#)).
- **Cell phones may be used within schools in disruptive, dangerous or unlawful ways.** In school assessment situations, cell phones may be used for cheating. There are also concerns about the use of cell phones to coordinate unlawful activities.
- **Cell phones within schools may increase concerns about surveillance of students and invasions of privacy.**

## Arguments for less restrictive cell phone policies

- **Cell phones are powerful tools that can be integrated into teaching and learning.** The most prominent argument for less restrictive policies is that cell phones have the potential to support student learning ([Philip et al. 2015](#), [Ott, et al. 2018](#)). Modern phones have many technology tools that are useful in classroom contexts including cameras, microphones, stop watches, calculators, and rulers. Students may also use them to do research, access tests or quizzes, or engage with education applications. However, research has also explored the readiness of teachers to integrate cell phones into teaching practice and the need for professional development in this area ([O'bannon et al. 2014](#), [Thomas et al. 2013](#)).
- **Cell phones provide access to digital technologies for students with economic disadvantage.** While many students may have laptop or desktop computers available at home, in economically disadvantaged communities, cell phones may be the only access point to online education resources and applications. In this case, a ban on cell phones raises equity issues ([Washington et al., 2021](#)). At the same time, solely having access to a cell phone may not be sufficient for completing school work ([Morgan, 2022](#)).
- **Cell phone use is part of 21st century life; students need opportunities to develop skills in responsible use of technology.** Increasingly, cell phones are integrated into our social, economic and political life. As schools seek to prepare students for 21st century citizenship, the responsible use of cell phone technologies is critical ([Lahiri, 2012](#)).
- **Cell phone bans put teachers in unnecessarily adversarial roles with their students leading to increases in disciplinary actions.** It is also worth noting the equity implications of this point. For example, [New York City rescinded a cell phone](#)

ban in 2015 because the ban was being enforced more harshly in lower-income schools.

- **Cell phones enhance school safety.** Some argue that cell phones are needed for communication with family and emergency services in the case of a school shooting or a dangerous weather event.

## What are the legal issues connected to student cell phone use?

The possession and use of cell phones within school also present some complex legal issues that school and district leaders need to navigate (Diamantes, 2010). Below are several examples.

### Issues related to student speech

While the courts have stated that students within PK12 schools have the right to free speech, they have also defined limits: speech that *interferes with the educational purposes of the school* is restricted. As powerful communication devices, cell phones provide opportunities for the elevation and broad dissemination of student speech. Recent court cases (Mahanoy Area School District v. B.L., 594 U.S, 2021) have explored the issue of when online speech qualifies as school speech (Hunt, 2022). This is determined by the time of day it is posted (i.e., on or off school hours), the device and network used (e.g., personal versus school-owned technology) and accounts used (e.g., private versus school email).

### Issues related to privacy

With the spread of cell phones within schools, questions have emerged about the school's right to search the content of student devices (Nowak et al. 2017). While schools have the right to confiscate phones, under what conditions can schools require students to unlock the phone and share the phone content (texts, contacts, images)? Generally, the school is not allowed to access the personal information on a student phone even if they lawfully confiscate it. In certain cases they may request particular content - for example if a student is accused of sending a threatening text - but they may not use that as an opening to search other content.

### Issues related to the possession of explicit content

The use of cell phones to collect and share explicit content can put school administrators in challenging legal positions. For example, in Colorado an administrator has been charged with child pornography for holding images from a student phone on a school computer as part of a disciplinary file.

### Issues related to due process rights

The confiscation of student cell phones may violate parents due process rights to direct the upbringing of their children. (Maddox, 2012). In these cases the arguments focus on how

both bans on cell phones and the confiscation of cell phones may interrupt communication between parents and their children.

### Final questions for consideration

Based on this review of key topics related to the use of cell phones within schools, we conclude with a set of questions for consideration by school and school district leaders:

- How does our district policy align with the outline of elements above? How much leeway is given to schools to enact building specific cell phone policies? Overall, is our policy more or less restrictive?
- What are the advantages of having a more restrictive cell phone policy? What are the disadvantages? How do we determine the appropriate balance?
- What are the equity issues underlying cell phone use? How do we ensure that our policy does not increase inequity?
- What data could we collect on cell phone use in schools that would provide evidence to guide policy decisions? In what ways are they being used as an instructional tool?
- What are the primary legal issues we must navigate connected to student cell phone use? How can we ensure that we are protecting the rights of students, parents and other school stakeholders?
- What types of professional development are needed to ensure our staff is prepared to address student cell phone use within schools?



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