

Arizona Needs a Strong “Away All Day” Cell Phone Policy

Few issues come along that can have such a quick and definitive impact on the learning and well-being of Arizona’s students as prohibiting cell phone use during the school day.

Key elements of an impactful student cell phone policy are a prohibition of cell phone use “bell to bell,” throughout the whole day, ensuring rigorous enforcement by administrators and not putting the onus on teachers, rigorous consequences for violating the policy, and clear parent communication.

A growing body of research shows that cell phone use in school negatively impacts student learning. A meta-analysis of 44 studies found that smartphone addiction negatively impacts students' learning and overall academic performance. In fact, the greater the use of a phone while studying, the greater the negative impact on learning and academic achievement. Additionally, the results suggest that skills and cognitive abilities needed for students’ academic success and learning are also negatively impacted¹.

Cell phone use also impacts students’ mental health. In Jonathan Haidt’s 2024 book, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, he documents the staggering increases since 2010 in clinical diagnoses of anxiety (134%); depression (106%); anorexia (100%); and substance abuse and addiction (33%)². Studies have also shown that higher use among children and adolescents is linked to inadequate sleep (which can disrupt neurological development and lead to depression and suicidal behaviors), low self-esteem, poor body image, eating disorder behaviors; and online harassment³.

Educators support prohibiting cell phone use in schools. An overwhelming 90 percent of NEA members support prohibiting cell phones during instructional time, and 83 percent support prohibiting cell phone use during the entire school day with exceptions for things like medical or assistive-technology needs.⁴

Phone free schools demonstrably improve academic focus and mental health. Several states and countries have successfully implemented “bell to bell” prohibitions of cell phones and demonstrated the benefits. The North Adams school district in Massachusetts saw a 75 percent drop in referrals in the last quarter of the 2024 school year, compared to the same quarter the previous year. The Bentonville district in Arkansas reported a 57 percent reduction in verbal- and physical-aggression offenses and a 51 percent decrease in drug-related offenses. The Indian River County district in Florida reported a 14 percent decrease in fights in just one year⁵.

Further, a 2020 study of Norwegian schools that had banned smartphones, found that banning smartphones reduces the number of consultations for psychological symptoms by about 2–3 visits per child, per year⁶. A 2016 study found that across the large English cities of Birmingham, Leicester, London, and Manchester, dozens of high schools that instituted bans on mobile phones saw significant improvement in scores on high-stakes tests⁷.

The importance of a strong Arizona policy is best summed up by a student in Colorado. She reports that enforcement of the district’s cell phone policy has helped her cut back her screen time and pay more attention in daily conversations. “I used to be on my phone 24/7,” she said. “I feel like I’ve become more social with everyone. Communication has gotten a lot better” throughout the school⁸.

¹ Oluwafemi J. Sunday, Olusola O. Adesope, Patricia L. Maarhuis, The effects of smartphone addiction on learning: A meta-analysis, *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, Volume 4, 2021,100114,ISSN 2451-9588, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbr.2021.100114>.

² *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, 2024.

³ *Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory*, 2023.

⁴ NEA Member Polling, June 2024

⁵ <https://www.edweek.org/technology/what-schools-look-like-without-the-cellphone-distraction/2025/02>

⁶ *Smartphone Bans, Student Outcomes and Mental Health*, Institutt for samfunnsøkonomi, 2024.

⁷ Louis-Philippe Beland, Richard Murphy, *Ill Communication: Technology, distraction & student performance*, *Labour Economics*, Volume 41,2016,Pages 61-76,ISSN 0927-5371,<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.labeco.2016.04.004>.

⁸ <https://www.edweek.org/technology/what-schools-look-like-without-the-cellphone-distraction/2025/02>