

Going Phone-Free at School?

A Resource for Parents and Schools

Clare Morell, Ethics and Public Policy Center

Findings

Phones in schools are strongly linked to poor academic performance

- Math, reading, and science scores have been dropping in the United States since 2012.
- As of 2022, scores for the lowest performing students are at levels last seen in the 1970s.

Long-term scores

National samples, reported as average scores

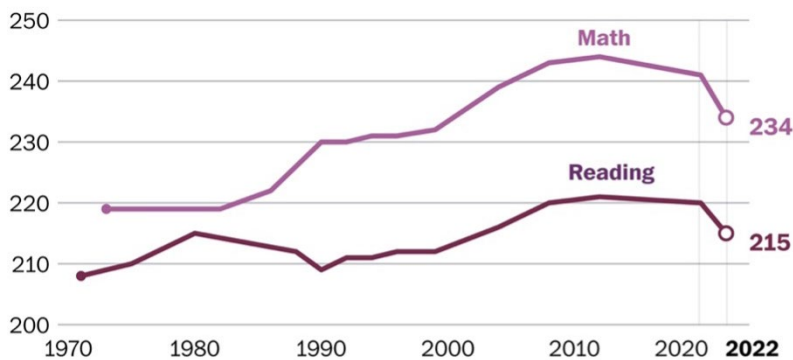


Figure 1: Scores in reading and math measured by *The Nation's Report Card* have decreased significantly since the proliferation of smartphones among teenagers.

Source: The Washington Post

- [Studies](#) show that excessive smartphone use negatively impacts grades and skill development.
- The mere presence of a smartphone is mentally distracting. [Research shows](#) that having a cellphone, even turned off in students' backpacks, decreases test scores.

For More Resources

See the [Preserving Our Humanity](#) Substack by Clare Morell and the Ethics and Public Policy Center's [Technology and Human Flourishing Project](#)

Phones cause discipline issues and negative social dynamics at school

- Phones facilitate cyberbullying, students photographing or filming one another without consent, rumors or gossip spreading on social media, and coordinating inappropriate activities.
- It is almost impossible for teachers and administrators to offer adult oversight and correction to these issues in the virtual world.
- Cyberbullying has been shown to increase when phones are in school. During the 2013–14 school year, New York City [had a cellphone ban](#) and 178 incidents of cyberbullying. The district then removed the ban, and the number of incidents rose to 804 in 2015–16.
- Over [90 percent of educators](#) feel students' mental health is a serious issue at their school, and a majority say there has been a significant increase in concerns related to student mental health in the past few years.
- Rates of school loneliness have doubled since 2012, in conjunction with the rise of smartphone access.

Phone bans are effective in reversing poor academic performance and reducing the achievement gap, as well as improving mental health

- London School of Economics [researchers found](#) that following a ban on phone use, student test scores improved overall by 6.4 percent
- For underachieving students (those in the bottom quartile of prior achievement), the effect was doubled: their average test scores rose by 14 percent.
- A 2024 [study from Norway](#) compared middle schools with smartphone bans to those without them and found that banning smartphones improved girls' grades, GPA, test scores, and their likelihood of attending an academic high school track (in Norway high school programs are divided between academic and vocational).

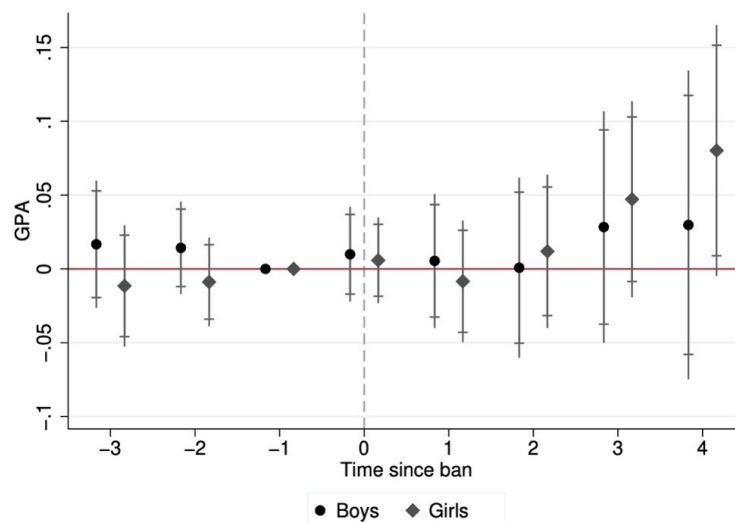


Figure 2: A 2024 study for the Norwegian Institute for Public Health found that student GPAs increased dramatically following the ban on smartphones in classrooms. Source: Sara Abrahamsson, "Smartphone Bans, Student Outcomes and Mental Health"

- The positive effects were largest among girls from lower socio-economic backgrounds. And the most striking result was the impact on mental health. In schools with bans, girls saw a 60 percent decline in the number of visits for psychological symptoms and diseases.

Courses of Action

What are schools doing in light of emerging data about the effects of smartphones on students?

Schools have taken four different courses of action:

A. Leave decisions for student phone use up to parents and teachers

Pros:

- Parents and children can communicate easily as needed.
- Parents rather than schools are making important decisions for their children.
- Some teachers make use of smartphones during classroom instruction.

Cons:

- Students do not have consistent and clear behavioral expectations that apply to everyone.
- Teachers struggle to police phones effectively in class.
- Studies show all students, both with and without smartphones, suffer academically with phones in the classroom.
- All students, both with and without smartphones, suffer socially and emotionally.

B. Allow students to bring smartphones to school, but implement a no-use policy during class time

Pros:

- Students can communicate with parents between class periods.

Cons:

- Classroom policies do nothing to mitigate the negative social dynamics in the hallways, the lunchrooms, and bathrooms, affecting all children.
- Problems like cyberbullying and students photographing or filming one another without consent persist.
- Enforcement falls all on individual teachers.

C. Allow students to bring smartphones to school, but implement a no-use policy during the entire instructional day, including during breaks and lunch

Pros:

- Schools don't need to figure out where to store phones during the day.
- Students have access to their phones in case of emergency.
- A uniform policy for the entire school that administrators enforce encourages students to comply.

Cons:

- Effectiveness requires clear and immediate consequences for rule violations that are consistently enforced, much of which still falls to teachers.
- The presence of a smartphone, even out of sight, still negatively impacts learning.

D. Impose bell-to-bell phone bans where phones are inaccessible to students

(this can mean using [Yondr](#) pouches, a central phone locker, or requiring phones to be left at home)

Pros:

- Academic outcomes improve most when phones are totally unavailable to students.
- Disciplinary issues decline significantly.
- Student engagement and socializing greatly improves.
- Teachers are able to teach rather than having to play “phone police.”

Cons:

- Parents have to rely on alternative ways to get in touch with their children during the school day.
- Schools need to plan for how student phones will be secured away (or require them to be left at home).

Frequently Asked Questions

1. How will I be able to get in touch with my child?

Schools can ensure all classrooms have phones that are reachable by the main office, and students can go to the office to call a parent if needed. Students with phones will be able to use them after school hours to coordinate after-school activities and pick-ups.

2. What about emergency situations, like an active shooter?

The last thing a school wants to do is make children less safe. But in this worst-case scenario, experts say the best thing is for students to focus on hiding and staying quiet, not taking out a phone and texting or calling parents.

3. What if my child has a medical condition where the electronic device is needed during the day?

Schools should allow medical exemptions from the policy and ask parents to have a licensed medical provider write a note for accommodations when there is a medical need, such as diabetes or seizure monitoring. Schools could also have these students leave their phones with the school nurse so they can check in with the nurse for their tracking.

4. Are there any social downsides to students not having smartphones during the school day?

There can be social downsides for students that don't have phones when other students are on phones, but when all phones are removed from the entire school day, it improves social interactions for everyone because no one feels left out. Removing phones also improves face-to-face communication among students; research suggests face-to-face interactions are linked to better mental health.

5. Are there any educational downsides to students not using smartphones in the classroom?

No. Any online components that could have been accessed via phones can instead be done with tablets/PCs provided by the school when necessary. Educators who work in schools that allow personal devices find it very disruptive. An [overwhelming majority](#) (83 percent) of educators support prohibiting personal devices during the entire school day and even more (90 percent) support prohibiting devices during instructional time.