The Good, The Bad, and The Complex: Teen Perspectives on School Phone Policies

This report was written by the University of Washington's Youth Advisory Board of the Center for Digital Youth in partnership with Rotem Landesman and Lucía Magis-Weinberg and edited by Katie Davis

Report design: Abbie H.

DIGITAL YOUTH LAB

YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD UW-YAB UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Introduction

In Winter and Spring 2025 the interACT Lab at the University of Washington collected data from middle and high schools in Washington state on phone restrictions to understand the academic, emotional, mental, and social implications they've had over the academic year.

The schools that participated in this study have different approaches to restricting phones, including "bell to bell" policies, limited use, and classroom specific policies. To complement quantitative and qualitative analyses performed by researchers [1], the UW Youth Advisory Board (UW-YAB) thematically analyzed a subset of the data from students (n = 84), teachers (n = 60), and parents (n = 20) who took that survey regarding pros and cons of various phone policies. This analysis yielded a set of themes that recurred throughout the data set, allowing the UW-YAB to point to the most common pros, cons, and considerations from the people who were surveyed. We then pulled out direct quotes from students, teachers, and parents alike to exemplify each category. As a team of teens, we worked together to explain the categories in ways that resonated with the perspectives we saw in the data, but also with our own experiences. Below are insights we drew from qualitatively analyzing the survey data described above. We divide this data into three main categories: the benefits of a phone policy at school, the downsides of a phone policy, and some recurring considerations participants saw when implementing these types of policies.

[1] Magis-Weinberg et al., (in prep) Student, teacher and parent perceptions of school phone restrictions in Washington State.

Insights from our Qualitative Analysis

BENEFITS OF A PHONE POLICY

Academics

1. **Less distractions.** Limiting direct access to phones during instructional time can prevent students from being distracted in class and encourage better focus. One teacher expressed that **"Kids are able to focus and engage more regularly, they are building social skills by having to speak with their peers, and there is less need for constant repetition of instructions."**

2. **Increased engagement in the classroom setting.** Students are encouraged to be more social with their peers. In cases where students had access to phones, they tended to spend more time on their device rather than conversing and building relationships with others. A teacher stated, **"Students are much more engaged in class; they talk with each other much, much more."** For students, this entails more connections with the coursework and teacher, improved interpersonal relationships and socialization, and overall better attention and focus. A student noted that **"everyone actually talked to each other"** following phone policy implementation.

3. **The reduction of academic dishonesty and cheating.** Phones are a common tool for looking up answers or sharing test information, so removing them reduces the opportunities for academic dishonesty. A student reflected that having a policy in place **"keeps kids on task limits their ability to cheat".**

Social Interaction

1. **Enhanced social aspect of a school community.** Without phones, students are more likely to talk face-to-face, build friendships, and strengthen classroom communities. Students reflected, for example, that having a phone policy means **"people are less distracted by games on their phones; More talking to each other"**, while a teacher noted that **"Cell phone restrictions allow students to engage in the classroom with their peers more effectively"**.

2. **Reductions in bullying, specifically cyberbullying.** Limiting phone use helps prevent harmful texting, group chats, and social media drama from interrupting the school day. Teachers reflected that having a phone policy may lead to **"fewer opportunities to engage in hurtful social media behavior"**, and another noted that there has been **"a decrease in cyber bullying at school and an increase in class participation."** This may also reduce the likelihood of students utilizing phones to spread rumors, photos, or engage in exclusionary online behavior. One student, for example, said that limiting phone use prevented students from **"taking photos of each other in the halls"**, while a parent thought a phone policy impacted **"safety in regards to photos or social media at school and who can just take a picture or video of anything."** Without devices in class, students are less likely to be filmed or posted online without their consent. A teacher noted that a phone policy **"would also help prevent the uploading of bullying and harassment material during the school day."**

DOWNSIDES OF A PHONE POLICY

Communication with families for day-to-day needs

Teens and parents feel that restricted access to phones makes it challenging to get in contact with each other. One parent noted that students were **"expected to have their phones put away the moment they enter campus, even if school hasn't started yet or is over. This makes it harder for me to communicate last minute changes about my work schedule, changes in transportation, etc."**

Another parent commented, **"[I] can't contact my child if there is a change of plans. They can't contact me if needed for being sick or other personal emergency".**

This makes scheduling harder, especially as families need to coordinate pick-ups and afterschool activities, and rely on phones to do so. One parent, for example, reflected that having a "lunch only" phone policy would mean that they would **"no longer have the ability to quickly get a hold of a child or vice versa."**

Safety Concerns

Participants also noted that phone restrictions may worsen existing safety concerns as students and parents alike are worried that they cannot contact each other or first responders quickly.

Parents, students and teachers talked about students' phones being an important tool for communication during emergencies, and reflected on safety concerns that may occur throughout the school day. For instance, parents may want to contact their children during emergencies, and having a phone restriction in place may slow down that process as one student reflected **"If you need to contact a parent you have to go to the office to do so, so if you have an emergency it would be faster if you had your phone with you."**

Academic Tools

Excluding phones from the classroom pose a threat to the accessibility and availability of teaching tools. Students can benefit from digital accommodations, such as translators, screen-readers, and even music. Moreover, digital tools have been heavily integrated into the classroom, with learning tools such as Quizlet or Microsoft Forms, as well as other digital flashcards, textbooks, and cameras disappearing without other non-digital tools to replace them. Teachers are also given the burden of adapting to a new classroom environment and curriculum, one that many students are already resistant to. A prime example of this is one teacher mentioning that **"in my classroom, most cell phone use was for positive uses. Could be for research, photo documentation, or media players as part of in class work. Or as 504/IEP accommodations. Now none of that is really possible. I would prefer to be teaching responsible cell phone use than having a hard ban."**

Freedom and Digital Literacy

Current students have grown up using devices, yet that technology is suddenly being taken away. Removing access to an important and personal aspect of modern life can make students feel constricted and controlled by their schools. Students feel the need to learn how to manage and understand their phone use by practicing autonomy, rather than heavily restricting it for several hours day. Beyond and outside of school, people will need to regulate their phone use and engage critically with their relationship with technology, which teachers and students alike see as a foundational skill that should be taught in school. One student identified that **"in a real workplace environment we will have to have self control with our phones and just taking them away from us gives us no room to practice this and does not set us up for having self control in the real world."**

Considerations

Reworking Existing Systems

Inside the classroom, many students use phones for a variety of academic purposes. Teachers need to find replacements for phones as they grow more prevalent in our culture—such as when using QR codes for students to fill out surveys in class, using phones as calculators, or having students take photos of instructions on the whiteboard. Restricting phones would require reworking these systems within the classroom. A student mentioned "**Sometimes things like QR codes or even other activities that could be simplified by a little more leniency on the rules because not everyone is using phones to do nefarious things.**" The student also noted how not everything done on a phone in school is off-topic; leniency on the rules can make the lives of students much easier. This also extends out to clubs or other activities that often require members to scan QR codes or communicate with group chats on their phones. When students don't have their phone throughout the school day, they can't "really check [their] phone[s] - even to check in with parents about after school plans", which made coordination trickier.

Responsibilities Outside of School

As many students grow in age, so do the responsibilities they hold outside of school. Whether they are involved in part-time jobs, academic clubs, family responsibilities or more, it is important to consider that many aspects of these commitments expect consistent communication from students (for example, scheduling shifts for a part-time job). One student from the survey mentioned that the policy **"makes it harder for me to communicate last minute changes about my work schedule, changes in transportation, etc."** Being an obstacle to responsibilities, phone restrictions must include considerations that recognize that losing access to these devices could have repercussions, as well as alternative ways that students can effectively commit to their roles and responsibilities. Such considerations about responsibilities further connects to communication (see Communications).

Accommodations

Students with different backgrounds and ability levels have vastly different needs, so phones can be a helpful tool in achieving an equitable environment to meet the needs of as many students as possible. From the data, several students and teachers brought up the need for translation devices in school, emphasizing that it's harder for them to communicate with peers and make friends without their phones. One teacher expressed that **"language translation is very helpful for students who do not speak English. The pro to cell phone rules would be that every student had the same expectations regarding recreational use. No one would be seeing something that others aren't because no one is on their phone."** Additionally, teachers also described how phones can be useful tools to accommodate students with different needs, as complete phone restrictions make it harder for these students to communicate with teachers and peers. Having a phone readily available to communicate with others thus helps these students better develop connections.

Communication

Whether used between students, family members, or educators, phones are critical tools utilized by students for communication. For example, some students may rely on phones to schedule pick-up times and arrange after-school plans. Phone restrictions impede this flow of communication by restricting students' ability to communicate with others. Phone restrictions of any kind must consider alternatives through which students may contact others—especially the individuals they need to contact. However, these alternatives must be streamlined and effective. One student that was surveyed talked about the alternative communication method in their school, where they had to **"go to the office to call [their] parents and [parents] can call the office to tell [students] a message."** The student further explained that **"once I had an orthodontist appointment and my mom was waiting for me to come down out of class early to go but when the office called my teacher to tell me to go to the office she forgot to and only told me 10 minutes later. I missed my appointment because of this, which was really hard for my family because my mom had to clock out of work to go to this appointment."** With clunky alternatives, students aren't able to communicate effectively when they need to. Thus, proper phone restrictions must come proper alternatives for students, families, and others to communicate with one another.

What the UW-YAB Thinks

With the data considered, the UW-YAB created its own response to bring to the table. As teens living through the phone policy ourselves, we combined both the responses of survey participants with our personal thoughts and suggestions. We crafted a set of actionable steps that can be done to alleviate concerns while maximizing well-being. Through these points, we strive to connect policymakers with the people impacted by policy.

Reframe phone policies.

Refer to the new policies under neutral ways that avoid terms like “Ban” or “Phone Free”. Sounding overly optimistic risks students deeming the policies as unrealistic and discourages them to abide by the policy. The word “Ban” also often carries a negative connotation as it often signifies authority and control. Students should feel as though they’re in charge of their day, even without access to their phones and the term “Phone Policy” allows schools to set clear expectations while **maintaining a sense of fairness and neutrality**.

Maintain students’ agency.

Implement phone policies that maintain students’ agency and freedoms. For example, a **“breaks-only”** form of phone restrictions might be a good middle point. This type of policy includes having phone restrictions set in place during instructional time but **allowing for students to use their phones during passing periods, lunch breaks, and independent worktime**. This would allow students to maintain focus and concentration during instructional time but still easily access academic tools for work during independent worktime. Additionally, a “breaks-only” policy permits easy communication between students and family members for after-school activities or emergencies.

Include everyone’s voices when designing policies.

It is important that schools **collect input from students, parents, and teachers** during the development of a new phone policy so that it is built for and by them. In addition to polls, we think that classroom discussions can increase “buy-in”. Once a policy is implemented, schools should request feedback and make changes in response to this feedback.

Communicate policies early and clearly.

Schools should clearly communicate, **in detail and on multiple platforms**, the policies to students and parents well in advance of the implementation date.

Apply policies consistently.

Keep clear and uniform rules as well as consequences in order to guarantee proper enforcement and implementation school-wide and avoid confusion. **Avoid having different policies by teacher or classroom.**

Consider everyone's needs.

Schools need to provide an alternative for phones to ensure that each student can still have the same opportunities in school without their phone to assist them. Schools should **provide more leniency within the rules to allow for flexibility if students need access to their devices**- they might have responsibilities outside the school or need translation or medical tools.

Promote social interaction inside and outside the classroom.

We recommend teaching material in fun and interactive ways that engage students. During instructional time, lessons should strive to be engaging and based in social interaction - that's how we learn best. Outside the classroom, it is important to **provide structured social activities** (like board games or other opportunities to connect) so that students have an easier time connecting to one another without our phones. Also, we would like to have some more breaks during our hectic school day.

Implement training and support to manage phone use.

Beyond our typical digital literacy lessons, we would suggest having **classes on digital wellness and healthy habits** that include topics where we need more support:

a. Developing an awareness of design features that make phones and online activities so attractive.

b. Identifying triggers that make you overuse media

c. Customizing phones to be less stimulating/tempting

d. The benefits of being bored and overcoming the need to be constantly connected
e. Using phones as tools beyond entertainment
f. Regulating phone use and aviod doomscrolling

Methods

During the summer of 2025, teens and researchers from the University of Washington Digital Youth Lab Youth Advisory Board worked together to get youth perspectives on phone restrictions in schools. For this report, we had six 2 hour in person sessions where youth re-analyzed data previously collected from schools in Washington state about phone restrictions and provided their input. Guided by researchers from the University of Washington, youth identified key themes through thematic analyses, summarized them and reflected on them through their own experiences. The UW-YAB is composed of 17 teens who attend high school in the greater Seattle area who meet in person during the summer and virtually over the school year to work with PhD students and professors from the iSchool and Department of Psychology from the Center for Digital Youth at the University of Washington .

What is the UW-YAB?

At the UW Youth Advisory Board (UW-YAB), part of the Digital Youth Lab at UW, like-minded teens step up to more closely examine our relationships with technology. How do digital tools affect us in our day to day living? How are they changing our brains? We collaborate with UW researchers on projects that break new ground. The UW-YAB has contributed to research about youth and social media, prototypes of an AI thought tool, and reimaginations of high school digital literacy curriculums. As teens emerging into adulthood at the same time that Chat-GPT and social media are transforming the online world, we offer a first-person perspective of what it feels to suddenly have the world at our fingertips. How can we help other teens navigate this digital landscape? By contributing to thoughtful discourse examining our relationships with technology at a personal level, we seek to re-think, redesign, and reflect on the issues that most profoundly impact teens today.

Teen members: Kaitlyn C. Ashvin M. Abigail H. Rachel D. Angad K. Tishya S. Arnav A. Jaden H. Akshara K. Sirjana K. Prajna S. Hamsitha M. Advaith S. Elle V. Ahila M. Maksym G. Ellen C.
Research members: Rotem Landesman, Daniela Muñoz Lopez, Yonatan Ambrosio Lomelí, Lucía Magis Weinberg and Katie Davis