

Dr. Miguel A. Cardona
U.S. Secretary of Education
United States Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

October 23, 2023

Dear Secretary Cardona,

Thank you for your leadership and commitment to over 53 million U.S. K-12 students.

Improving the state of education in this country is a goal we share. Our expertise is research. We are a community of individuals and organizations who see an academic, mental-health, and teaching crisis in every state of the union that can be improved automatically and effectually with a single strategy: *removing students' personal mobile devices from our places of learning* (with notable exceptions for those with special educational or medical needs).

As you know, England is the latest country to [impose restrictions on cell phones](#) in schools. Education Secretary Gillian Keegan calls personal mobile devices “a serious challenge in terms of distraction, disruptive behaviour, and bullying. It is one of the biggest issues that children and teachers have to grapple.” U.S. teachers, administrators, and parents overwhelmingly concur.

[France](#) banned cell phones from schools for students under 15 in 2018. [China](#) banned them for all grades in 2021. In fact, according to the [2023 UN Global Education Monitoring Report 2023: Technology in Education](#), one in seven countries ban the use of mobile phones in schools, while several others have instituted partial bans. Many schools in the U.S. ban cell phones, but most are private institutions. This United Nations report goes further to make the worldwide recommendation to remove smart phones from the classroom to improve students' learning and decrease their exposure to cyberbullying.

There is no longer a debate on the impacts of cell phones at school.

A [study in Britain of 8- to 12-year-olds](#) found that kids who sent 3+ text messages a day had significantly lower literacy scores than those who sent none. [Another study of students in two different universities](#) revealed that more than 90% of respondents reported receiving texts while in class and 86% reported texting someone from class. Respondents who sent texts received lower grades. Still [another study](#) reveals that students who were not using mobile phones during a class lecture “wrote down 62% more...notes, took more detailed notes, were able to recall more detailed information from the lecture, and scored a full letter grade and a half higher on a multiple choice test than those students who were actively using their mobile phones.”

Age matters. [A global study](#) of 27,969 young adults shows that the age at which they received a smartphone or tablet strongly correlates with mental health status in young adulthood.

- The later the age at which these young adults first got a phone or tablet that they could carry with them in childhood, the better their mental wellbeing as adults. In particular, the dimension of mental wellbeing most improved was the Social Self, an aggregate measure of self-confidence and ability to relate positively to others.
- Conversely, those who got their first phone at a younger age were more likely to experience suicidal thoughts, feelings of aggression towards others and a sense of being detached from reality. These trends were stronger in females than males.

Teachers, too, need your help.

As a former fourth grade teacher yourself, you can likely relate to this [Montana teacher](#) who says this about his 38 years in the classroom:

*“I don’t want to be a part of the cellphone police. It is a losing battle. This addiction is so strong that asking them to put away their phones and discuss a short story with the class is not going to change the problem one bit. It is not going to change if I confiscate a phone and take it to the office. In fact, in the latter case, the administrators tell me that the students report to the office shaking, in a state of panic about how to get their phones back. **They cannot control good use of the device. It controls them.**”*

This week, a school theater teacher in Colorado said this in the [Denver Post](#):

*“The attention spans of our students have just kind of decreased,” she said, adding that lessons have to be taught in almost three- or five-minute increments before switching to something else...to keep students engaged. In her theater class, [she] noticed her students are also more hesitant to take risks in class because they **fear that they will be recorded, the video will be posted online and then they will be judged.**”*

["The Case for Phone Free Schools"](#) fully explores the problems and some solutions to the cell phone crisis in the classroom. Key insights include:

1. Children do not have a mature frontal cortex to help resist checking a phone that is delivering constant notifications in their pocket.
2. Mobile devices not only distract students from schoolwork but prevent them from engaging with each other. Studies show that the heaviest smartphone and/or social media users are the most [depressed](#) and [lonely](#). According to the above linked article, “Smartphones impede learning, stunt relationships, and lessen belonging.”
3. Providing lockable phone pouches or phone lockers at school are the most likely way to produce substantial educational, social, and mental health benefits of a phone-free policy because they allow students a full school day away from their phones.

We have kept incident logs of the specific problems personal mobile devices pose in our schools. The number of stories about mis-use during school hours is alarming — from sexting to air-dropping compromising photos to hundreds of classmates with one click, to purchasing

drugs. Cyberbullying (even [self-inflicted](#)) is rampant. The average age that a child sees pornography is now 11 years old. We've seen reports of 8-year-olds accessing hard-core porn. We've heard similar saddening stories from the teenagers in our own homes, and suspect you've heard several from your teens.

Did you know that students themselves don't think cell phones belong in schools? [This study released last week](#) showed that:

92% of high schoolers recommend that elementary students should not have access to cellphones during class time; 71% recommend that middle school students should not have access to cellphones during class time; and 38% of high schoolers recommend that high schoolers themselves should not have access to cellphones during class time.

An [Edweek article](#) on the student viewpoint quotes Heather Perry, superintendent of Maine's Gorham School District, where students are required to place cellphones in "phone hotels" — plastic sleeves hanging on classroom walls — as saying, "Students' responses have been positive. They're saying 'thank you.'" Matthew Montgomery, Lake Forest (IL) High School district superintendent, echoed Perry, saying students were "relieved."

Problematic phone and social media use can no longer be considered an individual decision. In a school environment, it negatively impacts the community as a whole. [These issues spill over to the non-phone user](#). Like second-hand smoke, bystanders in class, on the bus, or in the lunchroom are also exposed to the distractions and harmful content. The mere presence of a smartphone by a neighboring student lowers a non-phone student's test performance by ~6%, according to the [London School of Economics](#) study, which has been replicated by other researchers.

According to the Common Sense Media report, [Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use](#), released this month, "Phone use during school hours is nearly universal but varies widely, reflecting a patchwork of different school policies." 97% of participants used their phones during school hours for an average of 43 minutes per day. The majority of students' time was spent on social media (32%), gaming (17%), and YouTube (26%). Mobile devices are a deterrent to learning.

Your involvement is critical.

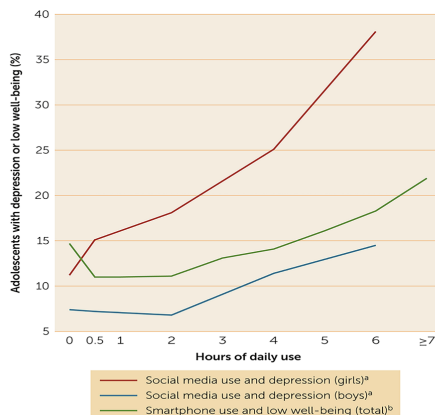
An official Department of Education **ADVISORY** urging U.S. K-12 schools to adopt phone-free policies is needed. You can also encourage state boards of education to offer **GRANTS**, [like those offered in Massachusetts](#), to districts that implement "policies/programs and practices that address the use of electronic devices (cell phones and similar electronic devices) by students throughout the school day in middle and/or high schools."

Here's what educators say after implementing phone-free school policies:

- + A middle school principal saw a 600% reduction in referrals to the front office.
- + A high school saw a dramatic reduction in fights.
- + A science teacher regained 45 minutes a week of teaching time — an entire period.
- + A principal saw an increase in attendance due to students not messaging their parents to call them out of class.
- + Teachers at one school are three weeks ahead in their lesson plans because students are more focused and completing assignments faster.
- + A school librarian noted a 50% increase in the number of books checked out.
- + A principal new to a middle school with an existing phone-free policy, said “I love it! I will not change a thing.”
- + An inner city principal at a Title One high school shared that the only way to keep his students safe and protected is by having a phone-free school policy.

As the Surgeon General stated in his advisory on [Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#) released in May of this year, “We have gaps in our full understanding of the mental health impacts posed by social media but at this point cannot conclude it is sufficiently safe for children and adolescents.” According to the [2022 KIDS COUNT Data Book](#), “children in the United States are experiencing a mental health crisis, with rates of anxiety and depression at unprecedented levels.” Dr. Murthy has declared we have no time to waste. “Our children and adolescents don't have [that] luxury.... Their childhoods and development are happening now.... At a moment when we are experiencing a national youth mental health crisis, now is the time to act swiftly and decisively to protect children and adolescents from risk of harm.”

The Department of Education has a duty of care to protect students from harm. Psychologists from San Diego State University and the University of Georgia used data from ~1.1 million U.S. teens to learn why the rise in happiness suddenly shifted in 2012 and fell sharply over the next four years. [The study](#) asked eighth-, 10th- and 12th-graders how they felt about life. Those who spent more time on social media, texting, electronic games, and the Internet were less happy/satisfied with life and had lower self-esteem.



Twenge, J. M. (2020). *Increases in depression, self-harm, and suicide among U.S. adolescents after 2012 and links to technology use: Possible mechanisms*. *Psychiatric Research & Clinical Practice*.

Phone-free schools could be the most cost-effective, efficient route to solving the youth mental health crisis.

If all students are phone-free during the school day, there will be less distraction, less inappropriate content viewed, less cyberbullying, less planned fights. There will be more focus on academics, development of social skills, and students engaging with each other — in class and at extracurricular activities.

Bottom line: Phone-free schools promote student achievement, foster educational excellence, and ensure an equitable experience for all.

Sincerely,

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