

Cell Phone and Smart Device Use in Schools

Background

Cell phone and smart device use has increased dramatically among youth and adolescents. According to the Pew Research Center, 95% of teens (ages 13–17) have a smartphone. In a [2021 report by Common Sense Media](#), 42% of children nationwide own a phone by age 10; 72% own a phone by age 12; and 91% own a phone by age 14.

Social media use by young people is nearly universal, with up to 95% of young people ages 13–17 reporting using a social media platform and 46% saying they use social media “almost constantly.” Research shows a relationship between social media use and poor sleep quality, reduced sleep duration, sleep difficulties, and depression among youth (Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy, May 2023).

Several school districts in Washington state have implemented policies limiting the use of cell phones and other smart devices. Their policies have taken different approaches: Some allow devices to be used between classes or during lunch, while others allow devices to be used only before or after school. Some school districts have landed on creative solutions like storing phones in locking pouches during class, allowing students to keep their phone in their possession without being able to access it. Relatively few school districts have policies that clearly state where and how phones should be stored when not in use.

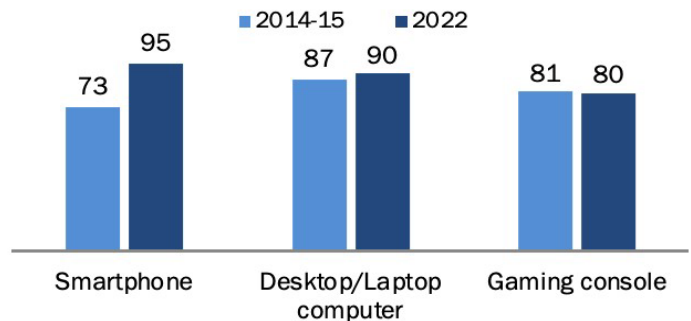
Message from State Superintendent Chris Reykdal

The research is clear: Reducing the use of cell phones in class improves concentration and learning, improves mental and physical health, and reduces pressures caused by social media. I am challenging all Washington school districts to engage their communities over the next year with a goal to reduce distractions during instructional time and determine a path for restricting cell phone and smart device use in class by the start of the 2025–26 school year.

Uniform, school-wide policies that limit cell phone access during instructional time create ongoing and consistent expectations for students, staff, and families. District and building leaders may consider exceptions to consistent policies when an educator is expressly using devices as part of a lesson plan, or in the event of an emergency consistent with locally adopted policies.

Nearly all teens in 2022 have access to a smartphone, up from 73% in 2014-15

% of U.S. teens who say they have access to the following devices



Note: Teens refer to those ages 13 to 17. Those who did not give an answer are not shown. The 2022 question wording further clarified access at home.

Source: Survey conducted April 14-May 4, 2022. “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER



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PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

Cell Phone and Smart Device Policy Considerations

Instructional Use

- Define and teach the appropriate use of cell phones and devices for instructional use.
- Provide equitable access to technology and consider using school-owned laptops instead of personal devices to ensure all students can participate.

Learning Environment

- Provide behavior expectations for cell phones and devices to students and families.
- Define use and non-use areas within the school and classroom.

Student Mental & Physical Health

- Provide information on the mental and physical health effects of high levels of cell phone and social media use to students and families.
- Teach about digital literacy, the effects of cyberbullying, and mis- and disinformation.

Accommodations

- Review and ensure that accommodations for students with disabilities that have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 are met.

Safety & Emergency Use

- Define parameters for emergencies, including how to contact a student while in school.
- Teach about the safe use of cell phones and smart devices during emergencies.

Case Study: Reardon-Edwall School District

"We knew after the 2022-23 school year that something had to change. Students were clearly distracted, and more research was coming out including the Surgeon General's warning.

We discussed as a staff and then engaged our parents over the summer. We have done town halls, written communication, book studies, screenings of Screenagers, etc.

Truthfully, it went way better than I thought it would last year. It has not gone perfectly, but it did go well, and we are continuing our stance going into the 2024-25 school year. As the saying goes, 'now that we know better, we need to do better.'"

–Reardon-Edwall School District Superintendent Eric Sobotta

Reardon-Edwall's Cell Phone Policy Highlights

- During the school day, cell phones must be kept in a locker or cubby.
- High school students may use their cell phones during morning break and at lunch.
- Elementary students may give their phone to their teacher at the beginning of the day to be kept in a locked drawer in the classroom.
- To contact a student, parents and guardians must leave a message with the school office.