

PHONE-FREE SCHOOLS: BREAKING DOWN COMMON OBJECTIONS

Evidence-based responses to the most frequent arguments against bell-to-bell phone-free school policies

When advocating for phone-free schools, parents and educators often face the same set of objections. Below are concise, research-backed rebuttals to the six most common arguments, designed to help you make the case clearly and confidently.

OBJECTION

SAFETY

"What if there is an emergency?"

Cell phones in an emergency actually make kids less safe.

- The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) supports bell-to-bell phone-free schools because cell phones make kids less safe on normal days and in emergencies.
- Phones distract students from listening to critical instructions from teachers.
- Pings and beeps can alert an intruder to a student's location.
- Parents clogging cell networks and roads impede emergency responders' communication and ability to reach the scene.

OBJECTION

EQUITY

"Phones level the playing field from an equity standpoint."

Children from minority and lower socioeconomic backgrounds already spend more time on screens. More screen time widens this divide.

- The downsides and costs of phones in school outweigh any benefits from access to technology.
- A top contributor to engagement is strong relationships between students and teachers. Phones make it harder for those relationships to develop.
- If smartphones reduced the equity gap, we'd see it shrinking over the past 15 years as access became ubiquitous. We haven't. The gap widened during Covid when screen use was supercharged.

OBJECTION

DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

"Kids must learn how to manage this technology."

Digital citizenship is best learned face-to-face, not through devices designed to be addictive.

- We don't ask kids to take drugs to learn to manage drug addiction. We should not ask them to carry phones to learn to manage phone addiction.
- 43% of adults admit to being addicted to their phones. It is unrealistic to expect children to control their use when most adults cannot.
- Students feel freer to act authentically when there's no threat of being recorded, and cyberbullying during the school day is significantly reduced.
- Kids report that social media fuels their mental health struggles. They depend on adults to remove these pressures from learning environments.

OBJECTION

LOCAL CONTROL

"We don't need bell-to-bell; 'instructional time only' is fine."

Stricter policies are associated with better teacher-reported outcomes.

- The PA State Education Association (nearly 200,000 teachers) supports bell-to-bell policies so teachers can focus on teaching, not managing phone use.
- Only bell-to-bell policies interrupt harmful addictive cycles, helping students build healthier habits, improve focus, and develop emotional resilience.
- When students know they'll soon have access again, dopamine surges and attention collapses. When access is removed entirely, cravings fade and focus returns.

OBJECTION

COMMUNICATION

"Parents need to be able to reach their kids."

Kids develop emotional resiliency by practicing in-person communication on their own.

- Constant text-based communication — even with parents — is distracting to young learners.
- Kids need to learn to navigate the world without constant parental access, and schools provide a safe place to practice that skill.
- If there is an urgent need to communicate, parents can always call the school's main office.

OBJECTION

IMPLEMENTATION

"My district doesn't have the resources to make this work."

Instituting a phone-free policy is not only doable — it's transformative.

- The key is a robust definition of 'phone-free' with clear, firm consequences for violations, communicated effectively to all stakeholders.
- While some schools opt for expensive storage, simple and affordable options work well, such as pencil pouches or envelopes stored in an office or homeroom.
- Enforcement guidelines will vary by district and community needs.

WHO SUPPORTS PHONE-FREE SCHOOLS?

A growing coalition of educators, researchers, and public safety officials back bell-to-bell phone-free policies as one of the most effective steps schools can take to improve focus, academic performance, mental health, and classroom culture.

National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO)

Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)

PA Association of School Administrators (PASA)

Distraction Free Schools Policy Project