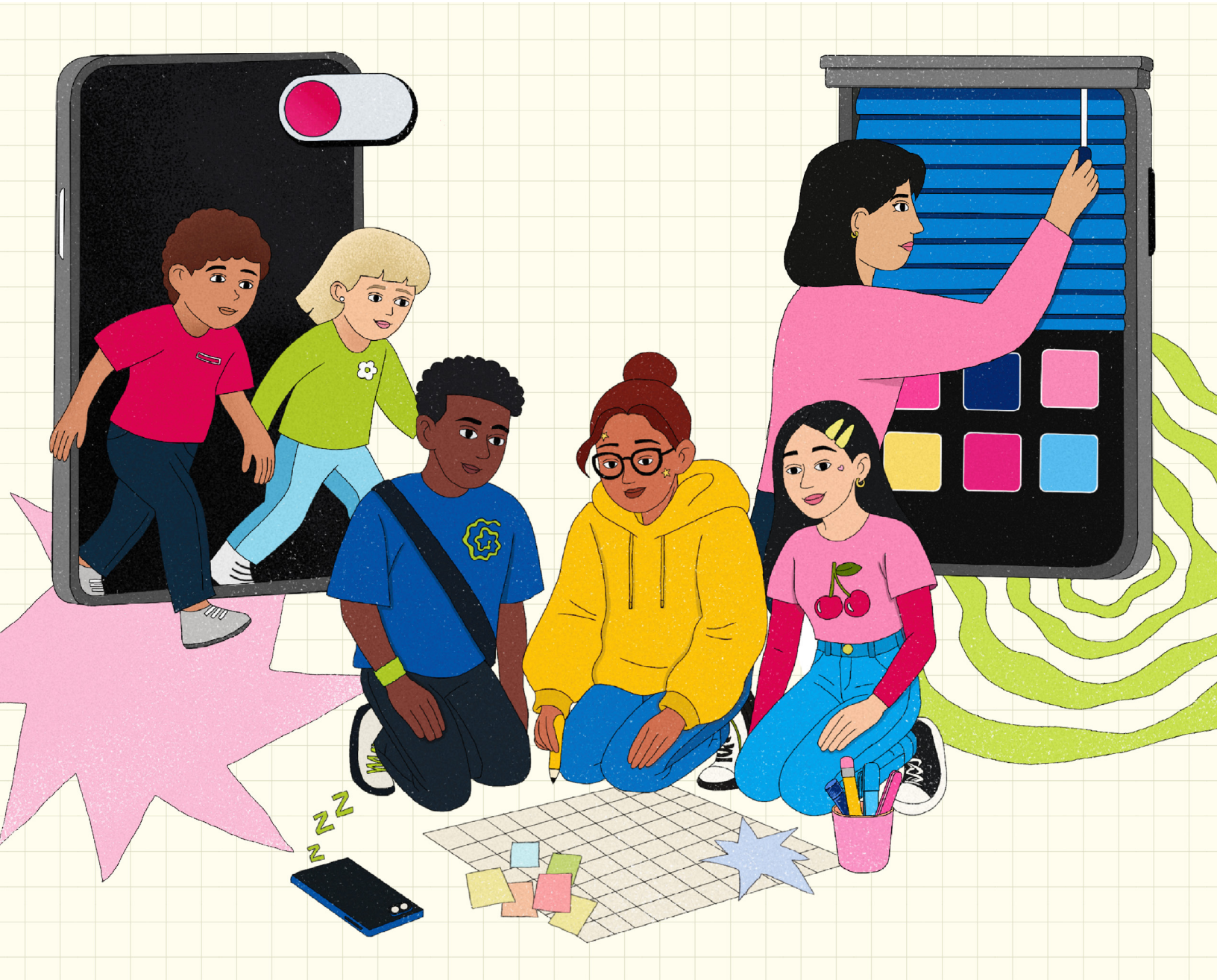


Roundtable Reflections: Navigating Phone Use in Schools



Acknowledgements

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The Dais is a public policy and leadership think tank at Toronto Metropolitan University, working at the intersection of technology, education and democracy to build shared prosperity and citizenship for Canada.

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Introduction

In 2024, all ten Canadian provinces introduced some form of restriction on personal device use—particularly mobile phones—in K–12 educational settings. These policies aim to address growing concerns about digital distractions, reduced student focus, and the negative impact of technology overuse on student well-being.

As part of the [Heads Up](#) program, the Dais at Toronto Metropolitan University conducted a [detailed mapping and comparative analysis](#) of these provincial policies. To better understand their early implementation, we organized roundtables in each province, engaging directly with those on the front lines of policy implementation in K–12 schools, as well as with individuals involved in related research, advocacy, and community work.

Each roundtable included approximately 15 to 20 participants, collectively engaging over 150 stakeholders nationwide. The two-hour sessions began with a 30-minute context-setting presentation, followed by 90 minutes of semi-structured dialogue organized around three key themes: early successes, challenges, and considerations to support and sustain these policies.

Participants represented a wide range of sectors, including educators,¹ school board leaders, education ministry representatives, parent advocates, healthcare professionals, community organization leaders, academics, and researchers.

This brief distills the insights from our national conversations into three main topic areas: early successes, challenges, and related issues that extend beyond formal education systems.

Context and Caveats

While the roundtables were designed to surface broad, cross-sector insights, they were not structured to capture detailed, school-by-school implementation data. Some participants did speak to specific classroom-level practices, but the format naturally lent itself to identifying common themes and systemic challenges rather than exhaustive, ground-level case studies. As a result, the examples shared reflect patterns and recurring observations rather than granular or representative data.

Additionally, roundtable participation involved some degree of self-selection: individuals who attended were typically engaged with, supportive of, or highly interested in these policies. As a result, perspectives opposing the implementation of phone restriction policies were not prominent in our discussions. Survey findings from [the Dais](#), the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF & Abacus Data, October 2024), and [Alberta's Ministry of Education](#), indicate strong public support for these policies among educators, parents, and the general public.

Looking ahead, future convenings and research may benefit from more targeted school-level case studies to complement and deepen the system-level insights gathered here.



What We Heard

Early successes

The value of having a policy

One of the significant early successes observed across provinces is the **adoption and acceptance** of K-12 phone restriction policies. Province-wide mandates have provided consistency for educators and administrators who previously navigated fragmented school-level rules. School leaders benefit from clearly articulated provincial directives by reducing the need to justify restrictions to parents and students. Educators across roundtables noted unexpectedly positive reactions from parents and students, with less resistance than initially anticipated. Some older students who initially resisted restrictions gradually accepted them when they understood their rationale and experienced benefits themselves. Provincial policies have created uniformity and reduced ambiguity around acceptable phone use, which in turn has generated greater support.

Student engagement and behavior

Where phone restriction policies have been effectively implemented, we heard reports of positive improvements in classroom engagement and student behavior. Schools describe noticeable improvements, such as more interactive hallways and cafeterias, heightened peer collaboration, and better engagement during extra-curricular activities. Teachers have observed students being more present, focused, and actively participating in classroom activities. Roundtable participants reported fewer incidents of cyberbullying, particularly those involving conflicts initiated or exacerbated online and carried over into school environments.

Moreover, these positive behavioral shifts are extending beyond school hours. Some after-school programs reported increased ease in managing phone-free activities, and some home environments are experiencing critical conversations around the risks and harms associated with phone overuse, prompted by policy infractions or simply the existence of these new school rules.

Implementation strategies that strengthen compliance

Across provinces, we heard that successful implementation depends on clear expectations and consistent follow-through, supported by communication and care. Schools that have seen smoother adoption and stronger compliance tend to approach phone restrictions not just as a rule to enforce, but as a shared norm to build—one rooted in student well-being and collective responsibility.

While each school's path may look different, the overall message is clear: intentional, collaborative, and values-driven implementation can make a meaningful difference.

Implementation Strategies

Building shared understanding for policy buy-in

- Introduce and discuss policy expectations early, embedding them into school routines and culture.
- Engage school staff to present the policy as a collective effort rooted in care and student well-being.
- Clearly communicate the rationale (“why”) behind the policy throughout the year, including through assemblies and student engagement.
- Communicate proactively with parents via formal letters, newsletters, meetings, and school council discussions.
- Use supportive, non-blaming messaging in ongoing parent communication, including regular reminders to build clarity and reinforce policy awareness.
- Refer to policies as “restrictions” rather than “bans” to emphasize flexibility and accommodate legitimate needs.

Unified enforcement alignment across the school

- Engage teachers, curriculum leaders, students, and parents early to co-create a shared understanding and support.
- Ensure uniform enforcement across classrooms—schools with aligned approaches see better outcomes.
- Respect teacher autonomy while ensuring consistent enforcement across classrooms to improve buy-in and trust.
- Track phone policy violations using shared systems (e.g., using Google Docs) to ensure consistency across staff.

Daily structures and tools for consistent enforcement

- Use structured storage solutions like lockers, phone hotels, or teacher-managed bins to reduce unauthorized use.
- Deploy phone check-in systems at classroom doors to reinforce daily compliance habits.
- Adopt escalating, clearly communicated consequences for violations to improve student understanding and compliance.
- Provide clear exception processes with documentation for students needing phones for medical, accessibility, or family responsibilities.
- Avoid punitive discipline — confiscate phones rather than suspending students; use tiered confiscation durations.
- Keep confiscated phones out of sight in secure, administrator-only accessible storage to discourage repeat violations.
- Eliminate end-of-task casual phone use by redesigning classroom routines with clear boundaries.
- Assign purposeful enrichment activities to students who finish tasks early to reduce idle time and phone use.
- Integrate age-appropriate digital literacy and online safety education into the curriculum to help students understand responsible tech use.



IMPLEMENTATION SNAPSHOT:

Balancing Accountability and Adaptability

📍 Urban High School, Nova Scotia

At a high school with over 1,700 students, administrators developed a system to implement the provincial phone directive. A staff-wide Google Form enabled quick reporting of infractions and documented followups. The enforcement approach of one warning followed by escalating consequences was framed to parents as shifting student routines without being overly punitive.

By the second semester, school leaders noted repeated infractions among a small group of students and revised their strategy. Instead of suspensions leading to lost learning time, phones were confiscated and stored for the day. To support students who rely on phones for digital payments, the school introduced alternative payment options at the school cafeteria, and engaged families through the School Advisory Council.

Challenges and Opportunities for Improvement

Uneven enforcement and enforcement fatigue

While all ten provincial directives mandate that phones remain “off or on silent and out of sight” at least during instructional time, they stop short of offering guidance on how that expectation should be operationalized. This lack of specificity has left significant room for interpretation at the school and classroom levels. In practice, this has resulted in wide variation in enforcement, both between schools and within them, leading to confusion, inconsistency, and increased strain on educators.

This challenge surfaced in three key areas:

Inconsistent practices across schools and classrooms

Implementation approaches vary widely. In some schools, students are required to place phones in designated storage (e.g., phone caddies or shoe hangers); in others, they are allowed to keep devices in backpacks, pockets, or personal lockers. Even within a single school, different classrooms may apply different rules. This inconsistency creates mixed

messaging for students and undermines the overall credibility and coherence of the policy.

Absence of systems to enforce and track the policy

There appear to be no systematic efforts at the district or provincial level to track how consistently phone restrictions are being enforced, or to evaluate which implementation models are most effective. This lack of monitoring limits opportunities to learn from emerging best practices, and inhibits accountability.

Enforcement burden and fatigue among teachers

Teachers are often left as the final enforcers of these policies, and are expected to monitor device use on top of a full slate of instructional and administrative responsibilities. Roundtable conversations highlighted the exhaustion that comes with constant monitoring, managing repeat infractions, and navigating the line between educator and surveillant. Without clear guidance and coordinated support, this enforcement burden risks straining classroom relationships and accelerating implementation fatigue among educators who are already balancing significant demands.



IMPLEMENTATION SNAPSHOT:

Building Collective Buy-In Through Care and Clarity

📍 Urban High School, Ontario

Ahead of the provincial phone restriction, an urban Ontario high school proactively engaged staff to co-create a phone policy rooted in care and clarity. Phones were required to be off and out of sight during class, with limited use allowed before school and at lunch. Expectations were communicated transparently to parents, and teachers retained flexibility in classroom enforcement.

Rather than emphasizing punishment, the school focused on culture-building by framing the policy as a shared commitment to student well-being. Clear and consistent messaging to students contributed to a shift in the school culture. The school focused on building a relational environment where students were guided to engage responsibly and respectfully.

Navigating tech-enabled learning in phone free schools

Another challenge is navigating phone restrictions in tech-enabled learning environments. Over the past decade, educators have been encouraged to integrate digital tools into their pedagogical practices and embrace “Bring Your Own Device” (BYOD) policies. In fact, as recently as 2019, **69% of secondary school principals in Ontario** reported using a BYOD model, where students were asked to bring personal devices for educational purposes. The sudden removal or restriction of these devices, without adequate provision of school-issued technological resources, can significantly disrupt established teaching practices. Educators find themselves grappling with limited digital infrastructure—insufficient school-owned devices—to substitute for students’ personal devices.

Educators emphasize the difficulty of balancing educational technology needs with policy compliance, leading to confusion and interruption to planned instruction. Teachers who previously depended on digital platforms for surveys, assessments, or student engagement now face obstacles in delivering assignments or facilitating collaborative projects. In schools with limited access to school-owned devices,

phone restrictions place added pressure on teachers to adapt and leave some students without the tools to meaningfully participate in digital learning. In many cases, a school’s ability to compensate depends on its fundraising capacity—further entrenching disparities between high- and low-income communities.

Centring youth voice and partnership

In most provinces, phone restriction policies were developed and enacted without systematically incorporating student perspectives. This exclusion extends to the school level, where implementation has often moved forward without structured opportunities for student input. The few schools that have meaningfully involved students, whether through discussions, feedback loops, or peer-led initiatives, are experiencing stronger buy-in and more sustained engagement over time.

Students are not merely passive recipients of policy. They should be active participants in shaping the digital environments in which they live. In many cases, students understand the logic, pressures, and social dynamics of their own digital environments more intimately than adults. Alongside phone restrictions, participants pointed to digital literacy and structured dialogue as supports that can strengthen

understanding, buy-in, and long-term behavioral change. Youth-led campaigns like *NoSo November* and *Take Back the Algorithm* show how peer-driven solutions can foster cultural change more organically than top-down enforcement.

Equity considerations and accommodations

Equity considerations and accommodations present a complex challenge that requires clear provincial guidelines, along with flexibility for nuanced implementation at the school level. While most provincial policies explicitly allow for medical or accessibility accommodations, granting these accommodations in practice varies widely. Some schools readily grant exemptions upon parental requests, while others require stricter documentation from healthcare professionals. Clear, standardized provincial guidance on the accommodation process would help ensure consistency and fairness, and reduce potential stigma for students requiring accommodations.

Another critical equity dimension involves students who carry significant family or employment responsibilities outside school. For instance, students from newcomer families may serve as the primary English or French communicators, requiring them to manage essential familial communications during school hours. Similarly, economically disadvantaged students who rely on their phones to secure casual employment after school may face undue stress under blanket phone restrictions. Educators recommend empowering teachers and principals with the discretion to provide targeted, reasonable accommodations. This flexibility would support students balancing academic expectations with essential family or employment responsibilities, ensuring that phone restriction policies do not unintentionally exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities.

Intersecting Issues that Extend Beyond K-12 Education

Regulating social media's design for distraction

The necessity for K-12 phone restriction policies stems from the attention-extractive design practices employed by social media and tech companies. Across roundtables, participants consistently emphasized that the underlying cause of students' diminishing attention spans and declining academic and social-emotional well-being lie in intentionally addictive digital interfaces. Social media platforms have been flagged repeatedly for designing features explicitly aimed at maximizing user engagement—such as notification bombardments, infinite scrolling, and gamified streaks—that significantly contribute to digital dependency among youth.

Participants strongly advocated for a robust legislative response from provincial and federal governments, urging lawmakers to hold tech companies accountable through stricter regulations and oversight. Additionally, participants raised concerns about targeted advertising and exploitative marketing strategies specifically designed to appeal to youth. Addressing these systemic issues requires comprehensive regulatory frameworks that go beyond limiting harmful practices, compelling tech companies to adopt transparent and responsible design ethics that prioritize user well-being over profit.

The need for a societal, systemic approach

Addressing the complexity of digital dependency requires a holistic approach that extends well beyond the formal education sector. Roundtable participants consistently emphasized that it is unrealistic and unsustainable to expect schools and educators to resolve deeply entrenched societal issues alone. Key actors—including healthcare professionals, mental health advocates, parents, community leaders, law enforcement, and policymakers—must share responsibility, each contributing their unique expertise and resources.

There was broad agreement across roundtable discussions on the importance of a coordinated public awareness campaign, modeled on successful initiatives like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, as a strategy to encourage responsible digital engagement. Such a campaign could illustrate the mental health consequences of excessive digital consumption habits and highlight manipulative design practices used by digital platforms. Increasing public awareness may support efforts to expand digital literacy, promote mental well-being, and influence healthier social norms around responsible technology use.

Digital literacy and building a culture of digital well-being

Schools alone cannot fully embed and sustain digital literacy and well-being. Roundtable participants underscored the essential role of family and community organizations in reinforcing healthy digital behaviors. Schools highlighted the critical need for digital literacy and responsible digital citizenship education to extend into home environments, where adults, especially parents and caregivers, consistently model healthy technology habits. Families' active participation in setting and enforcing boundaries around device use and promoting balanced digital lifestyles at home was identified as crucial.

Roundtable participants also advocated for expanding phone-use restrictions into after-school programs, community settings, and extracurricular activities to reinforce consistent expectations and amplify impact. Consistent alignment between schools, homes, and community settings could encourage a supportive ecosystem where students encounter clear expectations and boundaries around digital behaviours. Participants recognized that embedding these values will require ongoing parental support, accessible educational resources, and active community involvement to form a collective and sustained cultural shift towards digital well-being.



Conclusion

The first year of widespread phone restriction policies across Canada's K–12 schools marks an important and encouraging beginning. These policies are helping to reset norms around personal device use in learning environments, and are showing early signs of positive impact in many contexts. But they are not a complete solution. Ensuring their success requires thoughtful implementation within schools, ongoing engagement with students, families, and communities, and strong system-wide coordination. Most importantly, it requires recognizing that the roots of the issue extend beyond the classroom, to the design of the digital products young people use, the social pressures they navigate, and the broader societal choices we make about attention, well-being, and childhood itself.

The anecdotes and reflections gathered through these roundtables offer a valuable starting point. Building on these insights, we have developed an accompanying [Policymaker Playbook](#) and [Implementation Guide](#) to serve as evidence-based, practical tools for policymakers and educators.

Announcing [Heads Up](#)

Endnotes

¹In this document, “educators” refers broadly to teachers, school administrators, support staff, and other professionals involved in school life. When referring specifically to those delivering classroom instruction, we use “teachers”.