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Policymaker Playbook

Designing Effective School Policies on Personal Device Use



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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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Rajender (he/him) brings over a decade of practitioner-researcher experience working at the intersection of education, technology, and public policy. Combining expertise in policy research and program implementation, he develops rigorous, actionable solutions to some of society's most pressing challenges.

Starting his career as a software engineer, he was drawn by the promise of excellent education in building a just and equitable society, leading him to become a K-12 teacher in an under-resourced school in Delhi. He has since held leadership roles across nonprofit and for-profit sectors, including university instructor, policy analyst, and senior program manager, leading large-scale education programs that integrated teacher development, curriculum innovation, and EdTech interventions to address systemic challenges in diverse settings.



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He's published many papers, reports and articles, including in other past roles with IMFG, a cities-focused research institute at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy; and with the Public Policy Forum.



At a Glance

In 2024, all Canadian provinces introduced restrictions on personal device use in K–12 schools in response to rising concerns over distraction, mental health, and school climate. As provinces and schools implement these policies, early experience is clarifying what works: “bell-to-bell” policies across the school day, clearly communicated and consistently enforced.

This playbook distills research, roundtable insights, and youth perspectives to offer practical, evidence-informed guidance for creating, implementing, and evaluating phone restriction policies. It outlines four essential steps:

- Establish a clear rationale grounded in public support and evidence on distraction and well-being.
- Engage stakeholders early and continuously to ensure buy-in and relevance.
- Design comprehensive policies that balance consistency and flexibility, including inclusive exceptions and practical enforcement models.
- Monitor and evaluate implementation to address challenges, inform adaptations over time, and measure impact.

Designed for policymakers, this guide helps ministries and school boards establish phone restriction policies that support student learning and well-being.



Introduction

In response to growing concerns about distraction, student well-being, and school culture, every Canadian province introduced some form of personal device restrictions in K–12 schools during the 2024 school year. As these policies move from announcement to practice, the priority is lasting, successful implementation: ensuring restrictions work for students, educators, parents, and other key communities. This playbook outlines how to establish effective phone restriction policies, shaped by what the Dais has learned over the past year through research and engagement across the country.

As provinces and schools implement these policies, early experience indicates what works: bell-to-bell policies across the school day, clearly communicated to students and parents, and consistently enforced by principals, teachers, and school support staff. This playbook is primarily intended for provincial policymakers at the ministry level and school board leaders, as well as others involved in designing or refining phone use policies in K–12 settings.

Our guidance is informed by:

- A review of [provincial phone policies](#) across Canada.
- [Roundtable discussions](#) held in all 10 provinces with educators, school board leaders, parent advocates, researchers, experts, and community organizations.
- Our [Youth Champions](#) program, which equips high schoolers across Canada to lead conversations with peers, parents, educators and policymakers on phone restrictions and digital wellness issues.
- A scan of existing research and evidence on phone use, learning, and well-being.

STEP 1:

Establish a Rationale

Why restrict phones in schools?

There is substantial and growing evidence that unregulated smartphone use during the school day undermines both academic performance and student well-being.

Key concerns include:

- **Distraction and disengagement:** Unregulated phone use disrupts classroom focus and has been shown to negatively affect **academic performance**.
- **Impacts on mental health:** Excessive screen time is linked to **increased anxiety, depression, and disrupted psychosocial development**.
- **School culture and climate:** Existing research, corroborated in our national roundtables, point to phone use contributes to **increased peer conflict** and **cyberbullying incidents** in schools.

There is strong and sustained public support for restrictions. Surveys conducted by the **Dais**, the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF & Abacus Data, October 2024), and **Alberta's Ministry of Education** all show broad consensus in favour of these restrictions. In our survey, 81% of Canadian residents supported school phone restrictions, with consensus across age groups and provinces. However, views on the effectiveness of phone restrictions were mixed: 37% perceived the restrictions as at least somewhat effective, while 40% considered them not very effective.

In the absence of clear, coherent policies, enforcement is left to teachers and schools — leading to inconsistency, inequity, and confusion. Partial-day or classroom-by-classroom approaches can create the same problem, by leaving expectations unclear during lunch, transitions, and other high-risk periods for conflict and covert use.

A well-crafted policy is not anti-technology. It's about setting appropriate and enforceable boundaries that prioritize learning, equity, and mental well-being.

STEP 2:

Engage Stakeholders Early and Often

While there is broad support for phone use restrictions in schools, the success of these policies depends not just on a strong rationale—but also on meaningful consultation about how they should be implemented in practice.

Most provinces share a common rationale for phone restrictions, grounded in concerns about distraction, student well-being, and school culture. However, the design of policies—enforcement mechanisms, age-specific adaptations, and classroom integration—should be informed by consultation with key stakeholders. These include:

- Educators
- Students
- School leaders
- School mental health professionals
- Researchers

Consultation should be practical, focusing not only on **whether** phone policies are needed, but also on **how** they can best be designed and supported to reduce inconsistency and achieve high levels of buy-in. Ministries and school boards should co-develop implementation approaches with those expected to enforce the policies. This includes giving schools flexibility to adapt their school policies within a provincial framework, while setting clear standards for full-day phone-free expectations and their consistent enforcement.

Finally, consultation should not be a one-time exercise. Ministries and school boards should establish regular feedback loops to assess implementation, identify challenges, and adjust accordingly. Ongoing dialogue is essential to ensure that policies are practical, inclusive, and responsive to school realities without compromising on full-day phone-free expectations.

STEP 3: Design a Comprehensive Policy

The following key elements should guide effective policy development:

Define the Scope of Restricted Devices

Policies are primarily aimed at restricting student use of personal smartphones during school hours and on school premises. However, the underlying concern extends beyond smartphones to a broader category of devices, including but not limited to:

- iPads/tablets
- Smartwatches
- Gaming consoles
- Smart glasses
- Wireless earbuds / headphones

Emerging technologies require a broad, flexible definition that allows schools to determine additional devices that should be restricted based on their function, not just their form, as illustrated in the below definition from [PEI's provincial policy](#).

“Any user owned mobile device that will store, retrieve, manipulate, transmit, or receive digital information, and for greater clarity could include a smartphone, tablet, or laptop.” (PEI, 2024)

Set a Full Day Standard Across Grades Assess Age-Based Needs

Personal devices should be restricted for the entire school day (i.e. from bell-to-bell), including class time, breaks, and transitions for all students. The harms associated with smartphones extend beyond instructional distraction to social isolation and cyberbullying—often concentrated during lunchtime and breaks.

Most provinces (with the [exception of Quebec](#)) have adopted **age-based** restrictions. These apply full-day restrictions to younger students (typically K–6 or K–8), while for older students, restrictions usually apply only during instructional time, with devices permitted during lunch and other breaks. This phased approach reflects practical considerations, including enforcement challenges, age-based expectations of autonomy, and the need to reduce resistance from high school students when implementing a new policy.

An age-sensitive approach can help build long-term culture change, particularly in secondary schools where enforcement is more complex. However, early evidence from schools, public opinion, and international experience suggests that allowing access during unstructured periods can undermine the policy rationale that smartphone overuse affects school culture and reduces in-person social interaction. For these reasons, we recommend that provinces and school boards adopt full-day phone-restrictions even in secondary schools.

Choose an Enforcement Model

The most common enforcement options for phone restriction policies are summarized in Table 1. These approaches vary in how and where phones are stored during the school day, but can be grouped into two broad categories:

- **Out of sight:** Phones are not visible during the school day but remain accessible to students (e.g., in pockets, bags, or lockers).
- **Out of sight and out of reach:** Phones are both out of sight and physically inaccessible to students without staff involvement (e.g., locked storage, classroom caddies).

Every province introduced restrictions in 2024 that require phones to be out of sight during instructional time. In 2025, Quebec updated its policy to extend this policy requirement to the full school day. However, no province has required schools to keep phones out of reach for the full school day. As a result, many restrictions have adopted out-of-sight approaches, most commonly by keeping phones stored in students' pockets or bags.

A survey of more than 20,000 educators in the United States found that out-of-sight approaches that still allow students to carry phones in pockets or backpacks are less effective than out-of-reach policies. Full-day phone-free policies are generally easier to implement consistently when phones are kept out of reach by reducing covert use and uneven enforcement across classrooms, and lowering the burden of enforcement on individual educators. Where devices are needed for instructional purposes, schools should use school-managed devices where possible. Use of personal devices for instructional purposes should be teacher-directed and limited to a specific activity, given the well-researched challenges with frequent collection and redistribution of personal phones.



When students are able to bring their own devices to school, principals report that teachers plan lessons with this policy in mind. Sixty-four percent of elementary schools and 93% of secondary schools with BYOD report at least some of the teachers create lessons with BYOD in mind”

Table 1: Enforcement Model Options¹

Model	Category	Benefits	Challenges
Phones in student pockets or bags	Out of Sight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Easier to implement No storage required, lower cost Accessible for instruction as needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phones remain accessible for covert use High enforcement burden on teachers Inconsistent enforcement, as all teachers are unequally equipped and/or motivated to enforce
Phones in personal lockers outside classrooms	Out of Sight	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Easier to implement No storage required, lower cost Less covert use in classroom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inaccessible for instruction that relies on personal phones Accessible during breaks, and can lead to students taking more frequent breaks
Phones in classroom caddies or shoe hangers	Out of Sight+ Out of Reach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low cost Easier to enforce consistently 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less compatible with instruction that relies on personal phones; requires planning for alternatives
Phones in locked storage	Out of Sight + Out of Reach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevents all use during mandated hours Less ongoing enforcement required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher upfront cost (storage or pouch system) Limits access for instruction unless planned and supervised

Allow for Inclusive Exceptions

Effective phone use policies must be grounded in inclusion and flexibility, rather than rigidity. Drawing on roundtable discussions, common exceptions can be grouped into three broad categories.

Table 2: Exception Types

Exception Type	Examples	Recommendation
Ongoing, constant use	<p>Students with medical or accessibility needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A student with diabetes who needs regular access to a phone-connected glucose monitor or health app• A student with a visual impairment who uses a screen reader or magnification app on their phone to access learning materials	Formal exemptions should be supported by documentation (e.g., doctor's note) and included in student's Individual Education Plan (IEP).
Ongoing, intermittent use	<p>Students with caregiving, work, or essential family needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A student working casual shifts who needs to confirm or reserve work via phone• A student who is the only English speaker in their household who may need to manage essential family communications during school hours	Approval at the classroom or school level with a trust-based approach. Use should be allowed without stigma or penalty.
Rare, situational use	<p>Emergencies, important cultural or social events</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A student receiving time-sensitive news about a university admission or scholarship• A student coordinating transportation for a same-day off-campus appointment or exam	Teachers and administrators should have clear authority to grant temporary, contextual exemptions using professional discretion.

Schools must be empowered to grant exemptions thoughtfully, without stigma or disclosure of personal details, and based on professional discretion. Policies that account for reasonable student needs are more likely to succeed

Set Fair and Reasonable Consequences

Consequences for breaking phone use rules should align with approaches to other behavioral issues: beginning with verbal warning and escalating only as necessary. Schools should integrate phone restriction consequences into their existing disciplinary ladder, considering two additional key principles:

Suspend the device, not the student.

Suspending students over phone use is counterproductive: it separates them from learning while creating opportunities for more screen time at home. Consequences should rather focus on the device itself: for example, confiscation for the day or a discussion with parents.

Respond to repeat violations with care.

Students who repeatedly break the rules should not simply be labelled “repeat offenders”. Persistent or secretive phone use may signal deeper issues such as compulsive behavior, coercion, or involvement in [harmful networks](#). These situations require more than discipline: they call for thoughtful inquiry, support and protection.

Most provinces offer little guidance on consequences for violating phone-use rules, but [Newfoundland & Labrador’s policy](#) outlines a progressive, device-focused approach. Even there, repeat violations should be handled with care, not just disciplinary action.

Support Schools Through Implementation

Ministries and school boards should be prepared to offer targeted, differentiated support to schools based on their readiness and local context. Key supports may include:

- Financial support for purchasing phone storage solutions (e.g., pouches, lockers, locked cabinets).
- Professional development for educators concerning classroom management, enforcement strategies, and equity considerations.
- Integration with digital literacy curriculum, ensuring students understand the “why” behind the policy, and how to engage with technology responsibly inside and outside of school.
- Technical and administrative guidance, such as adapting IT or BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) policies to align with the new restrictions.
- Communication materials for students, families and staff to ensure consistent understanding of the policy and its rationale.
- Flexible implementation models, allowing for schools to choose operational enforcement approaches while maintaining consistent, system-wide full-day phone-free expectations.



STEP 4:

Monitor and Evaluate Impact

Despite wide adoption in 2024, no province yet has established a systematic evaluation mechanism to track policy implementation or impact on student learning, well-being or school culture. Other jurisdictions, such as [New South Wales \(Australia\)](#) and [the Netherlands](#), have paired implementation with systematic follow-up evaluations with key enforcers such as principals and educators.

Effective policy is iterative. Oversight and impact evaluation should be built into the policy lifecycle to ensure that policies remain effective, equitable and adaptable. Ministries and school boards should consider simple, scalable strategies for regular tracking and feedback, such as:

- A provincial requirement for every school to develop and publicly share a phone use policy, adapted from provincial guidelines and uniformly enforced.
- A board-level dashboard to track each school across key indicators of how well the policy is being implemented.
- Surveys of teachers, students and parents about the policy's impact on classrooms and school culture.

- Term-end implementation check-ins with school administrators to identify successes and challenges.
- Including phone policy status in existing school improvement planning cycles.
- Encouraging schools to document and share implementation stories, innovations and unintended consequences.

These strategies allow schools to tailor implementation to their local needs, while operating within a clear framework that enables accountability and support.

While phone restriction policies aren't a complete solution to shaping a healthy relationship with technology, they offer a powerful lever to improve academic focus and student wellbeing. With thoughtful design, policymakers can help schools create learning environments where students and educators thrive.



References

¹Table adapted from Jonathan Haidt, “Phone-Free Schools: What Works?” After Babel, June 2024.
<https://www.afterbabel.com/p/phone-free-schools>