

Executive Summary

Strengthening K-12 Cellphone Policies to Support Student Learning and Well-Being:

Research-Based Guidance for
U.S. Education Leaders

Kathy T. Do, Ph.D.

California Institute on Law,
Neuroscience, and Education
UC|CSU Collaborative for
Neuroscience, Diversity, and Learning
University of California, Los Angeles

Jennie K. Grammer, Ph.D.

UC|CSU Collaborative for
Neuroscience, Diversity, and Learning
University of California, Los Angeles

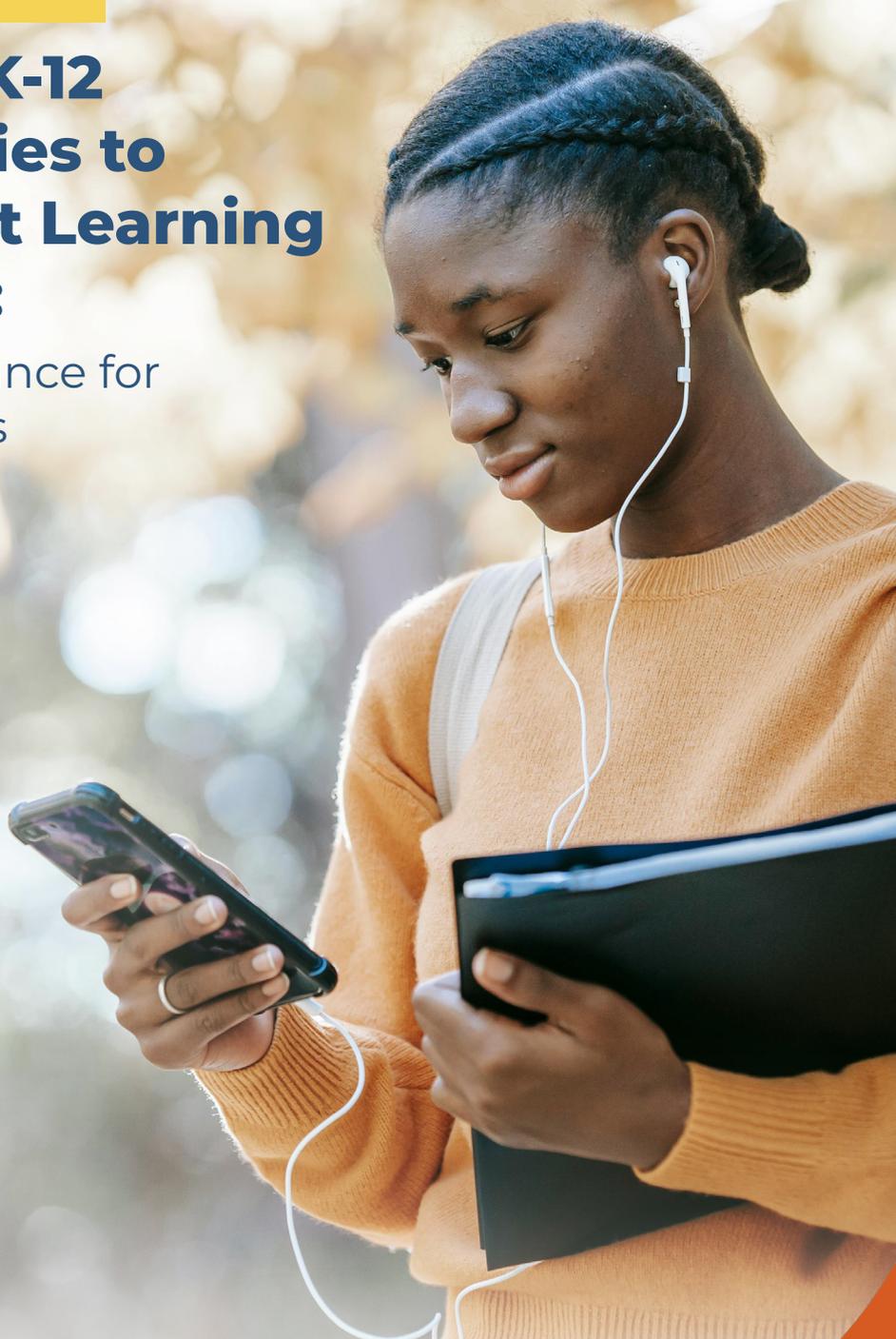
Joseph P. Bishop, Ph.D.

Center for the Transformation of Schools
University of California, Los Angeles



UCLA

**Center for the Transformation
of Schools**



Acknowledgments

Preparation of this research brief was supported by the UC|CSU Collaborative for Neuroscience, Diversity, and Learning, California Institute on Law, Neuroscience, and Education, and the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools, School of Education & Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles. We thank Chuting Wang, Julie Rinker, and Megan Valladao Thomas for assistance with the research literature and policy review. We also thank our UC|CSU Collaborative colleagues Dr. Alison Yoshimoto-Towery, Dr. Julie Schneider, Dr. Cristina Whyte, Zoe Mao, and Kyle Hay for their helpful comments, as well as Katie Bellman for design assistance on early drafts.

Credits:

Copy Editor

- Kathleen Rowley, Ph.D., School of Education & Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles

Designer

- Geneva Cegelis Sum, Center for the Transformation of Schools, School of Education & Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles



About the UC|CSU Collaborative for Neuroscience, Diversity, and Learning and Arraya Learning:

The UC|CSU Collaborative for Neuroscience, Diversity, and Learning is a community of UC and CSU faculty and system leaders from across California who are committed to equipping educators and decision-makers with evidence-based tools to meet the diverse needs of students and improve learning outcomes. Arraya Learning, developed by the UC|CSU Collaborative, is a comprehensive and free resource hub for research-based strategies, tools, and insights to create inclusive and effective learning environments for all learners. For more information, visit <https://ca-diverse-learning.org> and <https://www.arrayalearning.org/p/about>.



About the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools:

The UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools is dedicated to partnering with the education ecosystem to bring about systems change through Humanizing Research, Validating Practices, and Transformative Policies with key stakeholders to support equitable educational outcomes for students. Our vision is to be a catalyst for learning communities to boldly nurture and protect the dignity, well-being, and full potential of students. CTS was founded to be a thought partner and source of support to inform the field of education and ensure that all children receive the education they deserve. For more information, visit <https://transformschoools.ucla.edu>.

Suggested Citation: Do, K. T., Grammer, J. K., and Bishop, J. P. (2025). Strengthening K-12 cellphone policies to support student learning and well-being: Research-based guidance for U.S. education leaders. UC|CSU Collaborative for Neuroscience, Diversity, and Learning; Center for the Transformation of Schools, School of Education & Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles.

Overview

Cellphones have become a constant companion in the lives of young people. While cellphones offer valuable opportunities for learning and connection, the pressure to manage online and offline social interactions has led to excessive use. This, in turn, has disrupted learning, impacted youth well-being, and intensified challenges like bullying, distractions, and device addiction. Research suggests adolescents may be particularly susceptible to these cellphone-related risks compared to children or adults. During adolescence, brain and behavioral changes heighten sensitivity to peer influence and social rejection, while at the same time, underdeveloped impulse control makes it difficult to resist short-term rewards, despite negative longer-term consequences.

As a new school year begins, 42 U.S. states have passed laws or recommendations to limit student cellphone use in schools to address concerns about cellphone use and its impact on youth learning, health, and well-being. Yet, balancing cellphone policies that support learning, safety, and fair enforcement has remained a critical challenge for frontline school leaders and administrators, educators, and other school personnel. Understanding the variations in national and local policies restricting cellphone use and the rationale behind them offers valuable insight into how schools are responding to the growing body of research linking screen time, adolescent development, and academic success.

The current brief serves two goals. First, the brief summarizes the latest research on the effects of cellphone use on learning and well-being. We examine the effect of cellphone use on four major issues facing today's techno-centric youth: (1) Divided attention in learning environments; (2) Health and well-being of young cellphone users; (3) Social and emotional development in the digital age; and (4) Safety across online and offline environments. Second, the brief explores how national and local school cellphone policies vary across the U.S.—ranging from total bans to restricted or instructional-use-only guidelines—and highlights key implementation differences. To help all students benefit from technology while minimizing harm, school systems need thoughtful, research-informed policies. We provide research-based recommendations for K-12 education system leaders, including district leaders, superintendents, and school boards, for developing and implementing age-appropriate, inclusive, and equitable school cellphone policies.



30%
of parents/
caregivers were
asked for input
by schools when
developing their
cellphone policies

(Echelon Insights, 2024)



2 in 3

of 11 to 17-year-olds reported struggling to unplug at night

(Radesky et al., 2023)



Major Conclusions of the Brief

What the Research Shows

- **Cellphones in classrooms can be both distracting and valuable.** While the presence and intermittent use of cellphones often reduce attention and learning, they can also serve as important instructional tools—especially among neurodiverse students and in under-resourced schools with limited technology access. Because students are still developing focus and self-regulation skills, schools should balance minimizing distractions with creating equitable opportunities to use cellphones to support learning.
- **Youth need support building healthy digital habits.** Balance is key to healthy digital habits, but children and adolescents need guidance and practice to manage cellphone use, since their self-regulation skills and brains are still developing. While heavy use isn't always addiction, it can interfere with learning and well-being. Students learn from adults, so model healthy phone habits. Be mindful, and show empathy—phones often help students cope with stress, boredom, or feel connected.
- **The impact of phone and social media use on mental health depends on how it's used.** Research linking phones and social media use and mental health is mixed: studies say phone use harms mental health, while others say mental health issues lead to more phone use (Orben, 2020; Nesi et al., 2022). *How* phones are used matters: positive content and supportive interactions online can actually boost mental well-being, especially for marginalized youth (Price et al., 2025; Radesky et al., 2023).
- **Risks and benefits of cellphone use are not uniform.** Cellphones can support student social connection and learning (digital tools, accessibility, family communication), and for some students—such as those with medical needs, language access needs, or who rely on phones for safety or family contact—access is essential. School policies that ignore these differences risk deepening inequities.

Core Policy Elements for K-12 Education Leaders

- **Involve interest holders in policy decision-making.** Students, educators, staff, school leaders, families, and researchers each bring critical perspectives. Without their input, cellphone policies can inadvertently limit effective teaching, hinder student learning and well-being, or raise safety and trust concerns among families. Involving interest holders ensures policies are practical, clearly communicated, and regularly evaluated for improvement.
- **Center learning and development.** Younger grades (elementary school) generally benefit from stricter limits during the entire school day; middle/high schools may need granular rules that distinguish instructional vs. non-instructional time and create flexibility to develop responsible cellphone use.
- **Design for equity and accessibility.** Build explicit exemptions and support for students with individualized education programs/504 plans, multilingual learners, students who rely on devices for health/safety, and those without reliable technology access. Prioritize supportive over punitive responses to cellphone violations, recognizing that overuse often reflects mental health needs or developing self-regulation skills rather than intentional rule-breaking.
- **Be evidence-informed and pragmatic.** Use a harm-reduction approach: limit non-instructional phone use (e.g., social media) and multitasking during lessons while enabling purposeful, teacher-led instructional uses. Pair cellphone restrictions with instruction about digital citizenship and self-regulation.
- **Clarity + consistency = credibility.** Clear cellphone use rules (what, when, where), transparent exemptions, and consistent, restorative enforcement reduce confusion and legal risk. Train staff and communicate to families before policy enforcement.

Key Recommendations

- **Move beyond restriction—invest in digital readiness.** Pair cellphone policies with digital literacy education and training to explain *why* restrictions matter and equip students, families, and staff with strategies to build and reinforce healthy digital habits at school and home.
- **Establish district policies for cell phone use in schools with students, families, educators, and union leaders.** Co-designed, schoolwide policies build stronger buy-in, ease implementation, and ensure responsibility is shared across the district and school rather than falling solely to teachers.
- **Avoid one-size-fits-all policies.** Effective cellphone policies are flexible, age-appropriate, and equity-focused, balancing state or district guidance with school needs. Tailored approaches should align with students' developmental stages, account for differences in technology access, and reflect the mixed scientific evidence on mental health impacts—moving beyond assumptions that highlight only the harms of cellphone use while overlooking its benefits like connection and activism.
- **Survey students, families, and educators on cellphone policies.** Gathering feedback on how policies affect teaching, learning, and well-being helps districts assess impact and reinforces that policymaking is an iterative, community-building process (Bishop, 2023).



40%
of Title I teachers
avoid internet-
based assignments
due to concerns
over digital access
and inequality in
student learning.

(Clark et al., 2022;
Fazlullah & Ong, 2019)

