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& Richard Lange**



**The Academic Elephant
in our Students' Pockets**

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The Academic Elephant in our Students' Pockets

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As educators, we have sat in on many meetings, and there are two topics that are recurring. One: how do we get our students to engage and love learning? Two: how can that result in better academic outcomes? Often, solutions are discussed from a skills standpoint: how do you help a student decode words, build up academic vocabulary, or identify the primary source of a text? These skills are incredibly important for college enrolment, scholarships, [yet scores keep dropping nationwide \(Schwartz, 2025\).](#)

So what are we missing? It might be as simple as looking down, and addressing the elephant in our students' pockets. The elephant that buzzes, distracts, makes noise and demands attention. Teachers often express frustration at managing the elephant. They try to create policies, manage its usage, but often lose those battles. But this is not just a classroom management problem, it is a structural issue. It is time to have a conversation about how our kids' focus is being stolen, and how we get it back. Focus and test scores, while incredibly important, are not all that is at stake. Social and emotional health is plummeting in ways that can no longer be ignored.



Disconnected, Dependent, and Struggling

Data shows that a student's positive connection to their school leads to higher attendance and improved performance (Henebery, 2022). So, in simple terms, students with friends or a connection to the school are generally present and do well. Yet, by all metrics, student mental health is regressing. A recent study showed that 57% of high school girls reported experiencing "persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in the past year," up from 36% in 2011. while suicide rates for young men continue to rise as well (Englander/McCoy, 2025). There is so little discussion at the school level on how phones lead to a social disconnect among peers and, in turn, their relationship with the school. Bullying, while not unprecedented, is reaching new levels that are hard to fathom. This isn't happening in a vacuum, it's a direct result of cell phone use.

Bullying, while not a new phenomenon, feels different in 2025. In the past, bullying might have concluded at the end of the school day. Now, our kids live in a world where bullying continues online 24/7. Students coordinate Instagram posts, and when they're back at school, group chats strategize how to intrude on other students' peace with coordinated real time attacks or verbal assaults in classrooms or hallways (Singer, 2024). This constant surveillance rewards kids who take the initiative to bully with likes and reposts; the more shocking, the better. It also pushes students to avoid scrutiny by refusing to participate actively in school, staying under the radar to avoid becoming a next target. The result? A school culture that's filled with fear and distraction, where students are less willing to take risks and grow.

The Reality of Cell Phones in Schools

Cell phones in schools are the antithesis of social and academic student goals. We have for years been conditioned into thinking tech can improve the learning experience. Maybe a student can use their phone to look up a fact? In theory, that sounds great. But the reality is that a phone is not a learning tool, it is a “mobile slot machine” (Andersson, 2018) that many students can access 24 hours a day (including school time). Keep in mind that phone applications were designed to be addictive, with founders of apps like Facebook admitting that they set out to take up “as much consumer time as possible” (Andersson, 2018). Students regularly confess to going to bed at 2 am or later because they stayed up late scrolling. Daily screen times that we have witnessed can teeter anywhere from 12-15 hours a day, though the average is around 7-8 hours.



The evidence is clear. Phones are atrophying our children's mental health at an alarming rate and outcomes are lagging worldwide, leading to nationwide classroom phone bans in countries across the world (Chadwick, 2024). In the United States, twenty one states have passed a statewide phone ban in schools (Prothero, 2024). This is a great start, but it is not enough. We need enforcement mechanisms that empower public school teachers nationwide. When we do that, we can restore that classroom as a place of learning and emotional safety. Without decisive action, we

leave our kids' brains in the hands of tech companies who don't have their best interests at heart. It's time to confront the elephant in our pockets, honestly.

Practical Solution for Reducing Classroom Phone Use

Here are some practical solutions to help reduce or manage high school students' use of cell phones in classes. One is to require students to place phones in a pouch (some are lockable) or a designated storage area at the start of class. Of course, teachers and administrators need to be sensitive when taking students' property out of their hands. Losing a phone by such actions can be quite problematic and create a tense situation.

Write clear and consistent policies. As a faculty, establish a school-wide phone policy (e.g., "no phones during instructional time") with clear consequences. Individual teachers can set phone expectations for their classrooms if a school-wide policy isn't in place. Many school districts have written such policies.

Teaching about phone dependency (often referred to as problematic smartphone use) can be a powerful and relevant topic for high school. Have students create a debate: "Are Smartphones Hurting Us?" The objective would be to develop critical thinking and argumentation skills. Divide students into pro and con teams. Research and debate the impact of phones on health, social life, and productivity. This can help students be more responsible for building intrinsic motivation.

Another way to decrease cell phone use is to involve students in policy-making. When students help set guidelines, they're more likely to respect them. Communicate expectations to parents and enlist their support to minimize texting/communication during school hours.

Some schools use apps or systems that lock access to certain apps/sites during school hours. Designate specific times/places where phones can be used, so students know when it's acceptable. Create a phone-zone and reinforce its use. A mix of physical, behavioral, and educational approaches usually works best. Relying solely on rules or punishment often isn't sustainable without student and parent cooperation.



The Phone Policy Legal Landscape

Though structured policy is helpful, school administrators need legal backing from the state board of education to ensure their policies don't face parent pushback. In Illinois, Senate Bill 2427 (SB2427, 2025) aims to enhance the educational environment by mandating that all public school districts and charter schools in Illinois develop and implement policies restricting the use of wireless communication devices during instructional time by the 2026–2027 school year. This includes devices such as cell phones, tablets, laptops, and gaming devices.



By limiting the use of personal electronic devices during instructional time, the bill seeks to minimize distractions, thereby promoting better concentration and academic performance among students. The bill includes provisions for exceptions, allowing device use for medical reasons, as part of individualized education programs, or for English learners needing access to learning materials. This ensures that the policy accommodates the diverse needs of students.

The bill prohibits enforcement of the policy through fees, fines, or involvement of law enforcement, focusing instead on educational approaches to policy adherence.

Overall, SB2427 represents a proactive approach to addressing the challenges posed by personal electronic devices in educational settings, aiming to create more focused and equitable learning environments across Illinois schools



Conclusion

Many studies and experts, including organizations like the American Psychological Association, Pew Research Center, and researchers like Jean Twenge (Twenge, 2018), agree that minimizing cell phone distractions in schools has been shown to improve students' mental health and reduce bullying. Several schools have implemented strict phone bans, leading to positive outcomes. Students reported feeling less depressed and isolated, attributing their improved mental health to the reduction in screen time and social media use during school hours. This change allowed for more genuine social interactions and decreased exposure to online bullying.



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Michael Kleine is a public school teacher in [Chicago](#) with a master’s of arts in teaching from National Louis University. He teaches history and civics, with a passion for helping students build real-world critical thinking skills. His work focuses on school-based policy and how systems can better support students and teachers. Michael recently published the op-ed “[Underfunded and Undervalued - the Truth of Tier 2 pensions, 2025](#)” that analyzed the Illinois state pension crisis.  



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