Planning Together:

A Playbook for Student Personal Device Policies

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US Department of Education

Miguel A. Cardona, Ed.D.

Secretary

Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development

Roberto J. Rodríguez

Assistant Secretary

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A Letter from the Secretary

December 2024

As a lifelong educator, and as a father of two kids, I've seen firsthand how educators and families are wrestling with the presence of cell phones in schools. The vast majority of students ages 13 to 18 have cell phones, as do many younger students.[1,2,3]

These phones are remarkable achievements of engineering, and they have many positive uses. Parents tell me they play a special role in helping them keep in touch with their children, especially in emergencies. And phones can enable students to get new information, practice skills, or come together virtually to solve hard problems.

At the same time, a growing body of evidence is cause for concern about the impact of cell phones in schools on our young people. Adolescence is a critical time for the development of concentration skills, which support academic success and the ability to maintain emotional balance during stressful situations.[4,5] However, because social media is designed to keep users engaged, its use may impact the ability of young people to focus and stay on task.[6] Non-academic cell phone use during learning, such as multitasking,[7,8,9] visiting social-networking sites,[10] and internet searching,[11] tends to be associated with decreases in student learning, requiring students to take up to 20 minutes to refocus after engaging in non-academic activity.[12,13]

Social media accessed on cell phones also creates risk for the mental health and well-being of students. A report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine describes the potential benefits of social media use, like connecting with friends and family[14,15] and learning new things.[16] But the report also raises concerns regarding the potential negative health effects for some young people like depression and suicide,[17] sleep disruption,[18] or exposure to cyberbullying.[19] In 2023, Dr. Vivek Murthy—the nation's Surgeon General—issued an [advisory](#) on social media and youth mental health, calling on policymakers to strengthen safety standards and limit access to social media.[20] Research provides credible evidence that exposure to social media has detrimental effects on students' mental health, which in turn has adverse consequences for their academic performance.[21]

Emerging research reveals the potential academic benefits of restricting the use of cell phones in schools, with sizable benefits in certain contexts and for certain subpopulations. In one study, some 16-year-old students saw their test scores increase after schools banned phones, with most of this change driven by the most disadvantaged and lower performing students.[22] Another study showed 10.6 percent lower test scores [23] among students who retained their cell phones compared to student groups not interrupted by text messages. A study focusing on girls shows that removing cell phones led to higher grades and an increased likelihood of attending an academic high school.[24] Some parents and students who initially are less supportive of limits support them after seeing the benefits and having a voice in the schools' approach.[25]

Most schools already have some restrictions on cell phone use in classrooms, but the extent and enforcement of these restrictions vary widely. Some states are now adopting statewide policies that prohibit or significantly limit the use of cell phones in schools. These state policies still leave important discretion at the local level. Other states are leaving the entire decisions at the district or school level.

As Secretary, I believe the decision to implement restrictions aimed at improving student performance must be made at the state and local level, where parents and educators are closer to the students, not in Washington, D.C. However, we can share different approaches we have seen in the nation from different communities reflecting different perspectives. What I know is this: Within each state's guardrails, every elementary, middle, and high school should have a clear, consistent, and research-informed policy to guide the use of cell phones in schools. And that policy should reflect the insights and the engagement of educators, parents, and students.

For that reason, it is important to me that the U.S. Department of Education is a resource to you. That is why we are issuing this Playbook, which provides one approach to collaboration as you work to determine the best implementation plan for establishing any research-based cell phone policy. The Playbook can help education officials to engage community members in developing clear, consistent, and research-informed policies. This Playbook makes certain that schools, communities, and parents share responsibility for passing along the knowledge, skills, and attitudes students need to navigate the digital world responsibly and constructively— alongside the implementation of any policy.

These are the questions this Playbook can help local leaders confront:

- When can students have access to phones?

- When phone use is not permitted, where and how are phones stored?

- How are emergencies or dangerous circumstances handled? How do parents and children communicate? How and when do schools and districts communicate with parents during emergencies?

- How do policies protect the rights of students, including students with disabilities, adhering to their individualized education plan? Are there other considerations for underserved students such as English Language learners?

- What are the appropriate consequences when a student doesn't follow school policies?

- How do policies vary with the ages of students?

- Who is responsible for monitoring and enforcing policies?

- What training is provided for staff and students?

- What is the best approach to rolling out new policies?

- How can school districts and schools assess whether policies are working and how to refine them?

Answering these questions can be complicated, but we know this: The best way to implement a policy that teachers, parents, and students will support and honor is to engage them in answering these questions.

Digital technologies have transformed every aspect of our lives in a very short time. I strongly support the Surgeon General's call to address the growing risks and harms of social media on children and adolescents. While policymakers consider proposals to create safe and healthy digital environments to safeguard our youth, our educational leaders have an opportunity to take action. I have every confidence in your ability as

school leaders and educators to foster safe and constructive learning environments for students that navigate—alongside our students, educators, and families—the unique issues posed by cell phones and personal electronic devices. We stand ready to continue to support you and your school community in this effort.

Sincerely,

Miguel A. Cardona, Ed.D.
U.S. Secretary of Education

About this Playbook

STEP 1	STEP 2	STEP 3	STEP 4
BUILD YOUR TEAM	DEFINE YOUR GOALS	BUILD COLLECTIVE UNDERSTANDING	GATHER DATA AND INSIGHTS

This Playbook aims to assist school districts and school leaders as they develop or revise their policies to guide the presence and use of personal devices in schools. It outlines a process by which school district and school leaders can engage students, educators, and parents as partners in the development of school district or school-based policies (step 1); clearly defines a set of shared goals (step 2); builds understanding and promotes decision-making within their local context (step 3); and collects data to further understand and revise polices, as needed (step 4), working toward policies that support the behavioral and school climate shifts school leaders want to see. The Playbook also highlights key equity concerns and identifies some unintended consequences of some school-based approaches to regulating device use.

Student Personal Electronic Device

For the purposes of this Playbook, **student personal electronic device** (device or personal device) refers to cell phones, smartphones, and other personal electronic devices (such as smart watches, headphones or audio earpieces, and handheld games) that are the personal property of a student and not issued by a school for educational purposes. The definition does not include laptop computers or tablets.

The process and prompts outlined in this Playbook encourage each school district or school to develop a policy or set of guardrails that fits their local context and a framework for collaboratively developing the details of the policy and its implementation. If the goal is to navigate a complex array of partner interests and define clear policies, co-design can foster transparency, ensure diverse voices are heard, and allow an issue to be understood and addressed more holistically.

Developed in consultation with researcher and practitioner experts from across the country, this Playbook is centered on three key principles:

1. When co-designed with diverse and representative stakeholders—including students, educators, parents and caregivers, and school leaders—device policies can result in improved stakeholder buy-in and increased potential for success.

2. Potential for success is enhanced when there is broad awareness and a shared stake in participating in and implementing device policies. School leaders should effectively enforce these policies and ensure accountability for their implementation. Educators should advance effective classroom culture and norms for teaching and learning to accompany their school's device policy.

3. Device policies should be paired with an emphasis on digital citizenship at school and at home, including systemic, evidence-based approaches for teaching adults and children about how to keep students safe, healthy, and productive in online spaces.

The U.S. Department of Education's 2024 National Educational Technology Plan (NETP)[26] references the importance of digital health, safety, and citizenship as paramount to maintaining a healthy and empowered relationship with technology and the digital world, emphasizing the appropriate, responsible, and safe use of technology in education.

School districts and schools that prioritize digital citizenship education and open communication with students in conjunction with their device policy may help students build more balanced relationships with their smartphones and safer online habits. Investing in media literacy and digital citizenship education helps young people navigate online news and media and reduce online risks. For example, school-based media literacy training has been shown to decrease body dissatisfaction in adolescents[27,28] and conversations with students about privacy controls on social media leads to more scrutiny of targeted advertising.[29]

Shaping Policies to Guide the Use of Personal Devices in Schools

The approach to device policies varies across grade levels. A recent Pew survey found that 94 percent of middle school teachers are likely to say that their school district or school has a cell phone policy, followed by elementary (84 percent) and high school (71 percent) teachers.[30]

Elementary schools tend to restrict the use of devices during the school day, requiring students that do bring a device to school to store it off and away. Middle schools also tend to restrict the use of devices during the entire school day;[31] however, some begin building in more flexibility for middle school students, allowing the use of devices during lunch or transitions. Many high schools offer additional flexibility, allowing the use of cell phones in certain areas on campus or at certain times, such as lunch, between classes, in hallways, and outside on school grounds.[32]

Generally, policies concerning a restriction on the use of devices during the school day are either of these:

- **Full-day restrictions** prohibiting the use of devices during the school day, including during instructional time, lunch or free periods, and passing times; or

- **Schedule-based restrictions** prohibiting device use at certain times during the school day (e.g., during instruction) while permitting limited use at other times, such as during breaks, lunch periods, or when otherwise specifically authorized.

In school districts or schools that don't adopt either approach, decisions around the presence or use of a personal device are typically left to the discretion of the individual teacher or other staff as to whether the device is interfering with learning or having some other negative impact. Absent an overarching policy framework, this is likely to result in different approaches within a school and across classrooms, creating a challenge communicating clear expectations to students and parents, including any consequences. This kind of inconsistency can possibly lead to conflicts between teachers or staff and students and parents.

For school districts and schools with policies, physical proximity and access to devices—even with full-day or partial-day restrictions in place—is another factor for schools to consider. For example, policies that require personal devices be collected at the start of class or stored in lockers, magnetic pouches, or specified areas for the duration of the school day will be more restrictive than policies that allow students to store devices off and away in their backpacks. Each decision has implications to consider.

Before You Begin

As stated above, this Playbook outlines an approach for setting or resetting school policies for the use of personal devices. It draws on the work of youth-adult co-design partnership and youth participatory action research (YPAR) and applies resources from these approaches to this specific purpose of designing and establishing device policies in schools. This document includes examples from school districts and schools that have implemented effective policies in partnership with students and families. Whether an example focuses on designing device policies or addressing other issues facing students, schools and districts can learn from the principles and practices featured in this Playbook and apply them to their own context. This Playbook emphasizes the importance of taking time to thoughtfully implement structures and processes that can lead to better device policies, improved enforcement of those policies, and better outcomes for all those impacted by such policies. However, some schools may face capacity constraints that don't allow for the process outlined in this playbook to be followed completely. Do what feels accessible in your context to engage your partners in your policy development process. Ultimately, district and school officials are responsible for the policies that districts and schools set.
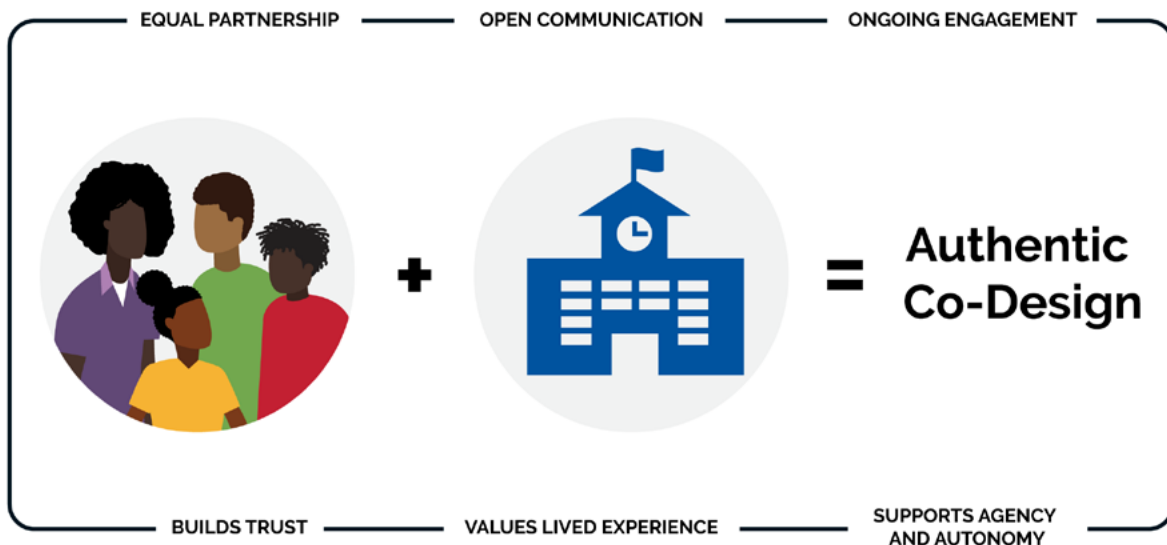
Why Co-Design?

Co-design creates a partnership between those who hold decision-making authority (e.g., school district, school board leaders, or school) and those who may be most affected by policies, practices, and conditions in schools (e.g., educators, students, families, community members), with the goal of designing solutions together to overcome local challenges.[33]

Using the co-design process to formulate and establish school-based policies helps to ensure the solution is informed by the perspectives, experiences, needs, and concerns of educators, students, parents, and other stakeholders. When leaders commit to this approach and implement it well, students and families are viewed as experts on their own lives, and their knowledge of their community context is honored.[34] This approach can build on young people's developmental need for autonomy and agency as well as strengthening students' life and learning skills.[35] This kind of authentic youth engagement can help youth build self-esteem, leadership, advocacy, and professional development skills, and increase their influence and personal stake in the community.[36] This approach can also be used for other policies where youth engagement would be important, such as school discipline.

Parent and caregiver attitudes and involvement can play a role in shaping school device policies and their implementation. Involving parents and caregivers in the development of these policies and providing opportunities for communication and collaboration could help foster a supportive school-home partnership. In addition, educators can bring an understanding of how devices are impacting classroom dynamics and insight into effective strategies for managing devices that can inform the development of the policy and implementation plan, including as it relates to enforcement. This should be done in consultation with teachers and school leaders, including their unions. Co-design is based on the theory that if a policy works better for those who are ultimately affected, there will be more support for and fidelity to the policy.[37]

What Does an Authentic Youth-Adult Partnership Look Like?

EQUAL PARTNERSHIP — OPEN COMMUNICATION — ONGOING ENGAGEMENT

+ = Authentic Co-Design

BUILDS TRUST — VALUES LIVED EXPERIENCE — SUPPORTS AGENCY AND AUTONOMY

These are aspects of an authentic youth-adult partnership:

- Both young people and adults have equal opportunities to build and utilize skills, make decisions, carry out tasks, and learn from one another.

- Traditional hierarchies are flattened, and balance is created among young people interacting with peers, adults interacting with other adults (e.g., teachers and principals), and young people interacting with adults.

- Trust is built between young people and adults.

- Diverse experiences and opinions are respected.

- There is open and honest communication and information sharing.

- There are clear expectations about roles and decision-making.[38]

The co-design approach may be a shift from current norms to establishing school-based policies and exercising decision-making. In addition to requiring dedicated time and space, an authentic youth-adult partnership redefines the traditional structures within the educational system. Creating an authentic partnership between leaders, educators, students, and families through which they can share their experiences with devices may help overcome fears or assumptions as they work together to develop and implement a device policy for their school. This may be particularly helpful as students may often object to, try to get around, or ignore device policies if they feel that these policies don't account for their needs or are out of step with the world in which they operate outside of school.

The National Equity Project identifies several common challenges when engaging in youth-adult design partnerships that shift school districts and schools from limited or episodic engagement with students to partnering and co-constructing decisions with students. These are highlighted in the call-out box.

Common Challenges of Youth-Adult Design Partnerships

- Students can feel like their involvement is without any substance or authority and is only to allow the school to say they have youth involved.

- Efforts to engage student voice are episodic (not ongoing), and students don't see and feel themselves having actual influence over time.

- Adult assumptions about young people's perspectives being less developed can reduce the value placed on student voice. Even well-meaning adults are often unaware of their adult assumptions and biases and the effects of these on youth.

- Groups can lose momentum and fail to take meaningful action, which may discourage youth who need to feel action is happening as a result of their participation.

- The power of student voice may not be understood or supported by organizational leaders. When youth speak their truth, oftentimes adults are not as ready to hear it as they might have thought, resulting in defensiveness and/or hesitance to seeking out youth input.[39]

Strategies for Addressing Power Dynamics and Hierarchies

When engaging in an authentic youth-adult partnership, it is necessary to take note of the existing power dynamics and actively use strategies to encourage open conversation between youth and adults. Even small adjustments, such as how and where participants sit during a meeting, can help flatten traditional hierarchies. Because existing power structures are embedded in our educational system, it is also important to check in over the course of a partnership to make sure power sharing is maintained.[40] Here are a few specific steps that school districts and schools can take to address power dynamics in an authentic youth-adult partnership:

- Consider seating participants in a circle with youth and adults seated next to each other in alternating fashion. Avoid a room set up where adults are seated up front and looking out at youth (e.g., panel style). Furniture placement can create barriers that may reinforce an "us vs. them" power dynamic.

- During meetings, address all youth and adults by first name or by the same title—everyone is a "designer" or a "policy maker" rather than students, teachers, principals, or superintendents. Avoid using titles (e.g., Principal, Superintendent, Mr., Ms.). Acknowledge that, depending on the school culture, code switching may be necessary outside of meetings as students and adults revert to using titles.

- Adults should hold the same expectations for young people as they have for other adults.[41]

- Be mindful when communicating. As an adult, be mindful not to interrupt. Young people may need more time to fully form their thoughts before they are comfortable sharing. Give them time to finish their thoughts and encourage them to share their ideas. Consider providing several ways for young people to share in case they don't feel comfortable speaking up. Ensure that just because young people may use different terms or communication styles, their ideas are not seen as less valuable.[42]

Evaluating Progress Toward Authentic Youth Voice

Design teams might consider adapting this list describing the experiences of young people when they are engaged to evaluate their progress toward power sharing. The frequency of checking in will depend on the length of the partnership. For example, during a year-long partnership, groups may want to check in and self-assess every two–three months. Students on the team could anonymously rank each item on a scale (e.g., not true, a little true, somewhat true, very true), and responses could be aggregated and shared with the team for reflection and discussion.

1. I feel respected, valued, and trusted.

2. I feel appreciated, safe, and comfortable.

3. I feel that I am working in an environment that facilitates my engagement, and I am involved in a meaningful way as a teacher as well as a student.

4. My voice is being heard and treated as worthwhile.

5. I can be involved and make decisions, gain leadership skills, and see my ideas realized.

6. I can participate in the social aspects of my involvement.

7. I see change and progress happening as a result of my contributions.[43]

Co-Design in Action: Engaging Students and Families in the Redesign of One School's Device Policy

A case study from Principal Ted McCarthy, Sutton High School, Sutton, Massachusetts

Dear Colleagues,

Like many of you, in winter 2022 we started hearing from our high school teachers about an increase in cell phone distractions in the classroom. We typically survey our students twice a year to understand how our school is working and what we can improve for our students, so in spring 2023 we asked a few questions to better understand our students' relationships with their cell phones. From this survey, we learned that our students were spending a median of seven hours per day on their phones. We also learned that a majority of students didn't necessarily see this as a problem—when asked if they wanted to reduce the amount of time they spent on their phones, 65 percent of our students said "No."

Informed by this data, we launched a volunteer Digital Wellness Committee at the start of the 2023 school year that included the Principal, Assistant Principal, three teachers, three parents, and four students. We met four times with the whole committee and sporadically with different groups. It was important to include students on the committee because any changes we made would affect them directly. The committee was tasked with facilitating a series of educational activities to invite students to reflect on their cell phone usage and equip students with the knowledge and skills to set boundaries with their personal devices. The committee was also tasked with reviewing the existing cell phone policy—which allowed classroom-by-classroom policies ranging from no restrictions to the use of "phone hotels"—and make any updates as needed.

We also included a goal in our 2023-2024 School Improvement Plan focused on developing positive interpersonal skills and work habits in our high school students. Included in this goal was a focus on skills, such as setting digital boundaries, that will be important for post-secondary work and life. Having the School Improvement Plan goal raised the level of importance of this work in our school and community and helped us keep it front of mind throughout the year.

As we embarked on this journey, we had a few guiding principles:

1. We wanted to be transparent and invite all the members of our community, especially students and families, to be part of the conversation so that everyone felt heard.

2. We wanted to look at the issue holistically to understand how both policy changes and educational initiatives might help us achieve the changes we wanted to see—and were committed to taking the time necessary to study the issue and engage our school community.

3. We knew we needed to do lots of messaging.

The Digital Wellness Committee got to work and carried out the following activities during the 2023-24 school year:

- In September, we held an assembly with a guest speaker who talked about the opportunity cost of spending so much time on the phone and not spending time with the people you love. Students took a

self-assessment, and the aggregated results were shared during the assembly. It was impactful to see data that reflected the experience of our own school community. For example, we learned that 75 percent of junior girls in our school reported feeling badly about their bodies after looking at social media.

- In November, we launched a two-week "No Phone November" challenge where students could receive a raffle ticket for each day that they opted to turn in their phone. Students who participated every day for two full weeks doubled the number of raffle tickets they received, increasing their chance of winning a $500 gift card. Approximately 58 percent of our students participated in at least one day of the challenge.

- In December, the entire school went phone-free for one school day. We did get pushback from some parents. In a world of school shootings, there were worries about safety and access to their children in the event of an emergency. Parents were reassured that if they needed to contact their child, they could always get them by calling the office. We also saw examples where students turned their laptops into messaging devices. That said, the day went off without a hitch—no phones were seen in school that day.

- Also in December, we asked our psychology and health teachers to collaborate on an expanded digital wellness unit to be embedded in all health classes in the 2024-2025 school year.

- In January, we planned to host a team screen time challenge. The plan was for teams to register their screen time at the beginning and end of the challenge, and the team that saw the biggest decrease in screen time would win a field trip to anywhere in Massachusetts. Unfortunately, we had to scrap this challenge when we realized that screen time calculators can be disabled or reset within individual apps.

- In February, the entire school went phone-free for two weeks leading up to winter break. The feedback was more positive than negative. Many students who were resistant at the beginning were able to see the value by the end of the campaign. As one student said, "I really liked this campaign and think that it is a very good and necessary thing. I think that a lot of people who were hesitant to participate (including me and my friends) found that we really appreciated it and the awareness it brought and think that our phone use will definitely be less."

In March, it was time to decide whether to revise our existing cell phone policy. We decided in the 2024-2025 school year, all classes would implement an "off-and-away cell phone policy" from bell to bell during instructional time.[44] Students are required to power off their cell phones during class and keep them stored out of sight in their backpacks. The "bell to bell" piece is intended to encourage small talk, connection, and interaction with peers and staff if there is leftover time before the bell.

Our updated policy was informed by survey data from both students and staff as well as the anecdotal feedback we received from parents throughout the year. Forty percent of our faculty voted to implement phone hotels (I should note that the students on our committee wanted the least restrictive policy possible), but we decided that requiring phones to be powered off and put away in backpacks is more reflective of what kids and adults must do in real life—in terms of establishing boundaries with their phone. Research has shown it can be emotionally challenging for some students to be physically separated from their phones.[45] Also, for students who may need their phones for health or personal issues, they don't have to walk up to a phone hotel to retrieve their phone. We also did not want to establish a situation where a student was "forced" to lie ("I don't have my phone") at the start of the period.

For those planning to update or create a student personal device policy, here are a few pieces of advice:

- Assembling a committee that includes students and families and dedicating the time to go through a process like the one laid out in this playbook is important. Involving our community and being open and transparent about our process and goals meant that even folks who may not agree with our final policy understand how we got there and feel like their voices were heard along the way.

- Have a bias toward action, and don't be afraid to iterate or adjust. We had to scrap our team challenge, but that didn't deter us. We also recognize that adjustments and iterations will likely be needed to the updated policy—both as we begin implementation and as we look to future technologies that may exist.

- Gather data to understand how the policy and activities are impacting the behavior you want to see. We plan to ask teachers and students about the updated cell phone policy and screen time on future school climate surveys to understand if adjustments may be needed.

- Focus on actionable steps students can take to minimize the time spent on their phones, rather than just sharing data on the effects. We spent a lot of time working with kids on the "why" of less screen time— not just scolding/shaming them about their screen time use. If we can get our students to move from seven hours of phone usage a day to five, that's two hours of more personal connection, physical activity, and relationship building with others. We'll take that win every time.

Getting Started

Choosing to design a device policy for schools with the involvement of educators, students, parents, and other stakeholders requires a commitment of time, resources, and energy. To set your school districts and schools up for success, consider these questions before actively engaging in the design process:

Time

- How much time are you asking participants to commit to this process? How much time outside of meetings? What is the frequency with which the group will meet?[46]

- If meeting during school hours, how can you ensure that students, families, teachers, administrators, and their representatives are given the time and space to meet without other priorities encroaching on their time?

- If meeting during school hours, how might this limit the involvement of other community stakeholders (e.g., families, local leaders)?

- What role might asynchronous activities play? How can you ensure accessibility for students and families (e.g., time, internet connection, device)?

Space

- How comfortable do students, parents, or other stakeholders feel in the meeting space? How might the meeting place reinforce or disrupt traditional power dynamics and hierarchies?

- How accessible is the location to students, parents, or other stakeholders?[47]

- How might you plan for multiple avenues of participation (e.g., virtual polls or meetings) for those who may not be able to participate in person, but want to be part of the conversation?

Scope

- Are there any boundaries around what the school districts and schools can or cannot do? If so, be transparent and identify these boundaries upfront.

Compensation

- If meeting after school, how are educators, students, parents, and others compensated for their time, experience, and expertise outside of the official school day? How can you accommodate partner participation in after-school activities? Consider a variety of ways to compensate participants including course credit, gift cards, or non-monetary compensation like recognition for participating.[48]

- What funds can support the design process?

Transportation

- Does transportation need to be offered to participants either to or from meetings, particularly if meeting after the school day or off-site?

- If involving families, are there any transportation needs that can facilitate regular and sustained engagement in meetings?

Childcare

- Does childcare need to be offered for students or families to engage in meetings?

Accessibility

- Is technology used by the group accessible to individuals with disabilities?

- Are physical spaces used by the group accessible to individuals with disabilities?

- Are communication needs of individuals with disabilities met in the group setting?

- Are any interpretation or translation services required to facilitate the meaningful participation of students who are English learners and/or meaningful communication with parents and caregivers who have limited English proficiency?

Step 1: Build your team.
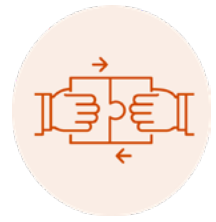
The goal of this stage is to assemble your team of designers to address the use of devices during the school day, by beginning to build trust and belonging among members of the team and creating agreements for how the team will engage.

Team Composition Considerations

- Team size will impact everything from relationship and trust-building to decision-making. A team as small as three–six people may not be representative of all the stakeholders, while a larger team (15–20 people) may be difficult for building cohesion and taking action. It may be necessary to have a core group of designers and then layer in different types of engagement with other stakeholders to bring in additional perspectives or experiences.[49] Chicago Public Schools developed the Spectrum of Inclusive Partnerships tool to articulate the goals for different levels of stakeholder participation and examples of what that engagement might look like.

- Consider the context and the challenge for which you are designing a device policy and which stakeholders should be involved on the design team. Identify which technology or curriculum staff may need to be included. Consider including members who may have important reasons to use personal devices during the school day. See call-out box, *Designing Policies with Students with Diverse Needs*, below.

- Involve students that may not traditionally be involved in student leadership organizations, may be experiencing less success or belonging, or may be from a historically marginalized group. The students you include may depend on which students may be most impacted by the policy you are designing.[50]

- Involve adults who are curious and open to learning, have relationships with students that can help support their belonging on the team, or can bring their own lived experience to inform the work. Include at least one adult who is closer to decision-making.[51]

Designing Policies with Students with Diverse Needs

At some point during their educational journey, students may find themselves in situations where the use of a personal device may assist with learning, health concerns, accessibility, or other issues related to their success in school. Student learning is of prime importance, and policies that allow for certain limited uses of devices may positively impact the educational environment for some students. Such policies also have the potential to improve instructional time and quality for some students.

School districts likely already serve some students who make use of technology to access educational, health, or other supports for their learning and success, whether through accommodations via an Individualized Education Program (IEP) under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), a 504 plan under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, or through other means.[52] Under these laws, some students with disabilities may need to use personal devices in order to have equal access to educational opportunities or to receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE). For example, some students with diabetes check their blood sugar via an app on their phone. In these cases, schools must ensure that the student can use their device, even if the school districts and schools' policy generally restricts student use of personal devices.

As a best practice, districts or schools considering the impact of device policies on student learning should try to build a design team that includes or takes into account the perspectives of youth and/or adults who may advocate for the needs and rights of diverse groups of students, including but not limited to students with disabilities, English learners, and others.[53] While not an exhaustive list, individuals from the following populations may also be impacted differently by personal device policies:

- Students with medical conditions
- Students with disabilities
- Students who are English learners[54]
- Students who are immigrants
- Migratory students
- Students who are LGBTQI+
- Students experiencing homelessness
- Students in foster care
- Students who are caregivers
- Students who have work obligations
- Students who are pregnant or parenting
- Students who have been victims of sexual assault or any type of assault or harassment

Taking diverse perspectives and experiences into account will help the team assess when limited exceptions to a device policy may be appropriate, considering various potential student needs, including but not limited to these:

- Remaining connected on time-sensitive matters to caregivers, cross-systems contacts, or critical services (e.g., social workers, housing services or case managers)

- Responding to or communicating with parents and caregivers in case of an ongoing family emergency (e.g., a family health situation) or a school emergency

Strategies for Building Trust

A strong youth-adult partnership requires trust between its members. Because teams will include members with different identities and power differences, it is important to make the time to intentionally build trust between participants, even in schools with a strong school culture.

Here are a few ways to build trust among team members:

- Invite members to share their stories and the issues they care about that may be driving their participation in the partnership. Give time and space to explore what experiences, perspectives, or skills regarding technology and personal devices each person brings to the partnership.[55,56]

- Create opportunities for team members to shadow one another for a full day or even a few hours. Having a school leader shadow a student may help the adult better understand exactly how young people use devices. Having a student shadow a teacher may help the young person understand how challenging it is to enforce device policies. Both sets of insights may help inform the policy design and implementation process.[57]

- Ask educators and students to work one-on-one or in small groups to take turns explaining how they interact with their personal devices throughout their day.

Creating Agreements

Before beginning to work together as a team, set aside time to develop a set of agreements for how team members will engage during meetings. Creating a set of guiding principles, like "Stay engaged," "Speak your truth," or "Provide equity of voice," can ensure that each member feels comfortable bringing their experiences and ideas to the group. Give specific thought to team agreements regarding personal device use during meetings to model the behaviors your team is hoping to support. Revisit the agreements at the start of each meeting and continue evaluating whether agreements need to be added or updated over time.

Resource Spotlight: Recruiting Students for Student-Powered Improvement

The resource *Recruiting Students for Student-Powered Improvement* from Community Design Partners outlines eight considerations for recruiting students to be part of a youth-adult co-design partnership and provides examples demonstrating how school districts, schools, and youth-based organizations put these considerations into practice. With ideas for including youth in designing outreach efforts, diversifying outreach channels, and developing youth-friendly and strengths-based applications, this resource can help schools and districts operationalize Step 1: Build your team.

Step 2: Define your goal(s).

The objective at this stage is to develop a shared statement of purpose—what you hope to accomplish through the partnership and why. The statement of purpose may evolve over the course of the partnership as new data and information are gathered and synthesized. In developing a device policy for your district or school, consider the context of any legislation, regulation, or other directives from state or local policymakers. You will need to know whether your team will work toward effective implementation within a detailed framework or a full reconsideration of existing policies.

Characteristics for a Statement of Purpose

The following characteristics for a statement of purpose were adapted from the Co-Designing Schools Toolkit. When defining the goals of your team, the statement of purpose has these characteristics:

- It is student-centered and focused on students whose needs have not been met by the education system, making it clear what impact you want your policy to have on students.

- It is focused on the "why." Instead of laying out one particular solution, it leaves room for multiple approaches to achieving the goal.

- It is specific and outlines behaviors you would like to see in your school community because of the actions you take. What behaviors do you want to see from students, families, teachers, or other adults in your school? What do you want to hear people saying or doing? As it relates to student personal devices, how would policy changes impact students' interactions with each other? What would teachers say about student attentiveness or well-being?

- It is positive, optimistic, and hopeful. It frames the goal as behaviors to work toward and not a problem to address.[58]

Resource Spotlight: Crafting a Statement of Purpose

The resource *Equity Aspiration Writing: Partner Interview Guide* from the Co-Designing Schools Toolkit details a process for crafting individual statements of purpose that can inform the shared team goal. Reflection questions like, "What behaviors do you hope to see as you progress toward your goal?" and "Which students are experiencing these challenges the most?" help individual co-design team members to articulate their goal for the shared work.

Step 3: Build a collective understanding of the issue.

The goal of this step is to build a collective understanding of the impacts of devices on students in school and the policies governing their use and presence. This includes diagnosing the issue; examining underlying research on the issue that may challenge initial assumptions; building an understanding of key stakeholders' experience with the issue (e.g., student, educator, family experience); and understanding the policy issue within the context of the school environment by collecting data from your school community.

Strategies for Building a Collective Understanding

Diagnosing the Issue

- Understand the current culture around devices in your district or school. For example, a survey of students could assist in understanding the status quo. Questions to explore may include, but are not limited to these: Is there a current policy governing the use of devices? Are there consistent practices in place for effectively implementing the policy? How many students bring personal devices to school and what kind? How many students do not bring a device, and how might this impact their school experience? Are educators effectively able to prevent disruptive device use in classrooms? Are there positive, effective, or creative uses of devices in your school? What are the biggest challenges educators, students, and parents are observing?

- Understand the root causes of the issues you are trying to address with your school's device policy. For example, if there is a concern around student engagement in class, work to identify whether devices are a primary cause of student disengagement and if there may be additional or other root causes that should be examined. Is there a curricular response (e.g., implementing a project-based learning approach) that can also help address issues of student engagement? Are there other strategies not addressed by your school's device policy that may be part of the solution, in order to holistically respond to the issues you are seeking to address?[59]

Examining Research

- In developing your school's device policy, seek out the latest research on the use of personal devices in schools and their association with student achievement, school climate, classroom distractions, student well-being and mental health, student socialization and peer engagement, student safety (e.g., cyberbullying), and teacher experience (e.g., well-being, classroom management). Consider articles that discuss both the concerns with and potential benefits of student use of devices in the classroom. See the Appendix and the above "Letter from the Secretary" on select current research on this issue.

- Read and discuss a few of the key articles as a team or in sub-teams (think book club). Consider including summary research articles that present different aspects of the policy issue.

Learning from Other School Districts or Schools

- Talk with school districts or schools of a similar size and location (e.g., urban, rural, suburban) to understand their approach to managing devices in their schools and their strategies for effective implementation. Consider learning from school leaders who have taken a range of approaches, from establishing policies that fully or partially ban devices in their schools to those that limit use of devices during the school day. See the *Personal Device Policy Considerations Quick Guide* below for additional examples.

Building Empathy

- Build an understanding of the experiences of those who may be most challenged by the school's current device policy and who may be most impacted by changes, including educators, students, and parents. Challenge biases and assumptions.

- Create space for educators, students, and parents to share their experiences with devices in schools.

Practicing Transparency

- Adults have greater access to data, system processes, and insight into school decision-making. Find ways to help students "see the system" by practicing transparency, sharing data and information about the system, and taking time to explain the system and answer questions.[60]

- As you consider your school's device policy, this might mean sharing data on numbers, instances, and types of violations of your school's device policy, and associated disciplinary actions.

Personal Device Policy Approach Considerations Quick Guide

	No Formal Policy: Restrictions Based on Personal Judgement of Use	Policy: Schedule-Based Restrictions	Policy: Full-Day Restrictions
Definition	Decisions around the presence or use of personal devices are typically left to the discretion of the individual teacher or other staff.	Student device use is prohibited at certain times during the school day (e.g., during instruction) while permitting limited use at other times, such as during breaks or lunch periods.	Student device use is prohibited during the school day, including during instructional time, lunch or free periods, and passing times.
Example policies	Science Leadership Academy (PA)	Sutton Memorial High School (MA) Montgomery County Public Schools (MD) Westfield High School (IN)	Lewiston Middle School (ME) Rosedale Union School District (CA) Bethlehem Central High School (NY)
Considerations — **Safety**	• Is there a school emergency operations plan in place that details how parents and caregivers will receive communications in the event of an emergency? • Has the plan been tested to ensure its effectiveness in the event of an emergency? • Are there clear expectations for personal device use during a school emergency? *Note: Consider using the Department's K-12 School and District Emergency Management Planning Tools.*		
Exceptions		Have we taken the time to understand the needs of the diverse groups of students identified in the call-out box, *Designing Policies with Students with Diverse Needs*, to determine if any exceptions to our personal device policy are needed? If so, have we put clear procedures in place so that educators, staff, students, and families understand how to request and document an exception? (e.g., if using over-the-door organizers to store devices during class, what exceptions might be made for students who need access to devices for health monitoring?)	Have we taken the time to understand the needs of the diverse groups of students identified in the call-out box, *Designing Policies with Students with Diverse Needs*, to determine if any exceptions to our personal device policy are needed? If so, have we put clear procedures in place so that educators, staff, students, and families understand how to request and document an exception? (e.g., if using pouches, students who need access to devices for health monitoring use a pouch with Velcro rather than magnetic closure)

Storage	• Are there circumstances under which a device might be taken away from a student, and if so, where is it stored? • What is the return policy?	• How will students store devices off and away during instruction (e.g., in over-the-door organizers, baskets, bookbags)? • Will a consistent storage solution be used in all classrooms, or will educators decide which storage solution to implement?	• How will students store devices away for the day (e.g., in pouches, lockers, bookbags)? *Note: Consider the cost implications and who assumes the primary burden for enforcement (e.g., teachers, school leaders) based on each storage solution.*
Cost		• What is the cost to equip each classroom with an off and away storage solution (e.g., over-the-door organizer)?	• If using pouches, what is the cost to purchase or lease pouches each school year? • Is this cost sustainable? • Who is responsible for the replacement cost of a pouch that is lost or damaged (e.g., school, student)?
Enforcement	• Who is responsible for enforcement? • Are roles and responsibilities of staff clearly articulated within current responsibilities? *Note: Different staff including school leaders, school security personnel, front office staff, or teachers may play different roles. For example, who checks and seals pouches, collects phones, enforces consequences?*		
Training	• What training do educators and staff need to implement the personal device policy consistently and effectively?		
Responsible Use	• Have we clearly outlined our expectations for how students will responsibly use their personal devices and school-issued devices (e.g., Responsible Use Policy)? (e.g., What are the expectations for obtaining permission from staff or other students before taking photos or videos?)		
Communication	• How do we communicate the policy to students, families, educators, and staff to ensure everyone understands the expectations, requirements, and consequences outlined in the policy?		
Evaluation	• How and at what intervals will we gather data and insights about our personal device policy to ensure it is meeting our goals? • What feedback loops can we establish with students, families, educators, and staff to understand what is working and where adjustments may be needed to address emerging issues, changes in technology, or evolving educational priorities?		

Step 4: Gather data and insights and iterate as needed.

As you implement your policy, you should also decide how you will gather data and insights to inform tweaks or iterations along the way and to assess whether you are on the right track or need to pivot to achieve the goals and changes in behavior you want to see.

Considerations for Gathering Data and Insights

- Brainstorm what type of data or information you might need to gather to measure progress. How will you know that a change is an improvement? How will you ensure that data is representative of the school community?

- Determine whether data will need to be collected prior to implementing the policy to better understand whether observed differences in outcomes are associated with the intervention, and make plans to collect these data in advance.

- Consider data that are already collected at school like attendance, grades, or other academic assessment data, disciplinary data, classroom observation data, and school climate survey data.

- Ensure the data you collect are measuring the behaviors/outcomes/attitudes that you predict should improve due to the changes you are making.

Measuring Progress

Consider the following ways to help measure the progress of your school district or school's device policy:

- To understand how a policy approach will be perceived by educators, students, and parents, data can be gathered through surveys, empathy interviews, or journaling. This data could capture each group's views on the new policy, as well as improvements or challenges they are experiencing as a result.

- To address issues of classroom distraction, data might include student grades, classroom observation data focused on disruptions, or teacher or student survey data.

- To address issues of peer social engagement, data might include observational data about student eye contact in the hallway, noise-level in the hall or cafeteria, or engagement in classroom discussions. Consider who would collect these types of measures and how they might be tracked in a way that is valid and reliable.

- To address issues of disruptive behavior, data might include disciplinary referral data for issues tied to cell phones.

- To understand the impact of restrictions, data might include logs capturing time spent on enforcement (e.g., checking for locked pouches, answering calls and relaying messages to students), start-up and ongoing costs for materials (e.g., pouches, lockers), or observational or survey data to understand the extent to which the policy can be consistently enforced across classrooms or schools.

Moving Toward Effective Implementation

As you go through the process of implementing your school's device policy with educators, students, and parents, below are a few questions to consider to further refine the policies and support effective implementation. The questions are followed by tags identifying whether they are intended for school district, school, or school board leaders.

- What training and ongoing support do educators and staff need to implement our school's policy consistently and effectively? (School leaders, district leaders)

- How and when do we communicate this policy to students, families, educators, and staff to ensure everyone understands the expectations and requirements outlined in the policy, including the consequences associated with violating the policy? (School district leaders, school leaders, school board leaders)

- What is the expectation for educator and staff use of devices during the school day? Is this explicitly included in our school's policy? Why or why not? (School leaders)

- Have we put clear procedures in place so that educators, staff, students, and families understand how to request and document any exception? (School district leaders, school leaders)

- How and at what intervals will we gather data and insights about our school's policy to ensure it is meeting our latest goals? What feedback loops can we establish with students, families, educators, and staff to understand what may be working and where adjustments may be needed to address emerging issues, concerns, or priorities including shifts in emerging technology or the latest research developments? (School leaders)

LAUSD Board calls for full-day cell phone ban and encourages input on policies and implementation from staff, students, and parents

On June 18, 2024, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Board of Education passed a resolution requiring LAUSD leaders to "develop updated cell phone and social media policies to prohibit student use of cell phones and social media platforms district-wide during the entire school day."[61] The resolution, *Supporting Student Mental Health and Learning by Ensuring a Phone-Free School Day*, also calls for the updated policies and their implementation to be informed by best practices and input from stakeholders, including staff, students, and parents. The full-day ban will take effect in January 2025, allowing LAUSD leaders time to build buy-in among key stakeholders by conducting focus groups, sharing research, and building a shared understanding of why these policies are being updated.

Schools will have some discretion in how they choose to implement the full-day restrictions (e.g., phone pouches, phone lockers)—noting that implementation should be age appropriate, differentiated by grade-level, and informed by the needs of the local school community.

After seeing significant progress, Kansas City High School revisits its cell phone ban in response to student feedback

In early 2023, DeLaSalle High School, a charter school in Kansas City, MO, implemented full-day restrictions on personal devices to limit distractions and disruptions and reclaim instructional time. Students were required to lock their phones in magnetically sealed pouches during the entire school day, with exceptions for students that required personal devices to monitor medical conditions, were experiencing a family tragedy or expecting an important phone call (e.g., from court), or were traveling off-campus for internships or college courses. Although students tried to find creative workarounds requiring additional staff time dedicated to enforcement, school leaders and staff were pleased with the results noting improvements in students' 2023 test scores, fewer disruptions and power struggles, and increased student engagement during downtime.

Despite these successes, in response to student feedback, school leaders decided to revisit the strict policy. Students in the Leadership 2020 class focused their class project on the cell phone issue and presented a proposal to use their phones outside of instructional time and ending mandatory use of cell phone pouches unless a student violates the rules.[62] Executive Director Sean Stalling noted, "While I might not agree 100 percent with every change students have proposed, I will agree 100 percent that having the policy that's co-created with students and school … will be easier to enforce and easier to implement." At the start of the 2024 school year, the school updated its cell phone policy with the goal of building in more flexibility while still maintaining the positive culture of learning they've established.

Conclusion

As your school considers how best to navigate the issue of devices in your school environment and in the classroom, this Playbook serves as a resource for one approach to policy development and implementation. Adopting the authentic youth-adult partnership practices outlined in this Playbook can help schools move from limited or episodic engagement with students and parents in the planning and implementation of school-based device policies toward a culture of clear and shared expectations in your school, responsive to the students and families that you serve.

Appendix: Resources for Building your Understanding of the Student Personal Device Issue

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[51] Malarkey, *Setting Conditions for Co-Design in Youth-Adult Design Partnerships*, p. 9.

[52] IEP Teams and groups of knowledgeable persons making Section 504 determinations may include the voluntary use of a student's personal device, and/or the use of an Assistive Technology (AT) device provided by the school, in a student's IEP or Section 504 plan. See 20 U.S.C. 1414(d)(1)(A) - (D); 20 U.S.C. 1436; 34 CFR 300.23, 300.320 - 300.321, 303.340 - 303.344; 34 CFR 104.33 and 104.35. An "assistive technology device" means any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of an infant, toddler, or child with a disability. 34 CFR 300.5 and 303.13(b)(1)(i). Assistive technology devices and services written into the IEP are the responsibility of the local educational agency (LEA). If the LEA and the parent agree that a personal device should be used instead of an AT device provided by the LEA, there are issues that should be addressed to ensure that both the parent and the LEA understand their responsibilities, including that a free appropriate public education (FAPE) must be provided without charge to the child and family; the use of the student personal device is voluntary; and the parent may choose an LEA-supplied AT device at any time. For additional information, see Myths and Facts Surrounding Assistive Technology Devices and Services. For information about effective communication requirements for individuals with a disability, see ED and DOJ DCL FAQs (PDF) (ed.gov).

[53] The Department's National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environments' Resource Library includes a range of resources for engaging with the identified student groups including *Strategies for Engaging Immigrant and Refugee Families* (SAMHSA, 2011), *Becoming an Ally: Partnering with Immigrant Families to Promote Student Success* (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2023), and *Empower LGBTQI+ Students And Allies With Comprehensive Tools And Resources* (ED, 2024).

[54] Please note that regardless of whether students who are English learners are permitted to use translation apps, public schools are required by federal law to take affirmative steps to ensure that students with limited English proficiency can meaningfully participate in their educational programs and services. When working with English learners, federal laws also require schools to ensure meaningful communication with parents/caregivers and families in a language they understand. See *Lau v. Nichols,* 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

[55] Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, *Authentic Youth Engagement,* p. 6.

[56] Malarkey, *Setting Conditions for Co-Design in Youth-Adult Design Partnerships,* p. 12.

[57] Malarkey, *Setting Conditions for Co-Design in Youth-Adult Design Partnerships,* p. 13.

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[59] This resource from the Department's State Support Network provides an overview of the approaches for conducting root cause analysis.

[60] Malarkey, *Setting Conditions for Co-Design in Youth-Adult Design Partnerships,* p. 14.

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