

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Can In-School Cell Phone Bans Boost Student Achievement?

Starting in 2013, student achievement in the United States began a gradual, long-term decline. Because the decline coincided with a rapid expansion in broadband cell phone access, many have speculated that it was due to cell phones. Along with colleagues at Dartmouth College and NWEA, the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard presents the first national analysis of student-level data to evaluate the impact of strict cell phone bans using lockable pouches, as well as state laws banning cell phones during the 2025–26 school year.

The authors analyze data from ~3.3 million students attending 4,600 schools nationally during the 2021–22 through 2025–26 school years. They compare the change in achievement growth on the NWEA MAP test in schools with and without strict cell phone bans, as well as in states with and without laws banning cell phones. The data are drawn from districts across 49 states and the District of Columbia and measure math and reading growth among students in grades 3 through 10.

Key Findings

Summary

Cell phone bans lead to:

↑ Reading Achievement

↑ Math Achievement

↓ In-School Cell Phone Usage

↓ Share of Students Experiencing Large Declines in Reading

~$25 per student

Key Findings

1. Implementing lockable pouches reduced cell phone use in schools.

In schools with bans using lockable pouches, the number of phones in use during the school day declined by roughly 20 percent over two years.[1]

2. Bans using lockable pouches appeared to boost achievement by an amount equal to an additional one to two weeks of learning per year in math and reading.

Although the impact may be modest in any given year, it is equivalent to roughly one-half of the annual loss in achievement that began in 2013. The boost is not a one-time change, but appears to continue beyond the initial year of implementation.

3. The impact of strict cell phone bans did not seem to vary across different student subgroups.

The estimated impacts did not vary by grade range (elementary, middle, and high schools), by baseline achievement of students or schools, or by gender or race.

4. Strict cell phone bans appear to reduce the share of students experiencing large losses in reading.

One interpretation is that some students are more distracted by the presence of phones in schools than others, so restricting phones reduces the number of students at various starting achievement levels experiencing large losses in reading.

5. There is suggestive evidence that state-mandated bell-to-bell and instructional time bans boosted student achievement last year.

The study also evaluated state-mandated bell-to-bell and instructional time bans implemented in 22 states in 2025–26 and found modest impacts. Students in states with bell-to-bell bans showed gains in reading and math, translating to about one to two additional weeks of learning in these subjects. However, researchers caution that these findings might be confounded by pre-existing trends in the states implementing bans.

Implications for Policy and Practice

1. Strict cell phone bans are a cost-effective way to add one to weeks of instruction each year.

Strict cell phone bans, such as those using lockable pouches or centralized storage, are a relatively cost-effective way to add the equivalent of one to two weeks of

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1. Cell phone use is measured using data from a data aggregator which compiles hourly counts of the number of devices that visit select applications within a school's geographic boundary.

instruction each year. Assuming an annual cost of $25 per student for storage, such bans would be roughly one-fifth the cost of one week of the average teacher's salary.

2. If the boost in learning persists, the benefits will accumulate over time.

However, it would take roughly two decades for strict bans to reverse the past decade of achievement loss.

Implications for Future Research

Despite the recent progress in studying in-school cell phone bans, the United States still lacks evidence on the role of cell phone use outside of school in driving the decline in student achievement since 2013. The primary obstacle has been a lack of data: even though the social media companies know how much time students are spending on their platforms, those data have yet to be linked to students' academic and non-academic outcomes.

For example, recent research has found that in-school cell phone bans produce a small boost in achievement growth, with similar effects across various student subgroups. However, student use of technology outside of the school day appears to be even more unequal, and restricting out-of-school use could have much larger effects on some subgroups of students than others.

In the recent Meta settlement, the company has agreed to share data from its platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram) with a yet-to-be-established independent research foundation to learn about effective restrictions. Below, we describe the type of data which would be needed both for monitoring the effect of the restrictions and for measuring any benefits (and costs) for students:

1. Extend social media restrictions to other platforms.

As they are incentivized to do under the agreement, state leaders should encourage other platforms commonly used by youth—YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, etc.—to adopt similar restrictions and make similar data-sharing commitments to those agreed to by Meta. If the restrictions and data sharing are limited to Meta applications, students will likely shift to other platforms and states will never know if social media use has truly been reduced.

2. Assemble baseline measures of social media use.

Under the agreement, Meta has committed to share data on students' social media use. But it remains to be seen which data will be shared. States and their research partners should work with Meta and other social media companies to track the amount of time students are spending on platforms at various times of the day (e.g., during school hours and after) and week (weekdays vs. weekends). To track the impact of the restrictions,

it would be useful to assemble data for the 2025–26 year to serve as a baseline for measuring changes. To protect the privacy of individual students, the data should be de-identified and aggregated, either to the school level or for groups of students ordered by risk of social media overuse.

3. Track changes in student engagement and mental health.

State education agencies should start tracking measures of student engagement in offline activities, such as participation in extracurricular activities, time spent reading, homework completion, in-person socialization, and measures of anxiety and depression. Parents and policymakers will want to know if the restrictions lead to improvement.

By enforcing the terms of the Meta agreement, state leaders have an opportunity not just to monitor the efficacy of the restrictions in reducing student use, but to measure the consequences for student outcomes (by comparing the gains for students most and least affected). States must use this time to build an evidence base before the agreement expires in 10 years.

Conclusion

Although the immediate impacts on student achievement are small, **strict cell phone bans represent a cost-effective way of adding one to two weeks of instruction in a school year.**

Given that the United States is more than a decade into an achievement decline, more evidence is needed on other possible causes, such as out-of-school cell phone use—and potential solutions such as regulating out-of-school social media use.

Learn More

This study is part of the **States Leading States** initiative at the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University. Read the full report, view implementation resources, and access other information about the research project at **cepr.harvard.edu/phone-free-schools.**

About CEPR

The **Center for Education Policy Research (CEPR)** at Harvard University is committed to transforming education through the power of quality research and evidence.

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