

FROM: Policy Analyst
TO: Governor Maura Healy
DATE: November 2, 2025
RE: Bill S.2581 – Cellphone Ban in Schools

Introduction

S.2581 would require schools and districts to develop policies prohibiting student use of personal electronic devices during the entire school day, with guidance from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. It is recommended that Gov. Healy continue her support for a bell-to-bell cellphone ban.

Background

In the United States, 95% of teenagers have access to a [smartphone](#). As concerns about the impact of cellphone use in schools has grown, [at least 31 states and DC](#) have created restrictive cellphone use policies in schools or have a statewide ban. In Massachusetts, however, there is currently no policy about cellphone use in schools, leaving decisions to individual teachers, schools, or districts.

[S.2581](#) creates a requirement for all Massachusetts public schools and districts to create and enforce policies that ban student use of personal electronic devices during the school day. Most commonly, this is known as a bell-to-bell cellphone ban. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education would provide guidance, storage options and enforcement recommendations. There are carved out exceptions for medical, accessibility and educational needs.

This movement toward a bell-to-bell ban comes after increases in Massachusetts school leaders reporting that phones and social media have contributed to [major classroom and behavioral challenges](#), including reduced attention, anxiety, higher rates of cyberbullying and hate incidents.

The Massachusetts Attorney General’s Office released a [“Cell Phones and Social Media in Schools”](#) toolkit in January of this year, with the intention of helping schools address challenges related to student device use and its impact on learning environments. Around the same time, AG Campbell introduced the [STUDY Act](#), as an “act promoting safe technology use and distraction-free education for youth.” It has evolved into the bill we have today. These efforts reflect a statewide movement to reducing digital distractions and improving school environments.

The bill is co-sponsored by 11 senators, 5 representatives, and AG Campbell. It passed the Senate with only two votes against and is currently in the House Committee on Ways and Means. Major supporters include the Senate President Spilka, Chair Lewis, Secretary Tutwiler, Massachusetts Psychiatric Society, AFT Massachusetts, Massachusetts Teacher’s Association, Massachusetts School Administrators Association, and school staff. Opposing groups include the Boston Student Advisory Council and individuals worried about communication in emergency situations.

Case in Favor of S.2581: School Phone Bans Work

Students are increasingly dependent on their phones, a trend that has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. This dependency has carried into the classroom, affecting participation and academic performance. Research shows that [72%](#) of teachers report students are distracted by their phones during class, and [more than half](#) of school leaders in the U.S. believe cellphones negatively affect student performance and mental health.

Medical professionals have also raised concerns about the impact of excessive phone and social media use on students. [Dr. Michael Rich](#), Director of the Digital Wellness Lab at Boston Children's Hospital, states that excessive use of devices undermines learning, socioemotional development and independence. Similarly, [the U.S. Surgeon General](#) has highlighted the potential risks to mental health and well-being of kids and teens with social media use.

The widespread use of cellphones in schools has made it increasingly difficult for teachers to maintain student attention and deliver instruction effectively. It not only affects students' academic performance, but also their social skills and increases feelings of [anxiety and depression](#). Students are being pulled into their devices instead of engaging with their surroundings.

Beyond academic concerns, the use of phones can also pose safety risks during emergencies. The [National School Safety and Security Services](#) states that phone sounds and notifications can draw unwanted attention, and that increased phone use during emergencies may distract students from following life-saving instructions during critical situations. Recognizing that communication during emergencies is important, schools must ensure they have clear protocols to address situations where students do not have access to personal devices.

Evidence from school interventions shows that limiting phone access can improve student outcomes and school climate. [Cellphone restrictions](#) have been linked to higher academic performance for at-risk students, reduced classroom behavioral issues, and increased teacher satisfaction. They have also been associated with improved student focus and [classroom engagement](#).

[Brockton High School](#) uses a physical approach to limit cellphone distractions through Yondr pouches. The school decided to implement this strategy to combat student behavioral problems. With Yondr, students lock their phones in a magnetic case during the school day, regaining access after school ends. [Since adopting in 2024](#), the school has observed reductions in student violence, teacher absenteeism, and students skipping class, as well as improvements in student engagement and socialization.

Other schools, like [Watertown High School](#), will begin to use technology to enforce cellphone restrictions without completely banning devices. Using the Doorman app, students install a VPN that blocks access to non-educational apps while still allowing phone calls and approved platforms such as Google Classroom. This approach reduces distractions from cellphones while

minimizing the administrative burden of collecting and returning devices each day. Additionally, it maintains communication between parents and students, especially in case of emergencies, which has been a major concern for opponents of this bill.

There have been more reports of positive outcomes from schools who have a restrictive phone policy. Students in schools with stricter phone policies are feeling more focused, causing their [grades to improve](#). Principals have also observed improvements in school climate, including increased social interaction and a more [positive overall environment](#). As such, bell-to-bell bans have positively impacted students' experiences while inside of the classroom.

Without requirements from the state, however, teachers are often left to create and enforce their own phone policy. This can become difficult and inconsistent across school grounds without [administrative support](#). Supporting the passage of S.2581 would eliminate this burden by requiring schools to create cohesive standards with support from DESE.

Case Opposed to S.2581: Restrictions Do More Harm

Without a state mandate, over [80%](#) of Massachusetts school districts already have a type of cellphone restriction in place. Schools are actively addressing the issue at the local level without the need for a legislative requirement. Because of this, it is not necessary to create restrictive legislation, such as the bell-to-bell ban, that may overlook the realities of the community. At the local level, educators and administrators can determine what policies serve their community and students the best.

It is important to note that the bill is an unfunded mandate, requiring schools and districts to cover the costs of implementation. Boston Public Schools awarded Yondr a [\\$850,000](#) contract for 2024-2027, with individual schools deciding whether to participate. The Yondr system costs approximately [\\$30 dollars](#) per student. This creates a financial burden for districts with limited budgets or larger student populations.

Besides being expensive, Yondr pouches are not foolproof. Some students at BPS have used second phones to [get around the rule](#) and kept their personal phone with them. Extreme circumstances in [California](#) have occurred with students breaking the Yondr pouches to reach their devices. This creates additional costs for schools that must replace damaged bags.

Research shows mixed results on the effectiveness of cellphone bans in schools. Studies have found no differences in mental health, student's daily screen time, academic performance, or well-being between schools with strict bans and [those without](#). Additionally, [an analysis of OECD](#) countries found an inverse relationship between cellphone policies and PISA scores. Countries with stricter cellphone bans tended to have lower PISA scores, even when controlling for other variables.

Cellphone bans can also affect school relationships and communication. Teachers report that enforcement can strain interactions with students, especially when they disagree and resist

turning in their [phones](#). Some students feel that having their phones taken away without consent goes against their personal property and [autonomy](#). The [Boston Student Advisory Council](#) argues that schools must teach students how to use their phone responsibly and provide the necessary support to do so. Similarly, parents agree that schools should teach their children [digital literacy](#). The removal of cellphones is counterproductive to these efforts and may negatively impact the way students interact with modern technology.

There are concerns for student safety, as they would not be able to communicate during an emergency. A survey from the National Parents Union found that [78% of parents](#) want their kids to have their phones in school for an emergency. The worry is that a bell-to-bell cellphone ban ignores the reality of school safety threats and [emergency situations](#). In these cases, students may be unable to reach their parents or emergency services if adult assistance is unavailable.

There is also a possibility that removing phones from students does not address the root issue but rather delays it. While experts like Dr. Michael Rich recognize the harms of excessive phone use, they emphasize the need to teach responsible balanced use [rather than total restriction](#). Others agree that helping students understand and manage their digital habits is more effective in the long run. Locking away phones may send the wrong message, suggesting that these challenges should be [hidden instead of addressed](#).

A statewide bell-to-bell cellphone ban overlooks local realities and the needs of parents and students. It limits communication during emergencies, may not effectively reduce excessive phone use and can instead encourage students to misuse their devices. It would also be a significant administrative and financial burden placed on schools.

Recommendation: Sign S.2581 Into Law

It is assumed that both sides share a goal of increasing student engagement, academic performance and social interaction during the school day while still allowing for communication between parents and students. A bell-to-bell cellphone ban that considers local needs and gives districts flexibility can achieve this balance. If the bill passes the House, it is recommended that Gov. Healy sign it into law. The bill would have the following benefits:

- 1) Fewer Distractions During Class:** Limiting cellphone use would help students stay focused on lessons instead of on notifications or social media. This improves academic performance and reduces dependency on phones during school hours.
- 2) Better School Climate:** Without cellphones, students can interact more with their peers and teachers. It encourages stronger relationships, face-to-face communication, and improves teacher morale.
- 3) Stronger Mental Health and Social Well-being:** Reducing access to social media during the day can decrease stress and help students feel more present at school.

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