

FAMILY MEDIA/APPS + TECH

Proposed Bill Aims to Remove Cell Phones From Classrooms in Washington State

Lawmakers move to curb classroom distractions

BY GEMMA ALEXANDER (/AUTHOR/GEMMA-ALEXANDER) |

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PHOTO: iStock

Kids today can't even imagine how their parents grew up without cell phones. What was science fiction for our parents is a routine – if fraught – parenting decision (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/teaching-kids-navigate-information-superhighway>), for us. According to the Pew Research Center, 95 percent of teenagers (<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/teens-and-internet-device-access-fact-sheet/>) have access to a smartphone, and although the exact percentage varies by grade, more than half of elementary (<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/07/28/childrens-engagement-with-digital-devices-screen-time/>) school students do, too. Nearly one-quarter of teens self-report being chronically online, and that has adults very concerned.

Studying cell phones

Every generation is marked by some kind of parenting panic, and like responses to the Satanic panic and rap music, cell phones may not be as dangerous as we fear. But nearly everyone agrees – even a quarter of teenagers themselves (<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/06/12/72-percent-of-us-high-school-teachers-say-cellphone-distraction-is-a-major-problem-in-the-classroom/>) – cell phones are a problem in the classroom.

“We know that number one, it’s a huge distraction. For any teacher trying to get through algebra or biology or history, there’s no competition between that and whatever’s on the internet that day,” says Meghan Kaul, head of the Seattle chapter of Mothers Against Media Addiction (<https://www.joinmama.org/>). (MAMA), a nonprofit dedicated to changing the culture around technology and putting more emphasis on in-person and play-based childhood.

A National Education Association survey found that 79 percent of educators whose schools allow cell phones find them very disruptive. Further, 90 percent of educators surveyed said they would support cell phone policies that restricted students’ use of cell phones during instructional time. Currently, 19 states have active state policies (<https://www.edweek.org/technology/which-states-ban-or-restrict-cellphones-in-schools/2024/06/>) of one sort or another. Washington is one of seven states with an official (but optional) recommendation that districts adopt a cell phone restriction policy. Now a bill making its way through the state legislature would make it a law.

HB 1122 and SB 5346

Reps. Stephanie McClintock, Mari Leavitt and Liz Berry introduced House Bill 1122 (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=1122&Year=2025&Initiative=false>) that would require school districts, including charter schools and state-tribal compact schools, to adopt a policy restricting student cellphone use during instructional time by the start of the 2026–27 school year. In mid-January, the bill was referred to the House Education Committee (<https://leg.wa.gov/about-the-legislature/committees/house-of-representatives/ed/>), where it awaits scheduling for a hearing. The companion Senate Bill 6346 (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=5346&Chamber=Senate&Year=2025>) has been referred to the Senate Early Learning & K–12 Education Committee (<https://leg.wa.gov/about-the-legislature/committees/senate/edu/>) and also awaits scheduling (as of publication).

Citing the need to reduce distractions and improve mental health, both versions of the bill would restrict student cell phone use during instructional hours in Washington schools. If you read the full text of the bill (<https://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2025-26/Pdf/Bills/House%20Bills/1122.pdf?q=20250116123340>), it would specifically:

Require the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to produce a report by Dec. 15. The report would summarize existing school policies that restrict mobile devices and recommend successful strategies and exceptions.

Require the Washington State School Directors’ Association (WSSDA) to develop a model policy and procedures for restricting mobile devices in alignment with OSPI’s report by March 15, 2026.

Require every school district in the state to adopt a policy and procedures consistent with the WSSDA’s model by the start of the 2026–27 school year.

This is the normal process for establishing statewide educational policy. Katy Payne, Chief Communications Officer for OSPI, says the bill is consistent with the OSPI guidelines on cell phones (<https://ospi.k12.wa.us/about-ospi/news-center/news-releases/superintendent-reykdal-publishes-guidance-schools-limit-cell-phones-during-instructional-time>) released in 2024. But OSPI has no enforcement authority, so those guidelines are strictly advisory without legislative action.

When the legislature creates legal requirements for Washington schools, [WSSDA \(https://wssda.org/\)](https://wssda.org/) is typically tasked to create model policies.

“We’re a local control state. So local school boards have the authority, the responsibility, the autonomy to adopt, or create their own local policies and procedures there. The model policies are intended to be a supportive measure, so that districts can feel confident when they adopt policies that it’s in alignment with state and federal laws,” says Payne.

OSPI supports the bill as written and has already begun drafting a statewide survey that would inform the report. Kaul said MAMA also supports the bill. “We’re looking to make technology use a little more intentional, age-appropriate and academically supportive. Right now, our number one goal is to get cell phones out of schools.”



Cell phones are a huge distraction in the classroom. Photo: iStock

Cost and resources

It’s too soon to tell how much a cell phone ban would cost. Bills prescribe the work, while fiscal notes summarize related costs. But fiscal notes are only produced once the bill is scheduled for a hearing.

“If the bill moves forward in the process and fiscal notes are produced, we’ll be able to see what it will cost to do that work,” explains Payne. The administrative costs of producing the report and adopting new policies are expected to be relatively low.

Exceptions

It’s easy to see where a blanket ban could overstep its usefulness. Sometimes teachers want their students to go online as part of their lesson plan. Some IEPs call for the use of a smart device to support students with disabilities. Students may also need access to a smart device to meet health needs, for example, a diabetic who uses a cell phone app for glucose monitoring.

“This bill does include that there should be exceptions for those types of things,” says Payne.

Mobile device

The “cell phone bill” actually uses the term “mobile device.” That’s an important distinction, and a point for debate.

“They define a mobile device as something that can make phone calls and send text messages,” says Kaul. Noting the growing dumb phone movement, she says, “I would not require basic phones to be locked up. Those phones that don’t have internet access and don’t have apps, I would allow that little inch of flexibility so that parents feel like they have some choices.”

But Payne said smart phones are not the only mobile devices disrupting classrooms.

“Something that we’ve heard from educators at the elementary level is that smart watches that students wear can be really disruptive.”

Instructional hours

Instructional hours are defined in state law as the hours in which students are provided the opportunity to engage in educational activity.

“I don’t think that’s enough. What I would change is that the bill will require a working policy from bell to bell, meaning the second students arrive at school until school is out, for those six hours. The reason it makes a difference is because a lot of the cyberbullying, harassment environment is happening during breaks and lunch,” says Kaul.

Although the bill doesn’t require a bell-to-bell policy, there is nothing in the bill that would preclude districts from adopting one.



The bills seek to ban mobile devices during instructional hours. Photo: iStock

School choice

“It’s important for people to know that their local school district will still have a choice about how to implement policy or what specific policy to implement,” Payne says. Although districts must be consistent with WSSDA’s model policy, such models are broadly written to provide guidance on legal requirements without prescribing the specific approach.

“It should be up to the local community to decide how they want to do that,” says Payne.

Strategies already in use include [Yondr pouches](https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/yondr-pouches-seal-students-cellphones-away-for-the-entire-school-day-are-they-working/) (<https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/yondr-pouches-seal-students-cellphones-away-for-the-entire-school-day-are-they-working/>), classroom collection bins and simply providing consequences when phones are not kept inside a backpack or locker.

“I like that the bill allows that flexibility. It could be excessive to plan one way to do it. Not every school is going to really harmonize with just one way of doing things,” says Kaul.

If you would like to share your thoughts on the cell phone bill, you can [submit your comments](https://app.leg.wa.gov/pbc/bill/1122) (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/pbc/bill/1122>) online.

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[Scroll Less, Live More: Fighting Back Against the Phone-Based Childhood](https://www.parentmap.com/article/the-anxious-generation-social-media-response)

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