CELL PHONES AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN SCHOOLS

A Toolkit for School Leaders and Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Smartphone and social media use are nearly universal amongst teens in America. Today, almost all teenagers have their own smartphone, and up to 95% of teenagers ages 13-17 report using social media, with over one-third reporting that they use it "almost constantly."[1]

In May 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health, advising the public that, despite some benefits for some youth, the current body of evidence demonstrates that social media use poses a profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents.[2]

> *"With near universal social media use by America's young people, these apps and sites introduce profound risk and mental health harms in ways we are only now beginning to fully understand. As physicians, we see firsthand the impact of social media, particularly during adolescence – a critical period of brain development."*
>
> — Jack Resneck Jr., M.D., President, American Medical Association, statement on the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory: Social Media and Youth Mental Health, May 23, 2023

Schools have not been shielded from these effects. Teachers and school leaders across the country report grappling with the pervasive distractions caused by cell phones and social media use, with 72% of high school teachers citing cell phone use as a major problem in classrooms.[3] School leaders in Massachusetts have reported significant impacts of cell phones and social media on students and the school environment, including distractions from learning, shortened student attention span, increased anxiety among students, negative peer interactions, and increases in cyberbullying, harassment, and hate incidents. Students use social media to plan and promote physical violence, with students recording fights on their phones then posting the videos on social media for "likes."[4] School leaders, educators, parents, and students in Massachusetts are asking for help.

This Toolkit is designed to provide information and resources to help schools navigate the challenges that cell phone[5] and social media use present in their learning environments. It aims to support districts in developing and implementing policies, gaining buy-in from stakeholders, and fostering communities that collectively promote the well-being of children and youth.

The toolkit contains three main components:

1. Model Cell Phone Policy for schools and a list of key considerations for school leaders to tailor their policy to the needs of their district.

2. Guide for Developing Community Norms on cell phone and social media use outside of school hours.

3. Digital Media Literacy topics and strategies for teaching students responsible use of technology and digital media.

The Massachusetts Attorney General's Office is driving efforts to ensure that schools have the resources they need to address the impacts of cell phone and social media use on their learning environments.

These three components may be implemented together as part of a comprehensive approach, or individually, depending on the needs of the district. The Toolkit does not require school districts to make any specific changes. Rather, the Toolkit should be viewed as a *resource* for each district to gather the information that is most useful and relevant to its own efforts and needs.

SECTION 1:
POLICY

A growing number of schools in Massachusetts and nationwide are adopting policies to ban or restrict cell phone use during school hours to improve the learning environment and school culture. As of 2022, 76% of U.S. schools have prohibited the non-academic use of cell phones or smartphones.[6] Schools with full-day phone-free policies (also known as "bell-to-bell" policies) report that students interact with each other more, are more engaged, and experience fewer disciplinary issues.[7] Massachusetts superintendents have reported that implementing phone locking pouches and other bell-to-bell policies have led to marked improvements, including increased student attention, improved peer relationships, and reductions in cyberbullying.

Developing and implementing a cell phone policy for your school requires careful planning. Although "bell-to-bell" policies, further defined below, tend to be most effective, there are a range of implementation approaches. Rigorous implementation is critical to success, with clear expectations and procedures communicated to the entire school community, strong administrative support, and consistent enforcement across the school.

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TYPES OF POLICIES

Schools across the country are currently implementing a range of strategies to manage cell phone and personal device use during the school day.[8] The below chart lists three common types of policies, with key considerations for each:

1. **Bell-to-Bell:** Cell phones are securely stored upon entering the building, and returned at the end of the day. Cell phones are physically inaccessible to students throughout the entire school day.

2. **Off and Away:** Cell phones are expected to be powered off and stored out of sight during the entire school day, including class time, passing periods, and lunch. Students may store phones in their backpack, student locker, or other location out of sight. Students maintain physical access to their phones.

3. **Limited Use:** Cell phones are expected to be powered off and stored out of sight during instructional periods, but may be used during designated times and in specific areas such as lunch or passing periods.

Please note: Schools increasingly provide students with school-issued devices (e.g. Chromebooks, iPads, other tablets, or laptops) to be used for educational purposes. In most schools, students also have access to school-owned desktop computers at different points during the school day. To manage the risks and ensure these devices are used solely for educational purposes, many schools implement internet restrictions, block access to social media applications, and enact other protections on all school-owned devices that students can access.

	PHONE-FREE "BELL-TO-BELL"	OFF + AWAY	LIMITED USE
Description	• Phones stored in a secure location when students arrive and are not physically accessible to students until the end of the day • E.g. lock boxes, locking pouches	• Phones turned off and stored out of sight for entire day, in student backpacks or lockers, or in designated areas in each classroom (e.g. shoe racks, bins)	• Phones allowed during designated times throughout the day, e.g., lunch, passing periods, and placed in backpacks or in designated areas in each classroom during class periods
Benefits	• Centralized and consistent implementation school-wide • Eliminates cell phone distraction in class and across the school building • Eliminates burden on teachers to enforce • Reduces strain on teacher-student relationships • Creates optimal environment for the development of in-person social skills	• Encourages student accountability • Reduces (but does not eliminate) cell phone distractions in class and around the school building • Encourages the development of in-person social skills	• Accommodates individual communication needs, especially for older students who may have after-school responsibilities • Fosters autonomy and encourages self-regulation

Drawbacks & Implementation Challenges	• Upfront cost of storage solutions (pouches, lockers)
	
	• Provides less opportunity for students (particularly at the high school level) to demonstrate autonomy and practice using their phone responsibly during school hours
	
	• Students unable to use personal cell phones during the school day to communicate with after-school employers or coordinate other after-school logistics
		• Burden on teachers to enforce
		
		  - Takes time away from teaching and learning
		
		  - Contributes to strained teacher-student relationships
		
		• Potential for uneven enforcement
		
		• Risk of use during instructional time
		
		• Can create a culture of monitoring or "policing" phone-use
			• Burden on teachers to enforce
			
			  - Takes time away from teaching and learning
			
			  - Contributes to strained teacher-student relationships
			
			• Can lead to battles convincing students to put their phones away during restricted-use times
			
			• Risk of use during instructional time
			
			• Relies on students to self-regulate phone use, which may be an unrealistic expectation
			
			• During designated periods when phones are permitted (e.g. lunch), students may engage in cyberbullying, video recording, and other non-educational uses
			
			• Can create a culture of monitoring or "policing" phone-use
			
			• Less opportunity for in-person social interaction and social skill development

	PHONE-FREE "BELL-TO-BELL"	OFF + AWAY	LIMITED USE
Common Parent Concerns	• Unable to reach their child on their personal cell phone during the school day • Concerns related to communication during emergencies	• Difficult to reach their child on their personal cell phone during the school day • Concerns related to communication during emergencies • Impact of teacher enforcement on teacher-student relationships • Distractions during instructional time	• Distractions during instructional time • Impact of teacher enforcement on teacher-student relationships • Negative impacts on peer dynamics and overall school culture • Cyberbullying during non-class times (e.g. lunch)
Age Group Considerations	• May be implemented at elementary, middle, and high school levels. • Implementation procedures may differ by grade level. E.g. at the elementary level, the policy may require personal cell phones to be left at home, whereas a front door cell phone locking protocol may be necessary at the middle and high school levels.	• May be used at middle or high school levels with careful implementation.	• Not recommended for elementary or middle school. May be used at high school level with careful implementation.
Massachusetts Examples	• Holyoke Middle Schools and High School • Brockton High School • Pioneer Valley	• Public Schools of Brookline • Mount Greylock Regional High School	• Lowell High School • Worcester Public Schools

Policy and Implementation Considerations

- Communicate clearly with the school community throughout the process of developing new policy. Identify any specific areas for input from school staff, families, and students.

- Policies and procedures may vary between elementary, middle, and high school levels. Ensure your policy and procedures clearly outline how the policy will be implemented at each level.

- Clearly communicate to school staff, families, and students the expectations and consequences for not complying with the policy.

- Decide how the policy will be enforced and how the school will respond if violations occur. Consider containing the role of teachers due to the potential impact on teacher-student relationships and instructional time.

- If implementing a bell-to-bell policy, decide upon and budget for storage solutions in advance.

    - Lock storage options include lock pouches, cell phone lockers, cell phone lockers with individual slots. Low-cost options include padded envelopes or pencil pouches stored in alphabetized compartments or hanging calculator storage systems located in the front office, homerooms, or other secure location monitored by staff.

- Establish clear protocols for parents/guardians to communicate with their child if necessary, during the school day (e.g. by calling the front office) and clear protocols in the event of an emergency at the school. Keep parent/guardian phone numbers and emergency contact information current.

Accommodating Students with Disabilities

Ensure that your policy accommodates the communication or other needs of students with disabilities or health conditions as required by their IEP, 504 Plan, or health plan.

Considerations for School-Owned Devices

Consider implementing internet restrictions and other protections on all school-owned devices that students have access to (including desktop computers in school buildings and school-issued individual devices) to ensure these devices are used solely for educational purposes.

If your school uses a social media account to communicate with parents and/or students, consider utilizing an alternative communication platform that does not require parents and students to have a social media account to receive information from the school.

- Ensure your policy and procedures address legitimate communication needs of older students related to after-school responsibilities, such as contacting an employer regarding a job or coordinating with family-members for caregiving or transportation needs. These needs can be met in a variety of ways, such as allowing access to a phone in the school's front office or granting brief, temporary cell phone access at the administration's discretion.

- Consider addressing in your policy other personal electronic devices, including smartwatches, headphones, personal laptops, tablets, and similar items that may provide access to social media and the internet or cause other distractions.

- Review for alignment with broader policies, such as those addressing bullying and harassment, and supports student safety, privacy, and well-being.

- If devices are part of the learning experience, differentiate between personal phone use and school-issued technology.

- Consider whether the policy extends to school events outside of school hours and how it will be implemented in those settings.

Discipline Best Practice

Schools should be cautious about utilizing suspensions as a consequence for violating a cell phone policy. Cell phone policies aim to maximize time students spend in school learning, and suspensions lead to further missed instructional time. Instead, consider implementing Action Plans with students who are struggling to abide by the policy, and engage the student, family, and school social worker or other counseling staff to address any underlying needs that may be contributing to repeated noncompliance.

MODEL BELL-TO-BELL CELL PHONE POLICY[9]

[School District] Cell Phone and Personal Electronic Device Policy

[School District] is committed to fostering a school environment that prioritizes engaged learning, supports the development of social skills, and promotes the overall well-being of our students. To achieve this, [school district] is a cell phone-free community. This means that, subject to the exceptions outlined below, cell phones and other personal electronic devices are not accessible to students during school hours. Implementation of this policy varies by grade level, as further described below.

Definition of Personal Electronic Devices:

Personal electronic devices ("devices" as used herein) are defined as any electronic device utilized to access the internet, wi-fi, cellular telephone signals, or to capture or play images or video. These include, but are not limited to, smartphones, mobile phones, headphones, earbuds, smartwatches, tablets, laptops, and gaming devices.

The school reserves the right to classify additional devices as personal electronic devices.

Grade-Level Policies

Elementary School:

- **Policy:** Students are not permitted to bring cell phones or devices to school.
- **If Brought to School:** Cell phones and devices must be checked in at the front desk upon arrival and stored securely for the duration of the school day. They will be returned to students at the end of the day. Parents will receive a call from the school requesting that personal devices be left at home.

Middle School and High School:

- **Policy:** Students are not permitted access to their cell phones or other devices at school during school hours. Students are encouraged to leave devices at home. At the start of each school day, students must place their personal device in a designated locked or staff supervised storage area. Students will re-gain access to their device at the end of each school day.

Response to Policy Violations:

First incident: The cell phone or device will be confiscated and placed in the designated storage location for the remainder of the school day. The student can retrieve the device at the end of the day.

Second incident: The cell phone or device will be confiscated and placed in the designated storage location for the remainder of the school day. A school administrator will have a conversation with the student and contact the parent/guardian.

Third incident: A meeting will be held with the student, parent/guardian, and school administrator (and school counselor, social worker, or other staff, as appropriate) to review the policy and develop a written

"Cell Phone/Personal Device Action Plan."

Repeat incidents (more than 2) may result in the loss of the privilege to bring personal devices to school. Beginning with the third incident, a meeting with the student and parent/guardian will be scheduled each time the policy is violated. At the meeting, the Action Plan will be modified as necessary and underlying needs of the student that may be contributing to repeated non-compliance will be discussed and addressed.

Parent-Student Communication During School Day:

Students needing to contact a parent/guardian during the school day may do so by using the phone in the front office, or by accessing their cell phone in the front office with administrator approval. Parent/guardian and emergency contact numbers should be kept current.

Parents/guardians needing to reach their student during the school day can contact the front office. The school will ensure urgent messages are promptly relayed.

Accommodations:

If a student has a disability or medical condition that requires a cell phone, or other device, the accommodation will be noted in the student's IEP, 504 Plan, or health plan. The special education team coordinator or health office will notify appropriate staff of the necessary accommodations.

Students with outside responsibilities, such as after-school jobs or caregiving, should make all plans prior to the school day. If there is a need for a student to access their cell phone during the school day, they may do so in the front office or other designated location, and only with the permission of a school administrator.

Families should make arrangements with their child that don't rely upon their child having access to a cell phone or device during school hours.

School events:

Students may not use cell phones or other devices at school-sponsored events.

Staff use of personal devices:

School staff are strongly discouraged from using cell phones or personal devices in front of students, except for essential educational purposes (e.g. taking photos in accordance with school policy, quick communication with another staff member, or quick, essential communication with a parent).

CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMMUNICATING THE FINAL POLICY

Communicating the Policy to Students and Families

- Update the school's student/parent handbooks to include the new policy.

- Use multiple channels, such as emails, newsletters, or school events like open houses, to communicate the policy to both students and families.

- Provide both online and in-person opportunities, such as webinars, town hall meetings, or Q&A sessions, for students and families to ask questions.

- Clearly explain the reasons for the policy, focusing on issues like distractions and cyberbullying, and highlight its benefits for an improved learning environment.

- Anticipate concerns around communication and loss of student autonomy and provide clear responses. Share an FAQ flyer addressing common questions, including those related to parent-student communication during the school day and emergency contact procedures. Refer to the [Sample FAQ](#) document in Appendix for sample responses to frequently raised concerns.

- Anticipate challenges during the transition period as students adapt to the new expectations. The shift will be hardest for *current* middle and high school students who are accustomed to using devices during school hours. Provide additional support to these students to manage anxiety and other emotions that may arise during the transition. The policy transition will be less challenging for younger students as these students and future cohorts of students will move into higher grades with the new expectations and norms already in place.

- Share success stories or testimonials from other schools that have seen positive results from similar policies.

Communicating with Staff and Broader Community

- Share the reasoning for the policy with teachers and staff, highlighting their own feedback on the topic, and emphasizing research or other evidence for how the policy is designed to minimize distractions and mitigate negative impacts of cell phone and social media use in the school.

- Establish clear roles for staff in the building relative to implementation of the policy. For example, schools may wish to limit the role of teachers and classroom support staff and place more responsibility for enforcing the policy in the hands of administrators. Schools should also think through whether there is a supportive role for school counselors or social workers for students who are struggling to follow the policy.

- Provide training for staff on the policy and specific roles and responsibilities of different staff members.

- Equip teachers with strategies to respond to student or parent complaints about the policy. Encourage discussions in the classroom and use role-playing in training to prepare for common objections.

- Hold implementation check-in sessions with staff to address concerns and to promote consistency in the implementation of the policy.

By communicating transparently about the rationale for the policy and addressing common concerns upfront, schools can foster greater community support for the new policy.

SECTION 2:
COMMUNITY NORMS

Policies address cell phone and social media use during school hours, but stop short of addressing the challenges that arise with these technologies outside of school that nevertheless impact the school environment. In addition, parents increasingly face difficult choices as they encounter pressures to provide their child access to these technologies at earlier and earlier ages in order for them to belong with their peers. These and other factors have led schools and families to seek broader solutions. "Community Norms" empower families, students, educators, and community stakeholders to align around shared values and practices regarding cell phone, social media, and other technology use. By collectively committing to guiding our children around responsible technology use in all settings, Community Norms create consistency between school, home, and the broader community, and reinforce positive habits that benefit students' learning, relationships, and well-being.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE NORMS

While norms should be tailored to the specific needs of each community, strong norms share several key characteristics:

1. **Clear:** Norms should be easy to understand and short. Long paragraphs make it harder for people to find the point.

2. **Actionable:** Norms should establish clear and concrete expectations that families and community members can implement.

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3. **Flexible:** Norms should be adaptable, taking into account individual students' needs and differing family circumstances.

4. **Focused on Community and Belonging:** Norms should affirm the community's values and provide supportive guidelines for families. Norms are not required and the focus should not be on compliance. Rather, the goal is for communities to coalesce around shared values that motivate families to voluntarily follow the norms.

5. **Brief:** Fewer norms are better. It's best to aim for between 5 and 10 norms that reflect the values of the community and address its greatest needs.

SAMPLE NORMS AND CONSIDERATIONS

This section provides one example of what a complete set of Community Norms might look like. These sample norms may be used and adapted by your school community, or your community may choose to develop its own. Either way, it is vital for each community to engage in its own process of identifying common concerns, articulating the community's values, and ensuring norms reflect the specific needs of the community.

1. **In-person interactions and activities are prioritized in our community, and device-use is limited.**

   - **Every child has device-free time built into their after-school hours.** Families strive to create and follow a schedule for device use, such as limiting device use to a specific time (e.g., one hour after school) or specific spaces (e.g., only in common spaces of the home). Individual families may choose to designate certain activities and times as device-free, such as meals, family gatherings, bedtime, and during homework, to foster connection, improve focus, and minimize distractions.

   - **Bedrooms at night are tech-free spaces.** This norm helps ensure children are getting adequate sleep and avoid the negative impacts associated with late-night technology consumption. Individual families may set the time for devices to be moved out of bedrooms and decide where to store devices at night (e.g., in a common area). Families may consider purchasing inexpensive alarm clocks if necessary to replace cell phone alarms.

2. **Our community commits and supports families to wait until high school (9th grade) to provide personal, internet-connected smartphone devices to children.**

   - We remind ourselves that while this may be a dramatic cultural shift and a difficult transition for current youth, younger children and future generations will not experience this change, only the new norm. If there are legitimate needs to communicate with our children on a personal smartphone earlier than high school (e.g. 7*th* or 8*th* grade), we commit to providing our middle schoolers with smartwatches with restricted internet access or mobile phones (i.e. "flip phones" or "dumb phones") to avoid the risks associated with constant social media and internet access for young developing brains.

3. **We take the harms and risks of social media use seriously. We therefore commit as a community to wait to enable social media apps on our children's phones until age 16.**

   > **Considerations for providing access to smartphones and social media:**
   >
   > First review the research on impacts of social media use by children and youth then decide upon a guideline around the age/grade to enable access to smartphones and social media based on a review of the data and expert recommendations.

4. **Adults in our community are self-aware and intentional about their own device use and strive to minimize cell phone use in front of children.**

   - We remind ourselves that our behavior as adults serves as a model for our children.

5. **Hate and bullying have no place in our community.**

   - As a community, we value differences and teach our children to be kind and respect others.

   - As a community, we strive to create a culture of inclusivity and belonging both in and out of school. This means we teach our children to include, not exclude others, regardless of differences or peer pressures.

   - Together, we aim to ensure every child knows what to do when they witness hate or bullying.

   - We work to ensure that all school staff, students, and families know how to identify bullying, harassment, and hate, and know how to respond when it occurs, including how/ to whom to report it.

6. **All youth understand and follow the general rule of thumb not to text, message, or post anything online that they wouldn't want everyone to see (including their parents, peers, teachers, the principal).**

   - Youth understand that their messages and posts- including images- can be shared with others, and even their "Snaps" can be screenshotted and shared.

7. **Children and youth in our community know when something is "Too Big to Handle Alone."**

   - Children and youth know the types of situations or problems that are too serious to handle on their own, and they know to contact a trusted adult.

   - Children and youth understand that conversations about any difficult or substantive topic are usually better in person than online.

   - Families in our community support each other in working through hard dynamics between peers or other challenging situations, with the goal of promoting a healthy, safe, and inclusive community for all.

COMMUNITY NORMS IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK

The following framework offers guidelines for engaging the entire community—school leaders, educators, staff, students, families, and community organizations—in the process of developing Community Norms.

Phase 1: Forming the Community Norms Advisory Group

Schools may establish a small group of stakeholders to develop voluntary Community Norms for cell phone and social media use outside of school. This group will also serve as a bridge between the school's initiatives and the home and community settings.

The group should ideally consist of 5-6 members, and it is strongly recommended to keep the total number under 10. This group may include a variety of stakeholders such as parents/guardians, educators, family engagement staff, school social workers, mental health counselors, and other community members (such as directors of after-school or extracurricular programs).

This group will help develop broader community buy-in for adopting norms, so their early commitment and engagement is critical.

Leadership: It's recommended that the principal/school leadership recruit the chair or co-chairs of the Advisory Group.

Steps:

1. The school principal identifies a parent and/or staff person to serve as the Advisory Group chair (or co-chairs). The chair's responsibilities are to (a) recruit and form the Advisory Group; (b) plan and facilitate meetings of the Advisory Group; (c) lead the process of developing Community Norms; and (d) serve as a liaison with school leadership.

2. The principal and chair develop high-level goals and milestones (i.e. decide when the Community Norms should be completed and shared with the broader community).

3. The Advisory Group chair recruits other Advisory Group members through newsletters, emails, and school events such as back-to-school nights and open houses.

   - Ensure a diverse mix of parents/guardians across grades, cultures, languages, and perspectives.

   - Include interested staff, such as those in counseling, social work, or technology, as appropriate for your school and district.

   - Invite a student to join, or explore other ways to incorporate student input.

   - Consider inviting local youth-serving organizations, after-school providers, and sports leagues to join, fostering broader community involvement.

4. Schedule and create an agenda for your first meeting.

You are ready to move to Phase 2 when:

- High-level goals have been clearly defined by school leadership (i.e. target date for completion and launch of Community Norms).

- 5-10 people have committed to joining the Advisory Group.

- The first meeting has been scheduled.

Note: A delay between Phase 1 and Phase 2 may lead to reduced engagement and participation, so it's important to maintain momentum.

Phase 2: Defining the "Why" and Educating the Advisory Group

In Phase 2, the Advisory Group will explore the reasons and need for creating Community Norms and will set clear goals. The Advisory Group will review relevant research and information on the use of cell phones, social media, and other technology by young people to deepen their understanding of the issues.

Leadership: The chair of the Advisory Group will lead this effort and will collect background educational materials to share with the group.

Steps:

At the first meeting, the Advisory Group should:

1. Discuss common concerns of the group members regarding student use of cell phones, social media, and other technology outside of school hours, and review background research and information on these topics.

2. Develop goals including what issues the group hopes to address through the Community Norms; and discuss desired outcomes.

3. Decide how frequently the group will meet, and if the meetings will be held virtually or in-person.

You are ready to move to Phase 3 when:

- Background research and educational materials have been shared and reviewed by the group.

- Common concerns, desired outcomes, and goals have been clearly defined.

- A consistent meeting cadence and schedule have been established.

Phase 3: Educate, Inform, and Engage with the Community

Informed by conversations and input from phases 1 & 2, the Advisory Group will begin engaging and educating the broader school and local community on challenges facing young people related to cell phone, social media, and other technology use.

Note: Don't be discouraged if the first large community event doesn't have a great turn out - it can take some time to build the habit of joining these kinds of events and word of mouth will help as time goes on.

Leadership: The Advisory Group leads the effort, with support from school administrators for publicity and community engagement.

Steps:

1. Select and share with the broader school community educational materials from credible sources on the impact of cell phones and social media on youth well-being.

2. Educate and engage the community in dialogue regarding these topics. Effective strategies to foster engagement may include:

   A. Co-host with school officials virtual or in-person sessions to discuss specific topics related to cell phones, social media, and other technology use.

   B. Organize screenings of relevant films.

   C. Collaborate with neighboring school districts, libraries, nonprofits, or community groups to bring in guest speakers or co-host events (e.g., researchers, child psychologists, and school administrators, educators, parents, and youth from neighboring districts).

You are ready to move to Phase 4 when:

- The Advisory Group's work has gained visibility within the community.

- Education programs from Phase 2 have begun (but don't need to be complete).

- Parents/guardians and community members have shown interest through attendance at educational sessions, engaging with emails, and signing up to participate in norm-setting discussions.

> Taking the time to educate the community about the risks of cell phone and social media use among youth is an essential step as it builds common understanding of the issues and need for Community Norms. Be sure to refer to reliable research and other credible sources of information.

Phase 4: Drafting and Community Review

The next phase focuses on drafting the Community Norms and collecting feedback from the school community to ensure the norms reflect the community's concerns.

Leadership: The Advisory Group leads, with support from school administrators.

Steps:

The Advisory Group:

1. Drafts proposed Community Norms, reflecting the needs of the school community, in formats and languages appropriate for your community.

2. Shares the draft Community Norms with the principal or school leader for review and input.

3. Distributes the revised draft to the entire school community via emails, newsletters, and other communication channels.

4. Hosts virtual or in-person meetings to present the Community Norms, gather feedback, and address any questions.

5. Seek feedback from students through student government, student clubs, or by collaborating with school staff to present and discuss the norms with students during an advisory or other period during the school day.

6. Incorporates feedback ensuring that the Community Norms continue to align with the goals outlined in phases 1 and 2.

You are ready to move to Phase 5 when:

- Community Norms have been drafted and shared with the community and all stakeholders.

- Feedback has been gathered using a variety of communication channels (e.g. email, surveys, and/or virtual or in-person events) and incorporated.

Phase 5: Finalize Launch

The final phase focuses on finalizing and clearly communicating the Community Norms throughout the community in formats and languages appropriate for the community.
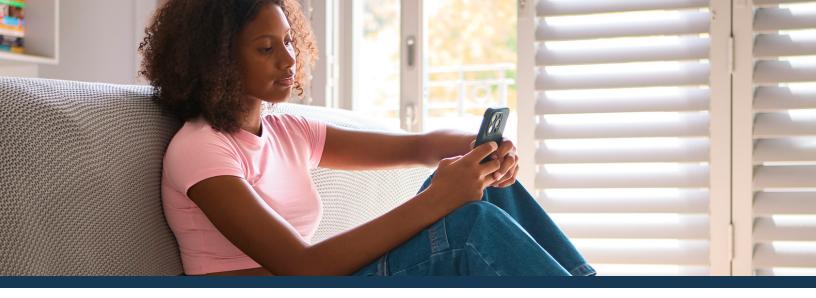
Leadership: The Advisory Group leads, with support from school administrators.

Steps:

1. Share the final Community Norms with the principal or school leader for awareness.

2. Share final Community Norms widely with students, parents/guardians, and the full school community via emails, newsletters, school events, and community meetings. Be sure to translate the document into other languages, as appropriate for the community.

Phase 6: Ongoing Engagement and Review

- Maintain open communication with the full school community.

- Gather feedback regularly to assess the Community Norms and address any concerns.

- Reinforce Community Norms by sharing reminders and tips, hosting additional educational sessions, and encouraging families to revisit the Community Norms throughout the year.

- Review and adjust the Community Norms as needed, maintaining alignment with the goals outlined by the Advisory Group.

- Communicate any changes to all stakeholders.

SECTION 3:
CURRICULUM GUIDELINES

Schools play a vital role in equipping young people with the knowledge and skills they need to engage responsibly in the digital world. Digital media literacy refers to the ability to access, understand, evaluate, and responsibly engage with content in digital spaces. This skill set empowers individuals to navigate online information thoughtfully, ethically and responsibly, recognize misinformation, and consider the broader impact of digital media on society.

This section of the Toolkit aims to provide school leaders and educators with guidelines on integrating key digital media literacy topics into existing curricula. Educators seeking examples of curricula to incorporate can find more information in the resource section.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN IMPLEMENTING DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY

There are a number of factors to consider when adding digital media literacy to an already full curriculum, to complement existing priorities without overwhelming students or educators.

When to introduce:
- Consider starting digital media literacy in elementary school as students begin using technology, with more advanced lessons in middle and high school.

How to Embed Across Subjects:

- Digital media literacy can integrate seamlessly into student leadership opportunities and a range of subjects, including:
    - Social Studies and Language Arts by analyzing media, understanding bias, and evaluating credibility.
    - Computer Science and Technology by teaching critical thinking, how algorithms work, and responsible tech use.
    - Health and Social Emotional Learning by addressing the mental health impacts of technology, such as social media use, and promoting well-being.

Flexible implementation:

Schools can implement digital media literacy through:

- Embedding lessons in core subjects or advisory periods.
- Project-based learning, workshops, or standalone lessons.
- Connecting digital media literacy lessons with the [Massachusetts Comprehensive Health and Physical Education Framework](#), which include related standards, to streamline integration into existing coursework.
- Educators looking to align and select curricula can explore the [resource section](#).

HOW TEACHERS CAN SUPPORT DIGITAL LITERACY

Teacher mindsets matter. The following principles can help schools be more effective in supporting digital literacies among students.

1. **Building Digital Agency:** Schools need both policies to limit the distractions of cell phones *and* digital media literacy lessons that equip students with the knowledge and skills to navigate technology responsibly.

2. **Be a Coach, Not a Referee:** Rather than acting as referees who only enforce rules and consequences, adults can serve as Coaches, guiding teens in a tech-filled world. Coaches support skill-building, collaborate with youth to navigate challenges, and use mistakes as learning opportunities. This approach fosters accountability, resilience, and a path forward for growth.

3. **Ask Instead of Assume:** Adults often make assumptions about teens' technology use, leading to misguided advice and interventions that don't resonate. These assumptions can unintentionally alienate youth, blocking open communication. By asking questions and approaching with curiosity, adults can gain a deeper understanding, fostering empathy and providing support that truly aligns with the experiences of young people. This approach enables adults to provide guidance that is constructive, tailored, and empowering.

CHOOSING A CURRICULUM

When choosing a curriculum, prioritize one that is evidence-based, inclusive of diverse perspectives, and relevant to your students' experiences. Look for programs that empower students with practical skills, foster meaningful connections, and equip educators to guide thoughtful discussions. Together, these elements create a well-rounded approach to addressing the challenges and opportunities of technology use.

Choosing a Curriculum – Two Key Considerations

How, why, and for whom it was created:

- Is the curriculum evidence-based?

- Who created it and why? Are there biases to consider?

- Was it designed with input from youth?

- Are the topics and activities relevant to your student population, and will the portrayals of tech be resonant, validating, and affirming?

- Do lessons reflect the relevance of identity and context and confer different risks and benefits when it comes to tech?

Learning goals and the role of students and educators:

- What are the lessons' goals, and do those goals focus on empowering students and building their skills to navigate technology responsibly?

  - Do the lessons help students learn Key Messages for Digital Media Literacy? See Appendix D.

- Does the curriculum encourage students' active engagement and opportunities to draw connections to their real lives and experiences?

- Will the lesson build connections between students and support the community in our classroom and school?

- Are educators equipped to embrace the role of a coach who intentionally creates space for dialogue with students furthering self-reflection and growth, rather than a referee who merely enforces rules?

CONCLUSION

Creating a thoughtful and effective approach to cell phone and social media use in school communities is an essential step toward fostering a positive learning environment and supporting students' mental health and well-being. This Toolkit provides a framework for implementing policies, developing Community Norms, and equipping students with the skills they need to navigate the digital world responsibly.

We hope this resource serves as a helpful guide for your school community. Together, we can create communities where children and youth are healthy, safe, and thriving. Thank you for your commitment to this important work.

RESOURCES

GOVERNMENT RESOURCES

- **Resources from the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office**
    - [Think Before You Send: Facts about Sexting and Cyberbullying](#)
    - [Guidance on Schools' Legal Obligations Regarding Hate and Bias Incidents](#)
    - [Addressing Hate and Bias in Schools: Q&A](#) ([Spanish](#))
    - [Combatting Hate in Our Schools: A Guide for Families and Students](#) ([Spanish](#))

- **Resources from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)**
    - [Digital Literacy and Computer Science](#)
    - [Digital Literacy and Computer Science Framework](#)
    - [Digital Literacy and Computer Science Curriculum Guide](#)

- **Federal Government Resources**
    - [U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory: Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#)
    - [Planning Together: A Playbook for Student Personal Device Policies](#) (U.S. Department of Education: Office of Educational Technology)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES[10]

- [Your Brain on Social Media](#)
    - [School Resources](#)
    - [Digital Media Literacy Lesson Plans](#)
    - [Top Parent Concerns](#)
- [Common Sense Media](#)
- [The Center for Digital Thriving](#)
- [Media Literacy Now](#)
- [Half the Story](#)

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APPENDIX

Disclaimer: The resources included in this appendix are provided for informational purposes only. Their inclusion does not imply endorsement or approval by the Massachusetts Attorney General's Office. Users are encouraged to evaluate each resource independently to determine its suitability.

APPENDIX A: MODEL BELL-TO-BELL CELL PHONE POLICY

[Download the Editable Model Bell-to-Bell Cell Phone Policy](#)

[School District] Cell Phone and Personal Electronic Device Policy

[School District] is committed to fostering a school environment that prioritizes engaged learning, supports the development of social skills, and promotes the overall well-being of our students. To achieve this, [school district] is a cell phone-free community. This means that, subject to the exceptions outlined below, cell phones and other personal electronic devices are not accessible to students during school hours. Implementation of this policy varies by grade level, as further described below.

Definition of Personal Electronic Devices:

Personal electronic devices ("devices" as used herein) are defined as any electronic device utilized to access the internet, wi-fi, cellular telephone signals, or to capture or play images or video. These include, but are not limited to, smartphones, mobile phones, headphones, earbuds, smartwatches, tablets, laptops, and gaming devices.

The school reserves the right to classify additional devices as personal electronic devices.

Grade-Level Policies

Elementary School:

- **Policy:** Students are not permitted to bring cell phones or devices to school.
- **If Brought to School:** Cell phones and devices must be checked in at the front desk upon arrival and stored securely for the duration of the school day. They will be returned to students at the end of the day. Parents will receive a call from the school requesting that personal devices be left at home.

Middle School and High School:

- **Policy:** Students are not permitted access to their cell phones or other devices at school during school hours. Students are encouraged to leave devices at home. At the start of each school day, students must place their personal device in a designated locked or staff supervised storage area. Students will re-gain access to their device at the end of each school day.

Response to Policy Violations:

First incident: The cell phone or device will be confiscated and placed in the designated storage location for the remainder of the school day. The student can retrieve the device at the end of the day.

Second incident: The cell phone or device will be confiscated and placed in the designated storage location for the remainder of the school day. A school administrator will have a conversation with the student and contact the parent/guardian.

Third incident: A meeting will be held with the student, parent/guardian, and school administrator (and school counselor, social worker, or other staff, as appropriate) to review the policy and develop a written "Cell Phone/Personal Device Action Plan."

Repeat incidents (more than 2) may result in the loss of the privilege to bring personal devices to school. Beginning with the third incident, a meeting with the student and parent/guardian will be scheduled each time the policy is violated. At the meeting, the Action Plan will be modified as necessary and underlying needs of the student that may be contributing to repeated non-compliance will be discussed and addressed.

Parent-Student Communication During School Day:

Students needing to contact a parent/guardian during the school day may do so by using the phone in the front office, or by accessing their cell phone in the front office with administrator approval. Parent/guardian and emergency contact numbers should be kept current.

Parents/guardians needing to reach their student during the school day can contact the front office. The school will ensure urgent messages are promptly relayed.

Accommodations:

If a student has a disability or medical condition that requires a cell phone, or other device, the accommodation will be noted in the student's IEP, 504 Plan, or health plan. The special education team coordinator or health office will notify appropriate staff of the necessary accommodations.

Students with outside responsibilities, such as after-school jobs or caregiving, should make all plans prior to the school day. If there is a need for a student to access their cell phone during the school day, they may do so in the front office or other designated location, and only with the permission of a school administrator.

Families should make arrangements with their child that don't rely upon their child having access to a cell phone or device during school hours.

School events:

Students may not use cell phones or other devices at school-sponsored events.

Staff use of personal devices:

School staff are strongly discouraged from using cell phones or personal devices in front of students, except for essential educational purposes (e.g. taking photos in accordance with school policy, quick communication with another staff member, or quick, essential communication with a parent).

Please note that this model is not, and does not reflect, legal advice. It may be necessary to consult a licensed attorney to evaluate the policy against applicable state and federal laws and regulations.

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE FAQS ON CELL PHONE POLICIES

[Download the Editable Sample FAQs on Cell Phone Policies](#)

1. **Why is our school adopting a cell phone policy now?**

   - Our school is joining over half of Massachusetts school districts in adopting a cell phone policy to address increasing concerns about the impact of cell phone and social media use on students' academic performance, social interactions, and mental health. By limiting cell phone and device use during the school day, we aim to foster a more respectful, distraction-free learning environment where students can engage fully in their education.

2. **What kinds of devices are included in the policy?**

   - Our policy includes all personal electronic devices utilized to access the internet, wi-fi, cellular telephone signals, or to capture or play images or video. These include, but are not limited to, smartphones, mobile phones, headphones, earbuds, smartwatches, tablets, laptops, and gaming devices.

3. **How can I reach my student during the day?**

   - If you need to reach your student during the school day, please contact the school's front office and school staff will ensure your message is delivered.

     Please keep in mind that receiving messages during school can be distracting and, in some cases, cause anxiety for students. Whenever possible, we suggest arranging after-school plans outside of school hours and waiting to speak to your student in person to share other important information.

4. **How can my student reach me during the school day?**

   - If your student needs to reach you during the school day, they can visit the front office, where staff will assist in contacting you.

     Tip: Add the school phone number to your contacts to ensure you don't miss any calls from your student.

5. **What if there is a lockdown or other emergency in the building?**

    - In the event of a lockdown or other emergency, the school will communicate with families through official channels, such as text messages, phone calls, or emails.

      In an emergency it's essential for safety that students focus on following the directions of their teacher and other school staff. While it may seem helpful for students to use cell phones during a crisis, research shows that it actually creates more risks by distracting students from safety instructions, spreading misinformation, and disrupting emergency response efforts.

      To learn more about how cell phone use can impact school safety during emergencies, please visit [Cell Phones and School Safety](#).

6. **What if my child uses a tablet or other communication device as part of their IEP or 504 Plan?**

    - Accommodations will be made for students with disabilities who use electronic devices to communicate, or for other reasons related to their disability, in accordance with the student's IEP or 504 Plan.

7. **What if my child has a medical condition that must be monitored using their phone?**

    - If your child has a medical condition that requires phone or other device use for monitoring, the school will work with you to create a plan that accommodates their health needs.

8. **What if my child needs to reach other people during the school day, such as their siblings or their boss, to make after-school plans?**

    - We encourage students to finalize after-school plans outside of school hours. However, if your student needs to reach other people, such as their sibling or boss, they can visit the front office, where staff will assist in making the necessary contact.

9. **Will my student miss out on opportunities to use technology in their learning if they don't have access to a personal device?**

    - Your student will not miss out on technology-based learning. While we limit personal device use, the school provides structured access to technology to support their academic growth. This approach minimizes distractions and helps to ensure student safety while providing all students the benefits of digital learning.

APPENDIX C: DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY CURRICULUM EXAMPLES

Download the Digital Media Literacy Curriculum Examples One-Pager

Center for Humane Technology

- Recommended Grade Level: 7-12
- Focus Areas:
    - Self-reflection on social media use
    - Recognizing social media harms
    - Understanding the business model of social media companies
    - Identifying cognitive biases
    - Encouraging journaling and storytelling
- Resources Formats:
    - Individual and group activities
    - Issue and action guides for educators
- Cost: Free
- Educator Resources:
    - Action guides on social media business models
    - Activities to promote student engagement through self-reflection

Common Sense Media

- Recommended Grade Level: K-12 (especially good for K-8)
- Focus:
    - Encouraging healthy tech behaviors
    - Recognizing when to take breaks from technology
    - Understanding the effects of social media on the brain
    - Identifying attention-grabbing design tricks used in technology
- Format:
    - Slideshow presentations for guided lessons
    - Activities include media creations and quizzes for reflection and analysis
    - Lessons take 30-45 minutes
- Cost: Free
- Educator Resources:
    - Pre- and post-lesson quizzes for assessing student understanding
    - Slideshow presentations and media creation activities for student engagement

[Project Look Sharp](#)

- Recommended Grade Level: K-12
- Focus:
    - Analyzing social media posts and articles
    - Encouraging critical thinking about media credibility
    - Developing skills to evaluate trustworthy media sources
- Format:
    - K-12 resources designed for classroom use
    - Activities centered on media analysis
- Cost: Free
- Educator Resources:
    - Tools to help students assess the credibility of media content
    - Lesson plans and activities for media analysis across grade levels

[CyberWise](#)

- Recommended Grade Level: K-8
- Focus:
    - Developing social-emotional skills for responsible device use
    - Teaching ethical and productive social media use
    - Assessing readiness for social media accounts
    - Understanding digital citizenship, information literacy, and digital media literacy
    - Discussing the harms of social media on the brain
- Format:
    - Comprehensive curriculum for digital literacy
    - Lessons on digital citizenship, information literacy, and digital media literacy
- Cost: TBD (may vary by school)
- Educator Resources:
    - Lesson plans for teaching responsible social media use
    - Activities focused on social-emotional development and digital media literacy

APPENDIX D: INTEGRATING KEY MESSAGES OF DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY (WITH OR WITHOUT A FULL CURRICULUM)

Created by the [Center for Digital Thriving](#).

[Download the Integrated Key Digital Media Literacy Lesson Without a Curriculum One-Pager](#)

For schools unable to implement a full curriculum, focusing on four key teaching areas can still make a significant impact. Understanding these lessons will help students navigate technology thoughtfully, prioritize digital well-being, critically engage with information, and understand the real-world impact of their online behavior.

1. **Key Message 1: Technology is *designed,* and design isn't neutral.**
   Students start to understand systemic forces that shape the tech they use.
   Lesson topics and themes:
     - **Business Model of Tech & Social Media:** Understand the "attention economy"—how tech and social media companies gather data to predict and influence behavior, profiting from time spent on apps.
     - **Persuasive Design:** Explore how the design of social media apps aims to keep users engaged, boosting ad revenue and profit.
     - **Generative AI:** Learn what generative AI is, how it functions, its potential uses, and limitations.
     - **Bias in Tech & AI:** Discuss the implications of bias in AI systems, such as algorithmically-generated content and advertising
     - **Mutual Influence:** Reflect on how people shape technology and, in turn, how technology shapes people.

2. **Key Message 2: Information varies in its quality and purpose.**
   Students develop literacy skills that help them engage critically with information.
   Lesson topics and themes:
     - **Digital Media Literacy Skills:** Practice evaluating sources, assessing credibility, and recognizing bias.
     - **Misinformation & Disinformation:** Cultivate awareness of the effects of misinformation and disinformation.
     - **Algorithmic Literacy:** Understand how algorithms shape the information we see, influence digital experiences, and impact our choices.
     - **Origins of Information:** Consider where information comes from, including the ethical implications of human- and AI-generated content.
     - **Digital Justice:** Attend to evolving digital divides in access, information literacy, and digital literacy as justice issues.

3. **Key Message 3: Digital well-being is essential to well-being.**

   Students believe that tech habits impact their mental and physical health, and they can use tech with care.

   Lesson topics and themes:

   - **Impact of Content on Well-Being:** Reflect on how different types of screen time affect mood and well-being, identifying supportive vs. harmful content.

   - **Mental Health and Social Media:** Discuss known links between problematic social media use and mental health challenges.

   - **Positive Tech Use:** Encourage intentional tech use to foster social connection, mood, interests, learning, and civic engagement.

   - **Adaptive Coping Skills:** Acknowledge tech challenges like persuasive design, social comparison, and multitasking, and develop strategies to help students manage overuse and negative impacts for well-being.

   - **Recovering from Digital Missteps:** Explore constructive ways to handle online mistakes.

   - **Social Norms and Tech Use:** Reevaluate norms around tech use in various settings, from school to home and community.

4. **Key Message 4: Tech is powerful, but we are not powerless.**

   Students understand the power of their digital posts and how they can impact others, their communities, and the wider world.

   Lesson topics and themes:

   - **Building Online Norms:** Collaborate to establish norms for respectful online behavior and respond to violations constructively.

   - **Device Use Norms:** Discuss appropriate tech use across various social and community settings.

   - **Safety and Harms:** Address issues like cyberbullying, sexting, and online harassment, emphasizing their real-world impacts.

   - **Digital Drama and Disinhibition:** Recognize the effects of online behavior, including the concept of online disinhibition.

   - **Consent in a Digital World:** Understand consent regarding sharing images, privacy, and personal boundaries.

   - **Tech and Marginalized Identities:** Consider how technology uniquely affects historically marginalized communities and how these impacts evolve.

ENDNOTES

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5   For purposes of this report, the term "cell phone" is defined broadly to include any electronic device utilized to access the internet, wi-fi, cellular telephone signals, or to capture or play images or video. These include, but are not limited to, smartphones, mobile phones, headphones, earbuds, smartwatches, tablets, laptops, and gaming devices.

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8   Lauraine Langreo, 6 Ways Schools Are Managing Students' Cellphone Use, EducationWeek (Apr. 25, 2024), https://www.edweek.org/technology/6-ways-schools-are-managing-students-cellphone-use/2024/04

9   Please note that this model is not, and does not reflect, legal advice. It may be necessary to consult a licensed attorney to evaluate the policy against applicable state and federal laws and regulations.

10   Information attributed to third parties and linked resources in this Toolkit do not represent the opinion or position of the Attorney General or her office. The content displayed on third party websites are not endorsed by the Attorney General's Office and do not represent the views or position of the Attorney General.