# Finding the Middle Ground: Why Schools Need Phone Policies, Not Phone Bans

Jessica Martinez

Department of English, El Paso Community College

ENGL 1301: Composition I

Professor Wood

April 28, 2026

**Finding the Middle Ground: Why Schools Need Phone Policies, Not Phone Bans**

Walk into almost any high school in America and you will find the same scene: teachers frustrated with students sneaking glances at phones under their desks, administrators debating what to do about it, and students caught in the middle of a battle they did not start. The phone debate has gotten so intense that some schools are now requiring students to lock their devices in pouches or lockers for the entire day. While the frustration behind these total bans is understandable, a complete ban is not the best solution. Schools should implement structured phone policies that teach responsible use rather than total bans that treat students like they cannot be trusted and fail to prepare them for a world where digital devices are everywhere.

First, it is important to acknowledge that the phone distraction problem is real and serious. According to research from the Pew Research Center, 72% of high school teachers report that phone distraction is a "major problem" in their classrooms (Hatfield, 2024). Teachers describe students checking social media, texting friends, and watching videos when they should be paying attention to lessons. This is not just teachers being old-fashioned or out of touch. A rigorous experimental study by Deng et al. (2025) found that when students were allowed to use smartphones in classrooms without guidance, they showed nearly 20% lower learning gains compared to when phones were banned (p. 9). The researchers used video recordings to track exactly how students spent their time and confirmed that smartphone-related distraction was prevalent when devices were allowed without structure. The distraction problem is real, and schools are right to want to address it.

However, the fact that phones are distracting does not mean that total bans are the right solution. The problem with complete bans is that they treat the symptom without addressing the underlying issue. Mary Frances Ruskell (2024), a high school senior writing about her

experience with phone policies, argues that total bans send the message that students "can't be trusted at all" and fail to teach the self-regulation skills students will need after graduation. She makes an important point: when students leave high school, no one is going to confiscate their phones at college lectures or office meetings. If students never learn to manage the temptation to check their devices, they will struggle in environments where that responsibility falls entirely on them, and she shares how hard that can be: "For weeks, I clicked the icon where TikTok used to be and was sent to my calculator. I kept staring at the ceiling, unable to focus but also having no 15-second-video relief to fall back on" (Ruskell, 2024, para. 11). A policy that removes phones from students' hands for eight hours does nothing to build the skills they need to manage technology for the rest of their lives.

A better approach is a structured phone policy that sets clear expectations while giving students opportunities to practice responsible use. Research supports this approach. The same study by Deng et al. (2025) that found performance decreases with unguided phone use also found that when teachers actively directed students to use smartphones for learning purposes, students showed higher learning gains than when phones were banned entirely (p. 2). The researchers explain that the benefits of guided smartphone learning outweighed the costs of distraction—specifically, the positive effect was roughly 18 times stronger than the negative effect (p. 10). This suggests that phone-free periods during direct instruction combined with designated times when phones are used for learning could actually improve outcomes compared to total bans. A structured policy treats students as developing adults who need guidance, not as prisoners who need to be controlled.

This approach also acknowledges a bigger truth about the phone problem: it is not just a school issue. As the Crash Course Sociology video on symbols, values, and norms (2017)

explains, the things a society values shape how people behave. We live in a culture that values constant connectivity, instant responses, and being always available. Students are not being distracted by their phones in a vacuum; they are responding to social pressures that affect everyone. Parents text their kids during school. Employers expect immediate responses. Schools can be part of the solution by teaching students how to navigate this environment intentionally rather than just removing the challenge entirely. The Center for Media Literacy's (n.d.) framework for analyzing media messages could help students recognize how apps are designed to capture their attention, giving them tools to resist manipulation.

Some argue that structured policies are too complicated and that total bans are simpler to enforce. This is a fair point. It is definitely easier to say "no phones at all" than to manage different rules for different times of day. Teachers already have enough to deal with without adding another layer of policy enforcement. However, the simplicity of a ban comes at a cost. Easy enforcement does not mean effective education. Schools exist to prepare students for the real world, and the real world does not ban phones. The research from Deng et al. (2025) demonstrates that the extra effort required to implement a thoughtful phone policy is worth it—guided smartphone use actually produced better learning outcomes than banning phones entirely. The initial investment in teaching the policy pays off over time.

The phone debate in schools is not going away anytime soon. Devices are too integrated into modern life, and the attention economy is only getting more sophisticated at capturing our focus. Schools need to respond to this reality, yet they should respond in ways that actually prepare students for the future rather than just making the present easier to manage. Structured phone policies that combine clear boundaries with guided learning opportunities offer a middle path between ignoring the problem and pretending we can make it disappear by locking phones

in pouches. Students deserve to learn how to live with technology intentionally. That is a lesson worth teaching, even if it is harder than just saying no.

## References

Center for Media Literacy. (n.d.). *The five key questions and core concepts of media literacy.* https://kelli.ninja/1301/e3/5_Key_Questions_CML.pdf

CrashCourse. (2017, May 15). *Symbols, values & norms: Crash Course Sociology #10* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGrVhM_Gi8k

Deng, Z., Cheng, Z. A., Ferreira, P., & Pavlou, P. A. (2025). From smartphones to smart students: Learning vs. distraction using smartphones in the classroom. *Information Systems Research,* 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1287/isre.2022.0078

Hatfield, J. (2024, June 12). *72% of high school teachers say phone distraction in class is a big problem in the US*. Pew Research Center. 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/

Ruskell, M. F. (2024, August 29). *What one high school senior wants you to know about phone bans*. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2024/10/08/health/school-phone-ban-student-perspective-wellness/index.html

---

*AI Disclosure: I used ChatGPT to help me brainstorm counterarguments to my position and to check my APA formatting. I did not use it to write any sections of my essay. When it suggested arguments, I evaluated them and decided which ones were actually worth addressing. The ideas and words in this essay are mine, and I can explain and defend every argument I make.*