

Use of personal mobile devices and social media in schools

Frequently asked questions:

In response to unprecedented demand from parents, teachers, and other education partners, a new ministerial order—Standards for the Use of Personal Mobile Devices and Social Media in Schools—will restrict personal mobile devices and social media use during instructional time for Early Childhood Services to Grade 12. This will reduce distractions, maximize learning time, support student mental health, and reduce opportunities for cyberbullying. Exceptions will be made for students using personal mobile devices for health or medical reasons or to support special learning needs. Personal mobile devices and social media use for other circumstances will also be permitted, as determined by the principal or equivalent.

What engagement was done leading up to the ministerial order?

Education gathered extensive feedback from students, parents, and school representatives (includes teachers, principals, central office administration, school support staff and trustees), superintendents, and education associations:

The Minister's Youth Council

- Information was sought on impacts of and potential limitations of cellphones in schools.

Survey

- Targeted survey for parents/guardians, teachers, and school representatives on the role cellphones should play in schools.
- Received more than 68,000 responses—an unprecedented level of responses.

Virtual sessions

- Engagement sessions with eight education associations, plus written feedback from one additional stakeholder.

Feedback included their preference on potential policy approaches and considerations for implementation of restrictions and timing

What were the key findings that came out of the engagement work and how did these results help inform the policy?

The prevalence of personal mobile devices in classrooms has been associated with increased distraction among students and instances of inappropriate usage, both of which negatively impact learning and mental health. Feedback from engagements overwhelmingly confirmed these concerns among parents and educators, further solidifying that action is needed.

- 90 per cent of survey respondents have concerns over student cellphone use at school.

- 85 per cent of survey respondents believe that cellphones have a negative impact on student achievement.
- 81 per cent of survey respondents believe that cellphones in schools increase the number of bullying incidents.
- 58 per cent of parents believe that having a cellphone negatively impacts their child's mental health.

Why is the GoA introducing this policy?

The prevalence of personal mobile devices in classrooms has been associated with increased distraction among students and instances of inappropriate usage, both of which negatively impact learning and mental health. The restrictions on the use of personal mobile devices and social media in schools aim to reduce distractions, maximize learning time, support student mental health, and reduce opportunities for cyberbullying.

What evidence or research is there to support this decision?

Scientific research has found that cellphones and social media distract students from learning, have adverse effects on mental health, and increase cyberbullying incidents.

Research on mental health impacts from personal mobile device use and social media

The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health stated that social media may perpetuate body dissatisfaction, disordered eating behaviours, social comparison, and low self-esteem, especially among adolescent girls. Studies have shown a relationship between excessive social media use and poor sleep quality, reduced sleep duration, sleep difficulties, and depression among youth.

According to Jon Haidt in "The Case for Phone-Free Schools," research shows a correlation between rising phone addiction and declining mental health. Teachers and administrators reported that keeping students off their cellphones during class was a constant struggle, and students' attention spans seemed permanently impaired.

There is evidence to suggest that the international epidemic of mental illness, which started around 2012, is caused in part by social media and the sudden move to smartphones in the early 2010s.

Studies indicate that even when people are successful at maintaining sustained attention—as when avoiding the temptation to check their phones—the mere presence of these devices reduces available cognitive capacity. These cognitive costs are highest in those with the greatest dependence on personal mobile devices.

A study published in the Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy found that despite the potential instructional benefits of integrating devices such as cellphones into schools and classrooms, improper use can negatively impact student behaviour, contributing to higher rates of cyberbullying. The growing prevalence of cyberbullying is especially concerning because it can have severely negative, even tragic, effects on student mental health and safety.

Research on personal mobile devices and academic performance

A 2024 Norwegian Institute of Public Health study found that banning cellphones improves the Grade Point Average of girls and increases their likelihood of attending an academic high school track. These effects are larger for girls from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Studies conclude that poor academic performance can be predicted by higher levels of cellphone use, instant messaging, media multitasking, and general electronic media usage.

Research demonstrates that using mobile devices and social media while learning new material reduces comprehension and impairs academic performance.

Prevalence of cellphone use in schools in Alberta

University of Alberta researcher, Dave Chorney, surveyed 264 Grade 5 students in Edmonton Catholic Schools on personal mobile device use. He found that 54 per cent of students indicated they had their own cellphone, with half the remaining respondents saying they expected to get a cellphone within a year. He also noted that many students reported getting their first cellphone as early as Grade 2 or 3.

What are the rules for personal mobile device use?

Children and students in Early Childhood Services to Grade 12 may not use personal mobile devices during instructional time. If these children or students have personal mobile devices with them during instructional time, they are required to keep these devices on silent or powered off and out of view of school staff and students.

School authorities' policies and/or procedures must include information on where students will store their personal mobile devices during instructional time.

Instructional time includes time scheduled for purposes of instruction, examinations/testing, and other student activities where direct student–teacher interaction and supervision are maintained.

“Personal mobile device” means any personal electronic device that can be used to communicate with or access the internet, such as a cellphone, tablet, laptop, or smartwatch.

Are there exceptions for when students can use a personal mobile device?

School authorities' policies and/or procedures are required to allow for the following limited use exceptions, as determined by a principal or equivalent:

- Limited use of personal mobile devices **must** be permitted for health or medical reasons or to support special learning needs.
- Limited use of personal mobile devices **may** be permitted for educational or other purposes.

Why are laptops included in the restrictions?

Principals or equivalent can make exceptions for the use of personal mobile devices, including laptops, for educational or other purposes. The restrictions ensure students are not pairing these devices with their phones to access social media and other distractions during class time.

Who determines if a personal mobile device is required for health or medical reasons of a child/student?

It is up to school authorities to work with children/students and parents/guardians to determine if a personal mobile device is required for health or medical reasons. School authorities' policies or procedures must include information about how exceptions will be managed, including whether a device is required for health or medical reasons.

What are the rules for accessing social media in schools?

School authorities are required to restrict access to social media platforms on school networks and school devices. Limited access to social media platforms may be permitted, as determined by a principal or equivalent.

Who determines which social media platforms are restricted?

It is up to school authorities to determine which social media platforms are restricted from their school networks and devices and to include this information in their policies or procedures.

When will this new restriction take effect?

The new restrictions limiting the use of personal mobile devices and access to social media take effect September 1, 2024. This timeline ensures that action is taken as soon as possible to help reduce distractions in the classroom, maximize learning time, support student mental health, and reduce opportunities for cyberbullying,

What are the requirements for school authorities?

School authorities* are required to have policies or procedures relating to personal mobile devices and social media use in schools. School authorities may develop new policies or procedures or amend their existing policies or procedures to ensure compliance and alignment with the ministerial order.

School authorities are required to clearly communicate policies and/or procedures to staff, students, parents, and other members of the school community, and are required to ensure that these policies and/or procedures are readily accessible to the school community and/or public.

*For the purposes of the ministerial order, “school authority” means any Alberta public or separate school division, francophone regional authority, charter school, private school, or private early childhood services operator.

What must be included in school authorities’ policies or procedures?

School authorities’ policies or procedures must include the following:

- where students will store their personal mobile devices during instructional time;
- social media platforms to be restricted from school networks and devices;
- roles and responsibilities of students, parents, teachers and the principal in enforcement of the restriction;
- consequences for non-compliance including a requirement to notify parents if the student violates the policy or procedure; and
- annual notification to parents and students of the policy or procedure.

Are the new restrictions for children/students only or also for school staff?

The minimum standards for restrictions apply to children and students. School authorities who may wish to extend these restrictions should explore discretion to do so with their legal counsel.

How will these new restrictions affect a school/school authority that already has a total ban on cellphones in schools?

A school authority's policies and/or procedures may further limit the use of personal mobile devices and social media, so long as the policies and/or procedures otherwise comply with the Standards, including the requirements related to the limited use exceptions.

What information will be provided to support parents/students?

Minister shared a letter to parents and guardians about the new restrictions with school authorities. School authorities are asked to share this letter with parents and guardians.

Parents and guardians are encouraged to talk with their children about the potential risks and benefits of technology and the importance of responsible Internet and social media use. This includes their online profiles, group chats, and chats on gaming consoles. Discuss the importance of respecting privacy and protecting personal information in age-appropriate ways.

How will First Nations schools on Reserve be impacted by these changes?

We respect the autonomy of First Nations in Alberta and are including First Nations schools in this communication for information purposes. Alberta Education does not have jurisdiction over First Nations schools on Reserve and this ministerial order does not apply to these schools.