

Tab 1

Dear Oakwood Schools Board,

I am writing to express concern over Oakwood Schools' new personal communication device policy, which prohibits the use of any personal communication devices, except during lunch, requiring them to be powered off and out of sight, even during passing periods and study halls. While this policy is well-intentioned, it feels somewhat out of touch with the reality of our classroom experience. As a student, I have seen how this policy disrupts the natural rhythm of our day and does not consider how students and teachers already use their devices for educational and practical purposes.

To be clear, I agree that phones can be distracting. I have seen it happen, and I have been distracted myself. However, I believe the new policy is not the best solution.

Let us start with the reality: students are not suddenly more focused; they are just texting when the teacher is not looking or sneaking off to the bathroom to check their phones. Now, on any given day, I witness a host of students sitting in bathroom stalls, scrolling. This policy does not eliminate distractions, it just relocates them. It is the same story we have seen time and time again: banning something does not get rid of it. It just drives the behavior underground. Look at Prohibition: outlawing alcohol did not stop people from drinking. It just moved the party into the shadows, into speakeasies. And the real issues, like addiction and mental health, were ignored. The policy focused on a symptom, not the deeper issue at play. Similarly, banning phones does not help us get to the root of the problem.

Psychology offers the same lesson: tell a child they cannot have candy or talk to a certain friend, and suddenly that is all they want. When students get to college after years of tight restrictions, they often struggle to manage new freedoms. Without having learned how to use technology responsibly in the work environment, they may end up overusing or misusing it. In trying to eliminate distractions, we may be missing an opportunity to teach balance, a skill far more valuable in the long run.

This is quite ironic, given that school is supposed to prepare students for life beyond it. In the real world, phones are everywhere. Employees, professionals, and leaders are not banned from their devices—they are expected to use them responsibly. That is what we should be teaching here: how to navigate our phones in a professional setting. Right now, this policy does not equip us for the real world; it shelters us from it.

Moreover, many of us have responsibilities that extend beyond the school day. We use our phones to coordinate rides, communicate with employers, update our families, or navigate last-minute changes for extracurriculars. For some students, especially those dealing with struggles at home or anxiety, having access to their phone is a safety net. If this policy had an exception process, the list would be too long: mental health needs, medical updates, emergencies, and transportation issues.

Next, the current policy creates legitimate logistical issues. How are students supposed to receive authentication codes, which are required to access college portals, scholarship platforms, and the Common App, essential for completing school-related tasks like scholarship and college applications? Many of these sites use two-factor authentication, and without access to our phones, students, ironically, are unable to complete tasks meant to support their education. Furthermore, not having access during passing periods is especially impractical, because those brief windows are often the only time we can quickly text a parent back or confirm a ride to practice.

Next, study halls are a time when students work independently. If someone finishes early, they should be allowed to quietly listen to music or use their phone in a respectful way. These unstructured periods are ideal opportunities for students to learn responsible usage in a work environment, and blindly prohibiting them removes that opportunity.

Even more frustrating is the inconsistency. While students are expected to lock away their phones all day, some teachers use theirs during class, even taking non-work-related calls. And the enforcement of the policy varies wildly. In one class, I am told my Apple Watch is fine; step into the hallway, and I risk detention. This lack of standardization creates confusion, frustration, and the sense that the policy is less about learning and more about control.

And honestly, this policy was unnecessary to begin with. Phones were not causing widespread chaos. Sure there were occasional distractions, but teachers have been handling this for years. They know when a phone becomes a problem and how to address it, just as they manage classrooms, behavior, curriculum, dress codes, and grading. Teachers are fully capable of setting boundaries when needed, and they understand their students and classrooms better than anyone. We already entrust them with so much, so why not trust them with this as well? There is no need for a new, schoolwide, one-size-fits-all rule when teachers are already capable of handling these situations in their own classrooms.

Now, some people may not see this policy as a big change, because after all phones were not even around before my generation. However, the whole point of innovation is to make life better and easier so that we do not have to live with the inconvenience caused by a lack of them. We do not reject modernity just because it has side effects; instead, we adapt and learn how to use new tools wisely. The same should apply to phones.

So, what if we changed our view of the role of phones entirely? Instead of seeing them only as distractions, we could integrate them into the learning process. From research tools to organizational apps to ChatGPT, phones have the potential to enhance education when used responsibly. Just as we are now considering how to responsibly integrate AI in the classroom, we should do the same for phones.

Finally, it is important to note that the bill this policy arose from, House Bill 250, does not actually require such a strict ban, as many students have been told. It simply requires an official policy that “governs cell phone usage during school hours and seeks to minimize student use of cell phones in K-12 schools,” which our previous policy already did. This decision goes beyond what is necessary and lacks input from those it impacts most. The students and many teachers who live this policy daily were not included in the conversation, and the rules reflect that disconnect.

I urge the board to involve students in crafting their policies so the policies reflect the realities of our school day. I specifically propose the board collaborate with student leaders, such as those in Student Council.

And lastly, instead of imposing a blanket ban, I propose a more balanced approach: allow phones during non-instructional periods and do not ban them entirely from our school day. This is wholly compatible with the expectation that devices be off during class. Let teachers continue making decisions for their classrooms, as they have for so many years, and which has worked.

I am not asking for more screen time—I am asking for a system that acknowledges busy schedules, promotes accountability, and equips us for a digital world rather than shielding us from it.

Sincerely,
Mannie Williams
President, Oakwood High School Class of 2026

Co-signed by:
Taylor Brown
President, Oakwood High School Class of 2025