Distraction-Free Schools
POLICY PROJECT

Local Control Talking Points

As we advocate for first bell to last bell personal device-free school legislation across almost every state, many are encountering a common obstacle: the sacred principle of "local control." In many places, this means a strong preference for allowing each school district to make decisions independently, based on what they believe works best for their communities. Local control is a deeply held value in many states, with school districts given the authority to shape policies that reflect their unique needs.

The long and foundational principle of public education, local control—invokes reflexively to justify decisions and preserve the status quo. However, in cases of public health, this approach fails our schools and our students. We can no longer afford to let appeals to local control override evidence-based, research-based best practices. When it comes to student health and well-being, local control should not stand as a shield against necessary action. In the past, lawmakers have rightly recognized the need to set aside "local control" on issues like bullying, concussions, and tobacco use.

Personal electronic devices, such as smartphones, is the latest case where public health and evidence-based best practices must outweigh the tradition of local control. Smartphones in schools pose serious risks due to their addictive design—driven by constant notifications, social media feedback loops, and algorithmic content. Exposure to cyberbullying functions as an independent risk factor for depression suicidality in youth. Product design of social media algorithms exploit children and undermine students' mental, emotional, and physical health. Unrestricted access during the school day leads to chronic distraction, inability to focus, disrupts learning and sleep patterns, increases anxiety and depression through social comparison, and reduces essential face-to-face social interaction. The compulsive urge to check devices hijacks attention and fosters dependency patterns similar to behavioral addictions.

Smartphones trigger frequent dopamine spikes through likes, notifications, and endless scrolling—creating a reward loop similar to gambling or drug use. Over time, this leads to **dopamine dysregulation**, where the brain becomes less sensitive to pleasure and craves more stimulation to feel satisfied.In teens, this rewiring of the brain's reward system can increase the risk of other addictive behaviors—such as substance use, disordered eating, and compulsive screen time. It also contributes to rising anxiety, depression, and attention problems.

A growing body of research and real-world evidence shows that limiting phones, and other personal device use, during the school day is one of the most effective steps schools can take to improve focus, academic performance, mental health, and classroom culture. **Bell-to-bell policies** can interrupt harmful addictive cycles, helping students build healthier habits and emotional resilience. It's important to note that instructional time only prohibitions do not interrupt the addictive cycle.

- Despite the overwhelming evidence of harm, many schools across the country have not adopted bell-to-bell policies. Many local boards are overwhelmed, are busy putting out

local fires, or have not had the time to get informed about the connection between devices and the harms. Because of the local boards' delays, an unprecedented number of states have been compelled to introduce bills in 2025. The fact that almost every state has introduced bills speaks to the argument that this is a public health issue, not unlike smoking and bullying - issues that have been regulated at the state level.

- While local school boards may see these bills as setting a precedent of centralized control at the state level - the reality is control of all our schools currently lives with Big Tech not with local school boards. The status quo means exhausted parents and exhausted teachers will continue to need to fight on the front lines in their classrooms and around their dinner tables. Most importantly, the price of not taking coordinated statewide action is our children's academic, mental, and emotional well-being.
- Fairness. Every student—regardless of their zip code, background, or school district—deserves the opportunity to experience the benefits of a personal device-free school day. That means six to seven hours of uninterrupted focus, genuine social interaction, and a much-needed break from the addictive pull of smartphones and social media. When we leave this decision entirely up to local control, we risk creating a system where only well-resourced schools—those with engaged parent communities, strong leadership, and sufficient funding—take meaningful action. Meanwhile, we leave students in less affluent or more overwhelmed districts behind in environments where distractions remain unchecked and learning suffers. A patchwork approach reinforces existing inequities. If we truly believe in educational equity, we must ensure protection for all students—not just the privileged few—from the harms of in-school phone use and provide the best possible conditions for learning and growth.
- Academics. American students' reading and math scores experienced significant declines, reaching low levels not seen in decades. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often referred to as the "nation's report card," documented these downturns which correspond to the 2012 wider introduction of digital products into classrooms. **This predates the COVID-19 pandemic**. If we fail to act, we risk falling even further behind.
- Parent frustrations with local boards. Many parents attempt to work through local channels, only to encounter dismissal of ideas, delays, or discouragement. Overwhelmed school boards and administrators experience competing priorities, while a small but vocal opposition gives the impression that parents don't support personal device-free policies. Across the country parents have signed petitions calling for bell-to-bell phone bans at their local district level—yet no significant, meaningful action has been taken. These efforts reflect a growing frustration with the limitations of relying solely on local change—and a call for broader, systemic solutions.
- Consistency. When a supportive principal or administrator leaves a district, policies—especially those not backed by state-level legislation—can disappear as quickly as they were implemented. A bell-to-bell phone-free policy should not hinge on the personal values or leadership style of a single administrator. Without a consistent, codified policy in place, we leave schools vulnerable to abrupt reversals. This sends mixed messages to students, teachers, and families. One year, students are held to clear boundaries around phone use; the next, the rules are relaxed or disappear

altogether. That kind of inconsistency undermines accountability and trust. If we want to create lasting change across schools in all areas, regardless of income and access to resources we need stable not situational policies—rooted in independent research informed best practices, not personalities.

- Economics. The economic case against local control is clear: going district by district wastes taxpayer time and money and drains limited resources. We already have the research—we don't need 100 separate debates to reach one evidence-based conclusion. This piecemeal approach leads to inefficiency, duplication of effort, and inequitable outcomes for students across the state.