

Research Related to the Use of Personal Mobile Devices and Social Media

Alberta's new *Standards for the Use of Personal Mobile Devices and Social Media in Schools* were developed following months of consultation with those most impacted, including students, parents, and teachers.

In addition to stakeholder engagement, Alberta Education reviewed recent research and statistics regarding the impact of mobile devices and social media use in classrooms and found reports of increased distraction, instances of inappropriate usage, negative impacts on learning and mental health, and an increase in cyberbullying. Below are highlights of the research findings referenced in the development of the Standards.

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

- There is a correlation between rising phone addiction and declining mental health. Teachers and administrators reported that keeping students off their phones during class was a constant struggle, and students' attention spans seemed permanently impaired ([Jon Haidt, The Case for Phone-Free Schools, June 6, 2023](#)).
- 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.
- Results from two experiments 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 ([Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity, April 3, 2017](#)).
 - These cognitive costs are highest in those with the greatest dependence on personal mobile devices.
- 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 ([Cell Phones, Student Rights, and School Safety: Finding the Right Balance, Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, 2021](#)).
 - The growing prevalence of cyberbullying is especially concerning because it can have severe negative, even tragic, effects on student mental health and safety.
- Social media may perpetuate body dissatisfaction, disordered eating behaviours, social comparison, and low self-esteem, especially among adolescent girls ([Social Media and Youth Mental Health: U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2023](#)).
- Studies have shown a relationship between excessive social media use and poor sleep quality, reduced sleep duration, sleep difficulties, and depression among youth.⁴

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 ([Smartphone Bans, Student Outcomes and Mental Health, February 2024](#)).
- Studies conclude that poor academic performance can be predicted by higher levels of cellphone use, instant messaging, media multitasking, and general electronic media usage ([Cell Phones, Student Rights, and School Safety: Finding the Right Balance, Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, 2021](#)).

- Research demonstrates that using mobile devices and social media while learning new material reduces comprehension and impairs academic performance ([Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity, April 3, 2017](#)).
- University of Alberta researcher, Dave Chorney, surveyed 264 Grade 5 students in Edmonton Catholic Schools on personal mobile device use ([Study probes cell phone use among Grade 5 students, March 25, 2024](#)).
 - 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.
 - Many students reported getting their first cellphone as early as Grade 2 or 3.
 - While the apparent reason for having a cellphone was keeping in contact with their parents, using the phone to take and make calls was not among the top reasons students gave for having a cellphone. Instead, they primarily used their phones for playing games and participating in social media.
 - Chorney advocates for a wider conversation about setting constructive boundaries around digital devices in schools and at home—a conversation that should include teachers, school administrators, parents, and the young people themselves.