

MEMORANDUM

TO: Arlington School Board
FROM: School Health Advisory Board
DATE: May 5, 2023
SUBJECT: Report and recommendations

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VICE CHAIR: Alison Babb

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RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Background: The School Health Advisory Board (SHAB) assists with the development of health policy in the school division and the evaluation of the status of school health, health education, the school environment, and health services.

The committee attendees unanimously decided again this year that APS students would greatly benefit socially, emotionally, and have increased focus in the classroom if there was a written APS policy (PIP) that mandates “off and away” for all personal electronic devices during school hours in every school. The committee has made this recommendation before and believes that this would help our students combat rising mental health issues¹, physical well-being and classroom learning. In addition, screen time/device use can cause students to be less physically active – potentially impacting student obesity levels, participation in sports, and play/socialization during the lunch hour. Social media use through devices can also increase online bullying², negatively impacting student mental health which has caused various state school districts to file a [lawsuit](#) against the social media

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/health/mental-health-crisis-teens.html>

² https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739?mod=hp_lead_pos7

companies. Another concern of excessive device use is the impacts on children's eyes as myopia has been shown to increase with excessive screen time³⁴. Additionally, due to concerns about multi-tasking and distraction during class time, this policy will help limit distractions of personal cell phones or other personal devices so students can focus on learning⁵.

2. Recommendation: System-wide implementation to mirror current APS Middle Schools' and FCPS'⁶ "Away for the Day" policy for student personal electronic devices as proposed in SHAB's 2021 year-end report, appendix A.

- **Rationale for consideration:** A survey SHAB did of the Middle School principals supports the benefit to the students and staff of having an "Away for the Day" cell phone policy. The five schools *unanimously responded* that it has been well received by parents and teachers and had a positive impact on the students. Here are the answers to the questions we asked:

Do you find it a successful policy?

- yes we do! It is especially effective in sixth and seventh grades – eighth we struggle with more – as they want to carry their phones around.
- Yes. While our campus, like many others, faced new challenges this year with the rise of mental health and substance abuse concerns, we dealt with fewer problems with cell phones. We still get cyber bullying and problems with online interactions, but these are not occurring during the school day, but rather at home on the weekend or in the evening. We have much fewer problems with stolen and lost cell phones. In the past, admin time could get tied up with trying to help locate a lost or stolen device. This has been reduced significantly. And the recaptured time has been **better focused on instruction**. Finally, we don't get the noncompliance and defiance with turning over a device for the day or for the parent to come pick up. In the past, prior to this policy, this situation—asking for the cell phone so the parent could pick it up—could escalate into a power struggle. With our Away for the Day policy and daily reminders, students just turn in the phone
- Yes, having the expectations that cell phones were in lockers helped with student behaviors, and also less social media induced drama during lunches.

Was there much push back from families when you implemented it?

- Parents were supportive.
- We have had no push back – really only support. I introduced this concept to students in the Fall by talking about the distraction that the phones create, even if students are not on them, actively, they are waiting for the buzz or notification – Parents really understand the distraction point.
- No. After last year, parents were all for more structure.

Do teachers find it a hassle or helpful for classroom management?

- Teachers find it very helpful to have a school policy that is easy to implement.

³ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2784348>

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9512310/#:~:text=The%20behavioral%20changes%20during%20the,Ma%20D%20et%20al>

⁵ <https://northernvirginiamag.com/family/education/2022/10/24/fcps-cell-phone-policy/>

⁶ <https://www.fcps.edu/news/student-rights-and-responsibilities-srr-updates-cell-phone-use-schools>

- I think it has **helped support teachers** and led to better management given that everyone knows you aren't supposed to have a cell phone in class.

How could we as a committee help the policy and its implementation (possibly in a specific PIP?) and in what way can School Health Advisory Board help you all with endorsing this policy at the administrative level?

- A specific pip that included this language would be helpful. It would be nice to have the "back up" of policy if and when families do push back.
- Having the support of a PIP and also the endorsement of the School Health Advisory Board would be great.
- If the language is in a PIP, the expectation is that schools will abide by it, so that would be the support behind the expectation

One concern of parents was brought up by a principal: In addition to those I would like to add that due to the increase of school violence over the past few years, some parents were opposed to students not having access to phones due to safety concerns. We feel this could be addressed by conveying to parents the facts about accessible phones for teachers and classrooms and having a specific safety concern exemption in the PIP.

All responses from APS Middle School principals agree: an "Away for the Day" policy is beneficial to both the students and the teachers and it would be helpful if there was a standard APS policy for all of the schools.

Many public schools have implemented this type of policy and have seen it create a more socially interactive student body. The students were happier and more focused during the day as well. CBS news just recently reported that according to the Department of Education 77% of public schools now have this type of policy. Another success story is Fairfax public school's implementation of a district wide Cell phone policy for the 22/23 school year⁷. Northern Virginia Magazine wrote an article about how it is being received. It said that since the policy was enacted, "the principals say it's been a nonissue inside the classroom. They've had few incidents with students; and procedures are in place in case students don't comply and note, even those students have been responding well to the new policy. Teachers agree that the policy has freed up distraction in the classroom, increasing attention and participation that's been suffering following an era of virtual learning."⁸

There are also multiple studies which show that when cell phones are banned from classrooms standardized test scores went up and the increases were much greater for those previously well-below proficiency. One study published by the London School of Economics looked at the impact of banning cellphones at schools on exam scores. Researchers found that students in schools with phone bans got on average 6% higher test scores and that low-performing students benefited the most with 14% higher scores. They concluded in the study that "**Restricting mobile phone use can be a low-cost policy to reduce educational inequalities.**"

⁷ <https://www.fcps.edu/news/student-rights-and-responsibilities-srr-updates-cell-phone-use-schools>

⁸ <https://northernvirginiamag.com/family/education/2022/10/24/fcps-cell-phone-policy/>

There are many studies showing the increase in myopia among children since the pandemic. There is a consensus among the researchers that, as stated in this [study](#), “Our review found that children used near-viewing devices such as smartphones and tablets more than other electronic devices such as televisions or personal computers. We discovered that strict home quarantine, reduced time spent outdoors, and increased screen time are associated with myopia progression in children during the pandemic. Increased use of mobile phones and tablets was also associated with myopia progression.” Giving the students a break from screens from their own devices during the day will help with this ongoing eye health problem.

The students spend a large amount of time at school learning by way of school issued devices. During breaks It would be healthier for the students emotionally and physically to not use a personal device. School should be a place where the students learn how to interact with each other face-to-face with eye contact and converse with each other without a device in their hand to distract them. They also will be more inclined to move about during breaks if they are not looking at their device, which is healthier for their bodies. Additionally, legislators nation-wide have grown concerned about social media use in children⁹.

An Education Next article called Take away their cellphones by Doug Lemov founder of Teach Like a Champion discusses why it is far better to restrict cell phones:

“I often hear: ‘the role of schools is to teach young people to make better choices. We should talk to them about cell phones, not restrict them.’

The argument that ‘schools should teach young people the skill of managing technology’ is patently unrealistic. Schools are not designed to address, much less unravel, psychological dependence on portable supercomputers designed to disrupt and hold our attention. Teachers already have a daunting list of educational priorities. They are not trained counselors, and the school counselors on staff are in woefully short supply.

It’s magical thinking to propose that an epidemic that has doubled rates of mental health issues and changed every aspect of social interaction among millions of people is going to go away when a teacher says, ‘Guys, always use good judgment with your phones.’ We’re not really wrestling with the problem if our response assumes that the average teacher, via a few pithy lessons, can battle a device that has addicted a generation into submission.

Restriction is a far better strategy. These efforts won’t be simple to execute, but the alternative is simply too damaging to students’ learning and well-being. Keep cellphones turned off and out of sight during the school day—and give students and educators a fighting chance to focus, reconnect, and build school cultures that nurture belonging and academic success.”

⁹ <https://www.arlnow.com/press-releases/warner-introduces-legislation-to-make-social-media-safer-for-kids/>

School systems that have implemented this type of cell phone policy have had very positive results for the students and teachers. Parents have been very supportive and the students adapted to the change quickly. It is a policy that can work when presented for the right reasons.

- **Proposed methods:** The administration would create the policy using the SHAB “Away for the Day” policy. The administration would then support principals and classroom teachers in implementing this school wide policy.
- **Budgetary Implications:** None additional. A system-wide policy will establish student and community expectations, thus reducing staff time needed to apply unique and individual strategies as well as reduce time spent redirecting students from their devices for teaching and learning.
- **Strategic Plan Alignment:** Supports core values of Integrity and Inclusivity (fostering direct person to person visual and verbal communication and participation that is available to persons of all means and backgrounds, and promoting a welcoming school environment) and Stewardship (by maximizing the unique benefits of in-person education and preparing students to be engaged citizens.) It also supports the strategic plan Student Well-Being goal – “Create an environment that fosters the growth of the whole child. APS will nurture all students’ intellectual, physical, mental, and social-emotional growth in healthy, safe, and supportive learning environments”. The “Away for the Day” policy gives the students the opportunity for the social-emotional growth that they are lacking due to the personal devices they currently use at school. It will help to establish a culture of physical, social, emotional, and mental health wellness.

3. Appendix

1. Appendix A – Away for the Day Personal Electronic Device Policy (Draft)

Appendix A

Away for the Day Personal Electronic Device Policy (Draft)

Prepared by APS School Health Advisory Board, Screen Use Subcommittee, December 2019

The Screen Use Subcommittee (SUS) of the School Health Advisory Board (SHAB) is recommending that Arlington Public Schools implement a personal electronic device “off and away for the day” policy for all students to minimize distractions and increase focus on academics. This policy would include cell phones, smart watches, non-school issued tablets and air pods. Headphones may only be used when requested and/or approved by a teacher for instructional purposes. Students receive school issued iPads or laptops to complete class assignments and homework, so there is no need for other devices at school for students to succeed.

Cell phone use during school hours is negatively affecting children both academically and emotionally according to current research¹⁰. Many studies link cell phone use among school-aged kids to depression, anxiety, lowered executive function, shortened attention span, lower academic scores,^{11,12,13} and even suicide¹⁴.

School is a time to learn how to interact with each other and to develop good communication skills and interpersonal connections. Experts in childhood behavior believe it is very important for children to have eye-to-eye contact when talking to each other. This helps to create healthy social relationships. The constant distraction of playing games, being in chat groups, texting, photo taking, internet searches, and social media check-ins on cell phones is detrimental to the social dynamic of the school community^{15,16}.

This policy will enable students to be more mindful and engaged in class. Cell phones, even when not in use, distract students and teachers alike in the classroom when they buzz or ring. Studies have shown that it can take the brain up to 10 minutes after this distraction to refocus on the subject that is being taught¹⁷. Eliminating cell

¹⁰ <https://www.awayfortheday.org/research#research-emotional>

¹¹ THE IMPACT OF MOBILE PHONE USAGE ON STUDENT LEARNING

Ref: Kuznekoff et al. (2013) Communication Education v. 62, 233-252

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03634523.2013.767917>

¹² NON-ACADEMIC INTERNET USE IN THE CLASSROOM IS NEGATIVELY RELATED TO CLASSROOM LEARNING REGARDLESS OF INTELLECTUAL ABILITY

Ref: Ravizza et al (2014), Computers & Education v.78, 109-114

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0360131514001298>

¹³ EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF OFF-TASK MULTI-TASKING WITH TECHNOLOGY ON REAL-TIME CLASSROOM LEARNING. Ref: Wood et al. (2012) Computers & Education, 58(1), 365–374 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0360131511002077>

¹⁴ Jean M. Twenge, PhD. *iGen*. New York: Atria Books (an imprint of Simon & Schuster), 2017.

¹⁵ Decreases in Psychological Well-Being Among American Adolescents After 2012 and Links to Screen Time During the Rise of Smartphone Technology

Ref: Jean Twenge et al (2018) Emotion <http://psycnet.apa.org/record/2018-02758-001>

¹⁶ R. Dwyer, K. Kushlev, E. Dunn Smartphone use undermines enjoyment of face-to-face social interactions

¹⁷ J. Exp. Soc. Psychol., 78 (2018), pp. 233-239 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0022103117301737>

phones and other personal electronic devices during the school day will ensure that students are learning to their fullest potential. Schools across the country are implementing similar policies and have found the results to be very positive. Testing scores have improved, and students are happier and more engaged.

The “off and away for the day” policy will also mean that students will not be allowed to use cell phones on school buses during field trips or in extended day. Extended day will have a phone available for student use when necessary.

Cell phone use will be permitted on school buses after school with earbuds so they do not disturb other children. Children should not access or share inappropriate content. If a student does go to sites that contain content that is offensive and shows it to others on the bus the student and the parents/guardians will be notified.

Parents and students will still be able to contact each other during the day when needed. There are phones in every classroom so that the main office can contact the student if a parent calls, and the student can call the parent when they need to. The office and classroom phones will be available if other phone calls need to be made or received because of work, childcare, or other emergencies.

Exemptions to the policy will be made by the school administration for students with special circumstances. Students in this case must keep the cell phone out of sight and may not bring it out for any reason during the school day except to send or receive a text message or phone call, or use an approved app.

The recommended “off and away for the day” policy will be as follows:

There is to be no use of personal electronic devices once students enter school. All electronic devices brought to school must be turned off and stored in the student’s locker. In the event a locker is not available, the device must be turned off and stored in a backpack. The student is responsible for making sure no one else is able to open the locker. Arlington Public School administration is not responsible for the loss of any device brought to school by the student. It is important for students to never share their locker combination with another student. Students with special needs who cannot properly lock their locker may store their cell phone in an approved alternate location.

If a student chooses to use an electronic device, staff members will confiscate the device and bring it to the main office to be secured until the end of the school day. Consequences for unauthorized use of electronic devices are as follows:

- 1st time: Student may retrieve his/her device at the end of the school day from the main office with a reminder of this policy.
- 2nd time: Student may retrieve his/her device at the end of the school day from the main office with a reminder of this policy. An email will be sent home to the student’s parent/guardian as a courtesy notification.

- 3rd time: The student's parent/guardian will need to pick up the device from the main office. Please note that after the second infraction, the device will only be released to the student's parent/guardian.
- Subsequent infractions: The student's parent/guardian will need to pick up the device from the main office, as well as have a conference with the student's administrator. A consequence will be assigned.

Staff Response: Arlington Public Schools recognizes that cell phone use can be a distraction from instruction. However, staff needs to fully understand the impact of implementing this initiative. Even with the cellphones away, students can still access texting, internet, and social media from Smart watches, earpods, and laptop computers. In reviewing recent articles (Washington Post, May 9, 2023) parents are split on this issue and schools and districts have a variety of methods to conceal cell phones. Moreover, it is important to gain the perspectives and input of those responsible for the day-to-day implementation of the policy.

During the next school year, staff will collect feedback from students, staff, administrators, and parents on this issue. Staff will also reach out to other school districts to learn more about their policy, implementation and consequences. Moreover, staff will also work to review alternatives that would also be able to limit the distraction of cell phones and other smart devices. At the conclusion of the investigation and review of feedback, staff will assemble a committee of stakeholders to make a recommendation. This recommendation will be presented to various stakeholder groups and administrators before being shared with APS leadership.

SHAB Response: We are concerned about two issues with the staff response. The first is, that the Away for the Day policy did cover all personal devices not just cell phones but the staff response stated "Even with the cellphones away, students can still access texting, internet, and social media from smart watches, EarPods, and laptop computers". The policy addresses these devices "This policy would include cell phones, smart watches, non-school issued tablets and air pods. Headphones may only be used when requested and/or approved by a teacher for instructional purposes. Students receive school issued iPads or laptops to complete class assignments and homework, so there is no need for other devices at school for students to succeed". Also, the latest article in the Washington Post, May 29, about school cell phone policy indicated that the vast majority of parents are happy with a cell phone policy.

Second, there has already been a lot of feedback gathered from all of the concerned parties about this. There is a real urgency in moving forward on a policy. The timeframe that was suggested by staff is a very slow process on a policy that has worked very well in other local school districts and has a proven track record. Fairfax County Public Schools cell phone policy has been a success and we often assimilate their policies into ours, so this certainly could be a starting point for our own policy and would reduce the timeline substantially. We want to help the kids sooner than later because, as declared by the Biden administration, the kids are in a mental health crisis.