

CELL PHONES IN SCHOOLS: WHAT THE SCIENCE SAYS & WHAT FAMILIES NEED TO KNOW

Supporting Student Wellness, Learning & Access in
Light of NYS' Distraction-Free Schools Law
Parent & Family Guidance



New York State recently issued **guidance restricting smartphones and other internet-enabled personal devices during the school day**. This decision is grounded in a growing body of research showing that excessive phone use in schools can interfere with learning, social development and mental health.



As a parent or caregiver, you may have questions— especially if your child used their phone to cope with stress or manage medical conditions. We recognize that the law creates a significant change and many families worry about the impact of this change for their child.

WHY ARE CELL PHONES BEING RESTRICTED IN SCHOOLS?

The Science is clear. Too much phone use during the school day can harm learning and mental health.

- **Learning Disruption:** Research shows that frequent phone use during class can significantly disrupt a child's ability to focus and retain information. Even brief distractions from notifications or messages can affect attention and memory. Over time, this can lead to lower academic performance.
- **Mental Health Risk:** Social media and constant connectivity also carry mental health risks. Many young people report feeling pressure to stay connected, compare themselves to others, or navigate online conflict. These dynamics can negatively impact their self-esteem and emotional well-being, even during school hours.
- **Social Disconnection:** Relying on phones during unstructured times like lunch or recess can reduce opportunities for real-life social interaction, which is essential for building healthy relationships and emotional resilience.
- **School Safety:** Students are most likely to be safe during an emergency at school when they are attending to school directions, and not trying to use their cell phone. We recommend that school teams develop plans in collaboration with parents and families for safe contact during an emergency.



What the Distraction-Free Schools Law Aims To Do

- **Protect focus**, learning time, and emotional development
- **Ensure equity**—so all students have the same opportunity to disconnect and engage
- **Reduce exposure** to online conflict and distraction during the school day



WHAT IF MY CHILD NEEDS THEIR PHONE FOR MEDICAL REASONS?

Carrying a cell phone in school will be an **extreme and rare occurrence** for **significant medical needs** that cannot be otherwise met.

Collaboration with Schools is Key: In all cases, we strongly encourage families to start a discussion with their child's school team to determine options for meeting each child's needs.

A few important things to note:

- School districts will require **documentation from a medical professional** that will then be reviewed by each district.
- A **letter from a medical provider does not automatically determine** that a student will receive an **exemption**.
- Any **exemption is subject to the school's review and determination**.
- Exemption requests should be noted in the **medical record** and **shared in writing with schools to support the school's efforts** on a student's Individualized Healthcare Plan (IHP), Individualized Education Plan (IEP), or 504 Plan.

What About Mental Health Concerns?

In general, students with mental health concerns (e.g., anxiety, depression ADHD, etc.) **will not be included in the exemption**. However, there will be other ways students can access supports at school without a personal cellphone/internet-enabled device.

- Students **are better positioned to learn other coping skills** when they **do not have access to a cell phone at school** and are receiving appropriate medical care.
- **Connecting your child with a licensed mental health practitioner** may be important for supporting you and your child as they learn strategies for managing their mental health condition.
- Mental health practitioners can work with families and school teams to **help identify the type of support** a child may benefit from (e.g., listening to music; accessing a mood-tracking app or form; electronic calendars) **so that the school team can consider how to best meet those needs**. For example, utilizing analog supports or a school-owned device.