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## The Use of Personal Mobile Devices in Canadian Schools:

### Trauma-Informed and Systems-Oriented Guidelines and Resources for Implementation

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## THE USE OF PERSONAL MOBILE DEVICES (PMD) IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS: TRAUMA-INFORMED AND SYSTEMS-ORIENTED GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

**Disclaimer:** *These guidelines are primarily written for professionals trained in [Violence Threat Risk Assessment \(VTRA\)](#) and the [Traumatic Event Systems \(TES\) Model of Crisis and Trauma Response](#). However, the majority of the content will be understandable for all professionals working in educational settings.*

### INTRODUCTION

The following guidelines are intended for school leaders across Canada as we prepare for a national movement regarding the management of Personal Mobile Devices (PMD) in our schools. Most provinces and territories have new PMD policies that are now being required by governments to be implemented by the start of this academic year. However, there is variance from provincial and territorial governments regarding what the restrictions are and how they will be applied to grade levels (See Appendix A). The reasons for new and/or expanded mobile device “use” policies is also varied. Some governments’ public statements have emphasized limiting use to reduce classroom distractions, while others have referenced bullying prevention. The Centre for Trauma-Informed Practices PMD guidelines have been developed to assist senior leaders, school administration, frontline teachers and other school personnel in planning, communicating, and implementing the varied policies across Canada by focusing on the three primary and distinct sub-systems connected to the school community:

- Student Sub-System.
- Staff Sub-System; and
- Parent/Caregiver Sub-System.

Each section of these guidelines will provide insight into:

- Current Circumstance.
- Perspective Making; and
- Solutions for Consideration.

As well, these guidelines are meant to assist leaders by providing a more trauma-informed and systems-oriented approach by:

- Lowering the anxiety of any system or sub-system concerned about how this will impact school climate.
- Providing an external reference source for senior leaders and school leaders to support local decisions.
- Providing perspective and strategies for increasing connection between student, staff and others; and
- Providing perspective and strategies to give voice to the students who have been left out of this conversation, about something so germane to their generation.

## Clarification About Terms

As this is a Canadian document developed for multiple educational systems, terms such as "policy" and "administrative procedures" may have different meanings and applications. In this resource, the term "policy" refers to documents created through public sector governance in areas that are within the purview of boards of education. The use of the term "administrative procedures" in this document refers to division procedures that address a myriad of domains including curriculum, instruction, and evaluation, student duties and expectations, human resources, and business practices, to highlight a few. The term Ministerial Order or "Order" refers to directives from Ministers of Education to enact a new policy/procedure in educational settings under their jurisdiction. The term "guidelines" refers to the implementation of Ministerial Order, Directives, and school board policies at the school level. We acknowledge that other Provinces/Territories will refer to the CEO as Director of Education or Superintendent. For the purpose of these guidelines the CEO for the Education system will be referenced as Superintendent.

## OVERVIEW

### Current Circumstance

A standard in our work with schools impacted by trauma is that "trauma does not necessarily create new dynamics in human systems, instead it tends to intensify already existing dynamics." Therefore, the pandemic did not cause all of the post-pandemic symptoms we are seeing with young people, it just intensified already existing symptoms including a variety of mental health struggles (e.g. depression, anxiety, eating disorders, etc.), behavioural struggles (e.g. increases in threat-making towards others, increase in weapons possession, etc.), family struggles and even societal angst, mostly among adults, as to what to do about cell phones.

During the pandemic, cell phones and related social media elevated symptoms in some of our children and youth who became more harmfully involved with their devices and in some cases addicted. At the extreme, some were physically threatened or sexually extorted through their devices. Yet others were saved by the lifeline it provided during times of isolation and quarantine. As we have interviewed, surveyed, and listened to students, staff, parents and caregivers across the country there are, of course, a range of perspectives on cell phones (smart phones or devices) in our schools, but most understand that there needs to be guidelines (policies) around reasonable use.

In general, we appreciate the initiative of provincial and territorial governments across Canada for taking on this complex issue and providing (post-pandemic) direction for implementing new policies. However, the requirement of governments to have Education turn policy into action so quickly has placed a significant burden on school leadership. The weight for actualizing them falls upon the school districts/divisions and then the schools themselves with the final landing spot being the classroom teacher. It is because of this reality that guidelines are required for understanding the social, emotional and occasionally even traumatic impact of a new policy that feels like it may restrict connection for some students, parents, or caregivers. How we communicate (i.e. the words we use and how we say them) can take the sting out of a reasonable effort to implement new policy or it can ignite a symbolic "cause" that some students, parents and caregivers may organize around.

## Perspective Making

Those of you trained in Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA) or the Traumatic Event Systems (TES) Model of Crisis and Trauma Response know our emphasis on the power of words. The language used in policies, especially those involving students, should be mindful and considerate to avoid triggering or escalating stress and anxiety. The findings from a joint Canada and USA scan of draft school cell phone policies (PMD) highlight the importance of using non-confrontational and supportive language.

HARD LANGUAGE	SOFT LANGUAGE
<b>Confrontational / Authoritarian Language</b>	<b>Non-Confrontational / Supportive Language</b>
Banned	Off Limits
Prohibit/Prohibited	Limit/Limited
Enforce/Enforced	Required/Expected
Comply/Compliance	Abide/Follow/Heed/Observe/Respect
Punishment/Discipline	Expectations around use of restorative actions, Restitution
Restrict/Restricted	Responsibility
Violation	Obligated/Obligation

If we advance the introduction of formal policy around PMD use by considering its potential impact on users, then a crisis intervention (TES lens) approach is the best to take. We say that everything we do in crisis response is meant to lower the anxiety of the system we are responsible for by modelling calmness and confidence in the steps we are taking.

If the students, parents and caregivers understand our reasonable efforts in this area, then taking a measured stance will help to lower their anxiety and build confidence that our decisions are meant to be **helpful and not hurtful**.



## Solutions to Consider

1. School district/division policies/administrative procedures/guidelines can use softer language for overall communication and where policies are already ratified, prepare school leaders and staff to consider softer language when communicating with students, parents, and caregivers.

### Example Revision of Cell Phone Policy Language

#### Original Policy Language (Confrontational - Alienating)

*Students are not allowed to use cell phones during school hours. Violations will result in confiscation and disciplinary action.*

#### Revised Policy Language (Trauma-Informed - Connecting)

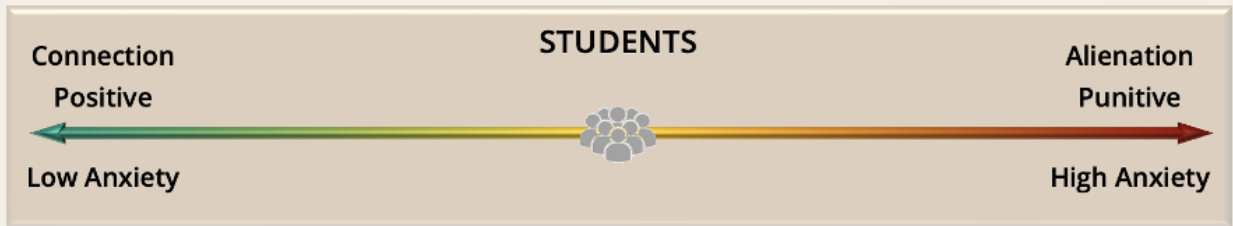
*To maintain a focused and engaging learning environment, we ask that students keep their cell phones put away during class. If you need to use your phone, please talk to your teacher so we can find a solution that works for you.*

By adopting a trauma-informed approach to language in school policies, schools can create a more supportive and understanding environment for all students.

2. Allow schools to move to student discipline on a case-by-case basis with emphasis being on **non-compliance to a staff directive** (in general) rather than making it all about the PMD in particular.
3. Before the students arrive, consider what approach are we taking? What will our policies, guidelines, words, and attitudes about the new policy communicate to our learning community? What are our plans for implementation as we consider the open-closed continuums listed below for all subsystems?

The three beads on a string that follow can be used by school administration teams and with the entire staff team to assess where we are now and where we need or want to be before the school year begins. Are we so focused on students we have forgot about parent/caregiver thoughts and feeling or maybe we have not paid as much attention to the diverse perspectives of our own staff teams?

Use these three charts (below) to assess your own current language and perspective about implementation and ask: *Is it more likely to result in connection or alienation with our colleagues, students, parents/caregiver?*



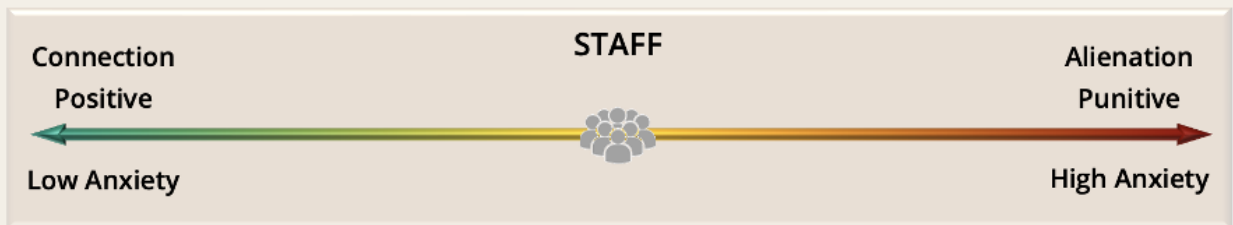
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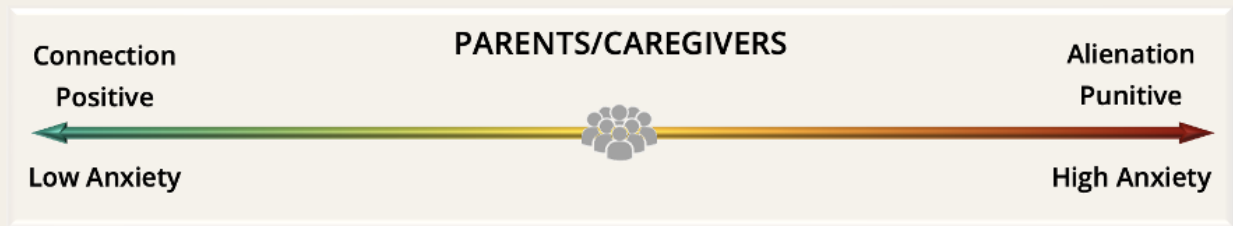
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How implementation looks and feels will be heavily influenced by school dynamics. Leadership style and our own adult connections with each other are the context students will be entering. What follows is a brief introduction to the open-closed continuum of school dynamics.

## **SCHOOL AS AN EMOTIONAL SYSTEM: OPEN VERSUS CLOSED DYNAMICS**

Like large families, schools have structure, function, and emotional processes that influence how we interact or do not interact with each other. Evidence of the importance of understanding the emotional functioning of human systems like schools, is to consider; could a staff member be mentally and emotionally healthy working in School “A” yet mentally and emotionally unhealthy working in School “B”? Although no two schools are the same, they can all be placed along a continuum of emotionally open versus emotionally closed. Most staff thrive in emotionally open systems and so do the students.

### **Emotionally Open Systems**

Emotionally open systems have clear hierarchies, clear roles, and equitable problem solving. They are also in tune when unresolved conflict is beginning to impair the system’s functioning like tension between a staff member and administration, tension between two different academic departments, tension between students that is manifesting in the classroom or growing unrest among some parents or caregivers. They are certainly in tune to the introduction of new (PMD) policies in schools across Canada. By nature, “Naturally Open Systems” already know how students, staff and parents/caregivers are likely to respond to the new management of cell phones (and other devices) in school. That is because of open and genuine relationships that already exist so there is little mystery about the thoughts and feelings of others on important school-related issues. With that knowledge, leaders will openly plan and discuss how to best use these new standards to enhance the learning experience, including safe learning, while limiting the focus on consequences. Open systems will also be mindful that no two students or their families are the same and some may require more thoughtfulness than others regarding implementation.

Open schools are also emotionally connected, meaning the administration team is open with each other and then models that openness with the staff team. If the adult sub-systems in schools are reasonably open and connected with each other it will create a “parallel process” where the adults are infused with so much emotional energy that it duplicates itself with their relationships with the students. In most schools, open systems will have minimal difficulty implementing the new cell phone policies because of their genuine connection with the students and the parent/caregiver community.

Open systems allow multiple pathways to implementation and understand that student learning is at the center of the PDM decisions being made. They are aware there are multiple pathways in meeting learning outcomes (equifinality).

### **Emotionally Closed Systems**

Emotionally closed systems often have clear hierarchies and roles, but decision making and problem solving is often not equitable. Often the emotional energy of staff goes into managing their world in the classroom, with a limited feeling of connection as part of a school team. Most staff and students

do not thrive in intensely emotionally closed systems. In these types of schools, there may be so many unresolved conflicts in and between sub-systems, that the new (PMD) policy may just be the visible straw that breaks the camel's back. Closed systems deny there are significant unresolved conflicts in their school. If a conflict is forced to the forefront, closed systems tend to ostracize the least influential person involved in the conflict or attempt to drive them out of the system rather than do the hard emotional work of understanding the conflict and seeking resolution.

Closed systems try to project the image that "we are ok", "everything is good here", and do not seek out help or counsel from district/divisional supports. At their extreme, closed systems would look at the new (PMD) policy as an opportunity to focus on students who misbehave. They would also implement strict disciplinary responses that would perpetuate an "us" (staff) versus "them" (students) dynamic that would make implementation very difficult because many students and their parents/caregivers would take their own strict stance to defend against it. Emotionally closed schools fail to see that genuine relationships, open dialogue and truly working together can lower system anxiety. As such, they may struggle throughout the entire academic year with implementation. In contrast, most open systems will have already accommodated to the new standards within the first few months of school.

### **District / Division Senior Leaders**

Most emotionally **open** school administration teams are so introspective that they may feel they are too closed. By nature, they want to do more and will ask and accept help from senior leaders and their designates. Most open Leaders have open schools, but some open leaders have inherited closed schools (no two schools are the same). While there may be emotionally closed dynamics (sub-system opposed to the changes – "We need to enforce this!"), open leaders can navigate the system by modelling openness in a compassionate and calm manner. Defensiveness is a close relative to denial and is managed much easier with open leaders. Open leaders should consider implementing an evaluation/feedback process from all systems to review and adapt any process changes required to lower the anxiety.

Emotionally **closed** school administration teams often see themselves as appropriately open, in control, and do not ask for help. The task for senior leaders is to strategically review each of the school's plans regarding messaging and perspective making around the positive implementation of (PMD) policies before the students return to school. Often senior leaders know which schools are the most closed. These guidelines were developed to be an external resource that leaders can use to support the diversity of school communities so that systems anywhere on the open-closed continuum can have a template for successful implementation.



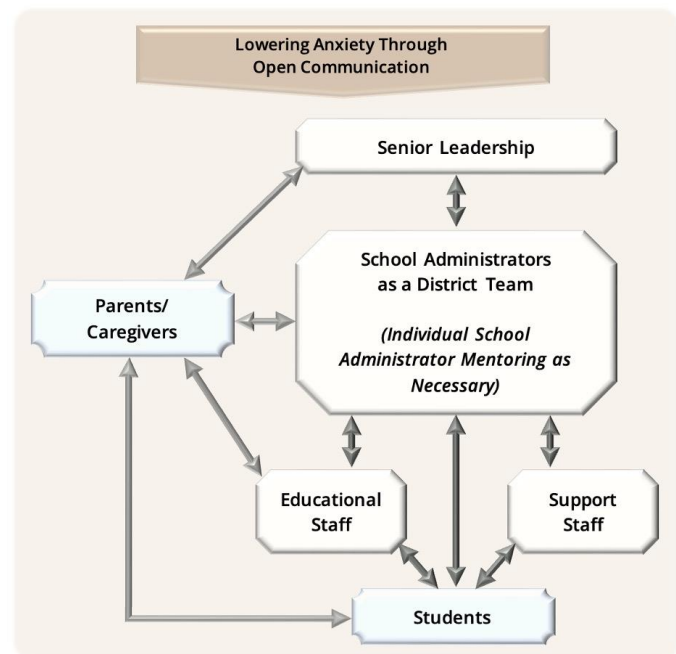
## HOW DID WE DO? CHECKING IN

1. End of the first day of school (Quick stand-up meeting)
  - How did it go?
  - Any surprises?
  - What did we miss?
  - Remember, “Treat the big things big and the little things little”. Are there any big things bubbling?
  
2. End of the first week (Quick sit-down meeting)
  - How are you all doing?
  - What have your interactions with the **students** been like and what percentage seem to be struggling with PMD implementation?
  - What have your interactions with the **parents/caregivers** been like and what percentage seem to be struggling with PMD implementation?
  - What are the big things or themes showing up?
  - What are the little things that could become a growing issue if we don’t start to address them?
  - What did we miss?
  - Considering we are only one week into the current school year, how do you think we as doing as a school team?
  
3. One Month (Sit-down meeting)
  - Pre-first month review - Consider a brief student survey
  - Pre-first month review - Consider a brief parent/caregiver survey
  - Pre-first month review - Consider a brief staff survey
  
4. Review results with the team from the above surveys
  - How are you all doing?
  - What have your interactions with the **students** been like and what percentage seem to be struggling with PMD implementation?
  - What have your interactions with the **parents/caregivers** been like and what percentage seem to be struggling with PMD implementation?
  - What are the big things or themes showing up?
  - What are the little things that could become a growing issue if we don’t start to address them?
  - Considering we are only one month in, how do you think we are doing as a school team?

## PROCEDURAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR LEADERS PRIOR TO THE FIRST DAY OF CLASSES

### Education and Communication Will Be the Keys to Success

- First, we need to allow time for thoughts, concerns, and criticisms to be put forward by school leaders responsible for implementing new PMD policies (i.e. venting!). Without giving stakeholders this sort of audience, pushback could potentially go on longer than expected or necessary. Even professionals have the right to be frustrated with how quickly the turnaround is from Ministerial Orders / policies / procedures to actualization in schools.
- After the professionals have had their “behind closed door” say they will be better equipped to model calmness and practice tolerance with others.
- Push back for the PMD policy is realistic. However, stakeholders typically adapt quickly to even unwelcome changes, so the “pushback period” should be over within a relatively short period of time. However, the time required to deal with the pushback will be directly proportional to the amount of preparation the system puts into ensuring people are aware of the Order, and the reason for the Order.
- The first two weeks will be a critical period within which success will depend on openness in communication and reception of feedback. As always, an open, rather than a closed system is going to be a key to success.
- Over communicating is always better than under communicating. Open and transparent communication with all stakeholders will reduce anxiety and help overcome any community rumours or speculation that may not only be misleading, but also incendiary.
- In terms of framing, it might help stakeholders to know that, prior to this Order, policies around devices ranged from one end of the spectrum to the other. This Order, like it or not, will provide some consistency between schools and school divisions.
- Actively listen to all stakeholders by ensuring and inviting people to have a voice. Explain to everyone there may be opportunity to tweak the policies in the future. (\*With constituent feedback Ministerial Orders have been modified in the past)
- Take detailed notes (dates, where, when, who was involved) so people literally see that they are being heard and their opinions and suggestions are valued.



## Superintendents and Senior Administration meeting with School Leaders

- Prior to the first School Leader meeting, set the agenda and the procedures that will be used to gather input and sharing of ideas surrounding the implementation of the Order. (What adult learning strategies will be used?)
- Decide where the meeting space will be located and what the room set-up will look like (round tables vs. rectangular tables, wall space, necessary materials, etc.).
- Send out questions to consider prior to the meeting so school leaders can reflect on input prior to the meeting.

### **Pre-Meeting Guiding Questions – System Administration with School Based Leaders.**

- On a scale of 1-10 (10 being we are ready to implement and 1 being not ready) provide a number assessing your readiness?
    - Staff feedback (all staff)
    - Parent feedback
    - Perceived student response
  - What school-based resources, (including CTIP guidelines) /information do you need to move towards implementation?
  - What uniqueness/exceptionalities does your school community have that requires flexibility that encompasses inclusiveness?
  - What role would you like division office personnel to play in supporting you in the implementation of the policy?
- Although district/division policies may be in final draft form, they should be presented to principals as an opportunity to truly collaborate on how the finished product will look. School administrators need a voice in this so that school teams will see the system-wide commitment to these classroom changes.

## School Leaders meeting with Teachers and Support Staff

- Report what took place at the Senior Administrative meeting.
- Strategize ways to rotate attendees on a regular basis to ensure all voices are heard and opinions are gathered. It's easy for one or two staff to dominate a meeting, but this upcoming policy and any new procedures are going to need to be supported by all school staff.
- Send a reflection / consideration page prior to the initial staff meeting so people have an opportunity to make notes (shared document may spur discussion prior to the meeting and allow input from all).
- Do not overlook the meeting room set-up and required materials. You want this to be a smooth meeting with unnecessary interruptions.

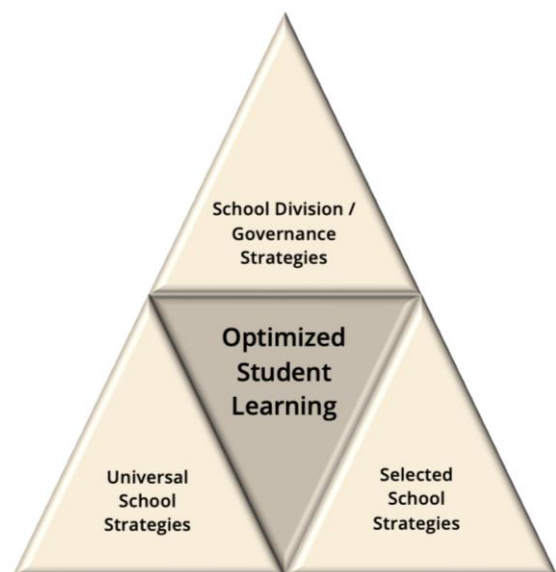
## School Leaders meeting with Parent Councils

- Consider providing physical copies of the Ministerial Order to review at the meeting.
- Provide physical copies of policies developed up to this point.
- Review any FAQ pages that have been developed.
- Make notes on feedback received.
- Provide information on previous feedback received from stakeholders up to this point.
- Emphasize the important impact this change has on student education. The educational impact reinforces a school's main purpose.
- Clarify, if necessary, that the primary purpose of PMD policy is for supporting enhanced education in the classroom and not for cyberbullying prevention. Due to public comments by some elected officials, there is a belief that these policies are primarily meant to address student safety but that is a separate issue meant to be addressed collaboratively by school, parent/caregivers and community agencies, including police if necessary. VTRA protocols encompass these more serious problematic online behaviours.
- On a school-by-school basis, if there is an ongoing bullying issue it may be an opportunity for discussion, but if there is not an ongoing bullying issue then do not introduce the topic or people may leave the meeting believing there is an issue.

It is imperative to model calm. The best way to do so is through preparation. Be prepared to answer questions honestly and respectfully. As professionals we understand that aggression and hostility is often the result of anxiety or a feeling of not being in control of our own environment. If we remove the anxiety and we depend on the relationships we have developed (or hope to develop), we are more likely to succeed with implementation.

## CONSIDERATIONS AND FRAMEWORK IN MODELING OPENNESS AND MANAGING CHANGE

The importance of creating system alignment and congruency in the policy development phase is integral for the overall system's functioning and the operationalization of PMD policy. At the center of all decisions, optimizing student learning, education's core focus, must be visible in the walls of schools. Knowing this, system leaders understand that 10 different schools will have varying dynamics that will require autonomy, flexibility and adaptation in the initial launch of the PMD policy. The following diagram outlines a framework to consider in doing so.



### Trustees

Mandated policies on PMD, in most provinces and territories, have been delegated to locally elected trustees to oversee the development of policy and universal implementation of the accompanying legislation. With that, trustees:



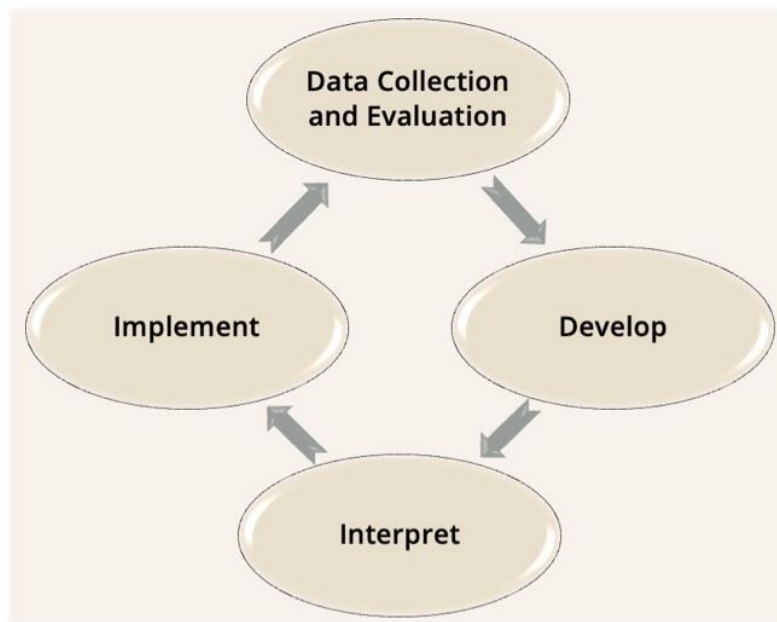
- Should understand that an intimate knowledge of their respective Ministerial Orders (Directives) are vital to successful implementation.
- Are the “face” to which the feedback from the general public is delivered, therefore it is crucial that they have the knowledge surrounding how policies will be implemented in their division.
- Need to have input in the procedural development process as it encourages ownership and allows their voices to also be a tangible part of the process. This in turn makes it easier for them to support the new procedures / policies when discussing it with constituents.
- Not been able to be directly involved in the process should be fully briefed so they are aware of the procedures that have been completed to establish the new policies.

## Superintendents

To modify a long-standing jingle in CTIP’s VTRA and TES work: “The better the data the better the assessment, the better the assessment, the better the implementation.” It is paramount that system’s leadership be engaged in a process that clearly outlines where the updated PMD policy can be applied to most schools (universal implementation), and to selected schools (i.e. behaviour program schools) that is transparent and in line with the overall Ministerial Order, and Board Policies. Specifically, As well, identify which selected schools will require more flexibility and perhaps autonomy in the system policy implementation (selected schools). For example, if a school division or school serves a traditional (less diverse) population, then clear direct policies will actually lower that communities’ anxiety even if the policy is a contextual modification the Board’s policy. Another example is an outreach school that depends on PMD to engage students for attendance and assignment completion. Schools and courses such as digital media will be “selected school” sites that have more autonomy in implementation. They may need more autonomy in operationalizing the policy. This reinforces a previously mentioned, and fundamental concept to keep systems open, and that is, open systems have multiple pathways for implementation. This adaptability and flexibility, clearly communicated, allows for the overall system to function smoothly during this transitional period and beyond.

- Consistency is key. Procedures/guidelines do not have to be carbon copies between schools, but shared language and common practices will assist parents and students to understand the Order, the division/district’s policy, and implementation procedures.
- Principals need to know they are supported, therefore having Superintendents in the room when policies/procedures/guidelines are being developed will be helpful.
- Superintendents’ support will ease the tension surrounding the Ministerial Order. It is important that all superintendents be fully apprised of the process so that they can then speak confidently about it with colleagues, trustees, and other stakeholders.
- Actively leading by example will encourage principals to follow suit when developing procedures with teaching and support staff when they return to the school following the principal meeting.
- Take the time during initial start-up principal meetings to allow school leaders to discuss and work through the process and planned implementation so that the start of the year goes smoothly, and all members of the educational team can demonstrate calm from the beginning of the school year.
- Be in the room but allow for creative ideas to flow. Encourage the internal leaders and the silent followers to share ideas so everyone has ownership for the upcoming policies/procedures/guidelines. Shared ownership, from all levels, demonstrates openness, consistency, and a common vernacular from all the educational partners.

- Utilize adult learning strategies that promote sharing of ideas in stakeholder discussions. (e.g., sharing circles, gallery walks, etc.)
- Work with principals and stakeholders to develop a common list of FAQs and distribute that information well ahead of the opening day of classes.
- Reminder, the responsibility for implementing these Orders/policies/procedures rests on the shoulders of the principals. at the school level. Principals need the support of superintendents to move forward.
- At all levels, there should be a constant review of all implementation processes.



## Principals

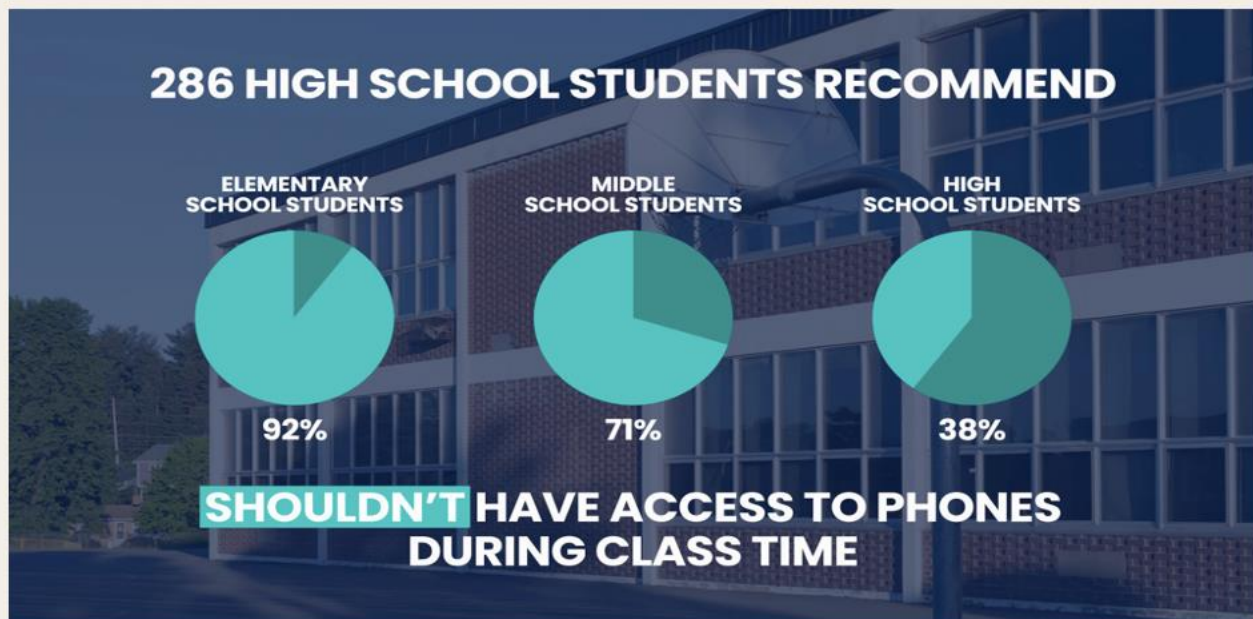
- Develop communication strategies that will inform parents/caregivers, students, and stakeholders while also allowing time for parents/caregivers and students to consider the upcoming changes prior to returning for the new school year (see attached letter to parents' template – Appendix C).
- Implementation at the beginning of the 2024/2025 school year may be easier than the mandated January 2025 date that is stated in some Ministerial Orders (policies) as it is a “natural” beginning.
- Group discussions may lead to similar, although not exact procedures being developed throughout the division. This will allow for some school autonomy and site-based decision making to continue.
- Round table discussions with district/division families of schools will allow for broad spectrum discussion and encourage foundational perspectives to be heard, encouraging long-term understanding and acceptance of the upcoming policies/procedures:
  - Reminder, this is relatively new terrain for elementary principals, as they deal with first-time users of technology and often first-time parents/caregivers of students with personal devices.
  - Procedures put in place at the elementary level can be incorporated throughout the educational journey of all students. This is a positive!
  - Providing Junior High and Middle School students, in advance of implementation, the expectations and rationale of the new procedures may lessen their desire to push back if they have a device.

- Many tweens and early teen’s view “equal” as just and fair. Being thoughtful with language choice will support the change.
- High School students have grown up as part of a phone-based generation. Giving them voice in understanding the reason for this change will help to lower anxiety and resistance.

**Note:** Sometimes adults and youth can see the ‘problem’ in others but not themselves. The survey data below reinforces why sometimes the adults need to over-function on behalf of children and youth, including the better management of PMD in the classroom.

A group of high school students in the United States responded to a survey about their views on cell phone access for students in schools (Ruston, Tabb, & Rudd, 2023). The key findings from this study were:

- 92% of high schoolers recommend that elementary students not have access to cellphones during class time.
- 71% of high schoolers recommend that middle schoolers not have access to cellphones during class time.
- 38% of high schoolers recommend that high schoolers themselves not have access to cellphones during class time.



(<https://www.screenagersmovie.com/resources/survey-high-school-students-cellphone-policies>).

It is not surprising to educators that High School Students would perceive a reduced need for PMD use during class time, as they reflect on their middle school and elementary experiences. Much of their perceptions is derived on how they “learned to learn” during different times and phases of their educational path. This is not much different than how teachers themselves, at times, have had to shift and adjust their learning environment in different ways in comparison to their own post-secondary education experiences. This transformational shift is made visible in the following example provided by a Canadian School.

## A PRINCIPAL'S VOICE: SCHOOL-WIDE IMPLEMENTATION OF PMD GUIDELINES

**Contributed by: Tracy Wong, Principal, Winston Churchill High School, Lethbridge, AB**

At our school, we are committed to continually examining our thinking, understandings, and practices to nurture a thriving learning environment. Last year (2023/2024), our staff Leadership Committee explored the effects of digital device use on learning, engagement, and well-being. After extensive discussion, including reviewing current research and considering staff observations, we decided to implement school-wide guidelines for digital device use.

As a principal, I am cautious about relying too heavily on formal policies. Our school operates more by its core values—Work Hard, Be Kind—and our vision - A community of learners working to make our world a better place. These principles guide our decisions and interactions more effectively than a strict set of rules. While policies have their place, I believe flexibility and nuance are essential in a school setting, where the needs and circumstances of students and staff are diverse.

In developing these guidelines, we intentionally avoided the term "policy." Instead, we focused on creating common practices and guidelines, which we felt would be more adaptable and aligned with our values. We began by engaging students and families in a dialogue about our concerns regarding mobile phone use. We sought their feedback to understand how digital devices were affecting learning, engagement, well-being, and relationships.

The feedback was clear: both students and caregivers felt that mobile phones did not contribute positively to these areas. Our community supported the idea of implementing guidelines to limit mobile phone use at school.

As we developed and communicated these guidelines, our goal was to emphasize our commitment to fostering healthy, happy, and engaged learners. We expressed that our concern was that mobile phones might impede this goal. Acknowledging that mobile phones and social media are integral to students' lives, we approached the guidelines with compassion and understanding. Our staff recognized that their own teenage experiences were very different, with either no mobile phones or limited social media influence.

Our Leadership Committee discussed the challenges these guidelines might present for students and agreed that our role should be supportive rather than punitive. For many students, phones act as a safety net or a tool for managing boredom and self-regulation. We recognized the need to offer alternative strategies to address these needs. To introduce the new guidelines, we created a humorous "80s Airline Video" to make the launch engaging and supportive. We equipped classrooms with fidgets and activities like coloring pages and doodles. Additionally, our counseling team established a lunchtime club called "Unplugged – The No Phone Club," providing students with opportunities for physical activity, nature connection, and journaling—activities that support their well-being and model healthy phone use.

Each month, our school participates in a Churchill Challenge Activity. For February, the challenge focused on reducing screen time. Both staff and students were encouraged to try a new hobby, delete an app, or set a screen time limit on their phones. It was crucial for us that students felt we were all in this together, with both staff and students participating equally.

Our aim is to cultivate an environment where students can thrive as happy, healthy, and engaged learners. Rather than viewing restrictions as punitive, we see them as opportunities to support student growth and well-being. By thoughtfully implementing these guidelines, we strive to balance the role of technology with our primary goal: the well-being and learning of every student. When we shared the guidelines with families, we were so purposeful with our language. Our documents are positive and supportive, not punishment based in language. The guidelines are written with care and compassion at the centre.

Implementing the guidelines has certainly come with its challenges. We understand that students have grown reliant on their phones, and initial resistance was to be expected. Our approach has been rooted in empathy and understanding. Despite the hurdles, we've heard positive feedback from students—they've shared that they're engaging more with their friends and are able to follow along in class more effectively. It's clear that, while the transition requires time, there are notable benefits. As with any new practice in a school, we must approach this with patience, compassion, and care. I look forward to continuing with our guidelines this fall and am excited to support our students in becoming their best selves.

Additional resources developed by Winston Churchill High School are located in Appendix "B" of this document:

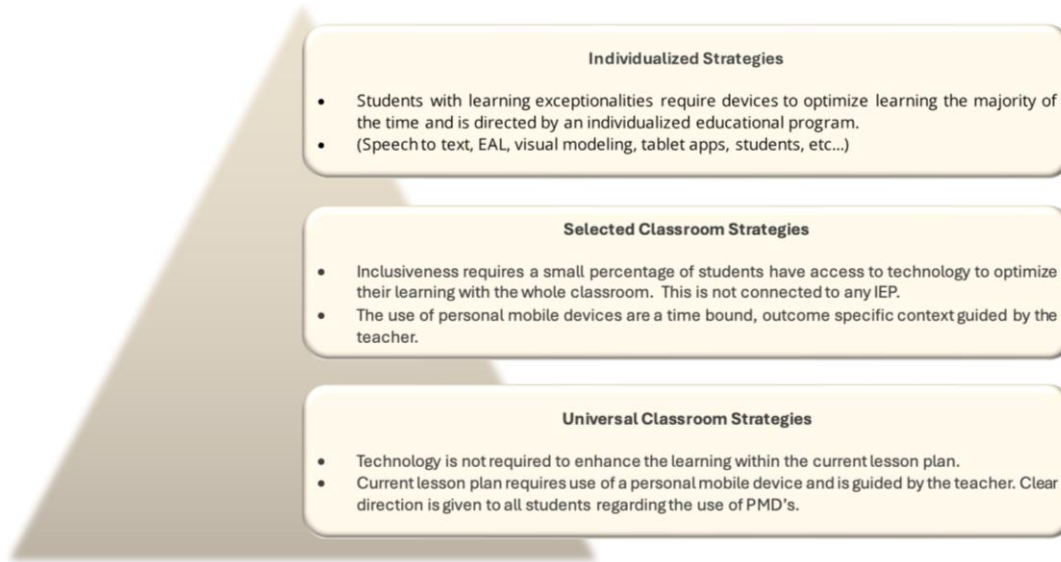
- WCHS Personal Digital Use Guide
- WCHS Cellphone Use Guidelines
- Effects Of Cellphone Use in The Classroom

**Click On Image to View Short Video**



This is a short two-minute presentation produced by the staff at Winston Churchill High School in Lethbridge, AB to introduce the new guidelines to the school community.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTPgDXt5Spc>



While the majority of provincial (territorial) governments throughout Canada have established parameters, and for some, clear restrictions, many have provided flexibility and autonomy for teachers to use their professional judgement for the use of personal mobile devices. Decisions made around use are consistent in allowing personal devices to be used if they are going to optimize student learning. This, however, does not suggest that personal devices be used for socialization or other non-education related activities. Nor does it suggest that personal devices should be used universally for all students all the time, unless the learning outcomes are connected to their use. The diagram above provides school-based administrators, teachers, educational assistants and other educators a framework for consideration.

## Universal Strategies

Universal usage of personally owned devices (i.e. cell phones) is sometimes referred to as “green light strategies”. The universal use of devices is generally integrated in whole classroom instruction activities centered on a common learning outcome. This is not limited to research-oriented searches on the internet but can also encompass collaborative learning communication in the form of classroom surveys and formative assessment feedback that enhances student learning.

## Selected Classroom Strategies

Prior to the integration of technology in the classrooms, differentiating classroom instruction has always existed in most classrooms. For example, to enhance learning inclusion in the classroom, some teachers may select some students to represent their learning in a written narrative (write what you know) format and others in a more accommodating auditory fashion (tell me what you know). The use of personal devices, for some selected students, enhances their learning experience (make a recording) or if written (speech to text) but more importantly provides a greater sense of belonging in whole classroom instruction. These strategies are specifically selected by the teacher to optimize the learning for a selected group of students. They are also time bound.

## Individualized Classroom Strategies

Individualized strategies are for those students who require and are somewhat dependent on technology the **majority** of the time in the classroom. For example, a classroom that has English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners clearly benefit from access to translation technology to enhance their learning. Students with hearing loss may benefit from speech to text recognition. It is imperative that exceptions are made to accommodate learning abilities. Individualized Classroom Strategies are generally connected to an Individualized Education Program for the student and these technology solutions are require in all classrooms for that student.

## Overall Classroom Management

Because most policies and procedures for PMD use in classrooms are close to finalization, students across Canada are already bracing themselves for these changes. Contributors to the CTIP guidelines have consistently messaged the importance of congruency and consistency in the implementation of any new guidelines. The diagram above provides classroom teachers and support staff connected to the policies/administrative procedures/guidelines with a clear implementation framework for consideration. That said, discussions should be had with students about the expectations of “fairness” and “equity” - two concepts that often get intermingled in the day-to-day management of classrooms and schools for that matter. Simply put - fairness may not look equal and having open discussions early and often during the implementation phase will be important. Also consider a universal management structure like “Red light - Green light” as presented by National Trainer Tom Connolly (pg. 48 of these guidelines)



## Other Considerations

- All teachers and support staff need to understand the background of the Order.
- It is important not to make it an “Us vs. Them” policy/procedure. This is not about punishment, and nor should it be seen as an opportunity to punish.
- This is not going to be an easy adjustment for all students and may take time and patience to implement and support. Many reminders for the first couple of weeks will be important. As time goes on, the implementation period can become more individually focused on a student-by-student basis.
- Discussion surrounding managing devices should include reflection on language and perspective (e.g. authoritarian vs. guidance approach). What type of relationship are we hoping to develop with our new students? Are we starting off with zero tolerance or are we going to allow for a softer approach?
- Students are going to be quick to realize if the procedures/guidelines are not bring followed in one class vs. another. If students know there are differences so will parents/caregivers and those differences are going to soon be pointed out when issues arise.
- What procedures/guidelines will be in place for staff use of personal devices? Students and parents/caregivers will quickly see if there are different expectations for staff and students. The Order does not indicate usage procedures for the adults in the building. If there is a difference, is it going to be communicated to parents/caregivers and students ahead of time?





# STUDENT SUB-SYSTEM





## STUDENT SUB-SYSTEM

### Current Circumstance

**Qualifier:** Our CTIP Youth Specialist has met with, presented to and/or interacted (through social media) with thousands of Canadian students. Those interactions and online polls are the primary bases for the counsel and insights given in this section.

Although governments have tended to use the term “personal mobile devices”, most students believe that it is a policy meant to target their cell phones and related devices. There is a feeling of incongruence for middle and high school students because of the past promotion, in schools, of learning “with our devices” to now seeing them represented as “bad” or “evil”. Some governments or official bodies (Teacher Associations, etc.) did consult with youth prior to new directives, but the majority are missing youth voices. Many students also see this change in direction as an attempt to curb what is often called “cyberbullying” and social media misuse and addiction. Without dialogue regarding the purpose and benefits of managing PMD more thoughtfully in educational settings, we run the risk of confirming the student’s perspective that “the adults just don’t get us!” and widening the generation gap.

### Perspective Making

From the perspective of older students, there is a broad range of views. Many high school students understand the “why” but see the new policy as more of a Middle School and Elementary School issue. From their perspective the dye is cast, and they have figured it out. As such the new policies are unreasonable for some of them. Middle School and Junior High School students are predictably more emotionally charged about the “why” and the fact that most were never given a voice in this major educational decision. Two key messages themed out of online polls and personal communications with students are:

- Many students see the adult belief system being ‘Social Media and Technology are bad and if I use them, then I will be viewed as bad too.’
- The second message is related and maybe the most concerning: ‘If I am struggling due to a situation that involves my device then school is no longer a place that I can seek support or help’ due to being in possession of a “prohibited”, “banned” or “restricted” device.

The idea of taking away something (personal mobile devices) that students were initially encouraged to use in their academic experiences in schools is incongruent and is fueling some of the frustration that many youth are feeling towards these new policies. For many youth, the idea of “cell phone restriction” in schools is causing heightened anxiety.

## **Solutions to Consider**

To pursue a more open system and create a safer space for youth to share and feel supported during this policy transition, it is important to understand that our words and actions are as powerful as the influences we see social media and technology having on our youth.

### **Acknowledge and Validate the Many Feelings Youth Have**

1. Teachers will need to address the new policies immediately and be prepared for open discussions.
2. It will be important for school staff to be on the same page prior to discussions between staff and students.
3. Students need to know what is coming their way prior to walking through the doors on the first day of school. They will have heard about the new policies, and many will have anxiety and a perceived game plan to work around the policies.

### **Adjusting (If Necessary) Our Language for Students to Feel Understood**

At times we may create unintentional moments with the words we choose when engaging with students, especially in terms of conversations around social media and technology.

It is important to refrain from common expressions students have identified, such as:

- “I’m too old for that stuff”
- “That’s for you guys”
- “I don’t even know how to use that”
- “Back in the day” and referencing education as better back then because this also can unintentionally create a disconnect for some students that makes them feel as though we do not care to understand (i.e. ‘Fighting the reality of school in this generation by wishfully hoping it would go back to how it used to be.’).

### **Important language that can be useful for youth to hear is**

- “Although we cannot use our devices during class time/ school hours, I want you all to know that if you or a friend is ever struggling with something online, you can always come to me.”
- “Please don’t ever feel like you need to struggle alone.”
- “I/we understand how important our devices are in our world.”
- (For some staff) “I might not know how difficult this may be because I never had a device when I was in school, but I would like to understand.”

### **Additional Things to Consider**

- Some students will be too afraid to “do the right thing” and share a concern with an adult if the concern originated on social media, out of fear of being picked on by peers.
- Some students feel that having teachers check in with student’s “just because” would be a better way to build trust.
- Many students are willing to cooperate but do not because they do not feel heard.

- Many students understand why it is important to not use their devices in class and would feel less frustrated if given opportunities to use their devices for appropriate moments i.e. free time, or for a class related project.
- Some students shared frustration over not receiving opportunities to prove they can be responsible with their devices.

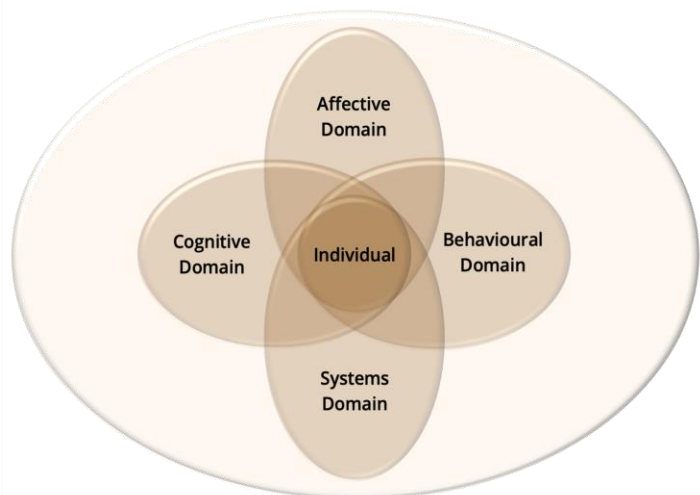
### **In conversations with students/a class regarding new school policies:**

1. Create a safe space to share and discuss by making it a conversation with everyone instead of a lecture.
2. Be thoughtful and acknowledge how difficult it may be for some students considering they have been in school x number of years without such policy.
3. Open up the floor for students to share their thoughts and feelings towards the change.
4. It is okay to share your own opinions and feelings with youth, even if you disagree. This creates a sense of higher connection and prompts an understanding that we can agree to disagree but still be unified and support one another.
5. Conclude by letting students and youth know that no matter what, you are always here to support their wellbeing and or would be more than happy to direct them to someone they also trust in the building i.e. Counsellor.

### **Alternative Approach**

Due to the way in which many youths communicate through technology, there is a sense of comfortability for some youth that allows them to be more open with their communication through a screen rather than in person.

1. Follow the above steps in a discussion but instead of having students speak freely, give them the option of writing their thoughts down anonymously, shuffle the responses and select responses to be read out loud and continue the discussion this way. Create prompts for students to comment on throughout to provide greater opportunity for vocal conversation.
2. Create a classroom or school wide survey (see on next page) that allows students to express not only how they feel but also give them a platform to collaborate and share ideas that they may have to help staff members better support them or make learning more fun.
3. Use a VTRA interviewing technique and ask questions in different domains. Too often interviewers may only ask affective domain questions like “how do you feel” when some students have difficulty identifying or sharing how they feel. As such, consider questions in multiple domains.





## **CTIP DRAFT STUDENT SURVEY and / or GUIDED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

The CTIP Team has developed a Draft Student Survey that can be used formally as an anonymous survey or used in the classroom as guided questions to prompt open dialogue. We recommend that the survey and/or guided conversations occur the first day (or two) back to school. The survey is meant for use with Middle School (Junior High) and High School students only.

### **Guided-Discussion Questions**

1. Now that the policy/procedure is implemented, if nothing else is done (no open communication with students), how do you think the new policy/procedure will affect our overall school culture and climate? (Have teacher explain “culture” and “climate” by citing examples).
2. If you were frustrated or upset hearing about the new policy/procedure, what was most frustrating: A) The new cell phone (PMD) policy/procedure itself? or B) That you were not given a voice in the decision?
3. What do you feel some adults missed in the development of the policy/procedure?
4. What would your ideal policy/procedure look like?
5. What do you recommend as next steps for our school?

It is easy for many students to comprehend the need for better structure in the classroom and given the current circumstances, many students do not deny the reality of why these policies have been put in place. How the adults message it may become the most significant variable for success.

## STUDENT VOICES

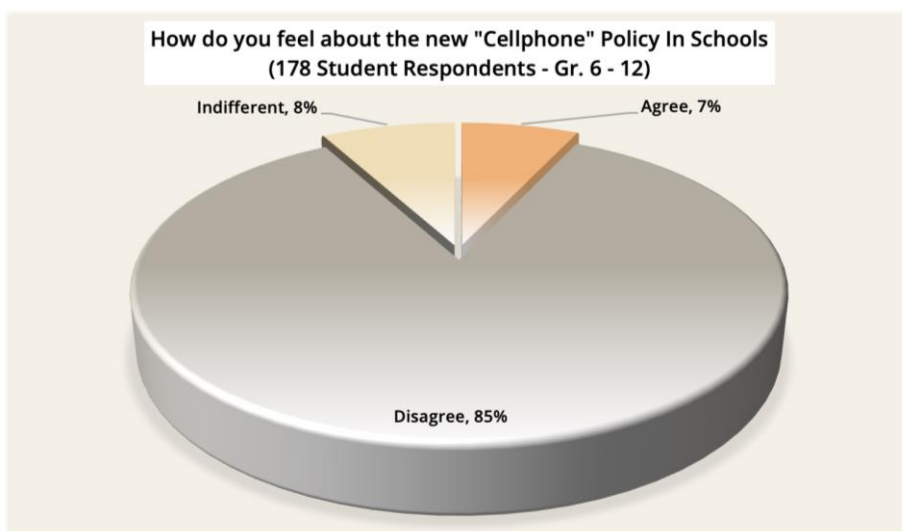
To compliment a series of CTIP polls conducted with students during the summer, we also invited students to provide their commentary. The first two quotes (#3 on next page) are from middle school students from two different parts of the country. The themes and quick quotes are national student voices.

- Create opportunities for youth to be involved i.e. student surveys, discussions.
- Use open language to support unity between staff and students i.e. We are in this together, we won't be perfect and that is okay, I am struggling to..., etc.
- Create opportunities, when appropriate, to incorporate the use of technology/devices during school hours. This encourages youth to use their devices responsibly
- Create a digital check in that students can access via their phone or on a school laptop to be able to express how they are feeling (not all youth will have the courage to share in person right away)
- Create more meaningful moments with students so that they do not feel as though they have to initiate conversations only when it involves academics or school-related topics. For example, start the period off by a brief discussion that is not school-related, play a classroom game, formally acknowledge each student as they get situated in the classroom.

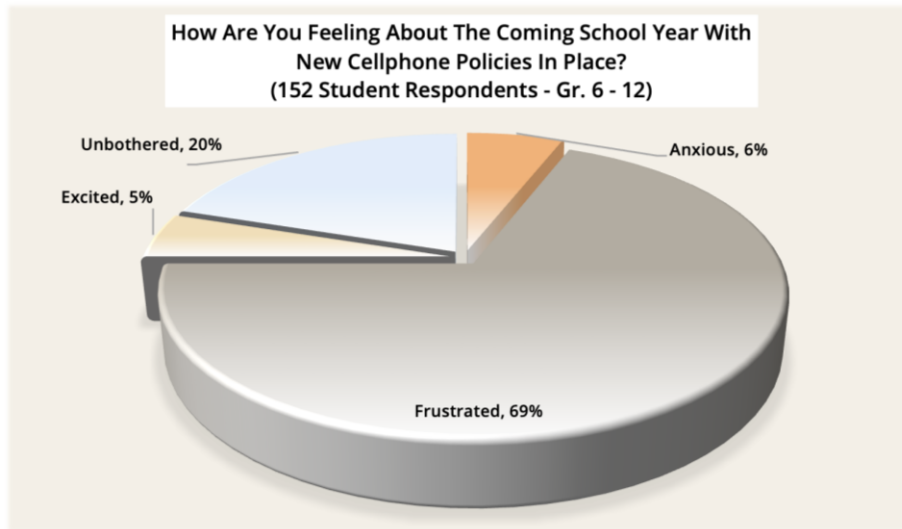
## Data Collection

(\*Below is a culmination of what students are communicating in our ongoing data collection and dialogue, about the return to school with the new policy.)

### 1. Student Poll - New "no cellphones" policy in schools (*Poll taken June 19/2024*)



2. Student Poll - How are you feeling about the coming school year with new cellphone policies in place? (Poll taken July 23/2024)



3. Student Poll - How do you think phone restriction will influence the relationship between students and staff in school? (Poll taken July 23/2024)

**Student Response (Coming from a student in a school that reflects a more closed school system)** *“Both negatively and positively. I think some staff will use the no phone policy as a way to encourage students to learn without the distraction of devices and enforce it in a reasonable way. While other staff (most older teachers) will use it as a power play against students, instead of hearing them out, and understanding how phones play a big role in our lives these days. From what I’ve observed of my peers, this restriction is fueling a desire to rebel, and use their devices more. In my experience, teachers who approach taking away phones with an understanding that it’s difficult for us to be without them, have far more success in the future with their students. While teachers who see them as a nuisance, and abruptly take them without discussing the student’s opinion, have little to no success with that student not using their phone in the future. I believe the success of the no phone policy is going to rely deeply on how staff use and abuse it.”*

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*“I think that phone restriction is important and genuinely a good thing for students learning. Children and adolescents are basically glued into their phone, and that is me as well, which i am working on lol. School is a place where students learn and grow as an individual and having a phone where videos and photos can go international and plus, what children see on the internet not only affects their own lives but also their social lives. So, I think that they will influence their relationship with teachers and other student in a good and positive way (hopefully) making it easier to ask questions without any distractions or complications involving the internet.”*

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#### 4. Student Poll - Why did you select the answer you did regarding “No phones” policy?

**Educator Response** *“I think we should be teaching more internet safety, and how to use cell phones as an educational tool. I get that they can cause issues, believe me! But I’ve also never had a “major incident” as a classroom teacher due to cellphone use.”*

I think we should be teaching more internet safety, and how to use cell phones as an educational tool. I get that they can cause issues, believe me! But I’ve also never had a “major incident” as a classroom teacher due to cellphone use.

#### **Themes and Quick Quotes – Student Responses:**

Why did you select “frustrated”? (Regarding phone restriction in school: As we get closer to the school year, how are you feeling about school now?)

“I’m so glad you’re asking students about how we feel so we have a say in this! I feel frustrated because it seems like teachers and parents aren’t listening to the benefits of having our devices in class. Yes, I understand to a point of phones being a problem, but not all students have a problem with them. I feel like a small percentage of students are abusing the privilege of having phones in class. For me I use my phone to play music in class when things are loud and I’m feeling anxious. Music helps me calm down and it’s making me feel nervous knowing I won’t have that outlet next year for school.”

**Student:** *“I’m so glad you’re asking students about how we feel so we have a say in this! I feel frustrated because it seems like teachers and parents aren’t listening to the benefits of having our devices in class. Yes, I understand to a point of phones being a problem, but not all students have a problem with them. I feel like a small percentage of students are abusing the privilege of having phones in class. For me I use my phone to play music in class when things are loud and I’m feeling anxious. Music helps me calm down and it’s making me feel nervous knowing I won’t have that outlet next year for school.”*

**Student:** *“I just feel like it’s frustrating cause sometimes when we’re going through hard times communicating with people becomes harder but at least at the end of the day we’re not completely lonely cause we have our phones you know? that’s just personal opinion, idk if it’s even reasonable cause I understand the main point is more important, but I feel like it still makes a major difference”*

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“I feel frustrated because it takes away the right to ALL personal devices, such as headphones. This is a very frustrating thing to do because I channel most of my focus through listening to music or using noise-cancelling headphones, and the classrooms tend to get loud and disruptive while I try to do my work.”

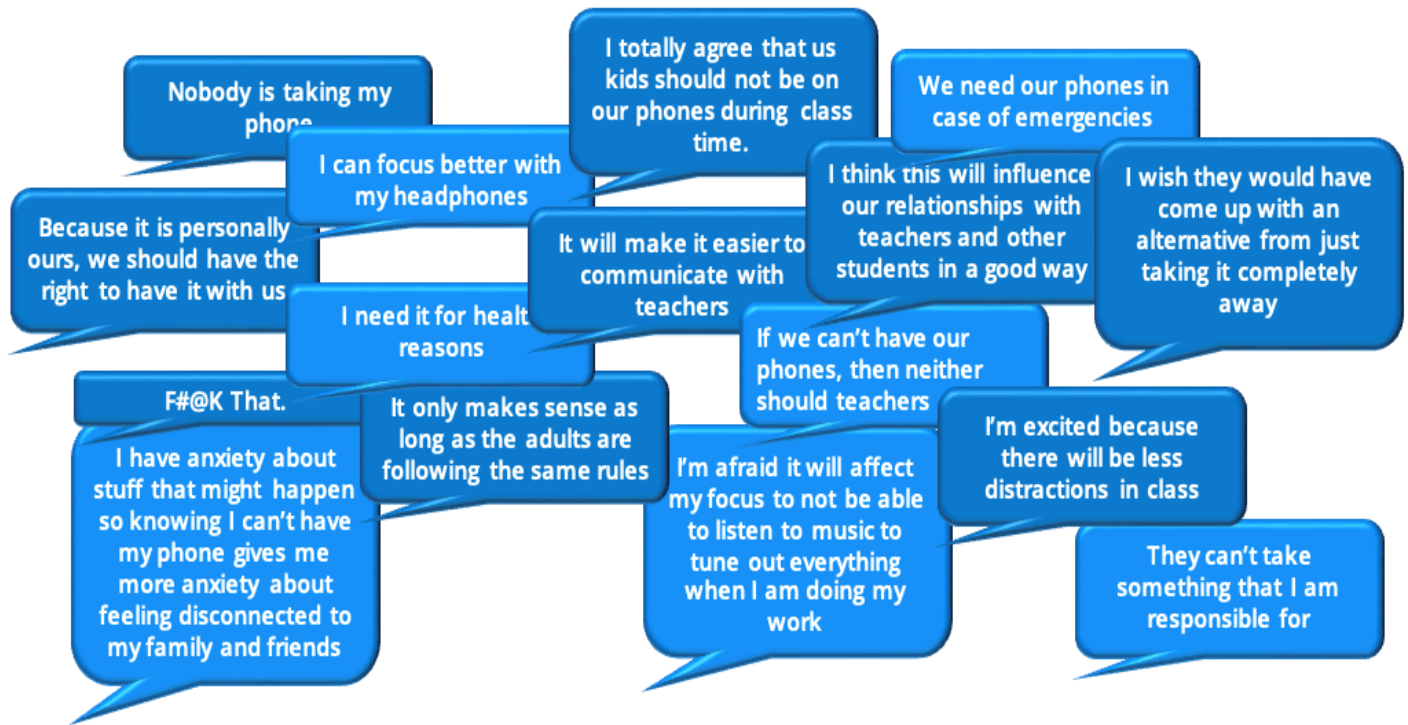
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Why did you select “Nervous”? (Regarding phone restriction in school: As we get closer to the school year, how are you feeling about school now?)

**Professional:** *“Working on the Digital Wellness Team has given me tons of insight into the relationships between youth and their devices. Why they use them, their habits, dependencies, etc. And while I AM in support of the provincial mandates for this, my concerns / nervousness comes from how I have watched schools who have attempted bans (or soft bans) have seen struggles with attendance (kids will skip class to use their phone in bathroom, outside, etc.), and try to manage parental anxieties surrounding not being able to connect with their children throughout the day. I predict I will receive an increase in emails and calls from parents asking for exemptions or modified circumstances for their children.”*

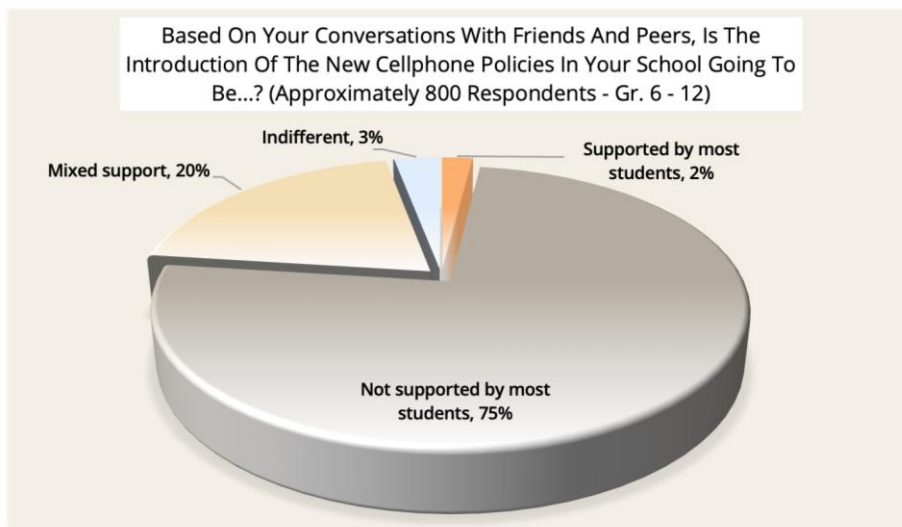
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*Themes and Quick Quotes – Student Responses (Continued):*

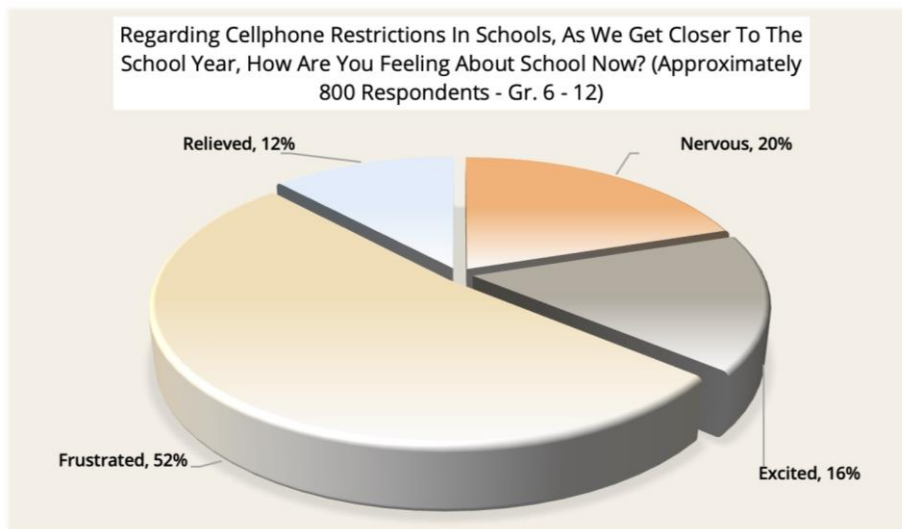


**5. Student Poll - Based on Your Conversations with Friends and Peers, Is the Introduction of The New Cellphone Policies in Your School Going To Be...? (Approximately 800 Respondents - Gr. 6 - 12) (Poll taken August 8/2024)**

1. Supported by most students.
2. Not supported by most students.
3. Mixed support.
4. Indifferent.



6. Student Poll - Regarding Cellphone Restrictions In Schools, As We Get Closer to The School Year, How Are You Feeling About School Now? (Approximately 800 Respondents - Gr. 6 - 12) (Poll taken August 8/2024)



### Mental Health and Addictions Concerns

With noted exceptions, cell phones and other PMD in the classroom, for any other purpose than education, are impairing the learning experience of many children and youth. However, many students, parents/caregivers and professionals are aware that cells phones are also the pipeline to the internet that allows students to inhale the worst social media has to offer. One of the most influential articles to drive the debate and then decisions to manage cell phones and other PMD in schools and homes was written by Jonathan Haidt (Haidt, 2024) and published as ***“END THE PHONE-BASED CHILDHOOD NOW: The environment in which kids grow up today is hostile to human development.”*** The arguments are compelling and clarifies that many young people are doing well and based on multiple research projects we are probably looking at approximately 10% of students who are actually addicted to their devices.

Haidt, J. (2024, May 6). The Terrible Costs of a Phone-Based Childhood. The Atlantic.  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2024/03/teen-childhood-smartphone-use-mental-health-effects/677722/>



## ADDICTION, PROBLEM USE, & CONTROLLED USE SOME USEFUL DEFINITIONS & TIPS FOR EDUCATION

**Contributed by: Bonnie Randall, National Trainer - CTIP**

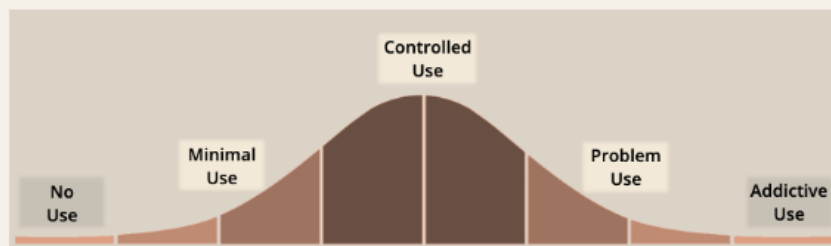
Colloquial assumptions frequently contend that youth are “addicted” to their devices—a hope-defeating inclination, and one that is not necessarily true. To be addicted, an individual must meet the following criterion:

1. Preoccupation or engagement with a substance or activity that has hijacked or overrode one or more of that individual's Major Life Areas (physical health, sleep/wake cycle, relationships, work / school performance, finances, hobbies and leisure).
2. A development of tolerance and dependency on the substance or activity that forms not only a reliance, but also a need of more of the same thing to achieve the desired result.

Given those parameters, it is reasonable to say that most youth do not fall into the category of what is considered formal “Addiction.” Rather, they may struggle with “Problem Use” wherein perhaps some Major Life Areas are somewhat impeded, but not to the degree where there is demonstrable suffering. Or, put another way, the Problem Use has not impaired function—but observers can also tell that the individual is not meeting their complete potential (in this case due to distraction and/or preoccupation with devices).

Still other youth—who will, arguably, make up the majority—will meet the definition of what is called Controlled Use, meaning they have learned to balance their Major Life Areas with their screen time, an unsurprising adaptation given that social media has become the relational vernacular, particularly for youth, over the past decade.

Given those distinctions; Addiction, Problem Use, and Controlled Use, if we could imagine a bell curve graph, the vast majority of individuals would land somewhere in the middle where Controlled Use resides, while on the far end of that curve, others would fit in the smaller population struggling with Problem Use or Addiction. Then, on the opposite side, there will in fact be outliers who do not engage with their devices much, or maybe at all.



For individuals who fall into the category called Controlled Use, the forthcoming prohibition of devices will not necessarily be palatable, but they will adapt. That said, this adaptation will be a process, not an event. A good analogy to help one understand this is imagining someone who has just purchased new shoes. They know they need the new shoes—the arches in their old pair no longer support their feet, and there are a few holes in them too; the rain gets in. Still, those old shoes are comfortable. Their feet know how to move in them. Conversely, the new shoes—despite their strong arches and fresh tread, (both of which our wearer knows they need) are markedly uncomfortable. They are stiff, unfamiliar, and might even raise a blister or two on the heel.

Nevertheless, within a couple of weeks, though they can still feel the newness, our wearer will start to adapt to the shoes. The shoes will now have assumed some of the form of their feet.

The majority of our youth will be much like this with the initial absence of their device. Muscle memory will quite literally compel them to reach or to check (and re-check). There will be initial discomfort and awkwardness. This may even look like visible distress or irritation. Add to that the possibility of an odd sense of loneliness or sense of being 'left behind' which they might experience. After all: devices have, largely, become the social arena for youth. The absence of their 'Town Hall' will feel isolating for many.

And for some, these symptoms will be more profound. Consider those on the far end of our bell curve, the youth who, in the diagnostic sense, are struggling with Problem Use or Screen Addiction. Their discomfort will be more pronounced, and you may see symptoms that are consistent with formal withdrawal. These symptoms may include:

- Anxiety
- Profound irritability
- Abruptness and/or shortness of temper
- Agitation / inability to physically settle
- Overall dissatisfaction that may present itself in overly critical/ harsh exchanges
- Nagging / bargaining / cajoling
- Explosive Anger
- Tears and frustration

In addictions parlance, we refer to the aforementioned Withdrawal Symptoms as "Craving." Colloquially, they are known as "Jonesing" or being "Jonesy."

Note also that Screen Addiction or Problem Use shares many traits with Stimulant Addiction (meaning to stimulant drugs like cocaine, or nicotine). By definition, each are distinct (one being a bona fide Substance Addiction, while the other is clearly a Behavioral, or Process, Addiction), yet both occupy the same reward pathway in the brain—a pathway which generates a "hit" of endorphin and dopamine (our euphoria chemicals) upon usage. Once addiction has occurred, the element of Dependence we discussed earlier will make it difficult for the brain to release these chemicals without the substance or activity that has come to generate that "hit."

The brain can be very lazy that way; if something external will do its work, it will be only too happy to outsource that job! The conundrum this creates for the problem user or addict, though, is that due to this dependency, the aforementioned Withdrawal Symptoms may be more intense and long-lasting than what you will observe in your ‘Controlled Use’ population. As a result, this may also generate an underscore of general malaise and hopelessness for the user—symptoms that will appear consistent with Clinical Depression.

Patience, time, and consistency will help alleviate this discomfort as the dependent brain re-learns how to manage without the perpetual hits of dopamine et al, and how to release these chemicals on its own again.

**PRO TIP:** Exercise and physical activity “live” on the same reward pathway in the brain as screen use and stimulant drugs, thus providing a safe, healthy, and highly effective way for individuals to reclaim the same burst of brain chemicals their devices have been providing for them. Engaging in any form of physical activity, therefore, is a highly reliable remedy for craving and withdrawal.

With all that being said, and bearing the notion of patience, time, and consistency in mind, you can likely expect Withdrawal Symptoms to peak within a month, then begin to ebb and extinguish themselves by the end of that first four weeks of “new shoes.” Note, though, that “relapse is part of recovery”—thus those same Withdrawal Symptoms may resurge after breaks from school when youth have no parameters prohibiting them from their screens. In the early days of implementation, therefore, Mondays may be far bumpier than Thursdays or Fridays. And after longer breaks—especially those earlier in the school year, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas—it might feel a bit like “back to the drawing board” not just for staff, but for youth too, who now have to muscle through their withdrawal symptoms all over again. To that end, be aware that, for those individuals on the far end of that bell curve, additional support (in the form of a referral to an Addictions Counselor or equivalent) may be required.

### **In Closing**

On a positive note, ambivalence is the underscore of addiction. Consider, for example, an individual who is addicted to cocaine. That individual likes their substance very much. Conterminously, though, that same person is also fully aware that giving up that substance will benefit them greatly. Youth with even profound addictions to their devices are no different—they also like their devices very much, yet (most) are simultaneously aware that there will be advantages to having limitations placed on their access. In other words, they might not like the process, but they are far from ignorant of the intention—and likely even agree with it to some degree. As a result, most of them will want to be part of the solution, not the problem, when it comes to remedying their own discomfort.

### **Special Note—Empty Vessels & Screen Addiction**

By VTRA definition, an Empty Vessel is a youth who lacks a meaningful connection with a healthy, emotionally mature adult. As such, when looking through a VTRA lens, we are always pursuing the question: What is our Empty Vessel connecting or filling themselves with?

Enter online relationships / potentially Problematic Use and fixation on a device. It is reasonable to expect a comorbid representation of Empty Vessels at the far end of that bell curve we have been discussing above. It is also incumbent upon us to remember that many of our Empty Vessels are also consistent with our “Mixed Type” or highly emotionally reactive typologies whose baseline behaviour is already primed to be explosive or short-fused. Add the aforementioned withdrawal symptoms to this pre-existing typology, and it is easy to see how this new embargo on devices may act as a catalyst that generates an escalation in both Justification and volatility on the Pathway to Violence. If such is the mosaic of one or more of your students, being aware is being wise.

### **Why Stay the Course? Resiliency Skills Both Expected & Unexpected**

The human brain is a highly adaptive machine—it will acclimate to and develop responses consistent with virtually any environment it is placed in. Over the past decade-plus, youths’ developing brains have acclimated to an online world of ever-changing social media platforms. The resulting skills from this immersion have included the ability to switch attention rapidly between a fast-changing variety of stimuli, and to absorb accelerated sound bites with marked acuity. There has, though, been a downside too. Shortened attention spans, impaired patience, and expectation of instant gratification have been by-products of the technological age. So too have impaired verbal and social skills.

By and large, these diminished skills have been the result of “pruning”—the process of the brain, in an effort to be efficient, pruning away the capacity for skills it does not think it needs. Though—and in the spirit of the adaptation the brain is so proficient at—atrophied brain architecture can and does experience repair. Therefore, something we can expect as youth will now have protracted stretches without devices, is for the re-emergence of Resiliency Skills such as:

- Patience
- Verbal dexterity
- Ability to entertain oneself
- Ability to process and read social cues
- Ability to process and read nonverbal cues
- Ability to appreciate tone and nuance in speech and diction
- Delay of gratification

Why does the re-attainment of these skills warrant mention in this guideline?

Largely because **framing matters**. Both students and parents may be offput by the advent of these new restrictions. As such, it may be helpful to focus on what may be gained as opposed to what is going to be lost (or on the reasons why it has been 'lost'). Any 'consumer' of a new rule or edict deserves to know "What's in it for me?" In this case, quite a lot: the aforementioned skills form some of the foundation for self-regulation, self-soothing, and relational capacity.

### **Special Circumstances—Parent / Caregiver Separation Anxiety**

Many parents and caregivers will follow the same bell curve noted above and yet not be parallel to where their own children are on the curve. In a smaller number of cases, we know from clinical experience that some have developed an unhealthy, even codependent, emotional fusion with their youth. The reasons for these fusions are many—everything from family dynamics, generational codependency, and even trauma can account for these enmeshed relationships. Regardless of etiology, the parent/caregiver who is hypervigilant over their child's whereabouts or safety may be profoundly activated by their own anxiety. So profoundly, in fact, that the pushback school administration receives may be far more pervasive from the parent / caregiver than the youth.

In the spirit of TES work, which implores us to always, and first, **Lower the Anxiety of the System**, some considerations to include, therefore, are:

- How can the parent / caregiver contact their youth during the school day?
- What times of the day will young people have access to their devices?
- What measures does the school have in place to ensure safety for their student?

Remember, the parent or guardian who is emotionally fused to their student may experience a battery of the same Withdrawal Symptoms discussed in the Addictions Section of this guideline. As such their struggles will peak during the first month, then gradually begin to extinguish, if administration and staff can manage their own anxiety during the initial phase of implementation.



# STAFF SUB-SYSTEM





## STAFF SUB-SYSTEM

### Current Circumstance

The issue of whether to allow cell phones and other PMD in classrooms is complex, one that educators across the country have grappled with for years. The original impetus for introducing PMD into the classroom was to shorten the gap between how students learned in school and how they acquired knowledge “out of school”. The days of going to the library to access information was being surpassed exponentially by technology and the Education system as a whole could not keep up. As the implementation of PMD grew, concerns were centered around the potential for cell phones to be misused in contexts such as drug dealing (Dial-A-Dope) or gang activity. While educators recognized these activities as disruptions to the learning environment, their more significant concern was the safety of students and staff. There was a fear that PDM like cell phones could serve as a gateway for individuals to engage in other illicit or unsafe activities within school buildings. This heightened anxiety among educators led many to attempt to ban PDM in schools altogether.

However, as PMD became more integral to daily life, maintaining and enforcing strict cell phone bans became increasingly difficult for educators. Many expressed concerns that they were spending more time policing or attempting to enforce the rules, which was as disruptive to the learning environment and their relationships with students as allowing PMD in class. In other words, the attempt to implement, maintain, and enforce the device ban increased anxiety at the system and sub-system levels.

Coinciding with this was a push for policy changes driven by the counterargument that PMD could enhance safety, especially during emergencies or crises. Parents and advocacy groups, along with numerous educators, often argued that the ability to contact family members or access emergency information could be crucial in dangerous situations. This argument further reinforced an “us against them” mentality, adding significantly to the stress many educators were already feeling.

Regardless of the research suggesting that during a crisis, the presence of PMD like cell phones can heighten the system’s and sub-system’s anxiety, create confusion, and hinder the effectiveness of emergency responses, new or updated policies were implemented. Unfortunately, they often led to more confusion due to varying ages and beliefs, creating inconsistent, and at times, adversarial approaches to navigating concerns regarding disrupted learning, mental health, and student safety (e.g. online bullying, sextortion). These differing perspectives, and the recognition that no two schools handle cell phone management in the same way, were compounded by a lack of staff training, varying experiences with technology, and age differences between new and experienced teachers. In the midst of this confusion, what remained constant was that students’, in large part, used their devices as socialization and connection because of the chaotic boundaries that existed. The system, in other words, was not clear what appropriate use of PMD look like in schools.

Teachers, who may be more familiar with technology, often have different views on PMD use compared to some of their colleagues who were not as confident with PMD integration. This divergence in perspectives can lead to inconsistent policy enforcement within the same school, further confusing students and staff. The lack of comprehensive training for front-line staff exacerbates this issue, as

teachers and administrators may not be equipped with the strategies or knowledge to manage PMD use effectively.

Moreover, the varied experiences with technology among educators contribute to differing opinions on the role of PMD in the classroom. Some see them as valuable educational tools, while others view them as distractions. These conflicting views result in policies that are not uniformly applied or understood, leading to frustration and tension among staff and students.

## **Perspective Making**

It's clear that schools need to find a middle ground where PMD can be used effectively without compromising quality of the learning environment, student mental health, or student and staff safety. The ongoing challenge for educators is to strike the right balance - leveraging the benefits of technology to enhance education while managing the potential downside.

## **Key Considerations**

### **Disruptive Learning**

- PMD can be a significant distraction, potentially disrupting the learning environment.
- Conversely, they can be valuable educational tools if used appropriately and integrated into lessons.

### **Mental Health**

- The constant presence of PMDs can contribute to issues such as anxiety, Bullying with a Device (cyberbullying), and social comparison.
- However, they can also provide students with a sense of security and a means to connect with support networks.

### **Safety Concerns**

- PDM are crucial for communication during emergencies, allowing students to contact parents or authorities.
- Their misuse can lead to safety issues, such as the inappropriate sharing of information or unauthorized recordings.

It would be remiss not to address the elephant in the room – PMD are not evil, nor are the students who use them. You may be familiar with the saying “guns kill” and the counter to it that says, “guns don't kill, people do.” The same can be said for PMD such as cell phones – they don't bully or extort, but they are tools that make it easier for such behaviors to occur. This is not meant to be finger-pointing or labeling our students as bad or evil; rather, it emphasizes the need for digital and social-emotional literacy education and most importantly, connection over alienation.

## Solutions to Consider

### System-Wide

To address these challenges, it is crucial to develop clear, consistent guidelines that consider the diverse perspectives within the school community. Providing comprehensive training for all staff on effective PMD management/integration and the potential impacts on learning, mental health, and student/school safety is essential. Additionally, fostering open communication and collaboration among educators of all ages and experiences can help create a more unified approach to PMD use in schools, ultimately benefiting the entire school community.

### Staff

It is important to always remind ourselves that this is but one student expectation and that we need to manage the situation as we would any other school-wide expectation. In other words, do not make it about the PMD, make it about meeting expectations.

#### Key considerations when mismanagement of a PMD happens:

*Connection + Context  
BEFORE  
Compliance*

#### Baseline Behaviour

- Is this “out of character” for this student? If so, has there been a change in circumstances?

#### Context - Be Curious

- Ask yourself what could be going on for this student that could be contributing to the situation at hand (context) – “What was happening for you to use your phone?”

#### Be Empathic and Understanding

- Acknowledge the challenges students face and frame expectations in a way that shows understanding of their needs and circumstances.

#### Use Positive Language

- Use language that focuses on positive behavior and outcomes rather than punitive measures. For example, instead of saying "Don't use your cell phones during class," say "You need to focus on learning during class time."

#### Use Clarity and Transparency

- Clearly explain the reasons behind your request to ensure students understand its purpose. For instance, "I need you focused during class time because I want you to do well on the assignment."

## **Use a Supportive Tone**

- Convey a supportive tone that shows your commitment to the student's well-being. For example, "If you need to use your phone for personal reasons, come talk to me and we can make appropriate arrangements."

## **Be Consistent with Trauma-Informed Principles**

- Ensure your language aligns with the principles of safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. This means avoiding language that could be perceived as authoritarian or dismissive.

As well, it is important to ask what policies/exceptions will be in place for staff use of personal devices? Students and parents will quickly see if there are differences between staff and students. The Order does not indicate usage procedures for the adults in the building. As noted earlier, if there is a difference, it needs to be communicated to parents and students ahead of time?



## MANAGING PMD IN THE CLASSROOM: Tips For Teachers

Contributed by: Tom Connolly, National Trainer - CTIP

### Positive Belief System for Teachers to Consider

- Language is important. Acknowledge that a lot of cellphone use in classrooms has been extremely useful to assist in the learning process. This recalibration is to bring balance back when it comes to cellphone use. Its main purpose is to assist in the learning process. Other uses only detract from the learning process e.g. TikTok, gaming, social connecting etc.
- Take a positive approach to messaging rather than a punitive restriction.
- Motivate students to want to put their devices away.
- Expect resistance! But in order to diminish resistance - students need to understand that this change is in their best interest.
- Avoid power struggles - you can tap into their power rather than “top down” overpower. Collaborate - seek and ask for a spirit of cooperation.
- With your students, co-create a **Classroom PMD Norms for Success** - Reasonable, logical and simple guidelines regarding cell phone use in classrooms.

### Suggestions For Consideration

- Whenever possible - avoid direct confiscation of a device as it can stimulate unnecessary confrontation. Have the student responsibly to place it or take it to the selected place. e.g. backpack
- Some success has been experienced when students enter a room and automatically place their phone in a predetermined place in classrooms e.g. pouches, wall hangers or backpacks.
- All students, upon entering the classroom are directed to place their cellphone - FACE DOWN.
- Visual, Visual, Visual - Whatever Classroom PMD Norms for Success that you co-create with your students - post them on an easy-to-read chart in your classroom. Students need constant reminders.
- Some teachers have developed a reward system as an incentive. Points are accumulated for regular compliance to the agreement resulting in rewards associated with free phone time.
- To alleviate stress associated with cellphone restrictions, some teachers have allowed a five-minute phone break in long period semestered schools.

- **Semester Review** - The agreement could be assessed by classroom students especially if they were involved in co-creating. Adapt where necessary.
- Be aware and sensitive to students with exceptionalities that may require cellphone use.
- **Digital Citizenship Concepts** - teach students how to access healthy apps to promote positive use of cellphones - mindfulness apps, sites, health + fitness apps, media balance and well-being etc.

**Traffic Light Colours** – What is the PMD Colour for Today's Class?



**Red Light Class** - Absolutely no phones in use during the period

**Yellow Light Class** - Phones will be used for educational purposes for part of this period/lesson

**Green Light class** - Phones used for educational purposes for the entire period

**Note**

Be transparent with your own phone use. There may be occasions when the teacher is called upon to use their own mobile device. Model honesty and transparency - share with class if possible - why is it that you have to use your mobile device.



# PARENT/CAREGIVER SUB-SYSTEM





## PARENT/CAREGIVER SUB-SYSTEM

### Current Circumstance

Many parents and caregivers have grown up with their own PMD which have become as much a part of their lives as their children's. A societal theme, for the past few years, is that parents and caregivers "need to know what their children are up to online"; "parents and caregivers need to limit cell phone and screen time use". This unheeded pressure by many parents and caregivers comes because of a variety of dynamics:

- Most parents/caregivers feel they have a close enough connection with their children that they would come to them if they got in over their heads online.
- Some parents/caregivers are uninformed about the dangerous aspects of the internet.
- Everybody's doing it! Most young people have PMD as do the adults.
- Allowing PMD use contextually lowers the anxiety between caregivers and their children because it can be:
  - A means of keeping a child busy or entertained so parents/caregivers can complete other tasks uninterrupted.
  - A peacekeeping device if parents/caregivers do not attempt to take it away or control screen time. Therefore, contextually, taking away a device can cause disharmony while not taking it away can lead to a belief that there is harmony.
  - A constant means of knowing where each other are through location services.
  - A constant means of emotional connection (i.e. some parents and caregivers do not hear the words "I love you" when face to face with their child but will receive multiple emojis, GIFs and "I love you" over text and joint social media accounts).

**"We are overprotecting our children in the real world while under protecting them online"**  
**Haidt, J. (2024). The Anxious Generation. Penguin Press**

Educationally, parents and caregivers have had growing concerns about cell phone use in the classroom and its impact on academic achievement. Notwithstanding the above comments, they have also been aware that screen time at home has probably not been as much homework related as some of their children were suggesting. Governments and educational associations across the country have confirmed this through dialogue and surveys with parents and caregivers that contributed to the current restrictions on PMD in Canadian classrooms.

Educational leaders are appropriately trying to keep the emphasis on enhancing the educational experience by better managing devices in the classroom. Many parents and caregivers see "banning" cell phone and other PMD in the classroom, or entire schools, as a way of 'letting kids get back to just learning'. But there is another impetus from governments and adults in general mandating these restrictions and that is the hope that somehow this will limit **overall** PMD use by students and in particular cyberbullying. In other words, the perspective of teachers in the classroom and parents and caregivers at home about the purpose and benefits of the new policies will not always be the same.

## Perspective Making

Taking a medication to **make you better** is different than taking a medication that will just make you **feel better**. Knowing the difference in advance prevents the patient from being emotionally set up to believe they are fully on the road to recovery. Parents and caregivers need to know that managing PMD in the classroom or even banning them all day from school is medication that will help students (for the most part) **get better** at school. But managing PMD in the classroom or even banning them all day from school may contextually (while in school) help students **feel better**, it will not fix the problem of cyberbullying and other harmful uses of social media.

The harmful aspects of social media including online sexual exploitation and cyberbullying are not going to be eliminated because of better management of PMD at school. Many of the most extreme cyberbullying cases start to escalate after the school day is over and well into the evening and early morning. This is one of the reasons why attempts and deaths by suicide have been linked to that timeframe: it is the most isolated and lonely time for any student suffering in silence. A barrier to managing this social issue (cyberbullying) that has been intensified by technology is the fact that it has been called “Cyberbullying”. The term itself has left too many professionals, parents, caregivers, and some students believing that it is this mysterious uncontrollable force that strikes unannounced and then disappears without detection. In our professional work on serious cases of so-called cyberbullying we explicitly change the language to your child is being **“Bullied with a Device” (BWD)**.

While there are some cases of anonymous cyberbullying, in most cases involving school aged children, we often know who the players are that are bullying with a device. In CTIP’s work in Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA), we included in our “Categories for Action” “ongoing, pervasive, targeted bullying”. This means we are not concerned with two friends who have a disagreement and made hurtful posts about each other and then apologized and become friends again a day later. Our focus is on “target selection” when one or more real people (bully) use their devices to harm another student. The adults often know, and in most cases the students certainly know who the “Individual(s) of Concern” (IOC) is behind the torment.

This means that in our formal assessments, we (all of the adults) need to assess and often support the person with the device and the person harmed by the device rather than assume that it is the device causing the harm. In essence, the device is part of the evidence that bullying, harassment, threats, etc. have occurred. One of the reasons BWD has flourished is because of constant adult deferral, such as, “I can’t manage cyberspace”, “it’s not my job to manage cyberspace”, “what am I supposed to do all this online crap”, “it’s that social media causing all the problems” etc. Because the problem has felt so big, too many adults (professionals, parents and caregivers) many have simply said it is the other persons job to fix it.

**Rx**      **PRESCRIPTION**  
Patient Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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**School PMD Policy - Promote student educational wellness**

**Adverse effects: May mask bullying with a device during school hours**

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_      Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

The new PMD policies, if implemented in a thoughtful way, will support better learning environment. But students being bullied with a device will still need greater collaboration from all key stakeholders.

***Please refer to J. Kevin Cameron's article "Inside Voice", Pg. 62***

## **Solutions to Consider**

We recommend that after schools have acclimatized to the new PMD policies and there is evidence that implementation strategies are working, Boards consider renaming "Cyberbullying" to "Bullying With a Device" (BWD). This will bring focus to the issue of "ongoing pervasive targeted bullying" as identified in most VTRA protocols across Canada and activate a multi-agency practice for assessment and intervention of BWD that includes parents and caregivers.

- Over-communicate with parents/caregivers.
- Be open and transparent with parents/caregivers.
- Start early so parents/caregivers understand the "Why" of managing devices better at school and can start communicating with students.
- Bring the Parent Council on board.
- Bring your biggest supporters on board—which agencies are your community partners? How can you leverage their support to make this transition smoother?
- Who are your critics in most circumstances? Call them in to hear their perspective and allow them to have a voice. Minutes of time now could save hours of time in the future. Do not do this in an attempt to placate the individuals – instead actively listen to understand their point of view.
- Utilize all of your usual communication tools and seek feedback from your trusted sources to ensure the communication was received. It is going to be important to be able to say the communication was sent out on specific dates and time.
- Use multiple resources to communicate the same message. Some parents will respond more to text messages (short and to the point), others like computer generated graphics, others want to see the Ministerial Order and read it for themselves (provide the Order).
- This is not a "one and done" scenario and is going to require multiple and varied communiques at the beginning of the school year.
- Share the FAQ with parents/caregivers and gather additional questions and answers to reflect on at early meetings with educational partners and stakeholders.

**This means that in our formal assessments of bullying, harassment, and online threats, we (all of the adults) need to:**

1. **Assess and often support the person bullying with the device.**
2. **Support the person harmed by what was communicated through the device; and**
3. ***Rather than assume that it is the device causing the harm*, recognize that it is still bullying, harassment, or threats that are delivered in a nonphysical yet profoundly painful way (BWD)**

**J. Kevin Cameron**

## Key Considerations for Parents

### Role of Parental Involvement – Parents as Allies

Parents can play a proactive role in helping their children understand the appropriate use of personal mobile devices at school. Discussing school policies with children, setting clear expectations, and modeling responsible phone use at home can reinforce positive behavior and help children manage their device use effectively.

When considering solutions for navigating PMDs, the following strategies may be helpful:

#### 1. Set Clear Expectations at Home

- **Solution:** Establish rules and guidelines for when and how your child can use their phone at school. Discuss the importance of focusing on academics during school hours and agree on specific times when phone use is appropriate, such as during lunch or breaks.
- **Consideration:** Reinforce these rules consistently to help your child develop good habits. Use tools like parental control apps to monitor usage if necessary.

#### 2. Educate on Responsible Use

- **Solution:** Teach your child about responsible phone use, including understanding the potential risks of social media, Bullying With a Device (BWD), and exposure to inappropriate content. Encourage them to think critically about how they use their devices.
- **Consideration:** Engage in regular conversations about their experiences online and provide guidance on how to navigate challenges like peer pressure and online interactions.

#### 3. Collaborate with Schools

- **Solution:** Work with your child's school to understand their cell phone policy and support its implementation. Attend meetings, provide feedback, and suggest improvements based on your experiences.
- **Consideration:** Encourage schools to adopt policies that balance the need for connectivity with the importance of minimizing distractions. Propose the use of technology for educational purposes while restricting non-academic use during class.

#### 4. Promote Alternative Communication Plans

- **Solution:** Create a plan with your child for staying in touch during the school day without relying heavily on their cell phone. This might include memorizing important phone numbers, using school office phones in emergencies, and setting clear after-school pickup plans.

- **Consideration:** Emphasize that they can always reach you when needed, but also that independence and responsibility are important aspects of growing up.

## 5. Support the School's Management Efforts

- **Solution:** Encourage your child to adhere to the school's cell phone policies and explain why these expectations are in place. Support the school by not texting or calling your child during school hours unless necessary.
- **Consideration:** Explain the benefits of focusing on schoolwork without the distraction of a phone and remind them that these policies are designed to help them succeed.

## 6. Advocate for Digital Literacy Programs

- **Solution:** Advocate for the inclusion of digital literacy and online safety programs in your child's school curriculum. These programs can teach students about the responsible use of technology, including how to protect themselves online.
- **Consideration:** Such programs can empower students to make informed decisions about their phone use and to understand the long-term implications of their digital footprints.

By implementing these strategies, parents can help their children navigate the challenges of personal mobile device use in schools while supporting a positive and productive learning environment.

## NAVIGATING NEW WATERS: RESEARCH AND TRAUMA-INFORMED PERSPECTIVES FOR SCHOOL LEADERS IMPLEMENTING NEW POLICY

Contributed by:

Dr. Coralee Pringle-Nelson, MEd, RPsych, PhD Educational Administration

### Current Circumstances

The halls buzz with anticipation as the new cellphone guidelines take effect. School leaders find themselves at the helm, steering through yet another frontier of uncharted waters. The context surrounding the new cellphone guidelines and policy implementation is a critical juncture and leadership opportunity for those in public education. The mandate is proceeding regardless of people's thoughts and opinions, and its success will be weighed in the halls of K-12 education. Success, however, is not about student compliance; it is about the ability of leaders to set the climate and tone for openness to change. It's about the ability to flexibly problem solve while maintaining dependable relationships throughout and beyond the implementation phase, ensuring students stay connected to school.

To achieve this, inclusive leaders (Adams et al., 2023; Northouse, 2022) must exemplify flexibility, calm-competence, ensure clear communication, and cultivate resilient, reciprocal relationships. They need to balance various pressures and adjust their responses to student and staff needs while aligning actions with organizational goals that foster a conducive learning and working environment.

### *Here's what we're facing:*

**The Hum of Danger:** When confronted with forced change, individuals frequently respond with a sense of alarm, prompted by the danger detector, or the amygdala deep in the brain (van der Kolk, 2013; Johns, 2014). This primal, instinctive reaction triggers a cascade of biochemicals that impact thinking and relational competencies—capacities students need for academic success. Leaders must project a vision that helps students and staff manage their overwhelm through a culture of empathy, compassion, and, when needed, restoration.

Some school leaders and staff will perceive a sense of danger as well, experiencing notes of alarm about the changes. The challenge for school leaders is to navigate these responses by demonstrating poised composure, ensuring open communication, and preserving relationships. Leaders' responses resonate throughout the school, influencing relationships and setting the tone for change implementation and management.

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**Balancing Act** School leaders juggle multiple pressures during the start of every school year, including district expectations, parental concerns, and student needs (Pollack et al., 2015, 2019). This year, the new cellphone guidelines add another layer of complexity. These additional demands can amplify leaders' stress, affecting the entire school environment. Leaders' must synchronize their responses to meet student and staff needs while aligning their actions with organizational goals, fostering a conducive learning and working culture. By articulating a vision that addresses staff and student emotions, leaders encourage a culture that prioritizes learning and social/emotional growth over enforced compliance.

### **Perspective Taking**

Student devices often serve as vital safety mechanisms, much like how a security blanket offers comfort to a young child. Mobile phones have become lifelines for many young people, acting as their support systems in times of stress, their social protection in uncertain environments, their buffers during unpleasant circumstances, their morale boosters on difficult days, and even their self-help tools when they are in need.

Unlike many school leaders, young people have never lived in a deviceless world. It's what they know, and often how they respond to distress—by reaching for their devices. Understanding this need allows inclusive leaders to comprehend the complexity of the change for students.

The cellphone mandate is here, and awareness of what separation anxiety may mean for students is imperative. Logic will battle emotional reactions. Students may understand the reason for the policy, yet their nervous systems may erupt in panic. Using punitive measures to extract compliance may have lasting negative consequences on relationships.

The optimal condition for learning occurs when individuals are in the calm-alert state. However, fear of phone separation may keep some students on edge and alarmed well into the first term. Inclusive leaders who implement the guidelines with thoughtful care, compassion and dialogue are likely to see more students remain in school, preventing them from choosing to stay away out of anxiety. By directly addressing students' fears and creating a supportive environment, leaders can transform potential disruptions into meaningful engagement and real academic progress.

## Solutions to Consider

### *For school leaders:*

**Mindset Matters:** Collisions with students, parents, and even teachers can be expected. However, it is crucial not to allow the negativity bias to dominate thinking. The negativity bias is an inclination to see the negative first and let any good bounce off. As psychologist Rick Hanson amusingly stated, the brain is Velcro for the bad, and Teflon for the good (2020). Leaders must challenge this response with realistic optimism, as it quickly permeates schools and systems. Inclusive leaders employ tolerant practices that anticipate diverse responses from others, value transparency and, where possible, invite collaborative decision-making (Northouse, 2022; O'Toole, 2022).

**Compassion for Students Wins:** Returning to school with cellphone limits will be impactful for students. Resistance and push-back often stem from fear of change. Leaders who roll with resistance (Miller & Rollnick, 2013) and reflect what they hear without judgment are more likely to see students successfully navigate this adjustment. Rolling with resistance avoids becoming argumentative, instead gently exploring the pros and cons of change with students. By addressing their anxiety and fear, leaders can strengthen their connection with students and foster a sense of collaboration, often leading to an open consideration of the changes.

**Nervous System Awareness:** School leaders will experience their own feelings and responses to the cellphone guidelines. It is essential for leaders to acknowledge their own emotional responses and prepare restorative resources for themselves. Tending to personal feelings of overwhelm and being proactive about self-care may help school leaders manage the emotional labour in their roles (Doyle Fosco, 2022; Maxwell & Riley, 2016), reducing the risk of burnout. Leaders need to prioritize their well-being to maintain the capacity to support others effectively.

### *For senior leaders:*

**Spotlight School Leaders:** Research demonstrated that more school leaders felt unsupported during and after a crisis or traumatic event in their schools than those who felt supported (Pringle-Nelson, 2021). Therefore, intentionally checking in with school leaders, providing necessary assistance, and offering beneficial resources as they navigate the cellphone guideline implementation is imperative. School leaders need to feel seen and listened to by senior leaders during this time.

**Model Inclusive Leadership:** District leaders play a significant role in setting the tone for the guidelines. Weave collaboration, empathy, and respect into written communication and conversations. Different schools have different needs and climates; therefore, senior leaders must not only acknowledge these differences but also demonstrate a deep understanding and ability to support them (Gouwens & Lander, 2008). This level of engagement is what defines inclusive leadership, ensuring that guidelines are honored while respecting the needs of students and families.

**Policies and People:** While policies are crucial, they only succeed when implemented with a profound grasp of the people they affect. District leaders must actively engage with and support each school's unique context, fostering genuine trust and collaborative growth from the top down. By moving beyond lip service and demonstrating a keen perception and ability to support these differences, district leaders ensure the cellphone policy is not just enforced but more likely accepted. This approach promotes a school culture where the guidelines are integrated smoothly, fostering constructive dialogue and a climate of mutual respect.

Reflective questions:

- How might understanding the danger detector of emotional reactions help education leaders navigate the new cellphone guidelines? Provide an example.
- How might school leaders balance district expectations, parental concerns, and student needs while fostering a nurturing environment? Describe a strategy for open communication.
- What steps could school leaders take to ease students' anxiety regarding the new guidelines? Provide a specific example.
- How can school leaders apply inclusive leadership principles to address resistance from students or staff? Reflect on a similar past experience.
- How might school leaders plan to manage their own anxieties related to the new guidelines? What resources or practices can they use to support themselves?
- How can senior leaders ensure they are genuinely supporting school leaders through the transition to the new cellphone guidelines, rather than merely giving lip service? Describe specific actions and strategies that demonstrate true understanding and support.

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## THE EVOLUTION OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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The realities of the adult world can seem vastly different from the experience of our students. Some parents, caregivers, and school staff had little to no experience with the types of technology influencing children and youth today. For youth in this generation, connection through their device has simply become a part of their connection as a whole. To many adults, it is a tool used when necessary but to many youths it is a lifeline and even a piece of their identity. When we consider the evolution of social media, it can be quite daunting to think about the influences it has/can have on young people. The reality is, not all of what has evolved has been for the better, but some has. We tend to over emphasize the “negative” and forget how impressive it is to witness a younger generation maneuver, adjust, and adapt so quickly to the updates and trends with such skill. The evolution of social media has allowed many youths to get inspired and re-inspire. It has dared young people to be more open and has created a variety of online communities for individuals to no longer go unseen or unheard. Although there seems to be no good without evil, there is a uniqueness that surrounds the way many youths connect themselves through their online experiences. It is all in the way in which we equip our younger generation to utilize the power of social media, that decides whether such things become the catalyst for the positive change we need.



## **THE “INSIDE VOICE”: IMPLICATIONS FOR VIOLENCE THREAT RISK ASSESSMENT (VTRA) & TRAUMA RESPONSE**

**J. Kevin Cameron, M.Sc. Marital and Family Therapy**

Long before the advent of “electronics” the human family survived by not always saying what we thought to those we cared about. Of course, that had to be within reason. Some things need to be discussed openly if a marriage or intimate partnership is going to survive or if we truly want to be emotionally connected and mature mentors for our children. But there is wisdom in the colloquial “biting your tongue”. Many conflicts and annoyances in families are transitory and deciding to “let that one go by” without a trite retaliation is called maturity. So many people survived by ventilating and processing conflict and annoyances with their “inside voice”. That is the mumble under our breath or the unseen tightening of facial muscles as we walk away in anger or hurt from those we love, yet may hate, in that immature moment.

Then came social media, and it was not this current generation of youth who were the first to be introduced to it, it was their parents and even grandparents in some cases. The most notable was Facebook. Many of you may recall how enjoyable life was before we heard some of our extended family members “inside voices” (i.e. their posts), but then one post after another resulted in the old term “TMI” (Too Much Information). Post after post, some people were revealing such private and awkward information that the new family discussions among the adults became, “did you see what so and so posted”! In a single generation the use of social media platforms propelled us from a somewhat emotionally closed society (biting our tongues) to a sometimes too emotionally open society.

The kids learned well! Rather than communicate with wisdom (think before you speak), communication for some kids is “just feel” and then post; as did some of the adults before them. Yet, a problem unique to this generation of young people is that some have cycled back to being emotionally closed with key adults in their lives but emotionally open (sometimes very open) when they are online. So, what has replaced the inside voice? To many students, their social media posts and behaviour is their inside voice! Yes, they know others will hear and see what they post but they assume it will be their peers or other young people reading it. In the classroom the students know the truth about each other and how they may feel about a classmate or a staff member. We, the adults may not know that the most pleasant student in our class is actually the one causing the most emotional harm to their peers. Or that the student acting out is not bothering their classmates today with their outburst because their classmates know the truth about what is going on in that students’ home.

The collective inside voice (social media) that students have been saturated with was both a distractor and a soother for some students in the classroom. For those who wanted to learn it was a distractor because of their peers use and pressure for them to grab their phones as well. For those students who are struggling with family dynamics, peer dynamics or solitary mental health struggles, social media (or their phone in general) was a soother in the classroom and now it is gone.

What this means from a VTRA and TES perspective is that students whose primary emotional functioning has been regulated through use of their Personal Mobile Devices (PMD) may unintentionally begin to share their inside voices in ways that may surprise them as well. This will include the student who has never been a behavioural concern who for the first time is disrespectful to staff members or threatening a peer in an angry outburst. We do not know everyone's story so it will be important to work from a trauma-informed perspective and wonder why such a change in a student's thoughts, behaviours, or affect now? The first hypothesis in VTRA is "cry for help". At a conscious or unconscious level, we wonder, "is the student giving us a cry for help" in ways other than saying "I am hurting".

Thematic of many of our VTRA cases, one young male student refused to go to school because his mother's new partner assaulted her in front of him. Guilt-ridden because he could not stop the violence, he vowed he would not leave her alone. The only way she convinced him to go to school was with a promise that if she felt unsafe again, she would text him for help. The case came to our attention because his teacher saw him with his phone and attempted to take it from him. The young student escalated and then threatened to kill the teacher. This boy had never behaved that way before. A trauma-informed VTRA quickly identified acute traumatization for the student and serious family violence. Lessons learned: everything isn't about addiction to a device.

All staff need to be aware that the first month will be a bumpy ride for some students and not always for the reasons we may think. Anytime a staff member has a concern or just a feeling that "something is off" with a student, they need to know we want them to share their genuine concerns. The biggest problem we deal with in violence prevention, suicide prevention, bullying prevention, etc., is underreaction. Most kids are ok and the ones that aren't will be if they know we are there to receive them.





## Appendix A

<b>Province: AB</b>			
<b>Elementary</b>	<b>Middle Schools</b>	<b>High Schools</b>	<b>Notes</b>
N/A	N/A	N/A	Not specific to grade level.
<p>The new standards on personal mobile devices will establish restrictions, enforcement procedures and exceptions for Alberta’s K-12 public, separate, francophone, public charter, independent school authorities, and early childhood services operators. Exceptions will be made province-wide for students using mobile devices for health and medical needs, to support specialized learning needs, and for educational purposes.</p> <p>Individual school authorities will also be required to develop policies to outline how exceptions will be managed and what the consequences will be for non-compliance at their respective schools.</p>			

<b>Province: BC</b>			
<b>Elementary</b>	<b>Middle Schools</b>	<b>High Schools</b>	<b>Notes</b>
N/A	N/A	N/A	Not specific to grade level.
<p>Boards must ensure their codes of conduct include one or more statements about restricting the use of personal digital devices at school.</p> <p>The statements about restricting the use of personal digital devices at school must address the following matters:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• restrictions on the use of personal digital devices at school, including during hours of instruction</li> <li>• use of personal digital devices for instructional purposes and digital literacy</li> <li>• use of personal digital devices that is appropriate to a student’s age and developmental stage</li> <li>• accessibility and accommodation needs</li> <li>• medical and health needs</li> <li>• equity to support learning outcomes</li> </ul>			

<b>Province: MB</b>			
<b>Elementary</b>	<b>Middle Schools</b>	<b>High Schools</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Student cell phones are restricted from being brought into schools.	Student cell phones are restricted from being brought into schools.	Cell phones and ear buds aren't allowed to be taken into the classroom.	Francophone school policy.  Anglophone school policy not found.

Province: NB			
Elementary	Middle Schools	High Schools	Notes
N/A	N/A	N/A	Not specific to grade level.
<p>“We have evidence that indicates we should limit cellphone use in classrooms,” said Education and Early Childhood Development Minister Bill Hogan. “The clarifications we are making will strengthen Policy 311 by reinforcing the ability of teachers to effectively oversee cellphone use in their classrooms and limit their use to teaching or medical purposes.”</p> <p>Section 6.13 has been added to the policy to outline the key changes, which include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At the teacher’s discretion, cellphone use by students is allowed in classrooms for educational reasons. During class time, teachers will have students place their cellphones in a designated area of the classroom on silent mode.</li> <li>• Students who use their cellphone for medical reasons, such as diabetes self-management, may continue to use it.</li> <li>• Examples of actions that could lead to student discipline are provided.</li> </ul>			

Province: NL			
Elementary	Middle Schools	High Schools	Notes
N/A	N/A	N/A	Holding back on developing new policies.

Province: NS			
Elementary	Middle Schools	High Schools	Notes
All students will be required to turn off their personal mobile devices and store them out of sight during instructional time.	Teachers allowing cell phone use in class for instructional purposes, will be available.	Teachers allowing cell phone use in class for instructional purposes, will be available.	

Province: NVT			
Elementary	Middle Schools	High Schools	Notes
N/A	N/A	N/A	No news of adjusting policies.

**Province: NWT**

<b>Elementary</b>	<b>Middle Schools</b>	<b>High Schools</b>	<b>Notes</b>
N/A	N/A	N/A	Yellowknife Education District No. 1 - Not specific to grade level – Otherwise no news of adjusting policies
<p>Yellowknife Education District No. 1</p> <p>Student cell phones, tablets, and other similar devices must be turned off from 8:30 to 3:20. For wearables such as smart watches, they must be put into the equivalent of 'airplane mode' during these same hours. This period covers all in-school recess and lunch breaks. Students may have their devices on and may use them outside of the school building before or after school. However, all use of these devices on our school grounds must conform to our school's code of conduct, and this procedure.</p> <p>Student mobile devices are to be out of sight from 8:30-3:20 regardless of whether a student is inside the school building, or on the school grounds. Students may have their wearables only if they are in 'airplane mode' as explained above.</p> <p>Students' use of any device's features beyond text messaging and voice conversation must be with the prior approval of a school permanent staff member (meaning, substitute staff members temporarily assigned to the school cannot provide this authorization). For example, a student wishing to take a picture with their device must first get approval in accordance with this procedure. This provision is included in our policy as a safeguard for the privacy of staff and other students.</p> <p>Note: This is a general provision for any device that has sound, still photography or video-recording capabilities (whether or not it is a mobile device or wearable)</p>			

**Province: ON**

<b>Elementary</b>	<b>Middle Schools</b>	<b>High Schools</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Our youngest learners in kindergarten to Grade 6, who may have phones, will now be required to keep phones on silent and out of sight for the duration of the day.	For students in Grades 7 to 12, phones can be with the student. However, they will only be permitted during instructional time if explicitly allowed by the educator.	For students in Grades 7 to 12, phones can be with the student. However, they will only be permitted during instructional time if explicitly allowed by the educator.	

**Province: PEI**

<b>Elementary</b>	<b>Middle Schools</b>	<b>High Schools</b>	<b>Notes</b>
To enhance student focus and to create more conducive learning environments, the updated policy will prohibit the use of cellular devices in the classroom effective this upcoming school year.	Teachers will still maintain the flexibility to allow students in grades 7-12 to use devices in class for educational purposes.	Teachers will still maintain the flexibility to allow students in grades 7-12 to use devices in class for educational purposes.	Exceptions will be in place when learners need access to their devices for special education or medical purposes.

Province: QC			
Elementary	Middle Schools	High Schools	Notes
N/A	N/A	N/A	Not specific to grade level.
<p>Teachers do have the option to allow students to use their phones for specific teaching purposes.</p> <p>As of December 31, 2023, a province-wide cellphone ban prevents secondary school students from accessing devices during school hours.</p> <p>Private schools are exempt from the ban.</p>			

Province: SK			
Elementary	Middle Schools	High Schools	Notes
Cellphones will not be permitted during class time, and it will apply to all schools in the province.	Cellphones will not be permitted during class time, and it will apply to all schools in the province.	Teachers will be able to seek an exemption from school admin., according to the province. That will allow cellphone use during class when needed for specific instructional purposes.	

Province: YT			
Elementary	Middle Schools	High Schools	Notes
N/A	N/A	N/A	No news of adjusting policies



## Appendix B

# WCHS CELL PHONE USE GUIDELINES

**We want our students to be healthy, happy, and engaged learners.  
We hope our students pursue growth and aim to be their best selves.**

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**To support student learning at WCHS, we have developed guidelines for the use of personal digital devices (cell phones).**

### **Personal Digital Device Definition**

- Any device that has internet access, texting, music, or gaming capabilities.

### **Personal Digital Device Guidelines**

- Personal digital device is in your bag, in your locker, or the space provided by your teacher (not on your person)
- Headphones/earbuds are not in use during teacher instruction
- No personal digital devices in washrooms or changerooms
- Smart Watches notifications are turned off during instruction
- Teachers will indicate if there are specific learning situations that support personal digital device use
- Students are welcome to access their devices during breaks and/or lunch

<b>FAQs</b>	<b>Answer</b>
<b>How can I reach my child if I need to contact them?</b>	In the event of an emergency, you can always contact your child through the office at <b>403-328-4723</b> . Every classroom has a telephone. The office can call your child's classroom so you can connect with them.
<b>What will happen if my child is struggling with the new guidelines?</b>	Teachers will reach out to parents to work together to help your child understand the new guidelines. Teachers will connect with Administrators for support if your child continues to struggle.
<b>Why are you implementing these guidelines?</b>	We believe (and research supports) that cell phone use is having a negative impact on student learning, engagement, mental health, and social and emotional development.

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**We believe in implementing these guidelines with care and compassion. We want to support our students in understanding how cell phones impact their learning and wellbeing. We also want to teach our students how to use cell phones appropriately and in a healthy way. Thank you for your support!**





# CHURCHILL'S

## Personal Digital Device Use Guidelines

- Personal digital device is in your bag, in your locker, or the space provided by your teacher (not on your person)
- Headphones/earbuds are not in use during teacher instruction
- No personal digital devices in washrooms or changerooms
- Smart watches - please turn off all notifications



# CHURCHILL'S

## Personal Digital Device Definition

- Any device that has internet access, texting, music or gaming abilities
- Headphones or wireless earbuds



# Effects of Cell Phone Use in Teens



"There is no doubt that smartphone use has become pervasive in our society. In a 2018 Pew Research Center poll, 95 per cent of teens reported having access to a smart phone. Some 45 per cent of teens reported using the internet "almost constantly" (a number that has doubled compared to the 2014-2015 survey), while another 44 per cent said they go online multiple times per day."\*

"Kids who spend hours on their phones scrolling through social media are showing more aggression, depression and anxiety, say Canadian researchers."\*\*



"[Students] can't focus during exams because they're so used to scrolling on TikTok or looking through their phone," Kent said. "They're so used to having that constant stimulation that when it comes to focus, they really struggle."\*\*



"According to research by Canadian charity Nature Canada, kids in Grades 7-12 spend up to seven hours per day on screens. Additionally, research from Western University found that screen time is now only slightly below the shocking 13 hours per day that six-year-old to 12-year-old kids spent on screens during COVID lockdowns."\*\*\*



We want our students to be healthy, happy, and engaged learners. We hope our students pursue growth and aim to be their best selves.

#### Article Sources:

\*<https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/health-technology/cell-phones-teens-and-mental-health>

\*\*<https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/smartphone-brain-nov14-1.7029406>

\*\*\*<https://torontosun.com/opinion/columnists/macpherson-smartphones-hurting-student-learning-in-the-classroom>





## Appendix C

### Draft Template to Parents/Caregivers from Principal

Consider sending a communication out to parents and caregivers prior to the first day of school. Consider holding a specialized “parent meeting” to communicate the Division/District and School’s PMD policy and the expectations around it.

#### Dear Parents/Caregivers:

The school and staff at (*Name of school*) are excited to start the new school year and to receive your children. As your Principal, I also want you to know how grateful I am and look forward to enhancing the relationship we have as we support your children for the 2024-25 school year. Your voice is important to us!

As you are likely aware the new changes to PMD legislations have now been put in place and I want to provide you with what that will look like in our school:

- a) **State the policy**
- b) **How it will be implemented**
- c) **Transparent progressive process on behavioral expectations**

While the media has reported on a variety of reasons why the PMD policy has been implemented, I want to assure you that the **NAME OF SCHOOL’s PMD policy** is centered on student learning. We acknowledge that the use of PMD in schools can generate anxiety for your children but know I have met with all our teachers and staff, and we are confident that the policy will enhance learning for your children. Open communication is the staple of our school community, and I want to personally invite you to contact myself should you have an uncertainty related to the PMD policy.

As we hear more parent and caregiver voices, we may choose to host one or more round table discussions as we accommodate to the new policy.

Yours in Education

**CTIP Note to School Leaders:** Do not over promise a reduction in “Bullying With a Device (BWD)” or other social media threats. If necessary, let parents know your VTRA protocols around pervasive bullying is appropriate to address these issues.





# CTIP

CENTER FOR TRAUMA  
INFORMED PRACTICES

