

ASSEMBLY THIRD READING
AB 1644 (Muratsuchi, et al.)
As Amended April 28, 2026
Majority vote

SUMMARY

Requires local education agencies (LEAs) to enact a bell-to-bell ban on student smartphone use if they serve students in transitional kindergarten (tk) to eighth grade, and encourages LEAs that serve students in ninth through twelfth grades to do the same. Requires the California Department of Education (CDE) to conduct a statewide study on LEA smartphone policies.

Major Provisions

- 1) Requires, by July 1, 2027, the governing body of an LEA that serves students in tk-8th grade to adopt a policy that prohibits smartphone by students while they are at a schoolsite or under the supervision of an LEA employee. Specifies that this includes the time from the start of the schoolday until final dismissal, including class, time between class, lunch, and recess, thereby creating a bell-to-bell ban of smartphone use.
- 2) Encourages LEAs that serve students in 9-12th grade to adopt a bell-to-bell ban on student smartphone use.
- 3) Authorizes bell-to-bell bans to include enforcement mechanisms, and be updated as frequently as needed.
- 4) Requires a student to not be prohibited from using a smartphone under any of the following circumstances:
 - a) In the case of an emergency, or in response to a perceived threat of danger;
 - b) When a teacher or administrator grants permission to a student to use a smartphone, subject to any reasonable limitation imposed by that teacher or administrator;
 - c) When a licensed physician or surgeon determines that smartphone use is necessary for the student's health or well-being; and
 - d) When smartphone use is required in a pupil's individualized education program (IEP).
- 5) Requires bell-to-bell bans to include at least one method for parents and guardians to contact students while smartphones are prohibited, such as contact through LEA employees.
- 6) Clarifies that these provisions do not authorize monitoring, collecting, or otherwise accessing any information related to a pupil's online activities.
- 7) Requires the California Department of Education (CDE) to conduct a report on existing smartphone policies. Require the report to include a description of stakeholder engagement that went into development, enforcement methods of the policy, and initial challenges or successes that arose from policy enactment. Require the CDE to issue recommendations by Jan 1, 2028, of best practices for smartphone policies based on their report.

COMMENTS

Current law requires LEAs to develop phone policies with significant community engagement by July 1, 2026. In 2024, the Legislature required all LEAs to develop a policy that would limit or prohibit cell phone use in schools (AB 3216 (Hoover), Chapter 500, Statutes of 2024). When crafting these policies LEAs are required to solicit significant stakeholder input to ensure the final policy meets the unique needs of students, parents, and educators in their community. For LEAs with students in tk-8th grades, this bill would replace the locally-developed policy with a bell-to-bell ban by July 1, 2027; LEAs with students 9th-12th grade may maintain their locally-developed policy, but are encouraged to adopt a bell-to-bell ban.

Reports indicate that many LEAs invested significant time and resources, and solicited extensive stakeholder engagement, when crafting policies in response to AB 3216. For example, Poway Unified School District distributed a survey to students, families, and staff, and received over 12,000 responses, and held focus groups with the Parent-Superintendent Advisory Council and the Student-Superintendent Advisory Council. Similarly, San Diego Unified distributed a survey that received 2,236 responses, engaged 60 students in focus groups, and received input from the Parent Teacher Association and staff.

Examples from California schools demonstrate the variety of current phone policies. In a 2026 amicus curiae brief for *TIKTOK INC vs Rob Bonta, Attorney General for California* (case number 5:25-cv-09789-EJD), the Association of California School Administrators interviewed school district administrators across the state on school smartphone policies. Their results demonstrate that districts are designing and implementing a wide variety phone policies. Example policies include bell-to-bell bans, limits during instructional time, and different requirements for younger versus older students.

As these policies are largely new, research on the breadth and impact of school smartphone policies is lacking. Careful consideration of which policies have been tried, and to what effect, would be instrumental in developing best practices and evidence-based recommendations.

Support for smartphone restrictions appears to be growing. The Brookings Institute reviewed multiple surveys on school smartphone use and found that interest in restrictions has grown in the last 3 years (Saavedra, 2026). Perhaps surprisingly, they found 76% of teens favored some restrictions on phone use during school, compared to 93% of adults. A 2025 Rand Survey found that 60% of students support some restrictions on cell phone use during classes. However, only 10% of surveyed students supported a full bell-to-bell ban on smartphone use in school.

Research demonstrates the impact of smartphone use on children. The U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory in 2023 about the impact of social media, most commonly accessed by smartphones, on youth mental health. The Surgeon General called for urgent action to better understand the full impact of social media, maximize its benefits, minimize its harms, and create safer online environments to protect children.

Some researchers have suggested a correlation between increased technology and smartphone use and the rising rates of teenage anxiety and depression. The widely cited book *iGen*, authored by San Diego State psychology professor Dr. Jean Twenge, presents evidence of an increase in depression and suicide among American teenagers that may be caused by increased mobile device screen time and social media use.

Moreover, an increasing body of research focuses on the impact of technology on student outcomes in grades K-12. A 2015 Discussion Paper from the London School of Economics and Political Science, Center for Economic Performance, explored the effects of banning cell phone use in English city schools in 2013. The paper found that student test scores improved following the ban, particularly among the most disadvantaged and underachieving pupils. The data suggests that low-achieving students are more likely to be distracted by mobile phones, while high achievers are less affected by the mobile phone policy.

The risks and benefits of smartphone use vary by grade level. Some research suggests that young children may be particularly affected by smartphone use. Reporting by Common Sense Media shows that 25% of children have a personal cell phone by age 8, and 91% of a personal cell phone by age 14. Research in the journal *Pediatrics* demonstrated that children who own a smartphone earlier in life are at a higher risk of depression, obesity, and sleep deficits (Barzilay et al., 2025). One study in adolescents aged 12-18 found an association between prolonged smartphone use and experiencing loneliness and depressive mood, which was stronger in middle school students than in older teenagers (Kim et al., 2026). The research coalition Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) found that increased use of social media, which is often accessed by smartphone, is significantly associated with a thinner cerebral cortex – the part of the brain responsible for attention, memory, and emotional control – in children aged 10-13 (Nagata et al., 2026). The national campaign *Wait until 8th* advocates for parents and children to put off getting a smartphone until at least 8th grade.

Research also suggests that teenagers are negatively impacted by smartphone use, especially as it relates to social media (Barthorpe et al., 2020; Twenge, 2017). However, high school students are also more likely to rely on a smartphone for social connection with their peers, or communication with parents or guardians as they become more independent.

To account for the differing needs of younger and older students, some districts, such as San Diego Unified, have adopted policies that prohibit smartphones in younger grades and limit smartphones in high school. In developing its smartphone policy, Poway Unified surveyed over 7,000 families on their opinion on smartphone use. They found that at the elementary level, only 29% of parents and guardians agreed that students should have phone access during the school day. However, at the high school level, 52% agreed. In summarizing their data, the authors note, "Family support for student cell phone access increases as students progress through grade levels... This pattern suggests that family perspectives on cell phone use are closely tied to developmental expectations and increasing student independence."

According to the Author

AB 1644 builds upon existing law by requiring schools to adopt clear, consistent ‘bell-to-bell’ policies that limit student use of smart phones throughout the school day, with appropriate exceptions for safety, health, and educational purposes.

Arguments in Support

According to the organization TechNet, “Excessive smartphone use is strongly linked to negative academic and mental health outcomes, including reduced focus, increased anxiety and depression, and lower overall well-being. The U.S. Surgeon General has warned of significant risks associated with youth social media use, and even the presence of a phone can impair attention. Early evidence shows that clear, consistently enforced restrictions improve academic

performance, reduce behavioral issues, and support student well-being, underscoring the need for stronger, uniform policies."

"AB 1644 establishes clear boundaries on smartphone use during the school day to support student focus, strengthen school climate, and improve academic outcomes. By limiting device use, it reduces distractions that undermine learning, mental health, and meaningful student engagement."

Arguments in Opposition

According to the Association of California School Administrators, "LEAs have just recently completed, or are finalizing, their mandatory policy adoption process for student smartphone use pursuant to AB 3216 (Hoover; Chapter 500, Statutes of 2024). It included extensive stakeholder engagement, as required, and the adoption of board policies with a July 1, 2026 deadline. LEAs shared they have worked intentionally to refine their policies based on pilot program outcomes, feedback from parents, students and staff, academic studies on student smartphone use, as well as cost analyses to purchase and maintain tools such as pouches, lockers or other access-restricting devices during part or all of the school day. Despite these deliberate and resource-intensive processes, AB 1644 creates a 'do-over' just one year later, creating unnecessary frustration and confusion for those stakeholders and administrators in LEAs that did not establish "bell to bell" smartphone restrictions for all grade levels."

FISCAL COMMENTS

According to the Assembly Appropriations Committee, "One-time General Fund costs of an unknown amount but likely in the hundreds of thousands of dollars for the CDE to conduct the required examination of at least 30 LEA smartphone policies, report to the Legislature, and provide technical assistance.

One-time Proposition 98 General Fund costs, potentially in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, to LEA governing boards and bodies to adopt updated policies imposing a bell-to-bell smartphone ban for pupils in grades kindergarten through eight by July 1, 2027.

Current law does not require LEAs to update existing smartphone use policies until July 1, 2031. Additionally, the bill allows an LEA's policy to include enforcement mechanisms to restrict access to smartphones, which may incur increased costs depending on the mechanism employed by an LEA."

VOTES

ASM EDUCATION: 8-0-1

YES: Patel, Hoover, Bonta, Castillo, Garcia, Lowenthal, Pellerin, Zbur

ABS, ABST OR NV: Alvarez

ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 15-0-0

YES: Wicks, Hoover, Aguiar-Curry, Calderon, Caloza, Dixon, Fong, Mark González, Krell, Pacheco, Pellerin, Sharp-Collins, Solache, Ta, Tangipa

UPDATED

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CONSULTANT: Sarah Cate Hawthorne / ED. / (916) 319-2087

FN: 0002668