

Subject: Practical Tips to Handle Cellphones in School

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[A young adolescent child using a smartphone in landscape orientation.](#)

Dialing In Discipline: Five Tips to Manage Phones



By **Jamie Nuñez**

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The presence of [cellphones in school](#) has been a hot topic for years, and it's reached a boiling point, post-distance learning. As an educator, you've likely asked yourself: **How can I limit the drama and headaches that come from phone misuse?**

Let me take you back ...

As a first-year teacher who was bursting with enthusiasm and innovative ideas, the idea of incorporating phones in my classroom seemed like a no-brainer. I had a burning desire to be liked by my students—to be a "poppin" teacher (it was 2005 😊) who understood their Myspace world.

I worried that enforcing strict phone use policies might alienate my students, so I asked them to submit their writing work via a text message and to record one another using their very early-model mobile phones. And while students enjoyed using their devices in the classroom and felt they were a safe outlet, they were also [distracted](#) by them.

"Put that phone away!"

Enter my counterpart, Ms. Salinas, a seasoned Spanish teacher with a no-phone rule in her classroom. At first, I was surprised by her strict stance on technology.

How could someone be so far removed from the digital world that filled every aspect of our students' lives? But as I observed her connections with her students, I began to see things differently.

"I'm not going to tell you again: Please put your phone away!"

What I witnessed was a classroom buzzing with student engagement. Students were regularly and actively participating, focused on multiple tasks. While students clearly wanted to check their phones, they regularly felt seen and validated by Ms. Salinas in ways that helped them curb those temptations.

Over many after-school meetings with Ms. Salinas, I began to understand the importance of [modeling social and emotional skills](#). While phones can provide learning opportunities, it's essential to not sacrifice the core tenets of classroom success: sustained engagement, learning, and mutual respect.

I realized that being a "cool" teacher didn't mean that I had to compromise on these principles. Instead, it meant setting high expectations and supporting the reality of my students' online lives.

The tricky part is that there isn't a lot of consistency to cellphone policies—and how they're enforced. Maybe you find yourself having to choose between focusing on instruction or managing phone use in your classrooms. I desperately wish I had a single clear answer for engaging all students and getting them to stop making TikToks during class (or whatever phone-induced issues you might be grappling with)! **What we have instead are more complicated solutions (because even banning comes with challenges). And these require clarity, consistency, and human connection.**

Here are five practical tips that I've found helpful along the way:

- **Review your school's AUP (acceptable use policy):** Communicate the phone use policy clearly with your students, and be transparent about the consequences. If the expectations aren't clear or aren't enforced, try [working with administrators for more clarity](#). When all else fails and you're left to your own devices (so to speak), aim for your classroom policy to acknowledge realities while setting expectations that you can enforce at the classroom level.
- **Teach digital citizenship:** Incorporating [regular, ongoing discussions](#) about students' digital lives not only keeps kids reflecting about phone use, but also offers an opportunity to connect around these topics—and [reinforce expectations](#) within a meaningful framework using a shared

language.

- **Model & teach SEL skills:** If your students feel distracted by their phone use, take a few minutes to [explicitly teach self-awareness and regulation](#). It's important to realize that students access their phones for reasons other than TikTok (including jobs, family, friends), so it's valuable to humanize their experience while also helping them manage the distractions.
- **Provide tech-based alternatives:** Offer alternative ways for students to engage with technology in meaningful ways. Incorporate interactive apps, [online quizzes](#), or collaborative projects that mirror their phone use while aligning with your lesson objectives.
- **Include families in the conversation:** We know caregivers can feel at a loss when it comes to managing phones, so prioritize [helping them understand the issues involved](#), the school/classroom expectations and consequences, and the strategies that might close the loop at home.

What you're grappling with isn't easy. But working toward this delicate balance is worth the effort, even if it doesn't lead to perfect results. And you're not alone: We're always here to help. ❤️

Best and good luck,
Jamie

Fun link of the week: [That feeling when you're teaching and monitoring phones at the same time.](#)

Did you enjoy this email?



Here's what else we have for you this week:

TRY THIS TOOL

PBS NewsHour
Classroom

[PBS NewsHour Classroom](#)

As election season heats up, engage kids with current events framed in age-appropriate ways.

USE WITH STUDENTS

Finding My Media Balance

Get students thinking about how and why they use media and tech, which could offer connection points to reinforce next time they pull out their phones!

SHARE WITH FAMILIES

Cellphones and Devices: A Guide for Caregivers

Make sure that families understand the impacts of phones and have the tools to manage them. Available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).

CHECK THIS OUT

Tell Your Lawmakers to Extend the ACP!

The ACP ensures that eligible students have home internet as they move from one grade to the next, but it's running out of funds. Use our tool to email your lawmakers to extend the ACP.

ATTEND AN EVENT

AI's Impact on Students of Color

Even if you couldn't attend the SXSW EDU conference, you can still listen to the author of this very newsletter (Jamie Nuñez) and his session about how AI impacts students of color.

GET INFORMED

Celebrate "Be an Author" Month!

From our friends at Book Creator: Inspire students to embrace their creativity and harness the strength of their voice!

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