# “What if Something Happens?”

**Student Perspectives on Fear, Safety, and Cell Phone Bans in Schools**

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# Introduction

Nearly every U.S. high school student is living under a school cell phone policy they had almost no role in shaping. As a reaction to what many policymakers see as a crisis of distraction, anxiety, and disconnection, over 40 U.S. states have enacted legislation banning or restricting cell phones in public schools. However, there are wide gaps between what parents think is needed, what policymakers are implementing, and what young people say they need regarding cell phone access in schools. Pew Research Center's 2025 poll found 77% of adults support in-class phone bans compared with only 41% of teens, and 48% of adults support full-day bans compared with only 17% of teens aged 13-17.

The underlying theme behind this disconnect is overlooked in policy debates: school shootings and other emergencies are not abstract fears for students; they are lived realities. In 2026 alone, there were at least 83 incidents of gunfire on school grounds nationally, resulting in 27 deaths and 47 injuries, according to Everytown Research. Schools and workplaces are the most common sites of mass public shootings in the U.S. When parents and policymakers create policies assuming that cell phones are solely distractions, they may be missing a more urgent need for many young people: if the worst happens, will they be able to reach help, or be reached by family?

The largest implementation study to date found little evidence of effects on learning, attendance, attention, or bullying when cell phone access is restricted among U.S. middle and high school students.[1] Other research from the U.K. found no evidence that restrictive school policies are associated with better mental well-being and that they may lead to increased after-school cell phone use.[2] Opponents of bans argue that the bans can prevent students from communicating in the case of emergencies, such as school shootings, and prevent students from documenting instances of harassment or abuse by school personnel. Restrictions on phone use may also hinder some students' learning, for example, when they rely on phone apps instead of expensive scientific or graphing calculators.

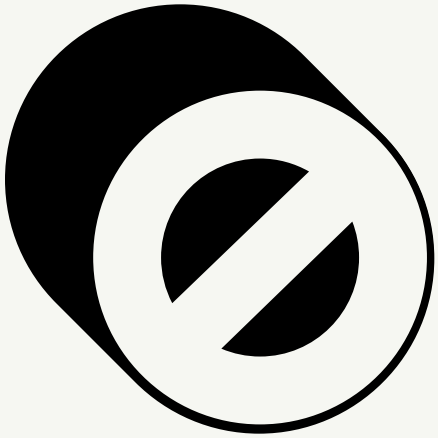
Effectively solving this challenge requires a better understanding of young people's needs and realities to garner buy-in from school administrators and policymakers, as well as from students and their families. These types of intergenerational efforts are happening across the U.S., as evidenced by Young Future's "Call Me Maybe" challenge, designed to shift the school phone debate away from a binary "ban or don't ban" framing and toward student-centered policy design. This brief goes beyond measuring support and opposition by asking teens to explain their reasoning in their own words. These findings are part of a large nationally representative survey conducted by Hopelab and Data for Progress in the summer of 2026. In this brief, we examine the prevalence of these policies among U.S. high school students, support for and opposition to in-class and all-day cell phone bans in schools, and open-ended responses explaining why they held those positions.

1 Allcott, H., Baron, E. J., Dee, T., Duckworth, A. L., Gentzkow, M., & Jacob, B. (2026). The effects of school phone bans: National evidence from lockable pouches (No. w35132). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://www.nber.org/papers/w35132

2 Goodyear, V. A., Randhawa, A., Adab, P., Al-Janabi, H., Fenton, S., Michail, M., ... & Pallan, M. (2026). How school phone policies influence adolescent phone use and wellbeing (SMART Schools): A qualitative comparative case study. *Social Science & Medicine, 398*, 119094. http://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2026.119094

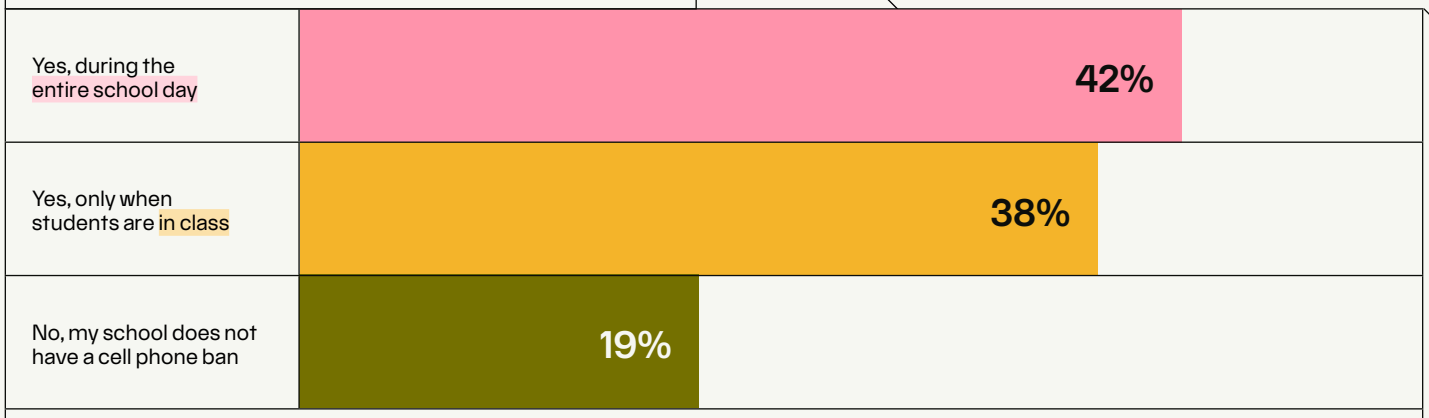
# 80% of Young People Attend a School With Some Form of Cell Phone Ban

In the survey, high school students were asked whether their school currently has a cell phone ban. The majority (80%) attend a school that either has a full-day phone ban (42%) or a ban only during class (38%). A small minority of high schoolers attend a school that does not have any cell phone ban (19%).



**Most High Schoolers Go to a School With At Least a Partial Cell Phone Ban**

**Q:** *Does your school have a cell phone ban?*




June 24-July 10, 2026 survey of 487 respondents who are in high school

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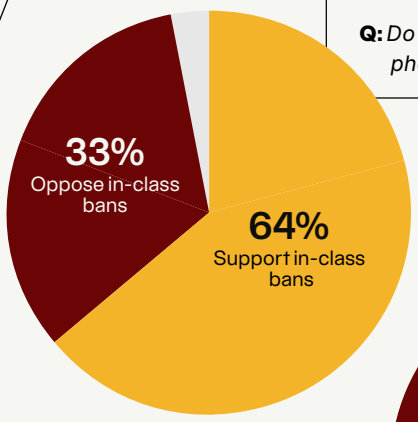
# Most Young People Support an In-class Cell Phone Ban and Oppose an All-day Cell Phone Ban

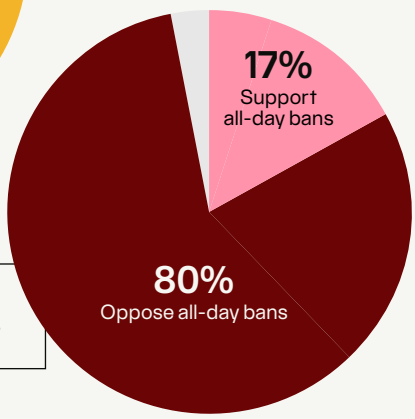
A majority of high schoolers (64%) support a ban on cell phones during class time. Only one in three high schoolers opposes this type of ban. An overwhelming majority of high schoolers (80%) oppose a full-day ban, including 59% who "strongly oppose" it.

High schoolers who attend schools that restrict cell phone use are more supportive of cell phone restrictions. In-class bans are supported by 68% of high schoolers who attend schools that currently have an in-class ban, compared to only 49% who attend schools with no bans. Similarly, a full-day cell phone ban is supported by 22% of high schoolers who currently attend a school with a full-day ban, but only 14% of those who go to a school with no bans.

**U.S. High Schoolers Support Cell Phone Bans During Class Time, But Oppose Them for the Whole School Day**




**Q:** *Do you support or oppose bans on cell phones when students are **in classes**?*




**Q:** *Do you support or oppose bans on cell phones in schools for the **entire school day**?*

June 24-July 10, 2026 survey of 487 respondents who are in high school. Categories represent proportions of respondents who indicated that they "strongly" or "somewhat" support or oppose cell phone bans in schools. Gray areas represent "Don't know" and "Decline to asnwer" responses (3% for each question).

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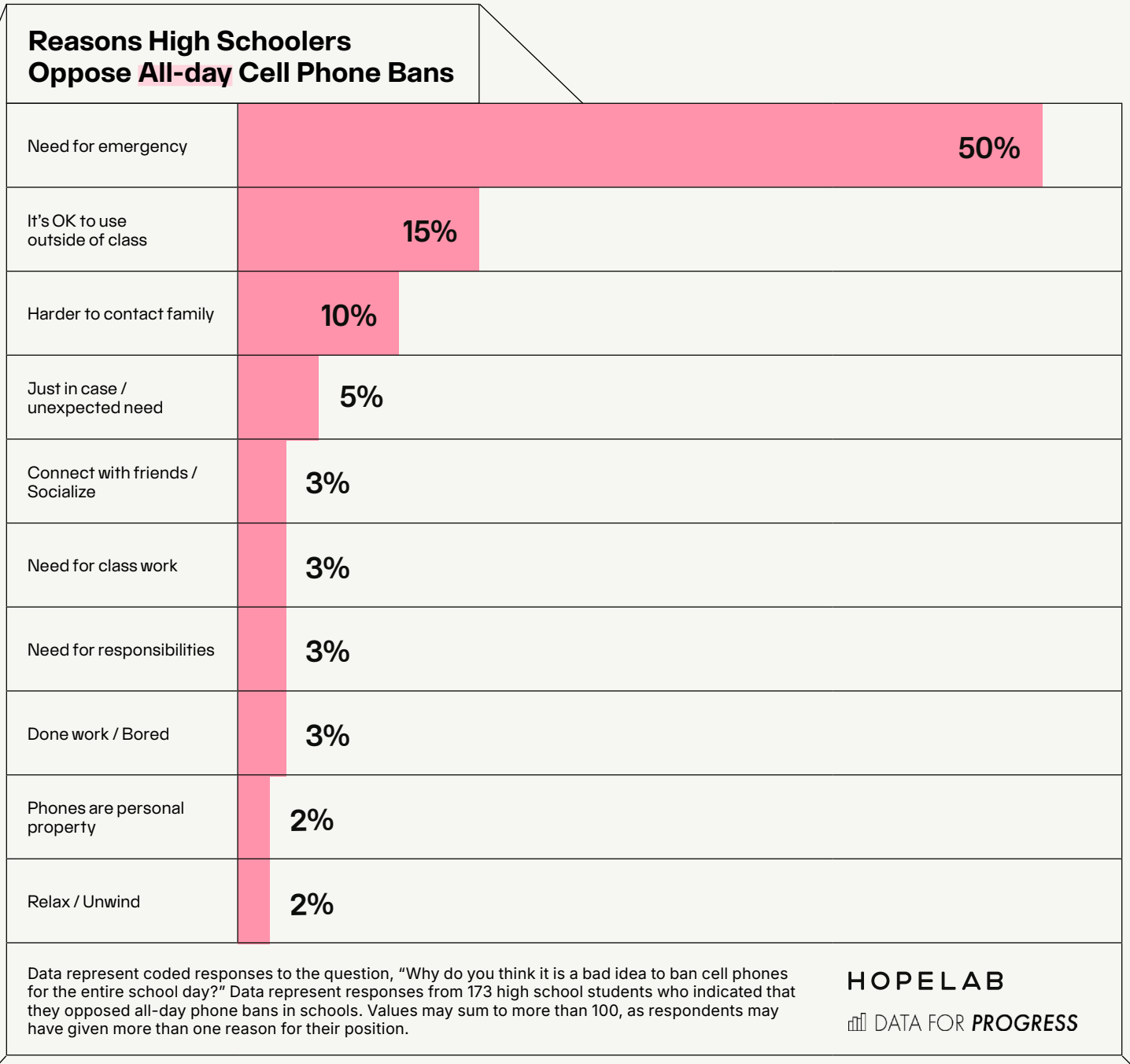
# Reasons for Opposing or Supporting Cell Phone Bans: Young People's Perspectives

After participants indicated their support or opposition to all-day or in-class bans, we asked them to describe reasons why they supported or opposed bans on cell phones in schools, during classes, or for the entire day. Participants were randomly presented with open-ended questions about their opinions on (a) all-day or (b) in-class bans. Text responses were coded by theme.

# Safety Overwhelmingly Drives Student Opposition to All-Day Bans




Data represent coded responses to the question, "Why do you think it is a bad idea to ban cell phones for the entire school day?" Data represent responses from 173 high school students who indicated that they opposed all-day phone bans in schools. Values may sum to more than 100, as respondents may have given more than one reason for their position.

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For both all-day and in-class bans, the overwhelming reason for opposition to the bans was **concern for student safety**.

**A white high school girl shared their reality on the threat of school shootings:**

*"With the lack of limitations on gun laws, anything can happen. Anyone can walk into my school and put us into harm, what if I want to text someone and say my goodbye? What if the staff members are unsafe and have no way to contact authorities? I can make a quiet phone call and save lives! What if I was in the bathroom and had no way of getting back to a classroom? What if I escaped school? How do I tell someone my school needs help?!"*

**A Black high school student connected phone access to students' ability to stay safe during unpredictable crises:**

*"Because of the amount of school shootings and evacuations that happen in today's time, I think the idea of not having a way to communicate is dangerous."*

**A Black high school girl raised concerns about students being unreachable when something urgent happens at home:**

*"Because if there is an emergency about their family and their family is constantly texting them and calling them and they can't answer that could be bad."*

For all-day bans, the second most common reason for opposition was the belief that cell phones were generally ok for students to use outside of classes.

**A white/Hispanic high school boy emphasized that young people need a reliable way to coordinate with caregivers during the school day:**

*"Students need phones to contact parents for emergencies such as sudden illness or after-school schedule changes at any moment."*

**A Black/Hispanic high school girl shared:**

*"High school students should be allowed to use their phones during lunch and free time if they so choose to."*

**A white/Hispanic high school boy shared:**

*"Because during lunch and between classes, it can be a good way to clear students' minds and give them a break from the classroom."*

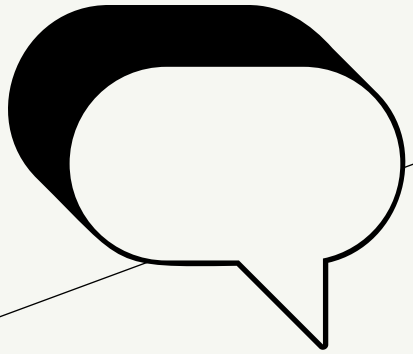
For all-day bans, the third most common concern was being able to reach family members for non-emergency concerns.

**A white high school boy shared:**

*"Because sometimes you need to have contact with your family members just in case. If you are banned from your phone all day you don't know what's going on at home."*

**A Black high school boy shared:**

*"I believe it is a bad idea to ban cell phones for the entire school day because students and parents should be able to have their own connection instead of the student having to use the school phone in the office."*



For all day bans, other concerns included maintaining connection, accessibility, and autonomy.

**A multiracial high school boy highlighted the ability to connect with friends and socialize:**

*"In a world of technology, the most common technology, the phone, is used for connectivity and building relationships, especially during school."*

**A white high school girl mentioned managing responsibilities outside of schoolwork:**

*"While they are full-time students, they should be able to access the outside world because they have other responsibilities alongside school."*

**A sense that phones are personal property and schools should not remove them from students. One white nonbinary high school student said about cell phone bans that the policy:**

*"This definitely makes students have limited freedom."*

**An American Indian/Hispanic high school boy emphasized access to complete classwork:**

*"It's unfair because some students use phones for accessibility — like reading aids or translation apps — which are super helpful."*

**A sense that students may want to use their phones to relax or unwind outside of class. As one Black high school girl said:**

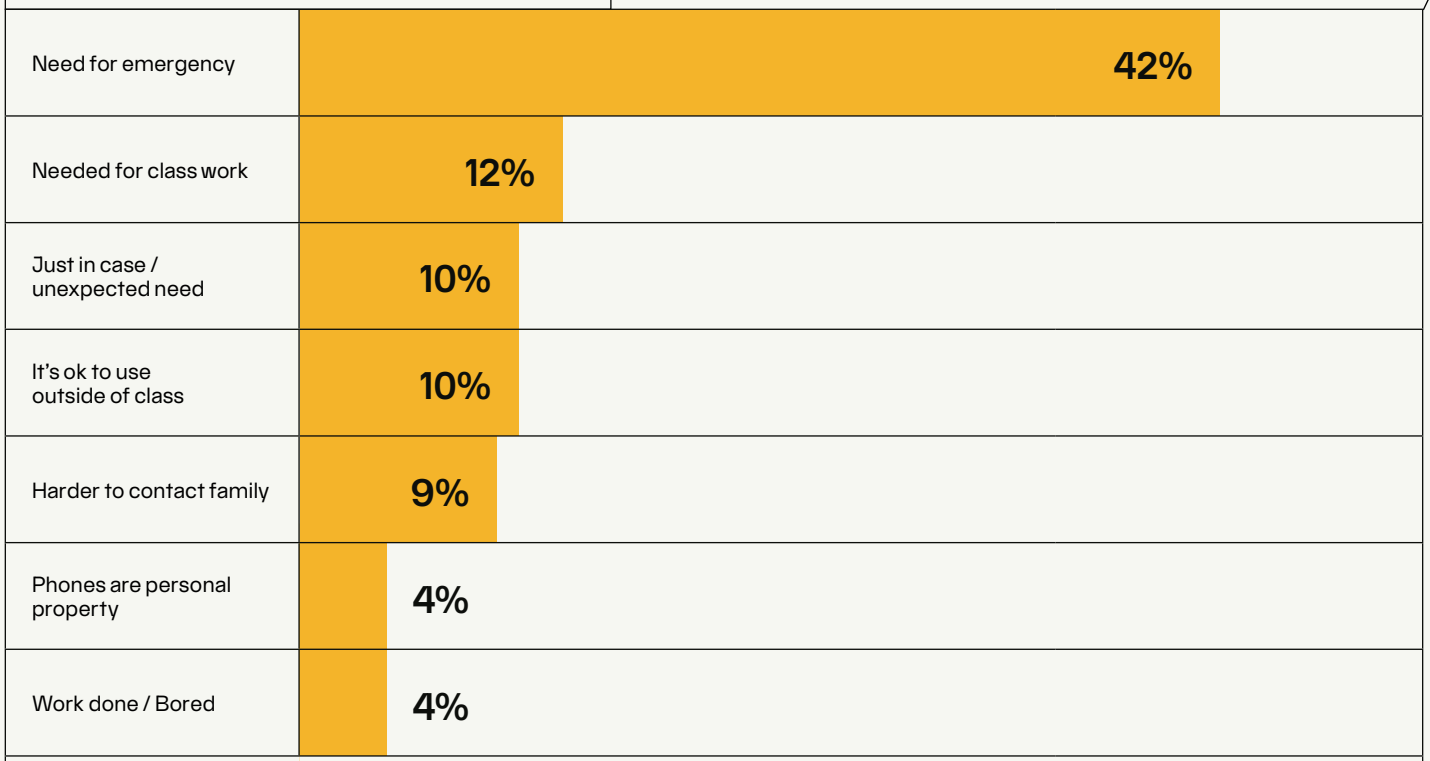
*"We want to relax on our phones."*

**Students indicated that phone use was acceptable if students had completed their other work or were otherwise bored. A white high school boy noted:**

*"There's just no need because at my school there are some days or classes where we just don't do anything."*

# Emergencies Drive Opposition to In-class Bans, but So Do Classroom Needs

**Reasons High Schoolers Oppose In-class Cell Phone Bans**




Data represent coded responses to the question, "Why do you think it is a bad idea to ban cell phones during class at school?" Data represent responses from 90 high school students who indicated that they opposed in-class phone bans in schools. Values may sum to more than 100, as respondents may have given more than one reason for their position.

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As with all-day bans, the main opposition to in-class-only cell phone bans was the **need to have phones for emergencies**.

**A white/Hispanic nonbinary high school student said:**

*"Cell phones are an important tool for communication, especially if an emergency should occur as well as the ability to provide peace of mind to parents while their children are in the care of others for several hours of the day."*

**A white high school girl noted:**

*"This is due to the safety [in-class bans] violate due to school shootings, discrimination, and other forms of violence that could be proven or helped through phones."*

After emergencies, the next most common reason cited for opposition to in-class bans was the need for phones to complete classwork.

**A Black high school girl said:**

*"Cell phones hold digital calculators and translation tools, so a classroom ban takes away quick learning resources I rely on during tough lessons."*

**An Asian high school girl notes:**

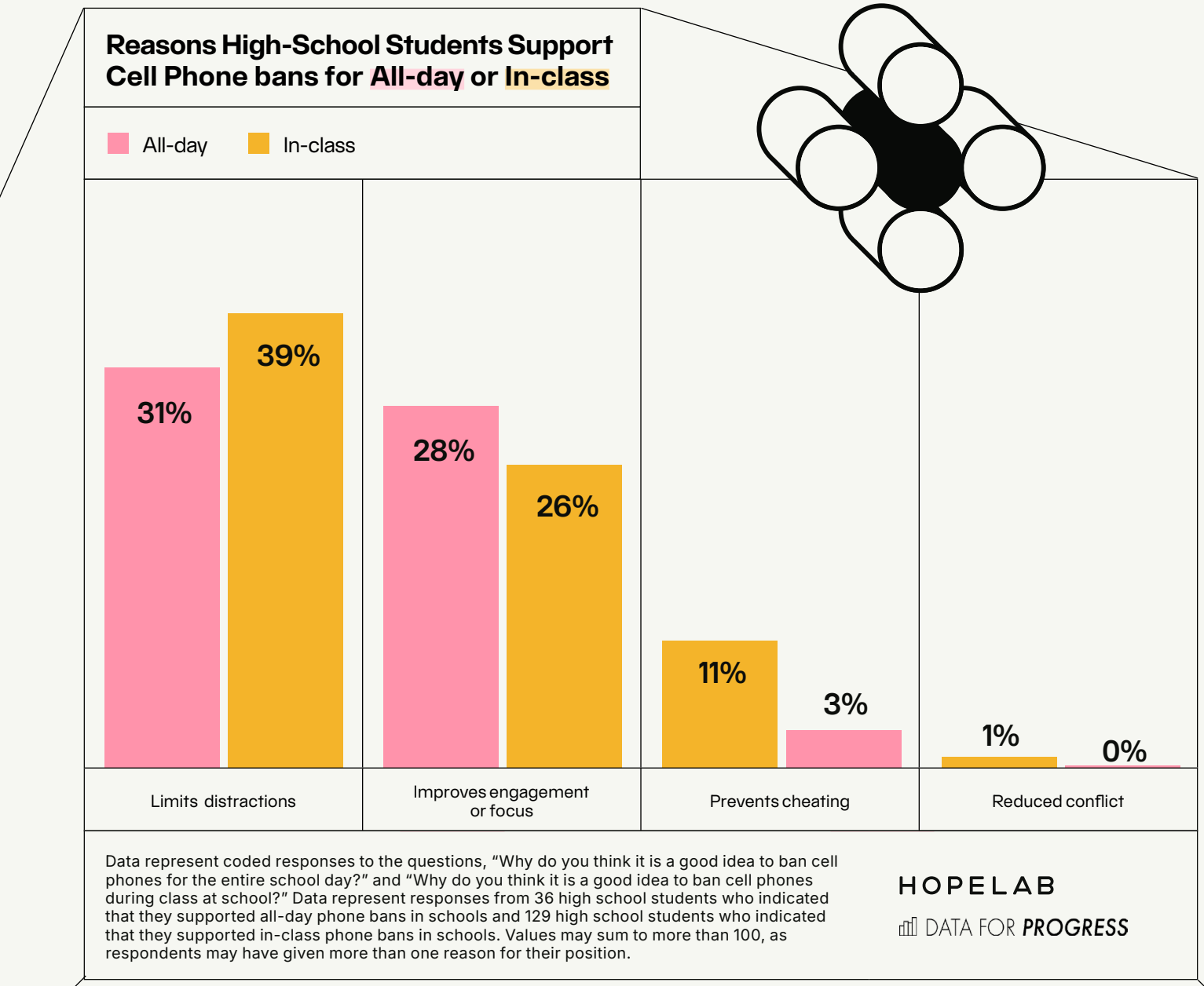
*"Many lessons have shifted to being online in the past years, having a cell phone ban prevents the student from being able to access the lessons when school-provided- laptops are commonly broken."*

**A white/Hispanic high school boy said:**

*"Phones hold digital textbooks and instant translation tools, so a full classroom ban strips students of fast, reliable learning aids for tough subjects."*

Other reasons for opposition to in-class-only bans generally mirrored sentiments expressed about all-day bans, including difficulty contacting family in a non-emergency, the view that phones are personal property and should not be taken from their owners, and the belief that students should be allowed to use their cell phones once their work is done or they're bored.

# Limiting Distractions & Improving Focus Top Support for Both All-day & In-class Bans




Data represent coded responses to the questions, "Why do you think it is a good idea to ban cell phones for the entire school day?" and "Why do you think it is a good idea to ban cell phones during class at school?" Data represent responses from 36 high school students who indicated that they supported all-day phone bans in schools and 129 high school students who indicated that they supported in-class phone bans in schools. Values may sum to more than 100, as respondents may have given more than one reason for their position.

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Among those who supported bans on cell phones for the entire school day, the primary reason cited was limiting student distractions.

The second most common reason cited in support of the bans was that they would improve engagement and focus.

A third reason, mentioned by one respondent, was to reduce or prevent cheating.

**A white/Hispanic high school boy said:**

*"Full-day phone bans cut screen distractions and push students to fully engage with classroom lessons."*

**A white high school girl noted that bans help:**

*"Because there is less 'phone noise' and students are far more likely to be productive."*

**A white/Hispanic high school boy said:**

*"Students don't cheat but pay attention in school."*

For support of in-class bans, the primary reason cited was improved engagement and focus in class.

Similarly, the second most common reason cited in support of the bans was that they would reduce distractions for students.

The other reason cited in support of the bans was reducing cheating.

**A Black high school boy indicated support for the bans:**

*"Because students should be learning and not on their phones."*

**A white high school girl noted:**

*"I think it helps students focus. As a current high school student who's experienced both a ban and no ban, it truly does help people focus, even if they don't want to admit it."*

**A white high school boy reported:**

*"I think that cell phones can be a distraction from schoolwork and not allowing students to use them eliminates that distraction."*

**A Black high school girl said:**

*"Cell phones are a major distraction, and many students misuse it during class time."*

**A Black high school girl indicated support for bans to reduce cheating by students:**

*"It can help kids focus better and to work harder without trying to cheat by using AI to get the answers for them instead of putting in the work effort."*

**A white high school girl said:**

*"Students are more likely to learn in a classroom if cell phones aren't around to act as distractions."*

**A white high school boy said bans were important to reduce conflicts between students:**

*"To prevent … pictures and videos taken of other students with the intention of bullying or harassment."*

# Conclusion

Young people's access to cell phones enables them to tap into a world of knowledge, learning opportunities, and connections with others. For many students, a phone is not just a convenience; it's a lifeline to family, friends, and support systems. At the same time, those devices may pose challenges in learning environments and create unnecessary distractions when focus is needed.

Our findings on attitudes toward cell phone bans mirror prior work, with nearly two-thirds of high schools supporting in-class bans and only 17% supporting all-day bans. Beneath those numbers lies a striking theme.

**Across both ban types, the single most frequent topic in open-ended responses was not convenience or social connection, but fear. Students described school shootings, medical emergencies, and the need to reach or be reached by family as their central concerns.**

Accessibility needs, such as reliance on translation or assistive tools during class, emerged as a related and important concern. Among students who supported bans, the most commonly cited reasons included improving engagement and focus, limiting distractions, and reducing cheating.

Taken together, these findings challenge a common assumption in the national conversation around phone bans: that student pushback is about resistance to rules or inability to disconnect. Rather, most high school students are not opposed to having rules around cell phone use. What they resist is a blanket approach that doesn't account for real-world exceptions, such as safety, family communication, and, most importantly, accessibility needs. This is the gray area at the center of the findings. Students broadly support the goal of limiting distraction, but they push back when a policy treats a tool that can be used both to contact family in case of a school shooting and as an educational support in the same way as potential distractions.

This nuance points to a different policy question. Rather than rushing to implement blanket cell phone bans with no student input, school administrators and policymakers would be better served working with young people to determine how exceptions for safety, educational support, and family connection can exist while addressing the goals of the bans that students support. What the data reveal are not student resistance, but both a very real concern about gun violence in schools and a design gap in these policies — one that schools and policymakers are well-positioned to close.

## Three recommendations follow directly from the evidence:

**1. Build emergency and accessibility carve-outs into policy design, not as afterthoughts.** Districts should pair any ban with explicit, communicated protocols for emergencies and formal accommodation pathways for students who use phones as assistive technology (e.g., translation, reading aids, calculators).

**2. Involve students in policy design, not just compliance.** The strong support/opposition split by current school policy (68% support among students already under a ban vs. 49% among those without one) suggests attitudes shift with exposure and, likely, with participation. This approach mirrors the co-design model Young Futures has supported through their Call Me Maybe challenge, and that has been supported by organizations such as Boston Children's Hospital's Digital Wellness Lab.

**3. Separate "in-class" from "all-day" in every policy conversation.** Treating these as a single issue, as much current legislation does, obscures the issue. Teens are far more willing to accept structure during instruction than a blanket restriction on personal autonomy.

These recommendations are not exhaustive, but they offer a starting point for schools and policymakers to design phone policies with rather than for the students they impact.

# Summary of Methodology

## Instrument Development

The Hopelab research team, in collaboration with Data for Progress, created the polling instrument based on information gathered from prior interviews with young people about topics important to their lives. In the initial phase of co-creation for this poll, the research team conducted eight one-hour individual interviews with young people to gather their perspectives on the items generated. Young people provided direct input on the poll's topics and questions, resulting in a revised and improved instrument.

Using the standard IRB review process and providing all requested materials, the survey was submitted to the Advarra IRB for review and approval. Young people's participation was voluntary, and informed assent/consent was obtained. Parent/guardian consent was waived by the Advarra IRB due to the survey's anonymous nature, the minimal risk posed by the questions, and the inability to feasibly conduct the study with parental consent. No names or personal details were included to ensure confidentiality and privacy.

## Procedure

From June 24 to July 10, 2026, Data for Progress surveyed 1,473 respondents ages 13 to 24 using a web panel. The survey was conducted in English. Validity and honesty check items were included in the survey, and participants were removed from the sample if their responses indicated invalid or dishonest responding. Quota-based sampling was used to recruit a diverse sample across key demographics, including age, gender identity, and race and ethnicity. Participants who did not meet the eligibility criteria, including being ages 13 to 24 and living in the U.S., were not included. Data for Progress also did not include additional participants from quota groups that had already been filled. The team weighted the sample to represent young people ages 13 to 24 living in the U.S. across age, gender, education, race, geography, and sexual orientation.

## Data Analysis

The analyses in this brief focus on young people's opinions on in-class and all-day cell phone bans in schools. Analyses focus on the subset of 487 participants from the larger survey who were in high school. The margin of error for this subgroup comparison is +/- four percentage points. Some values may not add up to 100 due to rounding. For more information, please visit dataforprogress.org/our-methodology.

# Ackowledgements

The project team acknowledges the contributions of all the young people who shared their time, expertise, and lived experiences to shape this study's design and results.

## About

Hopelab envisions a future where all young people have equitable opportunities to live joyful and purposeful lives. As a funder, connector, and science translator, Hopelab supports and builds equity-centered solutions for the mental health of Brown, Black, and Queer young people. For more information, visit hopelab.org and follow us on LinkedIn at linkedin.com/in/hopelab.

Data for Progress (DFP) is a multidisciplinary group of data experts that measures — and moves — public opinion by equipping the progressive movement with the insights it needs to win. Led by a team of experts, DFP offers high-quality, affordable polling in every corner of the country, message testing and focus groups on complex issues, and in-depth, victory-minded analysis. Learn more at dataforprogress.org. Follow DFP on X at @dataprogress and on Bluesky at @dataforprogress.org.

## Suggested Citation

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