



2025-26 Upper School Cell Phone Policy

St. Stephen's Episcopal School is proud to announce that we will become a phone-free community in the fall of 2025. Upper School students will lock their phones in magnetic pouches from 8:30 a.m. to 3:45 p.m., removing that distraction and allowing students to focus on face-to-face interactions during the school day. This spring, a significant majority of the 120 parents who responded to our survey supported the idea of restricting phones, joining faculty in the belief that students will benefit from the removal of the negative effects associated with teen phone use. We are excited to have a plan in place to give students the gift of a phone-free school day.

NEW PHONE POLICY (FALL 2025)

St. Stephen's has a "bell-to-bell" phone policy whereby students may not use phones during the academic day. Upper School students are required to keep phones locked in a magnetic pouch for the duration of the school day, from 8:30 a.m. – 3:45 p.m.

Rare exceptions to this policy include the following:

- On occasion, teachers may authorize the use of phones for a classroom activity. In these situations, students will lock them up again once the activity is completed for the day.
- Students who need access to their phones for designated and authorized medical purposes will have access to a medical velcro pouch.
- If a student needs to call home for a specific and discrete reason, a teacher can grant permission and provide supervision for a student temporarily unlocking their pouch to make a phone call.
- Students who receive a gate pass to leave campus early can unlock their phones when they leave school.

If students leave the academic area to go back to the dorm, visit the gym, etc., they must keep their phones in the pouch, but they should bring their laptops with them for access to communication in case of emergency.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Practical concerns about Yondr bags

1. What has directed the school to consider a "bell-to-bell" policy, rather than simply asking students to keep their phones away?

A "bell-to-bell" policy normalizes the absence of phones across campus, helping to promote a face-to-face community in which students lift their eyes to interact with the people around them and make conscious choices about how they spend their time. It also avoids the constant cat-and-mouse back-and-forth between students and teachers that inevitably accompanies a "keep it out of sight" policy. With a "bell-to-bell" policy, students don't have to make constant decisions

Continued



2025-26 Upper School Cell Phone Policy *(continued)*

about peeking at their phones based on whether or not a teacher happens to be watching, and the phone-free standard becomes universal across campus. Research shows that test scores are higher when phones are completely inaccessible than when they are in backpacks or pockets, suggesting that when phones are within easy reach, students are distracted even by the mere possibility of a notification or an online interaction. Our “bell-to-bell” policy will help us to keep students’ attention on the world around them here on The Hill.

2. Where did this idea originate?

Parents raised the topic during the 2024-25 school year, concerned about the influence of phones on teen mental health and interested in the idea of amending our policy to promote increased in-person interaction. After that, we spoke with peer schools that expressed excitement about the changes in their campuses after instituting phone restrictions such as magnetic pouches. For years, faculty members at St. Stephen’s and elsewhere have expressed frustration with the challenges of moment-to-moment management of phones during the school day. Recent research and writing in the past year has spurred a growing movement worldwide to limit the presence of phones in schools, and this spring, the Texas Legislature approved a bill prohibiting student use of cell phones during the day in public schools, joining nearly half of all U.S. states.

3. Why restrict phone use during free periods?

We support students making intentional choices about their own free periods. Sometimes students use free periods for intense study, sometimes they throw frisbees on The Hill, and sometimes they sit at a picnic table and talk idly with friends. All of these choices are wonderful options, and we encourage that freedom. When students lose themselves in their phones for a full class period, that time is often neither productive nor restorative; students are generally happier when they either work or play. Additionally, easy access to phones during free periods contributes to increased social media use, which is associated with negative outcomes for teens such as anxiety, online bullying, recording others without their consent, etc. Like most other organizations that work with teenagers, we have seen an increase in these issues over the past decade, and we feel that limiting cell phone use during free periods could help to slow that negativity while increasing positive social and academic behaviors.

4. Is there really a problem at St. Stephen’s that we’re trying to fix here?

No, and yes. We’re very proud of our community environment at St. Stephen’s. Our students are happy and healthy, and they exhibit a lot of really wonderful citizenship. You already see more students playing and studying on The Hill during their free periods than at most high schools, and students are generally respectful about putting their phones away when asked to do so. With that said, we always seek to improve; we want to be the best school that we are capable of becoming, putting our students in the best possible environment to succeed and be happy. This policy represents a step in our continual quest for self-improvement.

Continued



2025-26 Upper School Cell Phone Policy *(continued)*

5. Will laptops be allowed?

Yes. Students will continue to have access to their laptops. This means that students will have the ability to email or text parents, make phone calls, complete assignments digitally and employ all necessary technological functionality. The school will continue to provide loaner laptops and Chromebooks for students who need them.

6. But aren't laptops just the same as phones? Why draw a distinction between them?

The key difference is in convenience, and the temptation/distraction that comes along with that convenience. Opening a laptop represents a more deliberate action than pulling a phone out of your pocket. Students will be able to take advantage of all functional applications of technology with more intentionality than occurs with phones.

7. What if I need to get in touch with my child during the day?

As noted above, laptops will give students access to email, messaging and phone calls. Parents can always call the front desk, and teachers will have cell phones and be available to help track students down. Schools were able to accomplish these important tasks before the advent of smartphones, and we are confident that we will again be able to manage all important and necessary communication moving forward!

8. What happens in case of an emergency?

Faculty and staff will have cell phones in their possession, and in an emergency situation, students will go to the closest adult (their teacher, study hall proctor, lunch table host, etc.) and await instruction. Adults will follow Rave and Ruvna notifications to give students specific directions. Any student not in the vicinity of an adult will be notified of the emergency via siren; further instructions may also be sent out to student laptops. Research shows that students are safest in emergency situations when they are not distracted by phones and are instead listening to verbal instructions. Additionally, a limited number of active phones during an emergency avoids any potential concern about overburdening the bandwidth of cell towers.

9. Couldn't magnetic pouches represent a symbolic lack of trust? Is this too restrictive?

We do trust our students, for certain! The challenge is this: smartphones and their associated applications represent a market valued at more than half a trillion dollars. Many of these applications (including social media) are marketed to children and specifically designed to be addictive, and there are volumes of research indicating that they are successful in creating self-destructive behaviors. While we do extend trust to our students in lots of age-appropriate ways, we also work to set up the conditions that make them most likely to succeed. Limiting any addictive item represents an attempt to create a healthy learning environment. With that said, we have work to do with our students to help them understand this so that they feel the positivity of a face-to-face community, rather than feeling as if we're taking something away from them. Where possible, we will keep phones — and pouches! — out of sight and out of mind completely.

Continued



2025-26 Upper School Cell Phone Policy *(continued)*

10. Students will have unfettered access to phones in college. Shouldn't they start learning how to manage them now?

There are a lot of temptations that students will encounter in college that we do not promote in high school. Our job is to make decisions that are age-appropriate to help students develop positive habits. We feel that there is value in students learning what life can be like without a phone in their pocket, so that when they are away from our campus, they can make informed and thoughtful decisions about the role they want technology to play in their lives.

11. Why different policies for Upper School and Middle School?

We already effectively have a “bell-to-bell” phone policy in place in the Middle School, but that policy would not translate smoothly to the Upper School due to a few fundamental differences in Middle School and Upper School student life. Middle School lockers are conveniently located very close to all of their classrooms, and therefore Middle School students actually use these lockers far more consistently than Upper School students do. Additionally, free periods are supervised much more closely in Middle School than in Upper School.

12. My child has a specific medical need that requires monitoring via cell phone. How will they be able to manage that need?

Students who require phone access for urgent medical concerns will have specialized medical pouches with a strong velcro clasp instead of a magnet. They will be able to open these pouches as needed, and we will both trust and supervise them in using their phones only to care for their medical needs.

13. Are magnetic pouches really the best use of school funds?

We've heard from peer schools that pouches make a “bell-to-bell” policy simple, consistent, easy, straightforward, and fair. Schools with “keep it out of sight” policies report that teachers spend a lot of time asking students to put their phones away and struggling with consistency of enforcement; several of our own faculty members with experience elsewhere have urged a more effective approach at St. Stephen's. Our conclusion is that magnetic pouches help schools to remove the friction that often accompanies the execution of cell phone policies and allows students to focus on face-to-face interactions, rather than on when and how they can get away with sneaking a look at their phones. Pouches will empower us to celebrate a phone-free campus without constant back-and-forth between students and teachers. Those are community benefits that are well worth the cost.

14. What about flip phones? Smart watches? AirPods?

These are hard questions! On the one hand, these products do not cause the same level of concern as smartphones; on the other hand, it is always easier for a school to ease off of a policy than to tighten it over time. We are not yet ready to make a decision on any of these three topics at the moment, but we will do so before the opening of school.