

Education Today

Creating a Distraction-Free Learning Environment

By William H. Kerr, Ed.D.

Creating a distraction-free learning environment is critical for academic success.

Educators agree that cell phones frequently distract students with social media, notifications, and texts. Studies show that “even having a phone nearby can reduce concentration, lower test scores, and disrupt learning, while less screen time can improve focus, critical thinking, and reduce stress.

Mental health research indicates “that limiting smartphone use in schools lowers stress, anxiety, and sleep issues, while boosting social interaction and classroom engagement.” Encouraging face-to-face interactions during lunch or recess also supports better mental health.

Annelise Reinwald reports on Ballotpedia recently that 26 states require local school boards to restrict the use of cell phones in K-12 classrooms. Of those, 22 laws were enacted in 2025, with Oregon's being the latest through executive order.

Currently, Pennsylvania does not have any statewide laws that address cell phone use in K-12 classrooms. However, there are legislative actions pending for consideration by state lawmakers.

From a historical perspective, technology has transformed the way we as a society interact, access information, and learn. I recall when Governor Tom Ridge promoted “Link to Learn” funding to advance access and the use of technology in K-12 classrooms across Pennsylvania. Subsequently, each Governor has initiated new funding programs that support advanced educational technology.

Throughout the years, there was a strong movement to “bring your own device (BYOD),” allowing students to use cell phones for research and learning under teacher guidance. At the same time, state and local funding supported the purchase of iPads, computers, laptops, and Chrome books to enhance internet access for education.

Recently, K-12 schools nationwide have expanded online learning and student device access, supported by government funding during the Covid pandemic. While technology has increased connectivity, constant cell phone use, as previously stated, can have an effect on mental health, social skills, and distractions with learning.

To that end, Duquesne City School District maintains a distraction-free learning environment by collecting student cell phones each morning. Phones are stored securely in numbered slots matched to attendance lists and returned at dismissal.

The Duquesne system limits classroom distractions and has notably cut down on bullying and improper phone use. This approach maintains safety, promotes social emotional well-being, and focuses on intentional learning. In addition to the cell phone initiative, the District has made considerable investments in its technology infrastructure to enhance student learning outcomes. The student Wi-Fi network is strategically designed to ensure both access and accountability.

Distinct from the staff and after-school program networks, the student network offers direct Internet access while adhering strictly to federal regulations, including the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Rule (COPPA).

Web filtering blocks harmful or non-educational sites while allowing academic content. Traffic management gives priority to student browsing and staff classroom tools like Apple TVs and media streaming.

Student iPads are now managed with custom in-house profiles that limit device use to educational purposes. Unlike before, students cannot rearrange apps, change wallpapers, or install unapproved applications, ensuring a standardized and distraction-free learning environment.

Profiles are customized by age: Kindergartners use YouTube Kids, 7th and 8th graders access curriculum-aligned apps, and edutainment apps for younger students aren't available to older grades. This system ensures each grade uses only relevant tools.

The School District is implementing measures such as cell phone collection, managed wireless networks, and specific iPad configurations to minimize potential distractions. Expected outcomes include higher student engagement, improved test performance through focused learning, fewer incidents of misbehavior, and the use of technology to support educational activities.

By establishing a structured digital environment, Duquesne City School District is making changes intended to increase student performance in a distraction-free learning environment.

Mr. Chuck Robinson, Director of Information Technology, contributed to this article. William H. Kerr, Ed.D. is the Court-Appointed Receiver for the Duquesne City School District by the Common Pleas Court of Allegheny County, as recommended by the Pennsylvania Secretary of Education, for the oversight of academic, financial, and school district operations.