

Dear [SCHOOL] parents,

At [SCHOOL], we are committed to providing a phone-free learning environment during the school day to give our students the best chance of success, both academically and socially. The benefits of phone-free policies are well documented: fewer distractions, more classroom engagement, improved academic outcomes, fewer student discipline issues, improved student mental health and well-being, and richer connections among students and teachers.

But what happens during the school day is only a part of what shapes our students and school environment. Family life and home environments have a profound influence on students' mental and physical development, character, learning, interpersonal skills, and relationships, all of which feed into their behavior during the school day, for good or for ill.

We have observed that digital technology use at home, especially the use of smartphones, social media, video games, and tablets, has significant negative impacts on our students that they bring with them to school. These can include impairment to their ability to focus, pay attention, and learn during the school day; a lack of respect toward school administrators and teachers; a negative attitude and a lack of interest in school; behavioral outbursts and discipline issues; and difficult social dynamics among students.

For these reasons, we are writing this letter to strongly urge you, our [SCHOOL] families, to delay the introduction of or eliminate entirely the most addictive screen technologies for your children, namely smartphones and social media—not just at school but at home. To underscore the importance of delaying the use of smartphones and social media, as well as other interactive screens, beyond childhood and adolescence into the high school years or ideally until adulthood, we want to share with you some of the most compelling research on the harms of smartphone, social media, and screen use on children and teens:

- **Brain development:** A University of North Carolina study found that sixth- and seventh-grade students who checked social media platforms multiple times throughout the day (to say nothing of how long they spent on the platforms) demonstrated divergent brain development over time. Students who frequently checked social media developed hypersensitivity to the anticipation of social rewards compared with students who didn't check these platforms as often. In other words, a developing brain becomes more sensitized (hardwired) to the rewards and stimuli of social media, a pattern often seen in addiction. Pre-adolescents with more screen exposure also show weaker connectivity in brain circuits responsible for impulse control. Developing impulse control is critical for success as an adult.
- **Attention issues:** A longitudinal study found that social media use in particular is associated with increased ADHD symptoms over time. Children who spent a significant amount of time on social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, and Messenger gradually developed inattention symptoms.
- **Mental health:** Receiving a smartphone before age 13 is linked to worse mental health outcomes in young adulthood, including increased risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. These effects appear consistently across all global regions. Other research finds that the younger a person's age when acquiring his or her first smartphone, the worse his or her mental health is as a young adult (between ages 18–25). Using a smartphone at a younger age was most strongly correlated with increased suicidality as a young adult. Thus, there are long-term negative effects of acquiring a smartphone earlier. Frequent social media use is also associated with greater body dissatisfaction; disordered eating behaviors; increased risk of self-harm; and greater likelihood of alcohol, tobacco, and drug use in adolescence. More hours of screen time are also linked to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, family conflict, increased aggression, and poor peer relationships.
- **Impacts on physical health:** Younger age of smartphone acquisition is negatively associated with obesity and insufficient sleep for each earlier year of acquisition. Heavy screen use is also linked to worsening vision, reduced physical activity, and poor dietary habits.
- **Exposure to dangers:** Social media and smartphones expose adolescents to online exploitation, including the risk of sextortion. Sextortion is an increasingly common form of blackmail where perpetrators trick young people into sending them sexually explicit images, which they then use to pressure the young person into providing them with sex or money. Between 3.5 to 5 percent of children experience sextortion, which can result in significant psychological distress, fear, shame, and risk of self-harm. One survey found that 1 in 3 minors report having had a sexual interaction online, and 1 in 5 say they believe that interaction was with an adult. An internal study by

Meta found that 100,000 minors per day receive sexual content on its platforms. Social media use also increases the risk of cyberbullying. Nearly 5 out of 10 teenagers have experienced cyberbullying.

- **Autism:** A systematic review found that the longer the period of screen exposure, the higher the risk that a child may develop autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Further, the earlier the child is exposed to screens, the higher the risk of developing ASD compared to children exposed later.

Given the risks and harms to children and teens from interactive screens, especially smartphones and social media, we encourage you as parents to consider taking the following actions in your own home to protect your children and their health, development, and flourishing:

- **Delay smartphone access as long as possible, ideally until adulthood.** There are many options for useful “dumb phones” and alternative phones (such as the Pinwheel phone, Bark phone, Gabb phone, and Wisephone) that teenagers in high school can use in place of a smartphone. Most of these options have GPS and other tools teens may need once driving or working.
- **Delay social media access as long as possible, ideally until adulthood.** Delaying smartphone access also significantly helps delay social media use, but parents should be vigilant on other home devices to block social media sites and monitor children’s internet use.
- **Keep phones and screens, even dumb phones, out of all private places and bedrooms.** Charge devices in a central area at night to protect children’s sleep. All internet use in the home should be public and purposeful, where other family members can always see the screen.
- **Establish phone-free and screen-free times at home for both children and parents.** These can include family meals, walks, activities, bedtimes, and during homework. This will allow for times of family bonding and conversations along with reducing distractions that may damage children’s ability to pay attention for prolonged periods of time.
- **Talk openly and often with your children about the harms and addictive design of screens and social media platforms.** Explain that digital screens are engineered to addict them and capture their attention through notifications, constant feedback, streaks, infinite scroll, and algorithmic feeds. Consider using educational resources like the documentary *The Social Dilemma*, books like *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt and *The Tech Exit* by Clare Morell, and podcast interviews with these authors and other experts like Jean Twenge, Tristan Harris, and Anna Lembke. Teach younger children about how their brains work and how screens can harm them with Melanie Hempe’s book, *Kids’ Brains & Screens: Home Edition*. Train them early to resist digital temptations they may encounter using resources like the book *Good Pictures, Bad Pictures*. By talking openly with children about the harms of digital technology, you can train them to make wise decisions as adults.
- **Do a screen detox to reset. If you have already allowed smartphones, social media, or other interactive screens in your home, it is never too late to reverse course.** Start with a digital detox, ideally for 30 days. There is scientific support for the benefits of detoxes. They allow the brain to return to a baseline level of dopamine so children crave the screens less and can again experience pleasure from natural rewards and real life (whereas screens desensitize children to these real-world goods). They also reduce adrenaline and cortisol and help the brain come out of the state of chronic stress that is induced by interactive screens, reducing irritability and tantrums and improving sleep, emotional regulation, focus, attention, and impulse control. You can find more information on how to do a detox as a family in the books *The Tech Exit* by Clare Morell (with additional resources at thetechexit.com) and *How to Reset Your Child’s Brain* by Victoria Dunckley. A 30-day detox plan and other resources are available at screenstrong.org.

We recognize that following these guidelines will likely involve changes to your family life, and these changes are not always easy to make. However, the research makes a compelling case that families should consider tech restrictions to protect children’s health and development, setting them up for success in school and as an adult. We are here support you in taking these steps. We want to help our parents opt out together so you are not alone in restricting these technologies and so our students have peers who are doing the same. We believe our school can be a natural community for providing the collective solutions parents and students need to resist the social pressures to use these devices and to avoid the negative group dynamics that they create among peers. The more parents that opt out of a digitized family life, the easier it will be for others to do the same. This is why we are asking you to partner with us in fostering a low-tech, happy, healthy childhood and adolescence for our students both inside and outside school facilities.

If you have questions or would like to discuss strategies for your family or connect with other parents making similar commitments, please do not hesitate to reach out.

With gratitude,
[SCHOOL]