

Original Article

Do Cellphone Bans in Schools Work? A Clinical Case Study from One School District

Okullarda Cep Telefonu Yasakları İşe Yarıyor mu? Bir Okul Bölgesinden Klinik Olgu Çalışması

Christopher Ferguson^{ID}

Stetson University, Psychology, Deland, United States

ABSTRACT

Objectives: Recent years have seen many school districts institute various forms of cellphone bans to improve youth mental health, behavior, and academics. However, data on their effectiveness remains slim.

Study Design/Methods: This clinical case report study reports on data from one large school district in Florida for the year before and the year during its first year of a comprehensive cellphone ban. Data were obtained by Public Records Request and are presented descriptively.

Results: Data related to bullying, mental health referrals, and grades all suggest either stagnant or worsening outcomes after the cellphone ban. By contrast, the cellphone bans created 660 new suspensions of students.

Conclusions: Although descriptive, this data adds to concerns that cellphone bans may have been implemented before there was evidence they worked and may do more harm than good.

Keywords: *social media, mental health, depression, anxiety*

ÖZET

Amaçlar: Son yıllarda birçok okul bölgesi, gençlerin ruh sağlığını, davranışlarını ve akademik başarısını iyileştirmek amacıyla çeşitli biçimlerde cep telefonu yasakları uygulamaya başlamıştır. Ancak bu yasakların etkinliğine ilişkin veriler sınırlı kalmaktadır.

Çalışma Tasarımı/Yöntemler: Bu klinik olgu sunumu çalışması, Florida'da büyük bir okul bölgesine ait, kapsamlı bir cep telefonu yasağının uygulanmasından önceki yıl ile yasağın uygulandığı ilk yıla ait verileri bildirmektedir. Veriler Kamu Kayıtları Talebi (Public Records Request) yoluyla elde edilmiş ve tanımlayıcı olarak sunulmuştur.

Bulgular: Zorbalık, ruh sağlığı yönlendirmeleri ve notlarla ilgili veriler, cep telefonu yasağı sonrasında sonuçların ya durağan kaldığını ya da kötüleştiğini göstermektedir. Buna karşın, cep telefonu yasakları öğrenciler için 660 yeni uzaklaştırma cezasına yol açmıştır.

Sonuçlar: Tanımlayıcı nitelikte olmakla birlikte bu veriler, cep telefonu yasaklarının işe yaradığına dair kanıt bulunmadan uygulamaya konmuş olabileceği ve fayda sağlamaktan çok zarar verebileceği yönündeki endişeleri artırmaktadır.

Keywords: *sosyal medya, ruh sağlığı, depresyon, kaygı*

Received: 26.06.2025 · Accepted: 18.01.2026 · Published: 27.09.2026

Correspondence / Yazışma: Christopher Ferguson · Stetson University, Psychology, Deland, United States · cjferguson1111@aol.com

Cite this article as: Ferguson C. Do cellphone bans in schools work? A clinical case study from one school district. *Pediatr Acad Case Rep.* 2026;5(3):64-8.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Association of Pediatric Specialization Academy.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Recent years have seen schools institute youth bans on cellphone despite lack of evidence that such policies work. The current article reports on the experiences of one large school district which saw stagnant or worsening outcomes during a cellphone ban. Increasingly, it appears unlikely cellphone bans will achieve desired outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many school districts have created various types of cellphone bans to restrict youth access to cellphones in schools. Such bans are enacted in hopes that the removal of cellphones from classrooms will help with student grades, disruptive behavior including bullying, and mental health.

What data that does exist suggest mixed or weak outcomes. A recent review of studies which had been done on cellphone bans found that, overall, they provided little clear evidence for their effectiveness.⁽¹⁾ Similarly, one recent study found that cellphone bans do not work,⁽²⁾ whereas another found mixed results⁽³⁾ though neither study were randomized controlled trials.

The current study examines descriptive data provided by Orange County Schools in Florida, which comprises a large school district centered on the city of Orlando. Orange County implemented their ban during the 2023-2024 (beginning July 2023) school year, and their ban was also more comprehensive than that required by Florida law, requiring phones and all other communication devices to be silenced and away for the entire school day, not just during classes. Penalties for noncompliance escalate up to the point of out-of-school suspensions.⁽⁴⁾ Orange County Schools publicly made claims of dramatic success of their bans in the months following their implementation.⁽⁵⁾ Information for this study was obtained from Orange County Schools related to bullying, mental health referrals, and GPA for the year before the ban (2022-2023) as well as the first year of the ban (2023-2024). Suspension data for the year of the ban was also obtained. This allows for a simple one-year descriptive comparison and tests the following hypothesis:

H1: Orange County Schools will see overall improvements in study bullying, mental health referrals and grades for the year of the ban as compared to the year before the ban.

METHODS

Inclusion Criteria

Orange County Public Schools was selected as it was one of the first in the nation to adopt a "bell to bell" all-inclusive cellphone ban. It also received extensive press coverage with teachers and administrators reporting early, broad success. Florida's Sunshine public records laws also provide for access to school records.

Data

Data were obtained from Orange County Public Schools pursuant to a Public Records Request. Data were requested for the 2022-2023 academic year (the year prior to the cellphone ban), and for the 2023-2024 academic year (the first full year of the ban which was implemented July 1, 2023 under state law). The request was made for all data related to bullying referrals and youth assaults, as well as mental health referrals, high school and middle school GPA, and number of suspensions related to infractions of the cellphone ban. The data was requested in the fall of 2024, with data provided by February of 2025. Orange County Public schools informed that they did not have data on youth assaults and provided data on Level IV infractions for bullying, which indicate serious offenses. Orange County Public Schools define such bullying as "Systematically and chronically inflicting physical hurt or psychological distress on one or more students or employees. Bullying includes instances of cyberbullying, as defined in Section 1006.147(3)(b), Florida Statutes. Bullying may include, but is not limited to, repetitive instances of teasing, social exclusion, threats, intimidation, stalking, physical violence, theft, harassment, public or private humiliation, or destruction of property. If the physical harm or psychological distress is not the result of systematic or chronic behavior, evaluate for Harassment. Florida Administrative Code Rule 6A-1.0017. *The bullying includes intimidating behaviors that are repeated, intentional, and involve a power imbalance. *Repeated discipline of another nature (such as repeated fights with the same person) may constitute bullying." All other data were provided as requested.

Orange County Public Schools reports an overall student population of 207,993. They report that 44% of students are Hispanic, 24% are white, 24% are black, 5% are Asian and 3% are multiracial.(6)

RESULTS

All results are provided in Table 1. The only improved outcome was high school GPA which improved slightly from 2.82 to 2.95 during the year of the ban. This was, however, not mirrored by middle school GPA which remained flat. Level 4 bullying

incidents actually worsened substantially during the year of the ban, going from 2 to 12. With the exception of referrals made to community-based mental health providers, most mental health indicators also worsened during the year of the ban. 662 level-3 suspension-level outcomes (as well as thousands of lower-level penalties; 4496 level-1 infractions and 2405 level-2) were recorded for violations of the cellphone ban during the first year of the ban. Overall infractions using the keywords "cell," "phone," "record," and/or "video" also increased during the year of the ban.

Table 1. Descriptive Data for All Outcomes by Year Before and After Cellphone Bans

Outcome	2022-2023	2023-2024
Bullying (Level 4 Incidents)	2	12
High School GPA	2.82	2.95
Middle School GPA	2.84	2.88
# Students Receiving MH Screenings	5403	5503
# Students Referred to School MH Providers	7491	8930
# Referrals Made to School-Based MH Providers	8508	9827
# Students Made to Community MH Providers	2061	3440
# Referrals Made to Community MH Providers	4112	3727
# Students Receiving School-Based MH Services	12858	17661
# Students Receiving Community MH Services	2000	4466
Level 3 (likely Suspensions) Due to Cellphone Use	N/A	662
Overall Offenses Involving Phones*	2801	3951

Note: MH = Mental Health. Cellphone ban suspension data was not collected for 2022-2023 since the cellphone ban had not yet been implemented.

* = Infractions containing one of the following key words: "cell," "phone," "record," and/or "video"

DISCUSSION

Cellphone bans in schools have been a topic of considerable discussion and debate in recent years. Many schools, states and countries have implemented a variety of bans in schools. However, data on their effectiveness remains limited. The current study provides descriptive data on a single large multiethnic school district in the United States for the year before and during the implementation of the cellphone ban. Despite claims of startling success by school officials, public records data did not support that the ban had resulted in positive student outcomes for its first year.

Regarding bullying data, bullying outcomes worsened during the first year of the ban. However, this observation must be tempered by noting that the available data were for level-4 infractions, the most serious offenses. It is very likely that this misses considerable lower-level bullying or bullying which goes unreported to school officials. One difficulty in considering bullying data is that, according to National Center for Educational Statistics data, bullying has been declining in the United States consistently during the time period in which cellphones became increasingly prevalent.(7) This historical effect may make it difficult to fully and accurately assess the impact of cellphone

ban policies. School officials may mistake declining bullying rates as due to the implementation of cellphone bans when, in fact, they merely reflect a historical pattern. Unfortunately, data on less serious acts of bullying or other forms of assault were not available for Orange County Schools.

Regarding GPA, results were mixed. High school GPA improved slightly, whereas middle school GPA remained largely stagnant during the year of the ban. Once again, historical trends can make interpretation of GPA tricky. For instance, academics nationwide had declined during covid19, and all Florida schools, including those with much less restrictive cellphone bans than Orange County, saw standardized testing improvements in 2023-2024.(8) Given that these historical trends appear to be more likely to inflate than deflate GPA numbers, the outcomes for Orange County Schools on GPA appear to be modest at best.

For mental health outcomes, most data suggest worsening outcomes as indicated by referrals and services during the year of the ban. This is perhaps not surprising given that little data has conclusively linked the use of smartphones or social media to mental health among youth.(9,10)

For suspensions, the year of the ban recorded 662 suspensions as well as thousands of lesser infractions. This is worrisome given that out-of-school suspensions are associated with worsened outcomes for youth ranging from grades(11) to adult arrests.(12)

Of course, all this data is descriptive. It cannot be said from this data that the cellphone ban *caused* more negative outcomes in youth, aside from the increase in suspensions which are directly attributable to the bans. However, they do conflict with claims by school officials themselves regarding immediate and substantial improvements in student outcomes. Available data do not support those claims.

Why would school officials "see" positive outcomes that are not reflected in the schools' own data? There may be several reasons. Notably, school officials may be motivated to see improvements due to policies they implemented, support or are responsible for, regardless of their actual success. This may result in issues related to expectancy effects, confirmation bias, etc. It is unlikely that anecdotal claims from officials will prove reliable.

The current study adds to existing evidence that cellphone bans may be unlikely to fulfil the promises

made regarding them. However, in the absence of randomized controlled trials, we are reliant on much weaker descriptive and correlational data. Further, painting an unblemished picture of outcomes may be difficult given lack of a clear definition of what, exactly, constitutes a "ban". For instance, if Orange County Public Schools' ban appears to have failed, one might argue that this is because it was misdirected in the first place, due to a moral panic, or conversely that it was not restrictive enough. The latter, however, suggests something of a moving goalpost, continually moving as initial policies fail to provide satisfactory results. Unfortunately, given the widespread adoption of a variety of cellphone bans worldwide, the opportunity to conduct a randomized controlled trial may have passed.

CONCLUSION

The issue of cellphone bans is an important one and requires rigorous study. Unfortunately, policies moved ahead before that rigorous investigation was done. What data we have currently, however limited, has cast doubt on the utility of cellphone bans in schools. The current study constitutes only a single school district over two years. However, it does provide a clinical case study of experiences with one large school district and, most notably, how available data within that school district contradicted narratives of success painted by administrators. It is hoped the more rigorous studies will continue to evaluate these policies and that policies will respond appropriately to data as it becomes available.

Conflict of Interest / Çıkar Çatışması

The author declared no conflicts of interest with respect to authorship and/or publication of the article.

Financial Disclosure / Finansal Destek

The author received no financial support for the research and/or publication of this article.

Author Contributions / Yazar Katkıları

The author contributed to the concept, design, supervision, provision of materials, data collection and/or processing, analysis and interpretation of data, literature review, writing of the manuscript, and critical review of the manuscript.

REFERENCES

1. Campbell M, Edwards EJ, Pennell D, et al. Evidence for and against banning mobile phones in schools: A scoping review. *J*

- Psychol and Couns Sch.* 2024;34(3):242-265. doi:10.1177/20556365241270394
2. Goodyear V, Randhawa A, Adab P, et al. School phone policies and their association with mental wellbeing, phone use, and social media use (SMART Schools): a cross-sectional observational study. *Lancet Reg Health.* 2025. Retrieved from: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanep/article/PIIS2666-7762\(25\)00003-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanep/article/PIIS2666-7762(25)00003-1/fulltext)
3. Abrahamsson S. Smartphone Bans, Student Outcomes and Mental Health. *NHH Dept. of Economics Discussion Paper No. 01.* 2024. Retrieved from: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4735240
4. Orange County Schools. *Student Cellphone Policy.* 2023. Retrieved from: https://www.ocps.net/students_and_parents/student_cell_phone_policy
5. Postal L. Phone Ban Produces 'Remarkable' Change at Orange County, Fla., Schools. *Orlando Sentinel.* 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.govtech.com/education/k-12/phone-ban-produces-remarkable-change-at-orange-county-fla-schools>
6. Orange County Public Schools. *General Information.* 2025. Retrieved from: https://www.ocps.net/about_us/general_information
7. National Center for Education Statistics. *Fast Facts: Bullying.* Retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=719>
8. Florida Department of Education. *Florida Students Demonstrate Success in Second Year of First-in-the-Nation Progress Monitoring Assessments.* Retrieved from: <https://www.fldoe.org/newsroom/latest-news/florida-students-demonstrate-success-in-second-year-of-first-in-the-nation-progress-monitoring-assessments.stml>
9. Sun X, Haydel KF, Matheson D, Desai M, Robinson TN. Are mobile phone ownership and age of acquisition associated with child adjustment? A 5-year prospective study among low-income Latinx children. *Child Dev.* 2023;94(1):303-314. doi:10.1111/cdev.13851
10. Ferguson CJ, Kaye LK, Branley-Bell D, Markey P. There is no evidence that time spent on social media is correlated with adolescent mental health problems: Findings from a meta-analysis. *Prof Psychol: Res Prac.* October 2024. doi:10.1037/pro0000589
11. Alvarez B. School Suspensions Do More Harm than Good. *National Education Association Today.* 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/school-suspensions-do-more-harm-good>
12. Novak A. The association between experiences of exclusionary discipline and justice system contact: A systematic review. *Agg Viol Beh.* 2018;40:73-82. doi:10.1016/j.avb.2018.04.002