

# Student-Powered Cell Phone Policies: Starter Kit for Districts



## Why this matters

Across the country, states and districts are adopting bell-to-bell cell phone bans, hoping to create more engaged learning environments. But the real challenge isn't simply prohibiting phone use, it's designing policies that students and adults both understand, trust, and can implement together. This Student-Powered Cell Phone Policy: Starter Kit for Districts provides practical tools and guiding questions to help schools co-design effective approaches with students, building shared ownership, equity, and trust so policies move beyond compliance to truly support learning and community.

This starter kit is designed to help districts:

- Understand where they have **local discretion**
- Engage students meaningfully through a **design process**
- Move from compliance to a culture of shared ownership and connection

Use this kit as a starting point for planning, facilitation, and decision-making. To begin, gather a small design team that includes both youth and adults—especially those most impacted by cellphone use policies. Aim for a range of voices across grade levels, identities, and lived experiences.

## Opportunities for Student Co-Design

The overall policy mandates that students must not use personal electronic devices during instructional time (bell-to-bell). Beyond this mandate, there are at least five areas that are **flexible** and can be **locally co-designed with students**:

1. **Exceptions** (e.g., health needs, family responsibilities, IEPs/504s)
2. **Communication & Rollout** (how and by whom the policy is introduced)
3. **Enforcement Approaches** (what implementation looks and feels like)
4. **Replacement Supports** (e.g., regulation tools, safe social connection)
5. **Restorative Practices** (repairing harm, regaining trust)

## Why partner with students?

Student voices ensure policies are more relevant, realistic, and impactful than those designed only by adults. Research shows:

- "When students perceive that they have a voice in school decision-making, they are more likely to be engaged, motivated, and academically successful." (Mittra, 2004)
- Student voice was found to be a significant predictor of both affective and cognitive engagement. (Anderson, 2018; Zeldin et al., 2018; Voight & Velez, 2018)

Partnering with students is an equitable, trauma-informed way to foster belonging, trust, and a shared commitment to meaningful change.

## So how do we move from research into real-world student partnership?

That's where design sprints come in. Design sprints are short, focused collaborations, typically 1–3 sessions over a short period of time, where students and educators co-create solutions together. You don't need perfect conditions; just a committed team, a clear focus, and a willingness to learn together.

### Design Sprint at-a-glance

1. **Empathize:** Gather student perspectives
2. **Analyze:** Identify patterns, tensions, and needs
3. **Brainstorm:** Brainstorm possible solutions
4. **Prototype:** Co-create drafts of policy elements, communications, and supports
5. **Test:** Gather feedback, iterate, and refine

## Step 1: Empathize - Student Interviews

### What it is

Student interviews (sometimes called **empathy interviews** in Human-Centered Design) are a powerful way for your **design team** to hear directly from young people about their lived experiences. In this context, they help you understand how, when, and why students rely on their phones—and what they need to feel connected, focused, and safe at school.

This isn't a survey or a needs assessment. It's a conversation. One that starts with curiosity and trust.



### How to do it as a design team:

1. **Choose your participants intentionally.** Talk with students who may be affected differently by phone policies. For example, those who rely on phones for personal needs, those who navigate school without them, and those who've had disciplinary experiences related to phone use.
2. **Keep it informal but intentional.** You don't need a script. Start by explaining that you're trying to design a better learning environment and want to learn from their perspective.
3. **Interview in pairs.** Have one adult ask questions and the other take notes. Or better yet train student leaders to conduct the interviews themselves.
4. **Look for patterns.** After 5–10 interviews, pause and look for recurring themes: needs, tensions, opportunities.

## Examples of empathy interview questions

### 1. Exceptions and supports

Goal: Understand when and why students genuinely need access to phones and how supports could be equitably applied.

- Tell me about a time during the school day when having your phone really helped you. What was going on? What would have changed if you hadn't had a phone at that moment?
- Are there times when it feels especially hard not to have access to your phone? Why

### 2. Enforcement and adult relationships

Goal: Learn how students experience adult enforcement and what feels fair, confusing, or harmful.

- Can you tell me about a time you saw a teacher or staff member respond to phone use in class? How did it feel to watch, or be part of, that moment?
- What makes a rule feel fair to you? What makes it feel unfair?
- What would make it easier for students and adults to stay on the same page about phone expectations?



### 3. Restorative Practices

Goal: Surface ideas for how harm or conflict around phone use can be addressed restoratively, not punitively.

- Tell me about a time you made a mistake at school and had a chance to repair it? What helped that happen?
- What should happen when a student breaks a phone rule?
- What would help someone rebuild trust if they didn't follow the phone expectations?

### 4. Replacements for connection and regulation

Goal: Identify what students need in place of phones, both socially and emotionally, to feel well and stay engaged. regulation

- If phones were away during class, what would you need instead to feel connected or calm?
- What helps you regulate your emotions or energy at school (other than your phone)?
- Are there times of day when it feels harder to stay focused or emotionally okay? What helps during those times?

### 5. Communication

Goal: Understand how students experience communication about school policies—what builds clarity, trust, and buy-in, and what causes confusion or resistance.

- Tell me about a school policy or rule that made sense to you. How did you find out about it?
- Can you think of a policy that was confusing or frustrating? What made it hard to understand?
- What's the best way for students to hear about new policies or changes at school?

## Step 2: Analyze

### What it is

This step helps you make sense of what you heard from students during empathy interviews. By organizing what students said into key themes, your team can identify the most important areas to focus on when co-designing policy elements.

### How to do it

1. **Pull out key takeaways.** As a team, review your interview notes and identify the most important things you heard, especially:

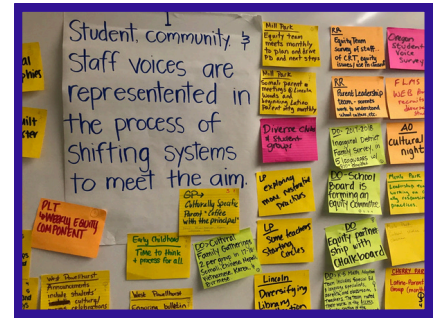
- What matters most to students
- What relates directly to the policy decisions ahead
- What surprised you
- What stood out as especially positive or challenging

2. **Choose strong insights.** Pick quotes or takeaways that feel most relevant or powerful and group the related ideas. Ask:

- Do these insights reflect different parts of the issue?
- Or are some connected?

3. **Look for patterns.** Return to all your interview notes and add more related quotes or ideas to each group.

4. **Name your themes.** Give each group a short title that captures what it's really about. These themes will guide your brainstorming.



## Step 3: Brainstorm

### What it is

Now that you've gathered student input and identified key themes, it's time to generate ideas. In this step, your team will explore different ways to design and implement the parts of the policy you do have control over.

### How to do it

1. **Choose a focus area.** Pick one of your themes or a specific issue students raised, like how exceptions are handled or how the policy is introduced

2. **Frame a clear question.** Instead of asking "What should we do?", try framing your question around possibility. For example:

- How can we create exceptions without making students feel singled out?
- What are different ways we could introduce the new policy in a way that feels respectful?
- How could enforcement feel more supportive and less punitive.



3. **Go for quantity.** Aim for at least 20 ideas that are big, small, wild, or impractical. The goal is to generate options without judging or editing.

4. **Use creative prompts.**

- “What would this look like in the best version of our school?”
- “What would surprise students in a good way?”
- “If students created this part of the policy, what might they come up with?”

5. **Build on each other’s ideas.** Say “yes, and...” instead of “yeah, but.” Try combining ideas or taking one idea and pushing it further.

## Step 4: Prototype Your Ideas

### What it is

Prototyping means turning ideas into something you can see, touch, or try out—so others can react and give feedback. It doesn’t have to be perfect. In fact, it shouldn’t be. The goal is to make your ideas real enough to test and improve.



### How to do it

1. **Choose a few top ideas from your brainstorm.** Start with the ones that feel most exciting or doable—and that connect to what students said they need.

2. **Make a quick version.** Work with students to bring the idea to life in a basic form. Think paper, sticky notes, slides, or even short skits or role plays.

a. Examples might include:

- A poster or slide that explains the new policy in student-friendly language
- A script or video for how adults might introduce the policy at an assembly or in class
- A sample form students can use to request an exception
- A simple visual flowchart showing how enforcement works (and what happens when it doesn’t)
- A list of alternative tools or spaces that help replace what phones usually provide (e.g., regulation, connection)

3. **Keep it rough.** This isn’t a final product. Don’t worry about polish. You just need enough detail for others to react to the idea.

4. **Create more than one version.** You don’t have to choose a single “right” idea yet. Try making a few different options, then test to see what works best.

# Step 5: Test Your Ideas

## What it is

Testing means trying out your early ideas and getting feedback from the people they'll impact, especially students. This helps you understand what's working, what's confusing, and what needs to be improved before rolling out the policy. Testing isn't just about refining a final product, it's also about making sure students, staff, and families feel included and respected in the process.

## How to do it

1. **Share your prototypes with others.** Choose a few students, staff, or family members and walk them through what you've created.
2. **Ask for reactions in simple ways.** Try using easy feedback structures like:
  - "I like, I wish, I wonder"
  - **Traffic lights:**
    - ● Green = ready
    - ● Yellow = needs refinement
    - i. ● Red = major concerns
3. **Invite people to think aloud.** Ask questions like:
  - "What stands out to you?"
  - "What would make this feel more clear, fair, or supportive?"
  - "If this policy went into effect tomorrow, how would it go for you?"
4. **Revise together.** Use the feedback to make updates, with students as co-creators. Even small changes can make a big difference in clarity and trust.

