

Personal Digital Device Restrictions Support Guide

The Ministry of Education and Child Care has [amended](#) the *Provincial Standards for Codes of Conduct Order* (the “Order”) to promote provincial consistency and to support boards of education in ensuring their schools have appropriate policies in place to restrict student personal digital device use. The amended Order will come into effect on July 1, 2024.

This guide is intended to support boards of education in amending their codes of conduct to align with the amended Order by including language that addresses student use of personal digital devices (including cell phones) at school. This Order sets out the standards that boards of education must meet in establishing student codes of conduct for their respective districts. The information in this support guide is provided for your convenience and guidance and is not a replacement for the Order.

The Ministry of Education and Child Care recommends boards of education engage with their Indigenous Education Councils as part of the process of updating their codes of conduct.

Order Language

The following sections are excerpts from the amended Order:

- 1 In this order “**personal digital device**” means any personal electronic device that can be used to communicate or to access the internet, such as a cell phone or a tablet.
- 6 Boards must ensure that the following elements are included in their codes of conduct:
 - ...(d.1) one or more statements about restricting the use of personal digital devices at school for the purpose of promoting online safety and focused learning environments;
- 8 Further to section 6(d.1), the statements about restricting the use of personal digital devices at school must address the following matters:
 - (a) restrictions on the use of personal digital devices at school, including during hours of instruction;
 - (b) use of personal digital devices for instructional purposes and digital literacy;
 - (c) use of personal digital devices that is appropriate to a student’s age and developmental stage;
 - (d) accessibility and accommodation needs;
 - (e) medical and health needs;
 - (f) equity to support learning outcomes.

Intention

Codes of conduct to restrict student personal digital device use at school to promote online safety and support focused learning environments.

Supporting Information

Section 1 Personal Digital Devices

The Order defines this term as “any personal digital device that can be used to communicate or to access the internet, such as a cell phone or a tablet.” Additional examples of devices that may fall into this definition are smart watches, gaming devices, and electronic toys.

Subsection 8(a) At school, including during hours of instruction

Codes of conduct must include statements about restricting the use of personal digital devices during hours of instruction. Boards of education are expected to use these statements to limit the use of personal digital devices at times when students should be focused on participating in educational programs.

With respect to the meaning of “hours of instruction”, please see the relevant definitions in the *School Regulation*.

Codes of conduct may also address student use of personal digital devices during school hours or on school property.

Subsection 8(b) Instructional purposes and digital literacy

Codes of conduct must address the use of personal digital devices for instructional purposes and digital literacy. Instructional purposes might include the use of devices as directed by teachers during class time. Digital literacy purposes might include designated computer or cell phone time that serves to promote digital literacy by providing opportunities for students to use devices while under the supervision of a teacher, which may include critical dialogue regarding responsible and appropriate use of devices.

Subsection 8(c) Age and Developmental Stage

Codes of conduct must address the use of personal digital devices that is appropriate to a student’s age and developmental stage. For example, elementary school codes of conduct may take a more restrictive approach, while middle and secondary schools may allow for progressively greater flexibility and student agency in using personal digital devices.

Subsection 8(d) Accessibility and accommodation needs

Codes of conduct must address accessibility and accommodation needs. This might involve the use of personal digital devices to support students with disabilities or diverse abilities as outlined in students’ support plans and Individual Education Plans. Codes of conduct may consider the use of assistive technology on personal digital devices at school to support student accessibility, communication, and autonomy. Examples of assistive technology could include devices or programs that support students with hearing loss or voice, speech or language disorders. Codes of conduct might allow for the use of tools such as augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, text to speech and speech to text programs or devices, translators, timers, calendars, and reminder software to promote accessibility and to facilitate participation.

Subsection 8(e) Medical and health needs

Codes of conduct must address medical and health needs. This might include approved use of personal digital devices to support medical necessities, such as monitoring blood glucose levels for a student with diabetes.

Subsection 8(f) Equity to support learning outcomes

Codes of conduct must address equity to support learning outcomes. Codes of conduct might include considerations to ensure personal digital device restrictions do not disproportionately impact some students

more than others. For example, codes of conduct may reflect computer or cell phone access facilitated by boards of education to support students who do not have access to internet outside of school and who therefore might use technology at school to complete schoolwork and foster connections with peers.

Research/Evidence

Restricting the use of personal digital devices at school is consistent with published research and evidence. The Ministry of Education and Child Care recommends that boards of education consider available research, including the following information, when amending their codes of conduct.

Reducing Screen Time at School

A recent academic paper (Smale et al., 2021) looking at the potential benefits and harms of cell phone use in classrooms to provide policy recommendations concluded that “removing cell phones from classrooms is likely to reduce students’ temptation to check their devices, play games, text, and surf the Internet, consequently enhancing their ability to focus and thus improving their performance due to greater intake and memory of academic material.” (p.51)

According to the 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey results (Smith et al., 2024), during their last school day prior to responding to the survey, top reasons for which students reported using their phones included: to scroll social media (74%), connect with family and friends (65%), game (not esports) (26%), game (esports) (18%), and only 11% of students reported using their phones for none of these activities.

There is a growing field of research into the impacts of cell phones and social media on mental health and academic performance, however there is still limited in-depth or longitudinal studies and more research is needed to confirm causality versus correlation (Smale et al., 2021; Abi-Jaoude, et al., 2020; Vuorre et al., 2021; Shannon, et al., 2022). Social media use in particular has been linked to emotional and coping challenges, including eroded self-worth, fear of missing out, distraction, stress and anxiety, and exposure to cyber-bullying (Vuorre et al., 2021; Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020; Shannon et al., 2022).

To promote physical and mental health and support healthy relationships, HealthLinkBC (2023) recommends a maximum of 2 hours of screen time per day for children aged 5-17. According to a recent report (Saunders & Colley, 2024) based on the Canadian Community Health Survey, average screen time increased between 2018 and 2021. In 2018, 42.5% of youth between age 12-17 reported meeting the recommended 2 hours or less of screen time on school days and 21% on non-school days, compared to 29.8% and 12.2% in 2021. Increased screen time takes away from time spent in direct connection with others, physical activity, and learning activities, and delays sleep.

Digital Literacy

As set out in the *School Act*, “the purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable all learners to become literate, to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy.” Digital literacy is instrumental to meeting this purpose. Digital literacy can include both the basic skills needed to operate devices and programs, as well as the thinking skills needed to access, evaluate, and utilize digital information. Jobs across all industries increasingly need foundational to advanced computer skills (Bergson-Shilcock, 2020). Digital literacy further promotes critical thinking related to internet safety, media, and online participation which benefit personal agency, holistic health, and political engagement and democracy (Cortesi et al., 2020).

Equity, Accessibility and Accommodations

Many B.C. students face barriers due to factors such as race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, care status, disabilities, diverse abilities, immigration status or primary language.

Students who face barriers are likely to experience greater benefits from access to technology and internet to support their unique needs. Cell phones can support equity through access to supports and services, connections and relationships, applications for learning, and more (UNESCO, 2023; McCreary Centre Society, 2018; Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2021). Cell phones can also support a sense of safety and promote social connection (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2021).

The UNESCO Technology in Education report (2023) identifies that, “People with disabilities face some of the most significant barriers in accessing quality education. Technology provides multiple means of representing information, expressing knowledge and engaging in learning, which can support people with disabilities, providing fair and optimized access to the curriculum, while developing their independence, agency and social inclusion” (p. 37). They further identify that “Some applications and technology-assisted learning initiatives support language learning” (p. 40).

Access to the Internet

According to the 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey, 97% of youth in B.C. had access to the internet in some capacity, and among these youth, 31% identified as accessing internet at school (Smith et al., 2023, p. 41). While highspeed internet or cellular services are available to most B.C. residents, many face barriers for access due to affordability (Ministry of Citizens' Services, 2022, pp. 26, 42). Students without internet access at home or cellular data may have access internet while at school or in other wifi-enabled locations outside of their houses.

BC Youth's Access to Technology fact sheet (McCreary Centre Society, 2018), based on 2018 Adolescent Health Survey data, identifies that a lack of internet access can create barriers to access health and mental health information, reduce feelings of connection and negatively impact school and employment skills (p. 1). They further note that those without internet were less likely to plan to graduate secondary school or pursue post-secondary education and reported poorer mental health and wellbeing, with higher levels of school absences, self-harm, and suicidality (p. 3). School connectedness was seen to be “protective for youth who lacked Internet access. For example, those who felt like a part of their school were more likely to rate their mental health as good or excellent ..., to feel happy ..., and to plan to continue their education beyond high school.” (p. 6)

Resources:

Curriculum

- [BC's curriculum](#) provides many opportunities for students to consider the appropriate use of technology. The provincial Applied Design, Skills, and Technologies (ADST) course is required learning for all students. Other areas of the curriculum reinforce this learning about technology use, such as the health components of the Physical and Health Education (PHE) curriculum which teach students about making choices to promote physical and mental health and developing healthy relationships.

Next Generation Network

- Through the Next Generation Network, the Ministry supports school districts with resources to protect internet access on school networks with firewall services to block: access to social media sites, inappropriate images, websites defined as inappropriate by the districts.

Digital Literacy

- BC's [Digital Literacy Framework](#) gives teachers suggestions on what ages to introduce important concepts related to topics like digital footprints, online safety, and information literacy.
- [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization \(UNESCO\) International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training](#) provides a database of digital competence frameworks, links to articles and think-pieces, and webinars.
- [Youth and Digital Citizenship+ \(Plus\): Understanding Skills for a Digital World](#) overview of digital citizenship, its importance in the digital age, includes frameworks and resources.

Assistive Technology

- [SET-BC \(setbc.org\)](#) provides assistive technology services for students living with physical disabilities.

Parent & Educator Resources

Digital literacy training

- [MediaSmarts](#) Non-profit organization that develops digital media literacy programs and resources with BC specific resources and curriculum charts for Grades K-12. Additional resources for parents include blogs, games, tips sheets, guides, workshops & tutorials, and videos.
- [Expect respect and a safe education \(erase\)](#) Online safety information, actions and resources to support K-12 students, parents, families, and educators in learning how to use technology responsibly, and stay safe from online harms.
 - erase Training sessions were designed to support families and caregivers navigate the digital world.
- [TelusWise](#) free digital literacy education program that offers informative workshops and resources to help people of all ages have a positive experience as digital citizens.
- [Canadian Paediatric Society - Digital media: Promoting healthy screen use in school-aged children and adolescents](#)
- [Canadian Paediatric Society - Screen time and digital media: Advice for parents of school-aged children and teens](#)
- [Canadian Paediatric Society - Social media: What parents should know](#)

Assistive Technology

- [Understood.org - What is assistive technology?](#)

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