June 4, 2024

Superintendent Francisco Durán,

We strongly encourage Arlington Public Schools (APS) to implement an “Away for the Day” personal device policy for the 2024-2025 school year to improve educational outcomes. Such a policy can be successfully launched at little to no cost to APS.

Science supports an "Away For The Day" policy in educational settings to improve students' learning. Research has shown that the presence of phones in classrooms harms academic achievement as well as social-emotional health, while the removal of cell phones during instructional time increases understanding of coursework and reduces anxiety. Now that we know the detrimental impacts of personal devices on students’ personal well-being and their opportunity to learn and access the curriculum, the sense of urgency is greater than ever before. School systems across the country are trying out policies to curb these negative impacts, and experiencing many successes.

APE is proposing that APS set clear rules, processes, and consequences to limit personal device usage at school. As part of this policy initiative, it is imperative that APS share the statistics and research which underpin the decision with the entire school administration and its teachers and staff, so that all entities involved understand the stakes and are invested in its success.

Specifically,

- **Clearly define the new policy:** All phones must be off and away throughout the school day.
- **Anticipate Exceptions:** Discuss in advance how exceptions will be handled.
- **Provide clear instruction on where phones are to go:** Phones should be stowed away in lockers, which are the preferred, no-cost solution.
- **Define specific consequences for using phones during the school day:**
  - First infraction: take phone away and return to student at end of the day.
  - Second infraction: take phone away, notify parents, return to student at end of day.
  - Third infraction: take phone away, notify parents, phone can only be picked up by a parent.

Common misconceptions regarding Away for the Day policies exist but can be easily cleared up. For instance:

- **The idea that parents want to be able to contact their children all day:** In fact, many parents want to help their kids plan their days on their own without reminders from their parents, to help them develop valuable executive-functioning skills and independence. APS should also remind parents with public messaging that if they wouldn’t call the office to give a certain message to their student, they should not text it to them during the school day.
• **The idea that parents want to reach their kids in the event of a school lockdown:** Phones can actually make children less safe in a crisis by creating excess noise, distracting from critical emergency protocols, and paralyzing emergency lines. Data supporting the need for phone-free emergency response is widely available and can easily be shared.

• **The idea that students can/should “just control their impulse” to check their phones during the school day:** We know that the frontal lobe, the control center for impulse control, is not fully developed in school-aged kids. Further, it is widely known that adults also struggle to ignore prompts from their phones; it is unfair to expect this of children. Finally, classrooms are not just any environment, but a specialized environment which specifically requires focus. We are sending kids mixed messages and setting them up for failure when we permit hyper-distracting elements into the classroom.

• **The idea that kids will feel less stress if they can check on their texts and social feeds:** It is widely documented that interacting with social media and other screen-based activities leads to isolation, anxiety and depression, whereas face-to-face interaction with peers counteracts these negative feelings. Schools can promote prosocial experiences, and have a huge impact on students’ emotional wellbeing, by implementing a policy that makes not only class time, but all school time (i.e. between classes, lunch, etc.) phone-free.

There will always be a portion of the population who are against change. We must focus on the dangers and harms associated with not acting, and remain committed to designing a policy that will protect students and help them be successful--both interpersonally and academically.

The enforcement burden associated with Away for the Day can be minimal. When solid systems are put in place, schools are not overburdened. In fact, it is without a system when teachers spend an inordinate amount of time policing student devices. There are dozens of examples of schools that have changed their policies to be clear and direct, resulting in little pushback from the community and resulting in immediate benefits. Habit-building takes time and there are supportive ways to help everyone ease into a new policy. One option is to allow a one-month adjustment period without official policy consequences for students. For the first month, students could receive a warning, with consequences taking place starting on the 2nd month.

Thank you for this opportunity to share this proposal with you and for the excellent work that you are doing on behalf of Arlington students.

Thank you,

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