



Lesson Plan
Values in Balance: The Phone Policy Dialogue <p style="text-align: right;">Developed by Ziquan Zhan University of Pittsburgh, Masters Student Applied Developmental Psychology</p>
Lesson Summary
Students in grades 9-12 will learn about evaluating information from different sources. Students will practice critical thinking, collaborative discussion, and ethical reasoning by examining multiple perspectives on a real-world school policy dilemma. Students will learn about how to weigh evidence from research, policy, surveys, and personal narratives to inform a stance on a complex issue.
Objective
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Evaluate differences in credibility, relevance, and impact of various evidence sources.2. Articulate personal views, listen to others, negotiate using reasons (not just preferences), and collaboratively produce a consensus ranking.3. Distill discussion into clear, persuasive recommendations, experiencing the complete professional communication cycle.
Vocabulary
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Credibility: The quality of being trusted and believed in. How reliable and truthful a source is.• Relevance: How closely connected or applicable something is to the matter at hand.• Impact: The strong effect or influence something has.• Evidence: Facts, information, or data used to support a claim or reach a conclusion.• Consensus: A general agreement reached by a group, where all members can support the decision even if it wasn't their first choice.• Policy: A set of rules or a plan of action agreed upon by a group, organization, or government.• Narrative: A story or an account of events and experiences.• Authority: The power or right to give orders, make decisions, or enforce obedience. Also refers to an expert or official source of information.• Negotiation: Discussion aimed at reaching an agreement.
Materials
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Core Scenario Statement handout (one per student).

- Set of 6 “Evidence Piece” cards (Pieces A-F, one set per group).
- Individual Ranking Sheet (one per student).
- Group Consensus Record Sheet (one per group).
- Whiteboard/Blackboard and erasable markers.

Lesson Activity

Teacher Prep

1. Print and prepare the 6 “Evidence Piece” cards (one set per group). The cards contain concise summaries of the following source types. The provided URLs are for reference and verification only, students do not need to access them. To ensure long-term access, educators are advised to save local PDF copies of the online articles. Cards contain:
 - **Piece A:** Scientific Research Abstract.
www.nber.org/papers/w34388
 - **Piece B:** Policy News (Pennsylvania Senate Bill 1014).
www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/news/pennsylvania-senate-passes-bill-banning-cellphones-in-school/
 - www.governor.ny.gov/news/distraction-free-schools-governor-hochul-announces-new-york-become-largest-state-nation
 - **Piece C:** Principal Interview.
www.govtech.com/education/k-12/nyc-schools-chancellor-explains-urgency-of-new-phone-policy
 - **Piece D:** Student Survey Data (or hypothetical local survey results).
www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/01/13/about-4-in-10-teens-support-cellphone-bans-in-classrooms-fewer-back-all-day-restrictions/
 - **Piece E:** Social Media Commentary (representative “hot take”).
<https://x.com/kevinroose/status/2001464352491311196>
<https://x.com/ellymelly/status/1998266983884947594>
 - **Piece F:** Documentary Clip
www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDP5Cgk6By4
2. Photocopy the Core Scenario Statement, Individual Ranking Sheets, and Group Consensus Record Sheets.
3. Prepare whiteboard/smart board space to list each group’s final ranking side-by-side for comparison.

Lesson Tips

- During individual work, encourage students to jot brief keywords (e.g., credible, relevant, has data) next to their rankings to aid later articulation.
- During small group discussion, circulate and prompt students to provide “reasons” beyond stating “preferences.” Ensure the group negotiates a true consensus through reasoning, not simple voting. Which means everyone in the group can understand, support, and explain the final ranking, even if it isn't their personal favorite order. It is built through reasoning and compromise, not a simple majority vote. It's okay if one or two members still have a different personal view, as long as they agree to support the

group's decision for the purpose of the activity.

- During whole-class discussion, remain neutral. Focus on mapping out different lines of thinking and evaluation criteria, not steering toward a “correct” answer.

Background Information

This activity simulates evidence-based decision-making processes used in many careers. The core issue, school smartphone policy, is a genuine, multifaceted dilemma with no single right answer. The evidence pieces provided are intentionally diverse in source type (academic, legislative, anecdotal, statistical) and perspective (pro-ban, anti-ban, neutral). The goal is to move students from information processing to persuasive output, helping them become more discerning information consumers and collaborative decision-makers. The educator’s role is that of a facilitator, not an advocate.

Introduction

- Share with your students: “Today, we will step into the role of advisors on a complex school policy issue. We will practice how professionals evaluate information and make collective recommendations.”
- Read the **Core Scenario Statement** aloud: *“Our school is considering a comprehensive ‘bell-to-bell’ policy to ban student smartphone use anywhere on school grounds during the entire school day, to minimize distraction and promote engagement. Consider: Do you support or oppose this policy?”*

Instructions

1. Individual Reading & Ranking (7-10 mins): Distribute the “Evidence Piece” cards and Individual Ranking Sheets. Students read all 6 pieces independently. On their sheet, based on “how influential this information is in forming my own support/oppose opinion”, they rank the pieces from Most Influential (1) to Least Influential (6).
2. Small Group Discussion & Consensus Ranking (15 mins): In small groups, members take turns sharing personal rankings and primary reasons. The group must then negotiate a single consensus ranking through dialogue and reasoning. They record the final ranking on the Group Consensus Record Sheet and summarize 2-3 key criteria used (e.g., “We valued direct data from peers more,” or “We gave more weight to authoritative research and policy guidance.”).
3. Whole Class Sharing & Comparison (10 mins): Each group’s spokesperson presents their consensus ranking and explains the key criteria. The teacher lists each group’s ranking side-by-side on the board for visual comparison. Guide the class to observe similarities and differences.
4. Facilitated Whole Class Discussion (15 mins): The educator leads a deeper discussion using the prepared questions (see Guiding Student Inquiry below).

Guiding Student Inquiry

Before Activity

1. What's your initial reaction to a full school-day phone ban?
2. What type of information would you find most convincing on this topic?

During Activity

1. Why is this piece more influential to you than that one?
2. How do we judge if this source is trustworthy?
3. Does this evidence feel relevant to *our* school experience? Why or why not?
4. How can we combine different pieces to build a stronger case?
5. What process is our group using to reach agreement?

After Activity

1. What most surprised you about the class's different rankings?
2. Did your personal view change based on the group discussion? Why?
3. What was the most important criterion your group used?

Check for Understanding

- **The “Influence” Question:** What strikes you when you see the differences in group rankings? Why do we disagree on “what information matters most”?
- **The “Source Credibility” Question:** How do we judge if a source is trustworthy? Is the “authority” of research, the “immediacy” of student surveys, or the “responsibility” behind a policy view more important to you? Why?
- **The “Epistemology” Question:** On this issue, is there one “absolutely right” answer? Or can both supporters and opponents have “some rightness”? How do we judge which side has “better” reasons?
- **The “Real World Transfer” Question:** How does this exercise simulate how we consume news and view social controversies? What does it teach us about becoming more discerning information consumers?

Extension Activity Ideas

- **Stakeholder Panel:** Hold a formal panel where students role-play as a researcher, a state legislator, a student, and a parent, using the evidence to defend their stance.
- **Policy Redrafting:** Groups use their key criteria and discussion to draft their own, more nuanced version of a school mobile device policy.
- **Evidence Hunt:** Students find one new, real-world piece of evidence (article, study, video) on this topic and present how it would fit into their original ranking.

School-to-Home Connection

- **Family Policy Discussion:** Students interview family members about their views on phone

use rules at home and school, comparing perspectives.

- **Home Media Audit:** Students and parents log their own screen time for an evening and discuss the pros and cons they observed.
- **“Show & Tell” Recommendation:** Students create a one-page brief or a short video summarizing their group’s key recommendation for the school policy, to share at home.

Academic Standards

Pennsylvania Career Readiness Standards:

- Standard 13.1 (Career Awareness and Preparation): Students engage in analyzing information from diverse sources and making evidence-based inferences to inform a stance.
- Standard 13.2 (Career Acquisition): Students practice the professional skills of researching, evaluating information credibility, and synthesizing findings—key to any career acquisition process.
- Standard 13.3 (Career Retention and Advancement): The core of the activity involves essential teamwork, consensus-building, negotiation, and conflict resolution strategies vital for career retention and advancement.

C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards:

- D2.Civ.10.9-12: Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights. (Considering stakeholder views in policy debate)
- D2.His.9.9-12: Analyze the relationship between historical sources and the interpretations to draw conclusions about how to evaluate and use sources. (Evaluating the credibility and relevance of different source types)

Appendix: Student Handout

Core Scenario Statement

“To enhance learning efficiency and the quality of social interaction on campus, our school is considering a new policy: a complete ban on student smartphone uses anywhere on school grounds (including breaks and lunch). All phones must be stored in designated lockers upon morning arrival and retrieved after school.”

Consider: Do you support or oppose this policy?

Put them in order, starting with the one that had the biggest impact (6) and ending with the one that had the smallest impact (1).

	Individual Ranking	Group Ranking
Piece A		
Piece B		
Piece C		
Piece D		
Piece E		
Piece F		

Piece A:

Scientific Research Abstract “A major Florida school district study (NBER WP 34388, 2025) found that cellphone bans led to significant test score improvements in Year 2 (after initial adjustment), along with large reductions in unexcused absences. Suspensions rose short-term during enforcement. Stronger effects for middle/high school and boys.”

Source: Figlio & Özek (2025).

Link: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w34388>

Piece B:

Principal Interview Quote “New York City Schools Chancellor David Banks stated in an interview: 'Phones have been the catalyst for student fights and safety concerns, as students can argue via text and other messaging platforms when they should be studying. They've also made students less social and prone to severe mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation... We don't think it's a panacea... I don't think taking phones away is going to solve all the issues, but we have absolutely seen an increase in mental health issues.'

Source: GovTech (Education Week reprint), July 1, 2024.

Link: <https://www.govtech.com/education/k-12/nyc-schools-chancellor-explains-urgency-of-new-phone-policy>

Piece C:

Student Survey Data “Pew Research Center survey of 1,458 U.S. teens (13-17), fall 2025: 41% support banning phones during class (51% oppose); only 17% support full-day bans (73% oppose). White & higher-income teens more supportive.”

Source: Pew Research Center (Jan 2026).

Link: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/01/13/about-4-in-10-teens-support-cellphone-bans-in-classrooms-fewer-back-all-day-restrictions/>

Piece D:

Popular Social Media Comment (X) “High-engagement X post: 'I confess I was not totally convinced that the phone bans would work, but early evidence suggests a total Jon Haidt victory' (NY public school phone ban).” (@kevinroose, Dec 2025)

Link: <https://x.com/kevinroose/status/2001464352491311196>

Another comment on X about school phone bans reads (149 likes): 'You know what you could have done? Ban phones in SCHOOL and stop the Education Union forcing kids to 'learn online'.' (User @ellymelly, December, 2025)."

Link: <https://x.com/ellymelly/status/1998266983884947594>

Piece E:

Documentary Clip Description “In the U.S. documentary Screenagers, middle school Principal, Darice Johnson, discusses the value of adopting an 'Away For The Day' policy at her school, which sees students lock away their mobile devices for the entire school day.

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDP5Cgk6By4>

Piece F:

Policy Reference

The Pennsylvania Senate has passed a bill that would ban students from using cell phones during the school day, often called a “bell-to-bell” ban and has sent it on to the state House for further consideration. The legislation, known as Senate Bill 1014, would set statewide standards requiring public schools to prohibit students from using or having access to their cellphones anytime they’re in school, not just during class instruction.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/news/pennsylvania-senate-passes-bill-banning-cellphones-in-school/>

New York State (2025) enacted a statewide bell-to-bell ban: No student smartphone use anywhere on K-12 school grounds during the entire school day (instructional + non-instructional time). Medical/IEP/educational exceptions only. One of the strongest statewide policies in the U.S.”

<https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/distraction-free-schools-governor-hochul-announces-new-york-become-largest-state-nation>