

From Distraction to Connection

Leveraging School Device Policies to Prioritize Building Social Capital and Life-Ready Skills

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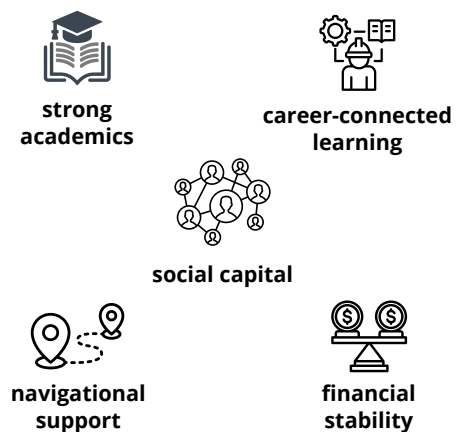
Efforts to limit cell phone use in schools are gaining momentum nationwide as educators and policymakers recognize the role of digital distractions in rising rates of anxiety, depression, and declining academic engagement. Unfortunately, implementation often misses the opportunity to redirect attention to a critical element of adolescent development: the need to cultivate independence, responsibility, and strong social networks.

Jonathan Haidt, in *The Anxious Generation*,¹ outlines four norms to counteract the unintended consequences of the digital age. Among them, his fourth norm—restoring independence, free play, and real-world responsibility—argues that young people must engage in self-governance and social interaction to develop resilience. Julia Freeland Fisher emphasizes in her book, *Who You Know*,² that building and leveraging social capital is just as important as acquiring knowledge for long-term success.

Together, their work presents a compelling argument: schools must not only reduce digital distractions but also intentionally create opportunities for students to develop

social networks and durable skills that will serve them beyond the classroom.

Strong academic outcomes alone do not guarantee economic and social mobility. Only 3 in 10 young people experiencing poverty earn a living wage by age 30—even among those who perform well academically.³ *The Paths of Opportunity* report from TNTP identifies five key factors that drive upward mobility:



Policies and practices implemented by state leaders, school districts, and industry partners should be thoughtfully crafted to ensure students graduate with both the independence and the social capital necessary for success in life and work.

The Critical Role of Strengthening Student Networks

A growing body of research points to a deeper crisis of student disengagement, isolation, and declining mental well-being:

- Nearly 75% of high school students feel negatively about school ⁴
- Time spent socializing in person has dropped 70% for young people since 2003 ⁵
- Loneliness increases the risk of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues at rates comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day ⁵

Given these alarming trends, it is critical that when creating and implementing policies on removing distractions (such as cell phones) policymakers, school leaders, and families are also intentional about understanding why students feel disconnected in the first place.

Today's teens experience fewer opportunities for unstructured play, less independence, and fewer real-world responsibilities, all of which are essential for healthy developmental growth. Haidt's fourth norm calls for deliberate shifts in school and family structures to restore real-world learning opportunities.

It is worth noting that independence alone is insufficient. To thrive, young people must also cultivate and sustain relationships with peers, mentors, and professionals who can open doors to opportunity. Strong academics without career-connected learning and social capital leave too many students without clear postsecondary pathways. Addressing this gap cannot be left to chance—it requires a strategic and intentional approach. Schools,

communities, and businesses must work together to create structured opportunities for students to engage with professionals, participate in work-based learning, and develop the relationships that will help them navigate their futures.

This means moving beyond sporadic career days or job fairs to sustained mentorship programs, employer-led projects, and community partnerships that provide real-world exposure.

States and districts should embed these opportunities into graduate profiles and success metrics, ensuring that relationship-building is seen as essential, not optional. By fostering intentional connections between students and industry leaders, we can help close opportunity gaps and prepare all students—not just the well-connected—for success in an increasingly network-driven world.

What Does This Mean For Policy and Practice?

Education alone cannot solve the challenge of economic and social mobility. It is clear that no single factor—academic success, financial stability, career experience, or mentorship—can guarantee opportunity on its own. Instead, schools, businesses, policymakers, and communities must work together to create pathways that connect students to both knowledge and opportunity.

The goal of restricting devices in schools isn't just to minimize distractions—it's to create environments where students develop the confidence, skills, and connections to shape their own futures.

If we build systems that prioritize real-world learning, mentorship, and meaningful relationships, we can ensure every student leaves school not just educated, but empowered.

Business and Industry Must Take A Proactive Role To Shift Existing Practices

The disconnect between education and industry leaves many students without clear career pathways, even when they succeed academically. Despite over 8 million unfilled jobs,⁷ young people often lack the industry connections and work experience needed to access them.

Projections based on birthrates indicate that the number of high school graduates will peak in 2025 and decline steadily through 2041.⁶ With predicted job demand outweighing available workers, business and industry must clearly signal the value of this shift to the K-12 education system by taking proactive steps such as:

- Recognize and validate students' work and credentials by embedding local, regional, and national endorsements into job applications and hiring platforms.
- Invest in young talent and move beyond passive engagement (e.g., career days) to sustained mentorship, networking, and skill-building programs.
- Partner with schools to provide students with real-world projects, apprenticeships, and pathways into growing industries.

States Must Leverage Graduate Profiles To Measure Social Capital

As more states develop graduate profiles, there is a need to measure not just what students know and are able to do, but also who they know and how well they are connected to future opportunities. Even when students excel academically, those without strong networks and mentorship struggle to access high-quality jobs.

Instead of placing the burden solely on schools, states can:

- Ensure all districts have access to robust college & career readiness tools to improve graduation pathway planning.
- Track the number of meaningful industry and community connections students establish before graduation.
- Ensure that work-based learning experiences are integrated into career pathways, rather than optional add-ons.
- Measure whether students have secured postsecondary mentors, apprenticeships, or job-related endorsements before leaving high school.

By embedding social capital as a key graduate outcome, states can help ensure that every student leaves high school with the relationships and opportunities they need to succeed—not just a diploma.

Endnotes

¹ Haidt, Jonathan. (2024). *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. Penguin Publishing Group.

² Freeland Fisher, Julia, and Daniel Fisher. (2018). *Who You Know: Unlocking Innovations That Expand Students' Networks*. Jossey-Bass.

³ TNTP. (2023). *Paths of opportunity: Exploring the connection between school experiences and student success after high school*. TNTP.

⁴ Moeller, J., Brackett, M. A., Ivcevic, Z., & White, A. E. (2020). High school students' feelings: Discoveries from a large national survey and an experience sampling study. *Learning and Instruction*, 66, 101301.

⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*. Office of the Surgeon General, 2023, <https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/connection/index.html>.

⁶ Lane, P., Falkenstern, C., & Bransberger, P. (2024). *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*. Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. <https://www.wiche.edu/knocking>.

⁷ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2024, July 2). *Job openings and labor turnover – May 2024* [Press release]. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/jolts_07022024.htm

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