



Reclaiming Student Attention: Spokane's "Engage In Real Life" Initiative & the Momentum for Statewide Cell Phone-Free Schools

July 16, 2026 AI Summary

[Watch the LEVinar recording](#)

Framing the Challenge

League of Education Voters CEO Arik Korman opened the event by describing the organization's commitment to educational equity and student well-being. He framed the discussion around an urgent question facing educators and families across Washington and the nation: How can schools create environments that foster focus, connection, and well-being when students are constantly surrounded by digital distractions?

Spokane's Wake-Up Call

The centerpiece of the webinar was Superintendent Dr. Adam Swinyard's account of how Spokane Public Schools arrived at its current approach.

Swinyard described what he sees as a troubling trend that has emerged over the last fifteen years: a steady decline in student engagement with school. This disengagement shows up in many forms, including rising chronic absenteeism, lower motivation, and reduced participation in classroom life. While multiple factors contribute to these trends, he argued that the rapid expansion of smartphones and personal technology has played a significant role.

Importantly, Swinyard did not present technology as entirely harmful. He acknowledged its many benefits, including its potential to expand access and support equity. However, he challenged educators and communities to critically examine the unintended consequences of constant digital connectivity, particularly for young people. He pointed to concerns about sleep deprivation, social isolation, anxiety, depression, and diminished engagement with the physical world.

According to Swinyard, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these challenges. While technology-related concerns existed before 2020, the pandemic normalized long hours spent on screens and reinforced habits of isolation that many students brought back with them when schools reopened.

Learning Before Acting

Rather than immediately imposing restrictions, Spokane began with community learning.

The district engaged students, families, and staff in conversations about youth mental health and technology. Community members participated in book studies of Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation* and viewed the documentary *Screenagers*. Together they explored rising rates of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and other shifts in youth behavior. The goal was not simply to tell students what to do but to build a shared understanding of why change might be necessary.

Only after this extensive engagement process did Spokane revise its cell phone policies. The district adopted a bell-to-bell restriction for elementary and middle schools, while high school students were prohibited from using personal devices during class but could access them during lunch and passing periods. Swinyard reported that these changes have been broadly successful and well received by adults, though students remain understandably mixed in their reactions.

The Birth of “Engage in Real Life”

What distinguishes Spokane's approach is that it does not rely solely on restrictions.

Swinyard argued that simply taking phones away is insufficient. Schools must also provide meaningful alternatives. This philosophy became the foundation of [Engage in Real Life](#) (IRL), a districtwide effort designed to connect students with people, activities, and experiences beyond their screens.

The initiative aims to ensure that every student participates in activities outside regular class time. Spokane dramatically expanded clubs, athletics, arts programs, and cultural organizations. Students can join everything from knitting clubs and fly-fishing groups to Dungeons & Dragons and even a popular cheese club. Athletic participation was broadened as well, with schools creating additional sub-varsity teams so more students could belong and compete.

Swinyard described the initiative as an effort to help students “find their people.” Whether through sports, music, welding, cultural clubs, or other interests, students are encouraged to build relationships and discover communities where they feel they belong.

Measurable Results

The district reports several encouraging outcomes.

Students participating in at least two Engage IRL activities experienced 20 percent lower rates of chronic absenteeism. Spokane also observed double-digit improvements in literacy and mathematics, reductions in behavioral incidents, and increased use of school libraries. Participation in extracurricular activities became so widespread that voters approved bond funding to expand facilities, fields, courts, and auditoriums to accommodate demand.

For Swinyard, these results demonstrate that student engagement is fundamentally about connection. When students find meaningful relationships and communities, their attendance, motivation, and academic success improve.

Students Confirm the Experience

The student panel largely validated Spokane's observations.

Darsh Patel, a junior at Mount Si High School in the Snoqualmie Valley School District and a member of the [Association of Washington Student Leaders](#) (AWSL), described how stronger phone restrictions at his school initially encouraged students to become more interactive during lunch and more involved in extracurricular activities. As enforcement weakened, he observed students becoming increasingly isolated and absorbed in their phones.

Isha Supreeth, a sophomore at Bellevue High School in the Bellevue School District and a member of AWSL, echoed those concerns, arguing that students sometimes forget that school serves an important social purpose in addition to academics. She expressed hope that stronger phone policies could help restore face-to-face interaction.

Jaden Hong, a junior at Eastlake High School in the Lake Washington School District and a member of AWSL, drawing on research conducted through the University of Washington Youth Advisory Board, praised Spokane's approach. He argued that successful phone policies require more than restrictions. Students need compelling alternatives and opportunities for connection. The real lesson from Spokane, he said, is that schools must create reasons for students to put their phones down voluntarily.

The Push for Statewide Policy

The discussion then expanded to Washington state policy.

Liz Trautman of [Stand for Children Washington](#) presented national research indicating that phones are inherently distracting even when they are not actively in use. Studies suggest physical proximity to a phone affects focus, academic performance, and even sleep quality. Research also shows students spend substantial portions of the school day

on non-academic phone activities, including social media, messaging, videos, and gaming.

Trautman highlighted survey data showing that educators report greater satisfaction and fewer classroom disruptions when schools adopt stricter phone restrictions. She also noted a growing national trend toward statewide action, with dozens of states implementing stronger policies and none reversing course after doing so.

Jenny Plaja, Chief Impact Officer at the [Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction](#) (OSPI), described Washington's evolving efforts. Since issuing statewide guidance in August 2024, OSPI has seen a significant increase in district adoption of cell phone policies. However, implementation remains inconsistent, with different schools and teachers often enforcing different expectations.

According to survey results collected by OSPI, districts with phone restrictions report fewer instructional disruptions, increased student engagement, and more student-to-student interaction. Yet many districts either lack comprehensive policies or struggle with inconsistent enforcement.

As a result, OSPI plans to propose an "away for the day" policy requiring phones to be stored away from the beginning to the end of the school day, including lunch and passing periods. The proposal would include accommodations for emergencies, medical needs, and students with IEPs or 504 plans.

An Educator's Perspective

Ben Folgers, English Language Arts (ELA) Teacher and ELA Department Chair at Mount Rainier High School in Highline Public Schools, reinforced the need for statewide consistency.

Drawing on his classroom experience, Folgers described how fragmented implementation often leaves individual teachers responsible for enforcement without adequate support. Over time, this inconsistency can erode otherwise strong policies. He argued that statewide standards would provide educators, administrators, and districts with the backing necessary for sustained implementation.

At the same time, Folgers cautioned that policy alone is not enough. Effective implementation requires funding, professional development, and non-punitive enforcement strategies. Restrictions should never become tools for over-policing students. Instead, they should support healthier learning environments while preserving students' dignity and belonging.

The Larger Goal

By the conclusion of the webinar, a clear consensus had emerged.

The discussion was never really about cell phones alone. It was about what schools are for.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that education depends on relationships. Students learn best when they feel seen, valued, connected, and safe. Phones, while beneficial in many contexts, often interfere with those experiences by drawing attention away from people and toward screens.

Spokane's Engage in Real Life initiative offers a compelling model because it addresses both sides of the equation. It limits distractions while actively creating opportunities for belonging. Rather than focusing solely on what students lose when phones are put away, it emphasizes what they gain: friendships, participation, confidence, community, and engagement.

As Washington debates a statewide policy, the strongest message from students, educators, and policymakers alike was that success will depend not simply on restricting technology, but on rebuilding the human connections that make school meaningful.

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