LAUSD imposes sweeping screen-time limits months after mass student walkouts

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Over 400,000 students have returned to Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) schools for the 2026-27 year under sweeping new restrictions on classroom screen time, building on a cellphone and social media ban that took effect last year in the nation's second-largest district.

The Board of Education approved a resolution in April directing the district to develop firm screen-time limits, then adopted the final policy unanimously on June 23. It bars screen use entirely through first grade and imposes rising limits on school-issued devices for older students. Grades two through five are capped at 60 minutes a day or 300 minutes a week, middle and high school students at 120 minutes a day or 600 minutes a week, homework included.

Unsupervised student use of YouTube and social media on district devices is barred outright, and existing technology contracts face review. Parents must now opt in for a student to take a district device home, and the district will spend $1 million a year on software to track screen time and block content. A separate cellphone policy, in effect since February 2025, prohibits smartphones, smartwatches and earbuds throughout the school day, including lunch and passing periods.

LAUSD is not acting on its own initiative but rather fulfilling a state mandate. California's Phone-Free School Act (AB 3216), signed by Governor Gavin Newsom in 2024, requires every district, charter school and county office of education in the state to adopt a policy restricting student smartphones by July 1, 2026. The measure passed with bipartisan support.

The district frames the crackdown as a defense of student concentration. Board member Nick Melvoin speaks of restoring "balance." Superintendent Andrés Chait, appointed after Alberto Carvalho resigned under federal investigation, invokes "purposeful" technology use.

Educators are not indifferent to the problems posed by the pervasiveness of screens and their misuse in schools. Those difficulties are real, and there is genuine confusion about how to address them. This is reflected in broad support for restrictions. A 2024 National Education Association (NEA) survey found 90 percent of teachers favor banning cellphones during instructional time, and 75 percent favor comprehensive "bell-to-bell" limits.

But the claim that screens are the source of the crisis conceals the underlying causes. Widespread distraction in the classroom is the inevitable product of the systematic underfunding and overcrowding of schools, the transformation of education into test-prep and credentialing, the commodification of attention by the tech corporations, and the broader social crisis of capitalism. LAUSD, like districts across the country, has presided over decades of austerity that have stripped schools of librarians, counselors, nurses and arts programs.

The classrooms capable of holding students' attention have been gutted by decades of bipartisan slashing of school funds, the non-renewal of ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds, the ongoing destruction of the Department of Education and federal grant funding and the Trump administration's drive to privatize public education wholesale.

This is only the beginning. LAUSD's own budget projects operating cash going negative by $231 million in November 2027, and the board has adopted a fiscal stabilization plan of $3.649 billion in cuts eliminating 5,690 positions, plus unpaid furlough days and healthcare cost-shifting. This is in a state whose 246 billionaires increased their wealth by $487.2 billion in the year to March 2026, and a countrfddrdfrrry ruled by a financial oligarchy. Both parties prioritize war over social spending; the war on Iran has already cost tens of billions of dollars.

The technology itself, which links people across the globe and has shown a revolutionary capacity to expand knowledge, is not the problem. It is owned by a parasitic oligarchy bent on war abroad and dictatorial rule at home.

The same policy that limits screens also installs monitoring software designed to surveil student youth and prevent them from organizing politically. The ruling elite is especially fearful of young people, who have used their phones to mobilize against the genocide in Gaza and in anti-ICE school walkouts across the country. On February 4, roughly 4,500 Los Angeles students from two dozen schools walked out and marched to City Hall and the Metropolitan Detention Center against the Trump administration's mass deportation campaign. Two days later participation nearly tripled, with the district confirming that over 12,500 students from more than 85 schools participated. The walkouts were organized through the very

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smartphones and apps the district has now moved to restrict.

This was part of a nationwide movement of student walkouts following the killings of Renée Nicole Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis in January, with parallel actions in Texas, Arizona, Virginia, Michigan and other states. Both the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy responded to the student walkouts not with solidarity but with a coordinated effort to contain, suppress and divert the movement. Across the US, the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) instructed educators not to organize or encourage walkouts, making this a plank of their official policy.

Phone bans hand the school bureaucracy tighter control over how students communicate and organize, a further inroad on freedom of speech and association.

Districts nationwide have for years hired private firms such as Geo Listening, Social Sentinel and Media Sonar to mine students' posts, emails and searches, and these firms market themselves as tools for intercepting student walkouts. Since that wave, the apparatus has only expanded. AI-powered systems from firms such as Gaggle, GoGuardian and Securly now scan the accounts and school-issued devices of tens of millions of students around the clock.

This monitoring is increasingly funneled into immigration enforcement. In 2025 and 2026, ICE and Border Patrol tapped district camera systems for license plates, and a 2025 Center for Democracy and Technology study found students flagged by school monitoring software being contacted by immigration agents, with 17 percent of teachers that year reporting their school had shared student data with immigration authorities.

The sweeping bans on phones and screen time in schools are a bipartisan offensive. The Democratic Party controls the LAUSD board and is executing the policy locally, but the crackdown was pioneered in Republican-run Florida in 2023 and is now law in more than two dozen states. It carries the full backing of the unions.

Both the NEA and the AFT actively campaign for it, issuing statements on phones and AI while refusing to mobilize their millions of members against the dismantling of public education. In a May 27 address at the National Press Club, "Devices Down, Eyes Up, Hands-On," AFT President Randi Weingarten demanded screen bans and limits on classroom AI. The posture is a fraud: A year earlier, in July 2025, the AFT launched a $23 million National Academy for AI Instruction with Microsoft, OpenAI and Anthropic, profiting directly from the corporate penetration of the classroom it now claims to resist.

The campaign has also pulled in openly reactionary forces, including conservative think tanks such as the Ethics and Public Policy Center and the anti-vaccine networks around Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s Department of Health and Human Services, which on May 20 issued the first surgeon general's warning on "harmful screen use." Weingarten's embrace of the campaign echoes her role in the COVID-19 pandemic, when she helped force unsafe school reopenings in step with such forces.

Karla Griego, an organizer for United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) endorsed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA-LA) and elected to the school board, co-sponsored the screen-time resolution and voted for the final policy. When the cellphone ban was approved, UTLA engaged with it only on behalf of members' working conditions, negotiating indemnification for lost student devices, a "test of reasonableness" for enforcement and a role for Local School Leadership Councils. On screen time it has confined itself to defending teachers' autonomy and demanding funding for physical textbooks.

These are the same unions that sabotaged the April 14 district-wide strike, the culmination of the statewide "We Can't Wait" campaign, handing LAUSD a free hand to impose mass layoffs and austerity in line with the Democratic Party's "fiscal stabilization" plans.

The unions are suppressing opposition to larger classes and the gutting of the arts, music and tutoring programs that keep students engaged, all while endorsing the police approach to disciplining youth.

This is a generation being radicalized by war, authoritarianism, climate catastrophe and social crisis. Young people are already walking out and using digital communication to organize against the conditions capitalism has created. As the class struggle erupts more openly, their ability to organize independently will only become more vital.

The working class must take up a political struggle against the oligarchy's demand for austerity, fighting for independent rank-and-file committees in every school and a massive infusion of resources for smaller class sizes and the training of educators in new technologies.

Such committees should draw in the healthcare, learning support, reading and special education specialists who understand child development and pedagogy, to determine democratically the scope and use of screens and AI technologies. They must be independent of the administration, the capitalist parties and the ed-tech industry, answerable only to educators, and linked worldwide through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The fight to defend high-quality public education for all is a fight against capitalism and the subordination of students' and educators' needs to Wall Street.

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