

**REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS**

# **Causal Research on the Impacts of Cell Phone Policies in K-12 Schools**



**EVIDENCE  
& EVALUATION**





# Arnold Ventures Overview

Arnold Ventures (AV) is a philanthropy dedicated to improving the lives of Americans through evidence-based policy solutions that maximize opportunity and minimize injustice. We focus on improving systems where outcomes are falling short, incentives are misaligned, and the time is right for change.

To advance this mission, we invest in rigorous research to better understand the root causes of problems and strengthen the evidence base on what works to solve them. Using this evidence, we advocate for policy reforms at all levels of government and help build durable, bipartisan coalitions for lasting change.

## The Opportunity

Smartphones are nearly universal among children and adolescents in the United States: [95% of teens reported having access to a smartphone](#), giving them regular exposure to social media, gaming, and video streaming platforms. While smartphones can support learning and social connection, emerging evidence suggests that using phones during school may also interfere with important educational goals, including student engagement, attendance, and academic performance.

In response, more than 30 states have passed laws restricting cell phone use in K-12 schools in recent years. These policies vary widely, ranging from “bell-to-bell” policies to classroom-level bans on phones only during instructional time. Despite the rapid adoption of these policies, rigorous evidence on academic, behavioral, and mental health impacts remains limited. In the absence of strong research, federal and state policymakers, as well as school and district leaders, lack the information needed to make informed decisions that effectively support student success. Building a robust evidence base is critical for shaping policies and practices that improve learning and well-being in both the short- and long-term.

**This RFP seeks to address these gaps by supporting rigorous, causal research on the academic, behavioral, and mental health impacts of cell phone policies in K-12 schools in the United States. We seek studies that generate actionable insights for policymakers, as well as school and district leaders, who are deciding whether and how to implement or refine such policies. This RFP will support both Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) and Quasi-Experimental Designs (QEDs) that can credibly estimate causal effects. While we are open to a range of research questions, we highlight 2 areas of particular interest below.**

- **What are the overall impacts of policies restricting cell phone use in K-12 schools?**
  - › What are the short- and long-term impacts of cell phone policies on student-level outcomes, including academic achievement and attainment (e.g., standardized test scores, graduation rates), behaviors (e.g., engagement, attendance, disciplinary actions), and/or mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, loneliness)?
  - › What are the short- and long-term impacts of cell phone policies on school-level outcomes, including school safety (e.g., reported incidents), school climate (e.g., bullying, social connections), and administrative factors (e.g., costs, logistics, communications with parents)?
  - › Do initial impacts persist, fade, or grow as schools refine their practices over time?
- **What factors explain variation in the impacts of cell phone policies?**
  - › Which students, schools, and districts are most impacted by cell phone policies?
  - › Which policy design features (e.g., *what* devices are banned, *when* devices are banned, *how* devices are stored/locked) make cell phone policies more — or less — effective?
  - › Which implementation strategies (e.g., training and supports for school staff, consistent approaches for enforcement) make cell phone policies more — or less — effective?
  - › How do the resource and operational implications of different policy approaches (e.g., costs, staff time, infrastructure needs) influence their effectiveness? How do these factors affect the scalability and sustainability of effective approaches?



STAGE OF APPLICATION PROCESS	DATE
Deadline to receive letters of interest (LOI)	<b>May 1, 2026</b>
Notification if invited to submit a full proposal	<b>June 12, 2026</b>
Deadline for invited applicants to submit a full proposal	<b>August 7, 2026</b>
Notification if selected for an award	<b>October 16, 2026*</b>

*\*Proposals over \$500,000 may require additional time for approval.*

## Selection Criteria

AV seeks to support rigorous research that generates actionable evidence to inform policy decisions and improve the lives of individuals, families, and communities in America. To that end, applications should demonstrate strength in areas that we view as essential to producing rigorous, policy-relevant evidence. Specifically, we ask that applicants address the following criteria in their proposals, which serve as the basis for our funding decisions: **(1) policy relevance and (2) study design**. We provide details for each of these 2 areas below.

While these criteria reflect our priorities and help guide funding decisions, we recognize that strong projects can vary, and there may be exceptions based on the specifics of a proposal. We also understand that not all details can be provided at the letter of interest (LOI) stage; applicants should address each criterion to the extent feasible in an LOI, with full proposals expected to address all criteria comprehensively.

CRITERION	DETAIL
<b>Policy Relevance</b>	<p><b>Why it matters:</b> We believe research should speak directly to the priorities and pressing needs of decision-makers and the communities they serve. Projects with strong policy relevance demonstrate a clear pathway from evidence to action and address questions that matter for real-world practice and systems change.</p> <p><b>What we are looking for:</b> A strong submission will clearly articulate why the study matters, who stands to benefit, and how its findings could shape policy or practice. Specifically, we look for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>U.S. relevance and scope:</b> Research on a U.S.-based program, policy, or intervention.</li> <li>• <b>Pathway to policy impact:</b> Description of the underlying social policy challenge the study addresses, why it is timely, and how it aligns with the priorities of specific policymakers or agencies at the local, state, and/or federal level. Strong submissions explicitly identify the decision-makers who stand to benefit from the research and describe how study findings could inform policy or practice at scale, including the concrete policy, administrative, or operational mechanisms through which effective interventions could be scaled or institutionalized (e.g., program expansion, funding allocation, operational improvements, or regulatory changes).</li> </ul>

CRITERION	DETAIL
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Contribution to the field:</b> Explanation of how the study builds on, extends, or fills gaps in existing evidence. Strong submissions situate the project within the broader evidence base, make a persuasive case for why new evidence is needed, and articulate how it will advance learning or inform decision-making.</li> </ul>
<b>Study Design</b>	<p><b>Why it matters:</b> We aim to support research that accurately measures impact and produces valid, reliable evidence that can inform real-world decisions. Strong study design is essential to generating credible causal estimates that policymakers can trust.</p> <p><b>What we are looking for:</b> A strong submission will present a well-specified, adequately powered, and methodologically sound design that demonstrates rigor and feasibility. Specifically, we look for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Clear articulation of the intervention, research questions, and outcomes:</b> A precise description of i) the program, policy, or intervention being evaluated, including its scope and how long it has been implemented; ii) the research question(s); iii) 1 to 2 primary outcomes and any additional secondary outcomes<sup>1</sup>; and iv) the planned duration of follow-up or measurement timing. The strongest submissions measure medium- to long-term impacts to ensure that immediate impacts do not fade.</li> <li>• <b>Compelling study design:</b> An overview of the proposed design. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› If the proposed study is an RCT, describe how recruitment and randomization will be conducted. Submissions should explicitly discuss limitations of the design and propose strategies to mitigate potential challenges, such as attrition, missing data, etc.</li> <li>› If the proposed study is a QED, provide the rationale for why the selected empirical strategy is well-suited to address the research question, a clear explanation of the identification strategy and source of variation used to generate causal impacts, and a precise articulation of how treatment and comparison groups will be constructed, if applicable. Submissions should explicitly discuss potential threats to validity and outline robustness checks to address these threats.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Adequate power for meaningful, policy-relevant effects:</b> Detailed sample size assumptions and a power analysis for the primary outcome(s). Submissions should provide clear justification for why the minimum detectable effect size (MDE) is realistic for the intervention and of a magnitude that is policy relevant. Note that detailed power calculations are only required at the full proposal stage, not for the LOI.</li> <li>• <b>Use of high-quality data sources:</b> Clear description of all data sources and plans to secure data sharing agreements. The strongest submissions use high-quality administrative data wherever feasible.</li> <li>• <b>Study timeline and feasibility:</b> A realistic timeline outlining key activities (randomization, recruitment, data collection, analysis, and dissemination).</li> <li>• <b>Adherence to research transparency and integrity:</b> A commitment to practices that promote credible, transparent research, such as pre-registration of the study and public posting of a pre-analysis plan prior to study launch. For more details, see our <a href="#">open science guidelines for research grants</a>.</li> </ul>

1. If the study has more than 2 primary outcomes, describe the method for multiple comparisons adjustment.

# How to Apply



We ask interested applicants to submit an LOI for AV consideration via our applicant [portal](#). **Applicants must use the LOI template provided [here](#).**

This RFP will remain open until May 1, 2026, and all LOIs must be submitted by that date. Applicants whose letters are reviewed favorably, based on the eligibility and selection criteria above, will be invited to submit a full proposal.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the LOI, please also share the following under the *Optional Upload for Supporting Documents* section on the portal (this will not count towards the LOI page limit):

- **Study team overview:** Applicants should outline the project team in 1-2 pages, including an overview of roles and responsibilities for key project members. Applicants will be asked to upload brief (1-3 pages) CVs of key members of the study team to the portal.
- **Budget request summary:** Applicants should specify the amount of funding requested from AV, reflecting the project timeline and the study scope, and include an approximate project budget that is consistent with AV's [cost policy](#). While a formal budget is not required at the LOI stage, applicants should discuss the anticipated drivers of project costs (e.g., personnel time, data acquisition, travel, and administrative costs).<sup>3</sup>

## Frequently Asked Questions

The Evidence and Evaluation team at AV oversees this RFP. Applicants can find responses to frequently asked questions (FAQs) for our general RFPs [here](#). Depending on your proposed study design, you may also find useful guidance under Strengthening Evidence RFP Questions for RCT studies and Building Evidence RFP Questions for QED studies in the FAQ document mentioned. In addition to these general FAQs, we have included 2 FAQs specific to this RFP below. Please direct other questions about the selection criteria or application process to [EvidenceTeam@arnoldventures.org](mailto:EvidenceTeam@arnoldventures.org).

- **What specific study designs are eligible for funding under this RFP?**
  - › This RFP will provide funding to conduct randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental studies that generate causal evidence. Eligible designs may include randomized controlled trials, natural experiments, regression discontinuity, difference-in-differences, and instrumental variable approaches. We do not fund studies that only rely on matching or selection on observables as their primary identification strategy.
- **Will questions beyond those listed in the RFP be considered?**
  - › Yes. While we will prioritize the questions explicitly outlined in the RFP, we welcome the submission of additional causal questions. All proposed questions will be evaluated for policy relevance, rigor, feasibility, and alignment with the objectives of the RFP.

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2. All qualified applicants will be considered without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, age, sex, gender identity or expression, marital status, sexual orientation, disability, military/veteran status, or any other characteristic protected by applicable law.
  3. In general, this RFP is focused on funding research projects where other parties have agreed to pay the cost of delivering the intervention or practice. However, we may consider supporting the costs of intervention delivery in a limited number of awards if such support would be needed to enable a rigorous impact evaluation (e.g., increase study power). Applicants seeking such funding should indicate so in their submission and provide the compelling reason for the funding request.

[Arnold Ventures](#) is a philanthropy that supports research to understand the root causes of America's most persistent and pressing problems, as well as evidence-based solutions to address them. By focusing on systemic change and bipartisan policy reforms, AV works to improve the lives of American families, strengthen communities, and promote economic opportunity.