

A better break is more than a break without phones

After Ho Chi Minh City's Plan 6468, what should schools fund first—and how should they judge success?

BRIEFWORK STUDIO · POLICY BRIEF · EN · 28 OCTOBER 2026

Decision audience: Leaders of lower and upper secondary schools, multi-level schools and education administrators in Ho Chi Minh City.

Scope: Independent analysis of public sources; not issued on behalf of the City Department of Education and Training.

Executive decision

From January 2026, schools covered by Ho Chi Minh City's Plan 6468/KH-SGDĐT were directed to implement arrangements limiting mobile-phone use during breaks. **The plan is not an absolute device ban.** It already requires schools to consult pupils, provide physical and quiet/rest activities, and accommodate certain supervised device-based activities [1]. The policy question is therefore not whether pupils should be allowed to play chess or rest quietly: the city's plan already acknowledges those options. The harder question is **whether individual schools can make them genuinely accessible, safe and sustainable when space, staff time and funding are limited.**

Briefwork's recommendation: Before funding additional clubs or compulsory activity programmes, school leaders should map pupils' needs and usable break-time capacity. They should establish a **verifiable baseline offer**: somewhere to rest, safe circulation routes, an activity that does not require club membership, clear rules on permitted device use and a route to adult support. Staff-led events and clubs should then target identified unmet demand. This is **Briefwork's conditional resource-allocation recommendation**, not a new city requirement or a model proven superior by a local experiment.

We propose an **eight-week operational review: two weeks of baseline measurement, one week to approve the design, and five weeks of implementation and review.** Neither participation rates nor confiscation counts should stand in for mental wellbeing. Continuation and expansion should depend on access, safety, pupil experience and operational burden together.

1. What has already been decided?

Plan 6468/KH-SGDĐT, issued on 30 December 2025, covers lower and upper secondary schools, multi-level schools and relevant continuing-education centres. It requires school-level implementation plans, consultation with **all pupils**, parent engagement, named responsibilities and monitoring [1]. Section III sets out three groups of provision: (i) active play and physical activity; (ii) quiet activities, reading and on-site rest; and (iii) certain supervised device use for learning, research or organised group recreation, with teacher permission in designated areas. The plan discourages passive, isolated personal screen use and cautions against unlawful device confiscation or handling [1].

This is a **break-time** initiative. It should not be conflated with the **classroom** device provision in Article 38(3)(d) of the school charter promulgated by Circular 15/2026/TT-BGDĐT, effective 10 May 2026 [2]. The classroom rule cannot be extrapolated into an unconditional ban throughout the school day.

A report in *Sài Gòn Giải Phóng* described the October–December 2025 pilot in 16 institutions. More than 80% of pupils reportedly took part in at least one alternative activity, and reported parental agreement exceeded 97%. The same account identified limited playground space, funding constraints, repetitive activities and reliance on teachers as implementation difficulties [3]. These figures may inform operations, but **they are not causal impact estimates**: the public account does not provide a complete denominator, measurement protocol, comparison group or credible before–after analysis. A citywide implementation announcement also does not establish what each individual school has achieved.

2. What the evidence supports—and what it does not

Source and design	Relevant finding	Limitation for this decision
SMART Schools, England (2025) : cross-sectional study of 1,227 pupils in 30 schools [4]	More restrictive schools reported less phone use during school hours, but no clear difference in the primary mental-wellbeing measure between school-policy groups.	An observational cross-section cannot show that a restriction <i>caused</i> , or could never cause, changes in wellbeing.

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Allcott et al., United States (NBER; revised September 2026): staggered difference-in-differences study of all-day lockable pouches [5]	Adoption was associated with reduced phone use; average test-score effects were near zero, and disciplinary and subjective-wellbeing responses varied over time.	All-day pouches in the US are not the same policy as HCMC break-time management; this is a working paper.
Oppici et al. (2025): review of 28 studies involving 19,753 participants [6]	Playground-enrichment interventions showed small gains in some activity measures; evidence on social and psychological outcomes was mixed and study quality varied.	Buying equipment or marking courts does not, by itself, establish social or mental-health gains in Vietnamese secondary schools.
Prinstein and Evans, NEPC (20 October 2026): evidence and policy synthesis [7]	The case for addressing non-academic screen use is meaningful, particularly around classroom distraction, with some small academic gains after restrictions.	Comparative policy design and social-psychological effects remain inadequately studied.

None of these sources should be recruited into a predetermined conclusion, either “phone bans always work” or “phone bans do nothing”. Reduced screen exposure, more movement, a stronger sense of belonging and recovery before the next lesson are **different outcomes**. A school may achieve one and not the others. The policy must state which outcomes it seeks and assess them separately.

3. Operational choices are not a false three-way contest

Option	Potential value	Exclusion risk and resources
A. Scheduled staff-led activities	Active facilitation can welcome pupils without a peer group; useful for events or themed sessions.	Preparation and supervision time; pressure to participate; congestion in small grounds.
B. Opt-in clubs	Sustained interests and pupil leadership; opportunities for longer-term connection.	Full membership lists; difficulties welcoming newcomers; adult supervision and rotation rules.

Option	Potential value	Exclusion risk and resources
C. Open-access shared provision	Space to talk, move lightly, read or rest without joining a group.	Popular groups may dominate; noise, safe routes, weather and safeguarding need management.

This is **Briefwork’s design comparison**, not a controlled trial of A, B and C. The conditional recommendation is to make C a baseline offer, while using A and B to address specific gaps. If a sports court is full while a reading corner is empty, another tournament might raise recorded participation without increasing choice. Conversely, where space is too constrained to separate incompatible uses, a carefully supervised, rotating activity may be safer than attempting many simultaneous open-access zones.

The proposed **baseline offer** need not begin with expensive purchases. School leaders should be able to identify where pupils can rest, which activities require no advance sign-up, what happens in wet weather, whom pupils can approach when excluded or unsafe, and when device use is permitted under the applicable plan. These are suggested operating checks, not legally prescribed numerical standards.

4. Equity, safety and operational burden

A pupil sitting alone may be enjoying quiet; another may want to join a game but be excluded. Participation counts cannot distinguish those experiences. Articles 12 and 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child address children’s participation in decisions affecting them and their rights to rest and play [8]. They support meaningful consultation, not an obligation to grant every individual preference or to shift safeguarding duties onto pupils.

Teachers have legitimate concerns about discipline, safety and disputes during device enforcement. Families need a reliable emergency-contact route. Schools should publish procedures for family contact, supervision, conflict resolution and permitted device uses. Where an individual needs a device for health or accessibility, schools should check the relevant law and local rules and provide a discreet process. **Plan 6468 should not be presented as though it expressly lists every possible medical exception.**

Costs must include time as well as invoices. A programme that buys no equipment but adds two staff supervisors each day still consumes capacity. Reports should record **net additional staff minutes**—new preparation, supervision and clean-up less work genuinely removed—alongside

materials, maintenance, cancelled sessions and separately recorded safety incidents. Pupil leadership should not become a substitute for adult safeguarding responsibilities.

5. An eight-week operational review—not a disguised experiment

Timing	Tasks and accountable owners	Decision output
Weeks 1–2: baseline	Deputy head leads a short anonymous survey and records response rates. Independent observers sample comparable breaks, usable seating, queues, bottlenecks, safety concerns and supervision time.	A needs -and - capacity map. Distinguish <i>choosing solitude</i> from <i>wanting to join but being unable to</i> .
Week 3: approval	School leadership, facilities and finance staff confirm layout, rules, wet - weather arrangements, duty roster, budget and evaluation questions. Consult pupils and parents in keeping with Plan 6468.	An accountable operating plan with full costs and adjustment criteria agreed before results are reviewed .
Weeks 4–8: operation and review	Provide at least one suitable quiet/rest option and one activity option; add clubs or organised sessions where demand warrants. Observation and activity facilitation should not be performed by the same person at the same time.	Weekly use and incident records, reasons for cancellations and an end - of - cycle survey using the same questions.

Eight weeks is a **proposed management horizon**, not a scientifically validated optimal duration. Five operational weeks may identify initial use and delivery problems; they cannot support a promise of durable improvements in mental health or test scores. If examinations, weather or staffing change substantially, measurement or the expansion decision should be extended. Anonymous surveys should avoid unnecessary names, diagnoses or personal information, and subgroup results must protect identity.

Four measures, with explicit responses

1. **Actual access:** Percentage of survey respondents unable to find a suitable activity or rest option; survey response rates; observed waits and refusals. *If unmet access is concentrated*, change allocation, admissions or rotation before buying new activities.
2. **Break quality and safety:** Repeat identical beginning/end questions about adequate rest, comfort and readiness for the next lesson; report harassment, conflict and accidents separately. *If experience worsens*, investigate rather than allowing high participation to outweigh safety concerns.
3. **Device-rule implementation:** Observe comparable time windows and record the management of permitted uses and exceptions, not only violations. *If compliance rises while break quality falls*, report both outcomes.
4. **Sustainability:** Actual spending, net staff minutes, cancelled activities and unfunded maintenance. *Where staffing is unsustainable or safety issues remain unresolved*, withhold expansion and redesign provision.

Schools should determine in advance what size of change is meaningful in light of baseline conditions, available resources and measurement quality; inventing an 80% or 90% success threshold is not justified. Ordinary before–after monitoring is vulnerable to examination schedules, weather, rule changes and participant differences. **Do not present observed change as a causal effect** without a defensible evaluation design and its assumptions.

Conclusion: a modest but demanding test

The city has already provided the policy structure and a requirement to listen to pupils. A school adds value not by inventing the longest activity timetable, but by **showing that the promised options exist, are genuinely accessible and can be maintained at a defensible cost**. A noisy, crowded playground is not automatically inclusive; a quiet corner is not a failure because the pupils there are not taking part in an organised event.

Managing phones is the instrument. A safe, usable break—and an honest account of how well it works—is the policy outcome.

References

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- [8] United Nations (1989), *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Articles 12 and 31, and Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 17 on rest and play: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

Scope: Public-source review to 28 October 2026; no fieldwork or site budgets. The operating models, baseline offer, eight-week cycle and measures are independent Briefwork proposals—not city requirements or documented client results.