## **Best Practices Guide**

for North Carolina Public Schools Units Establishing Personal Communication Devices Policies





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## **Co-Chair Introduction Letter**

Dear Governor Stein,

As co-chairs of the Advisory Council for Student Safety and Well-Being, we submit the Advisory Council's Best Practices Guide for North Carolina Public Schools Units (PSUs) Establishing Personal Communication Device Polices in response to Executive Order 13. Since you established the Advisory Council on April 7, 2025, we have had the pleasure of working alongside the dedicated members of the advisory council in learning, examining, and discussing implications of student use of personal communication devices, including cell phones, in schools. The result of our work is the publication of this best practices guide that provides our recommendations on policy implementation.

The Advisory Council grounded its work in the research on how personal communication devices, including cell phones, are affecting our children. Research indicates that early all teenagers have their own smartphone and that they are using them for more than four hours and receiving 237 notifications per day (Common Sense Media, 2023). Alongside the increased usage of personal communication devices, research indicates that students' mental health has significantly deteriorated over the last 15 years (US Surgeon General, 2023).

Based on this research and after engaging with students, it is the Advisory Council's recommendation to North Carolina PSUs that school systems establish policies that eliminate the use of personal communication devices from the start to the end of the school day. We believe this recommendation is critical in creating healthy learning environments for students that contribute to increased academic achievement and improved student well-being.

The purpose of this guide is to support North Carolina PSUs as they implement these policies in making schools free of personal communication devices. It is intended to support school systems in successful policy implementation efforts by providing topics to consider within their local context.

We believe that North Carolina must blaze a trail in its efforts to improve student academic achievement and well-being by eliminating the use of personal communication devices in schools. Let's give our students eight hours a day Monday through Friday when they can focus on being students, engaging actively with their friends and teachers in-person without the constant pressure of a device. Our students most certainly deserve it.

Sydney Batch Senate Democratic Leader Senate District 17, Wake County

North Carolina Senate

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Deputy Secretary for the Division of
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Heather Smith North Carolina 2024 Teacher of the Year Haywood County Schools

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## **PART I:**

## **Introduction and Rationale**

#### **BACKGROUND**

On April 7, 2025, North Carolina Gov. Josh Stein signed <u>Executive Order 13</u>, which established the Advisory Council for Student Safety and Well-Being.

Governor Stein's Advisory Council was established to work across agencies and with both state and local leaders to propose and implement policies and solutions that will improve student safety and well-being. It works to advance recommendations, provide guidance to state agencies, work with local communities, and share best practices.

The Advisory Council's first priority was to work with the General Assembly to support school systems in implementing policies that will make schools free of personal communication devices, including cell phones. The Governor directed the Advisory Council to publish this best practices guide for use by NC public school units as they implement policies in their local communities.

#### **HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE**

The purpose of this guide is to support North Carolina Public School Units as they implement policies in making schools free of personal communication devices, including cell phones. Throughout this guide, the term personal communication devices is used to encompass all internet-connected devices that students may use, including but not limited to smartphones, smart watches, headphones, tablets and laptops.

It is intended to support school systems in this effort by providing topics to consider in their policy-implementation efforts. This guide is not intended to be a prescriptive checklist for policy implementation, and public school unit leaders should consider their local context while implementing these recommendations.

In addition to the topics covered in the guide, several resources to support policy implementation are included at the end of the guide under RESOURCES to support students, staff, families and policymakers.



#### PERSONAL COMMUNICATION DEVICES AND OUR STUDENTS

In contemplating its recommendation to North Carolina public school units on personal communication device policy implementation, the Advisory Council first considered the research on how personal communication devices are affecting students.

Research indicates how prevalent cell phones are in the lives of students. Forty-three percent of tweens (ages 8-12) and 88% to 95% of teens (ages 12-18) have their own smartphone, and half of children in the United States get their first smartphone by the age of 11 (Rideout et al., 2022; Pew 2022). In their research study **Constant Companion** (2023), Common Sense Media researchers found that their school-age participants use cell phones on average 4.5 hours and receive 237 notifications per day.

Student device use includes significant time spent on social media. According to results from the 2023 North Carolina Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 81% of North Carolina high school students stated they use social media at least several times a day. Students report that they are on their phone for a median of 43 minutes during school, with the highest application categories for this time usage being on social media, YouTube and gaming (Common Sense Media, 2023).

At the same time that there has been increased usage of personal communication devices, research notes that students' mental health has significantly deteriorated. Between 2009 and 2019, the number of high school students reporting persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness increased by 40%; those considering attempting

suicide increased by 36%; and the amount creating a suicide plan increased by 44% (US Surgeon General, 2021). Additionally, a recent study noted that over 97% of experts agree that there is evidence that mental health in young people has declined over the past two decades (Capraro, Globig, Rathje, Van Bavel, 2025).

While the causes of the decline in mental health are multifaceted, this may be partially attributed to cyberbullying, which is reported in nine out of 10 public schools. A 2023 study found that 16% of high school students experience cyberbullying and could reach as high as 20% among LGBTQ students and females (KFF, 2024). The US Surgeon General's Social Media and Youth Mental Health Advisory (2023) found that social media usage has a "profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children."



School districts across the United States have acknowledged the negative impact of social media on student academics and well-being and are taking a stance against it. More than 200 school systems from across the nation, including several from North Carolina, have joined lawsuits against major social media companies, alleging that social media companies have designed highly addictive products that are harming student well-being. The school systems argue that they have had to spend significant resources on addressing the deteriorating mental wellness of their students due to these addictions to social media (Education Week, 2024).

As restrictions on student use of personal communication devices is in its early stages in many schools, systems, and states, the data on the effects of restrictions are limited but likewise promising. Studies conducted in Europe indicate that student academic performance increased after schools banned cell phones (Beland & Murphy, 2016). In the United States, researchers for Yondr studied the effectiveness of their program, which eliminates the use of cell phones in schools, and found that there were significant improvements in achievement and behavior. Specifically, they found that student academic success rates increased up to 6.25% and average monthly behavioral referrals decreased by 44% (Yondr, 2024).

Initial feedback from North Carolina educators working in schools with restrictions on student personal communication devices also notes improved outcomes for students, including improved academic performance and decreased discipline referrals. Administrators from Chatham County Schools in North Carolina presented at the North Carolina Association of School Administrators Conference in March 2025 about the positive outcomes they are seeing from the use of Yondr pouches in a pilot program. In addition to improved student academic outcomes and improved behavior, the Chatham County Schools administrators noted that student, staff, and parent interviews indicated an increase in student engagement during instruction and in their overall schooling experience, with increased participation in student clubs and interactions during lunch times.

#### THE ADVISORY COUNCIL'S RECOMMENDATION

The data on the prevalence of personal communication devices, including cell phones, in the lives of our children and the dramatic changes in student mental health informs the Advisory Council's recommendation on policy implementation in North Carolina public school units. It is the Advisory Council's recommendation that North Carolina public school units establish a policy that **eliminates the use of personal communication devices from the start to the end of each school day.** By removing personal communication devices for the entirety of the day, students can better focus on learning and connections with peers and teachers, leading to increased academic outcomes and improved well-being.

#### LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT

At the time of publication of this guide, both the North Carolina House of Representatives and Senate had bills progressing through the legislative process that address removing personal communication devices from classrooms and schools.

It will be critical for North Carolina public school units to monitor legislation that may become law to ensure they are in compliance with the specifications of the law.

## **PART 2:**

## Best Practices Guide for North Carolina Public Schools Units Implementing Personal Communication Devices Policies

#### **OVERVIEW**

The Best Practices Guide for North Carolina Public School Units Implementing Personal Communication Devices Policies provides school system leaders and policymakers with topics to consider in their local context. These topics include the following:



- Where to Start: Explain Why a Policy is Needed
- Engaging Stakeholders
- Policy Considerations
- Digital Literacy Training
- Evaluation
- Resources

#### WHERE TO START: EXPLAIN WHY A POLICY IS NEEDED

Personal communication devices, including smartphones, tablets, computers and other internet-connected devices, have become ever-present in our lives, including in our children's lives. For a number of reasons, discussion of policies on limiting the use of personal communication devices in schools may cause discomfort amongst students, staff and families. These individuals may feel that a "ban" is removing an important connection families have with their children during the school day, and children may feel similarly.

It's important to clarify for public school unit stakeholders why the school system is implementing a policy to make schools free of personal communication devices, including cell phones. Beginning policy implementation discussion with information about device impact on students is critical to implementation success. It allows educational leaders, students, and families to understand how personal communication devices, including cell phones, are impacting student health and learning during the school day.

As public school units consider creating school environments free of personal communication devices, it is critical to begin discussions with students, staff, and families with data on how these devices are impacting teaching and learning. The Advisory Council recommends that school systems share the data contained in the Introduction of this guide with students, staff, and families. Doing so helps build consensus around and allows policy implementation to be grounded in why such a policy is needed: To create healthy learning environments for students that contribute to increased academic achievement and student well-being.

#### **ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS**

After establishing why a personal communication device policy is needed, public school units should consider which stakeholders to engage in policy development and how to engage them.

Public school unit leaders should consider how to engage students, teachers, administrators, parents, and families in the feedback process for policy implementation. The Advisory Council recommends that students are key stakeholders to engage in policy development, and public school unit leaders should ensure they are engaging with students during this process.



Policymakers should consider how to collect stakeholder feedback through surveys, focus groups, or townhall processes. Through these methods, school districts should consider how to gather data on what could be the benefits, considerations, and challenges of removing personal communication devices from schools. School leaders should identify recurring themes in the feedback and then use these themes to inform policy creation and implementation.

Once policies have been drafted, public school units should consider reengaging stakeholders to gather their input and make changes to policies prior to and during implementation.

#### **POLICY CONSIDERATIONS**

The Advisory Council recommends several considerations for public school units personal communication device policies, with an emphasis on clarity and consistency for all stakeholders, including students, staff, administrators and families.

To achieve this, it is recommended that the following be considered during policy formation:

- Types of Devices: Students have access to the internet through a myriad of devices. As public school units develop policies, school leaders should consider which devices will be included in the policy and should be explicit in naming them. Personal communication device is an umbrella term that can be used to include internet-connected devices such as: smartphones, smart watches, headphones, tablets and laptops. Public school unit leaders should determine if certain devices may be appropriate for instructional use and how to establish procedures for the use of certain devices at designated times for student learning.
- When, Where, and How: Public school unit leaders should consider the when, where, and how of the personal communication device policy to best support implementation. A district should consider student age and grade ranges for these considerations and may consider different policies for different grade levels, such as elementary, middle, and high school. Public school unit leaders are encouraged to use the processes outlined in this guide to determine which policies are best for their local context.

For each of the grade ranges, public school unit leaders should consider the following, including the potential benefits and limitations of decisions for each:

#### o When

When will students not be permitted to use personal communication devices?

What are the potential benefits or limitations of varying forms of restrictions, such as during instructional time only or from the start to the end of each school day?

#### o Where

Where will students not be permitted to use personal communication devices?

What are the potential benefits or limitations of varying forms of restrictions, such as limiting use in classrooms only or also limiting use in hallways, common areas, and the cafeteria?

#### o How

What method, such as pouches or holders, will be used for limiting the use of personal communication devices?

Will the school collect items and store them during the day? Will students be responsible for keeping the devices off but in their possession?

What are the potential benefits or limitations of varying methods, such as methods that require: a financial investment, that teachers collect devices, or that students keep the personal communication devices in their possession?

Consistency is key - Students and families have been clear that consistency should be emphasized to support effective implementation. Public school unit leaders must ensure that all staff within a school follow the same procedures to provide consistency for students.

- Exemptions: Public school units will want to consider potential exemptions
  or allowances in the district policy. Legitimate exemptions may need to be
  included for: emergency, medical, instructional, and student Individualized
  Education Plan (IEP) and/or 504 Plan accommodations for students with
  special needs. Policymakers should discuss and consider how these exemptions
  may be included in policy.
- **Resources:** Public school units should consider what resources may be needed to effectively implement personal communication device policies, including communication, instructional, and storage resources.
- Anticipate and Address Challenges: Effective policy implementation
  anticipates and directly addresses challenges to help support students, staff,
  and families. Public school unit leaders should use the feedback gathered at
  the beginning of the policy implementation process to anticipate and address
  concerns from students, staff, and families, especially those concerns that may
  be unique to their local context. Some of the challenges public school units can
  anticipate include, but are not limited to, the following:



- o **Emergencies -** One of the biggest concerns in parent feedback about limiting access to personal communication devices, especially cell phones, is about communicating with their children in an emergency. Public school units must clearly detail what schools will do in emergency events to communicate with families. Leaders and policymakers should consider leveraging law enforcement expertise to support discussions with families about emergency events.
- o Daily Communication with Students Students, staff, and families have become accustomed to having quick and easy access to communication throughout the day. Public school units must consider what processes will be used and clearly detail how students and parents can communicate with one another during the school day if their personal communication devices are not permitted. For example, what processes will be used in the event that a bus route is not running and a student needs to communicate with their parent or guardian about this change? Additionally, school leaders should consider that limiting student use of personal communication devices will inevitably increase communication from students, staff, and families to and from the front office. Given how busy school front offices are, school leaders will need to consider how to address this increase in front office communication and what processes may be needed to best address these increases.
- o Unique Student Needs Families will want assurance that any unique needs that their student(s) may have will be considered in the policy creation and implementation. As explained previously in the Exemptions section, public school unit leaders will want to directly address how students with unique needs to personal communication devices during the school day will be considered.
- o Loss of a Personal Item As public school units consider potential storage options for personal communication devices under a new policy, including pouches or locker systems, school leaders should communicate to families the steps it will take to ensure that personal communication devices will be stored safely. The public school unit should have a process for reporting and resolving issues around the loss of a personal item and should communicate this process to families. Public school units may wish to consult legal counsel when developing this language.

Teach the Policy: For the personal communication device policies to be
effective, they must be taught and reinforced. Ensuring that students, staff,
administrators, and families were involved in policy creation will support efforts
to teach and enforce the policy. Leaders should consider the following as the
policy is taught:

#### **Level set with staff**

#### How will all staff learn about and implement the new policy?

Consider adding the policy to the beginning of year policy reviews, emphasizing why the new policy is being implemented, how staff should teach the policy to students, what resources they have for implementing the policy, how to engage with parents on the policy, and what they should do if they need support in policy implementation. Public school units should ensure that substitutes and volunteers understand and can enforce the policy and that school resource officers and administrators know their roles in enforcement. Additionally, if the district policy includes an exemption that allows teachers to make decisions about the use of personal communication devices for instructional purposes, public school units will need to provide clear directions for when and how teachers can allow students to use these devices during instruction. Consistency in this implementation will be key in supporting students in navigating this policy. Finally, public school units should consider policies for staff usage of personal communication devices, including cell phones, during the day. Such policies allow adults to model the same behaviors expected for student personal communication device usage during instructional time.

#### Student communication

#### How will students be taught about the new policy?

Consider adding the policy to the beginning of year policy review for students, emphasizing why the new policy is being implemented and the specific expectations for student behavior.

#### **Parent communication**

#### How will parents be informed about the new policy?

Consider adding the policy to the beginning of year policy review for parents, emphasizing why the new policy is being implemented, what it will look like for students, and how they can provide feedback about how the policy is affecting their students and families.



• Enforce: Public school units must consider how they will enforce the policy with students, staff and families. These parameters should be communicated to all stakeholders so there is a clear understanding for enforcement of the policy.

First, consider how to leverage positive reinforcement to encourage the right behaviors amongst students, staff, and families. How can school and district leaders celebrate milestones of policy implementation within the first week, months, and year? Initial studies on restrictions of student use of personal communication devices are showing potential positive outcomes. Schools and districts should leverage these positive results by communicating them with students, staff, and families. Also, public school unit leaders should consider how to engage school health personnel such as counselors, social workers, nurses, and/or psychologists on connecting students and families with resources to support changing behaviors.

Public school units should also provide clarity on consequences for individuals who do not follow or implement the policy. For student consequences, public school units should consider non-exclusionary discipline efforts that aim to change behavior to the desired behavior. Additionally, policymakers will need to consider if rulemaking is needed to implement consequences for individuals who do not follow the new or revised policy.

#### **DIGITAL LITERACY TRAINING**

The most effective policies will support students, staff, and families by teaching expected behaviors and giving individuals the tools they need to support healthy habits.

In implementing a personal communication device policy, public school units should consider what schools are teaching students about effective digital literacy. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction provides resources on <u>Digital Teaching and Learning Standards</u> including resources on digital citizenship, data privacy, and cyber safety. Common Sense Media also provides resources, including free lessons with materials in English and Spanish, on <u>teaching digital citizenship</u>.

Providing support to families is another consideration for successful implementation of a personal communication device policy. In addition to engaging families when policies are being created and communicating with them about policy implementation, public school units should consider how they can provide resources to families to support student use of devices while at home. Consider how resources can be provided to families through weekly messaging or through materials that can be sent home to families. Examples are included in the RESOURCES section.

#### **EVALUATION**

Implementation of a new policy is an opportunity to learn, and school systems should evaluate this policy implementation to determine what effects it may have on student achievement and well-being. First, public school units should evaluate their current policies in place on personal communication devices, including cell phones, and the effectiveness of these policies. This will provide a baseline for evaluation of any changes to existing policies.

As public school units implement a new or revised policy, they should consider what metrics or outcomes would support determining if the policy was implemented effectively and if it had a positive effect on students. Some possible metrics or outcomes may include but are not limited to: attendance, academic outcomes, engagement, and/or reports of mental health concerns. By establishing these metrics or outcomes when the policy is established, it will allow the school system to collect data throughout the first and subsequent years of policy implementation. School and district leaders can then use these data to share with students, staff, families, and communities as evaluation and/or adaptation of the policy is needed.

#### **RESOURCES TABLE**

Topic	Resources	Desciption
Policy Implementation Tools	Administrator Toolkit, Phone Free Schools Movement	Toolkits for policy implementation, including supporting data, implementation materials, and communication tools like surveys and letters
	How Can We Make Schools Phone Free? The Anxious Generation	Provides an action kit that supports: understanding the problem; starting the conversation; taking action for parents, educators, and school administrators; success stories; and FAQs
	Key Questions to Inform Your Cell Phone Policy, Common Sense Media	Provides questions that schools and districts should consider during policy implementation
Example Policies	Cedar Grove Middle School Brunswick County Schools	Includes information about its Yondr pilot program, including data and introductory videos
	Chatham County Public Schools	Example of a NC Public School Unit's Yondr Pouch Pilot Program
	Fairfax County Public Schools	A large Virginia public school system's cell phone policy
	Ohio Department of Education and Workforce	Example of a potential policy and considerations
	Town Creek Middle Brunswick County Schools	Includes information about its Yondr pilot program, including a parent letter and student policy guidelines in English and Spanish
Resources for Parents	Cellphones and Devices: A Guide for Parents and Caregivers, Common Sense Media	Helps parents/guardians consider when children should get cellphones, basic safety rules, and enforcing healthy habits
	Healthy Digital Habits, American Academy of Pediatrics	Provides videos and documents to help families create family media plans and establish healthy habits to device usage

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Data	A Look at State Efforts to Ban Cellphones in Schools and Implication for Youth Mental Health (KFF, 2024)	Includes legislation from states on cellphone bans and research on the connection between cellphone use and mental health
	Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use (Common Sense Media, 2023)	Provides data on student cell phone usage
	Daily Screen Time Among Teenagers The Handbook of Adolescent Digital Media Use and Mental Health (Winston Center, 2022)	Provides data on digital media usage and mental health
	Hold the Phone: Recent State Activity on Cell Use in Schools (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2024)	Details state policies on personal communication devices in schools
	How Are States Approaching Cell Phone Use in Schools? (Education Commission of the States, 2024)	Details state policies on personal communication devices in schools
	Protecting Youth Mental Health: The US Surgeon General's Advisory (2021).	Provides data on student mental health
	Resource Guide for Pediatricians: School Phone Policies (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2024)	Provides data on how phones are affecting students and schools and how individuals can support policies in schools
	Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The US Surgeon General's Advisory (2023)	Provides data on how social media is affecting student mental health
	Unpacking Grind Culture in American Teens: Pressure, Burnout, and the Role of Social Media (Common Sense Media, 2024)	Provides research on how social media is pressuring and affecting students