

North Carolina Governor Josh Stein's

# Advisory Council for Student Safety and Well-Being





## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Part I: Introduction

Background

How to use this guide

Our students and personal communication devices

The Advisory council's recommendation

Legislative context

### Part II: Best Practices Guide for NC Public School Units Implementing Personal Communication Devices Policies

Overview

Where to Start: Explain Why a Policy is Needed

Engaging Stakeholders

Policy Considerations

- Types of Devices
- When, Where, and How
- Exemptions
- Resources
- Anticipate and Address Challenges
- Teach the Policy
- Enforce

Digital Literacy Training

Evaluation

Resources

# Co-Chair Introduction Letter

Dear Governor Stein,

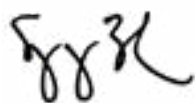
As co-chairs of the Advisory Council for Student Safety and Well-Being, we submit the Advisory Council's Best Practices Guide for North Carolina Public Schools Units (PSUs) Establishing Personal Communication Device Policies in response to Executive Order 13. Since you established the Advisory Council 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 nearly 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 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 where 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  
North Carolina Senate



William "Billy" Lassiter  
Deputy Secretary for the Division of  
Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention  
Department of Public Safety



Heather Smith  
North Carolina 2024  
Teacher of the Year  
Haywood County Schools

# Governor Josh Stein’s Advisory Council for Student Safety and Well-Being Membership

**Sydney Batch**, Senate Democratic Leader (co-chair)

**William L. Lassiter**, Deputy Secretary for the Division of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Department of Public Safety (co-chair)

**Heather Smith**, 2024 Burroughs Wellcome Fund North Carolina Teacher of the Year (co-chair)

**David W. Craven Jr.**, Senator

**Brian Biggs**, Representative

**Lindsey Prather**, Representative

**Alan Duncan**, Vice-Chair of the State Board of Education

**Bettina Umstead**, Board of Education Member, Durham Public Schools

**Sharon Bell**, Deputy Director, Division of Child and Family Wellbeing, North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services

**Natalia Botella**, Director, Public Protection Section, North Carolina Department of Justice

**Dr. Ellen Essick**, Section Chief for NC Healthy Schools, Department of Public Instruction

**Karen Fairley**, Executive Director of Center for Safer Schools, A Division of the State Bureau of Investigation

**Anne Goldberg**, School Counselor, Alamance-Burlington School System

**Tara Hardy**, School Social Worker, Craven County Schools

**Roger “Chip” Hawley**, Director of The North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation

**Emma Hodson**, In-House Counsel, Pitt County Schools

**Kristie Howell**, Chief Court Counselor – District 8, Division of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, North Carolina Department of Public Safety

**Melissa Lassen**, BSN, RN, NCSN, Lead School Nurse, Chatham County Schools

**Mark McHugh**, Director of Safety, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

**Dr. Shaneeka Moore-Brown**, President, North Carolina Parent Teacher Association

**Asia Prince**, Director of Court Programs, North Carolina Administrative  
Offices of the Courts

**Deputy Rhyne Rankins**, School Resource Officer, Iredell County Sheriff's Office

**Dr. Paul Smokowski**, Executive Director, North Carolina Youth Violence Prevention Center

**Beckie Spears**, Principal, Wilkesboro Elementary School and 2024 Wells Fargo  
North Carolina Principal of the Year

**Mary Katherine Stiles**, M.A./S.S.P., School Psychologist, Cumberland County Schools.

**Justice Warren**, Assistant Legal Counsel, North Carolina School Boards Association

**Julie Cecelia Werry**, Scholar Advisor, Morehead-Cain Foundation

**Dr. Freddie Williamson**, Superintendent of Public Schools of Robeson County



## PART I:

# Introduction

## BACKGROUND

On April 7, 2025, North Carolina Gov. Josh Stein signed [Executive Order 13](#), 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 produced from Common Sense Media explains how prevalent cell phones are in the lives of students, with 43% of tweens (ages 8-12) and 88% to 95% of teens (ages 12-18) having their own smartphone and half of children in the United States getting 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 a day and receive 237 notifications per day.

Their research additionally found that during the school day, students are on their phone for a median of 43 minutes, with the highest application categories for this time usage being on social media, YouTube and gaming (Common Sense Media, 2023). 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.

In addition to increased usage of personal communication devices, research indicates that students' mental health has significantly deteriorated over the last 15 years. The [US Surgeon General's Social Media and Youth Mental Health Advisory \(2023\)](#) notes that social media usage has a "profound risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children." Common Sense Media's research found that more than one-quarter of American teens struggle with burnout. Since 2009, the number of high school students reporting persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness has increased by 40%; those considering attempting suicide increased by 36%; and the amount creating a suicide plan increased by 44% ([US Surgeon General, 2021](#)). 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 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.



## 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. As of June 3, 2025, neither bill had been signed into law.

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.

*(We will update this section based on how legislation progresses prior to June 3, 2025)*





## **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 student well-being and increased academic achievement.

## **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 the primary stakeholders to engage in policy formation, and public school unit leaders should prioritize 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.
- **When, Where, and How:** Public school system 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. As outlined previously, it is important to note that it remains this Advisory Council's recommendation that personal communication devices are removed from student use from the beginning to the end of each school day. Public school system 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:

- **When**

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

- **Where**

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

- **How**

**What method 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?**

School districts may consider investing in various methods such as pouches or holders to implement the policy.

**\*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:
  - **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.
  - **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.

- **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.
- **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.

- o **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? Several North Carolina public school units who have already implemented personal communication device policies are reporting improvements in student attendance, academics and behaviors. 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 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 [Digital Teaching and](#)

**Learning Standards** 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 [teaching digital citizenship](#).

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 of these 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 for 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.

Topic	Resources	Description
Policy Implementation Tools	<a href="#">Administrator Toolkit, Phone Free Schools Movement</a>	Toolkits for policy implementation, including supporting data, implementation materials and communication tools like surveys and letters
	<a href="#">How Can We Make Schools Phone Free? The Anxious Generation</a>	Provides an action kit that supports: understanding the problem; starting the conversation; taking action for parents, educators and school administrators; success stories; and FAQs
	<a href="#">Key Questions to Inform Your Cell Phone Policy, Common Sense Media</a>	Provides questions that schools and districts should consider during policy implementation
Example Policies	<a href="#">Chatham County Public Schools</a>	Example of a NC Public School Unit's Yondr Pouch Pilot Program
	<a href="#">Fairfax County Public Schools</a>	A large Virginia public school system's cell phone policy
	<a href="#">Ohio Department of Education and Workforce</a>	Example of a potential policy and considerations
Resources for Parents	<a href="#">Cellphones and Devices: A Guide for Parents and Caregivers, Common Sense Media</a>	Helps parents/guardians consider when children should get cellphones, basic safety rules, and enforcing healthy habits
	<a href="#">Healthy Digital Habits, American Academy of Pediatrics</a>	Provides videos and documents to help families create family media plans and establish healthy habits to device usage
Data	<a href="#">A Look at State Efforts to Ban Cellphones in Schools and Implication for Youth Mental Health</a> (KFF, 2024)	Includes legislation from states on cellphone bans and research on the connection between cellphone use and mental health
	<a href="#">Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use</a> (Common Sense Media, 2023)	Provides data on student cell phone usage
	<a href="#">Daily Screen Time Among Teenagers</a>	Provides data on digital media usage and mental health
	<a href="#">The Handbook of Adolescent Digital Media Use and Mental Health</a> (Winston Center, 2022)	
	<a href="#">Hold the Phone: Recent State Activity on Cell Use in Schools</a> (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2024)	Details state policies on personal communication devices in schools
	<a href="#">How Are States Approaching Cell Phone Use in Schools?</a> (Education Commission of the States, 2024)	Details state policies on personal communication devices in schools
	<a href="#">Protecting Youth Mental Health: The US Surgeon General's Advisory</a> (2021).	Provides data on student mental health
	<a href="#">Resource Guide for Pediatricians: School Phone Policies</a> (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2024)	Provides data on how phones are affecting students and schools and how individuals can support policies in schools
	<a href="#">Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The US Surgeon General's Advisory</a> (2023)	Provides data on how social media is affecting student mental health
	<a href="#">Unpacking Grind Culture in American Teens: Pressure, Burnout, and the Role of Social Media</a> (Common Sense Media, 2024)	Provides research on how social media is pressuring and affecting students



DRAFT