Governor's Advisory Council for Student Safety & Well-Being
Best Practices Guide for Local School Systems Establishing Personal Communication Device Policies

INTRODUCTION
On April 7, 2025, North Carolina Governor 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 classrooms and schools cell phone-free. The Governor directed the Advisory Council to publish this best practices guide for school districts as they implement policies in their local communities.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE
The purpose of this guide is to support local school systems in North Carolina as they implement policies in making classrooms cell-phone free. 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 school district leaders should consider their local context while considering these recommendations.

In addition to the topics covered in the guide, several free resources to support policy implementation are included in the appendix under **RESOURCES** to support students, staff, families, and policy makers.

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 making classrooms cell phone free. These bills are [House Bill 87](#) and [Senate Bill 55](#). As of June 3, 2025, neither bill had been signed into law.

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

WHERE TO START: EXPLAIN THE WHY
Cell phones, tablets, computers, and smart devices have become ubiquitous in our lives, including in our children's lives. For a number of reasons, discussion of cell phone bans in classrooms can 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 your stakeholders why your district is implementing a policy to make classrooms 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.

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 used cell phones on average four and a half 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 NC Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 81% of North Carolina high school students used 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 of 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).

As school systems consider creating school environments free of personal communication devices, these data support beginning discussions about why it is critical to engage in this work: to create healthy learning environments for students that contribute to student well-being and increased academic achievement.

THE COUNCIL'S RECOMMENDATION

It is this Advisory Council's recommendation that school systems establish a policy that restricts the use of personal communication devices from the start to the end of each school day.

ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS

After establishing the why of personal communication device policies, school systems should consider which stakeholders to engage in policy development and how to engage them.

School districts should consider how to engage students, teachers, administrators, parents, and families in the feedback process for policy implementation. Policymakers should consider how to collect stakeholder feedback through surveys, focus groups, or townhall processes. Through these processes, school districts

should consider how to gather what could be the benefits, considerations, and challenges of removing personal communication devices from schools.

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

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The Governor's Advisory Council for Student Safety & Well-Being recommends several considerations for local school system 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 school districts develop your policies, they 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, & How:** School district 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 should be restricted from the beginning to the end of each school day.

  For each of the grade ranges, school systems 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 in order to implement the policy.

  *Consistency is key – Students and families have been clear that consistency should be emphasized to support effective implementation, so ensure that all staff within a school follow the same procedures.

- **Exemptions:** School systems will want to consider potential exemptions or allowances in the district policy. There may be legitimate exemptions that need to be included for: emergency, medical, instructional, and student IEP / 504 accommodations. Policymakers should discuss and consider how these exemptions may be included in policy.

- **Resources:** School systems should consider what resources may be needed in order to effectively implement its personal communication device policies, including communication, instructional, and storage resources.

- **Teach the Policy:** In order for the personal communication device policy to be effective, it should 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. Consider the following as the policy is taught:

  o **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. Districts 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, districts 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, local school districts should have conversations with adults about their usage of personal communication devices during the day. Adults should model the same behaviors expected for student cell phone 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.

  o **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 it is going for students and their families. One of the biggest concerns in parent feedback about cell phone bans is about communicating with their children in an emergency. The school district will want to clearly explain the process for parents to communicate with their children during the school day and what the school system will do in emergency events to communicate with families. School systems should consider leveraging law enforcement expertise to support discussions with families about emergency events.

- **Enforce:** Districts 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 we celebrate milestones of policy implementation within the first week, months, and year? Several North Carolina school districts who have already implemented personal communication device policies are reporting improvements in student attendance, academics, and behaviors. Schools could leverage these positive results by communicating them with students, staff, and families.

School systems should also provide clarity on consequences for stakeholders who do not follow or implement the policy. For student consequences, school districts should consider non-exclusionary discipline efforts that aim to change behavior to the desired behavior.

DIGITAL LITERACY TRAINING & RESOURCES
The most effective policies will support students, staff, and families by teaching expected behaviors and giving stakeholders the tools they need to support healthy habits.

In implementing a personal communication device policy, school districts should consider what they are teaching students about effective digital literacy. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction provides resources on Digital Teaching & 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, school systems 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.

One of the biggest concerns in parent feedback about cell phone bans is about communicating with their children during the school day, both in general and in emergency situations. School districts will want to clearly explain the process for parents to communicate with their children during the school day and what the school system will do in emergency events to communicate with families. School systems should consider leveraging law enforcement expertise to support discussions with families about emergency events.

EVALUATE
Implementation of a new policy is an opportunity to learn, and school systems should establish this policy implementation to determine what effects it may have on student achievement and well-being. As school systems implement this 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. 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 systems can then use these data to share with

students, staff, families, and communities as evaluation and/or adaptation of the policy is needed.

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- 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 & 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

RESOURCES:

Example Policies

- Chatham County Public Schools
- Fairfax County Public Schools
- Ohio Department of Education & Workforce

Data
- Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use
- Daily Screen Time Among Teenagers
- The Handbook of Adolescent Digital Media Use & Mental Health, Winston Center
- Hold the Phone: Recent State Activity on Cell Use in Schools, National Conference of State Legislatures
- How Are States Approaching Cell Phone Use in Schools? Education Commission of the States
- Protecting Youth Mental Health: The US Surgeon General's Advisory (2021)
- Resource Guide for Pediatricians: School Phone Policies
- Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The US Surgeon General's Advisory (2023)
- Unpacking Grind Culture in American Teens: Pressure, Burnout, and the Role of Social Media

Policy Implementation Tools
- Administrator Toolkit, Phone Free Schools Movement
- How Can We Make Schools Phone Free? The Anxious Generation
- Key Questions to Inform Your Cell Phone Policy, Common Sense Media

Resources for Parents
- Cellphones and Devices: A Guide for Parents & Caregivers, Common Sense Media
- Health Digital Habits, American Academy of Pediatrics