



Task Force on Cell Phone Use in Schools

Implementation Guidance and Resources for Support

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Introduction

Following the pandemic, students returned to school with an evolved relationship to technology, having spent more time in virtual environments than ever before. This shift has significantly impacted how students engage with their learning and each other. In response to these challenges, many states and school districts have implemented policies to limit cell phone use in schools. By February 2025, [19 states](#) had enacted statewide restrictions, and the majority of Maryland's 24 local education agencies (LEAs) had updated or created new guidelines for managing cell phone use during the school day (Prothero, Langreo, & Klein, 2024). As these policies take hold, it is increasingly clear that supporting school districts in effectively addressing the issues posed by cell phone use is crucial for maintaining a productive and focused learning environment.

According to data compiled by the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), more than half of public school leaders (53%) feel that their students' academic performance has been negatively impacted by cell phone usage (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). More than two-thirds feel cell phones have had a negative impact on their students' mental health (72 percent) and attention span (73 percent). To support overall student well-being and progress, the Maryland State Board of Education (State Board) and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) believe it is critical to support policies that address the distractions posed by cell phone use, which create challenges for both academic engagement and students' mental and social wellness.

Schools across the country have been troubleshooting this issue in a variety of ways, from implementing district-wide bans to designating specific times for phone use, in search of the most effective approach to balancing technology with the needs of students. [Federal data](#) from the 2024-25 school year reveals that while 77 percent of public schools already prohibited non-academic phone use during school hours, only 55 percent of high schools had implemented such policies (Burr, Kemp, & Wang, 2024). This gap suggests that, while many schools have recognized the need for action, there is still considerable room for improvement, particularly in high school settings.

Educators are increasingly finding themselves competing with smartphones in the classroom, as students are often distracted by an onslaught of digital activity during instructional hours. A 2023 study by [Common Sense Media](#) found that the average student receives 60 notifications and spends 43 minutes — roughly the length of a classroom period — on their phone during school hours each day (Radesky, Weeks, Schaller, Robb, Mann, & Lenhart, 2023).

In the wake of this, there has been a growing call for stronger regulations and comprehensive planning to address cell phone use in schools and support educators and school leaders in navigating this reality. According to a June 2024 [Pew Research Center](#) survey, 1 in 3 middle school teachers and nearly 3 in 4 high school teachers consider smartphones a major problem in the classroom (Hatfield, 2024). While this Task Force will not take a position on whether districts should implement full-day cell phone restrictions or allow students limited access to their devices, the guidance shared in this document will assist schools in designing a comprehensive policy that balances the benefits of technology with the potential for disruption.

In convening a diverse group of educators, school leaders, superintendents, field experts, students and parents to design this guidance, MSDE and the State Board sought to create a dynamic resource that guides schools and districts in the development of a policy with their stakeholders. This document serves as a comprehensive guide for school districts and educational leaders in developing, implementing, and refining policies related to student cell phone use. It outlines key considerations, offers model policy options, and provides actionable insights on engaging stakeholders, addressing legal exemptions, and differentiating policies across grade levels. By offering a structured approach and detailed resources, this guide aims to support school communities in creating balanced, effective policies that ensure students have access to the tools they need while fostering a productive learning environment.

Definition of Terms

- ***Academic school day*** means any structured or unstructured learning experiences that occur from when the first bell rings at the start of the school day until the dismissal bell rings at the end of the school day. This definition may also extend to school buses, field trips, and athletic events, as determined by the school district.
- ***Instructional time*** refers to the time students spend actively in class. This does not encompass lunch periods or time spent transitioning between classes, unless otherwise specified.
- ***Full-day restrictions*** prohibiting the use of devices during the school day, including during instructional time, lunch or free periods, and hallway transitions;
- ***Schedule-based restrictions*** prohibit device use at certain times during the school day (e.g., during instruction) while permitting limited use at other times, such as during breaks, lunch periods, or when otherwise specifically authorized. Since there are many different combinations and options for schools and districts to implement within the school day, they may determine the details of schedule-based restrictions alongside their school community.
- ***Cell Phone*** as referenced throughout this guidance is inclusive of any personal electronic communication device that connects to a smart phone, the internet, a cellular or Wi-Fi network, or future devices of this nature. Cell phones, as defined for this document, include some wearable devices such as smart watches, as well as personal headphones, laptops, tablets, and any other personal electronic communication devices with the abovementioned characteristics. These restrictions do not apply to school-issued technology designed and used for instructional purposes.
- ***Stored*** means a cell phone, as defined above, not carried on the student's person, including not in the student's pocket.
- ***Legal exemptions for cell phone use in schools*** refer to any exceptions or accommodations to a school's cell phone policy that are documented in a student's individualized education program (IEP), Section 504 plan, or otherwise documented by a licensed medical professional for health-related issues. Policy Checklist

Recommended Components of a Comprehensive District Policy

This section outlines the essential components of a comprehensive school cell phone use policy for school- and district-based leaders to consider when developing their plans. It provides a clear framework for the policy's development, implementation, and ongoing evaluation, with a broader goal of engaging stakeholders, ensuring effective communication, and ultimately designing a plan that takes the diverse and varying needs of all students into account. In developing their plans, districts should aim to address each of the following:

- **Goals and Metrics:** A thorough policy will identify its associated goals and define how success will be measured at each stage of implementation. This can and should include a variety of qualitative and quantitative data.
- **Stakeholder Engagement Plan:** Consider how each school or district will develop, implement, and refine the policy alongside all members of the school community, including students, educators, parents and guardians, and school leaders. Detail how policy leaders will partner with students and their families to co-develop policy strategies and incorporate opportunities for regular feedback.
- **Policy Outline:** Outline permitted and restricted usage for cell phones and other personal electronic devices during the school day, including when and where students are allowed to use their phones, if applicable, and any plans for differentiation between grade bands.
- **Communication Plan:** Articulate how the policy will be distributed to parents, students, and school staff to ensure all parties are informed prior to its start and on an ongoing basis. Policies should be clearly communicated in multiple languages so that multilingual families understand expectations, exemptions, and procedures. Consider incorporating the policy clearly into student handbooks, school websites, beginning-of-year acknowledgment forms or other direct communications to parents, or through back-to-school events, and summer orientations.
- **Discipline Policy:** Schools and school systems should include a detailed ladder of appropriate consequences for violations of a school's cell phone use policy. The discipline policy should account for multiple infractions, specify the roles and responsibilities of parents, and detail a confiscation protocol (if applicable) for staff to follow. Policies should offer a tiered system for offenses (e.g., first-time warning, second-time confiscation, etc.). The discipline policy should also include a transparent process for students or parents and guardians to appeal disciplinary measures.
- **Review Schedule:** Identify opportunities for meaningful stakeholder feedback throughout the year and specify a review schedule for when the policy's efficacy will be evaluated against its goals and metrics for success.

- **Accommodations/Modifications/Extenuating Circumstances:** List any exceptions and accommodations for students with disabilities, students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), students with Section 504 Plans, and students that must use a device to monitor medical conditions. Articulate how these exceptions will be navigated in the classroom. Schools must ensure that multilingual learners (MLs) who require language support—whether or not they have a documented language barrier—are provided access to translation tools as needed to support equitable access to education. This includes, but is not limited to, allowing the use of devices for translation purposes when school-issued supports are not readily available. Schools should also consider whether exceptions and accommodations will be made for other student populations, such as students who may be parents or caretakers.
- **Emergency Preparedness Procedures:** In the event of an emergency, plans should identify the proper protocols for parental outreach, family notification, and student cell phone use, with particular attention to accessible communication for students and families with disabilities or who use languages other than English. Schools should consider conducting training for staff and students.
- **Optional - Social Media Policy:** Set rules around students' social media activity during school hours and ensure that the policy addresses (or acknowledges existing rules for) cyberbullying or harassment of the distribution of inappropriate content that may occur through cell phones.

Creating a Strong Foundation: Leveraging Stakeholder Engagement

The decision to introduce restrictions on cell phone use during the school day, aimed at boosting student performance, should continue to be made at the local level, where parents and teachers are more directly connected to students and their school community. Each policy should involve input and collaboration from local stakeholders to ensure the strategies selected are grounded in the unique needs of those most directly affected. Similarly, the likelihood of success for any given policy increases when there is widespread awareness and a collective commitment to a co-developed product.

In the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) resource, [Planning Together: A Playbook for Student Personal Device Policies](#), ED advises states to consider the following steps when developing a student-facing cell phone policy: build a team of diverse, representative stakeholders, define specific goals of the policy and a shared understanding of its need, and ensure all decision-making is informed by various sources of data (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, 2024).

ASSEMBLING A TEAM TO LEAD THE WORK

As districts develop their policies or build out guidelines for how schools should pioneer new policies, it is important to consider how the policy selected will showcase the voice of students, guardians, and school staff. Developing authentic opportunities for **student leadership** will not only help students to become stronger advocates and build their capacity as leaders, it is also the most promising mode of creating buy-in and investment in the policy's success. Similarly, involving **parents and guardians** will help schools to further develop and leverage the existing trust between families and school leaders. This basis of trust will be critical in the implementation phase, as conflicts of enforcement may arise. Finally, allowing **educators and school staff** to lend their insights will work to ensure that the policy selected is grounded in the realities of the classroom and is responsive to the competing priorities of teachers and educational support professionals. Consider utilizing a [Stakeholder Engagement Plan Template](#) to capture these efforts and ensure multiple layers of input are factored into planning.

Considerations:

- What stakeholders should be included in your policy development team to ensure it is representative of all perspectives?
- How will you advertise the opportunity to join the team and select team members? Is this process transparent and inclusive?
- Are there any incentives that can be offered to participants or student leaders to make their participation easier or more accessible?
- If your team is smaller in size, how can you factor in regular opportunities for input from outside groups?
- What communication strategies will be leveraged to keep the public engaged as decisions are being made?
- Does the team represent a diversity of viewpoints (for example, teachers that may be more inclined to use technology like phones in class, students with disabilities, or students with personal circumstances that may require access to electronic devices)?

PRIORITIZE DATA-INFORMED DECISION-MAKING

Before Launching a Policy: Consider surveys and data sources that can help capture the realities of school climate and students' daily cell phone use. Draw upon measures of student achievement (test scores, GPA, rate of course failures per grade level) and the rate of disciplinary instances to establish a baseline of data before the policy goes into effect. Below are some sample survey questions to gather feedback from students, teachers, and families about students' cell phone use in school prior to enacting a policy. [Panorama's Cell Phone Impact and Policy Survey](#) offers an additional example of how surveys can be structured (Panorama Education, 2025). For an example of this work in action in Maryland, refer to the work of Howard County Public Schools (HCPSS). HCPSS conducted a [community survey](#) on the district's student personal technology policy. The survey was conducted in multiple languages and reached parents, students, and staff before the results were shared widely.

For Students:

- How much time each day do they spend on their cell phones during instructional hours?
- How often are they redirected by educators or school staff who are concerned about their phone use?
- Are they concerned about their cell phone use? Do they believe it distracts them from class, inhibits their performance in school, or affects how they socialize with peers?

For Teachers:

- Approximately how often is class time interrupted by students' off-task cell phone usage in a given day?
- Approximately how often are cell phones used for instructional purposes in class?
- How often are students relying on cell phones to access classwork (despite 1:1 device policies)?
- In enforcing school-wide cell phone policies, what challenges have they faced?
- For Families:
- Does your child bring their cell phone to school on a daily basis? Does your child leave their phone on all day?
- Do you believe your child should be allowed to use their cell phone during instructional time?
- Would you support a more relaxed or stricter cell phone policy at school?

During Implementation: After the policy has been launched, consider conducting mid-year surveys to assess how staff, student, and parent attitudes have changed over the initial period of implementation.

- What, if any, new concerns related to the cell phone use policy have arisen?
- What implementation challenges have teachers and school staff faced? Are there suggestions on how these can be addressed?
- Do staff and students feel the policy's impact (e.g., has it led to a significant decrease in the amount of time students spend productive/distracted in class)?
- Has instructional time been impacted positively or negatively as a result of implementation?
- How has the policy impacted student/teacher relationships?
- Do staff feel supported in enforcing the policy?
- Do students and families feel expectations are consistent as they move from classroom to classroom?

Evaluating Efficacy: Return to the baseline metrics that were collected before the policy's implementation to assess baseline academic achievement, disciplinary incidents (frequency or type), and school climate. Consider sending end-of-year surveys to track changes in sentiment and actions toward the policy and assess its effectiveness based on the team's goals. Ensure that both quantitative and qualitative data are used to tell the story of the policy, its successes, and its limitations.

Once the policy development team has gathered feedback from all stakeholder groups through a variety of channels, the team can begin showcasing the results and identifying next steps. Feedback channels should be widely accessible and feature two-way communication. Leverage established public forums to share the data – schoolwide events, virtual Q&As with families, student assemblies, staff meetings, parent-teacher association meetings, student council meetings, local board of education hearings, and social media outlets. In showcasing the results, share next steps for revising the policy and a timeline for when updates will be available. For an example of this work in action within Maryland, Baltimore City Public Schools crafted a [presentation](#) to the Baltimore City Board of Education that outlined proposed revisions, supporting research, and stakeholder survey results on the Board's Policy on Portable Electronic Communication Devices. The presentation sought to communicate the results of the Cell Phone Free Pilot and propose revisions to a standing board policy through data-informed decision-making.

Establish the “Why?” of the Policy

Within the assembled team and the school community at large, consider how to set clear goals for the intended outcome of the policy. Drive initial discussions and vision-setting with questions such as:

- What is (are) the ultimate outcome(s) you want to achieve with this policy?
- How can these be measured? What would indicate success in this policy?
- Is the policy grounded in research around student wellness? If so, have we made this known?
- How will we know if the policy is being followed/implemented effectively?
- How can we ensure that the policy is fair and equitable for all students?
- How can we balance flexibility with consistency in the policy's application?

Part of this work may include familiarizing the school community with the latest research on the topic and the impact of increased cell phone use on the mental and academic well-being of students. This could involve school assemblies, student-led “tabling” initiatives during lunch periods, family engagement nights, utilizing class or homeroom time for related activities, or spearheading a student/parent survey to establish a baseline of data that can be shared and referenced while developing the strategies. Districts should also seek to communicate the “why” through targeted signage and flyers, such as the [one-pager](#) designed by Baltimore County Public Schools that outlines the district’s updated policy, or the [graphics](#) designed by Washington County Public Schools to communicate the research-informed rationale behind shifts to the schools’ cell phone policies.

Consider some additional initiatives to build student, family, and staff investment:

- **Educational Assemblies or Guest Speakers on Mental Health and Technology:** Bring in experts to talk about the connection between cell phone use and mental health for children and young adults. Topics could include how excessive phone use during adolescence can affect sleep, anxiety, or self-esteem, helping students make more informed decisions.
- **Phone-Free Initiatives:** Introduce school-wide campaigns, such as a “No Phone November,” where students can earn incentives (like raffle tickets) for voluntarily turning in their phones to be stored by school staff. Organize days where students are challenged to go tech-free during lunch. Consider activities to boost social interactions, such as board games, card games, art stations, karaoke, trivia, etc. Additionally, consider implementing a phone-free day or even a two-week challenge, and gather student feedback to measure its impact. Communicate with parents and guardians regarding safety concerns during any phone-free initiatives, ensuring they know how they can reach their student if necessary.
- **Mindful Phone Usage Activities:** Offer workshops for students and staff on mindfulness and how to create a balance between phone use and personal well-being. These could include tips for reducing screen time and managing digital distractions in daily life. Have students complete a self-assessment to reflect on their own phone habits and share community data trends to highlight the community’s experience.

- **Family Education and Involvement:** Host informational sessions or create online resources for parents and guardians on how to support their children in managing screen time and making responsible, informed choices with their phones. This could also include setting guidelines for phone usage at home.
- **Integrating Digital Wellness into the Curriculum:** Collaborate with educators to include lessons on digital wellness and healthy phone habits as part of the standard curriculum, promoting awareness and balanced usage.
- **Tracking Screen Time:** Plan activities where students track their screen time over a set period, perhaps as part of a team competition aimed at reducing overall usage. Schools could also incentivize students who show improvement or reach specific goals.

After each initiative, seek feedback from students and staff to evaluate its effectiveness. Use surveys or discussions to assess how the activities are influencing phone habits and whether they are leading to lasting change or increased self-awareness.

Model Policy Options

Federal data from the 2024-25 school year shows that 38% of schools with cell phone policies have restrictions for cell phone use outside of class, such as during free periods, between classes, or during extracurricular activities. Overall, 30% of all public schools have a cell phone policy that prohibits students from having their cell phone in all classes or using their cell phone at school (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2025).

Maryland school districts, in partnership with their families, educators, and students, have the expertise to develop policies limiting students' use of cell phones during the school day. The Task Force on Cell Phone Use in Schools will not mandate what kind of policy a district should implement. The task force recommendation instead prioritizes flexibility for each district to design a policy that is tailored to their unique context and reflects the insights and engagement of its own educators, families, and students.

This section provides an overview of the most common policies and strategies governing students' use of cell phones that schools and districts have implemented. The options featured are not meant to be an exhaustive list or to limit the scope of policies that districts can choose to pursue. Rather, this is a starting point to support districts as they work within their own communities to guide the use of cell phones in schools.

Importantly, these policies and strategies must consider age-appropriate restrictions that align with developmental considerations for students and the structure of the instructional day in each grade-band and school. More guidance on the different expectations at elementary (K-5), middle (6-8), and high school (9-12) levels is provided in the following section.

Lastly, each policy and strategy must include allowable exemptions when necessary to comply with a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 plan (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act) as well as for students with health care needs that require access to and the use of a cell phone. Additionally, schools must ensure that multilingual learners (MLs) who require language support—whether or not they have a documented language barrier—are provided access to translation tools as needed to support equitable access to education. This includes, but is not limited to, allowing the use of devices for translation purposes when school-issued supports are not readily available. More guidance on exemptions for specific student groups can be found in the *Considerations for Legal Exemptions and Accommodations for Student Groups* section.

POLICY OPTIONS

- **Full-Day Prohibition:** Students are encouraged not to bring cell phones to school. If students choose to bring a cell phone to school, the student is not allowed to access or use it during the *academic school day, including lunch and between classes*. This policy usually requires students to keep their cell phone off, out of sight, and often not on their person, such as in student backpacks or lockers or in a school-provided storage area.
- **Schedule-Based Limitation:** Students are encouraged not to bring cell phones to school. If students choose to bring a cell phone to school, the student is not allowed to access or use it *during class or instructional time*. Cell phone use may be allowed between classes and during lunch only. With this policy, cell phones may be required to be placed in a designated area in each classroom as determined by the teacher.

STRATEGIES

- **Classroom Storage Areas:** Schools can set up designated storage areas in their classrooms, such as “caddies,” “cell phone hotels,” or “cell phone lockers,” where students can store their phones at the beginning of class. Options school divisions could choose to define as storage areas include, but are not limited to, in the student’s backpack, in the student’s locker, in a locked pouch, or in a designated place in the classroom. This approach allows students to remain in close proximity to their phones in case they may need to use them.

Considerations:

- Cost of purchasing storage containers;
 - Developing consistent routines across classrooms;
 - Securing storage areas to ensure phones are not stolen or misplaced and student privacy is protected;
 - Ensuring that the designated storage areas are accessible to students with disabilities.
- **Centralized Storage Area:** Students can either leave cell phones at home or check them in with a school staff person at the start of the school day for the remainder of the day. For example, students can leave their phones in the front office, with the teacher of their last class of the day, or schools can devise a whole-school collection procedure.

Considerations:

- Coordinating the logistics of collecting, cataloguing, storing, and distributing student cell phones at the start and end of the school day;
 - Additional staff capacity needed to implement collection;
 - Ensuring that the designated storage areas are accessible to students with disabilities;
 - Planning for emergency situations in which students may need to access their cell phone;
 - Addressing staff liability concerns in case phones are damaged, stolen, or misplaced.
- **Magnetic Locking Pouches:** Students who bring their phones to school place them in locked pouches upon entering the building and unlock them at the end of the school day. Pouches can be unlocked by school staff at designated stations or by a portable unlocking device in case of emergencies. This approach allows students to keep their cell phones with them throughout the school day.

Considerations:

- Cost of purchasing (and replacing) pouches;
- Coordinating the logistics of unlocking and storing student pouches at the end of the day;
- Ensuring that the pouches are accessible and functional to students with disabilities;
- Planning for emergency situations in which students may need to access their cell phone.

Considerations for Grade Level Differentiation

According to an [analysis](#) conducted across multiple countries with similar characteristics to the United States, approximately 30% of students report being distracted by using digital devices, and 21% say they are distracted by other students' digital device use during every or most of their mathematics lessons (OECD, 2023). Students may even be distracted by their personal electronic devices unintentionally, as [research suggests](#) that cell phone notifications activate an involuntary attention response, reducing cognitive capacity for other tasks (Radesky et al., 2023).

School districts' policies and strategies for limiting students' use of cell phones during the school day must consider age- and developmentally-appropriate restrictions that align with the structure of the school day in each grade-band and school. However, certain student groups within each grade band may still require exemptions and accommodations – additional guidance can be found in the *Considerations for Legal Exemptions and Accommodations for Student Groups* section.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

School districts should consider implementing the most stringent cell phone restrictions for elementary school students to maximize academic engagement, promote social and emotional development, and establish positive technology habits, all of which are essential for young children's overall development. The policy for elementary school students should consider removing cell phones from the classroom and school day environment. A more restrictive policy for elementary students supports young students' developmental needs for clear boundaries to focus on academics and socialization.

While elementary school policies may include the most stringent restrictions, schools should ensure that MLs and students with disabilities who require assistive technology for communication, translation, or accessibility receive appropriate accommodations. Policies should not inadvertently limit access to necessary supports.

Implementation Considerations:

- Designing clear, efficient, and secure procedures for collecting and storing student cell phones upon arrival at school or in the classroom;
- Building common understanding and buy-in with stakeholders to include options and clear protocols within the policy for those that may feel strongly about students needing phones for safety or connectivity;
- Identifying school-based communication tools and platforms to communicate emergency and non-emergency needs with parents;
- Ensuring a more restrictive policy won't inadvertently limit a student's access to learning supports or emergency resources that digital devices provide.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

[Research](#) shows that middle school students are particularly susceptible to the negative effects of excessive personal technology use and have a difficult time controlling their impulses (Schulz van Endert, 2021). Concurrently, middle school students experience increased autonomy and independence during the school day, which can lead to increased opportunity for cell phone misuse.

To support this age group's development and growing independence, however, [some middle schools](#) begin building in more flexibility, allowing cell phone use for time periods outside of the instructional day, including before and after school, on school buses, and on school grounds (Tandon, Zhou, Hogan, & Christakis, 2020). Providing boundaries for appropriate cell phone use for middle school students helps this age group build a healthier relationship with technology and could encourage self-regulation, which is crucial during this developmental stage.

While middle school policies may be more restrictive, schools should ensure that MLs and students with disabilities who require assistive technology for communication, translation, or accessibility receive appropriate accommodations. Policies should not inadvertently limit access to necessary supports.

Implementation Considerations:

- Designing clear, efficient, and secure procedures for collecting and storing student cell phones upon arrival at school or in the classroom;
- Building common understanding and buy-in with stakeholders to balance supporting students' independence and safety while encouraging healthy technology habits;
- Coordinating with families through school-based communication tools and platforms to communicate emergency and non-emergency needs;
- Developing developmentally appropriate guidance and support on the appropriate use of school-issued technology devices, educational apps, and educational tools for academic (both classroom and homework assignments) purposes;
- Ensuring a more restrictive policy won't inadvertently limit a student's access to learning supports or emergency resources that digital devices provide.

HIGH SCHOOL

[High school teachers](#) are especially likely to see cellphones as problematic. About seven-in-ten (72%) say that students being distracted by cellphones is a major problem in their classroom, compared with 33% of middle school teachers and 6% of elementary school teachers (Hatfield, 2024). Cell phones that are turned off and kept out of sight create classroom environments where both students and teachers can focus on learning.

However, high school students may be ready to take more responsibility for managing cell phone use and understanding the role of technology in their lives, helping them better prepare for life after graduation. Many high schools offer additional flexibility, allowing the use of cell phones in certain areas on campus or at certain times, such as lunch, between classes, in hallways, and outside on school grounds. Schools and districts with additional capacity could also consider implementing a tiered approach within the high school grade band; for example, requiring more restrictive cell phone policies for 9th graders and more flexibility for 11th and 12th graders.

The misuse of cell phones, both on and off school grounds, typically rises in high schools. This includes activities such as accessing, recording, and sharing inappropriate content and engaging in cyberbullying, which could also involve potentially illegal behavior.

Implementation Considerations:

- Outlining explicit expectations regarding appropriate and inappropriate cell phone use during the school day in the student Code of Conduct;
- Partnering with students and families on the “why” of less cell phone use during the school day to build understanding, common goals, and community support;
- Some students in this age group may rely on phones for educational purposes, like accessing online resources, apps, or assignments. Ensure the policy supports students learning to balance phone use with academic and social responsibilities;
- Designing schoolwide expectations and procedures for students having cell phones with them during class time;
- Teachers and administrators may face difficulties consistently enforcing the rules, particularly as students get more adept at hiding phones or circumventing rules.
- Policies requiring phones to be turned off or out of sight could result in a heavier burden on teachers, especially with large classes;
- Different rules for 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th graders might lead to confusion and inconsistency in enforcement.

Considerations for Legal Exemptions and Accommodations for Student Groups

Schools' and districts' policies restricting students' cell phone use should include allowable exemptions and accommodations when necessary to comply with a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP), 504 plan (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act), medical plan, or to ensure a student's equal access to instruction and a safe learning environment. Allowable exemptions and accommodations for cell phones should be written into a student's 504, IEP, individualized health care plan, or a school-created learning plan. This may require schools and districts to revisit students' 504, IEP, individualized health care plan, or a school-created learning plan to ensure they reflect updated cell phone policies.

For each of the student groups below, schools and districts should create a process for identifying and providing exemptions to their policy based on a student's specific needs, and as appropriate, according to each student's IEP, Section 504 accommodations, individualized health care plan, or learning plan. While students with accommodations and exemptions may require differentiated access to their cell phone, it remains within each school and district's jurisdiction to reevaluate such students' access if the student is misusing their phone in ways not aligned with their IEP, 504, health care plan, or learning plan. For this reason, districts may opt to only allow phone-based accommodations when an equivalent tool or resource is not accessible using a school-issued device.

Schools and districts should ensure that a student's teachers and, if applicable, their IEP, 504, or healthcare teams, provide input to develop guidelines that work for each particular student.

IEP AND 504 PLAN EXCEPTIONS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Schools and districts must consider students' IEP and 504 plans when creating policies regarding cell phone access, usage, and storage protocols. When making these decisions, consideration should be given to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) as well as any potential implications that may bring unnecessary attention to impacted students.

If using a cell phone during the school day is written into a student's IEP or 504 plan, the student must be permitted to use the cell phone as outlined in their IEP or 504 plan.

Students' IEP and 504 teams should determine where exceptions to a cell phone policy may be warranted to meet specific student health needs and ensure appropriate accommodations are included in the student's plan. Schools and districts should make sure the student, family, and educational team(s) supporting the student understand cell phone use as detailed in the IEP or 504 plan.

Assistive technologies such as speech-to-text, screen readers, translation apps, and other features available on cell phones can enable students to participate more fully in classroom activities, though many of these same functions may be available on district-managed devices. Schools and districts should consider providing school-based devices for assistive technology where appropriate.

HEALTH-RELATED EXCEPTIONS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

Students managing certain health conditions may need access to their personal cell phones during the school day to monitor their health in real time. Schools and districts may consider requiring a student to provide documentation of the health plan.

By the 2025-26 school year, districts must adopt, publish, and implement a student telehealth policy, in accordance with [state guidelines](#), to support and enhance students' access to telehealth appointments during the school day within public middle and high schools across the state. When drafting both their telehealth and cell phone policies, schools and districts should ensure both policies are aligned. Further, schools and districts should consider any accommodations that may be necessary to support students accessing telehealth at school, which may require students to use their cell phones.

If a student needs to use a cell phone during the school day for medical reasons, such as monitoring diabetes or epilepsy, an individual health care plan should be developed with and approved by the student, family, and school health team (such as the school nurse, medical monitor, or an administrator) and shared with the student's teachers to enable the student to access and use their cell phone. The plan may include:

- Details needed for the student to appropriately manage their health needs during the school day.
- Where and when during the school day it is appropriate for a student to use a cell phone based on their unique health care needs. Discuss if the student should be permitted to use their cell phone anytime, anyplace to monitor and address medical needs.
- Communication plan with all relevant staff members who may interact with a student using their cell phone for these purposes.

When developing their approach to health-related exceptions and accommodations to a cell phone policy, schools and districts may also consider how to support students who have sensory or mental health needs in which access to their cell phone provides calming or soothing benefits, such as a meditation app or noise cancelling features, and what kind of documentation may be necessary from families.

ACCOMMODATIONS FOR MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

Cell phones can also offer critical language accessibility for multilingual students who use languages other than English by providing quick access to translation tools. Schools and districts should ensure school-issued devices or approved accommodations allow for this support.

Policies should be clearly communicated in multiple languages so that multilingual students and families fully understand expectations, exemptions, and procedures.

If a multilingual student is determined to require access to technology to ensure the provision of a free and appropriate public education, school-based teams should collaborate to consider appropriate identification and use of assistive technology to support a student's unique needs and when necessary.

Considerations for Discipline Policies

In designing a cell phone use policy, schools should also stipulate a detailed ladder of appropriate consequences to respond to policy violations in a proportionate, consistent manner. Any discipline policies adopted should reflect the guiding principles outlined in local policy and the [Maryland Guidelines for a State Code of Discipline](#), which prioritize:

- Clearly communicated expectations for student behavior that are shared directly with all stakeholders and leverage the support of parents and families in addressing policy infractions;
- A tiered system of consequences that emphasizes restorative approaches to misbehavior (i.e. students have opportunities to learn from mistakes and consequences that are designed to preserve positive relationships with school staff);
- Processes to ensure that discipline procedures are fair, equitable, and evaluated regularly to minimize the risk of disproportionate impact on specific student groups, such as students of color and students with disabilities; and
- Adequate staff support and training to ensure the policy and any systems of accountability are implemented consistently throughout the school.

Any additions to the school's discipline policy must continue to promote a positive, supportive, safe, and welcoming school environment that is conducive to teaching and learning. To achieve this, schools and districts should consider outlining consistent expectations not just for students, but also for school staff, administrators, and parents and guardians.

Below is an example of tiered interventions to consider when outlining responses to student behaviors. The list is intended to illustrate the kind of responses schools and districts can consider when designing their policies and is not an exhaustive list. Additionally, schools and districts maintain the ability to adjust discipline tiers based on the severity of a student's infraction, regardless of the number of infractions a student may or may not have had before.

Discipline Tier	Interventions for Consideration
LEVEL 1	To address first-time or infrequent policy violations (First Infraction) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Classroom-based responses most likely issued directly by the teacher• Verbal Correction/Warning• Written Reflection/Apology• Reminders/Redirection

Discipline Tier	Interventions for Consideration
LEVEL 2	<p>To address repeated behavior (Second Infraction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent Outreach • Daily Progress Sheet • Restorative Circles (Classroom-Based or Specialist-Facilitated) • Securely store the student's cell phone in a teacher- or administrator-controlled locker, bin, or drawer for the duration of the class or period.
LEVEL 3	<p>To address persisting behavior that poses a disruption to class (Third Infraction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent/Guardian and Student Conference (with teacher and administrator) • Behavior Contract focused on cell phone use (with parent/guardian input) • Student's cell phone is stored in the school's central office for the remainder of the school day awaiting parent/guardian pick-up. • Referral to Student Support Team, IEP team (if the student has accommodations or modifications in place), mentoring program, or counselor
LEVEL 4	<p>To address serious behavior infractions while keeping the student in school (Fourth Infraction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of privileges, such as confiscating of cell phone during specific class periods or for the entirety of the school day • Permanent confiscation/ban of phone – Student may not be permitted to bring their phone into the school building and/or may be asked to turn in their phone each morning to be held for the duration of the school day.

While the responses aim to correct behavior, stress its severity, and acknowledge the harm done or disruption caused, all levels of the discipline ladder aim to keep the student in the classroom. To the greatest extent possible, consequences issued for illicit cell phone use should not incorporate exclusionary punishment, such as removal from class, in-school suspensions, or out-of-school suspensions. If a greater threat is identified related to cell phone use that poses a student safety concern, LEAs should address it appropriately in accordance with their local policy on discipline.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Enforcement of these policies at the classroom level will likely remain a challenge, particularly in the initial stages of implementation. Teachers may experience a greater impact on instructional time and their relationships with students as they navigate these new expectations. It is important to communicate clear, consistent expectations for all parties involved, while emphasizing the availability of additional supports in the building.

Offering targeted professional learning and developing in-house resources for educators who may be struggling with enforcement can help to alleviate some of the burden. Ultimately, providing specific strategies and tools to teachers will be key to ensuring successful implementation without overburdening staff. Some examples may include a consistent set of classroom rules for display purposes, designated phone storage areas, a protocol for alerting the office in instances where misbehavior escalates, and sharing technology monitoring tools. For example, Montgomery County Public School's [Discipline Guidance](#) provides suggestions schools may utilize to address student infractions related to the cell phone policy, progressively tiered as student behavior escalates.

All plans should aim to assist educators and staff in enforcing a schoolwide policy by implementing a clear monitoring system for cell phone use. Districts should add any information related to their cell phone use policy and discipline ladder to the student handbook or LEA code of conduct. To disseminate this information widely, consider having students and their families sign an acknowledgment form or sharing a policy introduction letter with families, such as these [parent/guardian letters](#) utilized by Caroline County Public Schools and available in multiple languages for families. Consider additional strategies for communicating the policy clearly to families, such as Montgomery County's ["Away All Day" Policy Flyer](#), which details the policy, student responsibilities, and exceptions. Any communication to students and families should also outline additional measures, such as the school's responsibility for lost, stolen, or damaged possessions in their custody and the appeals process for disciplinary decisions made.

Considerations for Emergency Preparedness Policies

As is best practice, and particularly when implementing policies limiting students' cell phone access in school, schools and districts should ensure they are providing families with regular updates about school in multiple languages and in both print and digital platforms. It is key that schools and districts maintain an accurate contact list for each student, including who to contact in both non-emergency and emergency situations. Schools should encourage classroom teachers to build strong two-way communication with parents. These relationships and lines of communication are critical if emergencies occur that require quick outreach to the school community.

When developing school or district policies limiting students' use of cell phones while at school, policies should detail procedures for how families, students, and staff should respond in school-based and family-based emergencies. Particular attention should be given to ensuring students and families with disabilities and whose home language is not English have equal access to information during a crisis.

When developing the emergency preparedness portion of a cell phone policy, districts should ensure that it is aligned with the district and school emergency plan and all applicable laws. Emergency planning requirements are codified in [Section 7-1510](#) of Maryland's state law.

It is reasonable for parents and families to want to directly reach and communicate with their student while at school, especially during an emergency. However, students' use of cell phones could decrease school safety throughout the school day or during a crisis:

- Cell phones and social media can be used to spread threats and coordinate acts of violence.
- Use of cell phones by students can accelerate the spread of misinformation, rumors, and fear.
- Cell phones could ring or vibrate at a point when students need to be quiet for safety reasons.
- Students on cell phones are likely less focused on listening to adults for directions on how to respond and stay safe.
- Cell phones can lead to families arriving at the school and make it more difficult for first responders to facilitate safe evacuation and tactical and emergency response.
- Cell phones can delay or hinder timely and efficient family-student reunification.
- Excessive communication can overwhelm cellular networks, hindering effective response efforts by public safety personnel.

Together with the school community as well as local public safety officials, schools should examine their current safety protocols and determine if changes to cell phone policies create additional risk to be mitigated. These policies and procedures should be developed with student and family buy-in.

As mentioned above, both [MSDE](#) and the [Maryland Center for School Safety](#) (MCSS) have requirements for schools and districts to regularly review, update, and publish their emergency plans.

Schools' and districts' emergency plans should clearly delineate which school staff will be responsible for communicating during the crisis and how school leaders will communicate with the broader community. Schools and districts must be clear in their protocols whether or not students can access their cell phone during a school-based emergency and communicate this policy clearly and in an accessible way to parents and students. Further, districts should consider what happens to a student's device if there is a school-based emergency and should develop procedures for reuniting students with their devices in such instances. This can ensure parents and families know when they can expect to contact their student directly during school-based emergencies.

Importantly, policies limiting cell phones in school do not remove all phones from schools. School staff and school-based crisis team members should have access to communication devices to contact the school office should emergency conditions arise. Schools and districts, in partnership with administrators, crisis teams, and public safety officials, should first refer to their district or school emergency plan and [MSDE guidelines](#). As already required, district and school plans must have procedures for family and community communication, reunification, training, and regular evaluation.

COMMUNICATION WITH THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY DURING A SCHOOL-BASED EMERGENCY

School leaders should have prepared policies and plans in place to have a unified, redundant, and practiced response for direct emergency communications. Schools and districts should share information about formal crisis communication plans to help students, staff, and families understand the procedures used in the event of an emergency. These communications should be distributed in multiple languages using processes most regularly used by the school, including email, telephone, website, and social media posting. Communication should avoid jargon to the greatest extent possible and written with families in mind. Schools must also ensure that families who do not have access to the internet or electronic devices will also need this information. As such, distribution of this information through the US Postal Service should be considered on an annual basis.

NON-EMERGENCY OR FAMILY-BASED EMERGENCY PLANNING

Schools and districts should develop procedures for when parents need to reach their child during the school day and ensure students receive messages in a timely manner. Each school should share their non-emergency and family-based emergency school procedures in multiple languages at back-to-school meetings, new student orientation, and posted on the website. Schools and districts should clearly define 'family-based emergency' and 'non-emergency' in all documents. For example, non-emergency communication may include changes in schedules, pick up and drop off plans, or forgotten items that need to be delivered to the school.

If schools and districts have the staff capacity, they can direct parents to call or email the front office, their teacher, or reach out through the school's messaging platform. For non-emergency messages, schools may consider alerting parents that their student may check their phone after school or during periods when students are allowed to use their phone.

Schools and districts should develop a procedure for parents to contact the school or school staff to reach their student in the event of a family-based emergency. Schools should treat family emergencies with urgency and ensure that students have the information and the support needed to manage a family-based emergency.

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Appendix A: Policies in Action in Maryland School Districts

Baltimore City Public Schools [presentation](#) to the Baltimore City Board of Education that outlined proposed revisions, supporting research, and stakeholder survey results on the Board's Policy on Portable Electronic Communication Devices.

Baltimore County Public Schools utilizes [posters](#) and [one-pagers](#) that outline the district's updated cell phone policy. The district also posts color-coded signs throughout schools to let students know where cell phone use [is](#) and [is not](#) permitted. Some schools and classrooms within the district also utilize cell phone "[hotels](#)" where students leave their phone during instructional time.

Caroline County Public Schools created a [website](#) with information on the district's pilot program for cell phone pouches for middle schools. The website includes example parent letters in multiple languages and an FAQ.

Howard County Public Schools (HCPSS) conducted a [community survey](#) on the district's student personal technology policy. The survey was conducted in multiple languages and reached parents, students, and staff. HCPSS also convened a [workgroup to develop recommendations](#) for the district's Student Personal Technology Devices in School policy.

Montgomery County Public Schools has developed multiple artifacts for schools to support their "Away All Day" policy, including:

- [Interest Session Presentation](#), which previews the policy, links to feedback received on the policy, model policies, and an implementation plan template.
- [Flyer](#), which details the policy, student responsibilities, and exceptions
- [Overview of the Policy for School Staff](#), which includes evaluation components and school-specific implementation details
- [School Implementation Plan](#) is a template schools can adapt to outline plans for staff training, logistics, communication, and any additional support needed.
- [Discipline Guidance](#) provide suggestions schools may utilize to address student infractions related to the cell phone policy.

Washington County Public Schools created [graphics](#) for schools to post to promote the "why" behind their updated cell phone policy.

Appendix B: Statewide Resources

[MSDE Assistive Technology Guide for Students with Disabilities](#) discusses technology tools, including translation software and digital accessibility that can be relevant for MLs as well.

[MSDE Digital Learning and Accessibility](#) provides information on digital accessibility and technology integration for equitable learning.

[MSDE English Learner Programs & Title III Support](#) includes guidance on language access, assistive technology considerations, and instructional supports.

[MSDE Guidelines for the Availability for Student Participation in Telehealth Appointments in Secondary Schools](#) was developed in December 2024 to provide a comprehensive and adaptable framework for the availability for student participation in telehealth services based on the recommendations from the State's telehealth workgroup. These guidelines will assist local boards in creating district policies to support access to telehealth appointments, when appropriate, during the school day within public middle and high schools across the State.

[Maryland Emergency Planning Guidelines for Local School Systems and Schools](#) was developed in December 2019 to provide local school systems a framework for the creation of a comprehensive Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) which sets guidelines to manage disaster in an effective, efficient, and timely manner.

[Maryland Guidelines for a State Code of Discipline](#) was developed in 2014 to provide a framework for local school systems to use in establishing local codes of conduct and in developing new discipline-related policies. These guidelines include behavioral expectations for all members of the school community; provide suggested prevention, intervention, restorative, and incentive-based strategies to respond to student misconduct.

[Maryland law](#) detailing school safety evaluations and emergency planning requirements.

[Maryland Center for School Safety's regulations](#) outlining requirements for schools to submit annual emergency and incident reports.

[Maryland regulations](#) that detail the requirements for local school systems to develop an emergency plan for all public school grounds to include maintenance, transportation, and central administration office under its jurisdiction.

[Safe Schools Maryland](#) is Maryland's official anonymous and free tipline to report any school or student safety concerns, including mental health concerns. Safe Schools Maryland operates twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and 365 days a year.

[Sample Stakeholder Engagement Plan Template](#)