CELL PHONE-FREE EDUCATION

SCHOOL LEADER IMPLEMENTATION TOOLKIT

Table of Contents

Section One:

Overview of Virginia Cell Phone-Free Education Guidance & Why It Matters

Overview of Cell Phone-Free Education & Why It Matters

Governor Glenn Youngkin issued Executive Order 33 (EO33) to establish cell phone-free education to promote the health and safety of Virginia's K-12 students. Executive Order 33 is focused on eliminating cell phone use during instructional time and addressing the mental health issues arising from children's social media and cell phone addiction.

Implementing cell phone-free education in Virginia's K-12 public schools is critical, especially given the increases in youth chronic mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety, that are driven in part by children's extensive social media and cell phone use. Executive Order 33 directs the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to provide guidance to school boards on cell phone-free education policies and procedures. Using this guidance, school boards will establish local cell phone-free education policies and procedures before the end of this year that will be implemented in January 2025.

The EO33 guidance is specific to students' use of cell phones and personal electronic communication devices and should not discourage the appropriate use of school-issued technologies aligned with the Commonwealth's education standards. The Commonwealth has put in place best-in-class computer science standards and has revised its math standards to include data analysis practices throughout a student's academic career.

Why It Matters

- On average, preteens and teens receive more than 200 notifications a day on their smartphones.
- In 2022, two-thirds of U.S. students reported being distracted by using digital devices, and about 54 percent said they are distracted by other students who are using those resources.
- Children spend an average of 4.8 hours a day on social media. Recent studies indicate that spending more than three hours a day on social media doubles the risk of poor mental health for adolescents.
- At the same time that children's social media use and time spent on their phones are skyrocketing, their mental health is rapidly declining.
  - From 2019-2021, the rate of suicide has increased 167% since 2010 for girls and 91% since 2010 for boys.
  - In the same timeframe, boys and girls experienced a spike in depression of 161% and 145%, respectively.
- More than half of teens (56%) associate the absence of their phone with at least one of three emotions: loneliness, being upset, or feeling anxious. Girls are more likely than boys to feel anxious or lonely without their phone.
- The mere presence of one's smartphone is shown to reduce available cognitive capacity.

How to Use This Toolkit

The VDOE School Leader Cell Phone-Free Learning Implementation Toolkit equips school leaders with evidence-based resources, decision trees, and strategies for effectively ensuring students experience "bell-to-bell" learning free of cell phones. As school leaders use this toolkit, resources are identified for three different stakeholder groups — educators, families, and students.

Resources and communications throughout the Toolkit have icons located in the bottom right corner of each page, indicating the target audience for the resource.

For Educators	For Families	For Students

Summary of Statewide Guidance

On July 9, 2024, Governor Glenn Youngkin issued [Executive Order 33](#) ("EO33") establishing cell phone-free education in public schools to promote the health and safety of Virginia's K-12 students. EO33 states the following:

- The necessity of implementing cell phone-free education in Virginia's K-12 public schools is increasingly evident. Parents, public health professionals, educators, and other stakeholders across the Commonwealth are expressing concern over the alarming mental health crisis and chronic health conditions affecting adolescents, such as depression and anxiety, driven in part by extensive social media usage and widespread cell phone possession among children. Cell phone-free education will significantly reduce the amount of time students can be on phones without parental supervision.

- Therefore, creating a cell phone-free education environment in public schools is not only a prudent measure, but an essential one to promote a healthier and more focused educational environment where every child is free to learn.

To address these concerns, EO33 outlined a series of actions to be taken by the Secretary of Education, the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Virginia Department of Education, and the State Health Commissioner, including the development of draft guidance for public school divisions to adopt policies and procedures establishing cell phone-free education. The draft guidance reflected the voices of Virginians that took part in nine public listening sessions (one in-person listening session in each of eight Superintendent Regions and one virtual listening session) with over 600 attendees, 11 additional stakeholder group conversations with community and faith leaders, parent organizations, school board, superintendent, principals, and school nurse associations, as well as nearly 1,500 submitted online comments in July and August of 2024 with 77% strongly in favor of the cell phone-free instructional time.

This draft guidance was available for review and feedback through September 15, 2024. Overall, the department received nearly 6,000 public comments and feedback during engagements, including 21 stakeholder convenings and public Commonwealth Conversations with over 1,160 Virginians. These comments reinforced the importance of "bell-to-bell" Cell Phone-Free education helped teachers focus on learning and not discipline, ensured students submitted authentic work, and allowed students to develop critical communication skills. Families also chimed in that they wanted their students to focus on learning and not get caught up in the drama that social media often causes during instructional hours.

Of the concerns raised, one common theme was around medical needs – specifically use of phone-based apps for health monitoring - and the department partnered with school nurses, pediatricians and the Virginia Department of Health to address practices for exceptions in the Guidance recognizing students with medical needs may require a medical exemption to the bell-to-bell policy included in their Individualized Education Plan, 504 plan, and/or individualized health care plans.

Second, many students wrote in asking to use their phones during lunch hours. However, research shows receive [more than 200 notifications a day](#) on their smartphones and [two-thirds of U.S. students](#) report being distracted by using digital devices. It is essential that students have the opportunity to develop

face-to-face conversations and develop critical in-person communication skills during unstructured school hours.

Third, it became very apparent there are general gaps in parent, teacher and school communication resulting in parents feeling like they must communicate directly with their child for both emergency and non-emergency situations. Specifically, concerns focused on the ability for a parent to contact their child in a school-based emergency including during or immediately after lockdowns. The guidance has a clear section on communicating with parents during school-based and family-based emergency situations as well as non-emergency parent communications protocols. The enhanced guidance also includes a new Appendix section on School-Based Emergencies to support principals and superintendents with best practices.

Polling was also released by the Washington Post-Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University poll on Friday, September 13 showing that 69% of Virginia parents of school-aged children support cell phone-free education, including during lunch and class breaks. This aligns with the overall broad, bi-partisan feedback the department received during the months of July through September.

With this final guidance, every school division and local school board should review existing policies and/or work to create or revise policies that adhere with the following minimum guidance no later than January 1, 2025. Communities are invited and encouraged to have community conversations and consider broadening their policies and protocols.

Below you will find the required definitions, outlines of the "Bell-to-Bell" guidance by grade, and model implementation plans are included in Step Five of this document.

Definitions

"Bell-to-Bell" means from when the first bell rings at the start of the school day to begin instructional time until the dismissal bell rings at the end of the academic school day. "Bell-to-bell" includes lunch and time in between class periods.

"Cell Phone-Free Education" means the age-appropriate elimination or restriction of cell phones and other personal electronic communication devices in public schools.

"Cell Phone" means a personal device capable of making calls, transmitting pictures or video, or sending or receiving messages through electronic means. The definition of cell phone is inclusive of a non-smart phone that is limited to making phone calls or text messages, a smart phone that encompasses the above features, and other future personal electronic communication devices with the abovementioned characteristics.

"Instructional time" 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 academic school day.

"Personal Electronic Communication Device" means any personal device capable of connecting to a smart phone, the internet, or a cellular or Wi-Fi network. Personal electronic communication devices may include some wearable devices such as smart watches, as well as personal headphones, laptops,

tablets, and other future personal electronic communication devices with the abovementioned characteristics.

"Stored" means a cell phone or personal electronic communication device not being carried on the student's person, including not in the student's pocket. Options school divisions could choose to define as storage options 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.

What is "cell phone-free" education?

Executive Order 33 requires that the Department provide detailed age-appropriate restrictions or elimination of cell phones during "instructional time" in Virginia public schools. The final guidance defines cell phone-free education as "bell-to-bell" instructional time and outlines different developmentally appropriate expectations at elementary (K-5), middle (6-8), and high school (9-12).

In Elementary Schools (K-5), cell phone-free education is:

- Cell phones and personal electronic communication devices will not be used by elementary students within the school building or on school grounds.
- If a parent decides that an elementary student should bring a cell phone or personal electronic communication device to school, the device must be turned off and stored away from the student during the school day.
- School divisions must make policies that determine cell phone and personal electronic communication device use on school buses where elementary students are present.
- Students must use school-based communication tools and platforms (whether in the office, classroom, or other centralized location) to communicate non-emergency needs with parents.
- Parents and educators should use school-based communication tools and channels to communicate emergencies and non-emergencies during bell-to-bell instructional time. It is encouraged to have a school official available to support the student in the event of communication involving a family emergency.

Note: If an elementary school houses students in grades other than K-5, the elementary definition of cell phone-free education is applicable for all grade levels within the elementary school. Each public school system must establish clear procedures for off-site events or activities, including all school-sponsored events and/or field trips, transportation- including daily bus transit, multiple instructional settings, and other non-building specific instructional opportunities that do not occur on the elementary school campus.

In Middle Schools (Grade 6-8), cell phone-free education is:

- Middle school students shall not have a cell phone or personal electronic communication device during the bell-to-bell school day.
- If cell phones or personal electronic communication devices are brought to school, they must be stored and turned off during bell-to-bell school day.
- Specifically for time periods outside of the bell-to-bell school day, school divisions must make local policies that determine appropriate cell phone and personal electronic communication device use by middle school students, including before and after school, on school buses, within the school building, and on school grounds.

- Students must use school-based communication tools and platforms (whether in the office, classroom, or other centralized location) to communicate non-emergency needs with parents.
- Parents should use school-based communication tools and channels to communicate emergencies and non-emergencies. It is encouraged to have a school official available to support the student in the event of communication involving a family emergency.
- Educators and all co-curricular and extra-curricular sponsors must use a non-social media-based app for communications with students regarding activity and athletic scheduling information during school hours.
- Schools should give middle school students 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) and educational research purposes.

Note: Some Virginia middle schools house grades other than 6-8, and the middle school definition of cell phone-free education is applicable for those middle schools. If a middle school student travels to a different campus during the school day, they must adhere to that school building's policy and procedures for cell phones and personal electronic communication devices.

Each school system must establish procedures for off-site events including all school-sponsored events and/or field trips, transportation- including daily bus transport, athletic participants, multiple instructional settings, and other non-building specific instructional opportunities that do not occur on the high school campus.

In High Schools (Grade 9-12), cell phone-free education is:

- High school students shall not have a cell phone or personal electronic communication device during the bell-to-bell school day.
- If cell phones or personal electronic communication devices are brought to school, they must also be stored and turned off during the bell-to-bell school day.
- Outside of the bell-to-bell instructional time, cell phones and personal electronic communication devices may be used on a high school campus before or after school.
- During bell-to-bell instructional time, students must use school-based communication tools and platforms (whether in the office, classroom, or other centralized location) to communicate non-emergency needs with parents.
- Parents should use school-based communication tools and channels to communicate emergencies during bell-to-bell instructional time.
- Educators and all co-curricular and extra-curricular sponsors must use non-social media-based apps to communicate activity and athletic scheduling information with students during school hours.
- Schools should give high school students 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) and educational research purposes.

Note: If a high school student travels to a different campus or facility during the school day, they must adhere to that building's policy and procedures for cell phones and personal electronic communication devices.

Each school system must establish procedures for off-site events including all school-sponsored events and/or field trips, transportation- including daily bus transport, athletic participants, multiple instructional settings, and other non-building specific instructional opportunities that do not occur on the high school campus.

Why It Matters & Benefits for Children

Data shows students who carry their cell phone throughout the day look at it 51 times a day, and receive 237 notifications on average. Additionally, many students are drawn into bullying, fights, and coordinated bathroom drug deals through their cell phone use during the school day.

For the sake of students' mental health and to eliminate challenges to their academic achievement, our students deserve the opportunity for a cell phone-free education from "bell-to-bell" during the school day. Learning occurs not only in classrooms through formal, structured experiences, but also in the hallways, in lunchrooms, and through conversational moments throughout the school day. Giving seven hours of cell phone-free learning to students reduces stress, anxiety, and the harms of smart phones/social media, as well as allowing students to avoid the distractions that come from constant notifications. Instead, students can build social relationships in-person with other students and engage in authentic learning experiences throughout their daily school experiences.

The goals of a Cell Phone-Free Education are:

- Provide students with distraction-free learning in their classroom lessons, creating focused learning time where teachers can teach without managing distractions that come from cell phones.
- Ensure students are doing their own work and not using artificial intelligence (AI) and other smart device tools to cheat.
- Focus student learning experiences on engagement and in-person learning rather than on distracted and disconnected screen time.
- Encourages opportunities for students to develop authentic, in-person relationships during non-structured learning times.
- Reduces the bullying and social media driven negativity that escalates through online cell phone and social media communications.
- Reduces the tendencies to leave the classroom to use a cell phone in the hall or bathroom, or to pull the cell phone out of pockets during instruction.
    - Increases school safety and makes it more difficult for large at-school organized fights and unauthorized behavior to take place in bathrooms and other unsupervised spaces.
    - Reduces stress and anxiety caused by social media notifications during the school day, creating an ever-present fear of missing out.
- Improves attendance because students are more attentive to the routines and structures of the school day.

Section Two:

Decision Tree for Local Policy Decisions

Step One:

• Feedback and Data Collection

Step Two:

• Current Practice Analysis

Step Three:

• Making Policy Decisions

Step Four:

• School Division Communications of Local Policy

Step One: Feedback and Data Collection

School divisions should begin their policy development/revisions by engaging their school community, including students, families, educators, and other interested community members, in conversations about the best policies and practices for Cell Phone-Free Education. As the Virginia Department of Education started the process of drafting statewide guidance, the Department used in-person conversations across the Commonwealth, small group discussions, and public comment data. In addition, many school divisions across the Commonwealth have used focus groups and local surveys to determine their community's policy expectations.

Focus Groups

A school division/school may choose to host focus groups with families, community members, educators, and students. These focus groups can be role specific or representative cross sections of the community. The focus groups' purpose is to gain insight into the perspectives of various stakeholders and better understand their experiences with cell phones in schools. Focus groups can provide strong direction to the school division leadership and school board on what concerns each stakeholder has regarding the upcoming decisions.

Surveys

A school division/school may choose to survey their teachers, families, and students to collect school specific data on the current impact cell phones have on the educational environment. Also, they can subsequently conduct a survey after implementing the bell-to-bell phone-free policy for a semester or a year to assess its impact. Caroline County and Roanoke City Public Schools both used this approach in their cell phone-free policy development.

- Sample Survey_Caroline County
- Sample Survey_Roanoke City
- Public Comment sessions to collect community feedback.
- A school division/school should consider sharing draft local policies for community feedback, and then finalize local plans through the school board's established procedures.

Considerations

- What will be the process to communicate the opportunities to provide feedback?
- Do all community members fully understand the rationale for developing the policy and why it matters?
- Have all relevant stakeholders been consulted? If not, how will they be reached?
- Are the right questions being asked in focus group and surveys to help make informed decisions?
- Do others providing feedback fully understand the policy and why it matters to engage in the conversation and give feedback?
- Does the school division need to do a campaign on the dangers of cell phones and social media? (See appendices for resources

Step Two: Current Practice Analysis

After collecting community feedback, the school division should engage with its staff including instruction, personnel, student support services, school nurses, and school safety and school leaders to determine what is working with current practices, what is not, and what critical opportunities are presented in the drafting/revision process. It is important for the team to be transparent and understand the root causes of challenges and the steps necessary for improvement. It is also important for this team to ground this analysis in the "why" these cell phone policies are important. The research infographic in Appendix A may be helpful to start this conversation.

Complete SWOT Analysis

A SWOT analysis is a strategic planning process used by teams to determine areas of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. As part of policy decisions, the school division should review current data and current practices in each school. School leaders and school division leadership should consider completing a SWOT analysis to analyze instructional challenges, issues with unstructured learning spaces, challenges with building logistics including bathroom spaces, how school leaders communicate with educators, how educators and club/athletics sponsors communicate with students, how the school communicates with families, potential student medical issues, language needs and student assistance, as well as a technology device inventory.

Here are some sample questions that could be part of this meeting:

- What are the school division's current cell phone-free policies?
- Are some schools having successes with the policies? Why?
- Are some schools having bigger challenges? Why?
- Do the schools have consistency in implementation and leadership? If so, what strategies led to those successes?
- What additional practices might provide opportunities to share across the school division?
- What successful communication strategies are schools using to stay in touch with families?
- Where are consistency challenges occurring?
- Are any schools having ongoing behavior challenges or issues with school violence, drug deals, or bullying that are related to social media or cell phone communications?
- Are there ongoing communication challenges occurring?
- What are the current challenges that provide the biggest threats to the success of the new policy?
- Are there any other related policies that need to be reviewed and considered? (e.g. bring your own device.)
- How do parents' expectation of instant and continuous communications with their child throughout the day affect this issue?

This analysis should help the leadership team shape draft policies, strategies, and procedures to discuss with stakeholders and the school board.

School Division Data

In addition to focused leadership conversations, the school division/school should analyze current data, including behavior, mental health, safety risks and academic successes. Consider how to collect data and what other potential data may be helpful to make informed policy decisions. Check to see how the input provided from all stakeholders such as students, parents, teachers, leaders, and others in the school community correlates with SWOT and data analyses. The team should also think about how additional data will be collected, such as through surveys or focus group meetings.

> ### *Considerations*
>
> - How can the team leverage strengths to support the new policy?
> - How can the leadership team capitalize on the opportunities identified in the SWOT analysis?
> - Are there any weaknesses that need to be mitigated so they do not undermine the policy's success?
> - How can the team prepare for potential challenges that might arise?
> - How can the team ensure the design and implementation choices leverage strengths, opportunities and data insights?

Step Three: Making Policy Decisions

As the school division leadership team works with the school board and community stakeholders, they should clearly and consistently communicate the "why" of the cell phone policy decisions and grounded in local data when possible. Share data and SWOT analyses to help inform final policy decisions.

When presenting the draft local policy, school leaders should ground the policy in the benefits and goals of the cell phone-free education policy. Provide the board with the results of local surveys, focus groups, and other data. School division leadership should highlight from the data the impact cell phones have had on academic performance, learning environment, concerns related to distractions, mental health, and student safety. Ground the conversation in this local context to make it locally relevant. Share how the local policy recommendation meets the feedback and needs of educators and the academic success of students.

Consider the following:

- Ground the opening of the policy discussion with the statistics and the "why" of the policy decisions. Consider using handouts in Appendix A.
- Present the results of local surveys, focus groups and any stakeholder comments that capture the perspectives of students, teachers, and parents.

Highlight key statistics and quotes that illustrate the widespread concerns about cell phone use in schools. In addition, consider sharing findings from local comments that discuss the challenges of classroom instruction, student mental health, and increased school safety issues because of cell phones.

- Clearly explain how the proposed cell phone-free policy addresses the identified challenges and how the team developed the draft guidance before the board.
- Highlight how the policy aligns with the feedback and needs of educators and local stakeholders.

Considerations

- How can the presentation team ground the conversation in "the why" of cell phone-free education.
- What is the important data and analysis that needs to be shared with stakeholders?
- How does the policy draft comply with the statewide guidance and ensure existing policies are merged?
- When presenting the policy, consider some communication and implementation components. How will the policy be communicated to employees? Families? Students?
- Do all components of decision points, policy, procedures and implementation protocols focus on student learning and align to the goals?

Step Four: School Division Communication of Local Policy

Communicating policy decisions should always be grounded in the broader "why". The team should consider using stakeholder comments, board member statements, and data when sharing board decisions. In addition, school divisions should consistently communicate the policy decision to make sure that community members, families, students, and educators clearly understand the importance of cell phone-free education and how the school division policy ensures students can learn distraction-free while reducing mental health and school safety risks that occur when cell phone use is allowed during the school day.

The Department has provided sample resources to use in your communication campaign. The team should understand which communication channels are most effective in their communities and consider multiple methods of communicating at all venues to ensure that families do not miss this important announcement.

Considerations

- Does this communicate the "why" of the need for these decisions?
- Is this being discussed in a way to bring parents, staff, students, and the community along with the decisions rather than simply telling them what will happen?
- Is the communication clear and does it set reasonable expectations on timeframes, implementation decisions, and supports and consequences?
- Does the message need to be differentiated for different audiences?
- How will these communications be delivered? Do there need to be different communications mediums for different groups?

More discussion of communicating cell phone-free policies and procedures is included in Step Seven: Successful Communications to Implement the Policy and Section 5: School-based Communications Strategies in this Toolkit.

Section Three:
Decision Tree for School-based Implementation

Step Five:

•School Planning & Determining HOW to Store Cell Phones

Step Six:

•Implementing Schools Storage Model for Cell Phone-Free Education

Step Seven:

•Successful Communications to Implement the Policy

Step Eight:

•School Leader: Develop Supports and Consequences

Step Nine:

•Determine Exceptions

Step Ten:

• Monitoring Consistent Implementation

Step Five: School Planning & Determining HOW to Store Cell Phones

Planning for successful implementation of a cell phone-free policy for a school involves several concrete steps to ensure it is effective, fair, and transparent. Ensuring that all educators across the school division deliver consistent messaging and implementation is crucial for successful outcomes. Considering family and student needs and concerns are also important steps. Finally, all existing practices and protocols should be analyzed to ensure that students experience a seamless and consistent transition.

After planning and determining the action steps, create a timeline for successful implementation. Ensure that all stakeholders are clear on the timeline and next steps in the implementation of new and updated Cell Phone-Free Policies.

School Leaders: Planning and Design Procedures

School leadership teams should plan how they will implement the new school division policy. Procedures and protocols must be consistent and clear to have effective implementation. While the school division discusses the policy decisions with the school board, it is likely that procedures and practices will need to be part of that conversation to ensure the success of the policy.

Teams should consider how phones will be stored as a critical first step of implementing "bell-to-bell" cell phone-free education.

Three models are provided for review: "off and away" storage, "lockable pouch" storage, and "cell phone lockers" storage.

When making this first critical "how" choice, schools and/or school divisions should return to the SWOT and data analysis during the policy step of this decision protocol. Each model has strengths and barriers for success. The team should incorporate the following into their model decisions.

Consider the following:

- What existing storage practices have been successful?
- What barriers exist or problems exist for consistency of implementation?
- How does the policy address emergencies and how will storage support or hinder those practices?
- Does the school have lockers or other locations where phones can be "off and away"?
- Does the school have existing "cell phone locker" practices that have worked consistently?
- Consider how the school administration will support teachers and ensure consistency and fidelity to the cell phone-free model.
- Finally, review how teachers and administrators are expected to use cell phones for communication and safety plan management. Will you need to revise your current safety plans and procedures? Existing safety practices must be considered in the "how" of cell phone-free implementation.

Note: School divisions must address transportation in their policies and procedures. Transportation policies should be considered as building determinations are made. Review the school

division's transportation safety guidelines. This is especially important for buses that transport K-12 students at the same time and may have variations by level in the policy.

Next Steps: Meet with your school leadership team to discuss the new policy and existing related policies and plan for success. The leadership team should brainstorm what exists and what is needed:

- Create opportunities for key stakeholders including students, families, teachers, and front office staff to give feedback.
- Review the school crisis and contingency plans for emergencies. Consider if implementation of the new policy will require you to make updates as it relates to logistics and communications.
- Identify how leaders and teachers will be implementing the policy. Ensure these roles are clear and explicit.

Considerations

- What are the necessary resources (time, budget, personnel) to successfully implement the policy? Do we have them? If not, what additional resources might be needed?
- What might be the downsides or obstacles to the cell phone storage option we have selected or process we have put into place?
- Have we considered and capitalized on the strengths of the school staff and building to implement the plan?
- What existing plans and procedures also need updating and communicating to avoid conflicting messages?
- What training or support will need to be provided?

Model implementation plans for cell phone-free education

The guidance on Cell Phone-Free Education states:

For Elementary School:

If a parent decides that an elementary student should bring a cell phone or personal electronic communication device to school, the device must be turned off and stored away from the student during the school day.

For Middle and High Schools:

If cell phones or personal electronic communication devices are brought to school, they must also be stored and turned off during the bell-to-bell school day.

The guidance defines "stored" as:

"Stored" means a cell phone or personal electronic communication device not being carried on the student's person, including not in the student's pocket. Options school divisions could choose to define as storage options 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.

Three approaches are commonly used by schools implementing cell phone-free education at the school level:

- Off & Away

- Lockable Pouch

- Cell Phone Lockers

School divisions should decide which of these approaches works best for their schools. Based on the situation at each individual school, school divisions may want to vary their approach to the strategy that will work for that individual school.

As they consider each of these three possible strategies, school divisions should contemplate the following issues:

Off & Away

The "Off & Away" strategy for cell phone-free education is very much as it sounds- students should turn off their phone and put it away during the bell-to-bell school day. Local school divisions can decide in their policies where students should put the phone during this time; the guidance simply states that the phone should not be held on the student's person (e.g. in their pockets).

Cost:

There does not need to be a cost to implement the "Off & Away" strategy.

Storage:

This is a decision for the local school division adopting the "Off & Away" strategy. A student's backpack, a dedicated location in a classroom, a student's locker, or other place within the school are all options where schools could choose to have students store their phones when they are "Off & Away".

Options for in-classroom storage could be as simple as a cell phone caddy in the individual classroom where the student puts their phone during class. The caddy could be as simple as a box with individual slots in which to place phones. Using a creative problem-solving approach, some teachers have hung [clear, over-the-door shoe hangers](#) in their classroom where students deposit their phone when entering class.

Other Considerations:

While it can be a highly effective policy with a strong and committed implementation, the "Off & Away" strategy can be the most difficult strategy to implement at the classroom level. Many students do not have the impulse control to stop themselves from checking their phone during class time if the phone is within reach, and their backpack is often in reach in middle and high school. School leaders should strongly consider how they are going to support their classroom teachers in enforcing this policy, as well as what consequences occur if a student does not follow the policy, especially in dealing with repeat offenders.

Additionally, schools much be conscious that if the student has the phone within reach, there will be a strong temptation to use the phone in locations where the student is unlikely to be seen, such as the bathroom.

Louisa County has had an "Off & Away" policy for cell phones since 2008. Their students are not permitted to use electronic devices on school property – including the time between class changes and during lunch. There is extremely positive sentiment towards the policy by teachers and parents. Teachers who are new to the division rave about the policy and teachers who leave to teach in divisions who do not have a policy in place report dissatisfaction with the lack of student focus and constant distractions.

[Case Study: Louisa County Public Schools Off & Away Strategy](#)

Lockable pouch

Schools can choose to purchase a lockable pouch system where students are required to put their phone into their own assigned personal pouch when they arrive at school, which is then locked with a magnetic pin similar to the anti-theft tags used in clothing stores. Students keep the pouch with them but cannot unlock it until the end of the school day, when they are given access to a magnetic unlocking device.

Cost:

The pouches, plus the equipment, training and support for the lockable pouch typically cost about $30 per student the first year.

Storage:

Each student is assigned a pouch for which they are responsible. If the pouch is lost or damaged, that student is responsible for replacing the pouch.

Other Considerations:

The lockable pouches are not indestructible. Students who want to get into the pouch during the school day have purposefully damaged their pouches to get to their phones when the pouch is locked.

No locking system is foolproof. The pouches' lockable magnets can be creatively opened by determined students without the system's magnetic unlocking device.

The pouches do not have to be used only at school. Fredericksburg City Public Schools have adopted the lockable pouch approach and some of their families have had great success using the pouches at home to enforce screen time restrictions and to make sure the phones are put away at night, eliminating the temptation for children to stay up past their bedtimes on their phones.

Hopewell City Public Schools began researching cell phone-free policies in 2021 and implemented the lockable pouch strategy in the 2022/2023 school year. Now in its third school year, the lockable pouch approach has been a successful approach to eliminate student distractions from cell phones in the classroom as well as shown considerable reductions in bullying, fighting, and other discipline issues since the implementation of the policy.

Case Study: Hopewell City Public Schools Lockable Pouch Strategy

Cell Phone Lockers

Schools can choose to have students lock their phones into a secure unit with many small compartments similar to a post office when they arrive at school. Students keep their key and get access to the phone lockers again when they leave school.

Cost:

Costs will vary depending on the lockers the school chooses to install, how, and where they choose to install them, and how many lockers will be needed to provide a lockable space for each student's phone.

Storage:

Each student is assigned a lockable space where they place their phone at the beginning of the bell-to-bell day and can retrieve their phone from at the end of the bell-to-bell day.

Other considerations:

Typically, phone lockers are permanently installed- either on a wall or freestanding at a location in the school. For larger schools, especially those with campuses spread across multiple buildings, they may be more complicated to manage at the end of the school day with most students all attempting to access their phone lockers simultaneously.

No strategy is foolproof and students are crafty. Some schools report that students will bring two phones to school - one to put in the locker for show and the other to keep with them throughout the day.

Cell phone lockers are considered the most reliable way to separate students from the temptation to use their phones for the duration of the school day.

Step Six: Implementing Schools Storage Model for Cell Phone-Free Education

As school leaders consider the launch of "bell-to-bell" cell phone-free education, the following protocols should be discussed, finalized and well-communicated:

- How the "why" of cell phone-free education will be communicated to students, educators, and families.
- What time "bell-to-bell" starts every day.
- Who monitors the beginning the of "bell-to-bell" days to ensure cell phones are effectively stored.
- Where students will go to communicate with families for personal emergency and non-emergency needs.
- How students will access their cell phones in emergency situations.
- How Individualized Education Program (IEP), Individualized Health Care Plan (IHP), 504 Plan (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act) and English Learner accommodation plans will be updated to meet the needs of students.
- What is the Support and Consequences policy and how will it be implemented (See Step Eight).
- How teachers and other educators will be supported in the implementation and monitoring of this cell phone-free policy.
- How personnel will maintain consistent implementation of the cell phone-free policy throughout the year, especially after school breaks.

Schools should consider their unique climate, context, and community as they finalize and implement procedures and protocols.

> ### *Considerations:*
>
> - Schools should review existing policies to ensure there are no contradictions to the procedures being put into place, including the school division's Acceptable Use Policy and any Bring Your Own Device policy.

Step Seven: Successful Communications to Implement the Policy

Students, families, and educators benefit from clarity and transparency about the purpose and expectations related to a schoolwide policy. Communication is two-fold: school division communication about the policy and school level communication about the implementation of the policy.

School division leaders created a division-wide communication campaign following the finalization of board policy. Now, school leaders have to communicate how they will implement cell phone-free education within their school setting. As discussed in step four, schools should consistently communicate the "why" and engage stakeholders in implementation of the chosen storage model.

Considerations for Families:

- Ground all communication in the "why" of cell phone-free education.
- Post all policies, procedures, and protocols on the school website and ensure consistent messaging in teacher communications.
- Consider using videos like this one from Winchester Public Schools to promote the "why" of your policy change and what changes students and families should anticipate.
- Share your message at all parent and student events until consistent implementation has occurred.
- Create an internal campaign to message the new policy using existing school division resources such as an internal television station, YouTube channel, and school morning news programs.
- Create an informational flyer with messaging to post around the school division and in schools, such as this one from Caroline County Public Schools.
- Recite daily a morning reminder announcement to turn off cell phones like they do at Riverbend High School in Spotsylvania County: "*Hey there, Bears (their mascot), it is time to learn! All cell phones and devices should be away and stored now that class has begun. Have a great class!"*

Considerations for Educators:

- Building leaders should plan with the teacher leadership team when and how to engage early and often with teachers in the design process to ensure that the procedures are practical and to address concerns.
- Teacher leaders should have collaborative opportunities to provide feedback in the storage model, implementation rollout, support for students who struggle with cell phone-free practices, and in ensuring consistent implementation.
- Teacher leaders should lead training and communication practices with their colleagues and all trainings should be grounded in the "why" of the cell phone-free education policy.
- Teachers should be surveyed frequently during implementation to ensure they have the support they need to successfully implement cell phone-free education in their school.
- Incorporating student support structures such as youth mental health first aid training.

Considerations for Students:

- Ground all communications in the impact of cell phone and social media addictions and mental health impacts.
- Engage student leaders in the campaign.
- Use video-based messaging grounded in the dangers of social media bullying, mental health, and cell phone addiction.

When setting behavior expectations, school leaders should establish clear procedures for support and consequences. These components should be part of all communications. Emphasize what students should do instead of what they should not do.

Communicating with Your Stakeholders

Clearly sharing your implementation process with your stakeholders- educators, staff, families, students, as well as the community at large. School division and building leaders should consider the following strategies when sharing the policy with various groups:

Messaging with All Groups:

- Define and commit to the "why" of the schoolwide policy. Be sure to align any goal goals to the school's mission and vision. For example: "At our school, everyone is focused on learning and growing. Our cell phone policy helps us limit distractions during all parts of the school day."
- Phrase expectations positively. Emphasize what students should do instead of what they should not do. For example: "Limit distractions, keep cell phones off and away from bell-to-bell means 7:30 a.m. to 3:15 p.m."
- Review with students what the cell phone-free policy looks like in all school areas (bathrooms, cafeteria, hallways, classrooms) and times of day (arrival, school meals, dismissal).
- Set and communicate clear consequences for not meeting expectations.
- Consider providing communication templates to be used across the school division from principals to families, teachers, and students.
- Standardize community outreach efforts by creating a survey for schools to use with teachers, families, and students or providing materials for events with stakeholders.
- Remind adults in the school and at home they can lead by example and have clear boundaries around their own use of cell phones consistent with the school's policy.

Messaging with Teachers & Staff:

- Ground the practices in improving learning in structured and unstructured environment.
- Make sure educators understand the signs of cell phone addiction and consider training all staff in youth mental health first aid to support students.
- Model expectations and what they look like in every area of the school for staff and students.
- Emphasize the importance of commitment from staff in all positions. It is important for the policy to be enforced uniformly in all settings.
- Explain how violations of the cell phone policy will be addressed by the administration and clearly identify the role of teachers and staff emphasizing that their enforcement of the policy will be supported by administration.

- Create a plan for teachers to provide feedback on implementation including what is working well and what adjustments could be made.
- Provide staff with signage about cell phone usage that can be placed within students' view in classrooms.
- Share information with staff about how consequences of violating the cell phone policy will be addressed at different levels of the administration. Emphasize to teachers that their enforcement of the policy will be supported by all staff.

Messaging with Families

- Send the exact language of the policy and provide answers to frequently asked questions in multiple formats. Consider using the Sample Family Letter about Cell Phones in School to support communication.
- Accept questions or concerns from families and provide a response in a timely manner. Develop a process to receive questions and concerns.
- Focus on the positive impact the policy will have on student learning and social skills.
- Be proactive and make available a document with answers to frequently asked questions.
- Share information about your school's communication plan and crisis and contingency plans.
- Provide information and resources to support family conversations such as [Cellphones and Devices: A Guide for Parents and Caregivers | Common Sense Media](#)

Messaging with Students:

- Continue to work with the school student leadership councils to ensure students are communicating the "why" with their peers.
- Share how cell phone use can impact students, from learning to wellness, and highlight the positive benefits of opportunities that do not involve cell phone use, such as involvement in sports or clubs that promote social interactions.
- Provide opportunities for students to address their concerns.
- Clearly and consistently communicate to students what is expected of them and what the bell-to-bell policy mean in their school.
- Consequences for violations should be presented upfront and be easily understandable.

Step Eight: School Leader: Develop Supports and Consequences

Once the school leaders have planned for next steps with logistics, processes, communication, and created a timeline, it is time to create support and consequence structures for staff and students. Consider creating a comprehensive communications package for this plan so that it is accessible to all stakeholders.

Supports

- Participation by all staff to enforce the policy is necessary in order for it to be effective. For this reason, it is important to share with staff the research that supports the policy and allow them to contribute to the implementation plan.
- Create and communicate expectations for cell phone storage during the bell-to-bell day.
- Be clear about how the policy applies in all areas of the school (e.g. classrooms, hallways, bathrooms, lunchroom).
- Implement a process for parents to get in touch with their children regarding time-sensitive messages during the school day.
- Use the expertise of school counselors, school nurses, and other mental health professionals to help students who are struggling with cell phone addiction and mental health issues. Consider training staff in youth mental health first aid.

Consequences

- In meeting with groups for the development of consequences and supports, school leaders should begin by reviewing the "why" of the cell phone-free education policy and shaping what successful implementation will look like for their school.
- The outcome should include clearly defined and consistently enforced consequences for non-compliance.
- Determine if the consequences the plan will provide and if the cell phone will be removed from the student's possession. Consider how families will be notified.
- Consider creating consequences on a progressive scale. Ensure that the consequences are specific and in line with the local policy.
- Overcommunicate the expectations of the plan and the consequences. It is important that everyone is clear on them. Be sure to share the policy with school volunteers and substitute teachers.
- Clearly articulate the roles of administrators for enforcing consequences.
- Ensure consequences are clear and managed at the school level so that teachers are not responsible for the consequences of enforcing cell phone-free education.
- School leaders should have a mechanism for receiving feedback on the consequences to help make any necessary adjustments and improvements.

See Sample Policies with Consequences:

- John Handley High School, Winchester Public Schools
- Newport News Public Schools Policy
- Danville Public Schools: Unplug 2 Learn Policy
- Hanover County Public Schools Policy

Step Nine: Determine Exceptions

Policies developed by school divisions should include allowable exemptions to the minimum standards for cell phone-free education when such exemptions are necessary to comply with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), Individualized Health Care Plan (IHP), or 504 Plan (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act). Viable alternatives to using a cell phone or personal electronic communication device should be explored and, if applicable, implemented in collaboration with the student's family.

Local school divisions can find it helpful to craft their policies and procedures in a way to create flexibility and communication processes for students who may require exceptions due to a variety of individualized and unique needs. Division staff should consider the following:

- Public schools must consider student's IEPs and 504 Plans when creating policies regarding cell phone and personal electronic communication device access, usage, and storage protocols, and should provide school-based devices for assistive technology where appropriate.
- Allowable exemptions for cell phones and personal electronic communication devices must be written into 504, IEP, and/or individualized health care plans (IHP).
- IHPs are developed collaboratively with school nurses, school staff, student healthcare providers, and parents/guardians. IHPs should be revised annually or when a change in healthcare status occurs. Administrators of school health services, or their designee, will review IHPs and implement based on clinical/practical judgment and in accordance with local school board policy.
- If a student with a disability or an English learner has a documented accommodation (e.g., text-to-speech, translation services) and requires access to technology to ensure the provision of a free and appropriate public education, IEP, Limited English Proficiency plan, or 504; teams should collaborate to consider appropriate identification and use of school-based assistive technology (e.g., communication device, tablet) to support a student's unique needs.
- If a student with a disability is determined to require assistive technology to ensure the provision of a free and appropriate public education, the IEP team or 504 committee should collaborate to consider the features and/or characteristics of potential tools and identify the AT that provides those features.
- When making these decisions, consideration should be given to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and any potential implications that would bring unnecessary attention to impacted students.

Questions to Consider in Family Meetings:

- Do unique factors or context surround the situation that might justify an exception?
- Have all other possible solutions been explored? Is there a way to address the situation without making an exception?
- Does the exception meet the unique situation of the student?
- If an exception is being made, how are the expectations for usage being clearly, consistently, and confidentially communicated to the student, parent, and relevant school staff?

Step Ten: Monitoring Consistent Implementation

School leaders and leadership teams should establish systems to monitor the progress of implementation strategies. This involves setting up regular check-ins, data collection methods, and feedback loops to ensure that the strategies are being followed and are effective.

- Ensure that the school strategic plan includes long-term goals and strategies for sustaining the cell phone-free policy. Define what success looks like for the cell phone-free policy in the long term.
- Track data on student engagement, student performance, student mental health surveys, teacher efficacy, and behavioral infractions to determine the impact of your policy. Use this data in your messaging about the impact of the policy regularly.
- Set a schedule for frequent reviews of the collected data. During these reviews, the leadership team or committee should analyze the feedback, identify trends, and discuss potential adjustments to the policy. Be transparent about the findings and the rationale behind any changes made to the policy.
- Maintain an ongoing communication campaign to keep the school community informed and engaged. Use various methods of communication to share updates and success stories about the cell phone-free policy. Highlight the positive impacts on academic performance, mental health, and the learning environment.
- Provide ongoing professional development for teachers and staff to help them effectively enforce and support the cell phone-free policy.
- Focus on building the capacity of the others in the process. Engage parents, students, and other stakeholders in the process to build a supportive community.
- Develop a comprehensive feedback system that includes regular surveys, focus groups, and feedback sessions. Ensure that this system is accessible to all stakeholders, including teachers, students, and parents.
- Encourage students to actively participate in the feedback process. Involve students in the communication campaign by having them share their experiences and benefits of the cell phone-free policy through school media or events.
- Recognize and celebrate the contributions of teachers, students, and parents in making the policy successful. Provide training and support for teachers, especially those new to the profession, to help them adapt to the policy and effectively manage classrooms without cell phones.

Section Four:

School Safety Considerations

School Safety Planning

Virginia has a long history of being proactive on school safety and has taken a strong stance in ensuring that evidence-based practices are put into place in our schools. Per § 22.1-279.8.,school division and school building leaders must review, revise, and adopt annually emergency procedures and contingency plans in alignment with the best practices outlined in the DCJS Division Guide for Crisis Management.

Each school must submit a copy of its school safety audit to the relevant school division superintendent and the superintendent must submit and certify all such school safety audits to the DCJS Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety Each school board must ensure that every school it supervises develops a written school crisis, emergency management, and medical emergency response plan, consistent with the definition provided in this section, and includes the chief law-enforcement officer, the fire chief, the chief of the emergency medical services agency, the executive director of the relevant regional emergency medical services council, and the emergency management official of the locality, or their designees, in the development of such plans.

These plans must be readily familiar to school leaders, and principals and school leaders must be able to clearly articulate the protocols in place should a school-based emergency occur. The department recommends that school division and school staff practice these plans in simulations throughout the year. Regular practice ensures that school leaders and school staff will be prepared during an emergency situation.

The local school board and the chief law-enforcement officer, the fire chief, the chief of the emergency medical services agency, the executive director of the relevant regional emergency medical services council, and the emergency management official of the locality, or their designees, must annually review the written school crisis, emergency management, and medical emergency response plans.

School leaders must work in close collaboration with their division leadership and local first responders and emergency planning officials to create crisis and contingency plans for school-based emergencies that incorporate Cell Phone-Free Education. School leaders and divisions should create structures for ongoing and consistent communication in and throughout a school-based emergency with local emergency officials with regular meetings to discuss school emergency planning.

School divisions must publicly share (1) how school-based personnel are trained to manage crisis and emergency situations, (2) re-unification plans, and (3) family notification processes during and through school-based crisis situations.

- These communications should be distributed 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.

As school divisions update these plans, division and school leaders must review their communication practices to ensure their communication procedures reassure families and community members during any emergency situations.

Student Threats

While Virginia provides the national model for ensuring that students who may exhibit threatening behavior and may result in a danger to school be identified and supported, schools and school divisions must continue to review and enhance practices to ensure preparedness.

The [Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines](#) (CSTAG), developed in 2001 by the University of Virginia and known as the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines until 2018, is an evidence-based model for schools to use in conducting threat assessments of students. This model has been rigorously evaluated in controlled studies and large-scale implementation studies involving thousands of schools in multiple states. In 2013 this model became the only threat assessment model to be recognized as an evidence-based practice by the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices.

Additional Considerations for School Safety:

- Schools must notify parents at the start of the school year about any updates to the annual crisis emergency plan and clearly outline the communications plan for parent notification should a school-based emergency or crisis occur, including any relevant or timely follow-up information regarding a school-based emergency event.
- Crisis plans should be revised to ensure that student use of cell phones is not a component of an emergency plan.
- Crisis plans should clearly outline the dangers of student cell phone use and should incorporate that discussion is safety drills so that educators can remind students of the importance of focusing on the adult and following their safety instructions.
- School wide drills must be completed per the minimum criteria outlined in the Code of Virginia (Fire drills, Tornado drills, Lockdown drills). Schools should consider conducting drills at a more frequent interval to ensure that all stakeholders are well-prepared for emergencies.
- Schools must ensure that training occurs for staff and that students also participate in practice drills.
- School safety training and discussions related to crisis planning should be a part of each school's meetings with faculty to ensure clarity of established crisis processes.
- As part of school safety drills, school teams and division teams should also conduct scenario driven, tabletop exercises at least two times a year to evaluate crisis plans. These scenarios should involve Cell Phone-Free Education instructions and incorporate emergency plans that communicate safety drills for students that do not have their cell phone.
- Parent re-unification and communications plans should be incorporated into the school and school division's crisis planning process, ensuring that parents of students who are directly impacted or critically injured are contacted directly versus through a mass communication system or recording.
  - Schools should have backup documents in hard copy with student and parent contact information in case electronic access is not available during a crisis.
  - Each teacher, administrator, and school health official (nurse) should have a portable, hard copy that is regularly updated and can be used to contact families in an emergency.
  - This communication should be made through mechanisms used regularly by the school. Consideration must be given to families who do not have electronic access via the internet.

Safety Resource Links

- [Virginia Educators Guide for Planning and Conducting School Emergency Drills](#)
  [DCJS Division Guide for Crisis Management Planning](#)
- [UVA Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines](#)
- See [Appendix C](#) for safety resources.

Section Five:

School-based Communications Strategies

Emergency Communications

School divisions must be thoughtful in their planning for how to communicate with families and their community during a school-based crisis. When a crisis occurs, too often communications take a back seat during the emergency. This is a failure to successfully plan and implement the planning. But in an emergency, planning, accompanied with pre-designed communication templates, sets the protocols and standardizes the process on how to consistently communicate to families and the larger school community throughout the emergency- a vital part of emergency response.

A comprehensive emergency response plan requires significant forethought and clearly outlines communication plans and strategies. School divisions should decide before a crisis occurs:

- **Who is going to be responsible for communicating during the crisis?**
  - Parents prefer to hear from their own school, but if the event is occurring at the school, consider that it is unlikely that school leaders will be well-positioned during the crisis to communicate with families. They may be focused solely on the safety of the students in the building. If that is the case, who at the central office or in division administration will be responsible for maintaining communications with families during and after any school-based crisis?
  - This needs to be decided as part of a school emergency plan before the school-based crisis occurs.
- **How are school leaders going to communicate during and throughout the crisis?**
  - What are the best ways to communicate directly to school families and community?
    - What communications channels and outlets will be used? Is there a need to differentiate between channels depending on the type of crisis and in what combination?
    - Options could include:
      - Text messages or push alert
      - Automated phone calls
      - Email
      - Division or school website
      - Parent-focused social media such as Facebook/Instagram/Twitter
      - School-based parent app such Parent Square or ClassDojo
      - Local media outlets
  - As part of the planning and coordination with local law enforcement agencies, schools should consider having a procedure in place to activate the local reverse 911 system to ensure that notification goes to the entire community, not only the designated family members.
  - Consider where the school's families typically learn new information. Is there a local website or community message board (e.g. Nextdoor) that would be a place families would seek out information? If so, include it in the communication channels being used.
  - Also consider who in the school organization has the passwords or login credentials for each option. The time to be trying to remember a particular account login or password is not during the crisis.
  - Emergency conditions can result in power outages, cell phone network overloads, or other conditions that may limit the choice of technologies. Be prepared to choose lower-tech methods to support communication efforts if necessary.
  - This all needs to be decided as part of a school emergency plan before the crisis occurs.

- **To whom is the communication aimed?**
  - Depending on what communication channels are chosen, schools may be able to differentiate their audience. Every issue may not require communicating to the entire division's parents. Think of the different scenarios that may occur and decide for each to whom the school wants to communicate directly.
    - Options could include:
      - All the families in the division
      - All the families at that school
      - All the families from that bus or buses
      - Families at that grade level in the school
      - Families in that particular classroom
  - This needs to be decided as part of a school emergency plan before the crisis occurs.
- Once it is decided **Who is going to be responsible**, **How** and **To Whom** school leaders want to communicate, build the contact lists needed to communicate effectively during the crisis.
  - In addition to collecting and sorting the individual contact information for families, consider factors such as:
    - When will this information be collected this information and how often do should these lists be updated?
      - Who is going to be responsible for making sure the lists are updated, including adding newly enrolled families to these lists during the school year?
    - Does this information need to re-verified with families during the school year?
      - The start of the second semester is a natural point of the school year to re-verify family contact information. Families' preferred phone numbers and emails may change during the school year. Be proactive about making sure schools have the best way to contact their families.
    - Where is this contact information going to be stored?
      - Assuming that this family contact information is stored in a database or in a preset communication channel, who has access to these lists? Will they need to retrieve this information from the database to communicate, and if so, does the individual(s) responsible for communicating during the crisis have the necessary credentials to access the list?
      - If not storing this information in a central database, where is it being stored and who will have access to it during the emergency? A contact list stored at an individual school or with an individual staff member likely may be inaccessible during a crisis. Consider multiple access options to ensure someone not managing the emergency can access the contact list.
  - This needs to be decided as part of a school emergency plan before the crisis occurs.
- **Who will be the communicator?**
  - Decide who is best to communicate consistently and clearly in an emergency situation. It could be the division superintendent, the principal, or a division spokesperson.
    - Different emergency situations may call for different voices.
    - If the principal is not available to be the primary communicator to school families, they may be available after the school-based emergency to assume that role.
  - This needs to be decided as part of a school emergency plan before the crisis occurs.

As part of planning, consider how often the school will communicate during an emergency. Time to communicate during a school-based emergency is limited, and often the urgency of the situation takes priority over the ability to know every detail of the emergency in real-time.

Emergency communications considerations:

- Match the speed and frequency of the emergency to how quickly and often school leaders communicate to their audience to the level of the emergency situation. E.g. Lockdowns and school shooter situations should have communications as frequent as every ten minutes.
- Eliminate delays in communications by creating message templates and identifying and establishing activation criteria to guide when and to whom school leaders communicate.
- Overcommunicate with school families during an emergency situation. Provide correct, comprehensive, relevant, and specific messaging. Err on the side of overcommunicating when dealing with conflicting or uncertain situations.
- Be as accurate and specific in school leader communications as possible. If something is unclear or uncertain regarding the emergency, do not fear admitting that to be the case. Be transparent with the current situation as it can help reduce misinformation from being spread about the situation.
- Do not withhold information unnecessarily. Withholding information serves to inspire distrust, encourage conspiracy theories, and forces people to seek information from other less reliable sources.
- Once the school emergency plan in place, share the emergency plans and procedures with parents and the community. Being proactive in sharing these procedures before an emergency occurs helps to build confidence that the school division and school will respond appropriately and helps parents know what to anticipate should an emergency occur.

Alexandria City Public Schools has created a suite of resources that discuss how to handle different kinds of emergencies including:

- Securing The Building
- Evacuation
- Lockdown
- Shelter In Place

[Emergency Management Video Series - Alexandria City Public Schools](#)

Alexandria City Public Schools has created a model for informing parents how to expect to receive communications during and following an emergency. The information they have published for parents is clear, concise and comprehensive. They have also accounted for their diverse student and family population and published the information in **Español**, **Amharic አማርኛ**, **Arabic العربية**, and **Dari دری** to assist their non-English language families and help them have confidence in the division in case of an emergency.

Another model example is Harrisonburg City Schools, who has set up and informed parents of a color-code system for situational awareness of any school-based emergency situation.

Harrisonburg City Public Schools

One Court Square • Harrisonburg, VA 22801
Phone: 540.434.9916 • Fax: 540.432.3260

"A dynamic and diverse community where learning has no limits and together we work for the success of all."

We have also developed enhanced communication procedures in the event of a school safety incident. We will be using a color-coded alert system to notify staff and families. If there is an incident at your child's school, you will be notified of the incident color code and instructed to visit our website where we will post additional information as it becomes available. During an incident, please refrain from coming to the school so that emergency personnel can safely access the campus. For your reference, the color code alerts are listed below and will also be available at the link provided during an incident.

Code Red: Everyone behind locked doors, lights off, quiet
Code Orange: Everyone behind locked doors, instruction continues
Code Yellow: Everyone inside the building
Code Green: All clear, back to normal operations

In case of a school-based emergency, school divisions and public schools need to communicate with parents during every situation. Too often parents do not learn about an incident until hours or even days after the emergency event. School divisions and schools need clear communication plans and strategies in their comprehensive emergency response plans, and they need to follow those plans consistently **every time** there is an emergency situation.

Communications needs to be a priority in these situations, and the time to think about how to communicate is not when the emergency occurs. These plans and strategies need to be considered in advance, and division and school leadership need to understand exactly what they should do to communicate clearly and effectively with parents.

In these school-based emergency situations, parents want to know if their child is safe and where they can reunite with their child. Communicating with parents and the school community during and through the school-based emergency **must** be a top priority when these situations occur.

Sample Communications Examples and Model Templates

A number of school divisions have excellent examples of communications and communication templates that can serve as models in preparations for school-based emergency situations. We appreciate these school divisions sharing their examples.

Washington County Public Schools Threat Communications Examples

Initial Message in Online Threat Situation

Good morning Wallace Middle School Families --

We wanted to make you aware that we have received information that rumors have been circulating on social media about a potential school threat. At this time, those rumors are not believed to be credible. Out of an abundance of caution, we will have an increased law enforcement presence and operating on a Safety First Protocol. In addition to the Washington County Sheriff's Office, the U.S. Marshals Service are investigating the threat.

Follow Up Message

We wanted to provide you with an update on the increased safety and security at High Point Elementary School, E.B. Stanley Middle School, Wallace Middle School and John S. Battle High School this morning. We are blessed to live in a community where safety is a top priority, and we are incredibly grateful for our law enforcement partners who provided a quick response. Through the great collaboration of the Washington County Sheriff's Office, U.S. Marshals Service, Virginia State Police and the Abingdon Police Department, a suspect has been identified behind the threats posted to social media and is in custody. We have determined that the threat was never credible, however all agencies involved treated it as if it were. We will continue to work with our law enforcement agencies to ensure the safety and security of our students and staff. We would also like to thank the staff members at our schools for their work to keep students calm and safe as the investigation was ongoing. Be sure to extend your thanks to our staff and law enforcement agencies involved next time you have a chance.

Other Washington County Public Schools Example

Good afternoon WCPS Families and Staff,

Washington County Public Schools is aware of the reported TikTok post circulating this week that references a threat to schools. It appears this is part of a viral trend that has affected schools and school divisions both locally and nationwide.

We have been in contact with our great law enforcement partners around the clock, as these threats and social media posts were investigated. We do not believe there is a credible threat to school safety.

We take these threats very seriously, as the safety and well-being of our students and staff is our top priority. We encourage anyone who sees or hears anything that could represent a potential school safety issue to immediately notify a teacher, staff member, or administrator immediately. We thank our students that did report the social media posts this week. Thank you to our law enforcement agencies and staff for the critical role they played and continue to play in ensuring the safety and security of our school division.

Alexandria City Public Schools Emergency Communications Examples

Alexandria City Public Schools has templates prepared for various emergency situations. Some examples include:

Active Shooter Threat

Subject: Active Shooter at [school] on [date]

There is an active shooter threat at [school] on [date]. For the safety and security of our students and staff, [school] is currently on lockdown status due to this active shooter threat. The Alexandria Police Department (APD) is currently at the school working with the school administration and school security to provide safety and determine next steps. More details to follow when the threat assessment is complete.

As always, during an emergency situation, we ask that you not call or text your child. The first priority for staff is to address the threat and ensure that all students are safe. Phone calls can distract from this priority and may potentially alert an intruder to the location of a student. The ACPS Office of Communications will communicate with families as soon as possible.

The safety and security of our students and staff is the most important priority.

We will continue to communicate via text, email, and the school website at [www.acps.k12.va.us/school] to provide the most up-to-date information.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]

Altercation at School

Subject: [School] Students Involved in Altercation on School Grounds on [date]

At [time] on [date], students at [school] were involved in an altercation on school grounds. School administrators and building security quickly intervened to bring control to the situation and assure the safety of all students and staff in the building. [Due to the nature of the altercation, the Alexandria Police Department (APD) was called.]

Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) is committed to maintaining a safe and secure learning environment for all. When students are involved in altercations, on or off school grounds, ACPS will take immediate and appropriate action to ensure a safe learning environment for the entire student body and staff. Further, ACPS and school officials will address issues of student conduct and responsibility and, if necessary, involve the APD if the situation continues to escalate or poses an ongoing threat.

Updates will be sent as details of the altercation become available and actions are taken by ACPS and school administrators. [www.acps.k12.va.us/school]

Thank you.

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]

Evacuation – Smell of Gas

Subject: [School name] students were briefly evacuated due to a report of the smell of gas

Dear [School Name] Staff and Families,

Students and staff were evacuated at about [time] today from [School Name] upon the report of a smell of gas in the building. The Alexandria Fire Department (AFD) has been notified to investigate this report and cleared the building for return by [time].

The evacuation was conducted in a safe and orderly manner and the school has resumed a normal operating schedule.

We appreciate the quick response and assistance of the AFD. The ACPS Office of Safety and Security has an emergency management video series available online in multiple languages to help stakeholders understand the ACPS protocol for school evacuations.

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]

Evacuation – Fire Alarm

Subject: [School Name] briefly evacuated due to a false fire alarm. Normal operations have resumed

Dear [School Name] Families and Staff,

At approximately [Time] today, the fire alarm was activated at [School Name]. Students and staff evacuated the building in a safe and orderly manner as a precaution. The Alexandria Fire Department (AFD) responded and, upon investigation, determined that one of the pull stations had been activated, causing the alarm to sound.

After approximately [Time], students and staff were allowed to return to the building after the AFD cleared the facility, and normal operations resumed.

We appreciate the quick response and assistance of the AFD. The ACPS Office of Safety and Security has an emergency management video series available online in multiple languages to help stakeholders understand the ACPS protocol for school evacuations.

Sincerely,

[Principal contact Information]

Lockdown/Shelter-in-Place

Subject: Lockdown Status at [School Name]

Dear [School Name] Staff and Families,

For the safety and security of our students and staff at [School Name] is currently on **Lockdown Status** due to an anonymous threat. The Alexandria Police Department (APD) is currently at the school conducting a threat assessment to determine credibility. More details to follow when the threat assessment is complete.

As always, during an emergency situation, the first priority for staff is to address the threat and ensure that all students are safe. While we understand your obvious concern, phone calls can distract from this priority. The ACPS Office of Communications will communicate with families as soon as possible.

The safety and security of our students and staff is the most important priority.

We will continue to communicate via text, email and the school website at [Link to School Website] to provide the most up-to-date information.

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]

Power Outage

Subject: Power outage at [school] today

There is a power outage at [school]. Dominion Energy is responding to the outage. The building is safe. Students and staff will remain in the building and the instructional day will continue. Teaching staff may need to modify instruction. Lunch service may also need to be modified as a hot lunch may not be available.

The safety of our students and staff is of utmost priority.

Thank you for your patience and understanding. We will continue to update families via text, email and the school website at [www.acps.k12.va.us/school] as more information becomes available.

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]

Secure the Building

Subject: [School Name] was briefly placed in "secure the building" status today

Dear [School Name] Staff and Families,

At about [Time] today, [School Name] was placed in "secure the building" status for approximately [Time] due to [Incident Information]. The Alexandria Police Department was on site to investigate the situation and reported no threat to the school, which has now resumed normal operations.

The decision to secure [School Name] was taken out of an abundance of caution. "Secure the building" means that the school day continues on a normal schedule inside the school but no one is allowed to enter or leave the school while the building remains secured. An Alexandria City Public Schools video provides more information on what happens when a school is placed in "secure the building" status.

The safety and security of our students and staff are of utmost priority.

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]

Social Media Threat

Subject: Social Media Safety Threat to [school] on [date]

Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) received a report at [time] about a threat posted on social media targeting [school]. We are working with the Alexandria Police Department (APD) to investigate the threat report. [School] is currently on "Secure the Building" status which means that the school day operates on normal status inside the building, but no one is allowed to enter or leave the school campus while the building remains secured.

Updates will be shared as more information becomes available. Thank you for your patience.

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]

Threat Investigation

Subject: Safety Threat to [school] on [date]

[School] staff was informed at [time] on [date] about a threat to school safety [by a student] [by an individual] [by a group]. The Alexandria Police Department (APD) was notified and an investigation was immediately initiated. The individual has been identified and the threat has ended. APD has determined that the school will be safe for students and staff tomorrow. Please continue to send your child to school as usual tomorrow. ACPS will increase its security presence at the school as a precaution.

Please be assured that ACPS takes any threat to our schools or facilities very seriously and any threat to the school is always investigated. Safety is always a top priority at ACPS and we will always put the safety of our students and staff above everything else.

Children react in many different ways to incidents such as these. If your child shares with you that they feel nervous about attending school, please contact your school counselor. School counselors and the Student Support Team (SST) will be on hand to provide additional support for any student who needs it.

We will continue to communicate via text, twitter, email and the school website as more information becomes available. www.acps.k12.va.us/school]

Thank you for your patience.

Sincerely,

[Principal Contact Information]

Chesapeake Public Schools Crisis Messaging Template

Chesapeake Public Schools has a well-designed Crisis Communications Messaging Template for tracking and helping develop emergency communications. The template can be modified for individual school division's needs.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Level 2 Lockdown - {Name} School
November 30, 2023

Who	Status	Action/Task
Name	In development	Text School Board
Name	Under review	Communications Advisory
Name	Under review	PAS Message to Families
Name	N/A	Press Release

Text School Board

FYI: {NAME} School is currently in a Level 2 lockdown in response to the report of possible shots fired near the school building. We will provide additional updates as they become available.

Update: The lockdown was lifted after approximately 12 minutes after police determined there was no longer a threat in the area.

Communications Advisory

TO: School Board, Cabinet, & Communications
SEND VIA: Gmail from {email address}
TIMING: Send on Oct 26, 2023 12:00 AM

Good afternoon,
The PAS message below will be shared with the {school} community at 11:45 AM today.

Intermediate School: Level 2 Lockdown - November 30, 2023

Good afternoon, this is {name} principal of {school}, with an important message. This morning, the Chesapeake Police Department informed us that there were gunshots in the neighboring area. As a precaution, the school was placed in a Level 2 lockdown. During a level two lockdown, all students continue with their instruction indoors while classroom and exterior doors remain locked.

After approximately twelve minutes, the police gave us an all-clear, the lockdown was lifted, and we resumed our school day. Please know that safety is always our top priority.

PAS Message to Families

Intermediate School: Level 2 Lockdown - November 30, 2023

Good afternoon, this is LC, principal of _____ Intermediate School, with an important message. This morning, the Chesapeake Police Department informed us that there were gunshots in the neighboring area. As a precaution, the school was placed in a Level 2 lockdown. During a level two lockdown, all students continue with their instruction indoors while classroom and exterior doors remain locked.

After approximately twelve minutes, the police gave us an all-clear, the lockdown was lifted, and we resumed our school day. Please know that safety is always our top priority.

Press Release

Appendix A:
Visual Tools

Research Infographic

The research infographic on cell phone-free education visually highlights the importance of such an environment for students. By presenting key findings and research, it aims to spark meaningful discussions among families, students, and educators about creating more focused and engaging learning environments. Whether used during Family Nights or parent and student conferences, this infographic is designed to inform and inspire conversations and initiatives that promote academic success and well-being for Virginia students.

Virginia Department of Education. (2024) Cell Phone-Free Education Research Infographic. Virginia Department of Education (VDOE). *Research Infographic*.

Just The Facts

Importance of Cell Phone-Free Education in Virginia

Virginia Department of EDUCATION

An average of 4.8 hours a day

Children spend on social media, and recent studies indicate that spending more than three hours a day on social media doubles the risk of poor mental health for adolescents.

American Psycological Association

The rate of **suicide** has increased **167% for girls** **91% for boys** since 2010.

Anxious Generation Figure 1.5

Depression is also on the rise **145%** for girls **161%** for boys since 2010.

Anxious Generation Figure 1.1

Academic achievement has **suffered in the last decade** as measured by the precipitous drop in the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) scores beginning in 2012

National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP)

Studies indicate that students who use their phones during class **learn less and achieve lower grades.**

American Psychological Association

Substantial phone and social media use can have a cumulative, lasting, **and detrimental impact** on adolescents' ability to focus and engage in their studies.

American Psychological Association

Each additional hour of total screen time **increases the odds of suicidal behaviors.**

Science Direct

Just The Facts

Importance of Cell Phone-Free Education in Virginia

Virginia Department of EDUCATION

72%

High School Teachers report cellphones are a major distraction in the classroom.

The Mere Presence of a Cell Phone May be Distracting

Students wrote down **62% more information** during class when not using their phones.

The Impact of Mobile Phone Usage on Student Learning

3+ hours per day on social media **doubles the risk of poor mental health** including experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health

There was a steep reduction of bullying **46% in girls** **43% in boys** after smartphone bans.

Smartphone Bans, Student Outcomes and Mental Health

Teens use their phone daily, picking up their phones **51 times per day on average.**

Pick up amounts ranged from **2 to 498 times per day.**

Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use

Teens self-report that they spend an average of

7 hours per day

on their phones.

American Psychological Association

Caroline County Public Schools:
Off and Away Communication Campaign

The communication campaign sign aims to promote around schools and classrooms the CCPS policy for cell phones to be off and away during school hours to maximize learning, reduce distractions, support academic success and mental health
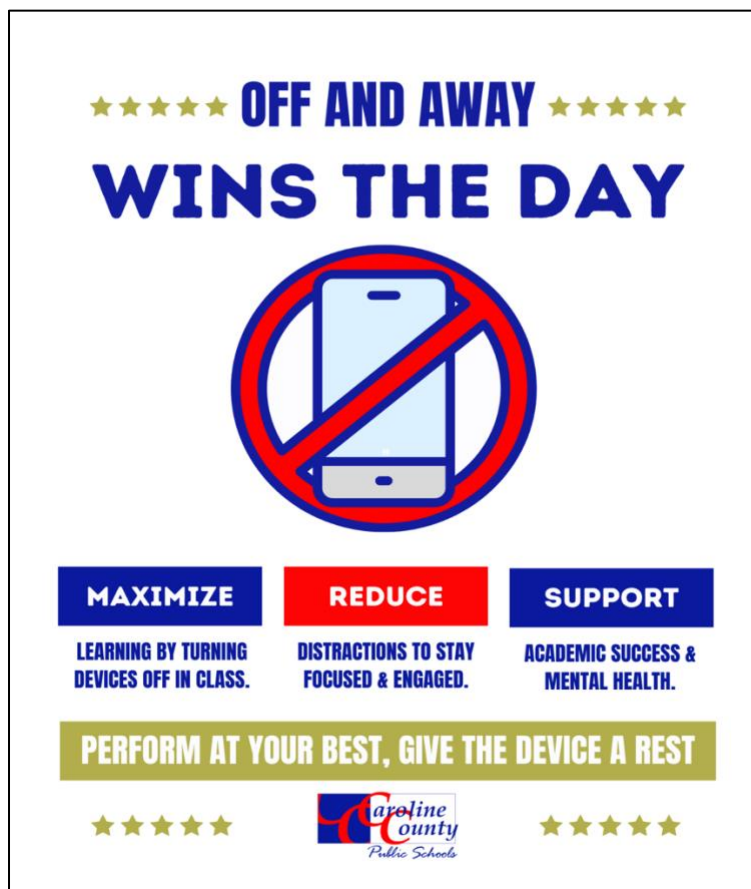
Caroline County Public Schools. (2024). Off and Away Communication Campaign Flier. Caroline County Public Schools (CCPS). Caroline County Public Schools Flier

OFF AND AWAY
★★★★★ ★★★★★
WINS THE DAY

MAXIMIZE

LEARNING BY TURNING DEVICES OFF IN CLASS.

REDUCE

DISTRACTIONS TO STAY FOCUSED & ENGAGED.

SUPPORT

ACADEMIC SUCCESS & MENTAL HEALTH.

PERFORM AT YOUR BEST, GIVE THE DEVICE A REST

★★★★★ ★★★★★

Caroline County
Public Schools

Additional Graphics

The ACPS infographic details the various channels the school division uses to communicate to families. It provides information about when and how to expect communications from ACPS in specific

Alexandria City Public Schools: Emergency or Crisis Situations Communications Guide 02-ACPS-CommsInfographicENGLISH.pdf (finalsite.net)

Alexandria City Public Schools. (2023). Communications infographic. Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS). ACPS Communications Infographic.

Appendix B:

Frequently
Asked Questions

Q: Why are you taking away my child's cell phone during the school day?

- Current national and Virginia survey data show that cell phones and social media apps are causing significant disruptions to student learning. On average, preteens and teens receive more than 200 notifications a day on their smartphones, and over half of young adults are **worried about growing addicted to their smartphone**, with the average American spending nearly five hours a day on their phone.
- Moreover according to Pew Research, 72% of high school teachers nationwide believe that cellphones are a distraction to students, **inhibiting their ability to learn** in an academic environment.   Additionally in 2022, two-thirds of U.S. students reported being distracted by using digital devices, and about 54 percent said they are distracted by other students who are using those resources.
- Additionally, the use of cell phones and social media are causing increased health issues in our young people, and schools must lead in addressing these chronic health conditions. From 2019-2021, the rate of suicide has increased 167% since 2010 for girls and 91% since 2010 for boys. In the same timeframe, boys and girls experienced a spike in depression of 161% and 145%, respectively.

Q: How will I reach my child in an emergency situation?

- We know that every parent wants to hear that their child is safe during an emergency.
- During an emergency, our number one priority is to ensure the safety of all staff and students. School security experts say phones can actually make children less safe in crisis situations:
  - Student use of cell phones during an unfolding emergency can distract their attention from safety and emergency response directions being given by school staff.
  - Cell phone use by students can disrupt and delay effective public safety personnel response.
- Cell phone use by students can impede public safety response by accelerating parental and community arrival at the scene of an emergency during times when officials may be attempting to access the site or evacuate students to another site.
- Students and worried family members trying to get through can jam communications networks, interfering with first responders.
- We are working hard to make sure that we are prepared to let parents and the community know what is happening during any emergency situation, that their child is safe, and where they can reunite with their child after the emergency concludes. We will continue to let parents know how we are going to communicate during emergencies so that parents are aware how they will receive updates as quickly as possible and so that they can have some certainty that they will know what is happening at their child's school should an emergency situation occur.

For more information: National School Safety and Security Services

Q: How am I going to be able to contact my child during the school day?

- If parents want their children to use cell phones outside of school, that's a family decision.
- In schools that have already removed cell phones from classrooms, students continue to have communications prior to school starting and after the end of the school day.
- Parents can leave messages for their child, and when the child finishes the day, they can access these communications.
- If it is an emergency, schools have consistently sent messages to students whether they own a cell phone or do not own a cell phone. The school is well equipped to reach the student swiftly and allow them to call home during an emergency.

In addition, the VDOE is continuing to work closely with division and school leaders to design strong and robust communication protocols with families. The department will help provide every school division best practices on how to create open and timely communications between schools and parents.

Q: When my child uses his/her phone and/or AirPods to reduce anxiety, how will they calm down?

- While there are many strategies that students use to reduce anxiety, it is important that the school counseling office support these strategies and that these support strategies don't distract other students in the classroom.
- During the school day, alternate coping strategies can and should be developed with the school counselors, nurses and administrators. This team can assist your child in developing strategies to support their needs.

Q: If my child has a medical need that requires my child to use a cell phone app, how do I work with my school to ensure that this medical support can continue at school.

- Common sense accommodations should be made for children with significant medical needs.
- Please reach out to your child's teacher, school nurse, or school leader to learn how the school is addressing these protocols for students with medical needs.

In addition, see Step Nine: Determining Exceptions in this document for more information.

Appendix C:

Family and School Leader Resources

Talking to Your Child About Cell Phones

Families can prepare their children for success by having open conversations and setting clear boundaries and expectations about cell phone use. Caregivers can welcome an open discussion about cell phone use, including sharing concerns and expectations and using active listening skills. Consider the following when talking with your children:

- Have a conversation with your child about the importance of following the school's policy.
- Share how you and your child can operate through the school's established protocol in various scenarios.
- Have conversations about your child's interests and what apps they use the most.
- Ask non-judgmental questions that encourage your child to reflect on how using the cell phone makes them feel. Help them consider their emotions, thoughts, and their ability to focus. Help them consider when they are using cell phones as a strategy to avoid facing another task or discussion.
- Facilitate conversations that help you and your child understand the underlying reasons your child might use their cell phone frequently. They may have a friend who is distressed or a game or app they consistently play, or they may be avoiding stressful interactions.
- Talk to your child about online safety, including having a digital footprint that cannot be erased. Discuss the importance of never disclosing any personal information online.
- Consider establishing a family media plan to promote open family discussion and rules about media use, including topics such as balancing online time, content boundaries, and not disclosing personal information.

Ohio Department of Education and Workforce. (n.d.). Cell Phones in Schools: Supports for Families. Retrieved from [Cell Phones in Schools: Supports for Families | Ohio Department of Education and Workforce](#)

Strategies to Reduce Cell Phone Use Outside of School

Families can apply strategies that promote healthy behaviors and reduce cell phone use so their children can feel and perform their best at both school and home. In addition to the open conversations described above, families can consider some of the items below as they work toward supporting their children's wellness.

- Take a pledge with other parents to wait until at least 8th grade to give your child a cell phone.
- Promote unstructured and offline connections with family members and peers.
- Allow children to take reasonable risks, like exploring the outdoors or trying a new sport or instrument.
- Encourage physical activity, such as playing outside or taking a walk with a friend or family member.
- Find ways to play with younger children, including arts, crafts, experiments, and unstructured free play.
- Consider structured after school activities, such as sports, music, drama, science, or art-related clubs.
- Keep mealtimes device-free to foster an environment that encourages family members to socially interact and engage in conversation.
- Help your child select educational media that encourages creativity and accelerates their learning.
- Keep cell phones out of your child's bedroom. Use a standard alarm clock instead of a cell phone.
- Set expectations around cell phone and general screen use at night. Set a screen-free routine with your child, like reading, to help them settle in for the night. If children are doing homework that requires a screen late, help them find a routine that calms their brain and body down after they turn off the device.
- Become familiar with any apps or social media your child uses frequently. Research and understand the apps to determine if you will allow them and, if so, any limits you need to set.
- Help your child adjust notification settings and set time limits on their devices for application time limits, time of day, and overall use.
- Track (with your child) how much time your child uses the cell phone and set limits for use.
- Set parental controls on your child's cell phone and talk to other caregivers about how they track what their child is doing to stay aware of trends.
- Establish consequences for problematic use. Talk to your child about when and how they can use their cell phone and the implications if they do not follow the expectations.
- Resist the urge to text your child during the school day. Follow your school policy for communication with your child during the school day.
- Model your own cell phone usage. Pay attention to how often you are using it and how it makes you feel. Control what you view on your cell phone (positive experiences, block users or apps that are damaging). Work with other families or friends to create boundaries and talk with others about what you are seeing.
- Set a good example about what responsible and healthy use looks like by limiting your own cell phone use, monitoring your own habits, and making clear attempts to avoid unnecessary cell phone use.

*Ohio Department of Education and Workforce. (n.d.). Cell Phones in Schools: Supports for Families. Retrieved from **Cell Phones in Schools: Supports for Families | Ohio Department of Education and Workforce***

Additional Resources

Children & Phones

Why wait? — Wait Until 8th

- This page explains the rationale behind the Wait Until 8th pledge, encouraging parents to delay giving their children smartphones until at least 8th grade. It highlights the potential negative impacts of early smartphone use on children's development and well-being.
- Why wait? — Wait Until 8th. (n.d.). Why wait?. Wait Until 8th. Retrieved from https://www.waituntil8th.org/why-wait.

Parents' Ultimate Guide to Parental Controls | Common Sense Media

- This guide provides parents with information on setting up and using parental controls across various devices and platforms. It aims to help parents manage their children's online activities and ensure a safer digital environment.
- Common Sense Media. (n.d.). Parents' ultimate guide to parental controls. Common Sense Media. Retrieved from https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parents-ultimate-guide-to-parental-controls.

Parenting, Media, and Everything in Between | Common Sense Media

- This blog covers topics related to parenting and media, offering advice and insights on how to navigate the digital world with children. It includes articles on screen time, social media, and the impact of media on child development.
- Common Sense Media. (n.d.). Parenting, media, and everything in between. Common Sense Media. Retrieved from https://www.commonsensemedia.org/blog

Effects of Social Media on Children

How Social Media Targets Children

- This article discusses the strategies used by social media platforms to attract and engage young users. It highlights the potential risks and negative effects of social media on children's mental health and development.
- Common Sense Media. (n.d.). How social media targets children. Common Sense Media. Retrieved from https://www.commonsensemedia.org/articles/how-social-media-targets-children

U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Social Media Effect on Youth Mental Health

- This advisory from the U.S. Surgeon General outlines the impact of social media on youth mental health, providing evidence-based recommendations for parents, educators, and policymakers. It emphasizes the need for greater awareness and proactive measures to protect young people's mental well-being.

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2023). U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on social media effect on youth mental health. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/reports-and-publications/social-media-and-youth-mental-health/index.html

Screen Time, Social Media & Gaming's Effects on Children - The Kids Mental Health Foundation

- This resource explores the effects of screen time, social media, and gaming on children's mental health. It provides practical tips for parents to manage their children's digital consumption and promote healthier habits.
- The Kids Mental Health Foundation. (n.d.). Screen time, social media & gaming's effects on children. The Kids Mental Health Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.kidsmentalhealth.org/screen-time-social-media-gaming-effects-on-children

Phones' Effects on Children's Sleep

Social Media and Sleep | Common Sense Media

- This article examines the relationship between social media use and sleep quality in children and teens. It provides advice for parents on how to help their children develop healthier sleep routines in the digital age.
- Common Sense Media. (n.d.). Social media and sleep. Common Sense Media. Retrieved from https://www.commonsensemedia.org/articles/social-media-and-sleep

Sleep in Middle and High School Students | Healthy Schools | CDC

- This page from the CDC highlights the importance of adequate sleep for middle and high school students. It discusses the consequences of sleep deprivation and offers strategies for improving sleep habits among adolescents.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022). Sleep in middle and high school students. Healthy Schools. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/sleep.htm

Resources for School Leaders: Letters

Teachers & Staff Sample Letter:

Dear Teachers and Staff,

Cell phones have undoubtedly changed the world we live in, including the landscape of education. The ubiquitous nature of phones and addictive algorithms have created unprecedented challenges for educators as we try to navigate our digital world. For students they have sparked a mental health crisis and contributed to learning and social emotional deficiencies. We know that you've been working hard to keep students' attention in the face of many distractions and recognize policing phones should not be your burden to bear alone.

As educators we have the ability to positively impact the lives of the children we serve. We are mentors, leaders and role models leaving a lasting mark on our students. Providing a healthy community where students can learn the academic, social and emotional skills needed to transition to healthy, happy and thriving adults has always been at the core of our school community and our role as educators.

Phones have impaired our ability to provide a positive, inclusive, and safe environment for all students where learning, focus, community and belonging are prioritized. The presence of personal devices such as cell phones, earbuds and smartwatches has undermined the educational experience, and the core values we strive to uphold.

Our jobs have been, and always will be, to put the education and wellbeing of our students above all else and therefore we will be moving to a bell-to-bell phone-free school policy. This means that phones must be turned off and stored away for the entire school day. Schools that have implemented all day policies are seeing positive classroom changes such as increased focus, attention, comprehension, engagement, less cheating and improved academic performance. Additionally, teachers and staff report enhanced face-to-face peer interactions, reduced cyberbullying, fewer fights and a decrease in social media-induced drama. Students also experience less stress and anxiety.

Our teachers and staff play an integral role in this community, and as administrators we are committed to supporting you by addressing the constant class disruptions and discipline issues caused by cell phones. We see this as a crucial, much needed pivot, and we hope it helps you recover focus, connection, and joy in your classroom.

Sincerely,

Phone-Free Schools Administrator Toolkit: Phone-Free Schools Movement. (n.d.). Retrieved from Administrator Toolkit | Phone-Free Schools Movement

Parent Sample Letter #1:

Dear Parents/Guardians,

Technology has undoubtedly changed the landscape of parenting and education. It has created many opportunities, as well as unprecedented challenges for parents and educators as we try to navigate our new world. For students it has sparked a mental health crisis, fractured attention spans and contributed to a wave of learning and social emotional deficiencies.

As educators we strive to impact the lives of our students in positive ways. We serve as mentors, guides and inspirations. Providing a healthy community where students can learn the academic, social and emotional skills needed to transition to healthy, happy and thriving adults has always been at the core of our school community and our role as educators.

Phones have impaired our ability to provide a positive, inclusive and safe environment for all students where learning, focus, safety, community and belonging are prioritized. The presence of personal devices such as cell phones, earbuds and smartwatches has undermined the educational experience and the core values we strive to uphold.

Our jobs have been, and always will be, to put the education and well-being of our students above all else and therefore we will be moving to a bell-to-bell phone-free school policy. This means that phones must be turned off and stored away for the entire school day. Schools that have implemented all day policies are seeing positive classroom changes such as increased focus, attention, comprehension, engagement, less cheating and improved academic performance. Additionally, teachers and staff report enhanced face-to-face peer interactions, reduced cyberbullying, fewer fights, and a decrease in social media-induced drama. Students also experience less stress and anxiety.

Attached please find our new phone-free policy. We know you may have some questions or concerns, so we are including important information that will help make this a smooth transition and ease any concern you may have. We also understand that there will be situations when you need to contact your child during the school day.

Parents and guardians can call the main office to have a message delivered to their student. Please note there are also exceptions for students that require a cell phone for medical needs.

We are excited to move forward with this shared mission to provide the best educational experience possible for our students. As parents and guardians, you are a vital piece of our community, and we look forward to working together to create the healthy academic and social environment all of our students deserve.

Sincerely,

Dear Families of **<School or District Name>** Scholars:

At **<School or District Name>**, we want all students to be engaged and feel safe every day. Student cell phones lead to educational disruptions, distractions, and significant social conflict. For this reason, the **<School or District Name>** will no longer allow students to use cell phones during the school day.

Please review our policy that includes the expectations of student use of cell phones and other devices, consequences of inappropriate use, and the communication plan to families in the event of an emergency:

<Include School or District Policy>

Family support is essential to the success of **<School or District>'**s cell phone policy. Be sure to review the phone policy as a family. Consider:

- Proactively talking with your student about after school plans, lunch planning, appointments, or activities in advance of arrival to school.

- Reminding your student how they can reach family during school hours, and how you can reach them in case of an emergency through the school office.

- Visiting <**our website**> for more information and resources about cell phone use for your family.

Thank you for your continued support and cooperation in facilitating a safe and supportive learning environment. Please let us know if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Ohio Department of Education and Workforce. (n.d.). Cell Phones in Schools: Model Policy. Retrieved from Cell Phones in Schools: Supports for Administrators

Student Sample Letter:

Dear Students,

As your educators and leaders it is our job to provide a healthy and safe community where all students are given the freedom to thrive. Technology has provided us with many benefits. For some of you it has been a way to find community, social support and a connection to a diverse set of peers. For others it has become an important outlet for self-expression. But technology has also brought challenges for our school community. The use of phones has impaired our ability to provide a positive, inclusive and safe environment for all students where learning, focus, safety, community and belonging are prioritized. The presence of personal devices such as cell phones, earbuds and smartwatches has undermined the culture of our school and the core values we strive to uphold.

Although we recognize the important role technology plays in your lives, we also know that time away from phones and social media is essential to healthy growth and good education. With this in mind, we will be moving to a bell-to-bell phone-free school policy. This means that phones must be turned off and stored away for the entire school day. We know this transition will pose some challenges and cause some discomfort, but we hope that you will quickly begin to experience its benefits both in your classes and in your social interactions.

I'm sure many of you will have questions or concerns, which we hope the attached information will cover. Transitions can be difficult, but we are here to provide you with any support you may need. We welcome questions and encourage you to discuss this policy change with your administrators and/ or teachers.

We are excited to move forward with this shared mission to provide the best educational experience possible for our students. As students you are a vital piece of our community, and we look forward to working together to create the healthy academic and social environment all of you deserve.

Sioverncerely,

Phone-Free Schools Administrator Toolkit: Phone-Free Schools Movement. (n.d.). Retrieved from *Administrator Toolkit | Phone-Free Schools Movement*

Resources for School Leaders: Surveys

Sample Surveys

- Sample Survey_Caroline County
- Sample Survey_Roanoke City
- Sample_Teacher Survey Phone-Free Schools Movement & Fairplay
- Sample_Student Survey Phone-Free Schools Movement & Fairplay

Student Support Resources

Regulations Governing Special Education Programs for Children with Disabilities in Virginia

- This document outlines the regulations for special education programs in Virginia, ensuring compliance with federal and state laws. It provides guidelines for the evaluation, eligibility, and provision of services to children with disabilities.
- Virginia Department of Education. (n.d.). Regulations governing special education programs for children with disabilities in Virginia. Virginia Department of Education. Retrieved from https://www.doe.virginia.gov/programs-services/special-education/regulations-laws-policies

VDOE Assistive Technology, Tools, and Strategies: Consideration and Assessment Guidance Document

- This guidance document assists school divisions in considering and assessing assistive technology (AT) for students with disabilities. It includes strategies for planning and implementing AT services to support educational goals.
- Virginia Department of Education. (n.d.). Assistive technology, tools, and strategies: Consideration and assessment guidance document. Virginia Department of Education. Retrieved from https://ttaconline.org/Document/zxbIhX_YCJMjWCo85sacgCuH7JJ6zDXP/at-guidance-document.pdf

VDOE Assistive Technology in Schools Guide

- This guide provides an overview of assistive technology tools and strategies for use in schools. It aims to help educators and families understand and identify appropriate AT solutions to support students from preschool through high school.
- Virginia Department of Education. (n.d.). Assistive technology in schools guide. Virginia Department of Education. Retrieved from https://www.doe.virginia.gov/programs-services/special-education/iep-instruction/assistive-technology

John Handley High School

Learning for all, whatever it takes

Student Electronic Device Procedure for John Handley High School

General Policy:

Possession of personal electronic devices such as cell phones, smartwatches, and earbuds on school property is a privilege. School Board Policy JFI outlines that student electronic devices will be off and away all day. Students will comply with school board policy to maintain a positive school environment.

1. **In-Class Use:**
   - Students will place their personal electronic devices in a designated area upon entering each classroom.
   - Personal electronic devices will be returned to students at the end of each instructional block.
2. **Hallway Transition:**
   - Personal electronic devices will be stored away (not in use) during hallway transitions between classes. The student will not have their cell phone visible in the hallways. If the electronic devices are visible, they will be confiscated. Students will keep them in their backpacks or in a clothing pocket during transition.
3. **Consequences for Violation:**
   - **First Offense:**
     - Personal electronic device(s) will be collected and secured in the front office.
     - Parent/Guardian will pick up the cell phone, smartwatch, earbuds, or other personal electronic device(s) at the end of the day.
   - **Second Offense:**
     - Personal electronic devices will be collected and secured in the front office.
     - A meeting will be scheduled with the Parent/Guardian. Student will serve after-school detention.
     - Parent/Guardian will pick up the personal electronic device(s) at the end of the day.
   - **Third Offense:**
     - Personal electronic device(s) will be collected and secured in the front office.
     - Student will serve in-school and/or off-site restriction.
     - For a period of 30 calendar days, the student shall be restricted from possessing a cell phone or other personal electronic devices at school during instructional hours. The student may either leave the device at home or will be required to check their device into the front office at arrival and retrieve it following dismissal.
     - Parent/Guardian will pick up the personal electronic device(s) at the end of the day.
   - **Fourth Offense:**
     - Personal electronic device(s) will be confiscated and locked in a secure area.
     - Student will serve off-site restriction.
     - Parent/Guardian will pick up the personal electronic device(s) at the end of the day.

Winchester Public Schools
P.O. Box 910, Winchester, VA 22604 ● (540) 662-3471 ● Fax: (540) 722-6722

Cell Phone/Two Way Communication Device

IMPLEMENTING REGULATIONS

The Newport News Public Schools' guidelines for the use of cellular phones and two-way communication devices are designed to ensure that the use of these items does not interfere with teaching and learning, or with maintaining a safe and orderly environment during the school day.

The Newport News Public Schools will assume no responsibility in any circumstance for loss, destruction, damage, theft or charges made on monthly statements for a cellular phone or two-way communication device.

- Elementary students with cell phones should keep them off, and out of sight, during regular school hours and during after-school activities.
- Middle and high school students are permitted to have and use cell phones or two-way communication devices after school dismissal on school board property.
- Under no circumstances may students use any device to photograph, video record, or audio record any student, employee, or member of the public on school grounds unless they have permission from both the person(s) being photographed or recorded and a school official.
- If a student, in violation of these guidelines, should record, or receive a recording of a rule violation that occurred on school grounds and shares such a recording with others, or on a social media platform this will result in consequences in keeping with behavior code Relationship Behaviors (RB) 3- Posting, distributing, displaying, or sharing inappropriate material or literature, including using electronics means.

Sanctions for violation of these guidelines will be as follows:

- *First Offense:* A warning will be given to the student by the administrator or other school official. The policy will be explained to student for any future violations.
- *Second Offense:* The cell phone/two-way communication device will be confiscated by an administrator, secured in the office, and will be returned to the student at the end of the day. Parents will be contacted to request their support in policy enforcement.
- *Third Offense:* The cell phone/two-way communication device will be confiscated by an administrator, secured in the office, the student will receive ISS for 1 school day, and the phone will be returned at the end of the school day.
- *Repeated violations* of these guidelines, after the third offense, will result in disciplinary actions that can range from Level 2 to Level 4 and may require a parent conference for reinstatement.

Use of other Electronic Devices

No student, unless authorized by the school principal/designee, shall bring or possess any object that has no educational purpose and may distract from teaching and learning (i.e. Toys, iPads, Kindles, Nooks, iPods, other MP3 and CD players, Digital or Tape Recorders, or any other portable communication devices).

In addition, the Newport News Public Schools will assume no responsibility in any circumstances for loss, destruction, damage or theft of any such item. Students who choose to bring such items do so at their own risk. *These items may be confiscated and sanctions for violating these guidelines are the same as outlined above for the cell phones/two-way communication devices.*

7

Additional Links:

Danville Public Schools: Unplug 2 Learn Policy

- The "Unplug 2 Learn" policy by Danville Public Schools aims to minimize distractions by prohibiting the use of unauthorized electronic devices during school hours. This policy is designed to enhance student engagement, academic success, and positive social interactions. Danville Public Schools. (n.d.). Unplug 2 Learn Policy. Retrieved from Danville Public Schools website

Hanover County Public Schools: Policy

- Hanover County Public Schools' policy manual outlines various guidelines and regulations to ensure a safe and effective learning environment. It includes policies on student conduct, technology use, and academic standards.
- Hanover County Public Schools. (n.d.). Policy Manual. Retrieved from Hanover County Public Schools website

The Cell Phone Toolkit (mnmsba.org)

- The Cell Phone Toolkit by the Minnesota School Boards Association offers guidelines for managing cell phone use in schools. It provides strategies for balancing technology use with educational goals and maintaining classroom discipline.
- Minnesota School Boards Association. (n.d.). The Cell Phone Toolkit. Retrieved from mnmsba.org

Resources to Support School Health Staff

Executive Order 33 - Medical Exemptions FAQs 8.9.24 (virginia.gov)

- Virginia Department of Education. (2024). Executive Order 33 - Medical exemptions FAQs. Virginia Department of Education. Retrieved from https://www.doe.virginia.gov/Home/Components/News/News/403/227
- This document provides FAQs regarding medical exemptions under Executive Order 33, which aims to create cell phone-free educational environments in Virginia's K-12 schools. It includes guidelines for students with medical needs who may require exemptions from the policy.

Safety Resource Links

Ohio DOE: Cell Phones in Schools: School Safety

- This page discusses the impact of cell phone use on school safety in Ohio, highlighting both the potential risks and benefits. It provides guidelines for schools to develop policies that balance safety concerns with the need for communication during emergencies.
- Ohio Department of Education. (2024). *Cell phones in schools: School safety*. Ohio Department of Education. Retrieved from https://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Student-Supports/School-Wellness/Cell-Phones-in-Ohio-Schools/School-Safety.

[Virginia Educators Guide for Planning and Conducting School Emergency Drills](#)

- This guide provides detailed instructions for planning and conducting various emergency drills in Virginia schools. It aims to enhance school safety by ensuring that staff and students are well-prepared for different types of emergencies.
- Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services. (2022). The Virginia educator's guide for planning and conducting school emergency drills. Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services. Retrieved from [https://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/sites/dcjs.virginia.gov/files/publications/law-enforcement/virginia-educators-drill-guide_0.pdf.](https://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/sites/dcjs.virginia.gov/files/publications/law-enforcement/virginia-educators-drill-guide_0.pdf)

[DCJS Division Guide for Crisis Management Planning](#)

- This guide offers comprehensive strategies for crisis management planning in schools, covering prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. It includes templates and resources to help schools develop effective crisis management plans.
- Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services. (n.d.). Division guide for crisis management planning. Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services. Retrieved from https://www.dcjs.virginia.gov/publication-link/division-guide-crisis-management-planning.

Harrisonburg City Public Schools

One Court Square • Harrisonburg, VA 22801
Phone: 540.434.9916 • Fax: 540.432.3260

"A dynamic and diverse community where learning has no limits and together we work for the success of all."

August 17, 2023

HCPS families:

We look forward to greeting our students next week as we begin the 2023-2024 school year! Each school is a community, and it is important to us that our students and families feel valued and safe. To this end, we have designed some new welcome procedures that will bring added care and consistency to our visitors' experience.

When you visit a school, please press the call button near the door to notify the office staff of your arrival. You will be welcomed and asked about the purpose of your visit before you enter. It's important that you do not hold the door open for others so that each individual visitor (or group, if together) can follow the check-in procedures. Once in the office, you will be asked to show a photo ID unless the office staff has already identified you.

We have also developed enhanced communication procedures in the event of a school safety incident. We will be using a color-coded alert system to notify staff and families. If there is an incident at your child's school, you will be notified of the incident color code and instructed to visit our website where we will post additional information as it becomes available. During an incident, please refrain from coming to the school so that emergency personnel can safely access the campus. For your reference, the color code alerts are listed below and will also be available at the link provided during an incident.

> Code Red: Everyone behind locked doors, lights off, quiet
> Code Orange: Everyone behind locked doors, instruction continues
> Code Yellow: Everyone inside the building
> Code Green: All clear, back to normal operations

Our students learn best when they feel a sense of security and belonging. We strive to provide a safe, welcoming school community where every child is cherished and every family is involved. Thank you for your partnership as we work together to make this the best year possible for your student.

Expect to be greeted with big smiles on Tuesday! We can't wait to see you!