



STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents
Public Information Officers
Instructional Leaders

FROM: Robert Cathcart
Policy and Legal Advisor, Division of Legal Affairs

DATE: June 27, 2024

RE: Cell Phone Survey Results and Policy Development

In late May, Superintendent Weaver sent out a brief survey to all certified teachers regarding the **use of cell phones in school**. Hundreds of responses poured in within the first ten minutes: of the over 50,000 emails delivered, just shy of 10,000 educators completed the survey, a massive 20% response rate (standard survey responses average between 3-5%). As you can imagine, teachers had plenty of meaningful feedback to share about how cell phones impact their classrooms.

A few survey highlights:

- 83% of high school teachers indicated that cell phones distract students daily in their classrooms.
- 92% of teachers support a policy limiting cell phone access, with 55% supporting a complete ban during the school day.
- Major themes that recurred in teacher comments included behavioral and social issues, cyberbullying, cheating/academic dishonesty, teacher morale, and lost learning.

Perhaps most alarming was data surrounding the amount of instructional time missed due to cell phone distractions. The federal chronic absenteeism threshold (for when a student is absent from school) is set at 10% of instructional time missed. Applying that same methodology to teachers' estimations of learning time lost due to cell phones would mean that between 55-70% of students are "chronically absent" (while still being physically present) due to cell phone distraction.

[This helpful one-pager, summarizing the survey data, is being shared with lawmakers, policy leaders, teachers, and other key stakeholders.](#)

Proviso 1.103

As the FY 2024-25 appropriations act was finalized this week, the budget conference committee adopted the Senate version of Proviso 1.103, which reads:

To receive state funds allocated for State Aid to Classrooms, a school district shall implement a policy adopted by the State Board of Education that prohibits access to personal electronic communication devices by students during the school day. For purposes of this provision, a personal electronic communication device is considered to be a device not authorized for classroom use by a student, utilized to access the Internet, wi-fi, or cellular telephone signals.

Anticipated Policy Development Timeline & Resources

To comply with Proviso 1.103, SCDE staff will work to draft a model policy—in collaboration with superintendents, board members, and parents—for inclusion on the agenda of the State Board of Education’s (SBE) next meeting in **August 2024**. Successful policies from across the state and country will provide valuable insight on best practices to inform workable implementation that doesn’t require teachers to play cell phone police each day.

If passed by the SBE in August, SCDE would then encourage local boards to include the adoption of the policy on their earliest possible board meeting (either **September or October 2024**) with the goal of the policy being fully implemented in every South Carolina school no later than **January 2025**.

Additionally, funds to support school safety initiatives have been included in the proposed FY 2024-25 budget. Pending final passage, the SCDE will advise districts on opportunities to harness these funds to support phone-free schools.

As Superintendent Weaver [recently wrote in the *Post & Courier*](#), dealing with the issue of cell phones in school is the single most practical step we can take to refocus student learning, address student mental health needs, increase school safety, and help teachers enforce classroom discipline. SCDE looks forward to partnering with each district to implement this meaningful move forward for the academic and behavioral flourishing of students and teacher retention.

Please refer questions or comments regarding cell phone policy development to Robert Cathcart at rdcathcart@ed.sc.gov or 803-734-2230.