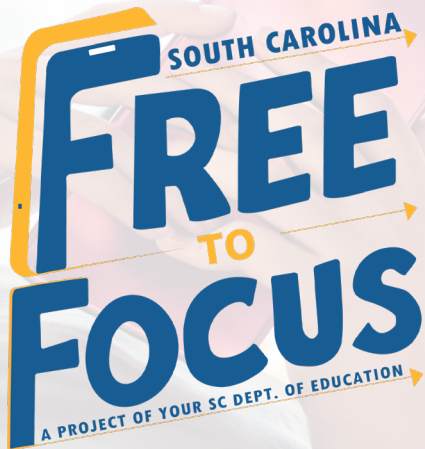




SOUTH CAROLINA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



ADMINISTRATOR TOOLKIT

RESOURCES TO IMPLEMENT SOUTH CAROLINA'S PHONE-FREE
SCHOOL DAY POLICY

Introduction

Dear Friends,

Addiction. It is a challenge to acknowledge... and an even bigger challenge to overcome. Yet when speaking with South Carolina students, they freely admit that they are addicted to their cell phones. (And if we're being honest, we adults far too often are as well!!)

An uncontrolled, society-wide experiment has been unleashed on children and their still-developing brains in the form of the smartphone. While almost always connected through technology, our students have never been more disconnected from their studies, mental and physical health, and even meaningful relationships with their peers, families, and other trusted adults. Dr. Jonathan Haidt, in his book *The Anxious Generation*, provides data-based evidence of the damage this has caused.

The good news, however, is that we now have a meaningful opportunity to help our students break this addiction and free themselves to focus on real life: their academic journey, their friends, and their online and physical safety. It bears emphasizing that in the event of a school-based emergency, it is critical that a student be fully focused on the adults who are directing them to safety, not distracted by a device!

While South Carolina's phone-free school day policy does not ban phones from school campuses, it does require that they be off and away for the entirety of the school day. In doing so, we free teachers to focus on instruction and give our students a new lease on life. Implementing this policy successfully will require strong communication between administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and students. But take heart: it has already been done by schools right here in South Carolina. And I'm confident the reward – students focused on their future – will be well worth the work! I hope this toolkit proves helpful on this shared journey.

Focused on SC's Bright Education Future,



Ellen E. Weaver

State Superintendent of Education



Students of Rock Hill High School - Rock Hill, SC

“

Kids are talking to each other again. Our school's culture has improved because of that, everyone is present with each other. Before it was just you and your phone. It's been very positive for us.

**- Tim Sawyer, Assistant Principal
Rock Hill High School**

”

Table of Contents



Supporting Data

Section 1:

- Research Infographic
- Benefits of SC's Free to Focus Policy



Policy & Implementation Best Practices

Section 2:

- SC State Board of Education Model Policy
- Sample Roll-out Timeline
- Implementation Best Practices



Stakeholder Communications

Section 3:

- Sample FAQ
- Common Pushbacks
- Sample Letters: Teachers/Staff, Parents/Guardians, and Students

The Why

The purpose of this policy is to create a phone-free school environment that fosters a positive learning experience free from electronic distractions.

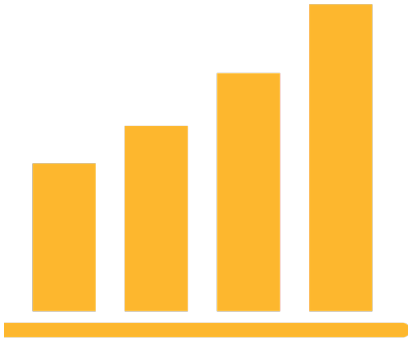
By prohibiting the use of personal electronic devices during the school day, this policy aims to enhance focus and engagement, allowing students to develop the college and career-ready skills outlined in the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate. Students will have more opportunities to engage in meaningful interactions, collaborate with peers, and cultivate the essential skills necessary for success in college, career, and life.

“

The goal in Orangeburg County is to ensure that our environments are for students to learn and for teachers to teach. This policy allows our district to keep the main thing, the main thing.

**- Dr. Shawn Foster, Superintendent
Orangeburg County School District**

”



Supporting Data

Section 1:

Research Infographic

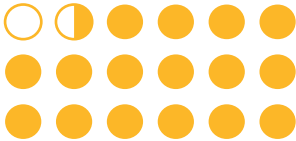
Benefits of SC's Free to Focus Policy

Research Infographic

97%

OF STUDENTS
USE PHONES
DURING SCHOOL

An average of 43 minutes per day, spent primarily on social media, YouTube, and gaming



[Common Sense Media](#)

SOCIAL MEDIA IS
NEARLY UNIVERSAL

40%

of 8 - 12 year olds are on social media

[Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#)

95%

of teenagers are on social media

TEENS SPEND NEARLY
FIVE HOURS A DAY
ON SOCIAL MEDIA APPS



[Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#)

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](#)

NEA Poll

83% OF TEACHERS

support an all day
phone-free policy

[National Education Association](#)



72%

OF HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS
REPORT CELLPHONES ARE A
MAJOR DISTRACTION IN THE
CLASSROOM

[The Mere Presence of a Cell Phone May be Distracting](#)

50% +

of kids get
237 NOTIFICATIONS
PER DAY

Some receive as many as

4,500

EVERY DAY

23% occur during school

[Common Sense Media](#)



**Phones prevent face to
face communication**

Research suggests that face-to-face communications are linked to better mental health

[Psychology today](#)

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



They also scored a full letter grade and a half higher on a multiple choice test

[The Impact of Mobile Phone Usage on Student Learning](#)

RATE OF SCHOOL LONELINESS HAS DOUBLED SINCE 2012

[Worldwide Increases in Adolescent Loneliness](#)

SINCE 2010

134% ↑

Increase in anxiety

106% ↑

Increase in depression

The Anxious Generation



41%
**OF TEENS WITH THE HIGHEST
SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE
rate their overall mental
health as poor or very poor**

American Psychological Association

35%

**of teens admit to using their
cellphone to**

CHEAT

Common Sense Media

22%

**of high school students have
SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED
SUICIDE IN THE PAST YEAR**

10%

**HAVE ATTEMPTED SUICIDE
IN THE PAST YEAR**

CDC, 2023

Adolescents who experienced
cyberbullying were more than

FOUR TIMES

as likely to report thoughts of

**SUICIDE AND
ATTEMPTS**

as those who didn't

National Institutes of Health



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

Science Direct

STEEP DROP IN BULLYING

46% & 43%
of girls of boys

**experienced a reduction of
bullying after smartphone
bans were enacted**

Smartphone Bans, Student Outcomes and Mental Health

**PORNOGRAPHY
EXPOSURE**

**1/3 OF
ALL TEENS**

**reported that they have been
exposed to pornography
during the school day**



Common Sense Media

**Youth reporting
LONELINESS**

are also more likely to
**drop out of school
at the age of 16**

Loneliness During the School Years



95%
**OF TEACHERS SAY
ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION
IS A PROBLEM IN PUBLIC
K-12 SCHOOLS**

National Education Association

87%

**of teachers said bullying is
a problem in K-12 schools**

34%

**of middle school teachers
call bullying a major
problem**

National Education Association



"BRAIN DRAIN"

The mere presence of one's own
smartphone reduces available
cognitive capability

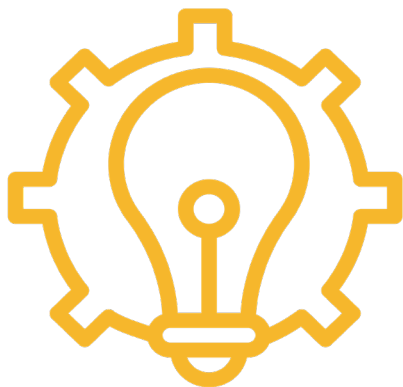
Brain Drain

Benefits of SC's Free to Focus Policy

Phone-Free Schools Movement's in depth discussions with administrators who have effectively implemented phone-free policies have consistently highlighted the same positive outcomes. Below are some of the tangible benefits noted by these administrators:

- **Fewer distractions:** Teachers report improved focus, attention, and comprehension leading to better skills and grades.
- **Less cyberbullying**
- **Fewer fights and social media related drama:** Administrators report spending less time on discipline referrals.
- **Increased engagement:** Students engage more with their peers and teachers both in and outside of the classroom.
- **Improved attendance:** Students aren't texting their parents to call them out of school.
- **Boosted efficiency:** Teachers report being ahead of schedule on their lesson plans because they aren't spending time policing phones, and because students are completing classwork and assignments faster.
- **More reading:** Phone-free schools report an increase in books checked out from their libraries.
- **Improved teacher morale and retention**
- **Less mid-class absenteeism:** Students request to use the restroom less frequently and trips to the restroom are shorter because students aren't using that time to be on their phones.
- **More vibrant lunchrooms:** Lunchrooms in a phone-free schools are markedly louder because students are having face-to-face conversations with their peers.
- **Less cheating**
- **Less reported stress among students:** School counselors are seeing a decrease in the rate of mental health-related student visits.

In summary, a bell-to-bell phone-free policy provides students with an average of seven hours each school day to be fully present and free from the pressures and harms of phones and social media. This policy helps them restore connections and reclaim a critical period in their development.



Policy & Implementation Best Practices

Section 2:

SC State Board of Education Model Policy

Sample Roll-out Timeline

Implementation Best Practices

SC State Board of Education's Model Policy

Adopted on September 3rd, 2024

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to create a phone-free school environment that fosters a positive learning experience free from electronic distractions. By prohibiting the use of personal electronic devices during the school day, this policy aims to provide an environment that enhances focus and engagement, allowing students to develop the college and career-ready skills outlined in the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate. Students will have more opportunities to engage in meaningful interactions, collaborate with peers, and cultivate the essential skills necessary for success in college, careers, and life.

The Model Policy Prohibiting the Use of Personal Electronic Devices during the School Day has been developed in compliance with the General Appropriations Bill, H. 5100 of 2024, Proviso 1.103.

Proviso 1.103. (SDE: Anti-Bullying/School Safety) 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.

This proviso requires each local school district to adopt a policy adopted by the State Board of Education that prohibits access to personal electronic communication devices by students during the school day. This model policy must be adopted by districts and is applicable to grades kindergarten through twelve for the 2024-2025 school year. The local school board must ensure that this policy is included in the school district's publication of the comprehensive rules, procedures, and standards of conduct for schools and in the student handbook. Administrative support for teachers is critical for this or any policy to be successfully implemented.

School Districts may, but are not required to, publish additional guidance or administrative rules as may be necessary to implement this policy with fidelity. Any previous device or cell phone policies in conflict with this policy are superseded by this model policy.

SC State Board of Education's Model Policy

Definitions

“Personal Electronic Device”...

hereinafter referred to as “device,” means any device utilized to access the internet, wi-fi, cellular telephone signals, or to capture images or video. This includes, but is not limited to, cell phones, smart watches, tablets, and gaming devices.

“Personal Electronic Device Accessories”...

hereinafter referred to as “device accessories,” include any wired or wireless accessory or wearable technology that connects to a device and any other accessory commonly used in conjunction with a personal electronic device.

“School Day”...

is defined as the period of time that a student is present on the school campus from their arrival (i.e., tardy bell) until afternoon dismissal at the end of the instructional day. This policy may also apply to school buses, field trips, and athletic events. The applicability of this regulation to these activities will be determined by the school district.

“Access”...

is defined as viewing, holding, wearing, or otherwise using a device for the purpose of communication, internet access, gaming, recording, or any other function commonly associated with devices. During the school day, devices should be powered off and stored as directed by the school district. Exceptions granted for medical necessity, authorized for classroom use, or other authorized reasons should be in writing and are not considered violations of this definition.

“Authorized for Classroom Use”...

is defined as the use of a personal electronic device that is explicitly approved by the District Superintendent or his/her designee in writing. The approval must include alignment with a standards-aligned educational objective that cannot be reasonably achieved using district-owned devices. Students must be provided with clear instructions on the appropriate use of devices and ensure that their use aligns with the approved educational objectives. The District Superintendent or his/her designee may revoke approval at any time if it is determined that their use does not meet the intended educational objectives or is causing disruptions.

“

It gives kids the opportunity to realize they don't need to be buried in their phones to be social.

**- Jennifer Tomcheck, Parent
Rock Hill High School**

”

SC State Board of Education's Model Policy

Policy Implementation and Enforcement

1

During the school day, students are prohibited from accessing their personal electronic devices, unless authorized for classroom use. Students may not wear or access device accessories during the school day. Students must store their devices and device accessories in lockers, backpacks, or otherwise as directed by the school district during the school day. Districts may forbid student possession of devices and device accessories on school property.

2

If explicitly required by a student's IEP, Medical Plan, or 504 plan, the student shall be allowed to access their personal electronic device for medically or educationally necessary purposes described and required for administration of the IEP, Medical Plan or 504 Plan.

3

A student who is a member of a volunteer firefighting organization or emergency organization may be authorized to carry a device with written permission from the District Superintendent or his/her designee.

4

If a student violates the preceding rules during the school day, the student will be subject to progressive consequences in the student code of conduct and disciplinary enforcement procedures.

5

Before the expiration or codification into state law of Proviso 1.103 (General Appropriations Bill, H. 5100 of 2024), a survey will be administered to all superintendents and other applicable personnel soliciting input and seeking what worked best and what can be improved upon within the proviso prior to the 2025-2026 school year. *This survey will be administered prior to April 30, 2025.*

Sample Roll-out Timeline



1 Planning (2 months)

- Administration to determine any procedural changes that need to be addressed as a result of the new policy
- Letter communicating the new policy and supporting documents are shared with teachers/staff
- Initial teacher/staff onboarding meeting



2 Pre-Launch (1 month)

- Email letters to parents and students announcing the new policy
- Hold informational meeting with parents and students to address any questions or concerns
- Have onboarding meeting with teachers/staff prior to implementation
- Send communication reminder to students and parents about the new policy prior to the policy implementation



3 Launch (2+ weeks)

- Have all hands on deck: administrators, counselors and staff are to be readily available to support students during the transition
- Equip and support teachers regarding any pushback from students



4 Post-Launch (on-going)

- Continue meeting with teachers/staff to gather feedback and keep implementation on track
 - The phone policy should be discussed at every staff meeting
- Ongoing communication with students and parents on the implementation
 - Communicate positive results and be available to answer questions or concerns



5 Follow-up (3-4 months after launch)

- SCDE will survey administrators, teachers, and if possible, students, by **April 30th, 2025**
- Ongoing communication with all stakeholders



6 Review

- SCDE will share results with stakeholders
- Discuss successes and areas to improve

Implementation Best Practices

Ensure that the district has clearly communicated the policy to all stakeholders. Building administrators/teachers/staff should be fully prepared and supported to implement the policy. Students should be aware of the rules regarding access to their phones. Parents should be aware of the policy and related practices as well.

Hold teacher/staff onboarding meetings prior to policy launch:

- Explain the problems and concerns of cell phones during the school day.
- Share the research (brain development, mental health, academics).
- Explain that building-wide enforcement is key to the success of the policy.
- Communicate that the administration is there to reinforce the policy and support teachers and staff.
- Review changes in procedures, consequences, and how to handle potential student and parent pushback.
- Provide ample time for Q&A.

Outline parent/guardian to student communication practices:

- If parent/guardian needs to communicate with student during the school day, a phone is available in the front office (or other area designated by the school).
- Many classrooms have phones that are accessible for teachers to use to communicate.
- If it is an emergency, students should be notified immediately by school staff.

Enforcement Imperatives

Consistency is the key when it comes to enforcing cell phone policies. Teachers and staff should all be on the same page about the rules and consequences for cell phone use in schools.

Remember that consistency, fairness, and communication are key when implementing consequences for cell phone misuse in schools. It is essential to establish clear expectations, educate the students on the reasons behind the rules, and provide support to help them make better choices.

The policy must have 100% participation by all staff for it to be effective. Building-wide enforcement by all teachers, staff and administrators is also essential to the policy's success. Consistency leads to less pushback by students. If one or two staff members allow students to use their phones, it erodes the policy and renders it ineffective. Enforcement must remain consistent for the entire school year.

Staff must supervise students as they enter the school, turn off their phones, and store the phones as required by district policy. Although teachers and staff are not required to put away their own cell phones, they should be mindful that they serve as role models to the students and should refrain from using their phones during class time, as well as in the hallways and lunchroom.

The first several weeks of the policy will require extra attention by the administrators to help students transition to the new norm. Some students are extremely connected—even addicted—to their phone and will experience withdrawal symptoms that may require extra support.

Storage Options

- Cell phone locker—readily available online from different manufacturers.
- Yondr Pouch—a lockable pouch where students store their individual phones. When the students enter the school, phones must be turned off prior to being locked in the pouch. The pouch is then stored in the students' backpack or in lockers for the entire school day. When the students leave school at the end of the day, they unlock their pouch using the unlocking device mounted by the exit doors or in the main office.
- Low-cost options include backpack storage, padded envelopes or pencil pouches stored in alphabetized baskets, hanging calculator storage systems located in the main office, homeroom, last period classroom, or a secure location monitored by staff.

Note: Personal lockers are not recommended, because teachers have reported students asking to use the restroom during class in order to access cell phones stored in personal lockers.

Consistent Consequences

Although the policy does not address disciplinary consequences, possible consequences for violations of the cell phone policy depend on the needs and culture of the district, but must be strict and consistently enforced to be effective. All consequences should require the cell phone to be removed from the student.

Because the policy is clear and should be clearly communicated in advance of implementation, no warnings should given prior to enforcement of the consequences. Potential escalating consequences could be:

- **1st Offense:** cell phone is taken to the office and the student can pick it up from the office at the end of the school day.
- **2nd Offense:** cell phone is taken to the office and the student's parent or guardian is required to pick it up from the office at the end of the school day. A copy of the cell phone policy can be provided to the family when they retrieve the cell phone from the office.
- **3rd Offense:** cell phone is taken and kept until a meeting is scheduled with the student's parent(s) or guardian(s) and a plan is agreed upon on how to proceed for the rest of the school year.

Other practical options could include:

- Suspension rights to attend extra-curricular activities.
- Require parents to pick up the student's phone in the office and schedule a required meeting.
- Fine parents for multiple infractions along with a required meeting.
- Assign community service hours after school.
- Assign in-school detention such as lunch detention or afterschool detention. A key objective is to not remove a student from instructional time, except in the most serious of circumstances.



Complying with IEP, Medical Plans, or 504 Plans

The State Board of Education specifies an exemption from the state's cell phone policy when necessary to comply with a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), medical plans, 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 implemented in collaboration with the student's family, when possible.

Allowable exemptions for cell phones and personal electronic communication devices must be written into 504, IEP and/or medical plans.

If a student with a disability or an ML student with a documented language barrier is determined to require 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 assistive technology to support a student's unique needs. Public schools must consider students' 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.

Assessing Current Procedures

- Evaluate emergency procedures to ensure they align with the new policy. Additional phones or other communication technologies may be needed throughout the school building for robust emergency communications.
 - If headphones are required for a classroom activity, they should be wired and provided by the school or parents whenever possible.
 - Assessing discipline referrals that involve a cell phone both pre- and post-policy implementation can be helpful to analyze the policy's impact.
-

Non-Electronic Activities

Non-electronic activities help facilitate student interaction during free time and provide ways for them to interact off-line. It's important to encourage teachers/staff and students to celebrate the joys of genuine connection and partaking of truly fun and interactive activities that don't involve social media. Examples could include card/board games, ping pong tables, or an abundance of school or community service opportunities.



Since incorporating extensive unstructured play each day, our school's annual office referrals have plummeted by 76%! SC Ready scores are dramatically higher for Play Club participants as well, as evidenced by a study from Long Island University. Our school culture has also become healthier, with 100% positive parent feedback on our state report card - a rare achievement in public education, where complete agreement is almost unheard of! Bus referrals have plummeted also, dropping by 94% since adding so much unstructured play to our days. More importantly, our students' independence, resilience, happiness, mental health, and social skills are skyrocketing. And all of this has occurred over the last six years, during which our school's population has grown from under 400 students to over 500, making these outcomes even more remarkable. It truly has been the return of childhood for our students at Central Academy of the Arts, and we're seeing enormous benefits everywhere!

**- Kevin Stinehart, 4th Grade Teacher & Play Club Founder
Central Academy of the Arts**





Stakeholder Communications

Section 3:

Sample FAQ

Common Pushbacks

Sample Letters: Teachers/Staff, Parents/
Guardians, and Students

Sample FAQ

The decision to restrict cell phone use in schools stems from a growing concern and substantial data showing that these devices can be a significant distraction that hinder students' ability to concentrate on their studies, interact with peers, and fully participate in classroom activities.

Additionally, schools aim to create a space where students are encouraged to develop essential social skills and minimize the potential for cyberbullying or inappropriate use of technology.

With limited exceptions, the policy adopted by the South Carolina State Board of Education prohibits students from using, wearing, viewing, or accessing cell phones and similar devices while on school property from their arrival at school to afternoon dismissal at the end of the instructional day.

The method and location in which the devices must be stored or secured during the school day will be determined by each district considering their unique facilities, personnel, and resources available to implement and enforce the policy in the way most suitable for that district.

This FAQ addresses frequent questions and concerns regarding the cell phone policy, explaining the reasoning behind the policy and how it benefits students and the school community.

Q1

Why is our school adopting a phone-free policy?

The school day is when students need to be able to focus, learn, interact with each other, build in-person community, and engage with teachers. Study data shows that having a cell phone, even turned off in their backpack, decreases student test scores. A phone and social media free school gives students back many needed opportunities for development.

Q2

What is included in a cell phone and personal electronic device definition?

- Cell phones (both phones that connect to the internet and non-internet connected phones that send and receive text messages, and make phone calls)
- Personal electronic devices such as electronic tablets and video games
- AirPods, earbuds and Bluetooth connected headphones
- Smartwatches and fitness trackers that connect to the internet

additional definitions can be found on page 9 of this toolkit.

Q3

How do I contact my student during the school day?

(i.e. schedule change, after-school activity)

Parents and/or guardians who need to contact their student during the school day and or change the pick-up time of your child, may do so by calling the main office. Contacting your child via their cell phone during the school day distracts them from their studies and the needed in-person interaction with their teachers and peers. By having 24/7 access, we prevent growth opportunities that our children need educationally, socially, and developmentally. If students text their parents every time they have a question, they miss the opportunity to think for themselves and develop problem solving skills.

Q5

What if my child needs their phone in case of a crisis or lockdown at the school?

School security experts say phones can make children less safe in crisis situations for the following reasons:

- 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 hamper rumor control and, in doing so, 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 evacuate students to another site.
- Victims and worried family members trying to get through can jam communications, interfering with first responders.

Our goal is to keep students focused on the adult getting them to safety before they access their phones.

Q6

How will I be notified if there is an emergency?

Each district has a comprehensive emergency plan in place based on the needs of their schools. Parents will be notified and updated in a timely manner regarding any emergency. Parents naturally worry about the potential for a worst-case scenario, but that focus makes it easy to overlook the everyday negative impacts that smart phones are having on students and their education. Furthermore, even in a worst-case scenario, the presence of cell phones can create significant safety concerns in the event of an emergency.

Contrary to popular assumptions, student cell phones often make the education environment less safe both physically and emotionally. Many schools and districts experience disruptive and unsafe learning environments in part because of student phone use, which is linked to distraction, bullying, physical violence, and hoax security threats.

It is understandable that families want to be able to quickly contact their students or to have their students be able to call for help or contact family members in an emergency. But students and families calling and texting one another during an emergency is more likely to decrease student safety, not enhance it, during a crisis or even during normal school operations:

- Cell phones and social media can be used to spread threats and coordinate acts of violence.
- Use of cell phones by students can accelerate the spread of misinformation, rumors, and fear.
- In an emergency lockdown situation, cell phones could ring or vibrate audibly at a time when students need to be quiet for safety reasons.
- Students on cell phones are less focused on listening to adults for directions on how to respond and stay safe.
- Cell phones can lead to families arriving at the school and make it more difficult for First Responders to facilitate safe evacuation and tactical and emergency response.
- Cell phones can delay or hinder timely and efficient family-student reunification and potentially put families into a zone of harm.

The proposed policy will not remove all cell phones from schools. Employees including school administrators, teachers, and crisis team members will have cell phones that they can use as an emergency management resource tool. In addition, school staff will have access to communication devices to contact the school office should emergency conditions arise. Finally, students are not prohibited from accessing their phones in the event of an emergency once they are safe.

For more information: [National School Safety and Security Services](#)

Q7**Why can't teachers be in charge of the class and collect the phones?**

Children need consistency and one policy for the entire school benefits all students. Teachers benefit by regaining classroom instructional time instead of having to police phones, as monitoring phones takes time and energy away from teaching and supporting students. If there is a consistently enforced building-wide policy in place then students are less likely to push back on the policy.

Q8**Why is it important to allow our children to be independent during the school day?**

Students need to be given independence from their parents or guardians during the school day to develop foundational skills. Constant contact can fuel a cycle of anxiety for both students and parents. Research shows encouraging independence fosters a child's self-confidence, resilience, problem-solving ability, and mental health.

Q9**What if my child has a medical condition that must be monitored by their cell phone?**

This exception must be written into a 504, IEP, or medical plan, and is specific to the need only and still prohibits cell phone use for any other purposes.

Q10**What if my child has an IEP/504 plan?**

It is extremely rare for a cell phone to be required for an IEP/504 plan. But if the situation does arise, documentation should be provided and the exception is specific to the need only and still prohibits cell phone use for any other purposes.

Q11**Will it be harder for students to make connections and friends if they are offline all day?**

Social media tends to foster asynchronous interactions leading to greater levels of anxiety, loneliness, and depression. In-person socializing forms far stronger connections and supports the development of healthier social and emotional skills.

Q12**Don't some students benefit from having social media?**

Even for students who use social media for connection, it is still a distraction during school hours. Our goal is to limit use during the school day to minimize disruption and mitigate the potential harms of social media dependency.

Q13**What if my child is bullied or harassed by a teacher and is unable to capture a video of the incident?**

Any complaint of harassment or bullying occurring inside the school will be taken seriously by school administration. If a student is in a situation where they may feel threatened or unsafe, they are encouraged to quickly contact a trusted adult or authority to prevent further harm and to receive the support they need.

To download the FAQ, please visit <https://ed.sc.gov/freetofocus/>

Common Pushbacks



When a parent/student asks why the policy was changed or implemented:

Phones are a disruption to the school day. They disrupt focus, learning and engagement. They also create challenges such as cyberbullying, privacy violations, and mental health concerns for students. Implementing a phone-free policy leads to increased student engagement during class, meaningful connections with peers, higher test scores, fewer disciplinary incidents, reduction in cyberbullying, and improved school culture and community.



When a parent/student states they need to have contact 24/7:

Parents and guardians who need to contact their student during the school day may do so by calling the main office number. If the student needs to contact their parent or guardian during the school day, a phone will be available in the main office. The same goes if you need to change the pick up time of your child. Contacting your child directly via their phone during the school day distracts them from their studies and the needed in-person interaction with their teachers and peers.



When a parent states they need their phone in an emergency situation:

We understand the emotions that come into play during an emergency, however 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 hamper rumor control and, in doing so, 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 evacuate students to another site.
- Victims and worried family members trying to get through can jam communications, interfering with first responders.

For more information: [National School Safety and Security Services](#)



When a student/parent claims the phone is needed for educational purposes:

The potential risks of using cell phones in the classroom outweigh the benefits. The district provides devices that are fully capable of handling all classwork and assignments. Staff will ensure that students are well-informed about the new process.



When a parent/student states they or their child feels more stress and anxiety without their phone:

Constant notifications and texts lead to increased anxiety among adolescents. Face-to-face time with friends and classmates counteracts the isolating, depressive effects of looking at a screen. Teachers and staff (school counselors) are here to support your child through this transition.



When a student/parent claims they or their child needs AirPods to listen to music for their anxiety:

We recognize that students may use their AirPods as a coping mechanism for anxiety. However, during the school day alternate coping strategies must be provided because the use of AirPods are prohibited.



When a parent/student asks why can't we just eliminate phones during instructional time:

The social aspect of the school day is important. Students need to build meaningful relationships and foster a sense of belonging within their community. By creating a phone-free environment, we restore essential opportunities for normal social development.



Parents were very receptive to it. Students also realized they can focus on what they're doing, and they don't have to be on social media to communicate with other people.

**- Victoria Williams-Cooper, Principal
Darlington Middle School**

Students of Darlington Middle School - Darlington, SC



Letter to Teachers/Staff

Download editable letter [here](#)

Dear Teachers & 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 relational 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 and life 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 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 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.

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,

Letter to Parents/Guardians

Download editable letter [here](#)

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 relational challenges.

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 and life 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 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 educational environment and experience that all of our students deserve.

Sincerely,

Letter to Students

Download editable letter [here](#)

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 focus and 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 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. This has been the routine experience in other schools that have implemented this policy.

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 educational environment experience that all of you deserve.

Sincerely,

Conclusion

All students deserve a phone-free educational environment where they are free to focus on their learning, friends, and safety and educators are free to focus on instruction, without the distractions of phones and social media.

We hope this Administrator Toolkit will help facilitate and streamline the implementation process for South Carolina districts and schools. If executed consistency throughout the school year, the result will be a more focused, positive and enriching learning environment for all students.

The SC Department of Education is committed to providing ongoing support and resources as you navigate the implementation. Should you have questions or need additional assistance, please contact us at communications@ed.sc.gov.

Become a Phone-Free School

Once you have successfully implemented a phone-free policy in your school, you can apply to be recognized by the Phone-Free School Movement as a Phone-Free School.

Recognized schools receive a Certificate and Seal of Recognition to display on their website and school communications. Your school will also be added to their growing directory of phone-free schools nationwide. Please visit phonefreeschoolsmovement.org to fill out an application or email info@phonefreeschoolsmovement.org.

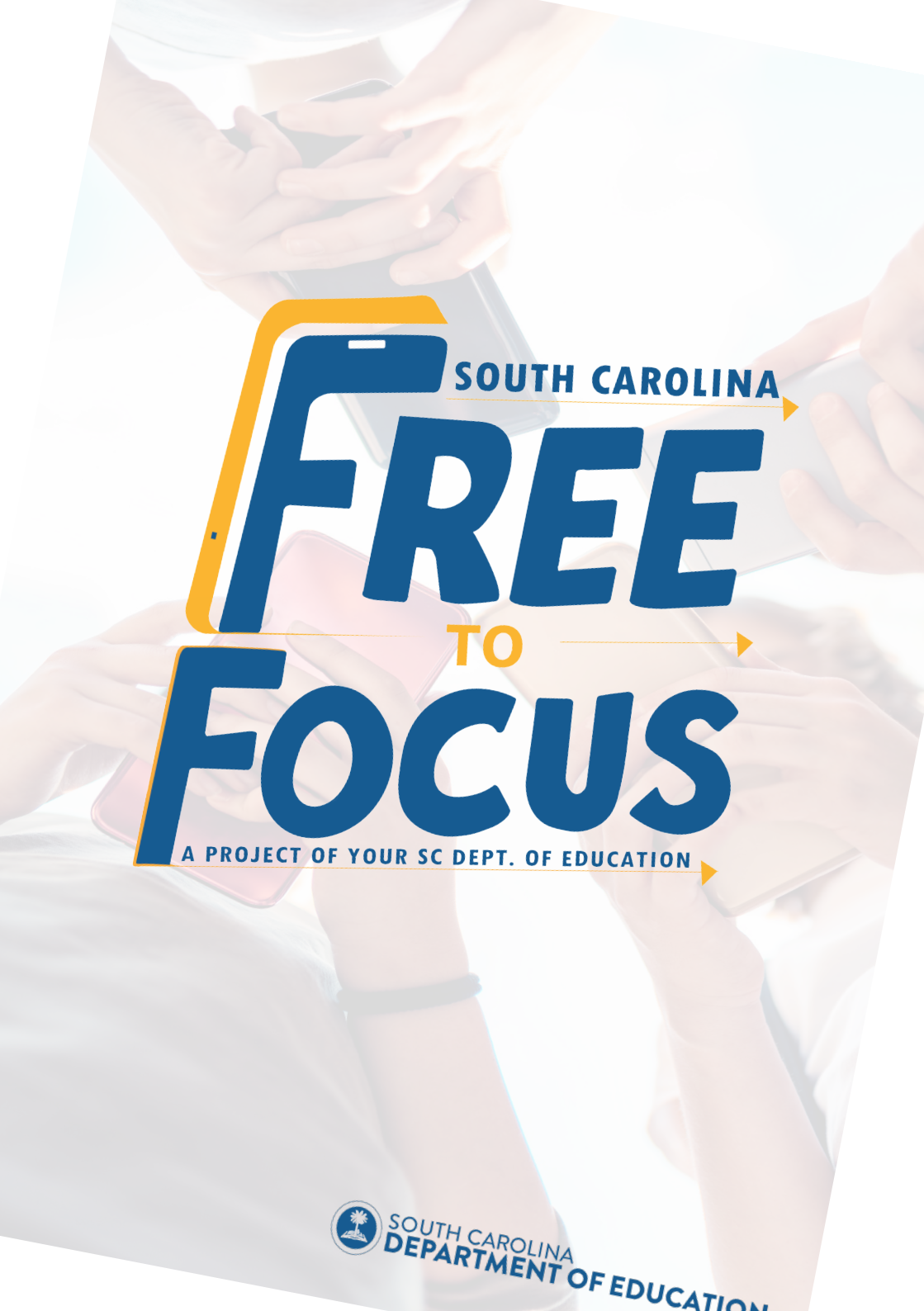
Special Thanks

The South Carolina Department of Education would like to acknowledge and thank [Phone-Free Schools Movement](#), [Fairplay](#), and the [Virginia Department of Education](#) for the customizable resources and invaluable information they have contributed to this Toolkit. Their generous partnership will enable a new generation of South Carolina students to thrive and reach their full potential.



Additional Resources

[The Anxious Generation - Free the Anxious Generation](#)
[Disconnecting to Reconnect: Crafting Local Policies for Focused Classrooms](#)
[South Carolina Students on Cellphone Rule: 'Not as Bad as it Sounds'](#)
[How's Indiana's school cellphone ban going? Students and teachers weigh in](#)
[In Pickens County, every day is play day](#)

The background of the entire graphic is a photograph of several hands holding various smartphones, suggesting a focus on technology in education. The hands are of different skin tones and are positioned around the central text.

SOUTH CAROLINA **FREE** **TO** **FOCUS**

A PROJECT OF YOUR SC DEPT. OF EDUCATION



**SOUTH CAROLINA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**