

**TO:** Members of the State Board of Education

**FROM:** Carey M. Wright, Ed.D., State Superintendent of Schools

**DATE:** September 24, 2024

**SUBJECT:** Background and Trends on Cell Phones in Schools



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### **Purpose**

Staff of the Maryland State Board of Education (MSBE) presents as information to MSBE an overview of national and local actions related to cell phone policies in schools.

### **Background**

After the height of the pandemic, students came back to school with a different relationship to technology and a much more virtual life than they had before the pandemic. Many states and school districts have begun taking action to limit students' use of cell phones at school. As of September 2024, 13 states have passed statewide policies restricting cell phone use at schools and 18 of Maryland's 24 LEAs have also updated or established new policies on cell phone use during the school day.

### **Executive Summary**

1. This presentation will provide information on the following:
  - Research findings on the impact to students and the learning environment of students' cell phone use in schools;
  - Stakeholder views on students' use of cell phones in schools;
  - An overview of state actions;
  - An overview of actions Maryland's LEAs have taken to address cell phone use in schools; and
  - Policy trends across states and Maryland's LEAs

### **Action**

No action is required; this information is for discussion only.

### **Attachments**

Cell Phone Board Presentation Final.pptx

STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION

# National and Local Scan of Cell Phone Policies in Schools

September 24, 2024

Presented By | Hannah Oakley, Deputy Director of the Maryland State Board of Education







## Presentation Outline

1. Background
2. Overview of State Actions
3. Overview of Maryland LEAs' Actions
4. Key Considerations for Policy Development

# Research Findings

According to federal data, nearly 75 percent of public schools already prohibited non-academic phone use during school hours over the 2021-22 school year. However, only 43 percent of high schools had such policies.

- According to a 2023 study by Common Sense Media, the average student receives 60 notifications and spends 43 minutes — roughly the length of a classroom period — on their phone during school hours in a single day.

While there is research showing that kids spending an unhealthy amount of time online and on social media is associated with depression, isolation, and thoughts of self-harm, **so far none of the evidence is causal.**

Especially since COVID, this has been an issue nationally. Policies have been implemented at the school, district, and state level.

# Stakeholders' Viewpoints

- A June 2024 Pew Research Center survey found that 1 in 3 middle school teachers and nearly 3 in 4 high school teachers call smartphones a major problem.
- A recent national survey of parents from the National Parents Union (NPU) found much **more mixed support of such policies among parents:**
  - 56 percent of parents believe students should sometimes be allowed to use their cell phones in school, during times like lunch or recess, at athletic events, and in class for academic purposes approved by their teacher.
  - 57 percent supported a school- or district-level decision on cellphone bans rather than a statewide one.
  - 43 percent of parents say their child's school already bans cell phone use unless they have a medical condition for which it is needed, but only 32 percent of parents support this policy.

# State Actions

## State policies on cellphones at-a-glance

Incentivizes policy	AR	DE	PA	3	
Policy recommended	AL	CT	OK	WA	4
Policy required	IN	MN	OH	VA	4
Statewide restriction	FL	LA	SC	3	

\* A Flourish hierarchy chart

- States that **incentivized adoption** of cell phone policies provided funding to LEAs.
- States that **recommended policies** encouraged LEAs to develop/update their policies – some provided no guidance, others with considerations and model policies.
- Four states **required districts** to adopt such policies by a deadline, usually accompanied by model policy resources or guidance.
- Those with **total restrictions** were passed by state legislatures.

[EdWeek Analysis](#)

# Role of State Actors

- **14 states have taken definitive action so far with timelines for implementation stretching into next school year.**
- The role of **State Boards** varied across states:
  - Approve Department's guidelines, policy, or rules;
  - Pass resolution urging local boards to adopt new or update existing cell phone policies;
  - Draft the policy itself; or
  - Create statewide task force and review its recommendations.
- **Governors** in six of 13 states acted through executive order, expressed support of proposed state policies, or signed legislation.
- **State legislatures** in eight of 13 states passed laws restricting cell phone use in schools or requiring districts to adopt cell phone restrictions.
- **State Departments of Education** in five of 13 states developed guidance, model policies, and policy considerations.

# Maryland LEA Policy Trends

- 19 districts have recently updated their cell phone policy. Others are currently reviewing or updating their policies.
- Several districts are piloting a policy in a subset of schools.
- Common language around phones being turned off and not visible
- Differentiation by grade band (e.g. cell phone use allowed at lunch and during passing periods in some high schools)
- Some districts piloting use of cell phone pouches, lockers, or “hotels”
- Some policies also address smart watches and earbuds
- Many districts are in the initial stages of implementing new or revised policies.



# Examples of Common Classroom Phone Storage Options



Cell phone “hotel”



Yondr cell phone pouch

# Policy Trends

- **Most states and MD districts** have “banned” cell phones for elementary and middle school students and allowed high school students to use cell phones during “non-instructional time” such as lunch and class transitions.
- Many states have included exceptions to their cell phone policies, such as during emergencies, to monitor a health condition, as mandated by their IEP, for non-smartphones, and at the teacher’s discretion.
- **Five states and the majority of MD districts** that have taken action came after parent or teacher surveys.

# Policy Trends

- Some states have coupled stricter cell phone policies with mental health supports and digital literacy education.
- Some states have also provided additional funding, either through grant or formula programs, to support implementation, require districts to adopt such policies, and bring in more mental and behavioral health supports to schools.
- Disentangling smartphone use and social media use
  - **FL and Montgomery Co. Schools** have restricted social media access on school Wi-Fi.
- Since research on the impact of cell phones in schools is still emerging, two states have required an evaluation of the effectiveness of these new policies and the impact they have on students' mental health.