

## S.B. 69 - School Device Revisions

# Bell to Bell

Senator Lincoln Fillmore

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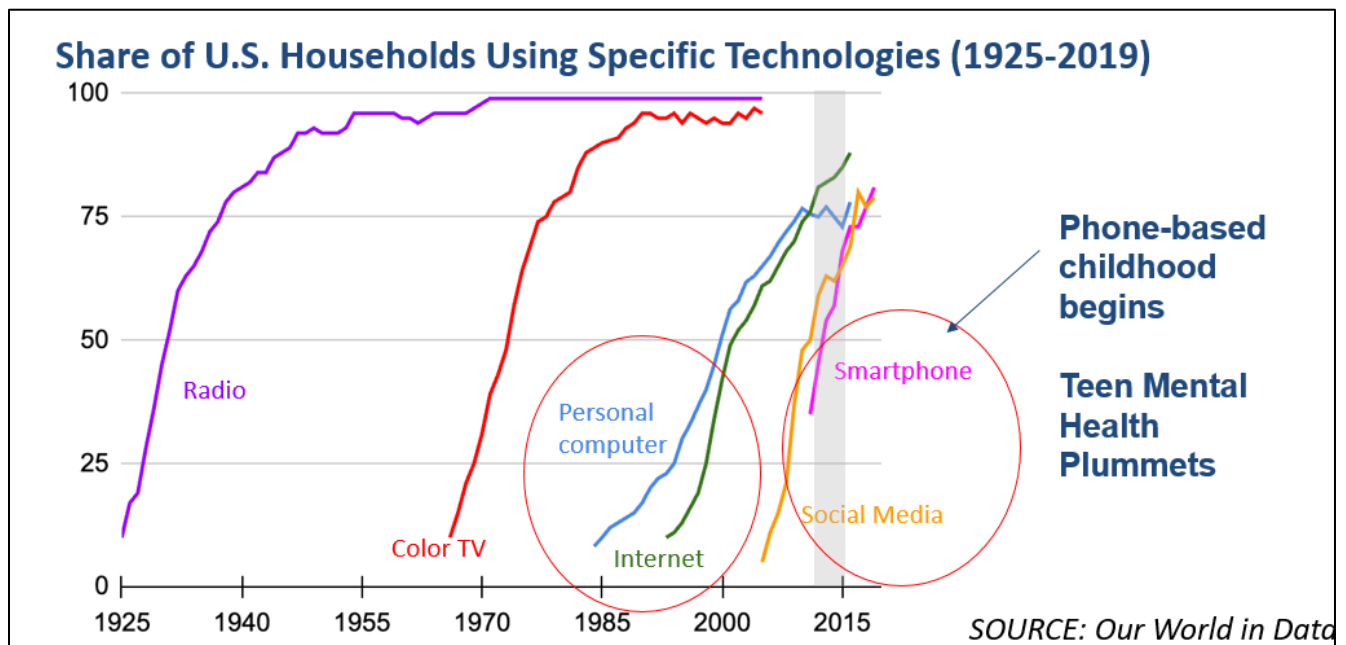
**Social Media and Cell Phones:  
How They Harm Students and What Policymakers Can Do About It  
December 2023**

*“We ended up overprotecting children in the real world while under-protecting them in the virtual world.”  
– Jonathan Haidt, social psychologist and author*

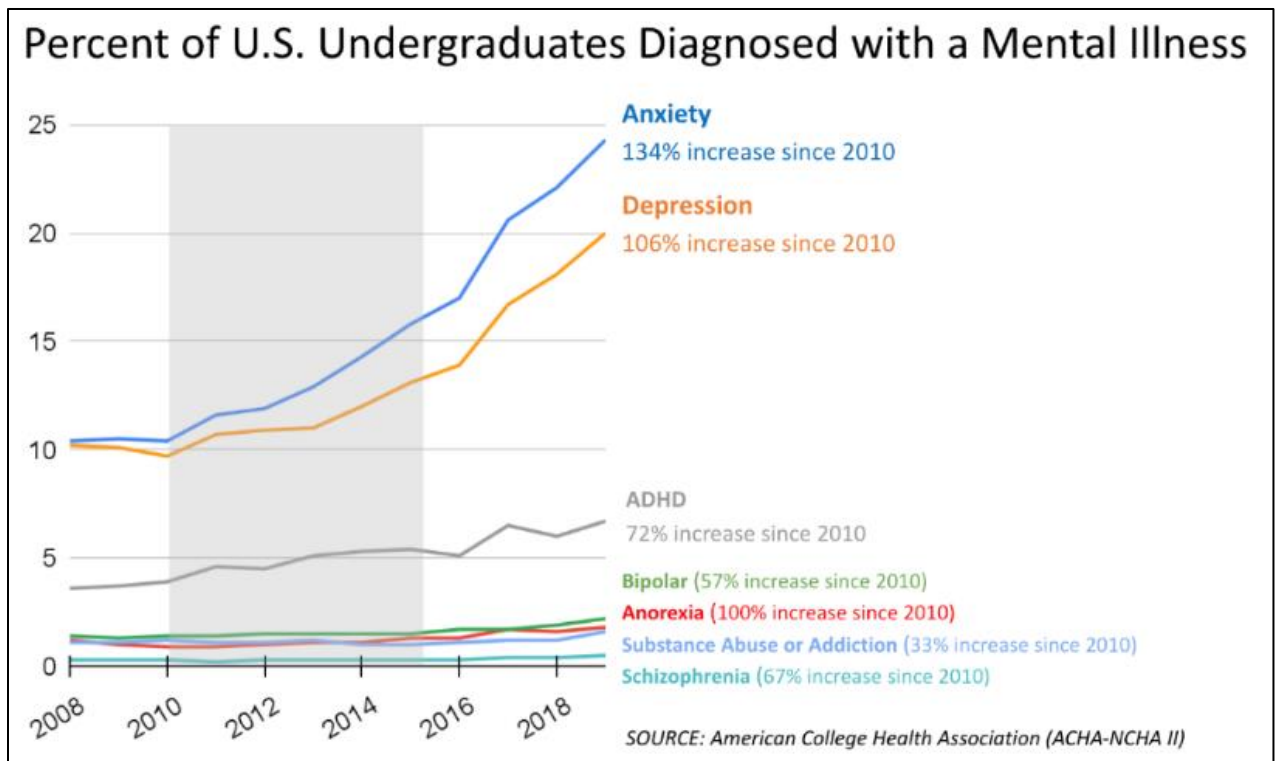
### Rising Mental Health Crisis in Young People

In today’s hyper-connected era, a concerning trend is unfolding among children, teens, and young adults. **Unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression and self-harm are on the rise, while quality time with friends and adequate sleep are diminishing.**

[Research<sup>1</sup>](#) traces these developments to the rise of the “phone-based childhood”: the years since 2010 when smartphones became ubiquitous, and **young people began accessing social media and online gaming earlier than ever before.** The pandemic exacerbated these challenges but did not initiate them.



<sup>1</sup> All charts are adapted from Jonathan Haidt’s keynote address at ExcelinEd’s 2023 National Summit (November 16, 2023). A recording of the address is available [here](#).

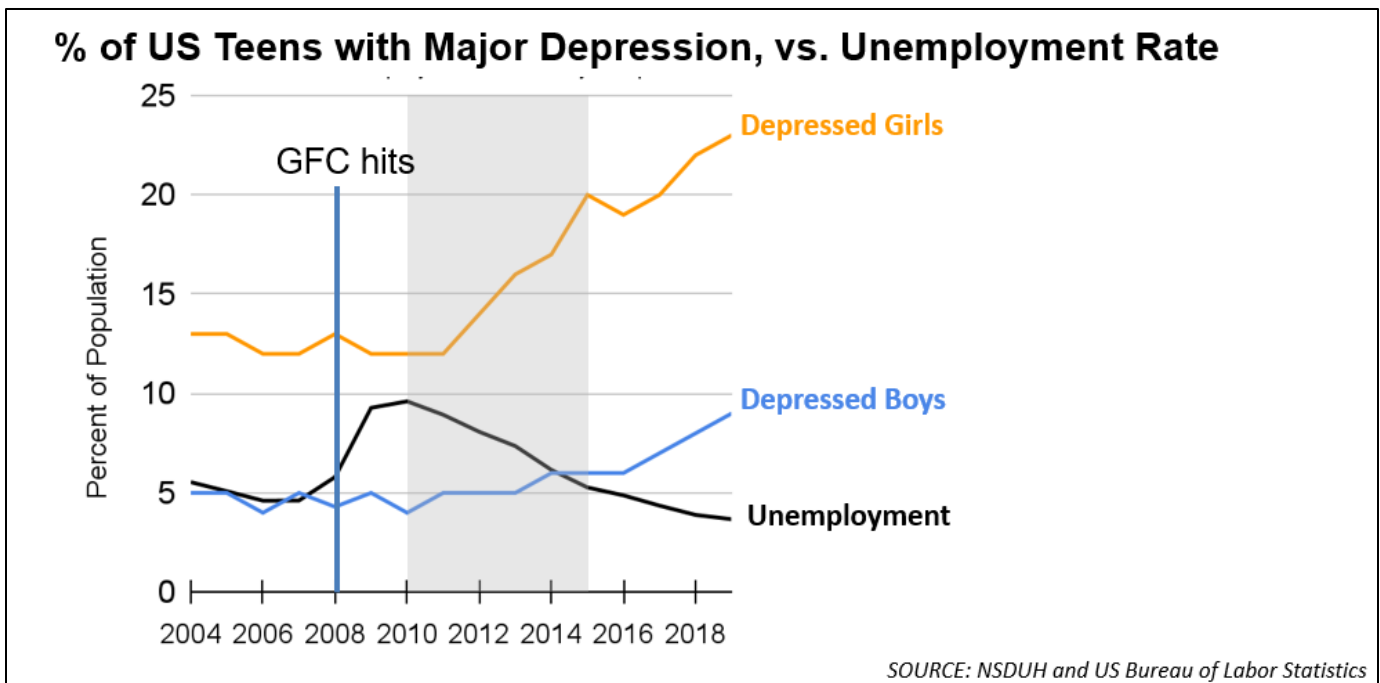


At the same time, adults have become more fearful of allowing children to experience reasonable risks in play and limited their growth in independent activities, like playing outside or walking to a friend’s house without supervision. These factors contribute to a learned helplessness that makes children [socially and physically fragile](#). **Policymakers and parents must address these issues to foster an environment that allows our youth to navigate real-world challenges and embrace the digital age responsibly.**

### The Problem in Schools

Today’s students grapple with shorter attention spans, a consequence of the rapid-paced entertainment and constant input from social media and online games. This poses a significant challenge in the classroom and **hinders the development of focus and cognitive stamina crucial for academic success**. The intentional design of online platforms amplifies this issue; algorithms on popular social media sites are crafted to keep users endlessly scrolling, potentially leading to addictive behavior.

Beyond attention spans, cell phone use in schools introduces additional complications. The constant barrage of notifications disrupts the classroom environment, impacting student learning. Evidence from [both pre- and post-pandemic](#) suggests that the decline in NAEP scores since 2012 correlates with a rise in screen time for students. Group texts, meant for communication, can morph into platforms for relational aggression (bullying). **These negative effects hit girls the hardest, with nearly 1 out of 4 teenage girls experiencing major depression.**



Even well-intentioned parents can contribute to distractions. [Online gradebooks enable remote monitoring](#) of students' academic performance, fostering a culture of constant oversight. **This undermines students' ability to take ownership of their schoolwork**, as parental intervention can inadvertently contribute to a child's sense of personal incompetence. It is essential to strike a balance that allows for parental involvement without compromising students' developing autonomy in managing their academic responsibilities.

### Solutions for States

- 1. Prohibit Cell Phones During the School Day.** [Research from the UK](#) underscores the positive impact of schoolwide cell phone restrictions on academic outcomes, particularly benefiting the most at-risk students. [Florida](#) has led the way in prohibiting cell phone use during instructional time at the state level. Florida continues to seek ways to enhance its multi-pronged approach and is a state to watch for exemplar legislation.
- 2. Support Districts in Implementing Cell Phone Restrictions.** Methods like phone lockers or [Yondr](#) pouches can provide safe storage for phones while preventing student access. [Indiana](#) and [Ohio](#) have laws requiring school districts to create and implement policies on cell phone usage during school hours.
- 3. Raise the Age at Which Minors May Access Social Media and Require Parental Knowledge and Consent.** The strongest legislation to date on this issue comes from [Utah](#). [Other states](#) continue to file and pass legislation on this matter, and Members of Congress starting to contemplate laws requiring age verification and parental consent.
- 4. Pass Reasonable Childhood Independence Laws.** These laws, popularized by the "[Let Grow](#)" movement, support parents in allowing their children opportunities to practice resilience without fear of criminal prosecution or social services investigations. These laws have passed with strong bipartisan support in Utah, Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado, Virginia, Illinois, and Connecticut.

### Community-Led Interventions

As parents become more aware of the harms of social media and cell phones, they can band together to establish collective norms without waiting for government action.

- **Delay Smartphone Introduction.** One key step is for the parents at a school or within a social circle to make a pact to wait until high school to give their children a smartphone<sup>2</sup>. The "[Wait until 8<sup>th</sup>](#)" movement is already taking off in

<sup>2</sup> Additional research and suggestions for solving the collective action problems that underlie efforts to reform social media are available from Jonathan Haidt and Zach Rausch at [Solving the Social Dilemma: Many Paths to Social Media Reform](#).

some communities, with parents waiting until their students are at least in 8<sup>th</sup> grade or age 14 to give them smartphones. By collectively embracing this norm, the commonly heard plea of “all my friends have them!” loses its persuasive power. Practical alternatives, like basic call-only cell phones and watches, exist to facilitate communication without exposing children to the pitfalls of smartphones.

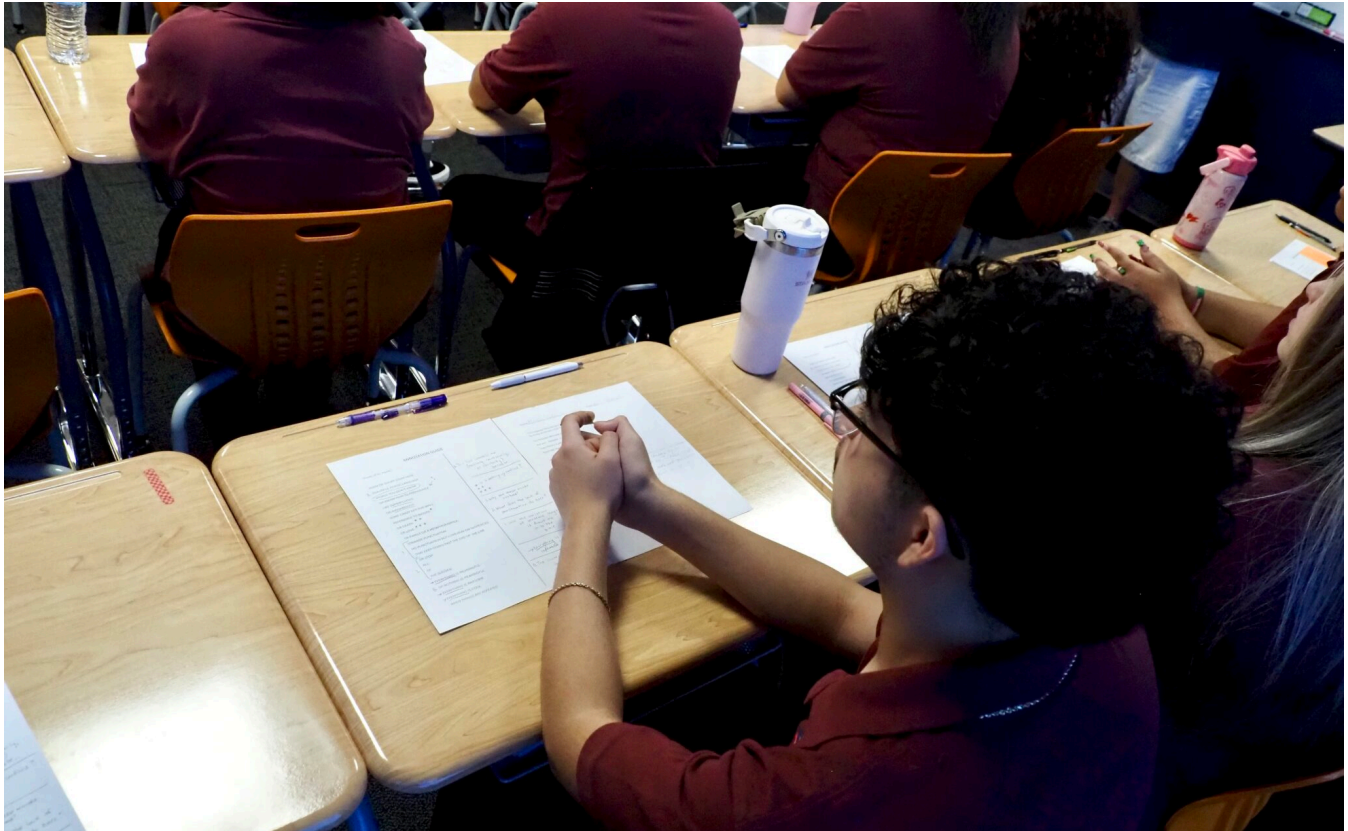
- **Parental Awareness and Monitoring of Online Activities.** In addition to delayed smartphone introduction, vigilant parental monitoring is crucial. Setting rules against access to social media before age 16 and staying informed about apps designed to conceal accounts behind innocuous icons, like calculators, helps safeguard children online. Some software even provides real-time monitoring, offering families an extra layer of control.
- **Community-Led Cell Phone Restrictions.** By working with local school board members, parents, teachers and administrators can craft and enforce policies that restrict cell phone access during instructional time, even before state-level actions. Having consistent parental support for teachers who implement these policies is vital.
- **Increased Time for Independent Play.** Parents and schools can join forces to promote non-screen playtime initiatives, such as longer recesses, keeping school playgrounds open before and after the school day. The Let Grow movement offers [more suggestions](#) as well.

By working together, we can all foster environments that prioritize child well-being and healthy development.

## Educators say Oklahoma's school cellphone ban has been a 'game changer'

Senate Bill 139 banned students from using personal devices for the entire school day

BY: **NURIA MARTINEZ-KEEL** - OCTOBER 13, 2025 5:30 AM



📷 Students sit at desks in an English language arts classroom at Dove Science Academy in Warr Acres on Aug. 19. All public schools in the state are required to ban student cellphone use for the entire school day over the 2025-26 academic year. (Photo by Nuria Martinez-Keel/Oklahoma Voice)

OKLAHOMA CITY – Robert Romines is happy to admit he was wrong.

The superintendent of Moore Public Schools didn't think the Oklahoma Legislature made the right choice when [implementing a statewide ban on student cellphones](#) in schools this year. He thought parents would be against it and teachers would spend too much time policing the rule.

"I'm all about eating crow when I have to, and they got this one right," he said.

Now nine weeks into the school year, Romines said "things have gone really, really well." Discipline incidents have significantly decreased, he said, and students are more engaged with their teachers and each other.

Students are passing footballs and playing volleyball in high school courtyards during lunch period. Junior high students are playing cards and board games.

“Those are things that we would not have seen last year and in previous years,” he said. “That’s big. I mean, that’s huge. It’s just been a really good thing.”



📷 Moore Public Schools Superintendent Robert Romines speaks at a State of the Schools event at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum on Aug. 6. (Photo by Nuria-Martinez-Keel/Oklahoma Voice)

in the state are under the same cellphone rule, so “parents can’t come back and say, ‘Well, Norman does it this way. Moore does it this way. Mustang does it this way, Edmond does it this way.’” The lack of comparison has helped with acceptance.

In Bartlesville Public Schools, cellphones had become an incessant nuisance in seventh-grade teacher Heather Davis’ classroom.

Davis, in her 32nd year of teaching, remembers when old Nokia cellphones first appeared in her students’ hands, but once personal devices started connecting to social media, “that’s when I saw the uptick in kids checking out of school and checking into their cellphones.”

“It was constant lunch detentions, calls home, sent to the office, all of that,” she said. “And I would say that probably it was a problem for about 30% to 40% of my students.”

That changed dramatically this year with the statewide ban in place. So far, Davis said she’s had to discipline only one student for breaking the rule.

Her school had attempted to crack down on cellphones in the past, but this time, students and their parents have been more willing to comply, knowing the policy comes from a state law, she said.

[Senate Bill 139](#) prohibited student use of personal electronic devices, including cellphones and smart watches, for the entire school day. The law required all public school districts to comply with the full-day ban for the 2025-26 school year. After that, each local school board can decide whether to continue with the policy or try something different.

Romines said he expects Moore to keep the policy next year, though the decision isn’t his to make alone.

He said it’s been helpful that all public schools



📷 The House and Senate authors of Oklahoma’s cellphone ban, Rep. Chad Caldwell, R-Enid, and Sen. Ally Seifried, R-Claremore, host an interim study at the state Capitol in Oklahoma City on Tuesday. (Photo by Nuria Martinez-Keel/Oklahoma Voice)

It's made a noticeable difference in her English language arts classes, she said. More students are participating, asking questions and completing their work.

"My kids are way more engaged," Davis said. "I have a lot more students who are passing at this point in the class in the school year."

Another seventh-grade teacher, Melanie Darter, said the cellphone ban has been a "game changer" at John W. Rex Charter Intermediate School in Oklahoma City.

Students at the school are required to leave their cellphones in their backpacks for the day, said Darter, who teaches science.



📷 Melanie Darter, a seventh-grade science teacher at John W. Rex Charter Intermediate School, speaks at an interim study at the state Capitol in Oklahoma City on Tuesday. (Photo by Nuria Martinez-Keel/Oklahoma Voice)

"I haven't seen one yet," Darter said while speaking at an interim study Tuesday at the state Capitol. "Every once in a while, one will ring in my class, but it's because it's in their backpack. And so, I'm like, hey, I don't even care. It's away. So, they're doing really well with that."

An author of SB 139, Sen. Ally Seifried, R-Claremore, said she hears from educators and parents multiple times a week about the impact of the cellphone ban – stories of extra books being checked out in school libraries and anecdotes of classmates showing more

togetherness.

Given the perceived success of the cellphone ban, Seifried and the law's House author, Rep. Chad Caldwell, R-Enid, are now exploring whether other technology, like Chromebooks, should be limited in schools. They didn't draw a definitive conclusion during their interim study on the topic Tuesday, but both said they want to continue the conversation.

In the meantime, Caldwell said feedback has been "really, really positive" with SB 139 in effect.

"Just the stories we've heard from our educators about the laughter and the conversation that is filling our hallways and our lunchrooms, I think that's exciting," he said. "And you take a look at increased learning opportunities and a decrease in behavioral issues, I mean, that is a true win-win. I think it's a very simple change, but it's one that's really having a profound impact on our kids."



## Success Stories

### Winchester Schools' No-Phone Policy Boosts Focus and Gains National Attention

In Winchester Public Schools, their bell-to-bell cell phone-free policy has been a transformative force for both students and teachers at the secondary level.

Students keep their phones with them, but upon

entering each classroom, they place them in a simple, cost-effective pouch hanging at the front of the classroom.

Their policy, which prohibits phone use not only during class, but also between periods and at lunch, has eliminated daily distractions and fostered greater engagement, focus, and positive social interaction. From the outset, the school division has communicated clear expectations with a consistent approach to enforcement, if needed. This consistent approach proved essential to their seamless implementation—so much so that some parents even requested that schools hold onto phones longer to reinforce the policy. Since adopting the policy in June 2024, proactive and frequent communication with families ensured full community support. There has been no pushback from students or parents throughout the year. The success of their initiative even garnered national attention, being featured on the Today Show, as a model for how schools can reclaim learning environments in the digital age.



### Poquoson Schools Sees Success with Cell Phone-Free Policy

Following the state-mandated launch of cell phone-free learning environments at the start of the new year, Poquoson City Public Schools has experienced a smooth and largely successful implementation across all schools. As with any new initiative, there have been challenges, especially as students adjusted to new habits, but their intentional and inclusive rollout helped pave the way for early success.

Poquoson began implementation with a focus on community collaboration, holding multiple committee meetings and gathering input from parents and staff. The division had a marketing package with images and consistent language from which each school pulled materials to create a communication plan tailored to its students' age group, ensuring clear, cohesive messaging. Before going on winter break, middle and high school teachers shared presentations developed by their administrators about the upcoming change with students and encouraged dialogue with the chance to ask questions. This helped students not only anticipate how they will be impacted but they could also begin to understand the reason *why* and *how* it would help them academically and socially. Additionally, a dedicated electronic device and cell phone-free website has supported families by offering information, FAQs, and resources.

While some students initially found the transition difficult, others quickly recognized the benefits. Several shared that it helped them better focus during lessons and engage more with peers.

Dr. Irene Winchester, principal of Poquoson High School, shared, “The impact went further than just an increase in student engagement in the classroom. We also saw a positive change in how our students socialize. We see students talking more in between class periods and they are more engaged during their lunch time. Change isn't always easy, but our community has been very supportive and we are glad to see the positive impact in our building.”

As the division continues forward, they remain committed to refining their approach and keeping communication open with all stakeholders. Ultimately, their goal is to create learning environments where students can be fully present, engaged, and connected. They are happy to see that vision already coming to life.

## **Montgomery County Cell Phone Policy Improves Student Success, Well-Being and Confidence**

In June 2024, the Montgomery County School Board passed a policy preventing student cell phone use during the school day. This decision has significantly boosted their students' success and overall well-being. Teachers report better classroom engagement and say students are more focused throughout school.

According to Christiansburg Middle School Principal Danny Knott, “The cell phone policy has had a very positive impact on our students. Students are talking to each other more in the hall and cafeteria. Some students have even reported how much better they feel now that they are not tied to their cell phones so much.”

Staff members have seen noticeable improvements in their students' attitudes, confidence, and self-esteem. We're pleased by the success of our cell phone policy. "We're excited about the success of this program, and we're encouraged by the response of our students and staff to commit to being cell phone free throughout the day," said Superintendent Bernard F. Bragen.

## **Middlesex Schools Reclaim Connection with Cell Phone-Free Policy**

In the summer of 2024, Middlesex County Public Schools began discussing the need to limit or eliminate cell phone use during the school day. While their initial considerations included allowing phones during transitions and lunch—particularly at the high school level—they ultimately recognized that even limited access would distract from their goal: creating a more focused, engaging, and connected learning environment.

To guide their implementation, they surveyed families, staff, and the community. The feedback was overwhelmingly supportive, with one consistent concern: parents wanted to ensure their children could communicate with them when needed. They listened. With this feedback in hand, they refined both their

practice and communication strategy and transparently communicated the rationale behind the change to their stakeholders.

Middlesex leadership addressed communication—especially for student athletes and families managing after-school logistics. They ensured that systems were in place so that families would be informed of schedule changes, and they designated supervised spaces for students to contact their parents when needed.

Middlesex County Public Schools' policy is clear: phones must be off and away, but may be kept in backpacks or purses. They began the year with daily reminders, and the transition was remarkably smooth. Not only are classrooms more engaging, but administrators report fewer disciplinary issues tied to phone misuse. Their lunchrooms, once quiet and screen-filled, are now full of laughter, conversation, and connection. It is a return to authentic social interaction and a powerful reminder of what school is meant to be. The journey to a cell phone-free school day was one of thoughtful planning, collaboration, and commitment to our students' well-being.

# Teachers Say Alabama's Phone Ban Made Classrooms 'Drastically Better'

Alabama's FOCUS Act bars students from using most personal devices at school. Some teachers say it was the best educational change in years or decades, and some parents say the change was easier than they anticipated.

August 28, 2025 •  
Rebecca Griesbach, al.com

(TNS) — Alabama teachers say back-to-school season is off to its smoothest start in years.

The reason? No more cellphones.

“It’s the best start to a school year I have had in over a decade,” Amy Melissa Hyde commented in response to an [AL.com question on Facebook](#). “Students have even begrudgingly admitted that they are more productive and have less anxiety. It’s been wonderful. Anyone complaining about this hasn’t spent time in a classroom lately.”

Alabama’s [new FOCUS Act prohibits most students from using cellphones](#), smart watches and other electronic communication devices during the school day. State leaders say the goal is to keep students more engaged in class, cut down on behavior problems and promote healthy Internet use.

Students will only be able to use devices at school if:

- They are eligible for accommodations through an individualized education, health or 504 plan
- The device is needed for learning purposes and they are under the supervision of school staff
- There is an emergency threatening the life or safety of the student or another person

The new state law has [sparked a number of questions](#) from parents about safety and compliance. But in just a few short weeks, many educators say they’re already seeing a positive impact.

“Today, all of my students — 100 percent of them — took notes in my class, did

their assignments, asked for help when they got stuck and turned it in,” Tuscaloosa County High history teacher Jonathan Buchwalter said in a [viral TikTok video](#), his face frozen in shock. “And then when they were done, they ... talked to each other.”

“Was it this easy the whole time?” he asked. “I’ve been pulling my hair out for like, eight years.”

## **WHAT ARE PARENTS, TEACHERS SAYING ABOUT THE FOCUS ACT?**

[AL.com](#) asked Facebook readers how the bans are playing out in their schools. We received more than 400 comments.

Several educators said they’ve noticed more students interacting in class and in the hallways.

“I’ve actually enjoyed watching the students outside at break,” said Kathy Green. “They are interacting, talking, laughing, with no heads looking down at phones.”

“The classroom culture is drastically better,” added Patrick Harris. “Best educational move in decades.”

“The best thing to happen to education in our state in years!” said Nikki Gaither Miñoso. “Kids are paying attention and engaged, scores are up, and I want to go to work every single day.”

Rules differ from school to school, but every district must have a baseline policy that spells out how the ban will be enforced. In some districts, punishments range from in-school suspension to [a trip to the local district attorney’s office](#), according to recent reporting from Alabama Daily News.

Some teachers are still figuring out how to help their students move away from common classroom habits — like using their phones to take photos of slides or sign up for school reminders. Others hope to see schools incentivize a phone-free classroom, rather than take a punitive approach.

“It takes adjustments from all sides,” said Richard Hall.

Some students have also figured out workarounds, using their school emails to communicate with friends and parents. Others have found more creative ways to

test the limits of the law.

“I had a student break out a portable CD player and a book of CDs he got from his pops,” said Reese Hogue. “I had a good old belly laugh (then told him to put it up ... it’s a personal electronic device too.)”

State Superintendent Eric Mackey said the state will roll out a larger survey in September to see exactly how schools are complying.

“We’re living in a digital, technological world,” he told reporters after an August board meeting. “They’re definitely still going to be using screens at school, but as much as we can, we need to kind of keep those things away from students as far as their downtime during school.”

School officials say that if an emergency occurs, families should first look for any messaging from the district and law enforcement. If needed, parents can contact the school office or send an email to the student’s school email address. Some districts are adjusting emergency procedures to ensure parents are more quickly alerted in the event of a threat.

“Honestly it hasn’t been as hard as I expected,” said Wendy Wheeler Smith. “Still don’t like that I can’t reach them in real time, but I did it at that age and we are surviving.”

But still, some news just can’t wait until the final bell.

“My daughter did not find out about Taylor Swift’s engagement until after school,” said Renie Porter Moss. “We are currently seeking therapy.”

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