



# Implementing Virginia's Cell Phone Policy

## Executive Summary

Prior to Virginia's January 1, 2025, cell phone policy implementation, we partnered with a school district to understand its impact. In December 2024, we surveyed the district's middle and high school teachers to collect baseline data and query teachers' views of the new policy. By large margins, teachers agree that cell phones are a distraction in class and support the new policy. Two schools had already implemented a version of the new cell phone policy. Unsurprisingly, teachers at these schools reported feeling more comfortable and prepared to implement the new cell phone ban from the state. Teachers wanted clear guidelines for implementation and consistent enforcement of consequences for students who violated the policy.

### Main Findings

- 76.1% of teachers believe cell phones are a distraction in the classroom
- 84.4% of teachers support the new cell phone policy
- Teachers want consistent implementation

### Policy Actions / Options

- Provide explicit guidelines regarding the consequences of violating the cell phone policy.
- Consistently enforce the new policy.
- Provide consistent communication regarding the importance of the policy

## Cell Phones in Schools

States across the country have begun banning cell phones in the classroom to improve student engagement, academics, and mental health. On July 9, 2024, Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin issued an executive order establishing cell phone-free education in Virginia's K-12 public schools<sup>1</sup>. The policy mandated that each school division in the state develop a policy that banned cell phones in schools from bell to bell.

Youth and adolescent mental health were trending downward before the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> However, these trends were exacerbated during this time.<sup>3</sup> Research from NYU social psychologist Jonathan Haidt suggests that unlimited access to cell phones and social media is at least partly to blame.<sup>4</sup>

Early evidence from places like Indiana<sup>5</sup> and New York City<sup>6</sup> suggests that cell phone bans work. Student academics improved to pre-pandemic levels, and student engagement and mental health also improved. Though the policies were limited to in-school time, a charter school in New York City found that after-

school extracurricular activity and high school sports attendance were also up 50%.

## What We've Learned

We partnered with a school division in Virginia to investigate the effectiveness of the new cell phone policy. As a first step in our research, we invited every middle and high school teacher in the school division to complete a survey to collect baseline data. We administered the survey in December 2024 and asked teachers about their views on the new policy, including any concerns they may have about it. Here is what we have learned so far.

**76.1% of teachers agree that cell phones are a distraction in the classroom.**

**84.4% of teachers support the cell phone ban.**

Teachers agree about the underlying problem – more than three-fourths of the teachers we surveyed believed cell phones were a distraction in the classroom. Teachers also overwhelmingly support the cell phone policy that is about to go into effect.

**Most teachers see the need for the policy and approve their school division’s plan to address it.**

Teachers expressed worries about insufficient backing from school leaders, which could lead to difficulties enforcing the policy. A middle school teacher shared, “Weak administrative support for enforcement of the cell phone policy will only lead to more issues and additional work for teachers.” Teachers also expressed concerns about implementing the policy, especially concerning communication and consequences.

NO CELL PHONES Provide explicit guidelines regarding the consequences of violating the cell phone policy.

NO CELL PHONES Provide a clear disciplinary framework that is consistently applied.

NO CELL PHONES Provide ongoing communication about the importance of the policy.

NO CELL PHONES Provide a unified support system from all adults to help enforce the policy.

Teachers support the plan now, but that support could fade if they do not feel they are given the tools to adequately and fairly implement the policy. With a unified front, the cell phone policy has the potential to transform classrooms into more focused, engaged, and academically productive environments. The extent to which this happens will hinge on its implementation.

**Author Information**

**David T. Marshall**  
Auburn University  
[davidmarshall@auburn.edu](mailto:davidmarshall@auburn.edu)  
[@marshalldavidt2](https://twitter.com/marshalldavidt2)

**Tim Pressley**  
Christopher Newport University  
[timothy.pressley@cnu.edu](mailto:timothy.pressley@cnu.edu)  
[@tpress87](https://twitter.com/tpress87)

<sup>1</sup> Youngkin, G. (2024, July 9). Governor Glenn Youngkin issues executive order establishing cell phone-free education in Virginia’s K-12 public schools. <https://www.governor.virginia.gov/newsroom/news-releases/2024/july/name-1030522-en.html>

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024). Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report. <https://www.cdc.gov/yrb/dstr/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> Marshall, D. T. (2024). COVID-19 and school closures: A narrative review of pediatric mental health impacts. *Journal of School Choice*, 18(1), 67-76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2023.2201734>

<sup>4</sup> Haidt, J. (2024). *The anxious generation: How the great rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness*. Penguin Press.

<sup>5</sup> Mahone, O., Petrilli, M. J., Tyner, A., & Griffith, D. (2024, August 14). *The nuts and bolts of banning cellphones in schools, with Othinie Mahone*. Thomas B. Fordham Institute. <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/resources/933-nuts-and-bolts-banning-cellphones-schools-othinie-mahone>

<sup>6</sup> Fox, E. (2024, July 17). *NY students banned from using phones first hated, then loved it*. KIPP Public Schools. <https://www.kipp.org/news/ny-students-banned-from-using-phones-first-hated-then-loved-it/>