



# Student Cell Phone and Electronic Device Policy

## I. PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) mission is to ensure that students reach their full potential through rigorous and joyful learning experiences provided in a nurturing environment. A critical step toward this mission is making sure that instructional time is focused on learning and that the school environment fosters opportunities for students to build healthy relationships with their teachers and peers. **To support these goals, students' access to cell phones and personal electronic communication devices will be restricted during the school day.**

To prepare students for life after school, educators must continue to utilize technology with their students as part of rigorous learning experiences. At the same time, stakeholders across DCPS have expressed concern over the harmful effects of widespread cell phone possession and significant social media usage by young children and adolescents. Given these concerns, the Deputy Mayor for Education for Washington, DC has encouraged public schools to establish clear cell phone policies with the goals of student safety and academic achievement.<sup>1</sup>

This policy aims to support student achievement by reducing distractions during instructional time and improving student focus. Cell phone use in the classroom can significantly decrease academic success by causing distractions that hinder students' ability to focus and retain information. Studies indicate that students who use their phones during class learn less and earn lower grades.<sup>2</sup> Research has also shown that allowing phones in the classroom negatively impacts both test scores and long-term learning retention.<sup>3</sup> The studies found that students who used phones for non-academic purposes during instruction performed worse in exams and exhibited reduced retention of the material. Moreover, the mere presence of phones disrupted the overall learning environment, affecting even those students who did not use them. This impact on student learning extends beyond mere distraction; substantial phone and social media use can have a lasting and detrimental impact on adolescents' ability to focus and engage in their studies.

This policy also aims to support student health, well-being, and safety by reducing cyberbullying and in-person conflict stemming from online interactions and decreasing the risk of distraction during emergencies. Restricting cell phone access can decrease the incidence of cyberbullying during school hours and make it less likely that students engage in harmful online behavior while at school. It can also

---

<sup>1</sup> Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, *Strengthening School Safety in Washington, DC*, (March 2024), available at [dme.dc.gov/safetyreport](https://dme.dc.gov/safetyreport).

<sup>2</sup> Jeff H. Kuznekoff & Scott Titsworth, *The Impact of Mobile Phone Usage on Student Learning*, Communication Education, 62(3), 233-252 (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Emily Boudreau, *Weighing the Costs and Benefits of Cellphones in Schools*, Harvard GSE News (Aug. 2022), available at [gse.harvard.edu/ideas/news/22/08/weighing-costs-and-benefits-cellphones-schools](https://gse.harvard.edu/ideas/news/22/08/weighing-costs-and-benefits-cellphones-schools); Arnold L. Glass & Mengxue Kang, *Dividing Attention in the Classroom Reduces Exam Performance*, Educational Psychology, 39(3), 395-408 (2018).

help to ensure that students are focused on the vital directions from teachers and staff in the event of an emergency and during practice drills.

This policy applies to all DCPS students in grades Pre-K through 12 during the school day while on DCPS school grounds beginning in school year 2025-26.

This policy rescinds and supersedes all previous policies, memoranda, and guidance promulgated by DCPS on this subject matter.

## II. AUTHORITY AND APPLICABLE LAW<sup>4</sup>

Source	Citation
Federal Law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 20 U.S.C. § 1400 <i>et seq.</i></li> <li>- Gun-Free Schools Act, 20 U.S.C. § 7961</li> <li>- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended (Section 504), 29 U.S.C. § 701 <i>et seq.</i></li> <li>- Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA), 42 U.S.C. § 1320d <i>et seq.</i></li> <li>- Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as amended (ADA), 42 U.S.C. § 12131 <i>et seq.</i></li> </ul>
Federal Regulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ADA implementing regulations, 28 C.F.R. Part 35 (ADA)</li> <li>- Section 504 implementing regulations, 34 C.F.R. Part 104 (Section 504)</li> <li>- IDEA implementing regulations, 34 C.F.R. § 300 <i>et seq.</i></li> <li>- HIPPA implementing regulations, 45 C.F.R. Parts 160 and 164</li> </ul>
District of Columbia Law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expulsion of Students Who Bring Weapons into Public Schools Act of 1996, D.C. Official Code § 38-231 <i>et seq.</i></li> <li>- Student Fair Access to School Amendment Act of 2018, D.C. Official Code § 38-236.01 <i>et seq.</i></li> <li>- Pre-K Student Discipline Amendment Act of 2015, D.C. Official Code § 38-273.01</li> </ul>
District of Columbia Municipal Regulations	DC Public Schools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 5-B DCMR § 2500 <i>et seq.</i> – Student Discipline (Chapter 25)</li> </ul>

## III. KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Assistive Technology (AT)** is an umbrella term that includes devices, products, software, and other systems of support that increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities. AT in an educational setting includes low to high tech supports that increase student access to the curriculum and learning environment.

<sup>4</sup> Nothing in this policy will supersede federal, state, or local law.

**Bell-to-Bell** means from when the first bell rings at the start of the school day to begin instructional time until the dismissal bell rings at the end of the academic school day, including lunch and time in between class periods. Bell-to-bell time does *not* include activities or programming before or after the DCPS school day, such as afterschool programs, or if students leave school grounds during the day, such as off-campus lunch.

**Cell Phone** means a personal device capable of making calls, transmitting pictures or video, or sending or receiving messages through electronic means. The definition of cell phone is inclusive of a non-smart phone that can make phone calls or send text messages, a smart phone that encompasses the above features, and other future personal electronic communication devices with the abovementioned communicative characteristics.

**Instructional Time** means any structured or unstructured learning experiences during the bell-to-bell school day.

**Personal Electronic Communication Device** means a personal device capable of connecting to the internet through a cellular or Wi-Fi network or connecting with another phone or similar device. Personal electronic communication devices may include some wearable devices such as smart watches or Bluetooth headphones, laptops, tablets, and other future personal electronic communication devices with the abovementioned characteristics.

**School Day** means the time during which students are in attendance at school, from bell-to-bell, and on school grounds.

**School Staff** means any adult who works full or part time in a DCPS school building, including but not limited to teachers, administrators, security officers, and substitute teachers.

**Stored** means a cell phone or personal electronic communication device is not accessible because it is not being carried on the student's person, including not in the student's pocket. Schools are permitted to determine the appropriate storage options for their students, building, and community and may choose to define "stored" as including, but not limited to, in the student's backpack, in the student's locker, in a locked pouch, or in a designated place in the classroom or school building.

## IV. REQUIREMENTS

### A. Student Cell Phones and Personal Electronic Communication Devices

DCPS students are prohibited from accessing a cell phone or personal electronic communication device during the bell-to-bell school day when on DCPS school grounds, except for the permitted uses described below. If a cell phone or personal electronic communication device is brought to school, it must be stored and turned off during the bell-to-bell school day while on DCPS school grounds.

Each school must establish a system for cell phone and personal electronic communication device storage during the bell-to-bell school day and implement it in a consistent manner for its students. For instance, schools may require students to store their powered-off phones and devices in a backpack or locker, place them in centralized lockers or pouches as they enter the school building, or turn them in to a bin or basket as they enter the classroom. Regardless of a school's storage system, students are

prohibited from accessing cell phones and personal electronic communication devices during lunch and transitions in between class periods during the bell-to-bell school day while students are on school grounds.

If a school grants permission for a student to access a cell phone or personal electronic communication device for one of the permitted uses below, teachers and staff may require such devices to be turned off and stored during assessments. In addition, if a student has been granted an exception based on one of the specific permitted uses below but consistently misuses the device, teachers and staff may reevaluate the student's access and propose reasonable alternatives.

When developing their cell phone and personal electronic communication device storage system, schools should consider staff capacity and building layout. Each school must establish clear roles and responsibilities for implementation of their storage system, including enforcement. Each school must also establish a clear set of consequences for students who fail to comply with their storage system. Consequences must be outlined in writing and align with the DCPS *Safe and Positive Schools Policy*.<sup>5</sup>

Each school must incorporate age-appropriate, turnkey lessons<sup>6</sup> on digital citizenship and safe online behaviors for students in grades K – 12.

### **B. Permitted Device Uses**

#### **1. School-Issued Devices Used for Educational Purposes**

School staff may continue to direct and permit students to utilize school-issued devices for educational purposes during instructional time. School staff also have discretion to permit students to use cell phones and/or personal electronic communication devices for educational purposes during instructional time (e.g., to support multilingual students in accessing core content).

#### **2. Extenuating Circumstances**

School staff may grant exceptions for students to access their cell phone or personal electronic communication device in extenuating circumstances (e.g., students who are parents of young children, students with scheduled court proceedings).

#### **3. Students with IEPs, 504 Plans, LEP Plans, or Individualized Health Care Plans**

If a student with a documented disability, medical need, and/or language barrier is determined to require assistive technology to ensure the provision of a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), the relevant Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, Limited English Proficiency (LEP) plan team, and/or Section 504 teams should collaborate to consider the appropriate technology to support the student's learning needs, access needs, and/or medical needs and should provide educational and/or assistive technology supports as appropriate.

---

<sup>5</sup> Available at [dcps.dc.gov/publication/safe-and-positive-schools-policy](https://dcps.dc.gov/publication/safe-and-positive-schools-policy).

<sup>6</sup> Sample lessons and other resources for families are available on the [DCPS Digital Citizenship Family Portal](#).

When determining appropriate assistive technology, consideration should be given to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPPA) in all efforts to protect student privacy.

While DCPS provides necessary educational and/or assistive technology supports in most cases as outlined above, some documented medical needs may require an exception for personal devices. For example, if a student with a documented chronic medical condition (e.g., diabetes) utilizes an FDA-approved personal cell phone application and/or device to manage their chronic medical condition, they may request access to their personal device during the bell-to-bell school day. In these cases, school leadership and school health suite staff should collaborate with the student, their physician, and their parent(s)/guardian(s) to gather documentation of the need and create a plan for appropriate and discreet access to the personal device.

### C. Field Trips

School staff may determine the appropriate restrictions on student use of cell phones and personal electronic communication devices during off-campus field trips and comparable activities and may permit their use if appropriate. Schools should consider the nature, location, and duration of the field trip in making these determinations and should communicate these expectations to students and/or parents/guardians before the trip.

### D. Communications

#### 1. Communications from Students to Families

Students *must* use school-based communication tools and methods (e.g., phones in the main school office, their classroom, or other centralized location) to communicate non-emergency needs with parents and/or caregivers.

#### 2. Communications from Families to Students

Parents *should* use school-based communication tools and channels to communicate family-based emergencies (e.g., seriously ill family member) and non-emergencies (e.g., forgotten lunch, change in pickup time) during the bell-to-bell school day.

#### 3. Communications from Educators to Students

School staff and all co-curricular and extra-curricular sponsors *must* use school-based communication tools and channels for sharing activity and athletic scheduling information with students during the bell-to-bell school day.

#### 4. Communications During Emergency Situations

DCPS is committed to communicating with families during emergency situations at schools and will use school-based communication tools and platforms to communicate necessary updates with families. During school-based emergencies, families should refrain from contacting their student directly as student safety is best supported when they can give their complete attention to the important instructions provided by school staff.

### 5. Annual Notification of DCPS Policy and School Procedures

DCPS will post the *Student Cell Phone and Electronic Device Policy* and translated copies on the DCPS policy website<sup>7</sup> at least fifteen (15) days prior to the start of each school year. Schools will share information on their school-specific cell phone and personal electronic communication device storage system with the community in the student/family handbook and/or school website in accessible languages. Schools are also encouraged to highlight their school-specific approach in additional communications (e.g., orientation sessions, back-to-school night presentations, and principal newsletters).

### E. Privacy of Personal Technological Devices

In accordance with DC law<sup>8</sup> and the DCPS *Student and Staff Technology and Network Acceptable Use Policy*,<sup>9</sup> DCPS staff may search a student's personal technological device or personal media account or compel a student to produce data accessible from the student's personal technological device or personal media account under specific instances of an imminent threat to life or safety or other violations of DCPS policy. For additional information, please see the *Student and Staff Technology and Network Acceptable Use Policy*.<sup>10</sup>

### F. Liability for Student Devices

DCPS and its staff do not assume responsibility for students' personal cell phones or personal electronic communication devices if they are brought to school grounds. DCPS is not responsible for loss, damage, and/or theft of students' personal cell phones or personal electronic communication devices if they are brought to school grounds.

## V. POLICY IMPLEMENTATION REQUIREMENTS

All DCPS employees are required to comply with the requirements set forth in this policy. Questions or concerns regarding the *Student Cell Phone and Electronic Device Policy* should be directed to the SEAD Team at [dcps.sead@k12.dc.gov](mailto:dcps.sead@k12.dc.gov). Implementation support resources for this policy will be shared with school leaders in Summer 2025, prior to the policy taking effect at the start of school year 2025-26.

DCPS is committed to serving every student with equity, excellence, transparency, and accountability. For any concerns about this policy or to report violations of it, contact the Office of Integrity by completing the Online Referral Form<sup>11</sup> or sending an email to [dcps.cio@k12.dc.gov](mailto:dcps.cio@k12.dc.gov).

---

<sup>7</sup> Available at [dc.gov/page/dcps-policies](https://dc.gov/page/dcps-policies).

<sup>8</sup> D.C Official Code § 38-831.04.

<sup>9</sup> Available at [dcps.dc.gov/publication/student-and-staff-technology-and-network-acceptable-use-policy](https://dcps.dc.gov/publication/student-and-staff-technology-and-network-acceptable-use-policy).

<sup>10</sup> Available at [dcps.dc.gov/publication/student-and-staff-technology-and-network-acceptable-use-policy](https://dcps.dc.gov/publication/student-and-staff-technology-and-network-acceptable-use-policy).

<sup>11</sup> Available at [dcps.dc.gov/page/office-integrity](https://dcps.dc.gov/page/office-integrity).