



# Dialing Into Compliance: Developing and Implementing a New Cell Phone Policy

2025 NSPRA Gold Medallion Award Entry  
Special Communication Project/Campaign

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Communication Staff of six  
K-12 Public School District  
21,000+ students / 3,000+ staff  
33 schools



**BEAUFORT COUNTY  
SCHOOL DISTRICT**



# Synopsis

At a joint School Improvement Council (SIC) Board of Education (BOE) Meeting in March 2024, SIC members raised concerns regarding the impact of student cellphone usage. Upon subsequent BOE discussions on the topic, they directed Beaufort County School District (BCSD) Superintendent Dr. Frank Rodriguez to explore possible revisions to the current administrative regulation surrounding the use of electronic communications devices in our schools.

BCSD researched, gathered feedback, and reviewed the current cell phone use policy. In May 2024, BCSD launched a community survey on cell phone use in schools, receiving over 2,000 responses from parents, staff, community members, and students. Meanwhile, the Deputy Superintendent formed a committee to review the existing policy, research cell phone usage effects, and study other districts' policies. On June 25, 2024, the committee presented its findings to the BOE, leading BCSD to restrict cell phone use for all grade levels, with the exception of limited use during lunch in the high schools.

This groundwork allowed BCSD to proactively prepare and implement our new cell phone policy on the first day of school, August 9, 2024, while we waited for the South Carolina Department of Education's (SCDE) guidance as legislators in Columbia debated the issue. On June 27, 2024, the SCDE issued a memo outlining budget Proviso 1.103, requiring districts to adopt a policy prohibiting student access to personal electronic devices during the school day to receive state funding.

In September 2024, SCDE introduced "Free to Focus SC," providing definitive guidance on the proviso and requiring districts to eliminate limited-use allowances. Schools had until January 2025 to comply. In October, Dr. Rodriguez met with student advisory councils across six high schools and the CTE center to explain the state's mandate and gather input on implementing changes. With two months until the January deadline, BCSD relaunched a campaign to inform staff, parents, and students of the policy change from allowing high school students limited cell phone use to complying with the SCDE's mandate prohibiting cell phone use.

# Research

The twelve-person Cell Phone Policy Committee (Committee) conducted qualitative research by analyzing district-level as well as state and national data.

At the district level, the Committee reviewed the existing cell phone policy, Administrative Regulation SS-27, and the Discipline Plan and Handbook. The Committee also reviewed policies from other school districts to identify best practices.

On a broader scale, the Committee researched state and national studies on the effects of student cell phone use on academic performance and mental health. This comprehensive review provided valuable insights to guide policy revisions that align with both local needs and broader educational trends.

The Committee conducted a survey through BCSD Connected, inviting parents, families, staff, students, and the broader community to share their perspectives. Principals also completed a separate survey to provide insight into cell phone use within their schools.

2,300 participants responded, with 55% being parents or guardians. The survey results showed that 73.6% of all respondents believe cell phone use should be limited in school. 84.6% of participants agreed that cell phones in schools are a distraction. Additionally, 49.4% of respondents supported limiting cell phone access in classrooms while allowing usage during designated times in specific areas.

Among Principals surveyed, 70% agreed that cell phones should not be accessible in school and 48% reported that cell phone use was a problem within their schools. These findings provided critical insights into stakeholder opinions, guiding the committee in shaping a balanced and effective policy.

“ Unfortunately, cell phones are like pacifiers - students have grown up with them and during COVID it became the norm to have it 24/7. I think it is a comfort thing. When I was teaching, if I said you must put it in your bag, several students practically could not function. If you allowed it to be on the desk face down you could see they were more comfortable and would periodically grab it. - parent survey respondent

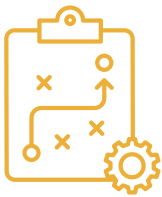
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# Planning



## Goals

1. To address cell phone use in the classroom, as brought forth by SIC members.
2. To engage and inform families, students, staff, and the community of the change in cell phone policy.

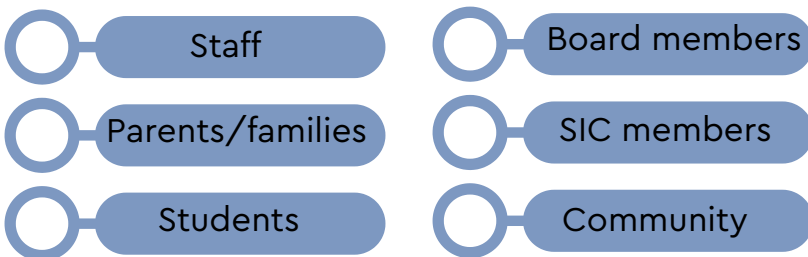


## Strategies

- Stakeholder engagement and education (students, staff, parents/families)
- Consistent messaging
- Internal/external communication
- Qualitative and quantitative research



## Audiences



## Messaging

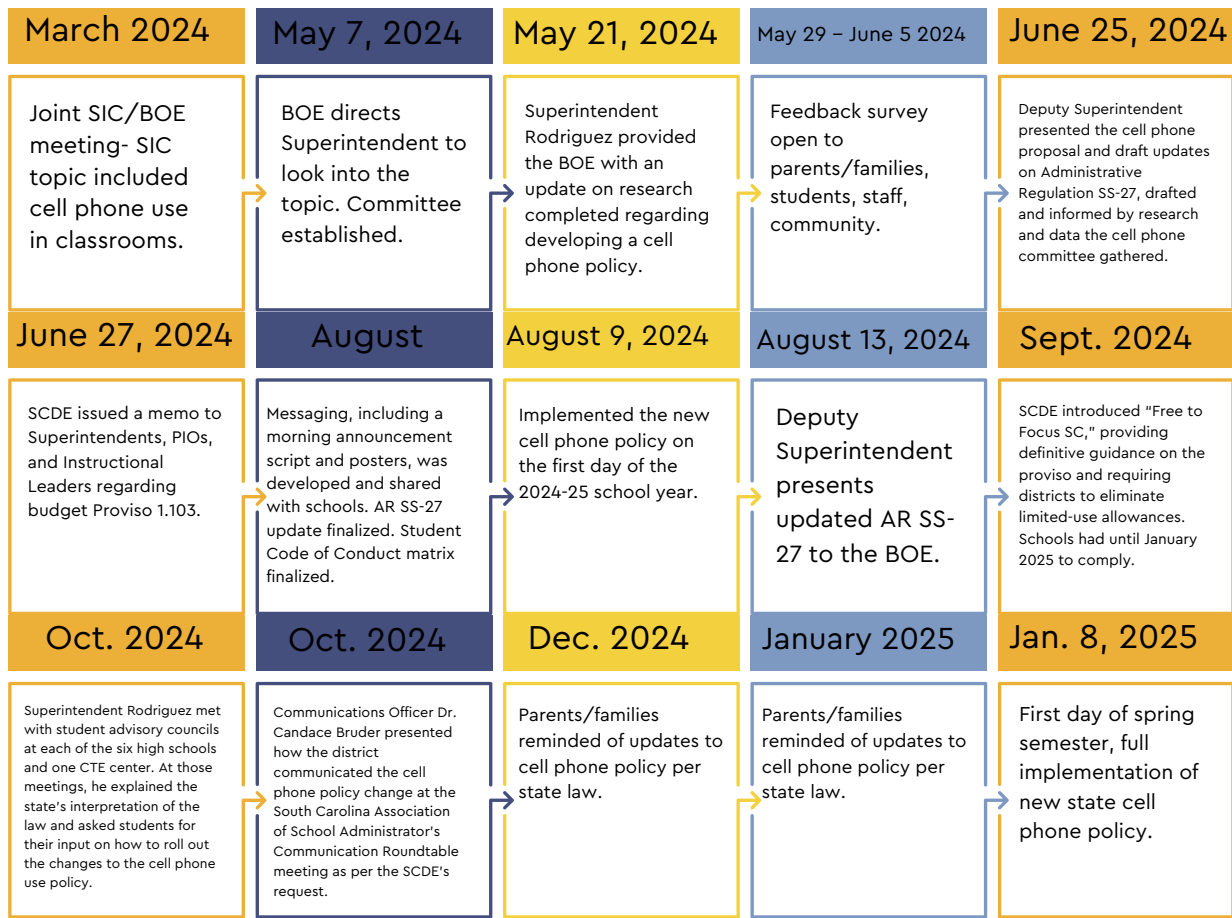


## Objectives

- To ensure our families, students, staff, and community are actively involved in shaping a well-received cell phone policy, we aim to gather at least 1,000 survey responses from key stakeholders.
- Implement a revised cell phone policy and distribute it to all teachers and students by August 2024 and January 2025.
- Publish the updated policy on school websites by January 2025.
- Send at least four parent notifications (emails, phone calls, and school newsletters) about the new policy by January 2025.
- Reduce unauthorized cell phone use in classrooms by 5% within 12 months, as measured by teacher reports or discipline referrals.
- Report a decline of 5% in student referrals typically associated with cell phone use (e.g., recording fights).
- Long term goal of increased academic achievement with students being free of cellphone distractions.
- 100% of schools will use the script and materials provided.

# Planning

# Timeline



## Budget

The implementation of the updated cell phone policy incurred no expenses beyond staff time. Posters were printed in-house at each school, ensuring clear communication of the policy without additional costs.

## Implementation



## Tactics/Activities

In March 2024, the School Improvement Council (SIC) raised concerns about student cell phone use, prompting the Board of Education (BOE) to direct Superintendent Rodriguez to explore policy revisions. Beaufort County School District (BCSD) conducted research, gathered feedback, and launched a community survey in May, receiving over 2,000 responses. A committee was formed to review the policy, study cell phone effects, and analyze other districts' approaches. In June, the BOE approved limited cell phone use during lunch in high schools, but soon after, the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) issued Proviso 1.103, requiring districts to prohibit personal electronic device access during the school day to receive state funding. In September, SCDE's "Free to Focus SC" initiative eliminated limited-use allowances, with schools required to comply by January 2025. The following tactics were implemented ensure students, staff, and parents understood the transition to a full cell phone ban.



## Tactics/Activities

- A Cell Phone Policy Committee (Committee) was established, bringing together administrators and teachers to review best practices. The Committee researched and analyzed cell phone policies from multiple school districts, comparing their approaches to identify effective strategies. Additionally, school administrators from other districts were surveyed or interviewed to assess the impact and success of their policies. Committee members were assigned to gather and present findings, which were compiled into a report summarizing key takeaways and potential improvements. These insights were then discussed in meetings to guide the District in refining its cell phone policy.
- To gather comprehensive feedback on cell phone use in the classroom, the Committee developed and distributed a survey to parents, students, staff, and the community through BCSD Connected, while Principals were surveyed separately to gain insights into enforcement challenges. The survey campaign ran from May 29 – June 5 and was shared through email, social media, and school newsletters to maximize participation. Additionally, a Teacher Forum session was organized to collect insights from educators, and student input was gathered to help shape the rollout of potential policy changes. Once responses were collected, the Committee analyzed survey results to identify key trends and concerns, ensuring that stakeholder perspectives informed the policy review process. For example, parents had concerns regarding being able to reach their student in an emergency, therefore the new cell phone policy allowed student to keep their cell phone on their person as long as it's not visible.
- The Committee analyzed feedback and research to identify necessary improvements in Administrative Regulation SS-27 and the Discipline Plan and Handbook. Based on these findings, the Committee drafted policy revisions that incorporated stakeholder input and best practices. Throughout the process, committee meetings were held to discuss specific changes, ensuring a well-informed approach. A draft policy document was then developed, reflecting key insights from research and community feedback.
- To ensure consistent communication of the revised cell phone policy across all schools, a standardized morning announcement script was created and distributed, with schools required to use it daily for a set period. Additionally, posters were designed and printed in-house at each school to reinforce the policy visually in high-traffic areas such as hallways, classrooms, and cafeterias. To support effective enforcement, Principals were provided with guidance on the policy update, Proviso 1.103, and how to address staff and student concerns and questions regarding the policy. These efforts helped create a unified message and clear expectations for students, staff, and the school community.

# Evaluation

**Objective One:** To ensure our families, students, staff, and community are actively involved in shaping a well-received cell phone policy, we aim to gather at least 1,000 survey responses from key stakeholders.

Strategies used - Stakeholder engagement and education (students, staff, parents/families); consistent messaging; internal/external communication; and qualitative and quantitative research



Over 2,000 stakeholders responded to the survey. 55% were parents/guardians; 27% were staff; 11% were students; and 7% were community members.

**Objective Two:** Implement a revised cell phone policy and distribute it to all teachers and students by August 2024 and January 2025.

Strategies used - Stakeholder engagement and education (students, staff, parents/families); consistent messaging; and internal/external communication



The revised cell phone policy limiting cell phone use at the high school level was distributed to Principals and implemented at the beginning of the school year in August 2024. Once the SCDE issued their guidance, the policy was updated and distributed again prior to the beginning of the spring semester - January 2025.

**Objective Three:** Publish the updated policy on school websites platforms by January 2025.

Strategies used - Stakeholder engagement and education (students, staff, parents/families); consistent messaging; and internal/external communication



The updated policy was updated across all BCSD websites prior to the start of the spring semester - January 2025.

**Objective Four:** Send at least four parent notifications (emails, phone calls, and school newsletters) about the new policy by January 2025.

Strategies used - Stakeholder engagement and education (students, staff, parents/families); consistent messaging; and internal/external communication



Messages were sent to parents via BrightArrow, the District's mass communication system. All 33 schools included messaging in their newsletters to remind parents and students of the new policy.

**Objective Five:** Reduce unauthorized cell phone use in classrooms by 5% within 12 months, as measured by teacher reports or discipline referrals.

Strategies used - Stakeholder engagement and education (students, staff, parents/families); consistent messaging; internal/external communication; and qualitative and quantitative research



Since the implementation of the cell phone policy in January 2025, we have not yet gathered sufficient data to fully assess its impact. Over the coming months, data collection and analysis will be conducted, with a comprehensive review available next year. However, early qualitative feedback from teachers and students indicates a positive shift—many report an improved ability to focus in the classroom. Additionally, students have expressed that the policy provides a welcome break from cell phone use, offering a sense of relief during the school day.

**Objective Six:** Report a decline of 5% in student referrals typically associated with cell phone use (e.g., recording fights).

Strategies used - Stakeholder engagement and education (students, staff, parents/families); consistent messaging; internal/external communication; and qualitative and quantitative research



Since the cell phone policy was implemented in January 2025, we do not yet have sufficient data to fully assess its long-term impact. However, between the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years, there has already been a 35% decline in student referrals for fighting, an 8% decrease in aiding others in provoking incidents, and a 12% reduction in bullying. Data collection and analysis will continue over the coming months, with a comprehensive review available next year.

**Objective Seven:** Long term goal of increased academic achievement with students being free of cellphone distractions.

Strategies used - Stakeholder engagement and education (students, staff, parents/families); consistent messaging; internal/external communication; and qualitative and quantitative research



Since the cell phone policy was implemented in January 2025, we do not yet have sufficient data to assess its impact. Data collection and analysis will take place over the coming months, with a comprehensive review available next year.

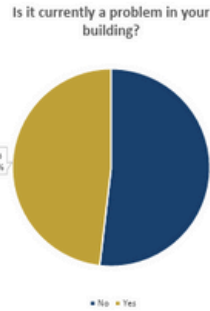
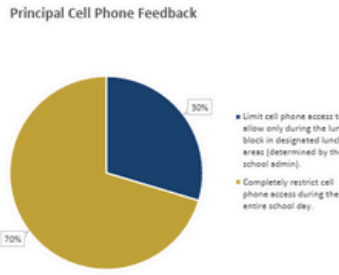
**Objective Eight:** 100% of schools will use the script and materials provided.

Strategies used - Stakeholder engagement and education (students, staff, parents/families); consistent messaging; and internal/external communication



All schools have been utilizing the provided morning announcement script and have printed and posted posters around their schools.

# Principal Survey Results

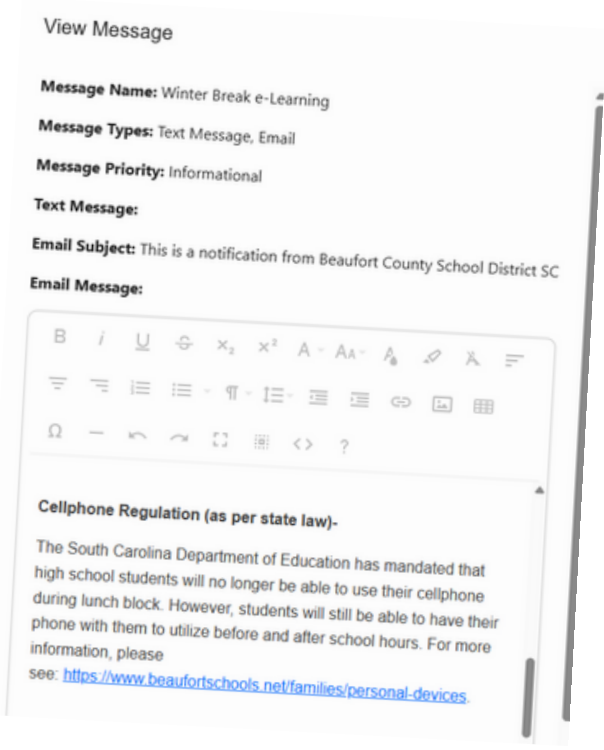
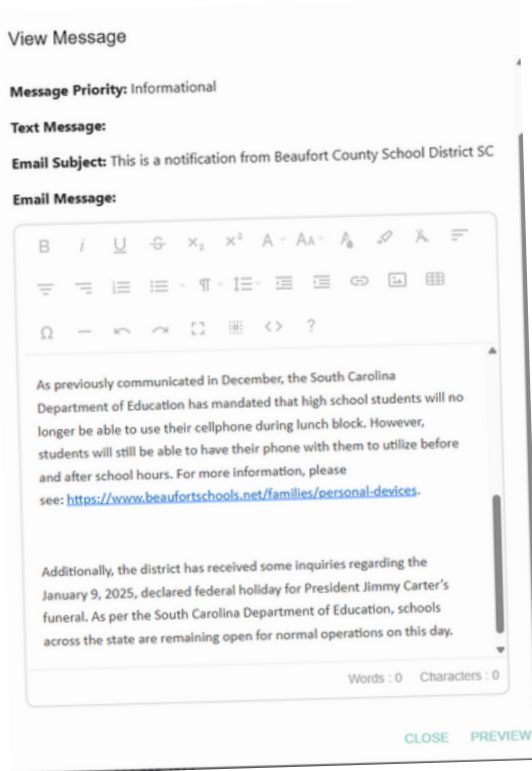


6/20/2024

Beaufort County School District ©

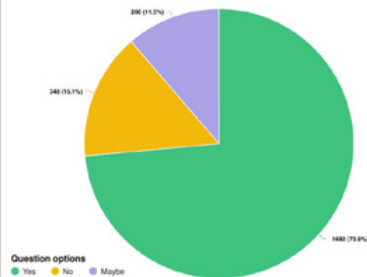
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Principal survey results. \*branding was prior to the new logo rollout.



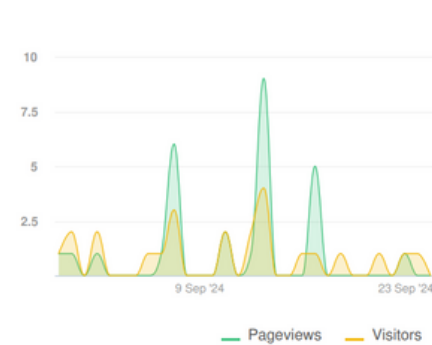
Parent messaging

Do you believe there should be limitations on cellphone usage during school hours?



Survey results

## Visitors Summary



## Highlights

TOTAL VISITS	25	MAX VISITORS PER DAY	4
NEW REGISTRATIONS	0	ENGAGED VISITORS	0
		INFORMED VISITORS	6
		AWARE VISITORS	24

Survey visitor summary

## Scripts

To assist School Administrators and teachers in consistent communication to students, the following scripts were developed for use during morning announcements and at the start of each class period.

### Morning Announcement Script

Good morning [mascot]! It's time to unlock your potential, not your phones! At this time, please turn off your cellphones and put them away. Let's make the most of our time together and dial into learning. Remember, phone off! Learning on! Make it a great day!

### Class Announcement/Reminder Script

Class has begun. At this time, if you have a cellphone, turn it off and put it away. If I see a phone I will notify the school administration who will take your phone for the remainder of the day.

### Sample Flyers / Posters

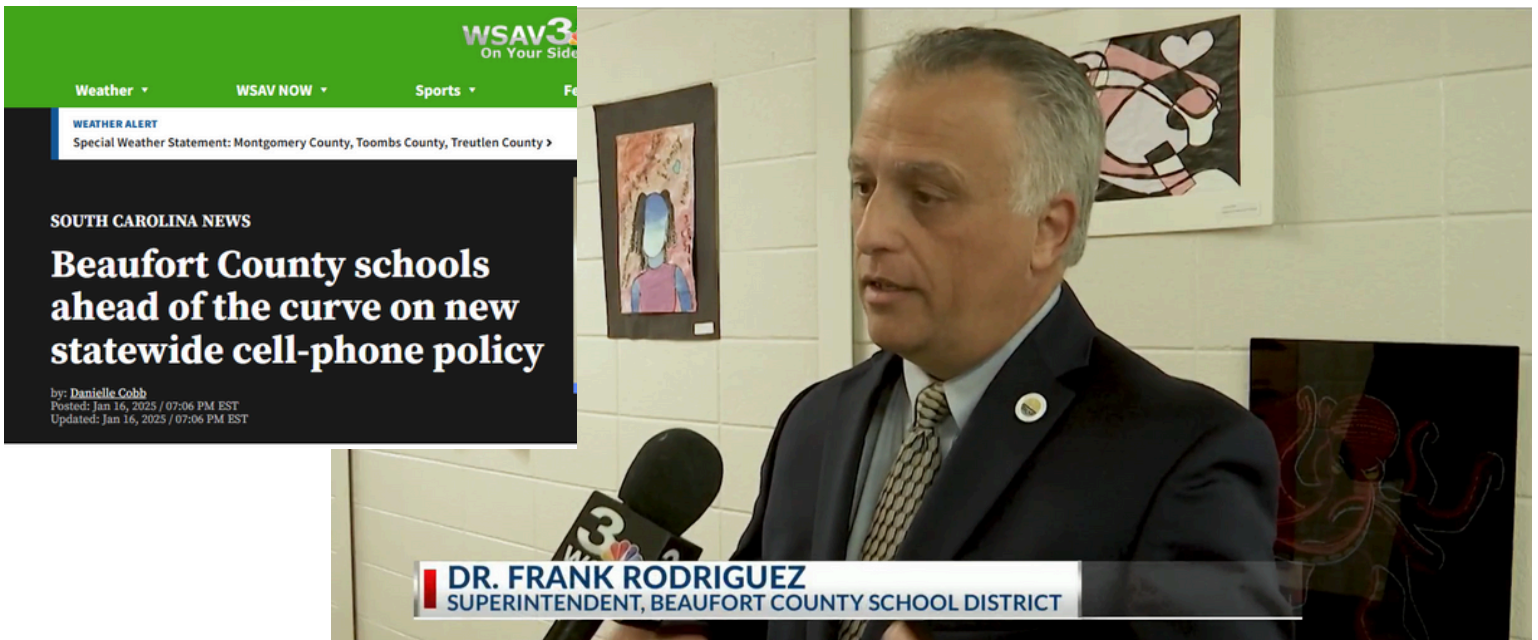
Sample flyers and posters can be found [here](#) with access to our BCSD Canva Account. Images of examples are below.



### 2024-2025 Cell Phone Violations

Phone Violations	# of Infractions
August	210
September	246
October	219
November	137
December	79
January	109
February	75
Total	1075

This policy represents a proactive step toward fostering a focused, engaging, and safe learning environment while ensuring BCSD remains in full compliance with state regulations. The district is committed to continuous communication, stakeholder engagement, and proper enforcement to ensure successful implementation.



## Cellphone policy interviews

### 2025:

- 1/7 - Dr. Rodriguez was interviewed by WTOC about our cellphone policy.
- 1/8 - IP/BG interviewed Dr. R about cellphone policy.
- 1/9 - WJCL interviewed May River High School students about the cellphone policy.
- 1/17 - Dr. Rodriguez was interviewed by WSAV about the district's cellphone policy.
- 2/24 - Dr. Rodriguez was interviewed by WTOC about our cellphone policy.

### 2024

- May 8 - responded to questions to the P&C about cellphone policy.
- May 29 - survey went out.
- June 6 - we put out media release to elicit community input – social media post.
- July 22 - Responded to questions by the Island News and the IP/BG about cellphones.
- Aug 8 - Dr. Rodriguez was interviewed by WTOC, WSAV, and WCSC as part of their morning back-to-school coverage, covering new cellphone policy. Drs. Lavan and Bruder were also interviewed by WTOC and covered cellphone info, Dr. Bruder specifically discussed on the community input we gathered when developing the policy.

# BCSD asks community to weigh in on cell phones in schools

June 4, 2024 Education

By Delayna Earley

## The Island News

Beaufort County School District, along with the Student Improvement Council, has reached out to parents, students, staff and members of the community to weigh in on whether cellular phone usage is cause for concern by asking them to fill out a survey by Wednesday, June 5.

The survey states that the school district is "proactively preparing for potential state guidance on the topic as legislators in Columbia are also currently debating the issue."

According to Superintendent Frank Rodriguez, budget bills have already been passed by the state Senate and House of Representatives that include a provision that would require individual school districts to adopt policies that stop students from using unauthorized electronic devices during school hours.

In the survey, participants are asked to weigh in if they believe schools should be cell phone free or if there should be limitations put on usage and what the negative and positive impacts of allowing cell phones in schools are.

Potentially removing the electronic distractions was originally discussed during the May 7 Beaufort County Board of Education meeting where the board directed Rodriguez to assess potential regulations that would prohibit cellphone use during school hours.

By Anna Stansfield  
Published: Jan. 7, 2025 at 5:43 PM EST

BEAUFORT COUNTY, S.C. (WTOC) - A South Carolina Department of Education policy mandates elementary, middle, and high school students to stay off their phones at school.

Statewide, school districts were required to start implementing the policy in January, but it's something the Beaufort County School District has been doing since the fall.

"It basically provides the opportunity for our students to be able to be free to focus on their learning, right, and our teachers to be free to be able to focus on their teaching," said Frank Rodriguez, the district's superintendent.

As the county developed a plan, they heard from many students and parents about their concerns. Ultimately, Rodriguez said they decided the best balance between safety and focus in the classroom was to allow students to keep their phones in their pockets, just making sure they weren't using them.

"We're hearing that teachers appreciate that, limiting the distraction of a cellphone available to them," said Rodriguez. "To be honest with you, I've heard from students who say it's almost like a relief."

While Beaufort County families are used to the policy, others in South Carolina are starting the semester off with new rules, which comes with concerns.

"Anything can happen in a split second, and they won't have no way to get in contact with anybody," said Aiyanna Bellamy, a Hampton County parent.

Aiyanna Bellamy's daughter is a student in Hampton County. She's hoping her district will follow Beaufort's model. "Keeping the phones on their person with the volume off is a good idea, especially for like, in case something is going on in the school and they did have to call 911," said Bellamy.

Any public school system in South Carolina who doesn't comply with the policy could be at risk to lose state funding. Copyright 2025 WTOC. All rights reserved.

## Bluffton Today

### NEWS

# Beaufort County schools implementing new cell phone policy as school begins Aug. 7

The Beaufort County School District will see a new cell phone policy as school begins Aug. 7

Shellie Murdaugh Bluffton Today  
Published 5:02 a.m. ET July 31, 2024



There will be new rules concerning cell phones in the Beaufort County School District as students head back to the classroom Aug. 7.

The Beaufort County School District Board of Trustees, during its June 25 meeting, directed Beaufort County School District Superintendent Frank Rodriguez to research potential regulations to prohibit cell phone use during instructional time.