NJ SCI
New Jersey School Climate Improvement
PLATFORM
September 2026

NJ Cell Phone Policies and School Climate

Beginning in the 2026-2027 school year, state law (P.L.2025, c.195) mandates that all public school districts in the state implement bell-to-bell policies prohibiting students' non-academic use of personal internet-enabled devices (smartphones, tablets, smart watches, smart glasses) during the school day, with some exceptions. The NJ Department of Education (NJDOE) provides **guidance** and **FAQs** outlining statutory requirements, policy considerations, and developmentally appropriate implementation strategies. Districts can decide how policies are implemented and can make decisions on device storage, supervision, and enforcement. This brief overviews research on school phone policies and how the **New Jersey School Climate Improvement (NJ SCI) Survey,** which measures several domains of school climate, can help schools understand some aspects of the potential impact of these policies over time when used alongside supplemental resources below.

BACKGROUND

Researchers have long examined the impacts of cell phone use among youth. For children aged 3 to 12, increased use of mobile devices is associated with increases in behavioral and emotional issues, including inattention, hyperactivity, and lower levels of prosocial behaviors[1]. In adolescents aged 12-15, spending over 3 hours a day on social media is associated with mental health issues, like anxiety and depression[2]. Others have found that bedtime use of devices is associated with inadequate sleep quantity and quality[3]. Most states have some form of legislation or policy to limit use of personal devices in school and while some caution that phone bans alone are not enough to address the underlying issues of excessive phone use in youth, others suggest they may have important benefits. A meta-analysis [4] found that smartphone bans were associated with **reduced bullying** behaviors and suggest they may also help **reduce distractions** in the classroom.

Similarly, researchers in Spain found that phone bans reduced bullying behaviors, particularly among older students[5]. A recent study[6] in the US also reported significant **improvements in student test scores** in the second year of a phone ban after an initial adjustment period (during which disciplinary incidents and suspensions temporarily increased) and **reductions in unexcused absences**. While there are benefits to implementing these policies, careful planning and implementation are required to address potential challenges, such as resistance from students and families, inconsistent enforcement, teacher workload, emergency communication concerns, and disproportionate disciplinary consequences for some students. These negative impacts may be temporary. For instance, one study[7] found that a specific device storage approach was associated with short-term increases in disciplinary incidents and declines in subjective well-being, which ultimately improved over time.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE STATE

September 2025

NJ Commission on the Effects of Social Media Usage on Adolescents released report

Recommends schools implement bell-to-bell bans on cell phones and social media and increase programs on digital citizenship and media literacy.

September 2025

NJDOE issued guidance for schools on use of internet-enabled devices

Recommendations provided to support districts in adopting and implementing policies.

January 2026

Legislation signed requiring boards of education to implement a bell-to-bell policy

NJDOE guidance updated to support districts in adopting policy by 2026-2027 school year.

CONSIDERATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Training: Plan staff training, establish enforcement procedures, and prepare for short-term disruptions.

Communication: Inform the community about storage options, exceptions, and emergency communications plans, and involve them in decisions to reflect community values and concerns.

Education: Educate the community on the impacts of cell phone use in schools while acknowledging how technology can support learning and connectivity.

Enforcement: Establish and enforce consequences using the least punitive response possible (i.e., avoid unnecessary removal from instruction).

Accommodations: Allow use of devices to fulfill accommodations in a IEP/504 Plan, to monitor healthcare, and for translation and care-giving services (see guidance).

Equity: Design the policy in ways that consider fairness and equal application.

Digital Literacy: Pair restrictions with programs teaching responsible technology use, self-regulation, online safety, and digital citizenship.

Monitor: Review the policy's effectiveness and monitor experiences, perceptions, and local data by subgroup. Review school climate data to assess the potential impact on the broader community.

ASSESSING IMPACTS ON SCHOOL CLIMATE

The free NJ SCI Survey measures various domains of school climate and can be used to assess perceptions as policies are implemented to support strategic planning and inform modifications over time. Data may inform these areas:

Safety and Discipline

The Sense of Physical Safety domain may show how policies impact perceptions of safety in various settings in the school and the Behavioral Expectations domain may help with understanding the extent to which policies are implemented clearly and fairly.

Relationships

Policies may lead to more opportunities for student face-to-face interactions, which may impact Negative and Prosocial Student Interpersonal Behaviors and Student Sense of Belonging domains. Leadership Support, Collegial Support, and Organizational Resources and Supports domains may reflect if staff feel prepared and supported in implementing policies. Punitive or inconsistently enforced policies may strain student–teacher relationships, which may get reflected in the Supportive Student-Staff Relationships domain.

Learning Environment

The Academic Culture and Classroom Practices domain helps measure student motivation and engagement, and may help uncover how restricting devices impacts classrooms.

Voice and Involvement

Student Voice and Involvement and Family Support and Engagement domains may help unpack the extent to which students and families are engaged in feedback and planning.

FOCUSING QUESTIONS AND NJ SCI SURVEY ITEMS

Below are discussion questions to help school climate teams discuss and understand the potential impact of personal internet-enabled device policies ("bell-to-bell ban") over time, with specific related NJ SCI Survey items referenced as short-term indicators to support implementation refinements. These questions help teams explore potential school climate impacts beyond those measured on the survey. NJ SCI Survey data can be compared to pre-policy baseline data (before fall 2026) with implementation data from the 2026-2027 school year, and/or can be used to understand the connection between new policy implementation and school climate outcomes moving forward.

Perceptions related to school climate may shift due to contextual factors beyond these policies and those factors may differ in impact across groups. Teams should prioritize domains for discussion based on local conditions, observations, and data (e.g., chronic absenteeism) and consider supplemental methods for collecting feedback on community members' experiences (e.g., staff-wide discussions, student focus groups). Teams should also consider how the fidelity of implementation (e.g. consistency of enforcement) and/or communication protocols (e.g., how the community was informed of policy changes) may impact perceptions.

Academic Culture and Classroom Practices

Climate Considerations

A personal device ban may remove a source of distraction, restore instructional control, and improve participation and engagement.

Focusing Question

In what ways, if any, have student focus, motivation, participation, and/or engagement changed across grades and subjects?

NJ SCI Survey Student Items

- In this school: _____ of the students keep trying when the work is hard.
- In this school: _____ of the students care about doing well on work.

Behavioral Expectations

Climate Considerations

A personal device ban may create uniform, predictable rules (the code of conduct can define warnings, escalation, and confiscation procedures). If not enforced consistently, it may shape perceptions of fairness.

Focusing Questions

- How do we ensure the policy is clearly understood by all students, staff, and families? Have efforts been successful so far?
- Do students, staff, and families feel that the rules and procedures are consistent, and fairly applied? Why or why not?
- How is enforcement of policies going across contexts?
- What changes, if any, have you seen in reported incidents of behavioral infractions and/or consequences?

NJ SCI Survey Items

Student

- In this school: the rules for how to behave are clear.
- The rules help make my school a better place.
- I think the rules at our school are fair.
- In this school: adults treat all students the same when they break the rules.

Staff

- In this school: adults are fair to all groups of students when they apply the rules.
- In this school: adults provide additional behavioral supports for students that need them.
- In this school: adults use practices to reinforce positive student behavior.

Parents/Caregivers

- In my child's school: adults are fair to all groups of students when they apply the rules.
- In my child's school: my child receives the support they need to meet behavioral expectations.

Supportive Staff-Student Relationships

Climate Considerations

Consistent, clear expectations and enforcement may preserve or strengthen relationships while punitive or uneven enforcement may strain them.

Focusing Questions

- What changes, if any, have you observed in student-staff relationships since the policy went into effect?
- How might enforcement method and consistency impact trust and connection between students and adults?

NJ SCI Survey Items

Students

- I can talk to an adult I trust in school.
- I think adults in my school really care about me.

Staff

- Adults in this school: build strong relationships with students.

Parents and Caregivers

- Adults in the school: really care about my child.
- My child has a strong relationship with at least one adult in this school.

Supports for Student Social and Emotional Learning

Climate Considerations

Personal device policies are intended to pair with digital literacy and self-regulation instruction, not to stand alone as a wellness solution.

Focusing Questions

- How do we teach and support student emotional regulation (e.g., managing their feelings or stress without devices) and digital citizenship (e.g., engaging productively with peers)?
- How have our approaches evolved as a result of implementation of this policy?

NJ SCI Survey Items

Students

- In my school we learn: to stop and think before we do something.
- In my school we learn: what to do when we feel stress.
- In my school we learn: what to do when we have upset feelings.
- In my school we learn: how our actions affect others.

Staff

- In this school: we help students develop strategies to express different feelings.

Parents/Caregivers

- In my child's school: adults help my child develop strategies to express different feelings.

Organizational Resources and Supports (Staff Only)

Climate Considerations

Funding opportunities, storage infrastructure (pouches, bins), and staff training are essential for effective implementation.

Focusing Questions

- In what ways were staff prepared for the successful implementation of the policy in terms of training, planning time, and necessary resources (e.g., storage pouches)?
- What additional or sustained resources are needed?

NJ SCI Staff Survey Items

- I am given professional learning opportunities or trainings that are relevant to my needs.
- I am provided the materials and resources necessary to do my job.
- I am provided with effective resources and/or training to: support the behavioral needs of all students.

Student Sense of Belonging (Students Only)

Climate Considerations

Increased face-to-face interaction and reduced social-media-driven comparison/exclusion during the day may support belonging whereas disproportionate disciplinary enforcement could undermine it.

Focusing Questions

- What changes, if any, have you observed with regard to student connectedness with each other and with the school (e.g., participation, attendance, isolation, absenteeism)?
- What changes, if any, are you observing by groups?

NJ SCI Survey Student Item: I feel like I belong at this school.

Family Support and Engagement

Climate Considerations

Informing families clearly in advance about storage, exceptions, and how to reach their child is important as well as providing opportunities for input and feedback.

Focusing Questions

- How did families respond to initial notifications of the policy?
- In what ways, if any, have we provided ongoing opportunities for family feedback on implementation?
- What questions, reactions, and needs emerged during implementation?
- In what ways have families been supportive partners in implementation?

NJ SCI Survey Items

Staff

- The school involves parents and families in making decisions.
- Parents or caregivers respect staff in this school.
- Staff work to build trusting relationships with parents and families.

Parents and Caregivers

- The school involves parents and families in making decisions.
- I feel respected by teachers and staff at my child's school.
- Staff work to build trusting relationships with me.
- I know what adults in the school expect of my child.

Student Voice and Involvement

Climate Considerations

Students who have a chance to provide implementation input and/or share perspectives on their experiences may be more likely to adhere to the policy.

Focusing Questions

- What opportunities have students had to share their experience of the policy (e.g., brief surveys, classroom discussions, focus groups)?
- How have students shaped the policy (i.e., design storage solutions)?
- How did communication about the policy before and during its implementation shape students' perceptions of voice and involvement?

NJ SCI Survey Items

Students

- In this school, I have chances to: share what I think about things.
- In this school, I have chances to: share my ideas and opinions.
- In this school, I have chances to: help make the rules.

Staff

- In this school, students have chances to share their ideas and opinions.

Parents/Caregivers

- In this school, my child has chances to" share their ideas and opinions.

Leadership Support (Staff Only)

Climate Considerations

Consistent enforcement requires administrators to support staff through effective communication and feedback.

Focusing Question

How do staff describe administrator support when implementing and enforcing the policy?

NJ SCI Staff Survey Items

- School-level leaders (e.g., principal, assistant principals, department chairs and supervisors, and team leads): back me up when I need it.
- School-level leaders (e.g., principal, assistant principals, department chairs and supervisors, and team leads): value staff involvement in decision making.

Collegial Support (Staff Only)

Climate Considerations

Uneven enforcement of the policy across classrooms may create friction while shared training and norms may increase collaboration and prevent the burden falling on some staff.

Focusing Question

- How do staff support one another in consistently enforcing the policy and addressing students' emergent needs related to implementation (e.g., making calls from the office)?

NJ SCI Survey Staff Item: I get support from other staff when I need it.

Prosocial Student Interpersonal Behaviors

Climate Considerations

Removing personal internet-enabled devices may increase face-to-face interactions and peer engagement, especially during unstructured time (e.g., lunch, passing periods).

Focusing Question

What changes, if any, have you observed in positive student interactions and relationships (e.g., increased prosocial behaviors) across various contexts/settings that you think may coincide with the policy?

NJ SCI Survey Items

Students

- Students at this school: are kind to one another.
- Students at this school: help each other if they need it.

Staff

- Students at this school: are kind to one another.
- Students at this school: help each other if they need it.

Parents and Caregivers

- Students in my child's school are kind to one another.
- Students at my child's school help each other when needed.

Negative Student Interpersonal Behaviors

Climate Considerations

A personal device ban may lead to reductions in cyber aggression and classroom conflict, but negative behaviors that were once done covertly on devices may shift to take place in person.

Focusing Question

What observed changes, if any, have you seen in negative interpersonal behaviors among students (e.g., setting, frequency, type, methods used, including on district-issued devices)?

NJ SCI Survey Items

Students

- Students at this school are mean to each other online or through text.
- Students at this school say mean things to each other in person.

Staff

- Students at this school are mean to each other online or through text.
- Students at this school say mean things to each other in person.

Parents/Caregivers

- Students in my child's school: are mean to each other online or through text.
- Students in my child's school: say mean things to each other in person.

Sense of Physical Safety

Climate Considerations

Emergency contact procedures may shift to alternative channels (e.g., main office, nurse) and families will need to adapt to having reduced immediate contact.

Focusing Questions

- To what degree do families seem informed about personal device restrictions, updated communication procedures, and emergency communication plans?
- How have students' and families' perceptions of safety on the way to and from school, and during the day, changed since the policy went into place?

NJ SCI Survey Items

Students

- I feel safe on the way to and from school.
- I feel safe during the school day.

Staff

- Students are safe at this school.
- I feel my school is prepared to deal with a safety threat or crisis.

Parents/Caregivers

- My child feels safe at this school.
- My child is safe on the way to and from school.
- Adults at this school are prepared to deal with a safety threat or crisis.

RUTGERS

[1](Morata Sampaio et al., 2025). [2](Riehm et al., 2019). [3](Carter et al., 2016). [4](Böttger & Zierer, 2024). [5](Beneito, P., & Vicente-Chirivella, Ó., 2020). [6](Figlio & Özek, 2025). [7](Allcott et al., 2026).