

Arkansas's Phone-Free School Pilot: Focus Groups

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This is the preliminary research on Arkansas’s phone-free school pilot. The study is the first large-scale evaluation of phone-free educational settings. Faculty and staff of the Office for Education Policy at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville (OEP) conducted focus groups with parents, teachers and students about their experiences in a phone-free school. The findings summarized below present insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers interested in phone-free schools.

The full evaluation will include measures of students’ mental health, student absenteeism, student discipline infractions, student academic achievement, student academic growth, teacher burnout, and teacher turnover.

About the Focus Groups

Focus groups took place in ten public school districts/charter systems. Districts had opted into the phone-free school pilot and were actively using Yondr pouches, though some were only using pouches as a consequence for not following phone use policies. Selection included districts of different sizes, located in different parts of the state, and serving varied populations of students, as shown in the demographic charts below. Districts identified the focus group participants.

On average, focus groups consisted of six participants and lasted 35 minutes. Participating students were in grades 5-12 and parental consent was obtained prior to the meetings. All 30 focus groups occurred in December 2024, and all but one location was conducted in-person. The interviews began with a brief explanation of the study, followed by a specific set of questions. The interviews operated in a semi-structured and open-ended format allowing interviewers to ask about tangential topics. Once the interviews were completed, recordings were anonymized, transcribed, and imported into a database for analysis.



Phone-free focus group districts enrolled slightly **lower percentages of White (51% vs. 57%) students and Black students (13% vs 19%) and larger percentages of Hispanic/Latino (23% vs. 15%) students** than Arkansas districts overall.



Phone-free focus group districts enrolled a somewhat **lower percentage students eligible for free or reduced price lunch (FRL) (52% vs. 60%)** than Arkansas districts overall.

The 10 districts involved in the focus groups spanned four regions of the state, with an average enrollment of 6,208 students per district. Our research team traveled to 10 counties across the state to gather this valuable perceptual feedback for the report.

Parent Perspectives

Overall, parents support the phone-free policies at their student's school.

The main concern that parents expressed about the policy was the inability to quickly communicate with their child during the school day. Many parents were fearful that their student would be unable to contact them in case of an emergency situation. Family scheduling needs, extra-curricular events where schedules might change, and student anxiety are areas where a lack of communication due to phone-free policies caused difficulties for students and their families.

While parents generally support phone-free school policies, many were upset with the implementation of the policies at their student's school. Parents expressed frustration that the phone-free policies varied from classroom to classroom, and that teachers and school leadership were not consistently holding students accountable for violations of the policy.

Many parents expressed that the policy was developed and implemented without parent input, and that communication about anticipated benefits for students was lacking.

Parents also discussed the challenges raised by the use of Yondr pouches. They expressed concerns about classroom learning time being lost to the routines related to the pouches.

Some parents of students in younger grades (i.e. 5th and 6th) expressed feeling that the new policies were increasing their child's anxiety. Parents reported that consequences related to forgetting the pouch, misplacing the pouch, damaging the pouch, and difficulties related to unlocking the pouch were causing unneeded stress. Some parents questioned the long-term plan for and sustainability of the pouches.

"Any way that we can remove distractions is a good thing. Phones are a major source of disruption, and not having them during school hours helps students focus." -

"With the shootings and everything happening, not being able to contact my child during school hours terrifies me. That lack of immediate communication is a big source of anxiety for both me and my child." - Parent

"We didn't get a clear explanation of how this was supposed to work or why it was necessary. It seems like the district made this decision without really engaging the community." - Parent

"Teachers are already overwhelmed with so much to do, and now they're expected to monitor the pouches. It takes time away from actual teaching, which is frustrating when every minute in the classroom counts." - Parent

"The teachers who care enforce it, but others don't even bother. So, the kids who follow the rules feel like they're being punished for doing the right thing." -
Parent

"The pouches feel like an unnecessary expense and effort when the real issue is enforcing the no-phone rules we already had [before the pilot]. If teachers and administrators aren't consistent, no amount of pouches will solve the problem." - Parent

Teacher Perspectives

Like parents, teachers supported the phone-free policies at their school. They reported that students are more engaged and interactive in class and that there is more conversation at lunch and in the hallways. Teachers also noted that students are not able to use their phones as much to “start fights” or “record inappropriate things”, and that “There’s been a noticeable decrease in those kinds of issues, which is a huge relief.”

“With phones less accessible, students seem more involved in school activities, whether it’s clubs, sports, or just casual conversations.” - Teacher

Teachers, however, also expressed frustration about how the policies are being implemented in their school. Many teachers highlighted how initial excitement around the policy waned due to inconsistent enforcement by administrators and staff. Teachers at every school stated that students are finding ways around the policies, and that it is challenging for them to monitor compliance. In addition, teachers noted that students still have ways to communicate electronically with the school-provided Chromebook. Teachers felt like variation in the policy was needed depending on the grade level of the students.

“The biggest issue with any policy is consistency. We need everyone—from teachers to admin—to enforce it for it to work effectively.” - Teacher

Teachers expressed their desire for a more holistic approach. Several teachers suggested that the phone-free policy should be part of a broader strategy to foster student engagement. They highlighted the need for administrative support and professional development to create positive classroom environments where students are motivated to participate actively.

“I teach at the middle school, and I feel like it’s definitely better. I’m not having as many issues as I was before. But I know high school teachers are still dealing with it a lot.” - Teacher

“Some students don’t even bother putting their phones in the pouches, and because it’s not enforced everywhere, they get away with it.” - Teacher

“Even before the policy, my students knew that phones weren’t allowed to be out, and they followed that rule.” - Teacher

Student Perspectives

Students, who are most directly impacted by the policy change, did not feel as favorable as parents and teachers about the phone-free policies at their school. Students understood the intent to reduce distractions from learning but were critical of the implementation and impact on their daily routines, leading them to question the effectiveness of the policy.

Punishments for not following the policy varied by school. In some schools the punishments were more significant than in others, and students felt they were excessively severe. Students in all schools reported not wanting to get “caught” breaking the rules and felt like they were overly restrictive.

“If you forget to pouch it, you can’t compete in robotics or trap shooting because they won’t let you on the team if you’ve been suspended.” - Student

“Phones can definitely be a distraction during lessons, but there’s so much idle time when you’re not doing anything, and that’s when it helps to have your phone.” - Student

“If you get caught with your phone, you get like four or five days of ISS. I want to say, you could smoke marijuana in the bathroom and get less of a punishment than if you have your phone out.” - Student

Students were doubtful that Yondr pouches meaningfully reduced distractions or improved the learning in the classrooms. Like parents and teachers, students reported that there are students and teachers who don’t follow the phone-free policy, and class can still be disrupted by misbehavior of various types. Students highlighted that the teacher has a greater impact on student focus than the absence of phones does.

“Some teachers have magnets and let students unpouch their phones during class, which kind of defeats the purpose.” - Student

Like parents and some teachers, students felt that their concerns and feedback about the policy were not heard or valued by administrators. Students reported feeling that this created an environment of distrust. When teachers are the ones left to implement the policy, students raised concerns about how that can negatively impact relationships between students and their teacher.

“It felt like the decision was already made, and they didn’t care about our thoughts or experiences.” - Student

Overall, students reported that they would prefer to have a less intrusive way to remove cell phones from their learning environment.

“Kids get just as distracted with their computers as they do with their phones. We still have access to social media websites and YouTube, and kids still get on that in class.” - Student

“If there’s going to be a policy, take it out of teachers’ hands entirely. Make it so it’s handled before we even walk into the classroom.” - Student

“In classrooms where teachers are engaging and doing their job, students don’t feel the need to be on their phones.” - Student

“If students just put their phone in their backpacks on silent, it would have the same effect as all these pouches.” - Student

Recommendations

Overall, communities support phone-free school policies, but parents, teachers, and students are generally unhappy with the implementation in their school.

Based on the experiences shared by members of the 30 focus groups, we recommend that school leaders and policymakers planning to implement phone-free school environments should:

1. **include parent, teacher, and student perspectives** when developing a plan for implementation. While some school community members we spoke with found Yondr pouches to be an effective tool to support a phone-free learning environment, others found their effectiveness under current implementation to be problematic.
2. **effectively communicate the policy** and the rationale behind it, including how effectiveness will be measured and reported, with community members.
3. **provide community members with clear information** on how emergency situations will be communicated and plans for ensuring student safety in an emergency.
4. **align consequences for violations** of the phone-free policy with the goal of student well-being and learning and strive for consistent application of the consequences to all students and school staff.

Arkansas Resources & Press Mentions

Resources:

- [Sanders Invites Arkansas School Districts to Join Phone-Free School, Mental Health Pilot Program](#)
- [Phone-Free Schools Study](#)
- [Yondr Website](#)

TV/Radio Stories:

- [Arkansas school districts on board with ‘phone-free’ pilot program](#)
- [Bentonville students and parents discuss no-phone policy](#)
- [Arkansas Rolls Out Pilot Program to Test Cellphone Ban in Schools](#)

News Articles:

- [Sanders calls on governors, Arkansas lawmakers to join effort to limit children’s access to smartphones, social media](#)
- [Arkansas school districts consider implementing new state cell phone, mental health program](#)
- [Arkansas governor, education secretary call on schools to join mental health pilot project](#)
- [Arkansas tries banning phones in schools](#)
- [U.S. Education Department pings states, schools to set policies on cellphone use](#)