

## Implementing Phone-Free Schools: Insights from Arkansas Administrators

Kim Shaw, M.A.  
Sarah McKenzie, Ph.D.

University of Arkansas

October 28, 2025

## Table of Contents

I.	Abstract .....	iv
II.	Introduction.....	5
III.	Review of Previous Research on Phone-Free Schools .....	6
	Arkansas Phone-Free Pilot.....	7
IV.	Research Method .....	8
	Research Questions .....	9
	Table 1: Outcomes of Interest and Associated Survey Questions .....	9
	Sample.....	10
	Table 2: Survey Sample of Respondents .....	11
	Table 3: Average Size and Programmatic Characteristics of Sample Respondents .....	12
V.	Results.....	12
	General Phone Policies .....	12
	Figure 1: Principal Responses to the Question, “What statement best reflects your school's cell phone policy this year?”.....	14
	Figure 2: Principal Responses to the Question, “What statement best reflects your school's cell phone policy last year?”.....	14
	Concerns About Students and Cell Phones.....	15
	Figure 3: Principals from treatment schools' responses about top concerns related to students and cellphones at school.....	16
	Figure 4: Principals from control schools' responses about top concerns related to students and cellphones at school.....	17
	Phone Policies during Non-Instructional Time.....	17
	Figure 5: Principal responses to student policies during non-instruction time....	18
	Accountability and Enforcement .....	18
	Enforcement.....	18
	Figure 6: Principal responses related to the enforcement of student cell-phone policy, separated by treatment and control group .....	19
	Compliance with Phone Policies .....	19

Figure 7: Principal's response to what percentage of teachers follow cell-phone protocols.....	20
Figure 8: Principal's response to what percentage of students follow cell-phone protocols.....	20
Consequences.....	20
Figure 9: Principal responses related to student consequences for first phone violation, separated by treatment and control groups.....	22
Figure 10: Principal responses related to student consequences for second phone violation, separated by treatment and control groups.....	22
Figure 11: Principal responses related to student consequences for third phone violation, separated by treatment and control groups.....	23
Figure 12: Principal responses related to student maximum consequences for phone violation, separated by treatment and control groups.....	23
VI. Discussion.....	23
Study Limitation .....	26
Policy Recommendations.....	27
VII. References.....	29
VIII. Appendix.....	31

## **I. Abstract**

To date, 34 states have enacted laws or policies that prohibit or monitor student cell phone use in K-12 schools (Higham, 2025). Mental health concerns related to children and cellphones, as well as phones causing distractions and behavioral issues in schools, are the primary reasons behind the increase in phone-free school mandates. At the same time, there is limited research that examines phone-free school initiatives. This paper explores how Arkansas public school administrators have implemented phone-free policies, drawing on results from an administrator survey. Key findings indicate that administrators are more concerned about student engagement during instruction and phone-related behavior issues than about mental health problems. Stricter phone policies resulted in lower compliance among teachers and students, along with more severe student consequences for early phone violations; however, the maximum consequences remained similar regardless of student phone policies.

## II. Introduction

There is growing concern about the impact of constant interaction with cellphones and unregulated online content on our adolescent population (George & Odgers, 2015). It is estimated that 53% of children in the United States have a cell phone by age 11, as do 95% of adolescents between 13 and 17 years old (Richter et al., 2022). As students returned to in-person learning after the pandemic, there were observable changes in students' behavior with technology in the classroom (Holte & Ferraro, 2021). Students' addictive interaction with cell phones during instructional time was more of a hindrance to learning and collaboration than before the pandemic. Historically, teachers have supported mobile devices in classrooms as learning tools and found them helpful in improving student engagement and modernizing lessons (O'Bannon & Thomas, 2014; Tingir et al., 2017). However, a more recent 2024 National Education Association (NEA) poll resulted in 90% of teachers supporting the prohibition of cellphone use by students during instructional hours and 83% supporting a total school day ban (Walker, 2024). On the other hand, the NEA also found that parents push back on cellphone bans because they want to be able to contact their children during the day, and they worry about their children during emergencies. In 2024 and 2025, states and school districts initiated new laws and policies to ban cellphones in schools (Higham, 2025). There is limited research on the impact of phone-free schools on student outcomes and the implementation of phone-free initiatives in schools.

This study contributes to the research on phone-free schools by examining how Arkansas public school administrators implemented these initiatives and their perspectives on phone-free policies. Through an online survey sent to principals and superintendents, we gather information on the implementation of the initial year of Arkansas's phone-free schools pilot program. Recognizing the challenges of implementing new school policies, we sought to better understand the process of adopting phone-free school initiatives.

Key findings included a large majority of superintendents of districts who used Yondr pouches during the initial phone-free pilot year plan to continue to use Yondr pouches in future years. When asked about their top concerns regarding students and phone use, principals identified engagement during instruction and behavior stemming from phone use as more pressing concerns, with mental health being the third most common response. Principals from treatment schools also reported lower rates of teacher and student compliance with phone policies compared to principals from control schools. Principals, from both treatment and control schools, also indicated that enforcement is still largely left up to the teachers. This may indicate that both teachers and students are resisting phone-free initiatives, and that teachers are struggling to enforce policies without more support.

### **III. Review of Previous Research on Phone-Free Schools**

To date, existing research on phone-free school policies is scarce and yields mixed results. Some studies indicate that excessive adolescent cell phone use is related to several negative outcomes. A large survey of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders found that those who use social media for more than 30 minutes a day report statistically significant lower levels of happiness and less meaningful in-person relationships (Twenge et al., 2018). Another study involving college students found that cell phone presence increased addiction to phones and reduced students' ability to focus in class (Lepp et al., 2015). Students who regularly used cell phones in class were also associated with lower achievement and effort (Bai et al., 2019). Multiple studies show evidence that children's excessive cell phone use can lead to missed opportunities to build meaningful in-person relationships and benefit from free play when students are on their phones during social times at school (Kopecký et al., 2021; Twenge et al., 2018). Moreover, cellphone addiction and its negative impact on student focus seem to be exacerbated by the remoteness from the COVID-19 pandemic, and there are still after-effects (Holte & Ferraro, 2021).

Conversely, a meta-analysis examining social media influences on mental well-being finds inconsistent results with small effect sizes (Ferguson, 2024). Other research also emphasizes the importance of technology in classrooms to prepare students for a digitalized society (Selwyn & Aagaard, 2018).

2021). That said, most existing studies lack randomization in their research design and cannot establish causal relationships.

Still, fear surrounding cell phones' effects on youths is growing, and schoolwide cell phone bans are gaining popularity worldwide (Selwyn & Aagaard, 2021). In early 2025, Arkansas joined other states to mandate public K-12 schools to be phone-free all day (Heubeck, 2024). Nevertheless, minimal evaluations of school cellphone bans have been conducted to date. A single study from the United Kingdom found no evidence of a change in student outcomes when comparing schools that ban cellphones bell-to-bell to schools that do not have bell-to-bell phone bans (Goodyear et al., 2025). This study also found that students, ages 12-15, self-reported the same amount of phone time regardless of their school's phone policy, bringing forth questions of whether school phone bans address concerns about children's phone use and mental health.

### **Arkansas Phone-Free Pilot**

In the summer of 2024, Governor Huckabee Sanders met with public school superintendents to initiate conversations about growing concerns associated with cell phones and adolescents. This initially raised the idea of a statewide public school cell phone ban for all public schools serving grades 5-8 (Grajeda, 2024). The Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) launched a phone-free schools pilot and study to evaluate the effectiveness of school cell phone ban policies. Governor Sanders agreed to fund phone-free interventions for any public school district that wanted to join the pilot. Also, in partnership with ADE, the Office for Education Policy (OEP) would evaluate how schoolwide phone bans affected student outcomes, behavior, attendance, and teacher satisfaction.

The superintendent committee for the phone-free schools' pilot preferred Yondr pouches as the intervention for students' personal devices. Yondr pouches are small, individualized, soft containers with a magnetic closure at the top, where students put their personal phones and other electronic devices, including headphones and smart watches. Once locked, the pouches can only be opened at a magnetic kiosk. Superintendents preferred Yondr pouches because students can still maintain possession of their

devices while not being able to access them, minimizing school liabilities related to student property.

While the phone-free pilot superintendent committee preferred Yondr pouches, they were not a required intervention to receive funding.

In February 2025, OEP released a [report](#) based on the findings of focus groups held at phone-free pilot schools, involving students, parents, and teachers (McKenzie & Shaw, 2025). Key findings included general support from teachers and parents for phone-free schools; however, they felt left out of implementation decisions and were frustrated with inconsistencies in phone-free school expectations from one class to another. Students did not like phone-free schools' policies and highlighted that students who chose to disobey the policies could easily work around the Yondr pouches or find other things to distract them in class.

Also in February 2025, the Arkansas State Senate passed House Bill 122, also known as the Bell-to-Bell, No Cell law, which mandates that all public K-12 schools implement school policies prohibiting the use of students' personal electronic devices during the school day, starting in the fall of 2025 (Ark. S.B. 142, 2025). The law emphasized that student cellphones were prohibited for all grade levels the entire day, including non-instruction times. The only exceptions outlined were for students with an individualized educational plan (IEP) or a 504 accommodation plan, and in cases of emergency situations. Specific methods and interventions were left to schools and districts to decide how to prohibit phones. Schools could use Yondr pouches, but it was not mandatory.

#### **IV. Research Method**

This report shares the results from a phone-free implementation survey, emailed by OEP to all K-12 public school principals and superintendents in Arkansas, commencing on February 20, 2025. The survey was available for administrators to complete until May 21, 2025, the end of the semester. Within the survey, participants could skip questions or provide multiple responses to the same question. The surveys were conducted to better understand how districts and schools changed their student phone

policies and the implementation of those policies. An outline of survey questions can be viewed in *Table 1*. Survey questions along with answer options can be found in the appendix.

## Research Questions

We considered the following research questions:

1. In the 2024-25 school year, how did districts and schools change their student phone policies both as part of the phone-free pilot and beyond?
2. What are principals' and superintendents' initial reactions and concerns related to phone-free school policies?
3. How are schools addressing the accountability of phone-free school policies?

**Table 1: Outcomes of Interest and Associated Survey Questions**

Outcome of Interest	Description
<b>Superintendent Survey</b>	
Pilot Participation Indicator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Did your district receive funds from the governor's Phone-Free Schools Pilot Program?</li></ul>
Yondr Pouch Indicator and Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• (If Yes) Did your district adopt Yondr pouches?</li><li>• (If Yes) Which statement best describes when students are expected to have their phones locked in Yondr pouches?</li><li>• (If Yes) Does your district intend to use Yondr pouches again next year?</li></ul>
Intentions for Next Year, Current and Previous Phone Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What statement best describes your district's cell phone policy?</li><li>• Did your district's cell phone policy change this year?</li><li>• (If Yes) What statement best describes your district's cell phone policy last year?</li></ul>
Open Response about Phone-Free Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Is there anything else you think we should know about your district's experience with phone-free environments?</li></ul>
<b>Principal Survey</b>	
Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Select your top two concerns about phones at school.</li></ul>

Current and Previous Phone Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What statement best describes your school's cell phone policy?</li> <li>• What statement best describes your school's cell phone policy last year?</li> <li>• Which statement best describes when your students are expected to have their phones locked in pouches?</li> </ul>
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In your opinion, what percentage of teachers follow the cell phone protocols?</li> <li>• In your opinion, what percentage of students follow the cell phone protocols?</li> <li>• Which statement best describes how your school enforces the cell phone policy?</li> </ul>
Consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the consequences for a student violation of the school phone policy?</li> <li>• (Please select the most common consequence for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd violations, as well as the maximum consequence.)</li> </ul>
Open Response about Phone Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there anything else you think we should know about your school's experience with phone-free environments?</li> </ul>

## Sample

The administrators' implementation survey was shared with all Arkansas K-12 public school principals and superintendents. We received responses from 211 principals and 89 superintendents. Our sample data are presented in *Table 2*. Administrators in schools listed in the Arkansas Department of Education's phone-free pilot, as well as administrators from schools identified by Yondr as utilizing phone pouches, were included in the treatment group. All others were considered controls. Although the pilot was focused on grades 5 and above, we included administrators from all grade levels, as the new Bell-to-Bell, No Cell Law applies to all grade levels. School levels are based on state accountability categories. The Arkansas phone-free pilot targeted schools that served grade 5 through 12, and most elementary schools did not address phones in schools. With that said, the Bell-to-Bell, No Cell law includes all K-12 public schools in Arkansas.

**Table 2: Survey Sample of Respondents**

Group	Treatment			Control			All Respondents		
	N	Expected	Response Rate	N	Expected	Response Rate	N	Expected	Response Rate
Superintendent	29	89	33%	60	174	34%	89	263	34%
Principal	59	227	27%	152	834	19%	211	1,061	20%
Elementary	3	33	9%	71	489	15%	74	522	14%
Middle	22	87	25%	32	120	27%	54	207	26%
High	34	107	31%	49	225	22%	83	332	25%
Total	88	316	28%	212	1,008	21%	300	1,324	23%

Our superintendent response rate overall was 34% and proportionally distributed between treatment and control groups. The principal response rate was 20% overall with a higher response rate from principals in treatment schools at 27% compared to control schools at 19%. Elementary schools in both the treatment and control group are underrepresented in our sample, with an overall response rate of 14%.

We examined the balance in characteristics between our respondent schools and districts compared to all Arkansas public schools and districts. Our results are presented in *Table 3*. Respondents, both amongst principals and superintendents, are comparable in average enrollment per grade and the average percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch, FRL. Schools and districts in the treatment are also comparable to those in the control category. Treatment schools have, on average, larger enrollment per grade compared to control schools at the middle and high school levels, as well as overall district size.

**Table 3: Average Size and Programmatic Characteristics of Sample Respondents**

Groups		Treatment		Control		All	
		Average Enrollment Per Grade	School Avg Percentage of Students Eligible for FRL	Average Enrollment Per Grade	School Avg Percentage of Students Eligible for FRL	Average Enrollment Per Grade	School Avg Percentage of Students Eligible for FRL
Principals	All Respondents	137	62	102	64	112	64
	Respondents	151	55	121	63	130	59
Elementary	All Respondents	68	74	65	66	66	67
	Respondents	48	69	69	66	66	66
Middle	All Respondents	190	59	134	63	155	61
	Respondents	195	55	123	65	148	61
High	All Respondents	138	56	112	60	120	60
	Respondents	164	56	136	57	148	57
		Average Enrollment Per Grade	District Avg Percentage of Students Eligible for FRL	Average Enrollment Per Grade	District Avg Percentage of Students Eligible for FRL	Average Enrollment Per Grade	District Avg Percentage of Students Eligible for FRL
Superintendents	All Respondents	189	67	113	64	139	65
	Respondents	254	60	131	63	171	62

## V. Results

### General Phone Policies

Superintendents were asked general questions about changes in cell phone policies and their plans for next year. When asked if they had changed their phone policy this year, the 2024-25 school year, 66% of superintendents from treatment districts responded that they had. Twenty percent of superintendents from control districts responded that they had updated their phone policies for the 2024-25 school year. Those superintendents participating in the phone-free pilot were also asked about Yondr pouches, which were the student phone intervention favored at the start of the pilot. Of the respondents from districts that participated in the pilot, 58% of superintendents reported using Yondr pouches, while 42% used an alternative intervention. Among districts that used Yondr pouches, 94% indicated they plan to continue using them next year. Many superintendents were satisfied with the policy change. one superintendent stated, “This has been the best thing that we have done. I highly recommend doing it from the morning bell to the last bell of the day.” Some superintendents liked the policy change but found the Yondr

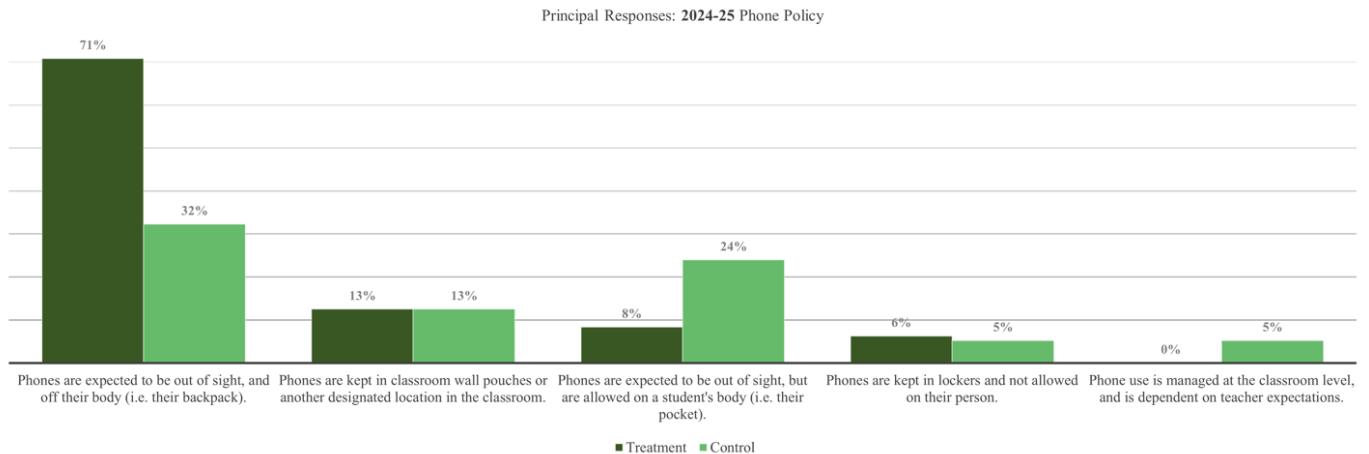
Implementing Phone-Free Schools

pouches unnecessary. As one superintendent responded, “It is very good for kids and families. It can be done without pouches, but not without complete district support.” Other superintendents found the new mandate too far-reaching. They felt that student phone policies should be decided at a district level, stating, “How school districts create student cell phone policies should be left to the local district.”

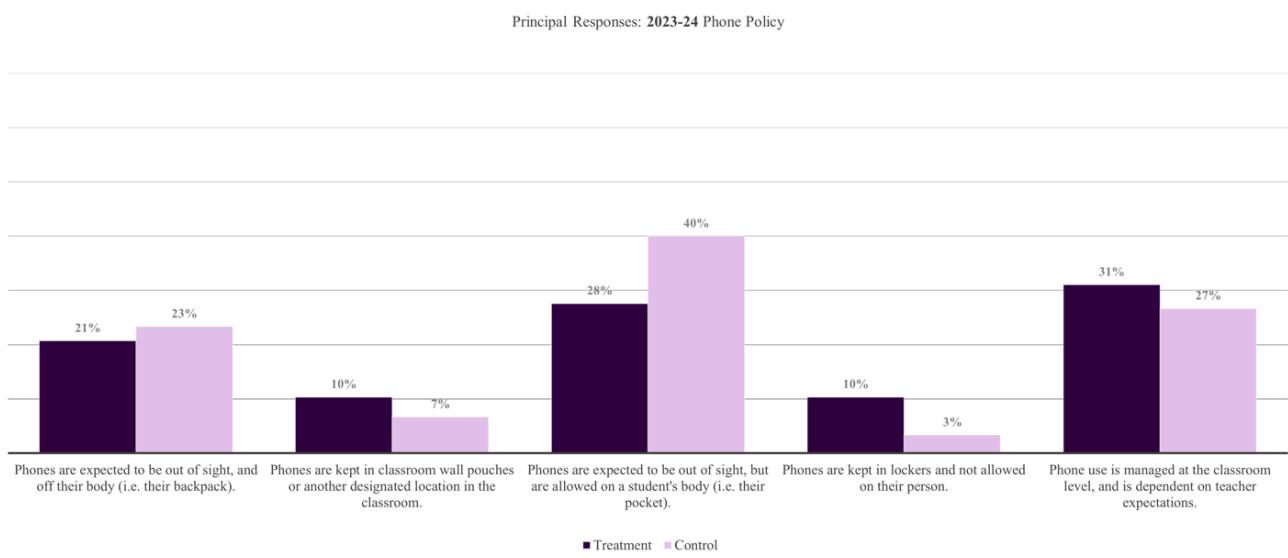
Principals were asked about general student phone expectations for the 2024-25 and 2023-24 school years, and the results are presented in *Figures 1 and 2*. The survey asked principals to indicate which statement best summarized where students’ phones should be stored during the school day. For the treatment group, the most common answer, at 71%, was, “phones are expected to be out of sight and off the body (i.e. their backpack).” The second and third most common responses, at 13%, were “phones are kept in classroom wall pouches or another designated location in the class,” followed by “phones are expected to be out of sight, but are allowed on a student’s body (i.e. their pocket) at 8%.

Similar to the treatment group, the most common principal response within the control group regarding student phone policy was also “Phones are expected to be out of sight and off their body,” at 32%. The second most common answer for the control group, at 24%, was that phones should also be out of sight but could stay on the student’s body, such as in their pocket. The third most common response, at 21%, stated, “We are an elementary school and do not need a phone-free policy at this time.” Less common responses included phones kept in lockers and not allowed on a student’s person, and phone use is managed at the classroom level, depending on the teacher’s expectations, at only 5%.

**Figure 1: Principal Responses to the Question, “What statement best reflects your school's cell phone policy this year?”**



**Figure 2: Principal Responses to the Question, “What statement best reflects your school's cell phone policy last year?”**



The survey also asked principals to best summarize their phone policy for the prior school year, 2023-24; these results are shown in *Figure 2*. We wanted to understand whether districts and schools, both within and outside the pilot, were changing their phone policies.

In contrast with student phone policies in 2024-25 school year, principals from the treatment

group indicated that the most common phone policy in 2023-24 at 31% was that “phone use is managed  
Implementing Phone-Free Schools

at the classroom level, and is dependent on teacher expectations.” The second most common response for the treatment group related to the 2023-24 school year was that phones are expected to be out of sight, but are allowed on a student’s body at 28%, followed by phones are expected to be out of and off the body at 21%.

For the 2023-24 school year, the most common response for principals within the control group was that phones are expected to be out of sight but are allowed on the student’s body at 40%, followed by phone use is managed at the classroom level, and is dependent on teacher expectations at 31%. These responses are followed by phones are expected to be out of sight and off their body as the third most common response at 23% for the control group.

### **Foremost Concerns About Students and Cell Phones**

We asked principals to select their top two concerns related to students and cellphones at schools, and the results, separated by treatment and control schools, can be seen in *Figures 3 and 4*. The survey provided six response options for both their first and second concerns.

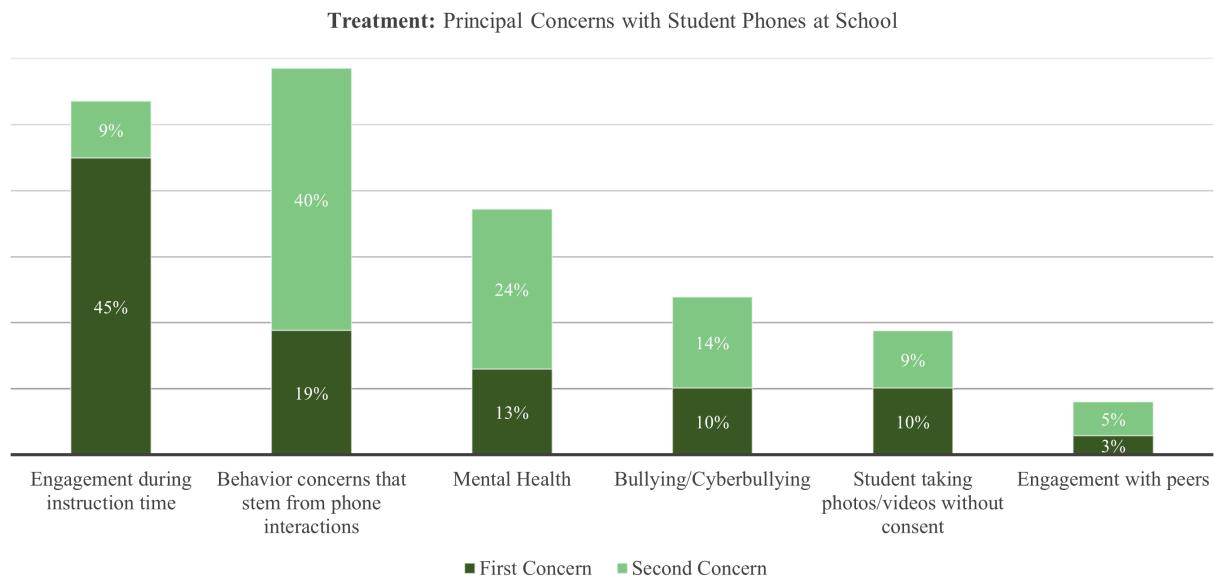
The most common response for top concerns for principals in treatment schools at a 45% response rate was engagement during instruction time, followed by behavior issues caused by phone interactions as the second most frequent response at 19%. Mental health was the third most common concern, with a response rate of 13%. One principal’s quote aligns with these survey question results: “Phone-free classrooms have resulted in students being more focused with fewer behavior issues.” Another principal outlines more comprehensive concerns that they think were addressed by stricter student phone policies: “Having a cell-phone-free school has encouraged greater participation in classes. Behavior incidents involving phones/ cyberbullying have drastically decreased. Students are working on talking to each other at lunch instead of staring into their phones. Even the students who do miss the phones recognize the positive changes that have come from adopting our current policy.”

Principal responses for top concerns from control schools were aligned with treatment schools. The most frequent response was engagement during instruction time at 33%, also followed by behavior

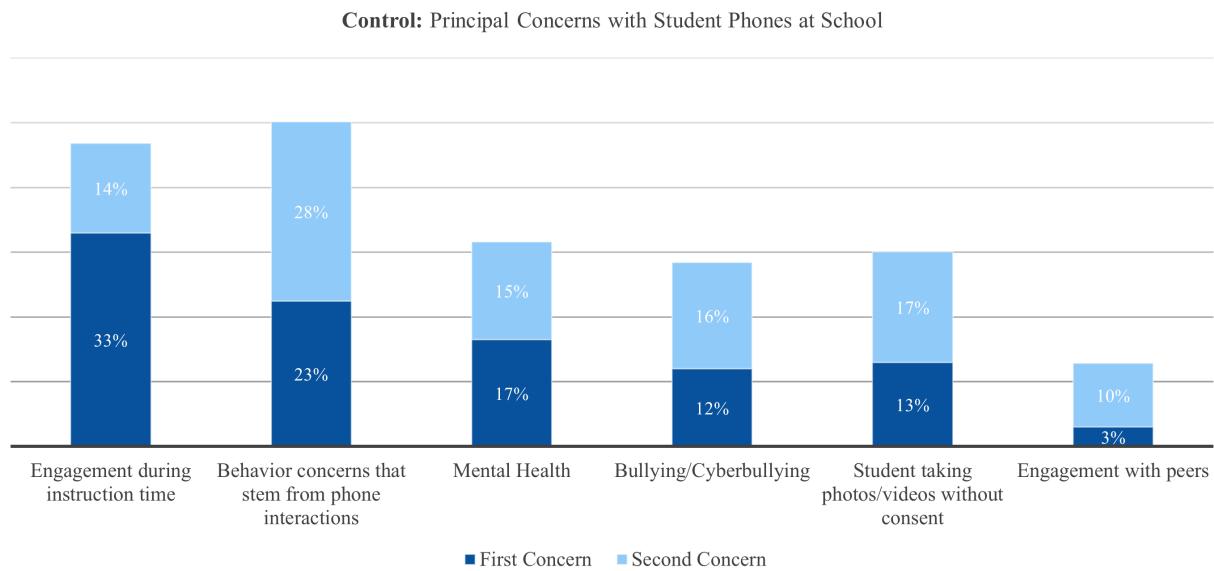
concerns that stem from phone interactions at a 23% response rate. Mental health concerns were again the third most frequent response for concerns at 17%.

We also asked principals to list their second concern as well as their top concern. For principals in treatment schools, the top response for second concern was mental health at a response rate of 24%. The next most common response of principals in treatment schools for second concern was bullying/cyberbullying at 14%. Principals in control schools had fairly distributed second responses, with students taking photos/videos without consent as the top response at 17%, followed by bullying/cyberbullying at 16%, and mental health at 15%.

**Figure 3: Principals from treatment schools' responses about top concerns related to students and cellphones at school.**



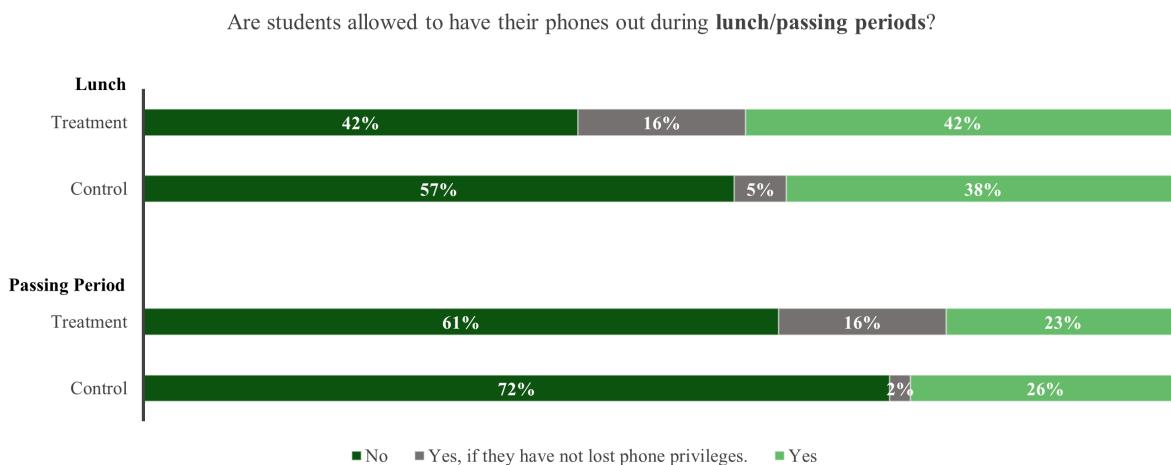
**Figure 4: Principals from control schools' responses about top concerns related to students and cellphones at school.**



### Phone Policies during Non-Instructional Time

We asked principals whether students are allowed to access their phones during lunch and passing periods. *Figure 5* presents the compiled results regarding student phone use during non-instructional times. During passing periods, 61% of principals at treatment schools reported that phones are banned, whereas 72% of the principals from control schools reported they were not allowed. Treatment school principals reported that phones were allowed during passing periods if privileges had not been lost at 16% compared to only 2% of principals from control schools. For lunchtime, 42% of principals at treatment schools responded that cellphones are not allowed, compared to 57% of principals from control schools. Principals at treatment schools had a response rate of 16% that phones were allowed during lunch if students had not lost phone privileges, whereas only 5% of principals at control schools responded that phones were allowed at lunch if students had not lost privileges.

**Figure 5: Principal responses to student policies during non-instruction time.**



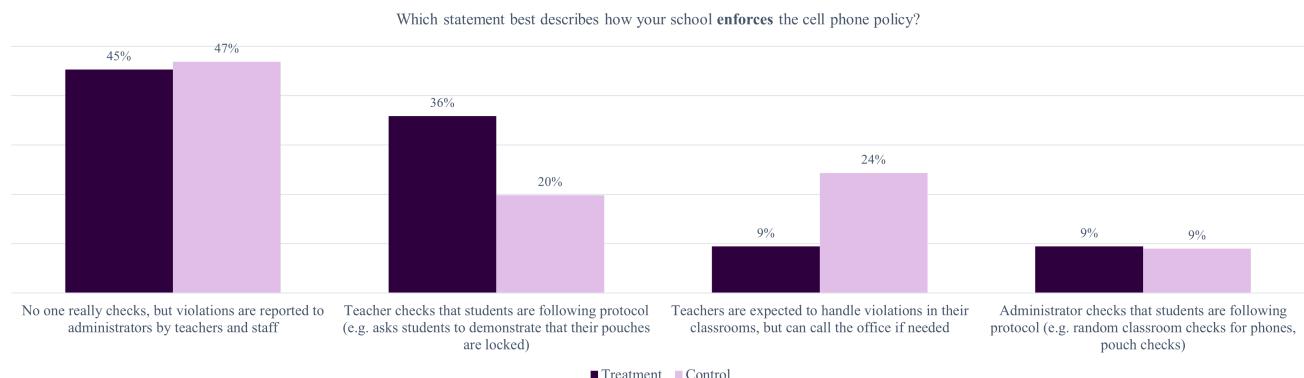
## Accountability and Enforcement

### *Enforcement*

To evaluate the accountability of phone-free policies in schools, we asked principals how these policies were enforced. Results are shown in *Figure 6*. The most common response for both treatment and control group, at 45% and 47% respectively, was, "No one really checks, but violations are reported to administrators by teachers and staff." There was a discrepancy between the treatment and control groups for the second and third most common responses. For the treatment group, the second most common response was "teacher checks that students are following protocols (e.g., asks students to demonstrate that their pouches are locked)" at a 36% response rate, but this had only a 20% response rate for the control group. On the other hand, the second most common response for the control group at 24% was, "Teachers are expected to handle violations in their classrooms but can call the office if needed." Only 9% of the treatment group responded to this policy enforcement option. The least common response, at only 9% for both groups, was, "Administrator checks that students are following protocol (e.g., random classroom checks for phones, pouch checks)." Multiple administrators noted that enforcement was a point of contention with the new, stricter phone policies. One principal stated, "It is something that is constantly monitored here," and another added, "To be completely transparent, we do find phones almost daily-

random searches, they will fall from students' pockets, etc.; however, students are not blatantly on their phones during instruction.”

**Figure 6: Principal responses related to the enforcement of student cell-phone policy, separated by treatment and control group**

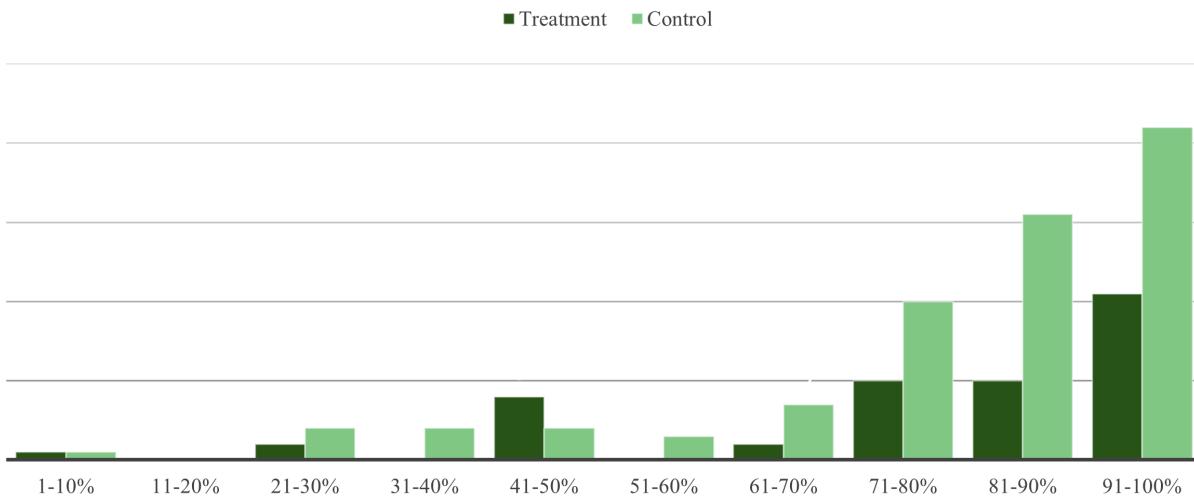


### **Compliance with Phone Policies**

We also asked principals to share their opinions on how many teachers and students followed cell-phone protocols, and the results, which are divided into treatment and control groups, are presented in Figures 7 and 8. In the treatment group, the majority of principals feel that 80% or more of teachers follow phone policies, but student compliance rates are more inconsistent. Principals report that larger percentages of students, compared to teachers, do not follow phone policies in both the treatment and control groups, although student compliance rates still have the majority of responses falling above 50%. Principals in the treatment group reported smaller percentages of both students and teachers following phone policies compared to the control group. For the control group, the majority of principals feel that both students and teachers follow the phone policy at 80% or higher. However, some principals feel that fewer than 80% of their teachers and students follow phone policies. One principal finds the policy overly challenging to enforce, particularly with Yondr pouches: “Yondr pouches are too much to monitor and too easy for the students to cheat the system. They have not made a difference in our school.” Another principal’s quote captures more moderate sentiments. “The students and teachers, for the most part, obey the phone policy. The students who do not follow the policy receive consequences. The same students who currently do not follow the phone policy will not follow the policy set forth by the state.”

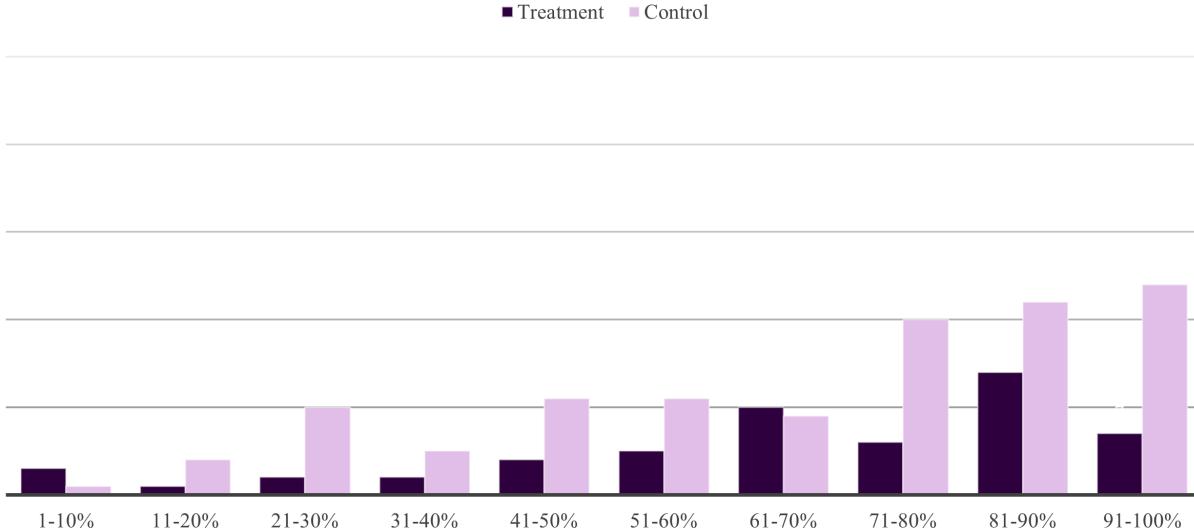
**Figure 7: Principal's response to what percentage of teachers follow cell-phone protocols.**

In your opinion, what percentage of your **teachers** follow the cell phone protocols?



**Figure 8: Principal's response to what percentage of students follow cell-phone protocols.**

In your opinion, what percentage of your **students** follow the cell phone protocols?

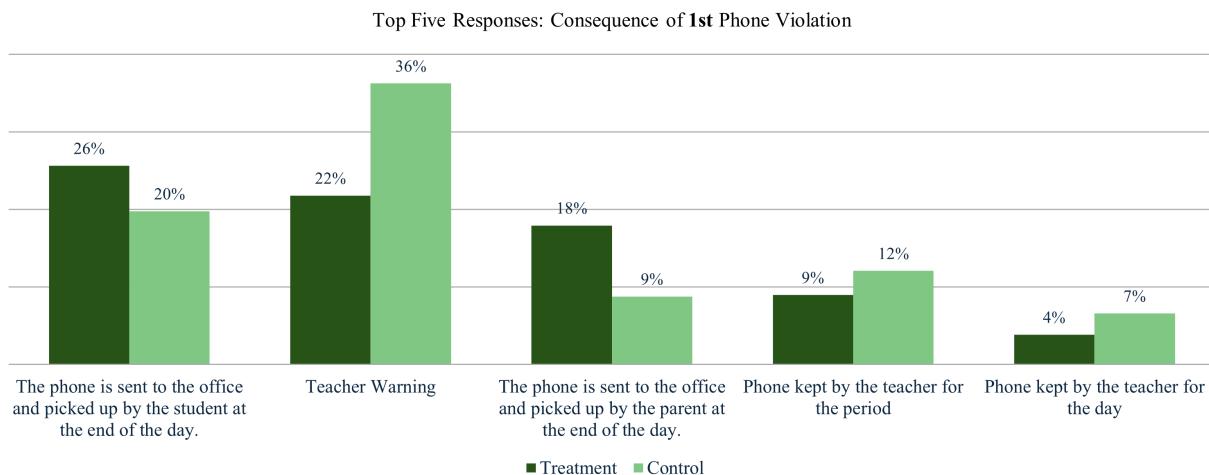


### **Consequences**

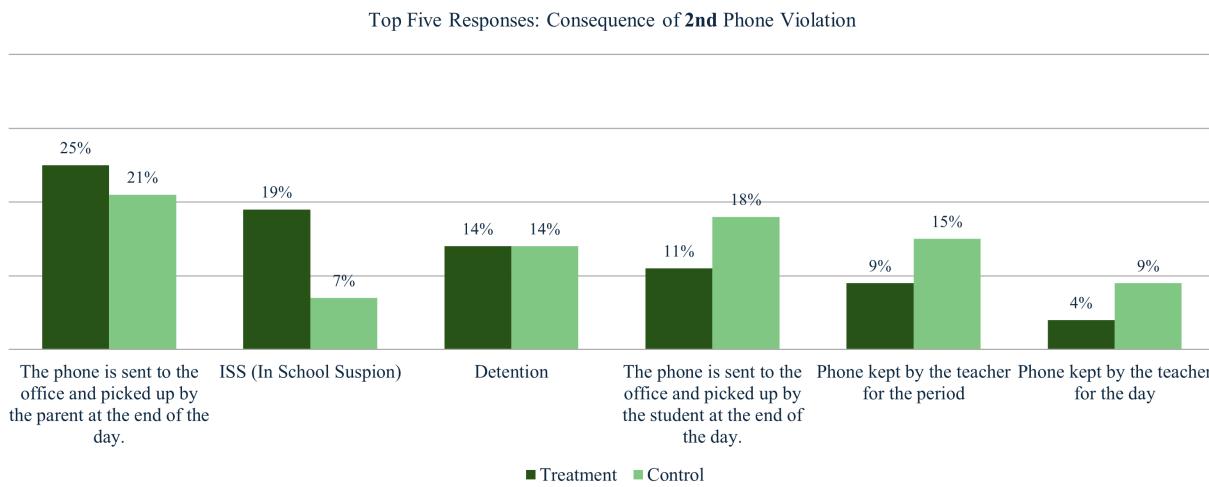
A key aspect of holding phone-free school policies accountable is the consequences for students who do not follow them. The principal implementation survey asked administrators to identify the most common consequences when students violate the policy, depending on how many times a student

disobeys the phone policies. We have included the five most common responses from principals for the first, second, and third violations, as well as the maximum consequence that can occur from a phone violation. A summary of the findings is presented in *Figures 9 through 12*. Key findings include that phones sent to the office for pickup by the student or parent are a common consequence for all phone violations. The most common first consequence for the treatment group was holding the student's phone in the office until the end of the day, at 26%. In contrast, the most common consequence for the first student violation was a teacher warning, at 36% for the control group. For the second violation consequence, the most common response for both groups was for the phone to be sent to the office and picked up by the parent at the end of the day. However, the second most common response for the treatment group was in-school suspension (ISS), at a 19% response rate, whereas the control group's second most common response was a phone sent to the office and picked up by the student at the end of the day. There is more variation in the severity of consequences as student violations increase, especially for the third violation and maximum penalties, although the responses between the treatment and control groups are consistent. The third violation can result in detention, in-school suspension (ISS), or a phone being taken and returned by the end of the day. The maximum consequences can be significant, and there were similar responses between both treatment and control groups. ISS was the most common response for both the treatment and control groups, at 21% and 18%, respectively. The second most common response was out-of-school suspension (OSS), at 16% for both the treatment and control groups, followed by expulsion at 12% for the treatment group and 11% for the control group. Some administrators noted they would like further recommendations about consequences related to the phone-free school policy changes: "Unless some guidance is given by the law on how to discipline students regarding cell phone usage at school, schools will probably revert to their current policy moving forward."

**Figure 9: Principal responses related to student consequences for first phone violation, separated by treatment and control groups**

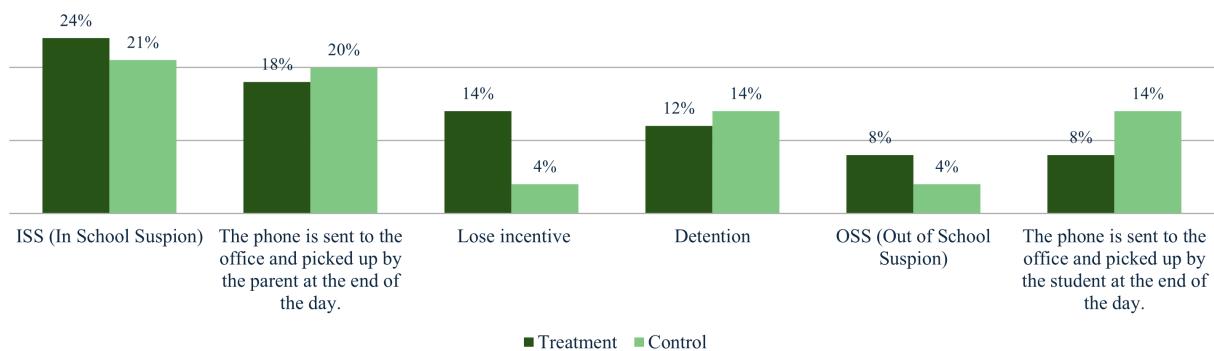


**Figure 10: Principal responses related to student consequences for second phone violation, separated by treatment and control groups**



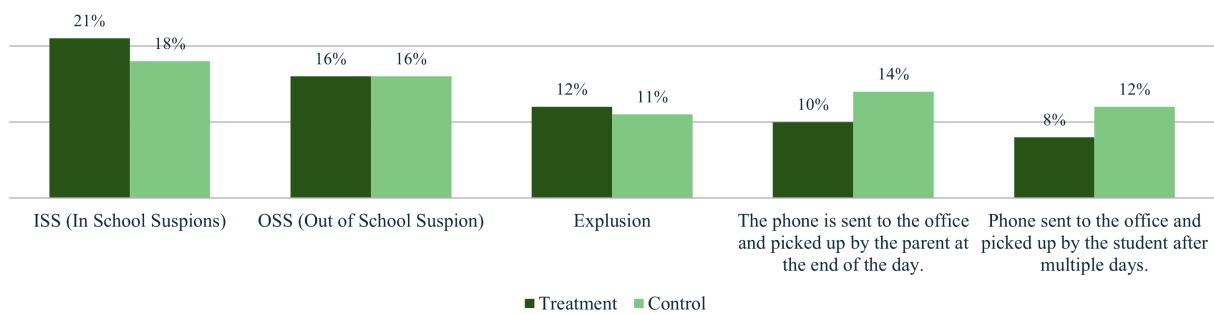
**Figure 11: Principal responses related to student consequences for third phone violation, separated by treatment and control groups**

Top Five Responses: Consequence of 3rd Phone Violation



**Figure 12: Principal responses related to student maximum consequences for phone violation, separated by treatment and control groups**

Top Five Responses: Maximum Consequence of Phone Violation



## VI. Discussion

Survey results showing that principals prioritize engagement during instruction and behavior, with mental health being a third priority, explain why schools proactively moved toward phone-free environments. While school administrators are concerned about student mental health, schools mainly focus on eliminating distractions and behavior issues caused by student devices.

Based on responses from principals and superintendents, there is evidence that some districts and schools adopted stricter phone policies, both in the control and treatment groups, before Bell-to-Bell, No Cell was put into effect. In the past, students were more often allowed to carry their phones throughout the school day, with policies often varying by classroom. For the 2024-25 school year, more schools implemented school-wide phone policies, with it becoming increasingly common for schools to require students to keep their phones off and out of sight. There is evidence of variation in these policies from district to district.

A key point in the Bell-to-Bell, No Cell policy is that student cell phones and electronic devices are banned not only during instruction time but also during social times at school, including lunch and passing periods. There is a growing argument that students' mental health is deteriorating due to reduced socialization with peers. School phone-free bans may be less effective at addressing mental health and socialization concerns if students can still access their phones during lunch, which could make them less likely to interact with their peers. While a slight majority of schools have already banned student cell phones during lunch and even more during passing periods, many schools still allow phone use during these non-instructional times. Student phones are not allowed at any point under the new Arkansas law.

Regarding accountability, enforcement, and consequences, there is variation across Arkansas in how schools are implementing new phone-free policies. While no school policy will ever be perfectly followed all the time, consistency in enforcement will improve outcomes. Between treatment and control groups, principals responded with a noticeable lower percentage of teachers and students following phone policies in treatment schools. This may also highlight students trying to circumvent more stringent phone policies and teachers struggling to enforce them. One superintendent summarizes this point by saying, "Phone-free policy is only as good as the staff in the classrooms enforcing it." Most administrators noted that enforcement of phone-free policies largely depends on teachers. Without support from administration, teachers may struggle to enforce phone policies effectively. There is also greater variation in the consequences assigned to students who violate the phone policy, particularly for those with

multiple infractions. Consequences in treatment schools were more severe after the first or second violation compared to control schools; however, both had comparably severe and varied consequences, with the maximum consequence being similar. This variation might relate to different consequences being suitable at different grade levels. With that said, questions arise about whether multiple phone violations should lead to out-of-school suspension or expulsion, as such punishments are in conflict with the learning goals of the policy.

Many administrators mentioned parents and their views on stricter phone-free school policies in the open-response portion of the survey. Multiple superintendents expressed eagerness to implement stricter student phone policies, but parents were vocally opposed to such a change. One stated, “When we polled parents during the summer about changing to the phone-free policy, an overwhelming majority of the parents were against the policy.” Administrators feel that parents want to be able to communicate with their children throughout the day and do not like the limitation that students cannot access their phones. They also find that parents frequently bring up potential emergency situations, and they want assurance they will be able to contact their student. A superintendent captures this sentiment with this quote:

Our district requested the monies for the cell phone-free schools in August. However, after requesting the monies, we surveyed all parents/guardians in the district. They overwhelmingly stated that they were opposed to removing cell phones and wanted to keep our policy as it is. While I understand and agree with the reason behind the phone-free issue, I also understand our parents' fear of not having communication devices in the event of emergencies. Right now, it is my opinion that we listen to our parents and try to work with them to create a policy that is beneficial for everyone.

Bell-to-Bell, No Cell stipulates that students who have accommodations outlined in an IEP or 504 accommodations can have access to their phone during school hours. Administrators are already seeing an uptick in cell phone accommodations added to student learning plans, as one superintendent noted, “We are needing more Velcro pouches because parents are getting 504 accommodation letters.” There are

many reasons a student may need to have access to cellphones during the day. Students with diabetes or other medical conditions may need to monitor their condition throughout the day. Other students who are English Learners may benefit from extra technology to help with translation needs. At the same time, there may also be parents who seek accommodations for their students to access their phones during the day, not necessarily for a medical or learning accommodation, but because they do not want their student to be separated from their phone.

Partnerships and aligned goals with parents regarding phone use, both in and out of school, may influence the effectiveness of phone-free school bans. Not only can parents seek workarounds to phone bans through 504 and IEP accommodations, but they can also monitor their student's phone use outside of school hours. If there is minimal monitoring of phone interactions or discussion of appropriate phone interactions at home, behavior stemming from phone interactions, including bullying and cyberbullying, is likely to continue to be a problem both in and out of school. Furthermore, if students are spending hours on their phones outside of school, school phone bans will not address mental health issues potentially stemming from too much time spent on phones in lieu of social interactions.

## **Study Limitation**

This survey was administered to gain a better understanding of how policy changes are being implemented, but it is limited to the perspectives of responding administrators. We have evidence showing that both treatment and control schools altered their phone policies during the 2024-25 school year, which blurs the comparison group. Additionally, the implementation of phone policies and Yondr pouch distribution occurred throughout the school year, resulting in varying treatment rates across schools.

This survey was conducted before the Bell-to-Bell, No Cell mandate became law, which allowed administrators to choose the implementation best suited for their schools and communities. However, this study does not capture the reaction to the law.

No aspect of this study can be interpreted as causal. This study also does not include results related to the associations between phone-free schools and student outcomes, including behavioral, academic, or engagement outcomes. Future research will examine these outcomes.

## Policy Recommendations

As schools transition to bell-to-bell phone-free policies, effective implementation will be key to achieving the best results. Like any new policy, success depends on clear communication of expectations and reasoning, along with careful rollout.

Accountability for these policies should not fall solely on teachers if consistency is to be maintained. Administrators should consider checking phones as students enter or conducting random searches to ensure compliance with school policies and regulations. Inconsistency will weaken the effectiveness of the policy across the school. Student consequences for phone violations are necessary for accountability, but schools should avoid overusing harsh punishments that remove students from the learning environment. Consequences should serve the student's best interests.

Districts should also consider different policies for different grade levels. Elementary schools may not require as much accountability while still maintaining a phone-free environment. High school students, especially those who are older, will likely need systems that allow quicker access to their phones, especially those who leave campus during the school day for outside opportunities. One administrator commented specifically about the flexibility needed in a high school setting saying, "I do not support a complete ban on phones at our high school. I believe this is set up to fail and will be a logistical nightmare." During middle school years, when students begin owning and accessing personal devices, phone-free policies may need to be enforced most strictly. Districts and schools also need to consider phone policies and expectations during extracurricular activities. The law stipulates that extracurricular activities during school hours must also be phone-free, even if off campus.

Involving school stakeholders and community members in discussions about new phone policies and their implementation is recommended to improve the outcomes of these policies. Within school,

accountability among teachers may be enhanced if they are included in conversations and understand the reasoning behind students keeping their cell phones away. Protocols related to emergency situations, and particularly communication aspects, should be communicated and discussed with parents and community members, without violating safety protocols. This is a widely mentioned concern that should be addressed locally by districts and individual schools.

Parents and community members can play a crucial role in aligning efforts to new restrictions on children's cell phone use. Even if phones are banned at school, if students have free access to phones at home, efforts to reduce access to addictive or inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and improve social interactions will be limited. Parents and guardians can help set standards for children's phone use outside of school but likely need support. We recommend that districts and schools establish advisory committees of parents and students, with regular meetings to discuss age-appropriate interactions with phones and internet safety. These committees can work to further educate parents about the potential dangers and adverse outcomes associated with adolescents and phones, as well as discuss protocols for communication during potential emergency situations at schools. Advisory committees could align with schools to better address student behaviors related to phone use and screen time. This may also better address a growing sentiment that children need to be taught appropriate interactions with technology, rather than enacting laws to ban technology for these students. One principal aligns with this view by saying, "We believe it is our responsibility, especially in high school, to teach students how to properly use their phones rather than relying on the government to do so."

## VII. References

Ark. S.B. 142, 95th Gen. Assembly, Reg. Sess. (Ark. 2025). “Bell to Bell, No Cell Act.”

Bai, R., Ma, Y., Liu, Y., Zhang, B., & Rasool, A. (2019). The relationship between cellphone use and achievement goals in junior high school students: A cross-lagged analysis. *Psychology in the Schools*, 56(6), 891–906. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22252>

Ferguson, C. J. (2024). Do social media experiments prove a link with mental health: A methodological and meta-analytic review. *Psychology of Popular Media*, No Pagination Specified-No Pagination Specified. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000541>

George, M. J., & Odgers, C. L. (2015). Seven Fears and the Science of How Mobile Technologies May Be Influencing Adolescents in the Digital Age. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10(6), 832–851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691615596788>

Goodyear, V. A., Randhawa, A., Adab, P., Al-Janabi, H., Fenton, S., Jones, K., Michail, M., Morrison, B., Patterson, P., Quinlan, J., Sitch, A., Twardochleb, R., Wade, M., & Pallan, M. (2025). School phone policies and their association with mental wellbeing, phone use, and social media use (SMART Schools): A cross-sectional observational study. *The Lancet Regional Health – Europe*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepe.2025.101211>

Grajeda, A. (2024, July 2). Arkansas governor, education secretary call on schools to join mental health pilot project • Arkansas Advocate. *Arkansas Advocate*. <https://arkansasadvocate.com/2024/07/02/arkansas-governor-education-secretary-call-on-schools-to-join-mental-health-pilot-project/>

Grajeda, A. (2025, January 29). Arkansas lawmakers file bill to restrict phone access at school. *Arkansas Advocate*. <https://arkansasadvocate.com/2025/01/29/arkansas-lawmakers-file-bill-to-restrict-phone-access-at-school/>

Heubeck, E. (2024, May). *Cellphone Headaches in Middle Schools: Why Policies Aren't Enough: EBSCOhost*. <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=8678dfed-098b-4a4a->

9bf3764720900d00%40redis&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWIwLHNzbyZzaXRIPWVob3N0LWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#db=tfh&AN=177530016

Higham, A. (2025, June 27). Map shows US states with school phone bans. *Newsweek*.

<https://www.newsweek.com/map-shows-us-states-school-phone-bans-2090411>

Holte, A. J., & Ferraro, F. (2021). Tethered to texting: Reliance on texting and emotional attachment to cell phones. *Current Psychology*, 40(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-018-0037-y>

Kopecký, K., Fernández-Martín, F.-D., Szotkowski, R., Gómez-García, G., & Mikulcová, K. (2021).

Behaviour of Children and Adolescents and the Use of Mobile Phones in Primary Schools in the Czech Republic. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(16), 8352. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18168352>

Lepp, A., Barkley, J. E., & Karpinski, A. C. (2015). The Relationship Between Cell Phone Use and Academic Performance in a Sample of U.S. College Students. *Sage Open*, 5(1), 2158244015573169. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015573169>

McKenzie, S., & Shaw, K. (2025). Arkansas's Phone- Free School Pilot: Focus Groups. *The Office for Education Policy*.

O'Bannon, B. W., & Thomas, K. (2014). Teacher perceptions of using mobile phones in the classroom: Age matters! *Computers & Education*, 74, 15–25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2014.01.006>

Richter, A., Adkins, V., & Selkie, E. (2022). Youth Perspectives on the Recommended Age of Mobile Phone Adoption: Survey Study. *JMIR Pediatrics and Parenting*, 5(4), e40704. <https://doi.org/10.2196/40704>

Selwyn, N., & Aagaard, J. (2021). Banning mobile phones from classrooms—An opportunity to advance understandings of technology addiction, distraction and cyberbullying. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 52(1), 8–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12943>

Tingir, S., Cavlazoglu, B., Caliskan, O., Koklu, O., & Intepe-Tingir, S. (2017). Effects of mobile devices on K–12 students' achievement: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 33(4), 355–369. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12184>

Twenge, J. M., Martin, G. N., & Campbell, W. K. (2018). Decreases in psychological well-being among American adolescents after 2012 and links to screen time during the rise of smartphone technology. *Emotion, 18*(6), 765–780. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000403>

Walker, T. (2024). *Take Cellphones Out of the Classroom, Educators Say* | NEA. <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/take-cellphones-out-classroom-educators-say>

## VIII. Appendix

Outcome of Interest	Description
<b>Superintendent Survey</b>	
Pilot Participation Indicator	<p>Did your district receive funds from the governor's Phone-Free Schools Pilot Program?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>
Yondr Pouch Indicator and Implementation	<p>(If Yes) Did your district adopt Yondr pouches?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul> <p>(If Yes) Which statement best describes when students are expected to have their phones locked in Yondr pouches?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bell to bell, including lunch, passing periods, and extracurriculars</li> <li>• Only during instruction time. Phones are allowed at lunch, during passing periods, and extracurricular activities.</li> <li>• Students only have pouches if they are on a behavior plan, or as a consequence for inappropriate phone use.</li> </ul> <p>(If Yes) Does your district intend to use Yondr pouches again next year?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul> <p>(If Yes) What are you changing?</p> <p>Open Response</p> <p>(If No) Why not?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unnecessary</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The accountability measures and daily protocol are too cumbersome.</li> <li>• Too many pouches are lost or broken</li> <li>• Other:</li> </ul>
Intentions for Next Year, Current and Previous Phone Policies	<p>What statement best describes your district's cell phone policy?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phones are kept in lockers and not allowed on their person</li> <li>• Phones are kept in classroom wall pouches</li> <li>• Phones are expected to be out of sight, but are allowed on a student's body (i.e., their pocket).</li> <li>• Phones are expected to be out of sight and off their body (i.e., their backpack).</li> <li>• Phone use is managed at the classroom level and is dependent on teacher expectations.</li> </ul> <p>Did your district's cell phone policy change this year?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul> <p>(If Yes) What statement best describes your district's cell phone policy last year?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phones are kept in lockers and not allowed on their person</li> <li>• Phones are kept in classroom wall pouches</li> <li>• Phones are expected to be out of sight, but are allowed on a student's body (i.e., their pocket).</li> <li>• Phones are expected to be out of sight and off their body (i.e., their backpack).</li> <li>• Phone use is managed at the classroom level and is dependent on teacher expectations.</li> </ul>
Open Response about Phone-Free Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there anything else you think we should know about your district's experience with phone-free environments?</li> </ul> <p>Open Response</p>
<b>Principal Survey</b>	
Pilot Participation Indicator, Yondr Pouch Indicator, and Implementation	<p>Did your district receive funds from the governor's Phone-Free Schools Pilot Program?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul> <p>(If Yes) Did your school adopt the pouches (Yondr or other type)?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul> <p>(If Yes) What statement best describes when your students are expected to have their phones locked in pouches?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bell to bell, including lunch, passing periods and extracurriculars.</li> <li>• Only during instruction time. Phones are allowed at lunch, during passing periods, and extracurricular activities.</li> <li>• Students only have pouches if they are on a behavior plan, or as a consequence for inappropriate phone use.</li> </ul> <p>(If Yes) Which statement best describes when student pouches are locked each day?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At school entrance while staff monitor.</li> <li>• At school entrance without staff monitoring.</li> <li>• In the classroom, while a teacher monitors.</li> <li>• Students are expected to come to school with pouches locked.</li> </ul> <p>(If Yes) Does your school intend to use Yondr pouches next year?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul> <p>(If No) Why not?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unnecessary</li> <li>• The accountability measures and daily protocol are too cumbersome.</li> <li>• Too many pouches are lost or broken</li> <li>• Other:</li> </ul> <p>(If Yes) For next year are you making changes to how your school uses the pouches?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul> <p>(If Yes) What are you changing about how your school uses the pouches?</p> <p>Open Response</p>
Concerns	<p>Select your top two concerns about phones at school.</p> <p>Answer Options: A drop-down was provided to label each concern as a first concern, second concern, or leave blank.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement during instruction time</li> <li>• Engagement with peers</li> <li>• Mental health</li> <li>• Behavior concerns that stem from phone interactions</li> <li>• Bullying/Cyberbullying</li> <li>• Students taking photos/videos without consent.</li> </ul>
<p>Current and Previous Phone Policies</p>	<p>What statement best describes your school's cell phone policy <u>this year</u>?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phones are kept in lockers and not allowed on their person</li> <li>• Phones are kept in classroom wall pouches or another designated location in the classroom.</li> <li>• Phones are expected to be out of sight, but allowed on a student's body (i.e., their pocket).</li> <li>• Phones are expected to be out of sight and off their body (i.e., their backpack).</li> <li>• Phone use is managed at the classroom level, and dependent on teacher expectations.</li> <li>• We are an elementary school and do not need a phone-free policy at this time.</li> </ul> <p>Did your school's cell phone policy change this year?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul> <p>(If Yes) What statement best describes your school's cell phone policy <u>last year</u>?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Phones were kept in lockers and not allowed on their person</li> <li>• Phones were kept in classroom wall pouches or another designated location in the classroom.</li> <li>• Phones were expected to be out of sight, but allowed on a student's body (i.e., their pocket).</li> <li>• Phones were expected to be out of sight and off their body (i.e., their backpack).</li> <li>• Phone use was managed at the classroom level, and dependent on teacher expectations.</li> </ul>
<p>Non-Instructional Time</p>	<p>Are students allowed to have their phones out at lunch?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul> <p>Are students allowed to have their phones out during passing periods?</p>

	<p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>
<p>Accountability</p>	<p>Which statement best describes how your school enforces the cell phone policy?</p> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administrator checks that students are following protocol (e.g. random classroom check for phones, pouch checks)</li> <li>• Teacher checks that students are following protocol (e.g. asks students to demonstrate that their pouches are locked, or that their phones have been put away)</li> <li>• No one really checks, but violations are reported to administrators by teachers and staff</li> <li>• Teachers are expected to handle violations in their classrooms, but can call the office if needed.</li> </ul> <p>In your opinion, what percentage of teachers follow the cell phone protocols?</p> <p>Sliding scale from 0 to 100%</p> <p>In your opinion, what percentage of students follow the cell phone protocols?</p> <p>Sliding scale from 0 to 100%</p>
<p>Consequences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the consequences for a student violation of the school phone policy?(Please select the most common consequence for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd violations, as well as the maximum consequence.)</li> </ul> <p>Answer Options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher warning</li> <li>• Phone kept by the teacher for the period</li> <li>• Phone kept by the teacher for the day</li> <li>• Lose incentive</li> <li>• Phone sent to the office and picked up by the student at the end of the day.</li> <li>• Phone sent to the office and picked up by the parent at the end of the day.</li> <li>• Phone sent to the office and picked up by the student after multiple days.</li> <li>• Phone sent to the office and picked up by the parent after multiple days.</li> <li>• Detention</li> <li>• Behavior Plan</li> <li>• ISS</li> <li>• OSS</li> <li>• Expulsion</li> <li>• Other:</li> </ul>

Open Response about Phone Policies	Is there anything else you think we should know about your school's experience with phone-free environments? Open Response
------------------------------------	---