Office for Education Policy

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Year One of Bell-to-Bell, No Cell: What Arkansas Principals Report

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Executive Summary

The 2025-26 school year was the first year with a statewide mandated student cellphone ban in K-12 public schools. The Arkansas law, Bell-to-Bell, No Cell, requires all public schools to prohibit students from using personal electronic devices during the school day. Although the law establishes a statewide expectation, schools retain discretion in how they implement and enforce their phone-free policies.

This policy brief reports on administrators' perspectives on implementing Bell to Bell, No Cell. In Spring of 2026, the Office for Education Policy (OEP) surveyed Arkansas public school principals to examine school phone policies, perceived changes in student engagement and behavior, instructional technology use, disciplinary consequences for phone violations, and parent perspectives and communication.

Key Findings:

- **Principals generally view the policy favorably.** A large majority of principals said Bell-to-Bell, No Cell is beneficial, with high school principals reporting the greatest perceived benefits.
- **Schools use different approaches to implementation.** Most principals reported requiring phones to be out of sight and off students' bodies, while others use Yondr pouches, lockers, or designated classroom storage.
- **Instructional screen use remains common.** Most principals reported that students use screens during at least some instructional time, with substantial variation across schools.
- **Consequences vary, including exclusionary discipline.** Out-of-school suspension was the most commonly reported maximum consequence for phone-policy violations.
- **Communication remains a concern for families.** Principals generally perceive parent support as high, but report emergency communication and day-to-day contact remain important considerations.

Methods and Sample

This report shares the results from the 2025-26 phone-free implementation survey OEP emailed to all Arkansas public school principals. We received 179 responses, representing an overall response rate of 17%. We emailed the initial survey on April 20th, 2026, and it remained open until July 10th, 2026. Principals could skip questions, and many questions allow for multiple response options. A full list of the survey items can be found in the full report.

This report presents results based on principals' responses to the implementation survey. These findings are recognized as the perceptions of respondent principals and not necessarily accurate estimates of realized outcomes due to Bell-to-Bell, No Cell.

Sample

Bell to Bell, No Cell requires all public schools to implement policies prohibiting student personal electronic device use. For this reason, we sent the phone-free implementation survey to all principals. Table 1 presents our sample data divided by school level: elementary, middle, and high school.

Table 1 – Survey Sample of Respondents

Group	N	Expected	Response Rate
All principals	179	1,061	17%
Elementary	36	522	7%
Middle	61	207	29%
High	82	332	25%
Total	**179**	**1,061**	**17%**

Response rates varied by school level. Elementary school principals had the lowest response rate at 7%, compared with 29% for middle school principals and 25% for high school principals. We also compared respondent schools' characteristics with all Arkansas public schools to ensure our respondent schools are representative of schools throughout the state. These results are available in Table 2. We consider the school characteristics of average enrollment per grade and the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL).

Table 2 – Average Size and Programmatic Characteristics of Sample Respondents

	Average Enrollment Per Grade	School Avg % Eligible for FRL
All schools	116	54
Respondents	136	52
Elementary		
All schools	81	58
Respondents	57	65
Middle		
All schools	179	52
Respondents	160	53
High		
All schools	133	50
Respondents	154	46

Respondent schools are broadly comparable to all Arkansas public schools on both average enrollment per grade and average percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL). The balance between respondent schools and all Arkansas public schools is also broadly comparable when analyzed by school level.

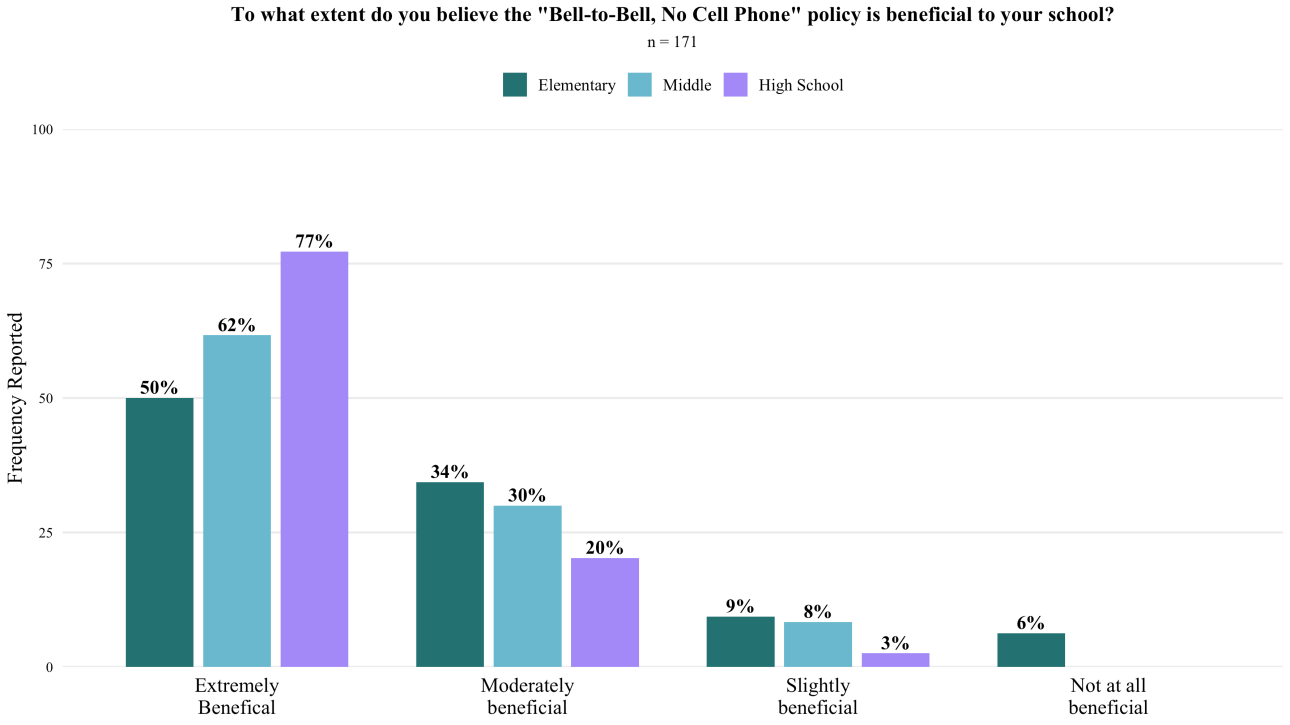
Results

Principals Report Phone-free Policies to be Beneficial

Results to the question "To what extent do you believe the "Bell-to-Bell, No Cell" policy is beneficial to your school?" are found in Figure 1. Most principals viewed Bell-to-Bell, No Cell favorably, with the large majority of principals indicating they believed Bell-to-Bell, No Cell was either "extremely beneficial" or "moderately beneficial."

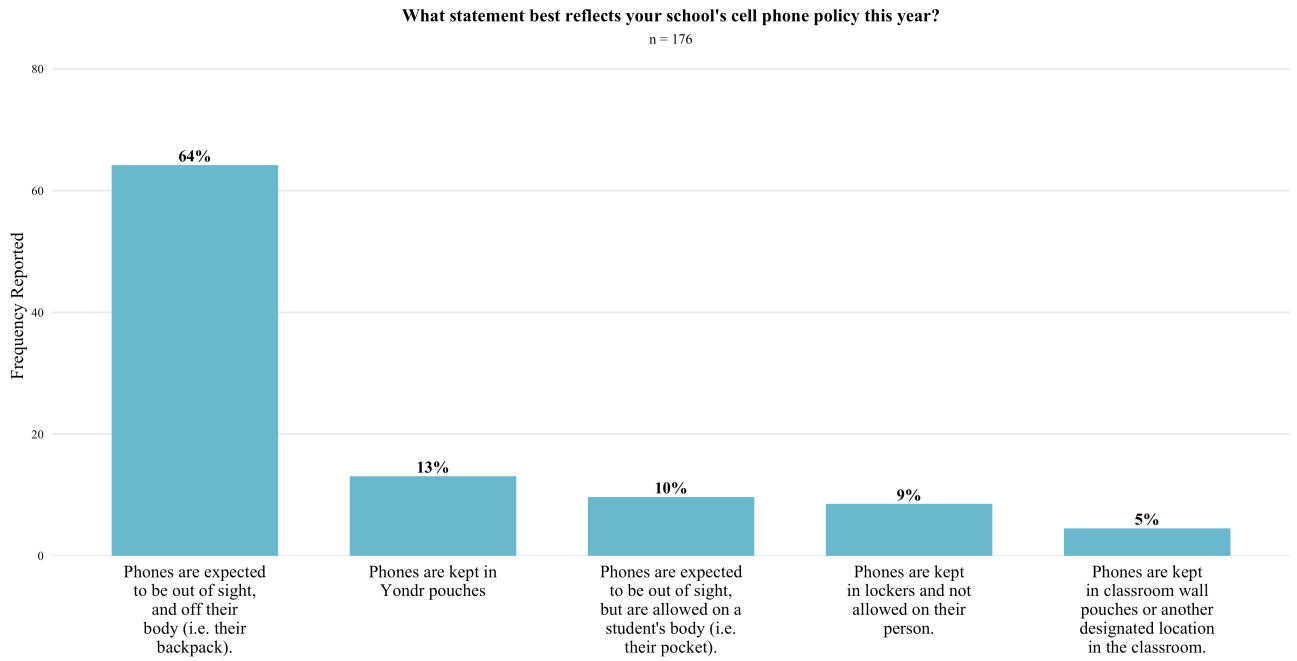
Perceptions differed by school level. High school principals were most likely to describe the policy as "extremely beneficial" (77%), followed by middle school principals (62%) and elementary school principals (50%). Elementary school principals reported comparatively more mixed perceptions.

Figure 1: Perceived Benefits of Bell-to-Bell, No Cell by School Level



How Are Schools Implementing Phone-Free Policies?

Figure 2: How Are Schools Implementing Phone-Free Policies?



Although Bell-to-Bell, No Cell establishes statewide expectations, schools differ in how they keep students' personal phones inaccessible during the school day. Results to the question, "Which statement best reflects your school's cellphone policy this year?" are shown in Figure 2.

Most principals (64%) reported that students are expected to keep phones out of sight and off their bodies, such as in a backpack. Thirteen percent reported using Yondr pouches, which lock phones away during the school day. Other approaches included requiring phones to remain out of sight but allowing students to keep them in their pockets (10%), storing phones in lockers (9%), and using classroom wall pouches or another designated classroom location (5%).

These findings suggest that phone-free school policies vary, with most responding schools relying on students to store their phones away, while fewer schools use a locking pouch system.

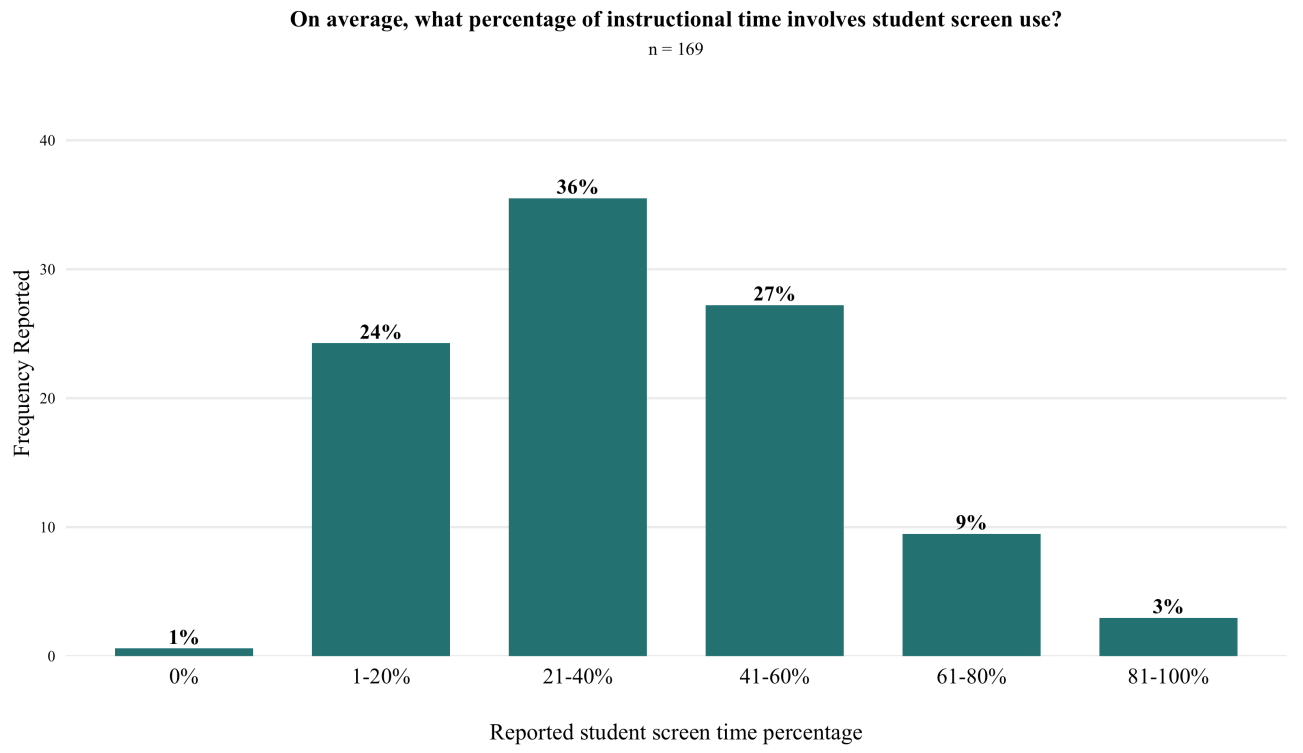
Phone-Free Policies Do Not Eliminate Instructional Screen Use

Bell-to-Bell, No Cell restricts personal electronic devices, but students may continue using school-issued technology for instruction. We asked principals, "On average, what percentage of instructional time involves student screen use?" The response results to this question are found in Figure 3.

Results indicate a high level of variation in reported student screen time use during instruction, with most responses between 1 and 60%. Thirty-six percent of principals estimated that screens were used during 21–40% of instructional time, while 27% reported 41–60% and 24% reported 1–20%. Smaller percentages reported screen use during 61–80% of instructional time (9%) or 81–100% (3%). Only 1% reported no student screen use during instruction.

The findings highlight an important distinction for policymakers: restricting personal phones does not necessarily reduce students' overall exposure to screens. Schools may benefit from clear expectations for both personal device restrictions and purposeful instructional technology use.

Figure 3: Percentage of Instructional Time Involving Student Screen Use



Consequence for Phone Violations

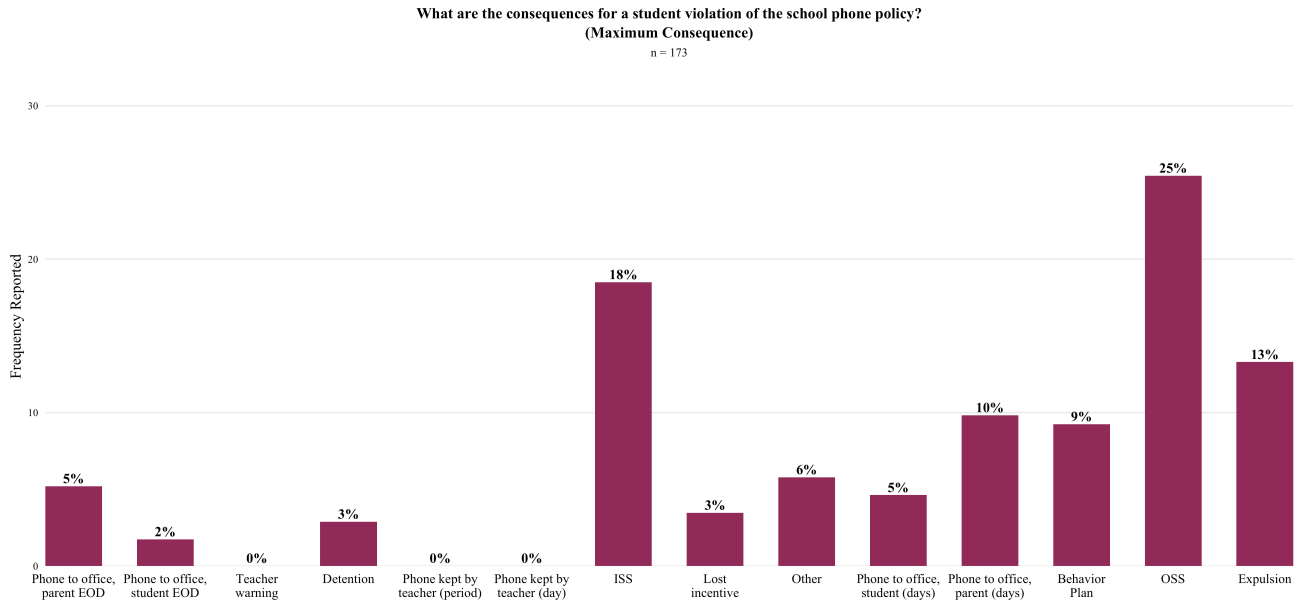
We asked principals a number of questions about student and teacher compliance, enforcement of policies, and disciplinary actions related to phone violations. The results to these survey items can be viewed in our full report.

We asked principals to report the most common consequence for phone violations after the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd violation, as well as the maximum consequence. The results for maximum consequence for a phone violation are shown in Figure 4.

Consequences for violations vary, with exclusionary disciplinary actions appearing among the most common responses. Principals most frequently selected Out-of-School Suspension (OSS) (25%), followed by In-School Suspension (ISS) (18%), and expulsion (13%).

Exclusionary disciplinary actions may conflict with an intended benefit of phone-free schools: improving instructional learning for students.

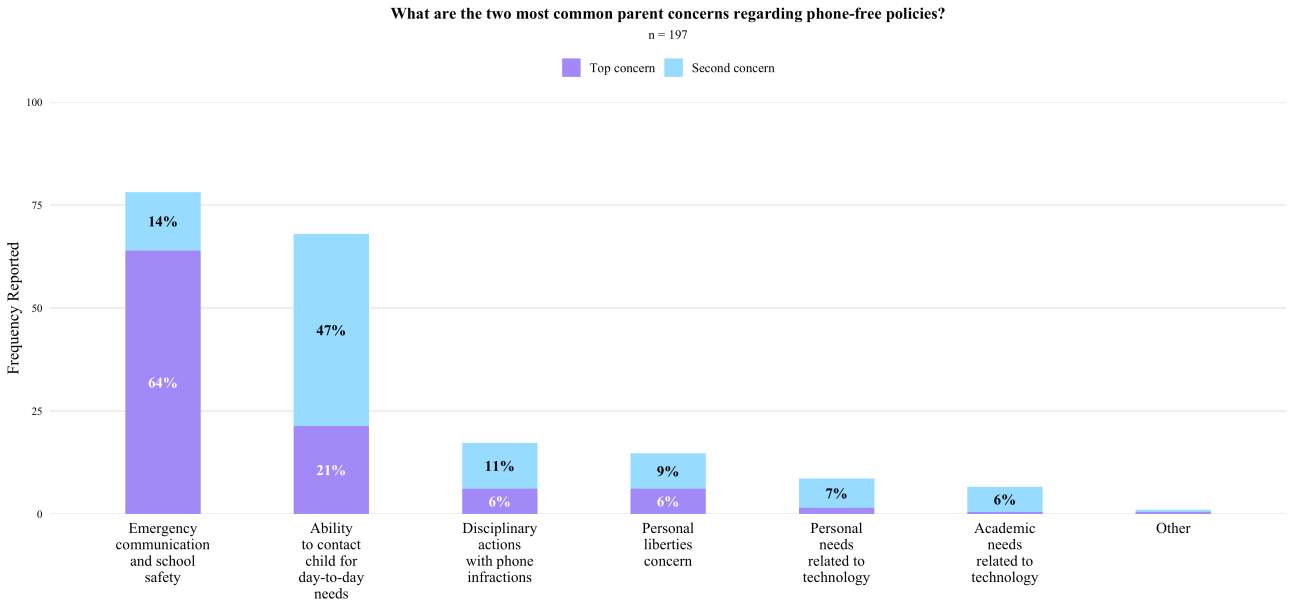
Figure 4: Maximum Consequence for Phone-Policy Violations



Parent Support Is High, but Communication Remains Important

Principals generally perceived parents as supportive of phone-free policies, and those results are available in the full report. Despite this support, communication remains a central consideration for families. The results to the survey item "What are the two most common concerns regarding phone-free policies?" are available in Figure 5. Principals most frequently identified emergency communication and school safety as parents' primary concern (64%), followed by the ability to contact their child for day-to-day needs (21%).

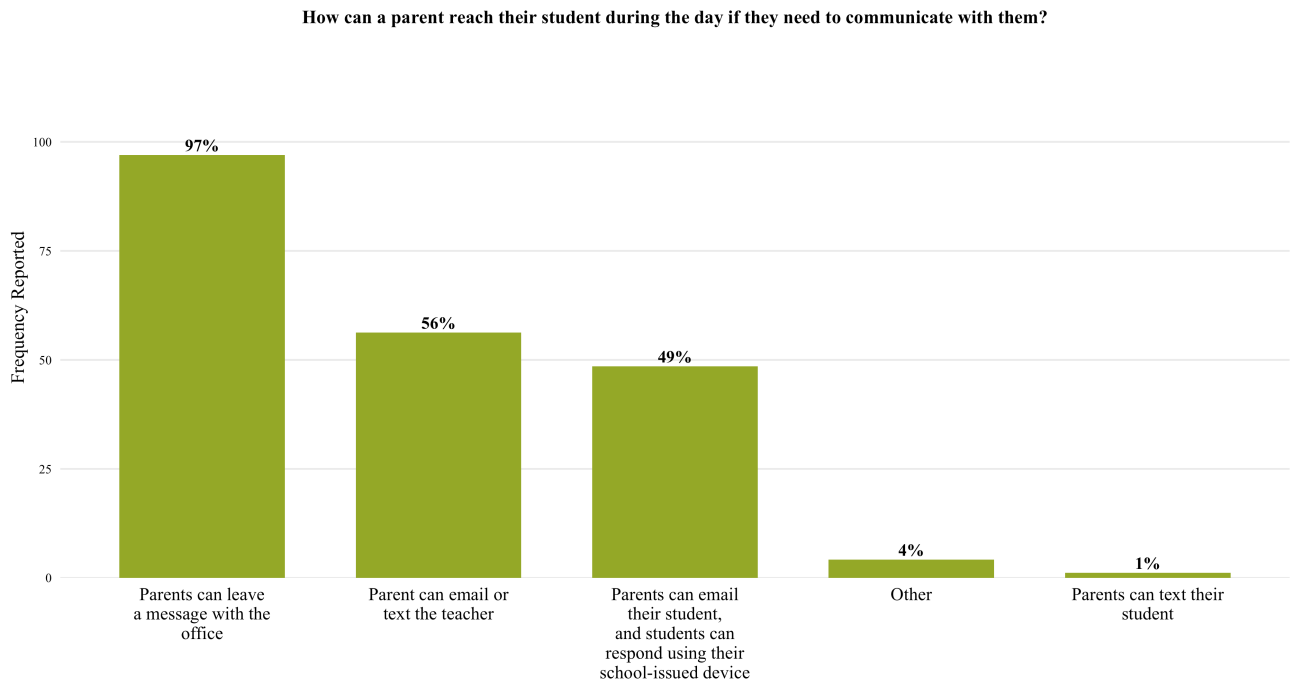
Figure 5: Parent Concerns About Phone-Free Policies



We also asked principals for more information on parent-to-student communication with the survey item "How can a parent reach their student during the day if they need to communicate with them?" These results are found in Figure 6. Principals reported several ways parents can reach students during the school day and were asked to select all that applied. Nearly all principals (97%) indicated that parents could leave a message with the school office. More than half (56%) reported that parents could email or text the teacher, while 49% said parents could email their student, who would respond using a school-issued device.

Clear communication pathways between students and their families can support more effective implementation of phone-free school policies. Schools should clearly communicate how families can reach students, how urgent messages will be handled, and how school-issued devices may be used for appropriate communication. Schools should also consider the staffing and coordination needed to manage these systems without disrupting instruction and overburdening staff.

Figure 6: How Parents Can Reach Their Students



Conclusion

Arkansas principals generally perceive Bell-to-Bell, No Cell as beneficial, especially those principals who work with older students. At the same time, schools vary in implementation approaches, enforcement practices, disciplinary consequences, and instructional technology use. These differences highlight the range of decisions school leaders must navigate while implementing a statewide policy across diverse school settings.

As the policy continues, policymakers and school leaders can build on these findings by supporting consistent implementation, protecting instructional time, establishing clear expectations for technology use, and maintaining reliable communication with families. Attention to disciplinary consequences and access to instruction may help schools balance accountability with students' learning needs. Schools may also benefit from reviewing whether existing procedures are practical for staff and clearly understood by families.

The results included in the brief are based on principals' reported perceptions and should not be taken as evidence of measurable student outcomes. Future research examining student engagement, behavior, attendance, and academic outcomes could provide additional evidence to guide policy decisions. Comparing implementation approaches across school levels and settings may also help identify practices that are feasible for schools and aligned with the policy's goals.

Establish clear and consistent enforcement procedures. Schools should communicate who is responsible for monitoring compliance, how violations are reported, and how consequences are applied. Clear procedures can help reduce variation across classrooms and limit the burden placed on individual teachers.

Distinguish personal phone restrictions from instructional technology use. Most principals reported that teachers manage school-issued devices, while instructional screen use varied widely. Schools should set clear expectations for technology use that preserve its instructional value while addressing potential distractions.

Prioritize instructional time when determining consequences. Principals reported a wide range of disciplinary responses, including ISS, OSS, and expulsion. School leaders should consider whether consequences can maintain accountability without unnecessarily removing students from learning.

Maintain reliable communication pathways for families. Schools should explain how parents can contact students during the school day and how emergency communication will be managed. These procedures should be clear to families and manageable for school staff.

Continue evaluating implementation and outcomes. Principals' responses provide an early look at school practices and perceived changes in engagement and behavior. Continued evaluation can help determine whether these perceptions persist over time and how implementation approaches relate to student outcomes.

Office for Education Policy

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