



District Cell Phone Policy: Engagement Executive Summary

Introduction and Background

Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) is developing a districtwide cell phone and personal electronics policy, prompted by requirements from the Minnesota state legislature. Currently, SPPS does not have a districtwide policy, and cell phone rules and expectations are determined by each school.

To inform the development of a districtwide policy, SPPS has engaged with students, families, and staff to better understand their preferences, perspectives and concerns about cell phone and personal electronics use and policy in schools. Surveys were sent to all SPPS families, and 6-12th grade students and staff. Additionally, discussions were held with eight Parent Advisory Councils (PACs), and a student roundtable was conducted with high school students and two Minnesota State Senators.

This executive summary provides a high-level overview of the Cell Policy Planning Engagement Report. The full report is available upon request.

Current School Practices

No SPPS elementary schools allow cell phone use during the school day. Middle schools also generally do not allow cell phones during the entire school day (full restrictions). High schools tend to have some restrictions, prohibiting the use of cell phones in class, but allowing use during lunch and passing time. A complete list of current school-level cell phone guidelines and restrictions is documented [here](#).

	No Restrictions	Some Restrictions	Full Restrictions
Elementary Schools	5*		35
Middle Schools	1 (SPPS Online)	2	13
High Schools	1 (SPPS Online)	11	2
Specialized Sites	2*		2

**These schools don't have written guidelines but generally express that cell phones are not allowed, and they have a 1-1 conversation with families when needed.*

Survey Response Numbers and Rates

Online surveys were a major part of the engagement activities, reaching more than 10,000 individuals. Response rates were slightly above 20%, and participation in languages other than English was higher than in other recent SPPS surveys.

Group	Number of Respondents	Response Rate
Students	3,974	21%
Staff	662	22%
Families	5,870	20%
Total	10,514	22%

Student Perspectives

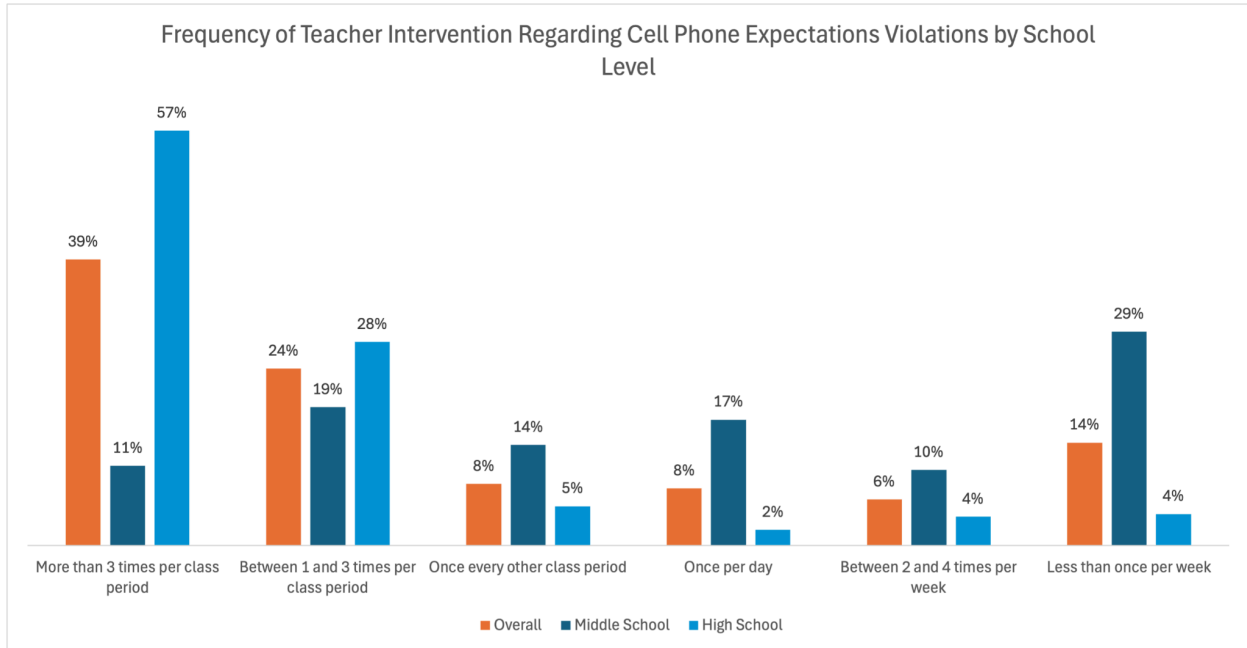
Both middle and high school students expressed a strong preference for less restrictive policies. They highlighted the utility of cell phones for academic purposes, family communication, listening to music, and mental health breaks. Students also generally reported that cell phones do not cause much distraction or disruption to their learning.

However, students' self-reported phone use during school suggests a greater impact. Students report using their cell phones significantly during school hours. Most strikingly, 12% report using their phones more than an hour and a half per day at school, and 7.5% report using their phones more than two hours per day at school. These findings are concerning in the context of existing research on the negative impacts of cell phone use on student learning and academic performance.

Staff Perspectives

Compared to students, school-based staff paint a contrasting picture. In middle and high school, teachers report frequent disruptions caused by cell phone use. Sixty-three percent of staff indicate that cell phone-related distractions (of a severity that they must intervene) occur at least once per class period, and 39% report three or more times per class period.

High school staff face significantly more classroom disruptions than their middle school counterparts, likely at least in part due to less restrictive rules and expectations. Additionally, middle schools with less restrictive rules and expectations face far more challenges.



Teachers also highlight the emotional strain of enforcing inconsistent policies and dealing with frequent power struggles with students over phone usage. Finally, staff frequently discussed the need for more policy implementation and discipline support so the burden is not only on teachers.

Parent/Family Perspectives

Parents occupy a middle ground in the discussion. While many parents recognize the disruptive potential of cell phones in classrooms, they also emphasize the importance of maintaining open lines of communication with their children, especially in emergencies. Parent preferences vary by grade level, with greater support for stricter policies in middle schools and more flexibility in high schools. However, across all levels, parents desire clarity and consistency in policies.

Equity

Both staff and families call attention to the need for equity in any districtwide policy. The policy and implementation plan should explicitly consider students with IEPs, and those requiring medical accommodations. Further, disciplinary measures must avoid exacerbating existing inequities by disproportionately impacting certain student populations or leading to students' exclusion from instruction. Finally, responses to policy violations should be tiered and not cause undue burden on teachers or parents.

Recommendations

The development of a districtwide cell phone policy should balance the diverse needs and perspectives of students, staff and parents while prioritizing equity, clarity, and support for implementation/enforcement. The following specific recommendations should be considered as the policy is developed and implemented:

- **Consider collecting more qualitative data:** This could include conducting focus groups with staff and/or parents and reaching out to staff bargaining groups that are most impacted by the proposed changes.
- **Adopt a consistent, well-communicated districtwide policy:** All stakeholders desire clarity and consistency in policy and implementation.
- **“Bell-to-bell” or “full restrictions” for at least elementary and middle schools:** Engagement results strongly support full restrictions at elementary and middle schools. Results for high schools are more mixed; stakeholders show more interest in students having access, but cell phones currently cause notably greater disruption and distraction at high schools than middle schools (likely due to less restrictive policies).
- **Support teachers in implementation and enforcement:** This was a primary message from staff, who said they do not currently have the support they need to address cell phones in the classroom. Lack of resources and support leads to inconsistent enforcement, loss of learning time, and strained teacher-student relationships.
- **Address parental communication:** Policies should account for parents' desire and need to reach their children in routine and emergency situations.
- **Equitable design and implementation:** Policies must address IEP/504 plans, prevent exclusion from learning, prevent undue burden on parents, and ensure all students are treated fairly.
- **Focus on digital literacy:** Schools should incorporate digital responsibility and self-regulation education into their curricula.
- **Ongoing evaluation:** The district should establish mechanisms to assess the policy's impact and make adjustments as needed.

Next Steps

These findings were presented to the Board of Education on Dec. 19, 2024, along with a draft of the recommended policy. The full presentation and draft policy are available in the [BoardBook](#) starting on page 123. Further discussion about the policy took place at the Committee of the Board meeting on Jan. 7, 2025. [Listen to a recording of the discussion here.](#)

The policy will be discussed by the Board again at the next two regular meetings on Jan. 21 and Feb. 18, with a vote expected at the Feb. 18 meeting. Members of the public wishing to comment on the policy are invited to [sign up for public comment](#). Once the policy is approved by the Board, schools will prepare to implement it at the start of the 2025-26 school year in September.