



Connecticut Association of Boards of Education

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PRESENTS POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

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Addressing Parent Concerns Regarding School Safety in the Face of Cell Phone Restrictions

CABE's policy department recently added a model electronic device (cell phones, smartphones, personal technology devices, etc.) to those already included under policy number [5131.81](#). This new addition to the policy bank follows the **Position Statement and Policy Guidance for Personal Technology Use in Connecticut Schools: Impact of Social Media and the Use of Cell Phones on Student Learning and Mental Health**

The "Guidance" unanimously adopted by the State Board of Education in August highlights concerns expressed by the US Surgeon General issued in an *Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health* of the "concerning relationship between excessive, unrestricted social media use and increased mental health challenges in youth." "Additionally," it adds, "emerging research suggests that social media has a significant negative impact on brain development at a time in adolescence when identities and a sense of self-worth are forming, and social rewards, pressures, and acceptance are paramount."

As boards consider this guidance and CABE's model policy in their deliberations, they will need to consider the likelihood of significant parental pushback. With continuing incidents of school shootings and reports of schools resorting to lockdowns due to threats of violence, parents understandably are on edge and may view their child having a cell phone in school as a security blanket of sorts. They will likely argue that a child with a cell phone would be able to immediately call 911, report an incident, and achieve a quick and perhaps life-saving response.

Other parents may argue that they would want to be in contact with their child if such a crisis were to occur. In the case of the recent Apalachee High School shooting, a student's text to his mother went viral, "School shooting...I'm scared...pls...I'm not joking." The texting exchange between the mother and her son continued with their sharing of their love for each other and the son's report that "someone's dead." School officials cannot simply dismiss these fears with these tragic events and the personal toll they take on individuals, families, and communities.

According to a recent article in EdWeek, "Being able to get in touch with their child if there's an emergency at school is the No. 1 reason parents say they want their child to have access to their phone at school, according to a National Parents Union survey conducted in February of 1,500 parents of K-12 public school students. (*The Georgia School Shooting May Accelerate the Backlash to Cellphone Bans*, Elizabeth Heubeck & Lauraine Langreo, September 5, 2024)

Rather than dismiss these fears, boards of education and superintendents will need to allow them to be expressed and included in the deliberative process. It is particularly challenging to allay such emotionally charged considerations. However, when they shift to matters of safety, rather than arguing against a student's access to a cell phone as an effective tool in a crisis, leave that up to the experts. When addressing parent pushback regarding stricter cell phone restrictions, your student safety policy ([5142](#)) and your emergency and disaster preparedness policy ([6114](#)) can provide helpful guidance. In addition, CABA's model policy Crisis Response: Crisis Management Plan (Emergencies and Disaster Preparedness Plan) ([5141.6](#)) can also be an appropriate vehicle for informing practice and deliberating over hotly debated topics such as cell phones and their impact on student safety.

Illustrating how such policies can be helpful, model policy 5142, *Student Safety Action Plan for Handling Crises and Emergencies*, for example, emphasizes that "accurate information is central to the effective response to the crisis or the trauma resulting from a crisis." It further specifies:

*The School Security and Safety Committee (SSSC) shall assist in developing and administering the school's safety and security plan. **The Committee is composed of a local police officer, a local first responder, a teacher employed at the school, an administrator employed at the school, a mental health professional (guidance counselor, social worker, school psychologist, school nurse, or child mental health specialist) a parent/guardian of an enrolled student, a special education department representative (newly added) and any other person the Board of Education finds necessary. Parents/guardians serving on this committee must not have access to information about disturbing or threatening student behavior reported to the Committee as this may compromise student confidentiality.***

This committee, with its law enforcement/emergency responder/crisis experts, would be able to provide informed testimony to questions such as: Should every child have a cell phone in case of an emergency? If not all children, which children? If having a cell phone accessible in a crisis is good practice, when and how will it be used?

Listening to those experts in law enforcement and emergency response on your committee, they are likely to support the model policy's guidance for school principals:

Discourage students from using the school telephone, cellular telephones, and other electronic devices, and instruct office personnel to call homes to report any emergencies that students may have.

However, they are the experts, and their input should be considered highly valuable when evaluating whether students' having cell phones adds to a school's overall security.

The School Security and Safety Committee should meet regularly to evaluate and update district plans and be responsible for vetting safety issues related to students' access to personal devices. Should all students have cell phones and be directed to call 911, school administrators, friends, or family members in case of an emergency, a suspected intruder, or the sound of a gun?

The policy also indicates that the school is responsible for:

- Conducting regular audits (at least annually) to evaluate and analyze the effectiveness of each school's safety and security plans. First responders, local law enforcement and the entire school community shall be involved in this process. Law enforcement and local public safety officials shall evaluate all fire and crisis response drills.
- Communicating with parents/guardians and community members about school-level emergency preparedness protocols to the greatest extent possible.

Understandably, parents may have conflicting concerns regarding the impact of restrictive cell phone policies. While restricting cell phones may create a less distracting and positive school climate and play a positive role in children's mental well-being, parents have an intense need to know what is going on when they're alerted of a crisis. Often, such alerts are generated by the news media and spread through social media. That information is often instantaneous and often wrong. Nevertheless, in anticipation of such events, and certainly during a crisis, parents want direct access to their children.

Since a school's primary concern is for the safety and well-being of all children and staff, we need experts in the field to help inform policies and to guide school officials and boards to ensure that all policies relating to safety, crisis, and preparedness are coherent and reflect best practices.

Generally speaking, superintendents are not trained public health officials but were responsible for leading their districts through the recent pandemic. They strategically used the information and guidance from experts in the field to guide their practice.

Superintendents, board members, and staff are generally not trained emergency/crisis responders. Relying on those experts is critical in developing emergency and safety plans. Representatives should be on your teams and have input in developing, practicing, monitoring, assessing, and ensuring your policies align with and support your plans.

Given cell phone policy deliberations and the strong feelings held by various constituents, it's advisable to use your safety committee to consider whether students should have cell phones to ensure access to parents and whether cell phones should play a role in communicating emergencies and sharing information.