



Commonwealth of Virginia
Office of the Governor

Executive Order

NUMBER THIRTY-THREE (2024)

ESTABLISHING CELL PHONE-FREE EDUCATION TO PROMOTE THE HEALTH & SAFETY OF VIRGINIA'S K-12 STUDENTS

By virtue of the authority vested in me as Governor of the Commonwealth, I hereby issue this Executive Order directing the Secretary of Education, Secretary of Health and Human Resources, Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Virginia Department of Education, and the State Health Commissioner to heed the call of parents, public health professionals, educators, and other stakeholders across the Commonwealth and take immediate actions to protect the health and safety of students in Virginia's K-12 public schools by issuing guidance on the establishment of cell phone-free education policies and procedures.

Importance of the Initiative

The necessity of implementing cell phone-free education in Virginia's K-12 public schools is increasingly evident. Parents, public health professionals, educators, and other stakeholders across the Commonwealth are expressing concern over the alarming mental health crisis and chronic health conditions affecting adolescents, such as depression and anxiety, driven in part by extensive social media usage and widespread cell phone possession among children. Cell phone-free education will significantly reduce the amount of time students can be on phones without parental supervision.

Children spend an average of 4.8 hours a day on social media, and recent studies indicate that spending more than three hours a day on social media doubles the risk of poor mental health for adolescents.¹ Most alarming is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data from 2019-2021, reporting that the rate of suicide has increased 167% since 2010 for girls and 91% since

¹ American Psychological Association (April/May 2024). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2024/04/teen-social-use-mental-health>.

2010 for boys.² In the same timeframe, boys and girls experienced a spike in depression of 161% and 145%, respectively.³

In addition to the worsening state of youth mental health in the past decade, the state of academic achievement also suffered, as measured by the precipitous drop in the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) scores beginning in 2012.

Many school divisions in the Commonwealth and around the nation have acknowledged and taken steps to address this growing challenge by restraining cell phone use and access to social media, especially during instructional hours. Up to now, public schools have often left these decisions and consequences to individual teachers, resulting in a variety of expectations and enforcement, all too often leading to students frequently checking their devices, scrolling through social media, and sending direct messages.⁴

Studies indicate that students who use their phones during class learn less and achieve lower grades.⁵ The issue extends beyond mere distraction; substantial phone and social media use can have a cumulative, lasting, and detrimental impact on adolescents' ability to focus and engage in their studies.⁶

Therefore, creating a cell phone-free education environment in public schools is not only a prudent measure but an essential one to promote a healthier and more focused educational environment where every child is free to learn.

Several school divisions within the Commonwealth have transitioned to cell phone-free education during the school day, and we should learn from these early leaders across Virginia and the nation and continue to benefit from emerging best practices. Clear guidance provided by the Virginia Department of Education will significantly benefit students, parents, and educators, while assisting local school boards and divisions in considering the appropriate response to this mental health and educational problem.

Directive

Accordingly, pursuant to the authority vested in me as the Chief Executive Officer of the Commonwealth, and pursuant to Article V of the Constitution and the laws of the Commonwealth, consistent with Code of Virginia § 22.1-23(6), I hereby order the Secretary of

² U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.), National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. (n.d.). Additional notes and figures from *The Anxious Generation* [here](#).

³ National Survey on Drug Use and Health conducted by federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (n.d.), U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.). Additional notes and figures from *The Anxious Generation* [here](#).

⁴ Clayson, D. E., & Haley, D. A. (2013). An Introduction to Multitasking and Texting: Prevalence and Impact on Grades and GPA in Marketing Classes. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 35(1), 26-40.

⁵ Kuznekoff, J. H., & Titsworth, S. (2013). The Impact of Mobile Phone Usage on Student Learning. *Communication Education*, 62(3), 233–252.

⁶ Glass, A. L., & Kang, M. (2018). Dividing Attention in the Classroom Reduces Exam Performance. *Educational Psychology*, 39(3), 395–408.

Education, the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Department of Education, and the State Health Commissioner to:

1. Facilitate listening sessions and other stakeholder engagement opportunities to solicit public input on age-appropriate cell phone-free education policies and procedures, gather feedback on best practices currently underway in Virginia public schools, and receive input for the draft guidance establishing cell phone-free education in K-12 public schools.
2. Establish a detailed definition of “cell phone-free education” which incorporates feedback from parents, students, teachers, and other stakeholders. The definition should address the age-appropriateness of all actions including the elimination or severe restriction of the use of cell phones and smart phones during instructional time, as well as input on age-appropriate restrictions on other personal electronic communication devices, such as smart watches, tablets, and computers connected to the internet during instructional time other than school authorized uses.
3. Publish model implementation plans that offer school divisions options to achieve cell phone-free education learning environments, such as pouches, dedicated cell phone “lockers,” and other best practices derived from localities and states that have adopted similar policies.
4. Publish draft guidance for public school divisions to adopt policies and procedures establishing cell phone-free education, through the restriction or elimination of cell phone use during instructional time, on the Virginia Department of Education website for feedback from parents, students, teachers, public school administrators, school board members, and other stakeholders by August 15, 2024.
5. Address within the draft guidance processes for parents to communicate with children for typical reasons, such as forgotten items and changes in pick-up times, as well as protocols for students with medical needs to access their devices and for emergency communication.
6. Issue final guidance after considering feedback from stakeholders by September 16, 2024, for school divisions to adopt policies and procedures by January 1, 2025. Nothing in this Executive Order is intended to prohibit school divisions from adopting age-appropriate policies and procedures ahead of this date or that are more comprehensive than the guidance issued pursuant to this Order.
7. Establish a reporting mechanism to post public school division adopted cell phone-free education policies and procedures in line with this Executive Order on the Virginia Department of Education website and to collect relevant data on an ongoing basis related to student outcomes for follow-up reporting.

8. Coordinate with the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, Virginia Department of Health, and other relevant agencies to disseminate information regarding the effects of cell phone usage on academic and mental health development and chronic health conditions, such as depression and anxiety, that affect school aged children; as well as tools to promote healthy social media and phone usage for youth, to teachers, parents, and medical professionals.

Effective Date

This Executive Order shall be effective upon its signing and shall remain in force and effect unless amended or rescinded by a future executive order or directive. Given under my hand and under the Seal of the Commonwealth of Virginia, this ninth day of July, 2024.




Glenn Youngkin, Governor

Attest:


Kelly Gee, Secretary of the Commonwealth