

WISCONSIN COULD JOIN CALL FOR CHANGE ON CELL PHONES IN SCHOOLS

Lawmakers are debating a bill to add Wisconsin to the growing list of states banning K-12 students from using cell phones in schools during instructional time. Of the 309 districts and charter schools responding to a recent survey, most already restrict student cell phone usage to common areas, with smaller districts tending to favor more stringent restrictions. The bans offer potential benefits but enforcement may prove challenging.

In recent years, cell phones have become increasingly central to daily life for teenagers and adults alike. In response, K-12 schools have had to respond by assessing how this potent technology fits – or doesn't fit – within modern instructional spaces.

The issue has been particularly salient for teachers, many of whom increasingly find themselves competing with devices for their students' attention. In a [Pew Research survey](#) released last year, 72% of high school teachers who responded said that students being distracted by their cell phones is a "major problem in their classroom."

Wisconsin school districts have responded by adopting a patchwork of cell phone usage policies for students. Among districts and independent charter schools that shared their policies with the state Department of Public Instruction, most permit students to use cell phones only in common areas such as cafeterias or hallways.

Others have opted for a more restrictive policy, fully banning students from using phones on school premises. Still others take a more permissive approach, imposing no restrictions – while typically permitting individual teachers to restrict cell phone use in their classrooms if they choose.

Some Wisconsin lawmakers want to change the patchwork approach by enacting a statewide ban on students using cell phones during instructional time in public school districts. Under this proposal, schools and districts still would be permitted to enact more restrictive policies. The debate comes at a time when many states have adopted, or are considering, similar statewide measures.

Meanwhile, for many educators, cell phone usage restrictions may prove difficult to enforce when students still have phones in their pockets, purses, or backpacks. As such, some schools have also begun to restrict when and where students may possess their phones.

DISTRICT POLICIES VARY WIDELY

To understand the current landscape for cell phone policies in Wisconsin's public schools, we first analyzed the results of a recent [Digital Learning Survey](#) of school districts by the state Department of Public Instruction (DPI). Among the questions posed to districts was: "What does the current policy in your district regarding cell phone use look like?" Among Wisconsin's 421 public school districts – as well as independent charter schools, which are publicly funded but independently run — 309 responded to this question in the optional survey.

While nuances of their cell phone usage policies varied, responses to this question were sorted by DPI officials into four categories. They were: no district restrictions on usage (teacher's discretion); usage permitted in middle school and high school common areas only; usage permitted in high school common areas only; or full ban at all schools in the district. The survey data did not indicate when districts adopted these policies, though available information suggests many have done so in recent years.

A total of 43.4% of districts or schools responding to the survey said their policies permit cell phone use only in middle and high school common areas. Another 26.2% said their policies permit it only in high school common areas. Districts or schools with a full ban accounted for

20.7% of responses, followed by 9.7% of districts that had a no-restrictions policy. As Figure 1 demonstrates, it is difficult to discern broad geographic patterns in cell phone policies.

SMALLER DISTRICTS, MORE RESTRICTIONS

The next phase of our analysis looks at the 302 districts or schools that responded to the DPI survey question, and for which broader demographic data are available. As shown in Figure 2, the survey data show Wisconsin's smallest districts or schools are more likely to have adopted more stringent restrictions. Among those with 500 or fewer students, 36.2% had full bans, significantly more than the statewide share.

Districts or schools with greater shares of students of color also have adopted more stringent restrictions. Among those with student bodies in which students of color are a majority, 32% have adopted full bans, while just 8% have a no-restrictions policy.

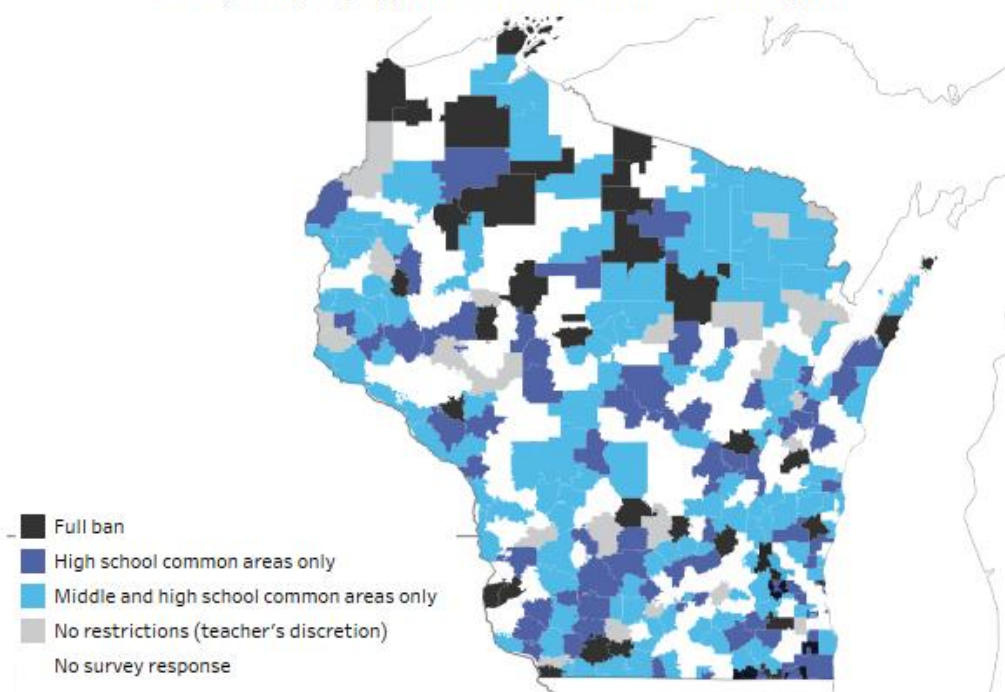
We also analyzed districts and schools according to four categories of urbanization: city, suburban, town, or rural. The latter three categories showed minimal differences in their policies, but the city, or urban, category had a markedly larger share of districts or schools with full bans, at 31.8%.

Notably however, all of the urban districts or schools with a full ban are independent charter schools. This may help to reconcile our findings that both city and small districts or schools are more likely to adopt stricter policies. In addition, the state's largest urban district, Milwaukee Public Schools, did not respond to the survey. However, its policy fully bans students from using phones on school premises during the school day.

Another way to consider the geography of these policies is according to the state's 12 Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) districts. CESA District 12, in the far northern part of the state, has the highest share of

Figure 1: A Range of Policies on Cell Phones in Wisconsin Schools

Cell phone policy by public school district, 2024-25 school year



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction - Digital Learning Survey

districts with a full ban: 54.5%. Next highest is District 1 in far southeastern Wisconsin, with 36.8%.

District 8, in the state's far northeastern corner, has the lowest share of districts or schools with a full ban (0%) and the highest share with no restrictions (35%). Both CESA districts 8 and 12 include primarily rural or town school districts in far northern Wisconsin, making the dissimilarity of policies in these two regions notable.

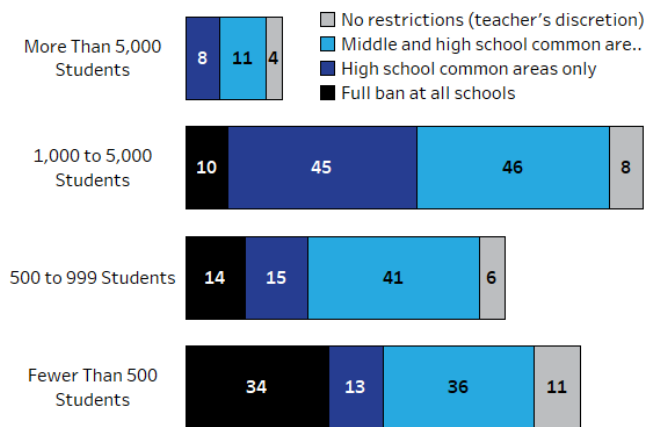
Accounting for the total number of students in these 302 districts provides a different way to consider their impact. Of the more than 525,000 students in districts or schools that responded to the survey, 46.9% were in schools that permit cell phone use only in middle and high school common areas. Another 34.4% were in schools permitting use only in high school common areas, while 8.0% were in schools with a full ban and 10.6% were in schools with no restrictions.

A CONTINUUM ON POSSESSION

While school cell phone usage policies are key, they're only part of the picture. Educators may encounter challenges in enforcing such policies if students have their phones within easy reach throughout the school day.

Figure 2: Smaller Districts More Likely to Have Full Bans

District cell phone policy as of 2024-25, by student enrollment



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction - Digital Learning Survey

The DPI survey looks only at policies regarding student cell phone use, not at whether and how schools are restricting student cell phone possession. That said, [this continuum](#) developed by the agency provides more detail about the options that districts are adopting, particularly between the extremes of a full ban at one end of the spectrum and no restrictions at the other.

These policies include requiring students to keep their phones in their lockers during instructional time. Another option is requiring that students place their phones inside personal lockable pouches, which can then be carried by the student in purses or backpacks.

Teachers also may require that students place their phones in a classroom phone caddy at the start of each class, and then allow them to retrieve their phones at the end of class. Some schools also permit students to use their phones during instructional time only for educational purposes.

MORE STATES ADOPT BANS

In a growing number of states, policymakers have eschewed a patchwork of school policies in favor of a uniform statewide restriction or policy, or at minimum, a baseline policy recommendation. According to data collected by the Kaiser Family Foundation, through April 30, 19 states had adopted either a statewide ban or restriction regarding cell phone use in K-12 schools, or their state education agency had issued a policy recommendation or pilot program for districts.

Many more states, including Wisconsin, have such proposals being debated in their Legislatures. As shown

in Figure 3, legislation has been introduced in an additional 16 states to enact potential statewide restrictions or policies.

[The bill](#) currently under debate in our state would require public school districts to adopt a policy banning students' use of cell phones during instructional time. There would be limited exceptions, such as during an emergency or to manage a student's health care. Under the bill, districts also would be permitted to adopt more stringent restrictions. As of the publication of this report, the bill had passed the state Assembly but had not yet been voted on in the state Senate.

Looking to our borders, neighboring Minnesota recently enacted a law requiring all districts, as of March 2025, to have adopted a policy on students' possession and use of cell phones. The law did not specify what restrictions, if any, districts had to impose.

More action has occurred in recent weeks. In neighboring Iowa, [Gov. Kim Reynolds just signed a law](#) banning student cell phone use in schools during instructional time. And in Illinois, Gov. J.B. Pritzker recently announced his [support for a bill](#) to ban student cell phone use in schools throughout the state.

PUBLIC OPINION FAVORS RESTRICTIONS

Amid today's deeply polarized landscape, student cell phone use in school has proven to be among the few policy issues that unite a sizable share of Democrats and Republicans.

Available survey data show cell phone restrictions in schools are generally popular, though it depends on how restrictive the policies are. Another [Pew Research survey](#) released last year found 68% of U.S. adults said they support a ban on middle and high school students using cell phones during class.

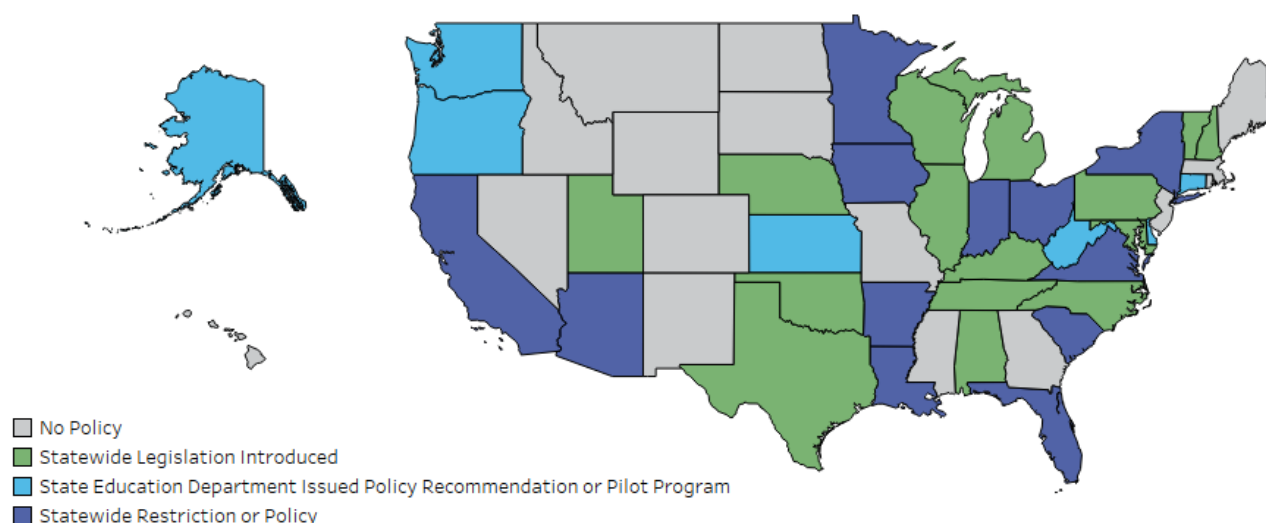
This survey found little difference in views between adults who were parents of a K-12 child and those who were not: 65% of parents supported such restrictions, as did 69% of non-parents. A majority of self-identified Republicans and Democrats supported such restrictions, though support was higher among Republicans (74% compared to 64% for Democrats).

There was a sharp age gradient in views on this question, with just 45% of the youngest respondents (ages 18-29) supporting a ban on cell phone use during



Figure 3: Some States Already Have Policies on the Books

State-level policies on cell phone use in schools as of April 2025*



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation

*Note: Iowa's new law was signed on April 30, 2025.

class. The share was 67% among those ages 30-49, and 80% among those 50 and older.

Among respondents who opposed these restrictions, 60% told Pew that a major reason was because they agreed with the statement that “parents should be able to reach their child when needed.” This aligns with what the Forum heard in interviews with state and school district officials, who outlined the pushback from some parents in response to proposed restrictions.

Meanwhile, a full ban on all cell phone use in schools was much less popular, the Pew survey found. Among adult survey respondents, 53% opposed such a measure, compared to 36% who supported it.

CONCLUSION

In an age of digital distractions, cell phones are among the biggest offenders for adults and children alike. Internet-connected devices give a near-infinite supply of knowledge and information at our fingertips, but they also can challenge our ability to maintain our focus on a given task.

This may be particularly challenging for children, whose impulse control and executive function are still developing. As educators have increasingly voiced concern about the role of phones in classrooms, recent years have brought [a growing national movement](#) to restrict their use.

While surveys show – and our interviews with school officials suggest – that cell phone restrictions in schools are popular, not all students and parents are on board. Districts and state lawmakers would be well-advised to better understand these objections as they craft new cell phone policies or tweak existing ones.

In addition, phone usage restrictions are only part of the picture. More schools – recognizing the difficulty of enforcing such restrictions – are adopting additional restrictions on when and where students can possess phones during the school day.

If used properly, digital devices have the potential to greatly enhance student learning. Over the last decade, districts have issued laptops or tablets to students as a learning tool. But unlike with personal cell phones, educators can determine what content students can access on these devices – and more easily determine when they use them during instructional time.

Limiting the use of students’ cell phones in schools may seem like an easy decision to some, but it marks just the start of a journey toward a larger goal. In our digital age, Wisconsin students must move into adulthood with the skills needed to command both their attention spans and their use of digital technology.

