



# Phone-free schools in New Jersey

What families need to know about

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Agard Research Associates Inc.

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Starting in September 2026, every New Jersey public school must have a policy that stops non-academic phone use during the school day.

## PART ONE

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# The law and the evidence

What changes, when it changes, and what research actually shows.

## What the new law does

- 01 Every school board, including charter and renaissance schools, must adopt a device policy for the 2026-2027 school year.
- 02 The core rule: no non-academic use of personal internet-enabled devices on school grounds during the school day, from first bell to last.
- 03 It covers phones, tablets, and smartwatches. It does not cover school-issued devices used for class.
- 04 Districts choose the details: storage method, consequences, and whether to go further. Your district's policy is the document that governs.

# How New Jersey got here

SEPT 2025

■  
State guidance issued; a state commission recommends a full-day ban.

OCT 2025

■  
A grant program opens to help schools buy storage, grades 6 to 12.

JAN 2026

■  
The law is signed January 8; updated guidance follows January 15.

JUNE 2026

■  
The grant period ends; the new state budget has no program funds.

SEPT 2026

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Policies take effect for the 2026-2027 school year.

# Why lawmakers acted

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84%

of NJ high schoolers report three or more hours of daily recreational screen time

2023 New Jersey Student Health Survey

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36%

felt sad or hopeless for two weeks or more in the past year

49 percent of girls; 22 percent of boys

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15%

were electronically bullied through texting or social media

A rate essentially flat across recent surveys

# What research shows, honestly stated

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## FINDINGS THAT SUPPORT RESTRICTION

England: after school phone bans, exam scores rose about 6.4 percent of a standard deviation, most among the lowest achievers.

Norway: girls' grades and mental health improved and bullying fell for all, strongest for lower-income girls.

The U.S. Surgeon General links more than three daily hours of social media to roughly double the risk of anxiety and depression symptoms.

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## FINDINGS THAT URGE CAUTION

The most direct UK comparison of restrictive and permissive schools found no difference in wellbeing or grades.

Students used phones about 30 minutes less at school and made it up afterward.

Scientists openly disagree on whether social media causes the teen mental health decline.

No U.S. statewide bell-to-bell law is yet evaluated; New York's first year is the closest test.

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Both sides can point to real evidence. The gains, where found, went mostly to struggling students. New Jersey's own results do not exist yet.

## PART TWO

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# Your child's rights and your voice

Exceptions, special education, staying in contact, and how to be heard.

## When your child may still use a device

- 01 A plan controls: device use written into an IEP, a Section 504 plan, or a student health plan continues. Enforcement cannot override the plan.

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- 02 Medical need: prescribed care with a note from a health care professional, such as a smartwatch that monitors blood glucose.

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- 03 Translation help for multilingual students, and case-by-case approval for students who care for a family member.

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- 04 Emergencies: every district policy must say how devices are handled in an emergency or a perceived threat of danger.

# Special education: know your rights

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## WHAT THE LAW GUARANTEES

Federal law, through the IDEA, Section 504, and the ADA, requires accommodation, and the New Jersey statute repeats the protection in its own text.

State guidance says schools should tell families how to request a device accommodation and handle it confidentially, and must base decisions on documented needs and review them regularly.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

Ask for an IEP or 504 team meeting to write needed device use into the plan.

Provide the medical documentation for prescribed care.

Ask how staff will know about the accommodation without singling your child out.

If enforcement conflicts with the plan, contact the case manager or 504 coordinator and request a team meeting.

## Reaching your child during the day

- 01 Routine messages go through the school's main office, and staff relay them. Save the office number where you can find it.
- 02 State guidance: in a lockdown, students should avoid unnecessary communication and follow staff directions. Ask how your district will send updates.
- 03 If devices are stored and school closes unexpectedly, the district should publish how and where devices are returned.
- 04 Ask whether your district guarantees a way for parents to reach students. New York requires one by law; New Jersey leaves it to each district.

# How to raise a concern so it lands

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## WHERE TO GO

Public comment at board of education meetings, where the policy is adopted. District surveys, policy committees, and back-to-school sessions.

The principal or superintendent for building-level issues.

The IEP or 504 team for accommodation issues.

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## HOW TO BE EFFECTIVE

Read the written policy and the state FAQ first, then ask about specifics: storage, discipline steps, contact channel, and the exceptions process.

Put requests in writing, and ask for translated materials if you need them.

State guidance calls for an annual policy review, and your input shapes the local design.

# The money picture, plainly

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\$3.0M

in state grant money appropriated for 2025-2026, for grades 6 to 12 only

About \$980,000 reached 86 school systems

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\$0

appropriated for 2026-2027, the first year the mandate applies

Districts fund implementation locally

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2%

yearly cap on growth in the local school tax levy

Whether this is an unfunded mandate is an open legal question

# Four questions worth asking your school

01 Which storage model applies, and who pays if a stored device is lost or damaged?

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02 What are the exact consequence steps, and how will the school keep discipline even-handed?

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03 How do I request a device accommodation, and how long does a decision take?

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04 How do I reach my child during the day, and what is the plan in an emergency?

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For students: the rule runs bell to bell. If you need your device for health, translation, caregiving, or a plan, the exceptions exist for you. Ask.



## ABOUT

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Agard, Alyssa I. 2026. *Phone-Free Schools in New Jersey K-12 Public Education*. Agard Research Associates Inc.

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## ABOUT ARA

A nonpartisan research institute. This briefing does not advocate for or against the policy.