

Phone-Free Schools in New Jersey

Information current as of September 29, 2026

THE BOTTOM LINE

Starting in September 2026, every New Jersey public school must have a policy that bars students from using phones, tablets, smartwatches, and other internet-connected devices for non-school purposes during the whole school day, from the first bell to the last. The law, P.L.2025, c.195, signed January 8, 2026, keeps nine exceptions, including for health needs, disabilities, emergencies, translation, and students who care for a family member. Each local school board writes the details, including how devices are stored and what happens when a rule is broken. This is a New Jersey law, not a federal one. The small state grant fund that accompanied it was not renewed, so the law takes effect in a school year for which the State has budgeted nothing to carry it out.

What the law requires

A phone-free school day, bell to bell. The law directs the state Commissioner of Education to issue guidelines and directs every board of education, including charter school and Renaissance school project boards, to adopt a policy consistent with them, starting with the 2026-2027 school year. The guidelines must prohibit non-academic use of internet-connected devices on school grounds during the school day, and the school day means all of it: class time, lunch, and the minutes between classes. Covered devices include smartphones, tablets, and smartwatches. Basic phones that cannot reach the internet are outside the prohibition, and so are laptops and tablets the school itself provides for learning. Policies must also address devices on school buses and at school-sponsored events supervised by staff, and a board may adopt rules stricter than the guidelines, but not weaker.

Nine exceptions protect students who need a device. A student may still use a device when it is part of an IEP (a special education plan), a Section 504 plan (for students with disabilities), or a student health plan; in an emergency or a perceived threat; with the principal's permission for a necessary purpose when no reasonable alternative exists; for prescribed medical care, with documentation from a health care professional; for translation; with case-by-case approval for a student who routinely cares for a family member; and whenever the law otherwise requires it. State guidance gives concrete examples, such as a smartwatch that monitors blood glucose, and tells schools to handle exceptions confidentially, so the student is not singled out.

Local boards decide the everyday details. Storage can range from locked pouches, lockers, and check-in cabinets to simply requiring devices to stay off and put away in a backpack. Districts also design the discipline for violations; state guidance recommends step-by-step responses suited to the student's age rather than harsh ones.

A state law, not a federal one

The report answers a common question directly: no federal law requires or forbids phone-free schools in the states' public school systems, and education is a power the Constitution leaves to the states. A pending federal bill, the Focus on Learning Act, would order only a national study and a small voluntary grant pilot, and it has not moved out of committee since February 2025.

Federal law still sets limits on how schools carry the policy out. Schools must honor disability accommodations. Taking custody of a phone under a published rule is permitted, but searching what is on the phone requires its own legal justification. Discipline that leads to suspension requires notice and a chance to respond, and civil rights law watches whether device discipline falls unevenly by race, disability, or English learner status. As of August 6, 2026, no court challenge to any statewide law of this kind had been located; when parents sued years ago over New York City's own district ban, the courts sided with the school system.

The numbers behind the law

By the numbers. These figures come from official records and peer-reviewed studies, cited in full in the report:

35-0 / 63-3	How the Legislature voted. The bill passed the state Senate unanimously, twice (35 to 0, then 37 to 0 on concurrence), and the Assembly 63 to 3 with 5 abstentions, with lead sponsors from both parties; the state’s largest teachers union supported it. In Trenton, this law was not a party fight.
39 states	States requiring districts to ban or restrict student phone use, plus Washington, D.C., by one national tracker’s July 2026 count; 30 of them require it for the whole school day. Counts differ by tracker, but New Jersey sits in the strictest group in each.
\$980,000	The state money actually awarded, in December 2025, shared by 86 school districts and charter schools for storage and staff training in grades 6-12, about \$8.40 per covered student. The full \$3.0 million fund equaled about \$2.36 per K-12 student statewide.
\$0	State funding for the law’s first year in effect. The state budget signed June 30, 2026 carries no money for the program, and about \$2.1 million left unspent was not carried forward, even though lawmakers restored money, most of it partial, to ten other education grant lines that had been proposed for elimination or reduction.
100 hours	Staff time per week that schools spend managing student phones, in the one study that measured it, from England, and the total was about the same whether the school’s policy was strict or lenient. Strict policies mainly moved the work from teachers to other staff. No state, New Jersey included, has counted this cost in an official fiscal document.
36%	New Jersey high school students who reported feeling sad or hopeless for two weeks or more in the past year, in the state’s 2023 student health survey; 84 percent reported three or more hours of daily recreational screen time. These figures describe the worry behind the law. They do not prove that phones are the cause, and researchers openly disagree about that.

The law will not touch every family the same way. About 38 percent of New Jersey public school students qualified for free lunch in fall 2025, and the strongest studies abroad found the largest academic gains among exactly such students. At the same time, in many lower-income households the phone is the family’s main link to the internet, so a lost, damaged, or confiscated device costs those families more. And 152,211 New Jersey students, about one in nine, are still learning English; the law lets them keep using a device for translation.

Both sides of the question

Consistent with ARA’s nonpartisan mandate, the report presents the case for and against on equal terms. **Supporters**, including sponsors from both parties and the state commission whose report recommended the bell-to-bell approach, argue that restriction cuts classroom distraction and protects mental health. Their strongest evidence: after English schools banned phones, test scores rose, most for the lowest-performing students, and after Norwegian middle schools did, girls’ grades rose, bullying fell for girls and boys alike, the gains were largest for girls from lower-income families, and no effects were detected for boys. **Skeptics** point to the most direct comparison available, a British study of 30 schools that found no difference in wellbeing, sleep, or test results between strict and lenient schools, apparently because students made up the screen time after school; scientists also openly disagree over whether social media causes the decline in teen mental health or merely accompanies it.

The sharpest dispute is safety. The national association of school resource officers endorsed all-day restriction, arguing that in an emergency students must focus on instructions, that a lit screen can reveal a hiding place, and that mass calls can overload the networks responders use. Many parents answer that reaching their child in a crisis is the whole point; in one national poll, 78 percent of parents whose children carry a phone to school cited emergencies as the reason. The research settles neither claim, and the report says so. New Jersey’s law requires every local policy to address emergencies, and because no statewide bell-to-bell law anywhere in the United States has yet been evaluated, no one can honestly promise what this one will do. The report states both sets of facts and lets readers weigh them.

Where New Jersey stands

- 01 **The rules are written and the clock is set.** The state Department of Education issued updated guidance on January 15, 2026, one week after the signing, and every district's policy must be in effect when school opens in September 2026.
- 02 **The money question is open, and there is a referee.** New Jersey's constitution contains a rule voters added in 1995, often called State Mandate, State Pay: if the State orders local boards to do something new without providing resources other than the property tax, a body called the Council on Local Mandates can declare the law an unfunded mandate, and it stops binding. Only a covered board (or certain officials) can raise the question. The report finds serious arguments on both sides: the funding was partial and is now gone, but a district can also comply at almost no cost by requiring devices to stay off and put away, which makes bigger spending a local choice. No board had filed as of August 6, 2026, and the report takes no position on the answer.
- 03 **The daily work lands on school staff.** Collecting, storing, and returning devices, checking exceptions, and relaying parent messages through the main office are labor. Under New Jersey public labor law, districts and unions cannot bargain over whether to have the policy, which the statute commands, but they can bargain over its workload effects. The state's largest teachers union supported the law and helped shape it, so the report expects cooperation rather than conflict, and it found no labor dispute filed anywhere as of its writing.
- 04 **Custody has consequences.** When a school stores devices, loss, damage, and return become its problems, including when school closes unexpectedly. The cautionary tale is New York City's early district ban, when students paid shops about a dollar a day, roughly \$180 a year, to hold their phones, a cost that fell hardest on the lowest-income students. State guidance tells districts to plan storage, logging, and retrieval in advance.
- 05 **New York is a year ahead.** Its statewide bell-to-bell rule began in September 2025 with \$13.5 million for storage and a legal guarantee that parents can reach their child during the day, a guarantee New Jersey's law does not include, leaving that to local policy. New York's first-year results, and the first academic studies of them, will be the closest preview of New Jersey's experience.

A practical step before September

The details that will matter most to your family are local. Before school opens, ask your district for its device policy: how devices will be stored, what happens the first time a rule is broken, and how a parent reaches a child during the day. If your child needs a device for a health condition, a disability plan, translation, or the care of a family member, the law protects that use; ask the school in writing how to request the exception, and expect it to be handled discreetly. Districts must explain the policy to students, families, and staff, and state guidance calls for translated materials and multiple channels. School board members and taxpayers should watch the first year's real costs, storage purchases and staff hours alike, because that record, not predictions, will decide the funding question.

About this summary. Agard Research Associates Inc. (ARA) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research institute in New Jersey. This document summarizes the full ARA report, Phone-Free Schools in New Jersey K-12 Public Education (August 2026), which contains complete citations for every figure above. It neither supports nor opposes any party, candidate, or legislation, and it is general information, not legal advice. Version 1.1, September 2026.