

Implementing phone-free schools

A practical guide for New Jersey administrators and educators
under P.L.2025, c.195.

Agard Research Associates Inc.

AUGUST 2026

New Jersey has not imposed a single state-run ban. It has required every board of education to adopt a bell-to-bell policy, and it has left the design choices to you.

PART ONE

What the law requires

The statute, the guidelines, and the deadlines.

Five dates that define the mandate

SEPT 2025

■ NJDOE issues device guidance; a state commission recommends a bell-to-bell ban.

OCT 2025

■ Phone-Free Schools Grant Program opens for grades 6 to 12.

JAN 2026

■ P.L.2025, c.195 signed Jan. 8; updated NJDOE guidance follows Jan. 15.

JUNE 2026

■ FY2026 grant period ends; the FY2027 budget carries no program funding.

SEPT 2026

■ Local policies must be in effect for the 2026-2027 school year.

What P.L.2025, c.195 requires

- 01 The Commissioner of Education issues K-12 guidelines; their floor prohibits non-academic device use on school grounds during the school day.
 - 02 Every board of education, charter and renaissance boards included, adopts an aligned policy for school hours, buses, and supervised events.
 - 03 Each policy must address emergencies and perceived threats of danger, and boards may adopt policies more stringent than the guidelines.
 - 04 The mandate first applies in the 2026-2027 school year. School-issued devices used for educational purposes are outside the prohibition.
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Prohibit non-academic use of an internet-enabled device on school grounds during the school day.

The statutory floor

N.J.S.A. 18A:36-40b(b)(2), enacted January 8, 2026

What is covered, and what is not

COVERED BY THE PROHIBITION

Personal smartphones, tablets, smartwatches, and other devices that connect to the internet, including social media applications.

The whole school day, bell to bell, including lunch and passing time.

School buses and school-sanctioned events under staff supervision.

OUTSIDE THE PROHIBITION

Devices provided by the school and used for educational purposes. Basic phones without internet access, though the state guidelines must still address them.

Educational use of a personal device under a reasonable accommodation approved by the principal or a designee.

Nine pathways the guidelines **must** preserve

- 01 IEP accommodations: device use provided in a student's Individualized Education Program under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. s.1400 et seq. [subsection (b)(3)]

- 02 Section 504 accommodations: device use provided in a student's educational plan established under section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. s.794 [(b)(3)]

- 03 Student health plan: a plan established to monitor or address a student's health condition [(b)(3)]

- 04 Emergency or perceived threat of danger: the guidelines must address permitting use [(b)(4)]

EXCEPTIONS

Nine pathways the guidelines **must** preserve (cont.)

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| 05 | Administrator authorization for a necessary specified purpose: granted by a principal, chief school administrator, or designee, and authorized only when no reasonable alternative exists to achieve the same objective while remaining compliant with the Commissioner's guidelines [(b)(5)(a)] |
| 06 | Prescribed care: use necessary for the provision and administration of a student's prescribed care, consistent with documentation from a health care professional submitted by a parent or guardian [(b)(5)(b)] |
| 07 | Translation services: device use authorized to obtain translation assistance on school grounds during the school day or at a school-sanctioned event [(b)(5)(c)] |
| 08 | Student caregiver: case by case, for a student routinely responsible for the care or well-being of a family member, on approval from a principal, chief school administrator, or their designees, which may include a school psychologist, school social worker, or school counselor [(b)(5)(d)] |
| 09 | All circumstances when required by law [(b)(5)(e)] |

PART TWO

Implementing the policy safely

Design choices, funding realities, special education, and legal guardrails.

Building your local policy

- 01 Start from the updated NJDOE guidance of January 15, 2026, plus the Department FAQs and sample parent letter, and adopt before September 2026.
 - 02 Choose the architecture: student-managed storage at near-zero cost, or staff-managed systems: locked pouches, lockers, bins, check-in cabinets.
 - 03 Write consequences into the code of conduct as progressive, developmentally appropriate steps. Define confiscation handling: log, secure, retrieve.
 - 04 Fold device procedures into the school safety plan required by N.J.A.C. 6A:16-5.1, and build a retrieval protocol for unplanned closures.
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How five states built similar mandates

STATE	SCOPE	STATE FUNDS	LOCAL COSTS
New Jersey	Bell to bell	\$3.0M FY26; \$0 FY27	Not estimated
New York	Bell to bell	\$13.5M storage	Not estimated
Michigan	Class time only	None scored	Absorbed staff time
Virginia	Bell to bell	None scored	Indeterminate
New Hampshire	School day	None scored	Indeterminate

Scope shorthand: New Jersey and New York reach the full K-12 day. Source: official state fiscal instruments; ARA policy analysis, August 2026.

The money and the mandate differ in size

\$3.0M

appropriated for FY2026 grants, grades 6 to 12 only, on a bell-to-bell condition

86 grantees shared about \$980,000 in round one

\$0

appropriated for FY2027; unspent balances were not carried forward

Enacted June 30, 2026; the OLS scoresheet shows no line

2%

annual cap on growth in the local school tax levy that absorbs the rest

N.J.S.A. 18A:7F-38, with narrow exceptions

Protected technology *stays* protected

THE FEDERAL AND STATE FLOOR

The IDEA, Section 504, and ADA Title II require accommodation, and c.195 expressly names IEP and 504 plans. A device written into a plan is assistive or medical technology, not contraband.

Examples in state guidance: a smartwatch monitoring blood glucose, an anxiety-management app, caregiver contact in a behavioral plan.

OPERATIONAL DUTIES

Ensure staff can tell an accommodation from a violation: brief, confidential device-use summaries.

Involve nurses, case managers, and IEP and 504 coordinators in planning.

Base determinations on documented needs and review them regularly.

Never let enforcement override a plan in the moment, and minimize attention drawn to the student.

What disability advocates warn against

- 01 Blanket enforcement that overrides a plan in the moment, and staff who cannot tell an accommodation from a violation (COPAA and NDRN positions, reported in Diament 2024).
- 02 Exception processes so burdensome that families abandon them, with parents carrying the load of squaring plans with new rules.
- 03 IEP teams declining to consider low-cost device-based supports because a ban is assumed to control.
- 04 Stigma for students visibly permitted what classmates are denied. Confidential implementation is the answer state guidance prescribes.

Guardrails for enforcement

DEVICES AND SEARCHES

Taking custody of a visible device under a published policy is routine administration. Searching its contents is a different act.

Under *New Jersey v. T.L.O.*, a search needs independent justification, and *Riley* treats phone contents as the privacies of life. Train staff: confiscate yes, examine no.

SPEECH AND PROCESS

Discipline the device violation, not off-campus speech discovered through enforcement; *Mahanoy* sharply limits school authority over off-campus expression.

Goss requires notice and a chance to respond before suspension. Log confiscations and define retrieval; stored devices are family property.

PART THREE

People, communication, and year one

Staff support, family concerns, equity, and what to watch.

Enforcement is labor. Plan for it.

102

staff hours per week managing student phone use in restrictive-policy schools

Perry et al. 2026, 20 English secondary schools

108

hours per week in permissive schools; the burden moves, it does not vanish

Teaching staff carried 75 versus 94 of those hours

3

full-time equivalents of staff time either way over a 39-week year

A projection for New Jersey, not yet a measurement

Supporting teachers and support staff

- 01 Do not make teachers the sole enforcers. Assign entry collection and storage duties deliberately, and consider stipended assignments.
- 02 The policy is managerial prerogative, but workload impacts are negotiable under the EERA. Expect impact bargaining; engage the association early.
- 03 The NJEA supported and helped shape the law; members with questions go to field representatives. Cooperative implementation is the likely posture.
- 04 Train staff before day one: accommodations, confiscation protocol, storage logging, and emergency procedures, with escalation backup.

Communicating with parents and stakeholders

- 01 A communication protocol is statutorily required. Explain the rationale, the rules, and the exceptions together, in that order.
- 02 Use every channel: handbooks, newsletters, websites, back-to-school nights, orientations, and code-of-conduct presentations.
- 03 Translate materials and offer question sessions and feedback forms. New Jersey enrolls 152,211 multilingual learners, 11.2 percent of all students.
- 04 Keep communicating after rollout: announcements, signage, and an annual policy review that takes stakeholder feedback seriously.

Answering the two hardest questions

EMERGENCIES

School resource officers argue phones reduce safety in a crisis: students must focus on instructions, sound or light can reveal hiding places, and mass calls congest networks (NASRO 2025).

Many parents disagree, and 78 percent of phone-sending parents cite emergencies. Neither view is empirically settled. Build device procedures into drills and say so plainly.

REACHING A CHILD

Route routine family contact through the main office and staff the relay. Publish a retrieval protocol for unplanned closures that separate students from stored devices.

New York guarantees a parental contact channel by statute; New Jersey leaves it local. Decide your answer before September rather than improvising after.

Equity commitments that prevent problems

- 01 Provide storage free wherever possession is restricted, and set a liability and replacement policy for devices in district custody.
- 02 For many families the phone is the household internet: about a third of adults in households under \$30,000 are smartphone-dependent (Pew Research Center 2026).
- 03 Log device-policy discipline by race, disability, and English learner status, and compare it with the School Performance Reports, which publish removals by student group.
- 04 Avoid the New York City pattern of the 2000s, when students paid private shops daily to store phones, a cost carried by the lowest-income families.

What to track in year one

- 01 Exception requests: volume, approval and denial rates, and processing times, especially on the discretionary pathways.
- 02 Attendance and chronic absenteeism: crossing the 10 percent threshold triggers a corrective action plan under N.J.S.A. 18A:38-25.1.
- 03 Staff hours and stored-property claims: the costs fiscal notes never count are the ones a serious first-year record should.
- 04 Guidance revisions, PERC filings, and any Council on Local Mandates complaint. None existed as of August 2026; the first would matter.



ABOUT

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

Agard Research Associates Inc.

ABOUT ARA

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