

WCPS-WCTA PHONE-FREE SCHOOLS FORUM

FOCUS GROUP REPORT

JUNE 16, 2026



Prepared by
Carol Mowen, WCTA President,
& Kara Burhans, WCPS Strategic Initiatives Coordinator,
for Dr. David Sovine, Superintendent,
Dr. Gary Willow, Deputy Superintendent,
& the Washington County Board of Education

WCPS-WCTA Phone-Free Schools Focus Group Report

Purpose

In response to the Joanne C. Benson Maryland Phone-Free Schools Act, WCPS and WCTA convened focus groups on June 4, 2026, to gather stakeholder input on implementation. Participants shared practical considerations, operational challenges, enforcement expectations, communication needs, and student supports.

These discussions were intended not to revisit the law's requirements, but to identify practical steps for successful implementation across Washington County Public Schools.

Participants were asked to provide feedback regarding:

- Daily procedures and logistics
- Enforcement and administrative support
- Exceptions, communication, and student support
- Priorities for successful implementation

This report summarizes the recurring themes and recommendations that emerged across the focus groups.

Summary of Maryland Law

Under Maryland law, by the 2027–28 school year, all local school systems must implement policies that:

- Significantly restrict student use of personal electronic devices
- Require students to put away personal devices during instructional time, passing periods, lunch, and recess (i.e. the entire school day).

The law applies to:

- cell phones
- smart watches
- personal laptops/tablets
- earbuds and similar devices

Exceptions include:

- school-issued devices
- IEP/504-required accommodations
- documented health needs
- emergencies
- administrator-approved educational activities when school-issued devices are unavailable

Overview of Participation

At the invitation of Dr. Gary Willow, Associate Superintendent of WCPS, WCTA President Carol Mowen invited representatives from middle and high schools across the county. Twenty-four WCTA members attended the meeting.

Schools represented included Boonsboro High, Boyd J. Michael II Technical High, Clear Spring High, North Hagerstown High, Smithsburg High, South Hagerstown High, Williamsport High, Springfield Middle, and Western Heights Middle.

Key Takeaways

Participants expressed varying views on implementation methods, but broad consensus emerged around several key themes:

- County-wide consistency in expectations and enforcement
- Strong administrative support for classroom implementation
- Clear communication with students, staff, and families
- Secure and practical device storage solutions
- Clearly defined exceptions and accommodation procedures
- Adequate training and resources prior to implementation

Stakeholders agreed that success will depend less on the storage method chosen and more on consistent expectations, clear procedures, and strong support across schools. The most common concerns were enforcement consistency, administrative capacity, instructional time, device security, accommodations, and parent communication.

Operational Considerations

The following themes summarize participant feedback on daily procedures and logistics related to implementing a cell phone policy.

Device Storage Options

- Primary options discussed were all-day locker storage, locked storage boxes, or another secure secondary location.
- Backpacks were viewed by some groups as difficult to monitor consistently; if used, clear backpacks were suggested.
- Participants emphasized that all personal electronic devices should be treated consistently under the policy.

Locker Considerations

- Locker capacity, hallway congestion, and limited passing time may create implementation challenges in some schools.
- Schools will need procedures that prevent midday locker access while allowing for practical accommodations such as alternative locks when needed.
- Participants generally supported requiring phones to be stored before the first bell and retrieved at dismissal.

Arrival, Dismissal, and Daily Operations

- Consider AM/PM homeroom procedures if using locked storage boxes.
- Address procedures for tardy students.
- Determine whether additional passing time is needed.
- Consider impacts on schools with delayed starts or unique schedules.
- Clarify procedures for floating teachers and other staffing situations.

Discipline and Enforcement

- Participants supported a progressive discipline approach with county-wide expectations and a clearly defined escalation process.
- Clarification is needed regarding classroom-managed versus office-managed violations and consequences for repeated noncompliance.
- Timely administrative response was identified as essential to avoid prolonged classroom disruption.

Administrative Support and Consistency

- Consistent enforcement by both teachers and administrators was identified as critical to policy credibility.
- Participants emphasized that implementation should not fall disproportionately on classroom teachers.
- Schools with limited administrative or security staffing may require additional support.

Security and Liability

- Students expressed concerns about phone security and theft.
- Some suggested students leave phones at home or in vehicles.
- Clarify district liability and student responsibility for stored devices.
- Develop procedures to ensure devices remain secure throughout the day.

Emergency Communication

- Develop and communicate a clear emergency communication procedure.
- Provide families and students with clear expectations for communication during emergencies.

Questions and Concerns Raised

- How will gaming consoles and other electronic devices be addressed?
- Will class time be reduced due to implementation procedures?
- How can schools prevent students from retrieving phones during the day?
- How will schools handle increased monitoring responsibilities?
- How will consequences and referrals be managed efficiently?



Implementation Expectations and Accountability

The following themes summarize stakeholder feedback on enforcement expectations, administrative responsibilities, and accountability.

County-Wide Consistency and Accountability

- Participants consistently called for county-wide enforcement that is clear, visible, and sustained throughout the year.
- They also emphasized accountability for both administrators and staff in implementing the policy with fidelity.
- Clear communication is needed so students, staff, and families understand how expectations will be applied across schools.

Roles and Responsibilities

- Clearly define who confiscates devices (teacher, administrator, security, or other staff).
- Teachers should initiate referrals and notify administration when necessary.
- Administration should secure devices once confiscated.
- Administrative response should be timely to prevent classroom disruption and excessive wait times.
- Clarify responsibilities for schools with limited administrative staffing.

Discipline Matrix and Progressive Consequences

- Stakeholders requested a county-wide discipline matrix with documented progressive consequences.
- The matrix should distinguish routine violations from refusal to comply and address repeated offenses over time.
- Consequences should reflect the severity of the behavior and the level of disruption.

Suggested Consequence Progression

- First offense: device confiscated, parent notified.
- Second offense: detention and parent contact.
- Third offense: parent conference and additional consequences.
- After repeated offenses, administration may retain the device until parent pickup.
- Parent pickup of confiscated devices was frequently recommended.

Student Refusal and Escalation Procedures

- Student refusal should result in immediate administrative involvement.
- Develop clearly defined escalation procedures for repeated refusal or disruption.
- Administration should consistently support teachers when students refuse to comply.
- Clarify how repeated violations interact with existing disciplinary regulations.

Parent Communication

- Parent notification should occur early in the discipline process.
- Consider administrative email communication rather than multiple phone calls when appropriate.
- Clarify parent conference expectations and device pickup procedures.
- Provide consistent communication to families regarding policy expectations.

Teacher Expectations and Modeling

- Teachers should model expected behavior and avoid personal device use in front of students.
- Staff buy-in is critical for successful implementation.
- Provide training and guidance to ensure staff understand procedures and expectations.

Administrative Capacity and Support

- Concerns were raised regarding administrative workload and phone-related referrals.
- Schools need sufficient administrative support to handle enforcement responsibilities.
- Develop procedures for situations when administrators are overwhelmed with referrals.
- Ensure consequences are meaningful and consistently implemented.

Additional Considerations

- Clarify how smart watches, earbuds, and other small devices will be addressed.
- Provide guidance on documenting violations and warnings.
- Review alignment between proposed procedures and existing board policies and regulations.

Exceptions, Communication, and Student Supports

The following themes summarize stakeholder feedback on exceptions, communication expectations, and student support needs.

Exceptions and Accommodations

- Exceptions should be limited to documented educational, health, or disability-related needs and clearly recorded in the appropriate plan.
- Approved accommodations must be communicated to relevant staff while maintaining confidentiality.
- Improper use of an accommodated device should be addressed through the same standards that apply to other misuse of technology.
- Participants also requested clarification regarding principal-approved exceptions.

Health, Medical, and Student Needs

- Maintain a process similar to allergy or medical accommodation lists for approved phone-related needs.
- For students with documented needs, devices may need to remain accessible but out of sight.
- Consider health plans, anxiety-related accommodations, and other documented needs.
- Clarify expectations regarding dual enrollment and two-factor authentication requirements.

Parent and Student Communication

- Families should be directed to contact the school office during emergencies rather than communicating directly with students.
- Students should retain access to school-based communication when needed, supported by a clear family communication protocol.
- Building-level expectations should clarify routine communication, emergency procedures, and the importance of updated contact information.

Training and Education

- Parents need training and education regarding social media, device use, and policy expectations.
- Provide parent information nights and community education opportunities.
- Educate families regarding the impact of phones on learning, mental health, and student well-being.
- Provide staff training to ensure consistent implementation of accommodations and communication procedures.
- Use assemblies, presentations, focus groups, and classroom discussions to support understanding.

Student Support During Transition

- Provide support to help students adjust to reduced phone access.
- Address student concerns related to mental health and phone dependency.
- Help students understand both the benefits and challenges associated with reduced phone use.
- Develop strategies for students who finish work early and may seek entertainment through devices.

Multilingual Learners and Accessibility

- Ensure appropriate translation supports remain available.
- Consider alternatives when students currently rely on phones for translation.
- Explore use of Chromebooks, translation applications, and classroom technology.
- Provide class sets of headphones or other accessibility supports when needed.

Monitoring and Oversight of Exceptions

- Monitor phone exceptions carefully to prevent inappropriate expansion of accommodations.
- Develop clear criteria and oversight processes for granting exceptions.
- Clarify how accommodated students should use devices during the school day.
- Ensure confidentiality is maintained while still informing staff of approved accommodations.

Technology and Alternative Supports

- Leverage Chromebook capabilities and district-approved tools when possible.
- Provide alternatives to phones for academic and communication needs.
- Consider availability of district-supported applications and monitoring tools.
- Provide training on tools such as GoGuardian and other instructional technology supports.

Community Communication and Awareness

- Develop a community-wide communication campaign explaining the purpose of the policy.
- Use social media, school meetings, family information sessions, and district communications.
- Provide clear messaging about emergency procedures and expectations for parent contact.

Highest-Priority Themes

Consistent County-Wide Enforcement and Discipline

Participants most often emphasized the need for a county-wide discipline matrix, consistent consequences, administrative accountability, and uniform enforcement across schools.

Clear Procedures and Expectations

Stakeholders requested clear procedures, flowcharts, communication protocols, and escalation processes that are easy to understand and implement.

Strong Administrative Support

Participants consistently identified administrator involvement as essential for handling referrals, parent communication, discipline, and enforcement.

Parent and Community Communication

Strong emphasis was placed on educating families, establishing communication protocols, and building stakeholder buy-in before implementation.

Secure Phone Storage Solutions

Lockers, lock boxes, and other secure storage options were discussed, along with supervision and security considerations.

Training and Professional Learning

Staff requested training related to implementation, accountability, accommodations, monitoring systems, and communication strategies.

Addressing Workload and Instructional Time

Concerns focused on teacher workload, administrative capacity, enforcement demands, and loss of instructional time.

Accommodations and Special Circumstances

Stakeholders emphasized the need for clear guidance regarding IEP/504 plans, dual enrollment students, half-day students, and other exceptions.

Recommendations

- Adopt a county-wide implementation guide and discipline matrix.
- Define tiered consequences, escalation procedures, and repeat-offender guidance.
- Provide secure storage options appropriate to each school setting.
- Implement a coordinated communication and education plan for staff, students, and families.
- Ensure accountability, training, and implementation support across schools.

Concerns

- Consistency of enforcement across schools and personnel.
- Added workload for teachers and administrators.
- Loss of instructional time, increased referrals, and related behavior concerns.
- Storage, security, and management of accommodations and exceptions.
- Potential parent and stakeholder resistance without strong communication.

Support Needed

- Administrative support and accountability structures.
- Clear procedures, implementation guidance, and staff training.
- Family, student, and community education.
- Student transition supports, staffing, and implementation resources.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Focus group participants generally supported implementation of Maryland's personal electronic device requirements, provided that clear expectations, consistent enforcement, and adequate supports are in place.

The highest-priority actions identified by participants were:

1. Develop a county-wide implementation guide that clearly defines expectations, procedures, consequences, and administrative responsibilities.
2. Establish a county-wide discipline matrix that promotes consistency while clearly addressing repeated violations and refusal-to-comply situations.
3. Identify secure device storage solutions that are practical for individual school settings.
4. Create a comprehensive communication plan for students, staff, families, and community stakeholders.
5. Provide professional learning and implementation training for teachers, administrators, and support staff prior to rollout.
6. Develop clear procedures for accommodations, documented student needs, and approved exceptions.
7. Monitor implementation during the first year and gather stakeholder feedback to identify necessary adjustments.

Overall, participants emphasized that successful implementation will require consistent expectations, visible administrative support, and coordinated communication with staff, students, and families.

Middle School Considerations

- Existing locker use may make storage procedures easier to implement.
- Students may require additional support as they adjust to reduced access to personal devices.
- Parent education and communication will be critical during implementation.
- Schools may benefit from assemblies, advisory lessons, and digital citizenship supports.

High School Considerations

- Locker availability varies significantly among schools.
- Narrow hallways and limited passing periods may create logistical challenges.
- Dual enrollment students may have technology-related needs, including two-factor authentication requirements.
- Translation needs and specialized instructional supports may require alternative solutions.
- Increased student independence may require additional clarity regarding expectations and consequences.

Participants noted that while county-wide consistency is essential, implementation procedures may need flexibility to address operational differences among schools.

Summary of Closing Whole Group Discussion

Mental Health Considerations

- Some students may benefit from opportunities to socialize in different ways during the school day by integrating clubs, lunch activities that provide for brain breaks via nontechnology related engagement (i.e. board games, student interest groups, etc.)
- Teachers agreed that students' mental health concerns should be seriously addressed to support their transition from dependence on cell phone use.
- Teachers agreed that once the initial implementation has occurred, students' engagement in learning and social interaction at school will improve as their dependence on cell phones decreases.

Parent/Adult Education Considerations

- Parents and other adults will need to have opportunities to learn about the impacts of cell phone use in school on students and the school environment.
- Forums, meetings, and parent cafes that provide for formal and informal conversations and the sharing of information are encouraged.

Initial Implementation Consideration

Teachers noted concern that the ratio of administrators to students at schools may present a challenge for consistent enforcement that is needed; therefore, a plan should be developed to address the need for additional administrative support.

Focus Group Session Slides

WCTA & WCPS "PHONE-FREE" SCHOOLS FORUM

THURSDAY, JUNE 4
4-6 PM AT CES

for WCTA Member Input on
Local Implementation
of the Maryland
Phone-Free Schools Act

The new state law mandates a "bell-to-bell" ban on student cell phones and personal electronic devices by the 2027-2028 school year. The WCBOE plans to accelerate its timeline to enforce these changes early, starting in the 2026-2027 academic year.

WCPSS has asked for our input.

MEMBER
WCTA Voices

Washington County Public Schools,
Dr. Gary Willow, Deputy Superintendent,
and
Washington County Teachers Association,
Carol Mowen, President
June 4, 2026

School Cellphone Bans

43 states have passed laws or implemented policies/resolution orders banning or limiting student cellphone usage in classrooms or encouraging districts to move in that direction.

MARYLAND OFFICIALLY PASSES STATE-WIDE SCHOOL PHONE BAN LAW

Maryland Schools have
joined the national trend.

What are our
recommendations for OUR
schools in addressing the
Maryland law?

Maryland Senate Passes Phone-Free Schools Bill

Welcome & Session Purpose

Today's session is designed to explore the parameters of the new state mandate and gather meaningful feedback to shape a practical, realistic roadmap.

Core goals of this Collaborative:

- Reviewing legal compliance targets and structural realities.
- Assessing immediate and long-term classroom implications.
- Documenting teacher-led suggestions for administrative support.

The Statewide Mandate Overview: HB 525 / SB 928

2027-2028

MANDATORY ROLLOUT

Passed by the Maryland General Assembly, the **Phone-Free Schools Act** requires all local boards of education to construct, implement, and enforce policy restrictions on student personal device use.

- **Full Academic Day Coverage:** Applies from the first morning bell to final dismissal.
- **Unstructured Times Included:** Covers class times, lunch, recess, and passing periods.

Core Policy Requirements



Device Restrictions

Restrict student access to personal phones and communication devices (earbuds, smart watches) during the school day



Storage Protocols

Establish exact, secure device storage protocols during the school day



Social Media Ban

Limit access to designated entertainment and social media platforms throughout the active school day.

Critical Legislative Exemptions

- **Individualized Needs:** Reasonable accommodations aligned with a student's IEP or Section 504 plan.
- **Documented Health Needs:** Allowing active access to monitor or address specific student medical issues.
- **Authorized Emergencies:** Emergency device access authorized explicitly by school administrators.
- **Educational Equity:** Dedicated access to translation tools for multilingual students when other resources are unavailable.

Aligning BOE Policy to Maryland Phone Free Acts

[Draft WCBOE Policy JICJ](#)

- Washington County currently regulates student electronic device use under Policy JICJ and Regulation JIJC.
 - The elected WCBOE members set all POLICIES for WCPS.
 - The superintendent and admin team set the REGULATIONS that enforce the policies.
- The state has established ***that schools must become substantially phone-free during the school day***. The key questions now are how implementation should work in practice and what teachers need for the policy to succeed

3 Rounds of Discussions

Guiding questions provided as a starting point for each round.

Each round will be about 12-14 minutes long.

1

**Daily
Procedures
& Logistics**

2

**Enforcement
& Administrative
Support**

3

**Exceptions,
Communication,
& Student Support**

We will then review the recommendations, concerns, and support needed together.

Round 1

1

**Daily
Procedures
& Logistics**

Desired Outputs

- Procedure recommendations
- Practical implementation ideas
- Consistency – both across the district and within schools

Round 2

2

**Enforcement
&
Administrative
Support**

Desired Outputs

- Discipline recommendations
- Administrative response expectations
- Escalation procedures
- Equity considerations

Round 3

3

**Exceptions,
Communication,
& Student Support**

Desired Outputs

- Exception-handling guidance
- Family communication systems
- Staff support recommendations
- Training needs

Recommendation Prioritization

Step 1: Write on Chart Paper and then post your chart paper.

- Top 3 recommendations from each round – on the GREEN paper
- Biggest implementation concerns from each round – on the PINK paper
- Most important support needed for staff and student success – on the BLUE paper

Recommendation Prioritization

Step 2: Gallery Walk Review with your team or individually.

- Put BLUE dots for FULL SUPPORT of the recommendation
- Put YELLOW dots for PARTIAL SUPPORT or for SUPPORT with CONCERNS / QUESTIONS
- Add post-it notes with comments or questions you may have (if needed)

Next Steps

- Compile the results of today's forum to share with the WCBOE members.
 - Major themes
 - Areas of consensus
 - Emerging recommendations
- Share the results with other WCTA members.
- Move forward together.