Guidance Brief:
Student Cell Phones, School Safety, and Emergency Response

Prepared for District Leaders, Principals, and Policymakers

Idaho School Safety and Security Program

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Purpose of This Brief

School districts across Idaho and the nation are re-examining student cell phone policies as part of broader efforts to improve school safety, instructional focus, and emergency readiness. While student cell phones can provide benefits in limited, specific circumstances, most available evidence suggests that routine, unrestricted access during the school day introduces predictable, avoidable obstacles to student safety and well-being, particularly during the phases of emergency preparedness, response, and recovery.

The statutory goal of the Idaho School Safety and Security Program is to research and promulgate effective practices for all publicly funded educational institutions throughout the state. This brief provides K-12 district leaders with a research-informed overview of the safety implications of student cell phone access and outlines key questions to guide policy development.

Research Questions

This document addresses three primary questions:

1. Do student cell phones improve general student safety?

2. Do student cell phones support—or hinder—emergency response during acts of school violence or other crises?

3. How does student access to cell phones affect the effectiveness of preparedness, drills, emergency response, and post-incident recovery?

Evidence Summary

1. General School Safety

Research to date, national surveys and federal guidance do not indicate that allowing students to have unrestricted access to their personal phones during the school day improves general, day-to-day school safety. Instead, districts implementing restrictions often report:

- Improved school climate

- Reduced cyberbullying

- Fewer phone-related disruptions or digital conflicts

- More effective instructional environments

Further, a 2025 RAND nationally representative survey found that 86% of principals who adopted cell phone restrictions reported safety-related benefits, including declines in cyberbullying and improved student behavior. That said, removal of student cell phone access may require internal changes to address student reporting options (e.g., confidential tiplines that have app-based reporting functionality) to maintain the effectiveness of those programs.

2. Emergency Response

Safety organizations and responders consistently note that widespread, real-time student phone use complicates emergency operations more often than it supports them <u>during</u> an emergency response. However, the availability of cell phones <u>after</u> an emergency may decrease disruption and improve response efforts.

In addition, though limited in scope, there exist some cases where student phone use supports emergency response. For example, K-12 students who travel to colleges or universities for dual enrollment purposes use their cell phones to receive emergency alerts from the institutions of higher education. Similarly, some K-12 districts may issue text alerts to students who are allowed to drive off campus during the school day, and others may utilize a self-reporting call in system in the event of off-campus evacuations.

3. Preparedness, Drills, and Recovery

Student phone use during training and drills decreases overall response effectiveness. If students are attentive to their devices instead of practicing emergency response or learning response procedures, they are unequipped to take necessary safety responses.

Impact of Student Cell Phone Use Across Emergency Response Phases

A. Preparedness and Drills

Challenges introduced by student phone access:

- Reduced drill fidelity: Students are more distracted and less attentive to staff instructions.

- Delayed protective actions: Students pause to send texts, check notifications, or record video during drills.

- Inconsistent messaging: Students may interpret or share unofficial information during drills, undermining unified school communications.

Districts with phone restrictions consistently report smoother drills and greater student compliance.

B. Immediate Emergency Response

1. Network Congestion

During emergencies, large numbers of students simultaneously call or text parents, attempt to live-stream, and post on social media. Local cell phone towers and wireless networks often fail under these circumstances. Cellular network failure is commonly noted in after-action reviews of school emergencies.

This surge predictably and frequently overloads local cell towers, effectively halting:

- Internal school communications

- Administrator-to-first responder coordination

- Direct communication from the school to parents

2. Compromised Hiding and Protection

Lockdown success depends on silence, concealment, and following staff directions. Phones can undermine this by:

- Emitting sounds, vibrations, or notification tones

- Illuminating rooms with screen light

- Diverting student attention from critical instructions

Law enforcement and the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) warn that these factors can expose hiding locations and reduce students' ability to follow life-saving procedures.

3. Parent Convergence and Traffic Congestion

When students text parents mid-incident, parents often drive directly to the school. This creates:

- Traffic jams blocking access to lifesaving responses

- Confusion at the perimeter regarding who is a threat, bystander, or caregiver

- Risks to parent safety when entering an unstable scene

From an incident command perspective, parent convergence dramatically complicates perimeter control and staging. This response roadblock has been documented repeatedly in after-action reviews following school emergencies.

4. Information Management and Misinformation

Student social media activity during incidents often results in:

- Rapid spread of incorrect, incendiary, and incomplete information

- False reports that escalate stress and confusion

- Photos that reveal the locations of students or responding officers

- Inadvertent sharing of sensitive tactical movements

Cell phone access makes it harder for the school and response agencies to communicate clearly, effectively, and correctly to allow for effective responses and recovery actions.

C. Recovery and Reunification

Student phone and photo activity can amplify trauma, cause confusion about reunification procedures, and complicate communication during recovery. Idaho students have posted photographs and videos inside of active emergency responses. This continual exposure to traumatic events extends the harm of the original actions. The photos and videos can persist indefinitely as a vector for additional malicious trauma.

Questions for Districts to Consider

A. Safety and Preparedness

1. How does unrestricted phone access affect drill quality and compliance?

2. Are emergency communication systems robust enough without relying on student devices?

3. Do current plans address risks created by student phone use?

B. Emergency Response Operations

4. Are local cell networks prone to overload?

5. How will the district manage parent convergence triggered by student messaging?

6. Do policies support Incident Command System/ National Incident Management System-aligned information control?

C. Student Support, Instruction, and Well-Being

7. Would a restriction support improved school climate?

8. How will legitimate student needs (medical, student travel, IEPs, communication support) be accommodated?

D. Communication and Community Trust

9. How will the district communicate policy rationale?

10. What alternative communication methods will support student safety?

Selected additional resources.

National Association of School Resource Officers. (2025). NASRO position statement on student cell phone use in schools. NASRO.

RAND Corporation. (2025). School leaders' perspectives on student cell phone policies: Findings from a nationally representative survey. RAND Corporation.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology. (2024). Planning together: A playbook for student personal device policies.

Associated Press. (2025). California to restrict student cell phone use statewide by 2026 under new safety and engagement legislation. AP News.

BBC News. (2025). Research on student well-being and school phone bans indicates the need for broader mental-health strategies beyond device restrictions. BBC News Education.

New York Times. (2025). Governor supports bell-to-bell school cell phone restrictions citing safety and instructional benefits. The New York Times.

Digital Wellness Lab. (2024). Annual report on youth digital media use and developmental impacts. Boston Children's Hospital.

Pew Research Center. (2023). Teens, social media, and technology. Pew Research Center.

Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. (2023). K–12 School Security Guide (3rd ed.).