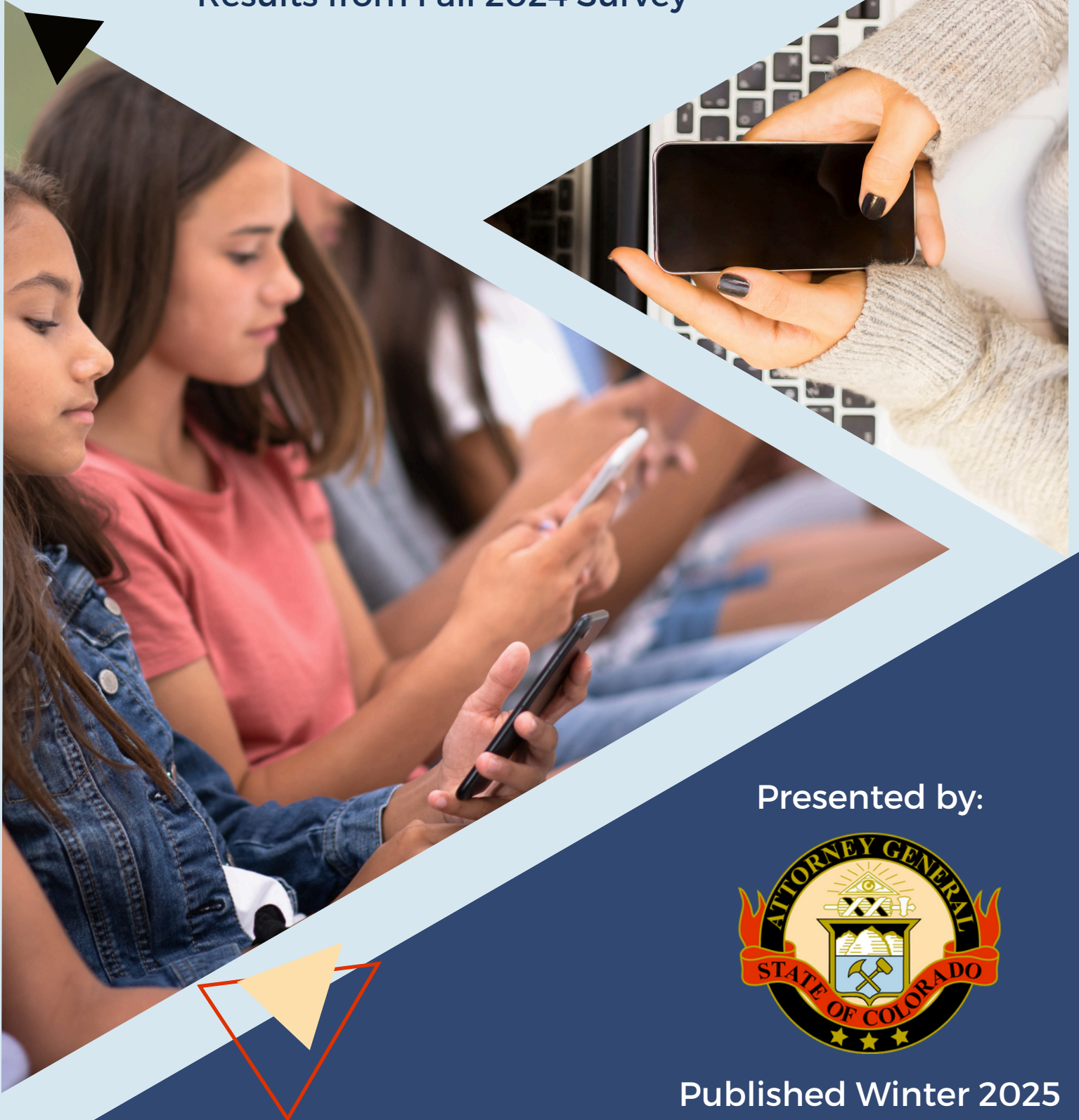




SMARTPHONES IN SCHOOLS

Results from Fall 2024 Survey



Presented by:



Published Winter 2025



MESSAGE FROM Attorney General Phil Weiser



One of my top priorities as attorney general is supporting youth mental health and wellbeing. This work includes helping our schools promote safe and productive learning environments, advancing efforts to reduce or remove barriers to quality mental health care, and promoting culturally sensitive and effective resources and programming for our youth to build resilience and valuable life skills.

With nearly 95 percent of teenagers in the U.S. having access to smartphones,¹ my office has started looking at the impact of phones on students in schools across Colorado and the ways in which we can support policies that encourage responsible technology use and minimize potentially negative impacts on our youth.

Across my travels as attorney general, I hear from school leaders and youth advocates about what challenges impede student success and wellbeing. Consistently, these leaders report that the presence of smartphones can disrupt the learning environment, negatively impact student engagement with learning materials and with one another, can be a platform for bullying and buying drugs, and cause other harms. I have also heard great apprehension around how to design and implement a policy that addresses these harms while appropriately considering the appropriate use of smartphones, ranging from medical interventions, supporting learning, reporting an emergency, and for parents and caregivers to reach their student during the school day. In a very encouraging sign, I visited Grand Junction D51 this fall and learned about its experience with a smartphone policy that parents, students, and teachers all praised.²

1: Jen Hatfield, "72% of U.S. high school teachers say cellphone distraction is a major problem in the classroom," Pew Research Center, June 12, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/06/12/72-percent-of-us-high-school-teachers-say-cellphone-distraction-is-a-major-problem-in-the-classroom/>

2: CITE, https://www.gjsentinel.com/news/western_colorado/ag-hosts-d51-roundtable-on-phone-policy-new-grants/article_c373a468-77a3-11ef-92e5-435d249cb9a6.html



This fall, my department invited local education providers³ in Colorado to share their policies and experiences with student smartphone use. We have analyzed these results and share their trends in this snapshot. We hope the insights and examples offered can support LEPs in developing or refining their own policies. Additionally, the Department of Law has selected seven LEPs to receive up to \$50,000 in discretionary grants to support different strategies around smartphone interventions and policy development. Our goal for these grants is to enable pilot opportunities to test different approaches and learn from the results to share with other Colorado LEPs.

The experiences described throughout these survey results demonstrate the need and value in the implementation of policies that reduce smartphone related distractions in the classroom setting and promote student mental health and wellbeing. The survey also emphasizes the value of state-level efforts, including legislative action that supports Colorado school districts in developing policies that best serve the needs of their students and communities.

I am pleased to share findings and experiences from our October 2024 survey to support efforts to develop and advance policies to support Colorado students, educators, and learning environments.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Philip J. Weiser".

Phil Weiser, Colorado Attorney General

³: For the purposes of this survey, an LEP is: a School District; a Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES); a Charter School authorized by a School District; a Charter School authorized by the Charter School Institute; Facility School; Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind; or an Indian tribe or tribal organization (as such terms are defined in section 4 of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Act (25 U.S.C. 450b)).



THE SURVEY



In September 2024, the Colorado Department of Law (DOL) announced an initiative to support LEPs to create policies and pilot interventions that address the impact of smartphones on students' learning environments, mental health and wellbeing, and academic performance. The opportunity seeks to explore ways LEPs can reduce the distractions caused by smartphones during school hours while maintaining access for necessary functions like safety alerts and medical situations.

As first step, DOL invited LEPs to complete a survey about policies, challenges, and needs related to student smartphone usage. DOL analyzed the data to help understand the landscape of challenges and opportunities statewide and where further support may be needed.

“We want to be sure we have a healthy balance where students are learning appropriate uses of technology while not allowing technology to interfere with healthy academic habits. Restrictions seem to be relatively new, so we are curious to hear more about what researchers have found and best practices for implementation.”

– 2024 DOL Survey Response, Northern Colorado district leader

Policy Insights from Survey Results

We received 27 survey responses from institutions serving over 205,000 students across Colorado. Twenty of these respondents reported having a policy in place for the 2024-2025 school year related to smartphone usage, while seven (approximately a quarter) had no formal policy.



TRENDS & FINDINGS

across the 20 policies



Development

Most of the policies were developed in consultation with some combination of community, students, parents, educators, and administrator input. Examples of such engagement include surveys, hearings, and work with district and youth committees and advisory councils.



Policy launch

Nearly half of these policies were developed or updated last year, while some respondents report policies dating as far back as 2014 and 2002.

Variation across school level

Several policies articulated a tiered approach, with different access permitted for elementary, middle, and high school classrooms – often, with full restrictions for K-8 students and some exceptions for high school students (e.g., access during lunch or break, phone use prohibited during instructional times).

“We also did a case study where I had students pull out their phone at lunch and we tallied how many notifications they received during the morning (4 class periods of 52 minutes. The students, all together, had over 700 notifications that would have been classroom distractions that morning alone. We were shocked as were the students!”
-- 2024 DOL Survey Response, Northeastern Colorado district leader



Storage options

There was not a dominant storage method or device “keeper.” Storage requirements range from “silent mode” during instruction time, backpack storage, lockers or locked bags, classroom bins, or leaving a device with a teacher or administrator.

Exceptions

Most policies articulated that students may access smartphones when specifically authorized under a current individual education plan or IEP, a Section 504 accommodation plan, or a health care plan in force and effect.

Access during emergency

Several policies articulate that students may access their smartphone, when otherwise prohibited, to respond to or report an emergency. These policies also define what constitutes an emergency.

TRENDS & FINDINGS

across the 20 policies



Other technology

Several policies articulated restrictions on tech that enable access to smart devices, such as a smart watch or blue tooth headphones. Some responses that permitted smartphone use articulated specific prohibitions on camera use in any location where it may violate reasonable expectations of privacy.



Other offerings

Several responses articulated educational or experimental efforts to raise awareness of the impact smartphones have on attention and learning, (e.g., guest speakers, “No Tech Tuesday,” or educator trainings.)

“We are stuck in how to balance the parent expectation of immediate access to their children with the need to limit distractions and improve overall mental health of students.”

-- 2024 DOL Survey Response, Northern Colorado district leader

Barriers

Standardization across schools and classrooms was the most-cited barrier, followed by the need to achieve educator and parental buy-in throughout the school year, and student efforts to work around policies (e.g., by surrendering a “dupe” phone).



Liability

Most responses considered student liability for student devices, whether in the school's or student's possession, and student liability for school property (e.g., school-issued storage pouch).

Evaluation

Respondents submitted a range of metrics considered in evaluating a policy's efficacy and opportunities to improve. These metrics include observational feedback (students appear more engaged, educator reports of fewer disruptions and higher attentiveness in classroom) reported via survey or meetings. Other metrics include analysis of disciplinary trends, test scores, and frequent engagement with stakeholders, particularly student advisory groups and surveys for teachers, parents, and students.

“We have sent multiple surveys to teachers and students to gather information on how they feel the new protocols are going. The teachers responded that 73% of them felt this was the one process that has most impacted their ability to teach in a positive way this school year.”

-- 2024 DOL Survey Response, Southern Colorado district leader

OPPORTUNITIES & ASPIRATIONS:

What LEPs want

Our survey asked how existing policies could be more effective, and what additional tools and resources would help develop or improve policies to address smartphone usage in schools. Responses fell primarily into the following five categories:

- **Curriculum development** - Training and education materials to promote healthy and appropriate phone use, digital etiquette, and online safety. This may include extending training to parents who can help reinforce safe usage beyond the classroom.
- **Educator training** - Provide educators with effective implementation practices to encourage consistent policy enforcement throughout the school year.
- **Storage device procurement** - Standardized storage devices in each classroom (bins, lockers, or pouches).

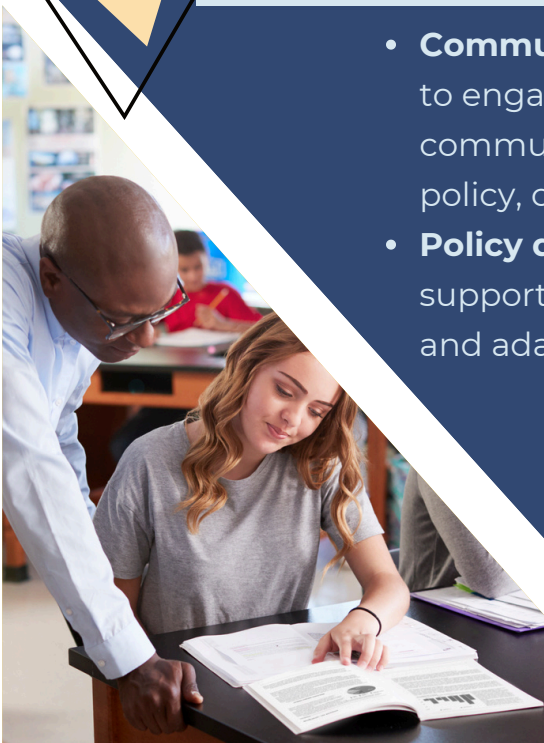
“Community education is an ongoing challenge with parents, educators and families currently not having the same understanding of the reasons for adopting a smartphone policy. Without a common understanding and drive it is hard to institute changes.”

-- 2024 DOL Survey Response, Front Range district leader

- **Communications tools and engagement support** - Resources to engage a facilitator or other expert to host robust community conversations and develop a stakeholder-informed policy, or communication tools to raise awareness and buy-in.
- **Policy development and/or evaluation support** - Resources to support efforts to draft a new policy, or to monitor, evaluate, and adapt an existing policy.

“While having a restrictive policy is effective, our school would like to have a more collaborative approach to teaching kids about the responsible use of cell phones.”

-- 2024 DOL Survey Response, Front Range school leader





SPOTLIGHT

Department of Law funding to support interventions

The DOL invited a subset of survey respondents to apply for up to \$50,000 in discretionary grants to support policy development and interventions to maximize learning, foster student attention in classrooms, and promote healthy student smartphone usage.

Our goal for these discretionary grants is to enable pilot programs to test different approaches and identify the most effective options. When selecting funding recipients, we prioritized those that have engaged with community, parents, and youth to develop their existing or proposed smartphone policy, and those that have “shovel ready” ideas that can be implemented right away. To ensure that we can learn from this experiment, all funding recipients will be required to provide data to our office about the effectiveness of their chosen intervention and/or policy on a variety of fronts, including changes in disciplinary action related to smartphones, student engagement, academic performance, and teacher experience.

In the spirit of experimentation and innovation, we encouraged LEPs to consider a range of possibilities for what might work for them—from the use of specially-designed phone storage devices to technologies that block certain smartphone features, to educational curricula about the uses of smartphones, and more.

FUNDED PROJECTS

Seven projects were selected for DOL discretionary grant funding to pilot interventions including the following practices:



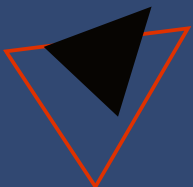
- **Storage device implementation**, including professional learning opportunities to support implementation.
- **Restorative practices programming** to support students as they adapt to a smart phone free policy, including workshops, peer-led discussions, and individual support sessions to help students build healthy relationships with technology, develop self-regulation skills, and understand the positive impact of reduced smartphone use on their mental health and academic performance.
- **Digital literacy programming**, including guest speakers, parent engagement events, continuing education events, and communications tools to reinforce curriculum.



- **Engagement of a dedicated professional**, (e.g. a safe technology specialist or liaison) to coordinate efforts to educate students, parents, staff and administrators to promote healthy screen time habits, foster positive online and offline interactions, and establish boundaries for cell phone use to create spaces and times focused on learning, connection, and mental breaks.
- **Commissioning a policy review** of existing smart phone practices across districts to inform policy development.
- **Implementation of an incentive system** to encourage greater compliance with existing smartphone policies.

This work will be conducted and analyzed in LEPs across Colorado: Aurora Public Schools; Denver Justice High School; Eastlake High School; Englewood Schools; Mesa County Valley School District 51; Pueblo County School District 70.

Please note: Grant agreements for this work have not been finalized as of the date of this publication.

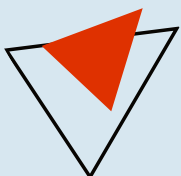


NEXT STEPS



Each participating LEP will implement their pilot project during the 2025-2026 school year. To best understand the impacts of policies and interventions related to student smartphone use, the recipients will produce a statement of impact and report key outcomes. Each recipient will also provide DOL with standardized data to evaluate outcomes, including data they receive through educator and student surveys. DOL will analyze outcomes across each of these programs to examine trends and findings across the pilot projects and make available key findings that may inform Colorado LEPs in their own efforts to create a learning environment that is more focused and supportive.

Smartphones in school is just one of many challenges that students and teachers are facing today. By engaging in this conversation, seeking to support leading experiments, and sharing best practices, we look forward to making progress on this issue in a collaborative and thoughtful way. The right smartphone policies, accompanied by effective implementation, can have a positive impact on school culture and the learning environment. We appreciate the effort of the participating LEPs to implement, monitor, and share key findings to inform this work statewide.





ADDITIONAL READING

- [Planning Together: A Playbook for Student Personal Device Policies](#). U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development (December 2024).
- [How to Manage Cellphones in Schools: 6 Tips From Teens](#). Education Week (July 2024).
- [Managing Cellphones in Classroom: Tips From Teachers](#). Education Week (January 2024).
- [Here's how Colorado's 20 largest districts regulate student cellphone use](#). Chalkbeat Colorado (August 2024).
- [More Social, Less Media: How Colorado's District 51 Advanced a Unified Cell Phone Policy to Enhance Student Learning and Wellbeing](#). Developed and published by Colorado Education Initiative, in partnership with Mesa County Valley School District 51 (December 2024).
- [Attorney General Phil Weiser launches initiative to fund smartphone strategies in schools, further supporting student wellbeing](#). Colorado Department of Law (September 2024).



COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF LAW
RALPH L. CARR JUDICIAL BUILDING
1300 BROADWAY, 10TH FLOOR
DENVER, CO 80203
(720) 508-6000