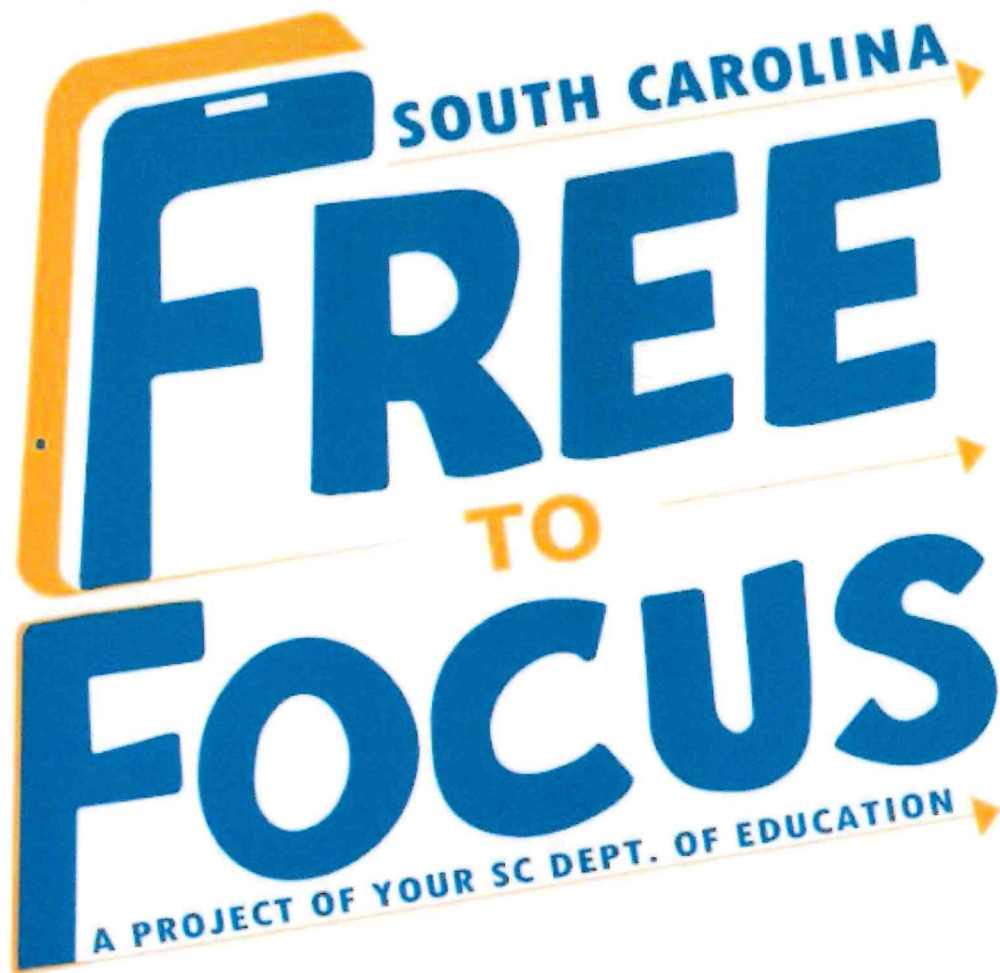


**SCDE launches 'Free to Focus SC'
program, provides resources for
parents and educators**



The "Free to Focus SC" program stems from a new policy approved by the South Carolina Board of Education that will prohibit students from using cell phones and other personal devices during school hours. The ban, which takes effect in January 2025, is designed to eliminate digital distractions and create a more focused learning environment. Under the policy, students will not be allowed to access their phones from the time they arrive at school until they are dismissed in the afternoon.

The new rule was developed after extensive research highlighted the negative effects of smartphone use on student performance and well-being. Many South Carolina educators reported that cell phones contribute to behavioral issues such as cyberbullying, cheating, and reduced engagement in the classroom. By removing the distraction of personal devices, schools aim to create a setting where students can develop the skills necessary to succeed in college, careers, and life.

State Superintendent of Education Ellen Weaver voiced her support for the policy, explaining that it aligns with South Carolina's broader mission of preparing students for the future. "With this policy, South Carolina students will be free to focus on their academic future and building life-long friendships in a safe environment, while South Carolina educators are free to focus on teaching," Weaver said.

While the ban applies to all public schools in the state, local districts have been granted flexibility in how they implement and enforce the policy. Each district will have the authority to decide on specific measures for ensuring compliance, such as requiring students to store their phones in lockers, pouches, or backpacks. Districts will also determine appropriate disciplinary actions for students who violate the ban.

The policy includes exceptions for students who require access to their phones due to medical needs or disabilities. Additionally, district superintendents can authorize phone use for educational purposes if it cannot be achieved with district-provided technology. These exceptions allow schools to maintain a balance between enforcing the ban and meeting individual student needs.

Students in violation of this policy will receive a pink slip with consequence, and will have their item(s) confiscated and secured until such time as a parent can pick them up from the office. Refusal to hand over the device will result in automatic level 3 additional consequences. THIS DOES PERTAIN TO AFTER-SCHOOL CARE AS WELL.

Model Policy Prohibiting Use of Personal Electronic Devices during the School Day

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to create a phone-free school environment that fosters a positive learning experience free from electronic distractions. By prohibiting the use of personal electronic devices during the school day, this policy aims to provide an environment that enhances focus and engagement, allowing students to develop the college and career-ready skills outlined in the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate. Students will have more opportunities to engage in meaningful interactions, collaborate with peers, and cultivate the essential skills necessary for success in college, careers, and life.

The Model Policy Prohibiting the Use of Personal Electronic Devices during the School Day has been developed in compliance with the General Appropriations Bill, H. 5100 of 2024, Proviso 1.103.

Proviso 1.103. (SDE: Anti-Bullying/School Safety) To receive state funds allocated for State Aid to Classrooms, a school district shall implement a policy adopted by the State Board of Education that prohibits access to personal electronic communication devices by students during the school day. For purposes of this provision, a personal electronic communication device is considered to be a device not authorized for classroom use by a student, utilized to access the Internet, wi-fi, or cellular telephone signals.

This proviso requires each local school district to adopt a policy adopted by the State Board of Education that prohibits access to personal electronic communication devices by students during the school day. This model policy must be adopted by districts and is applicable to grades kindergarten through twelve for the 2024-2025 school year. The local school board must ensure that this policy is included in the school district's publication of the comprehensive rules, procedures, and standards of conduct for schools and in the student handbook. Administrative support for teachers is critical for this or any policy to be successfully implemented.

School Districts may, but are not required to, publish additional guidance or administrative rules as may be necessary to implement this policy with fidelity. Any previous device or cell phone policies in conflict with this policy are superseded by this model policy.

Model Policy Language

I. Definitions:

- A. "Personal electronic device," hereinafter referred to as "device," means any device utilized to access the internet, wi-fi, cellular telephone signals, or to capture images or video. This includes, but is not limited to, cell phones, smart watches, tablets, and gaming devices.
- B. "Personal Electronic Device accessories," hereinafter referred to as "device accessories," include any wired or wireless accessory or wearable technology that connects to a device and any other accessory commonly used in conjunction with a personal electronic device.

- C. “School day” is defined as the period of time that a student is present on the school campus from their arrival (*i.e.*, tardy bell) until afternoon dismissal at the end of the instructional day. This policy may also apply to school buses, field trips, and athletic events. The applicability of this regulation to these activities will be determined by the school district.
- D. “Access” is defined as viewing, holding, wearing, or otherwise using a device for the purpose of communication, internet access, gaming, recording, or any other function commonly associated with devices. During the school day, devices should be powered off and stored as directed by the school district. Exceptions granted for medical necessity, authorized for classroom use, or other authorized reasons should be in writing and are not considered violations of this definition.
- E. “Authorized for Classroom Use” is defined as the use of a personal electronic device that is explicitly approved by the District Superintendent or his/her designee in writing. The approval must include alignment with a standards-aligned educational objective that cannot be reasonably achieved using district-owned devices. Students must be provided with clear instructions on the appropriate use of devices and ensure that their use aligns with the approved educational objectives. The District Superintendent or his/her designee may revoke approval at any time if it is determined that their use does not meet the intended educational objectives or is causing disruptions.

II. Policy Implementation and Enforcement

- A. During the school day, students are prohibited from accessing their personal electronic devices, unless authorized for classroom use. Students may not wear or access device accessories during the school day. Students must store their devices and device accessories in lockers, backpacks, or otherwise as directed by the school district during the school day. Districts may forbid student possession of devices and device accessories on school property.
- B. If explicitly required by a student’s IEP, Medical Plan, or 504 plan, the student shall be allowed to access their personal electronic device for medically or educationally necessary purposes described and required for administration of the IEP, Medical Plan or 504 plan.
- C. A student who is a member of a volunteer firefighting organization or emergency organization may be authorized to carry a device with written permission from the District Superintendent or his/her designee.
- D. If a student violates the preceding rules during the school day, the student will be subject to progressive consequences in the student code of conduct and disciplinary enforcement procedures.
- E. Before the expiration or codification into state law of Proviso 1.103 (General Appropriations Bill, H. 5100 of 2024), a survey will be administered to all superintendents and other applicable personnel soliciting input and seeking what worked best and what can be improved upon within the proviso prior to the 2025-2026 school year. This survey will be administered prior to April 30, 2025.



Parent/Student FREE TO FOCUS Acknowledgement Form 2024-25

Dear Parents & Students,

It is important that you are aware of the school's policies, some of which are regulations pursuant to our license with the HCS system & SCDE, including the FREE TO FOCUS device policy. . Please read and familiarize yourself with each page of this memo and use them as reference as needed.

Please sign and return this form to your child's teacher by October 25, 2024. This is an attestation that you and your student have reviewed this memo and acknowledge that you and your student will uphold the policies expectations therein.

ATTESTATION

I acknowledge that I have read and understand the FREE TO FOCUS memo as indicated below:

STATE POLICY REVIEW: ____ (student initials) ____ (parent initials)

CONSEQUENCES FOR VIOLATION: _____ (student initials) _____ (parent initials)

WE HAVE READ & REVIEWED ALL SECTIONS OF THIS MEMO.

Child's Name _____

Parent's Name _____

Parent's Signature _____

Classroom Teacher Name _____

Date _____

THANK YOU!