**Fiscal Facts: Wisconsin Could Join Call for Change on Cell Phones in Schools**

Wisconsin could join the growing list of states with laws restricting student cell phone use in schools. Our research finds that of the more than 300 districts or schools responding to a recent

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) survey, most already restrict student cell phone use to common school areas.

Wisconsin school districts currently have a patchwork of cell phone policies for students. While permitting use in common areas only is the most prevalent policy, some districts impose a more restrictive policy, fully banning students from using phones on school premises. Others impose no blanket restrictions, while typically permitting teachers to restrict cell phone use in their classrooms.

Now, Wisconsin lawmakers are debating a bill that would bring greater uniformity to these policies, enacting a statewide ban on student cell phone use during instructional time in public school districts. There would be limited exceptions, such as during an emergency or to manage a student’s health care. Under the bill, districts also would be permitted to adopt more stringent restrictions.

It's a salient issue for educators, many of whom find themselves competing with devices for students’ attention. In a recent Pew Research survey, 72% of high school teachers said student distraction due to cell phones is a “major problem in their classroom.”

The DPI survey data show Wisconsin’s smallest districts or schools are more likely to have adopted more stringent restrictions. Among those with 500 or fewer students, 36.2% had full bans, significantly more than the statewide share. Districts or schools with greater shares of students of color also have adopted more stringent restrictions.

We also analyzed districts and schools according to four categories of urbanization: city, suburban, town, or rural. The latter three categories showed minimal differences in their policies, but the city, or urban, category had a markedly larger share of districts or schools with full bans, at 31.8%. Notably however, all of the urban districts or schools with a full ban are independent charter schools.

Data from KFF, a leading national health policy think tank, show that a growing number of states are eschewing the cell phone policy patchwork in favor of a uniform statewide restriction or policy -- or at minimum, a baseline policy recommendation. Such proposals are gaining bipartisan support. Looking to our borders, in Iowa, Gov. Kim Reynolds just signed a law banning student cell phone use during instructional school time. In Illinois, Gov. J.B. Pritzker announced his support for a similar ban.

Student phone usage restrictions are only part of a larger picture. More schools — recognizing the difficulty of enforcing such restrictions – are adopting additional restrictions on when and where students can possess phones during the school day. Such policies may include requiring students to keep their phones in their lockers during instructional time, requiring that students place their phones inside personal lockable pouches, or requiring students to place their phones in a classroom phone caddy at the start of each class.

While surveys show that cell phone restrictions in schools are generally popular, not all students and parents are on board. Policymakers would be well-advised to better understand these objections as they craft new policies or tweak existing ones.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at* [*wispolicyforum.org*](https://wispolicyforum.org/research/state-tax-burden-up-but-overall-burden-still-falling/)*.*