

Achievement First

Cell Phone & Internet-Enabled Devices Policy

Rhode Island Region

READER'S NOTE: This version of the policy has been revised for compliance with Rhode Island law. All highlighted text is new or revised. Section banners shown in green are entirely new sections. The controlling authority is R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-21-43 (P.L. 2025, ch. 109 & 110), effective August 1, 2026, which requires each public school — including charter schools — to adopt a personal electronic device policy and file it with the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE).

Purpose and Rationale

At Achievement First, we believe every minute of the school day matters. To foster a safe, respectful, and productive learning environment, and to minimize distractions to teaching and learning, we maintain clear expectations about cell phones. While we understand families may want students to carry a phone for safety and communication purposes outside of school, we also know that unrestricted use during the school day negatively impacts learning, peer relationships, and school culture.

This policy does not change what we already expect in our schools: **cell phones and internet-enabled devices are not permitted for use during the school day including learning time, in classrooms, or in ways that disrupt the school environment.** We are formalizing these expectations so they are consistently understood, applied, enforced and communicated across our schools.

This policy is also adopted to satisfy R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-21-43, which requires each Rhode Island public school to maintain a policy governing the use of personal electronic devices on school grounds and during school-sponsored activities in order to reduce distractions, maintain environments focused on learning, and protect the privacy and safety of students and staff.

Definitions

The following definitions govern this policy in the Rhode Island region and are aligned to R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-21-43(b).

- **Personal electronic device ("PED"):** a smartphone, mobile phone, tablet, computer, smartwatch, or other electronic device that is **not owned or provided to a student by the school** and that is capable of communication through the internet or a wireless network. For purposes of this policy, "PED" is the controlling term and includes both internet-enabled and non-internet-enabled devices as described below.
- **Internet-enabled device(s):** smartphone, tablet, smartwatch or other devices capable of connecting to the internet and enabling the user to access content on the internet, including social media applications, including, without limitation, computing devices such as laptops, iPads and tablets; portable music and entertainment devices such as iPods and gaming consoles. Internet-enabled devices are a subset of personal electronic devices.

- **Non-internet enabled device(s):** cellular phone or other communication device not capable of connecting to the internet or enabling the student to access the internet. Non-internet-enabled devices remain subject to this policy and to the prohibition on use and physical access during the school day.
- **School-issued device:** a device owned or provided to the student by the school, such as a school-issued Chromebook or calculator. School-issued devices are **not** personal electronic devices and are governed by the school's acceptable use and network policies.
- **School Day:** the entirety of the instructional day ("bell to bell"), including all non-instructional time during the school day such as homeroom period, lunch, recess, study halls, and passing time, as defined by the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws §§ 16-2-2 and 16-2-9 and any regulations promulgated thereunder, including 200-RICR-20-05-1.
- **School Grounds:** all building structures, athletic playing fields, playgrounds or land contained within the real property boundary line of the school.
- **School-Sponsored Activity:** any school-organized or school-supervised activity, event, program, athletic contest, performance, field trip, or transportation occurring on or off school grounds, including before- and after-school programming.
- **Physical access:** the ability of a student to hold, retrieve, handle, view, or operate a personal electronic device. This policy prohibits physical access, not merely use, during the school day.
- **Locked pouch or container:** a reusable, individually assigned case, pouch, bag, or lockable compartment that secures a personal electronic device so that the device cannot be viewed or operated during the school day and that remains in the student's possession or in an assigned, secured location until it is unlocked at dismissal.
- **Emergent Multilingual Learner ("MLL"):** a student identified through the school's state-approved identification process as an English learner who is entitled to language access programs and services necessary to ensure the provision of an appropriate, meaningful public education.
- **Language access programs and services:** the instructional supports, translation and interpretation tools, and accommodations provided to an emergent MLL student, which may include a device-based translation or interpretation application where documented in the student's plan.
- **Assistive technology:** any item, piece of equipment, or system used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of a student with a disability, as documented in an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 plan.
- **Identified plan:** a student's IEP, Section 504 plan, individual health care plan, or MLL/language access plan in which an approved exception to this policy is documented.

General Policy

- Students may bring cell phones or any internet-enabled devices to school at their own risk, but they may not **use, display, or access** them during the school day (bell to bell). Consistent with R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-21-43(a)(1), students are prohibited from having **physical access** to a personal

electronic device during the school day. This includes instructional and non-instructional times such as homeroom periods, lunch, recess, study halls, and transitions.

- Calculators and school-issued Chromebooks are the only devices allowed for instructional purposes, unless otherwise explicitly authorized by a teacher.
- Possession of cell phones and internet-enabled devices are a privilege, not a right. Any misuse will result in disciplinary action and loss of privilege.
- This policy applies on school grounds and during school-sponsored activities, and will be enforced consistently by school administration, systematically, and in a manner that minimizes the potential for conflict between students, parents, educators, and staff.

Exceptions to the Policy

Rhode Island law requires that specific exceptions be made. The school will grant an exception in each of the following circumstances:

1. If authorized by a teacher, principal or school for a specific educational purpose.
2. Where access to **assistive technology** is necessary to comply with a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 plan.
3. Where necessary for the management of a student's healthcare, including medical needs such as continuous glucose monitoring or other device-dependent monitoring or treatment.
4. Where necessary to support an **emergent Multilingual Learner (MLL)** with appropriate language access programs and services to ensure the provision of an appropriate, meaningful public education. See the section below for detail.
5. In the event of an emergency.
6. On a case-by-case basis, upon review and determination by a principal or their designee, for a student caregiver who is routinely responsible for the care and wellbeing of a family member.
7. Where required by law.

Allowable exceptions under items 2, 3, and 4 above must be written into the student's identified plan and approved by the appropriate team or coordinator — the IEP team, the Section 504 team, the school nurse or health care coordinator, or the MLL/EL coordinator, as applicable. An exception documented in an IEP or Section 504 plan is mandatory and is not subject to principal discretion.

A parent may make a request under one of the above exceptions to the Principal. Any healthcare-related exception must also include documentation from a healthcare professional affirming such need.

Requests for an MLL language access exception should be directed to the Principal, who will refer the request to the MLL/EL coordinator for review and documentation in the student's plan. Requests, notices, and determinations will be provided to families in a language and format they can understand, consistent with the school's language access obligations.

Exceptions and Accommodations for Multilingual Learners (MLLs)

Achievement First will make exceptions to this policy for emergent Multilingual Learners where a personal electronic device is needed to deliver appropriate language access programs and services. This requirement is established by R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-21-43(a)(2).

- **Identification and documentation.** The MLL/EL coordinator, in consultation with the student's teachers and family, determines whether a device-based language support is needed. Any approved exception is written into the student's identified plan, including what the device may be used for, when, and in which settings.
- **Scope of permitted use.** Where an exception is granted, use is limited to the documented language access purpose — for example, translation or interpretation of instructional content, captioning, or bilingual reference tools. It does not authorize general phone use, messaging, social media, photography, or recording, all of which remain prohibited.
- **School-issued alternatives first.** Where the school can meet the documented need with a school-issued device or an equivalent tool, it will do so. This is not a mechanism for denying support; a school-issued alternative may only be substituted where it fully meets the need documented in the plan.
- **Family communication.** This policy, the available exceptions, and the process for requesting one will be translated and communicated to families of emergent MLLs in their preferred language, and interpretation will be provided for any meeting at which an exception is discussed.
- **Review.** Exceptions are reviewed at least annually, and whenever the student's language proficiency designation or plan changes.

Non-Stigmatizing Implementation of Exceptions — No Segregation of Students

Consistent with R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-21-43(a)(3), students who are provided an exception to this policy shall not be segregated from students without such an exception.

Achievement First will implement all exceptions in a manner that is not stigmatizing, isolating, or segregating. Specifically:

- A student with an approved exception will **not** be separated from peers, seated apart, assigned to a different classroom, room, table, line, or entrance, or removed from any class, lunch period, recess, assembly, field trip, or school-sponsored activity because of the exception.
- Students with exceptions will not be required to wear, carry, or display any badge, lanyard, sticker, wristband, colored tag, or other visible marker identifying them as having an exception.
- Storage, check-in, and retrieval procedures will not create a separate visible line, list, or process that publicly identifies students with exceptions. Where a separate process is operationally necessary, it will be conducted discreetly and without announcement.
- Staff will not announce, discuss, or reference a student's exception — or the reason for it — in front of other students. The existence and basis of an exception is confidential student information and will be shared only with staff who have a legitimate educational interest, consistent with FERPA and applicable Rhode Island student privacy law.

- Staff will not question or challenge a student's approved exception in front of peers. If a staff member is unaware of an exception, the student may be quietly redirected and the matter resolved privately with the principal or designee — not in the classroom or hallway.
- A student's use of a device under an approved exception is not a policy violation and will not be logged, counted, or reported as an infraction under the School Response to Policy Violation section of this policy.
- School staff will receive training on implementing exceptions discreetly and without stigma as part of the annual staff readiness session described in the Pre-Implementation Checklist.

On-Site Storage of Internet-Enabled Devices

Students must store their personal electronic devices in designated on-site storage areas during the school day. On-site storage areas may include, but are not limited to backpacks (K–4 only), lockable pouches and centralized secure storage.

Principals will communicate the procedures for storing and retrieving devices, ensuring that students understand their responsibilities in using the on-site storage facilities provided.

Storage Methods Must Protect Student Privacy and Property

Achievement First will select and operate storage methods that protect both the privacy and the property of students. Storage procedures will meet the following standards:

- **Privacy of contents.** Devices will be stored powered off or silenced and in a manner that does not expose the device screen, notifications, lock screen content, or any data on the device to staff or other students. Staff will not view, read, or monitor content visible on a stored device, and will not require a student to unlock a device, disclose a passcode, or open an application as a condition of storage or retrieval.
- **Security of property.** Storage locations will be locked or continuously supervised, in a controlled-access area, and assigned to an individual student rather than shared. Each storage location will be individually labeled or numbered so that a device is returned only to the student who stored it.
- **Accountability.** A designated staff member is responsible for securing each storage location and for storage and retrieval at the start and end of the school day. Logs used to track storage will record only what is necessary to return devices correctly and will be maintained as confidential student records.
- **Access limited.** Only designated staff may access stored devices. No device will be removed from storage, powered on, connected to any network or computer, or handled other than as necessary to secure or return it.
- **Retrieval.** Devices will be returned to students at dismissal, and made accessible without unreasonable delay. In an emergency, or where a student must leave school during the day, the device will be returned promptly.

- **Damage and loss.** Where the school takes possession of a device, it will be stored in a secure location. Any lost, stolen, or damaged device must be reported immediately to the Principal and will be investigated.

No Search of Device Contents While Retained by the School

No school official, employee, or agent of the school may search the contents of a student’s personal electronic device while that device is retained by the school during school hours and is not in the student’s possession, including while the device is secured in a locked pouch or container.

This prohibition is required by R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-21-43(d) and applies as follows:

- It applies to any device the school holds, whether stored voluntarily under this policy, collected at entry, secured in a locked pouch or container, or confiscated as a consequence of a policy violation.
- “Search the contents” includes powering on, unlocking, browsing, reading, opening applications, viewing messages, photographs, or files, copying or extracting data, connecting the device to any other device or network, or directing or permitting another person to do so.
- No staff member may require, request, or pressure a student to unlock a device, provide a passcode or biometric, or display its contents as a condition of the device being stored, returned, or a consequence being reduced.
- Taking custody of a device under this policy is not consent to search it, and a student’s compliance with storage or confiscation is not consent to search.
- Any request to examine the contents of a student’s device — including a request from law enforcement or arising from an investigation of bullying, harassment, threats, or academic dishonesty — must be escalated to the Principal and the Achievement First legal team before any action is taken. Staff may not act on such a request independently.
- Nothing in this section limits the school’s ability to monitor school-issued devices and school networks in accordance with the school’s acceptable use policy, or to act on information reported to it by other means.

Security of Devices

AF Schools will exercise reasonable care to maintain the security of devices that are held by the School but cannot guarantee the devices will be secure. AF Schools shall not be responsible for any personal device that is lost, stolen or damaged during the School Day or at school-sponsored activities. Any lost, stolen or damaged personal device should be reported immediately to the Principal.

Where the school takes affirmative custody of a device — for example through centralized collection or confiscation — the school will secure it as described in the On-Site Storage section, and the disclaimer above does not excuse a failure to secure a device the school has taken into its possession.

Guidelines by Grade Level

Grades K–4

- Students must keep their device turned off and stored in backpacks or another designated area determined by the school throughout the school day.
- Phones must not be visible or used at any time during school hours, including lunch and recess.

Grades 5–12

- Students may use phones before and after school (including afterschool programming).
- During the school day, bell to bell, devices must be turned off and stored (school designated storage area).
- Schools may implement additional classroom-specific procedures aligned to this policy, including requiring phones to be placed in collection bins or designated areas.

During Exams and Assessments

- Possession of a personal device during any exam or assessment even if not in use is a violation of academic integrity and subject to discipline.
- All assessments must be completed using the school-issued technology.
- A device used under an approved exception documented in an IEP, Section 504 plan, health plan, or MLL language access plan is permitted during exams and assessments to the extent provided in that plan, and its presence is not an academic integrity violation.

Prohibited Uses — Subject to Disciplinary Actions

- Using cell phones to photograph, record, or livestream any student, staff member, or activity during the school day or school-sponsored events without permission is strictly prohibited.
- Sharing, posting, or distributing unauthorized photos, videos, or recordings will result in a disciplinary action.
- Talking on a phone, texting, or using social media during instructional time will result in a disciplinary action.

School Response to Policy Violation

- Any unauthorized possession of cell phone devices during instructional time or in violation of this policy will result in the following actions (family communication must take place with each infraction):
 - (1st Time) Verbal warning to put the device away in the school designated area. Communicate with the family that a warning was given.
 - (2nd Time) Call to family with the scholar present.
 - (3rd Time) Family meeting.
 - (4th Time) Confiscation of device and returned at the end of the school day.
 - The device must be stored in a secure location. If the device is not secured after confiscation, and something happens to the device, the school will be held liable for the device. Inform the family that the scholar's device was confiscated.

- (5th Time) Confiscation and family pick up of the device.
 - The device must be stored in a secure location. Inform the family that the scholar's device was confiscated and must be picked up by the family.
- At every stage, a confiscated device is subject to the No Search of Device Contents section of this policy. Confiscation never authorizes examination of the device's contents.
- We will proactively communicate each infraction (1st to 4th) to families ensuring they have a clear understanding that students have 4 chances before we require the family pick up the device.
- Communication with the family must be documented in ICART and IC (PLP tab) or wherever your school tracks family communications.
- **Schools are prohibited from issuing a suspension for violation of the general policy.** Some uses of cell phones and internet-enabled devices will constitute a separate violation of network policy and be subject to additional consequences.
- Consequences will be applied consistently and in a manner that minimizes conflict between students, parents, educators, and staff, consistent with R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-21-43(c).

Adoption, Notice, and Filing with RIDE

- This policy is prescribed by the Board of Trustees in conjunction with school leadership and in consultation with any collective bargaining agents that represent school staff, as required by R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-21-43(c).
- Achievement First will notify the parents or guardians of all enrolled students of this policy, and will make it available in the languages spoken by our families.
- Achievement First will file this policy with the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in the manner and form prescribed by the Department, along with the required submission checklist, pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-21-43(f).
- This policy will be reviewed annually against RIDE's published guidance on personal electronic device policies.