



INSIDENOVA

PRINCE WILLIAM



\$1

APRIL 13 - 19, 2023

WWW.INSIDENOVA.COM

Social Media Sabbatical

Patriot HS community looks to drop 'rotten' routines

» BY JARED FORETEK
jforetek@insidenova.com

Patriot High School's lunch commons looked like a throwback to the analog days on a recent spring afternoon.

Teens read from conversation cards set out at tables, various board games were being played, and phones were at least less central, said Principal Michael Bishop.

The third week of March was "Social Media Awareness Week" at the Nokesville high school, and for the second straight year, Bishop wanted to emphasize the

impact social media has on students. A gregarious, old-school kind of educator, Bishop said he's running out of good options to blunt the technology's worst effects on school life.

"We have so many kids with anxiety. We have so many kids that lack the socialization skills," Bishop said. "When you look in our commons, on the outside of the commons during lunches, singular seats, kids sit by themselves because they don't necessarily



Patriot High School students take part in "Social Media Awareness Week." CARSON BERGET | PROVIDED

SOCIAL MEDIA » PAGE 8

SPRING SELFIES



The annual Bluebell Festival at Merrimac Farm in Nokesville was a hit last weekend, with hundreds of attendees lining up to snap photos and pose for Instagram-worthy selfies. CAMERON DELEAN | INSIDENOVA

Story and Photos, Pages 12-13

Traffic camera enforcement coming soon

Republicans object to red-light cameras

» BY JARED FORETEK
jforetek@insidenova.com

The Prince William Board of County Supervisors approved a speed and red light camera pilot program Tuesday, giving the go-ahead to the county's police department to set up cameras and to ticket infractions at eight school zones, one roaming construction zone and eight signalized intersections.

Police and the county's department of transportation plan to begin the pilot this summer after a 30-day grace period that will start in July. During the grace period, signs indicating photo enforcement will be erected, and the camera systems will issue warnings to drivers going more than 10 mph above the posted limit or running red lights. Once the grace period is over, fines will be \$100 for

CAMERAS » PAGE 21

PRINCE WILLIAM TODAY

SUBSCRIBE TODAY



INSIDENOVA.COM/SUBSCRIBE

SUBSCRIBE@INSIDENOVA.COM

CALL: 703-318-1386

8 57144 00400 1

want to talk to anybody and they're on their phones. And the No. 1 thing our staff told us last year is phones. It's the No. 1 distraction."

The first time around, the planning was done by adults, and the event gained little traction within the student body.

This year, Bishop enlisted a group of students to help with the vision. They knew what might work and what definitely wouldn't, but neither the students nor the adults involved were naive about what they might accomplish. They don't expect students to wipe their phones of all social media apps or completely hide them away during the school day any time soon.

The goals of the week's activities were more modest: to help make students slightly more aware of their tendencies and to encourage just a little more face-to-face interaction.

On "Mindful Monday," students were asked to sign a pledge for the week promoting positive, affirming social media usage and were given tips on how to monitor their own online habits.

"Try it Tuesday" encouraged students to put down the phone, meet someone new and engage in a conversation. On Wednesday, many students wore name tags saying what "defines" them. "Think it Through Thursday" encouraged students to think before they post, considering how it might make others feel.

"Phone Down Friday," students and faculty agreed, was the hardest. The high schoolers were asked, with varying success, to put their phones away for the day.

"It's as if you left it at home. It's like, what would happen? Would you pay attention more? Would you meet new people? Would you talk more?" Patriot High School senior Jocelyn Aristanto said. "The hope is just that you realize you don't need social media just to survive through the day. You'll be fine without it. The hope is that it kind of sparks something in their minds ... That's the goal of the whole week."

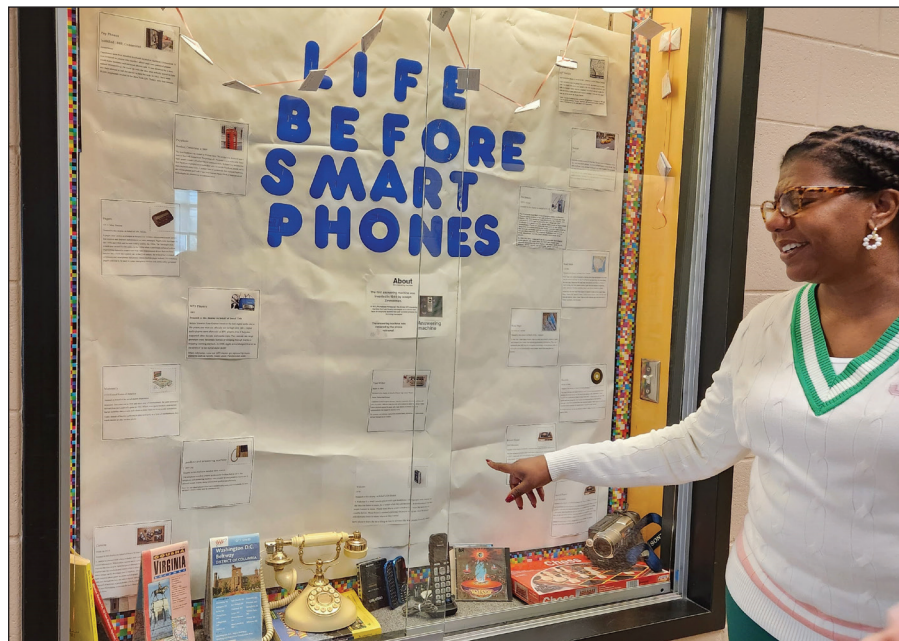
LIFE BEFORE AND AFTER COVID

Before COVID, Patriot had a strict policy prohibiting the use of phones in the classroom. The first time it happened, teachers would take the phone and return it to the student after class. The second time meant a trip to the office. And on the third instance, phones were taken away and parents had to come to pick them up.

But when students came back in-person full time, Bishop said, "It just became almost impossible ... You've got one teacher and 30 kids in a room."

Parents also objected, asking how they can reach their kids if something happens. When Bishop suggested a return to a strict no phones policy at a back-to-school night with parents, he said the parents in attendance stood and applauded.

"But I thought to myself, but you're the one that's allowing it to happen," Bishop said. "We've had parents call their kids



A "Life Before Smart Phones" display featured a rotary phone, a phone book, a Walkman and other items. JARED FORETEK | INSIDENOVA

during class. We've had parents texting their kids during class."

Patriot counselor Vicky Campbell posited that the combination of COVID and the regular horror of school shootings has made parents want a direct line to their students at all times.

"We've had parents email the teacher to ask why their kid hasn't returned their text during that class," Campbell said.

The student organizers said they know too well the lengths to which phones – and, in particular, social media – have upended social interaction. It's not uncommon, according to students, to see groups of teens huddled around a lunch table together hardly making conversation, focused instead on the constant scroll of online updates from others.

It's also not uncommon, they say, for kids to be deep in a text conversation with a classmate and pass them in the hall without saying a word. Even some of those involved in organizing the week's events said their in-person connection with friends had been strained by social media.

"I've had times where I've been out to lunch with my friends, and we spend like 40 minutes just trying to get the perfect picture for Instagram when we could be having a good time and just talking instead of trying to get something for social media," Aristanto said.

Study habits have also been affected. Patriot junior Abby Boursiquot said she isn't one for New Year's resolutions, but this year she's resolved to getting off her phone unless it's actually important.

"I've seen what it does to my work and school," she said, adding that on top of everything else, scrolling through social media often leaves her feeling worse than when she started.

"It's like eating a pizza and then after, you realize it was, like, rotten. It just didn't feel good and I felt disgusting. I just felt like I did it too much," Boursiquot said. "My friends were getting better and turning in work and things like that while I was on my phone, getting home and just going straight to my phone and keep scrolling hours on end,

just not realizing that I wasn't getting in my school work."

A CHANGE IN BEHAVIOR

Boursiquot helped to plan the awareness week because, as she put it, she knows that other students feel the same way, but they might just not realize that they can cut back.

Heavy social media usage has been found in some research to have significant effects on study time, homework and, maybe most importantly, sleep, which has its own correlations with academic achievement.

Most of the student organizers at Patriot said they're far from social media puritans and still use platforms like Instagram, but they have recently become more aware of just how addictive and anxiety-inducing the apps have become. The problem only worsened after a year of online school when face-to-face socialization was deliberately cut off.

"People started to rely on it more for entertainment to keep themselves off of the fact that they were stuck in the house for however long," said Patriot sophomore Carson Berget. "And ... it was a way that friends could communicate. So then it ended up building up a reliance on social media, I feel, and now that we're back to 'normal' ... we're so used to being on our phones and on social media to communicate that now we don't know how to switch back."

Aristanto said that a "Phone Down Friday" would have been relatively easy before the pandemic.

"When everything shut down, I was a freshman, and I remember just not having to use my phone all day," she told InsideNoVa. "There would be days it would stay in my bag the whole day ... Now everybody's like, 'I'm not gonna put my phone down; that's crazy. How can you expect me to put that down for like, more than five minutes?'"

Students at Patriot are also quick to point out that, in other words, the sky isn't necessarily falling. Phones can still be great tools for learning and engaging

with broader communities; many students are well-adjusted and know how to moderate their use, and some remain off social media entirely. As with any trends among young people, the reliance on interaction via app may eventually cycle out and become less cool among even younger generations, they agreed.

But social media and digital interaction are clearly posing some significant problems in and out of school.

"From an administrative side, every single day, there's something. Messaging threats, social media comments," Bishop said. "It's non-stop."

'IT'S AN ADDICTION'

TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat are the behemoths of social media for young people, according to research. Last year, 67% of U.S. teens said they had used TikTok, and 62% said they had used Instagram. In self reporting, 36% of teens said they spend too much time on social media, and rose to 41% for teenage girls. In the same survey, 54% said it would be hard to give up social media.

Research conducted on links between social media usage and teen mental health have hardly been conclusive, with many studies actually pointing to only small impacts. But that impact could vary by age. A major study conducted in the United Kingdom and published last year found that during early adolescence – ages 11-13 for girls and 14-15 for boys – "life satisfaction" ratings were lower for kids engaging in higher social media usage.

Meanwhile, internal research conducted by Instagram and leaked to The Wall Street Journal in 2021 found that 32% of teenage girls who "felt bad about their bodies" reported that "Instagram made them feel worse." Naturally, the documents showed, the platform's engagement mechanisms were also designed to make it more addictive.

"As a counselor, I do have kids that will come in and I will say in the 90th percentile, when kids are upset, it has involved some kind of social media interaction," Campbell, the counselor, said. "The best tool that I have is to process through it with them. Talk about what happened, maybe talk about options that the kid would have to handle it from there. ... We process what happened, why they're upset, and once they've calmed down, we move to: How can we resolve the situation in a healthy way?"

The goals of the week at Patriot were admittedly small in scale. The students said they were encouraged to see their classmates taking part in games or Q&A-style icebreakers in the lunch room and really enjoying face-to-face interaction.

But would it have a lasting impact? Students said most likely not.

"Honestly, I think everyone knows like, 'Oh, I'm on my phone a little too much,'" senior Divine Rumanyika said. "But it doesn't always matter what they know, a lot of people are probably still going to do it ... It's an addiction."



INSIDENOVA

PRINCE WILLIAM

\$1 JUNE 1 - 7, 2023

WWW.INSIDENOVA.COM

PUT TO THE TEST



Marine Corps Base Quantico partnered with Prince William County to conduct a large-scale training exercise in over a decade on May 25. The initiative simulated a train derailment involving hazardous materials and tested the ability of the installation and the county to work together in a multi-faceted emergency that affects the entire community.

Story and photos, page 10

Democrats pillory Youngkin's border order

Governor sending 100 guard members to Texas

BY JARED FORETEK
jforetek@insidenova.com

Local Democrats slammed Gov. Glenn Youngkin's decision Wednesday to deploy Virginia National Guard service men and women to Texas to "secure" the southern U.S. border with Mexico.



GLENN YOUNGKIN

In his announcement, Youngkin said Texas Gov. Greg Abbott requested assistance from all states to address border crossings.

"The ongoing border crisis facing our nation has turned every state into a border state," Youngkin said in a news release announcing the move. "As leadership solutions at the federal level fall short, states are answering the call to

BORDER >> PAGE 12

Schools consider changing approach to grading

Standards-based method coming under scrutiny

BY JARED FORETEK
jforetek@insidenova.com

After about a decade of standards-based grading in Prince William County Schools, big changes could be on the way.

The school division is starting a review of its county-wide grading practices, with some officials saying the current standards-based method has been unevenly applied and is not working as intended.

Standards-based grading is meant to emphasize mastery of material over test-taking or other assignments. As

such, tests can be retaken and grades can be changed if a student demonstrates understanding of what has been taught. At the same time, homework is de-emphasized.

But some parents and school officials say there's been no consistent application of the policy since it was instituted about a decade ago under former Superintendent Steven Walts.

During the May 17 School Board meeting, Superintendent LaTanya McDade said she was initiating a task force of teachers and administrators to review the division's grading policy and recommend any changes it might find necessary.

"The grading policy, I do believe, needs to be amended.



LATANYA MCDADE

We do need to take a look at the grading policy. I know that there were changes made during COVID, and we're out of that now; it's time to take a hard look at that and some of the practices that are occurring," McDade said.

"We also do need to take a look at how we're ensuring that we're norming practices across the school division so that from one school to the next, making sure that there are some consistencies around grading practices," she added.

INCONSISTENCIES ACROSS SYSTEM

The standards-based method – in particular, the practices around test retakes and homework – has been the

GRADING >> PAGE 6

PRINCE WILLIAM TODAY

SUBSCRIBE TODAY



8 57144 00400 1

INSIDENOVA.COM/SUBSCRIBE

SUBSCRIBE@INSIDENOVA.COM

CALL: 703-318-1386

Sale will bring 'renewed energy' around stadium site

» BY JONATHAN HUNLEY
For InsideNoVa

After the pending sale of the Washington Commanders is completed, there will be "renewed energy" around the discussion of where the franchise might put a new stadium, team President Jason Wright said in Northern Virginia recently.

Commanders owners Dan and Tanya Snyder have agreed to sell to a group led by Josh Harris for \$6.05 billion, which would be a record price for a North American professional sports franchise.

The sale needs approval from three-quarters of National Football League owners and satisfaction of other closing conditions, but Snyder and league officials are "working hard to get a quick approval done," Wright said at a flag-football event. League owners are meeting this week in Minneapolis and are expected to receive an update on the sale, but no vote is scheduled.

"I don't expect it to take long, but I don't have an estimate on the timeline, either. It's a league-run process," Wright said during a flag-football event May 20. "But I think everything feels like it's moving in the exact right direction."

When that's done, Wright said, more attention can turn to finding a new playing facility for the Commanders, who play at FedEx Field in Landover, Md. The lease for the stadium ends in 2027, and possible locations for a new site include nearly 200 acres in Woodbridge along Interstate 95 for which the team obtained options last year. A site in the Sterling area of Loudoun County has also been mentioned.

Commanders leaders will need to see what stadium strategy is favored by the new ownership group, led by Harris, managing partner of the Philadelphia 76ers, Wright said. But they continue to communicate with government officials about possible locations in Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia.

The idea is to "better understand" the officials' economic development aims, he said, and see what they would want in place for a sports facility. There's still enthusiasm for a stadium in all three jurisdictions, but Wright declined to discuss

specific sites.

No matter its location, new construction likely would include a mixed-use development, which has become the standard for areas around professional sports venues, Wright said.

"Any organization in any jurisdiction is looking at something that can provide year-round economic value, year-round foot traffic, that isn't something that sits there idle for a large portion of the year," he added. "So when you just think about it from a utilization lens, all the sudden you start to think about an economic development or a real estate development that is more comprehensive. That includes retail and hospitality, green space and social services and things like that."

That makes for a spot that's "useful and productive year-round," Wright said. "And I think smart city planners, smart community leaders are figuring out how things can be productive for citizens year-round."

FLAG-FOOTBALL CLINIC

Wright's May 20 comment came during a flag-football clinic for 100 local athletes aged 5 to 14. A handful of Commanders players and coaches and varsity players from Springfield's John Lewis High School taught the youngsters about football skills, while staff from healthcare provider OrthoVirginia shared best practices with parents and families.

OrthoVirginia is the Commanders' official orthopedic and sports medicine partner, and the event took place inside the team's practice bubble in Ashburn, now known as the OrthoVirginia Training Center. The event was the first person event since the team announced the OrthoVirginia naming rights partnership last fall.

Before the clinic, Wright said one notion behind the partnership with OrthoVirginia is that together they can make football's future "safer, more enjoyable and longer lasting" so parents feel more comfortable about getting their kids involved in the sport.

Children are taught to play football in a safer way nowadays, he said. "I learn how to tackle differently, how to place



Washington Commanders President Jason Wright talks with parents before the flag football event at the team's OrthoVirginia Training Center in Ashburn. JONATHAN HUNLEY | FOR INSIDENOVA

their bodies differently."

"The way that I was taught to play is different than the way that your kids are being taught to play," Wright told parents, "and that is important."

Families seemed to have a good time at the clinic, too. Purcellville residents Chris Hedblom and Sean Ryan brought their 6-year-old sons, Lucas and Cash, respectively, to the clinic before heading off to soccer.

Hedblom praised the event.

"Very nice day," Hedblom said. "Great event. They did a great job of putting it on for the kids. Everything ran very smoothly."

What was the best part?

"Seeing all the new players," Ryan said. Then he asked his son: "Think that was cool?"

"Yeah," said Cash Ryan, who already had his cleats on for soccer.

GRADING » FROM PAGE 1

subject of significant research, some of it showing that the approach can lead to better comprehension for students.

But some School Board members say what they're seeing in some schools now is a far cry from how it was supposed to be implemented years ago.

Justin Wilk, the Potomac District representative, was at Gainesville Middle School when he helped pilot the new approach. Back then, he said, students with certain grades on exams were offered the opportunity to retake an exam, but only after demonstrating a willingness to better master the material.

"At its onset ... and done right, I think it's a very effective system. It makes the kids work harder – or it should have – to show mastery, to have the right to do something like a retake. It's become now almost like unlimited re-takes, or kids have learned to game the system now," Wilk told InsideNoVa.

"Now it's just become a matter of, 'OK, get them over the finish line.' And that was not the intention of standards-based

grading when it was implemented," he added. "There needs to be consistency across the schools and even across grade levels and departments."

Critics of the system also point to the fact that, since the approach was first implemented in the school division, the percentages of students receiving Ds and Cs hasn't dropped significantly.

Meanwhile, some say, habits developed among students and teachers during the height of the pandemic – when deadlines for all kinds of assignments were far more flexible – have been hard to completely shake now that school is back in person full-time, as it has been for the past two years.

Gainesville board member Jen Wall said she has heard from parents whose children have attended different high schools – due to the redistricting timeline for Gainesville High School – and say that policies changed dramatically between buildings.

"Parents are like, 'What is this grading policy?'" Wall

told InsideNoVa. "Before they can say, 'Is this philosophy working?' ... They need to say, 'Are we implementing it appropriately and consistently?' And if we are and it's still not working, then we can look at the philosophy itself."

While McDade did not offer a timeline for when the task force might complete its review, Wilk said he hoped it might have something to report to the School Board around the beginning of the 2023-24 school year in August.

While Prince William County Public Schools are considering moving away from the standards-based method, other divisions are thinking of adopting it. Last year, Fairfax County Public Schools officials announced that division was reviewing grading policies and was considering moving toward a standards-based system.

"I'm not sure we're particularly happy with this route," Prince William School Board Chair Babur Lateef told InsideNoVa. "Now, there's a lot of research that supports going down [the standards-based] road ... The problem is, we have some inconsistencies"



INSIDENOVA

PRINCE WILLIAM

\$1 AUGUST 24 - 30, 2023

WWW.INSIDENOVA.COM

NEW YEAR, NEW ISSUES

As 90,000 students return, so do challenges

Cell phones in schools becoming problematic

Could a system-wide ban be on the way?

» BY JARED FORETEK
jforetek@insidenova.com

As school divisions across Virginia debut more stringent cell phone policies aimed at limiting student distractions in class, Prince William County Public Schools officials are hinting local policy changes could be on the way.

Schools and teachers in the county can set their own cell phone policies. But with educators and students saying the problems posed by the devices have only become worse since the COVID-19 pandemic, Superintendent LaTanya McDade says her central office is considering new division-wide policies for the first time.

“We have some schools that have independently implemented cell phone policies. As a school division collective-

CELL PHONES » PAGE 5

HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL PREVIEW



Freedom's Tristan Evans-Trujillo has a new name but the same game.
SPORTS, Page 15



The Osbourn Park High School band was on hand for first-day festivities Monday.

JARED FORETEK | INSIDENOVA



The new Innovation Elementary School, just outside of Manassas, welcomed students for their first day of school on Monday. Innovation is the county's first three-level elementary school.

CAMERON DELEAN | INSIDENOVA

Division publishes 'explicit' book list

Titles include 'Beloved,' 'The Invisible Man'

» BY JARED FORETEK
jforetek@insidenova.com

Prince William County Public Schools has published its list of teaching materials deemed “sexually explicit,” which parents can opt their students out of being taught under a state law that went into effect at the start of the 2023-24 school year.

After reviewing curriculum materials in the run-up to the new year, school

BOOKS » PAGE 5

SEE THE FULL LIST

» All 113 books currently found on the county's “sexually explicit” list can be found online at bit.ly/PrinceWilliamBookList.

MORE SCHOOL NEWS

County won't follow state transgender policies

» EDUCATION, PAGE 3

First-day takeaways, new elementary school

» EDUCATION, PAGE 4

PRINCE WILLIAM TODAY

SUBSCRIBE TODAY



8 57144 00400 1

INSIDENOVA.COM/SUBSCRIBE

SUBSCRIBE@INSIDENOVA.COM

CALL: 703-318-1386

division officials put 113 books and plays on the list of “sexually explicit material.”

The list includes a slew of literary classics like George Orwell’s “1984” and Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man,” contemporary best-sellers like Celeste Ng’s “Little Fires Everywhere” and Bryan Stevenson’s “Just Mercy,” as well as ancient texts like Sophocles’ “Oedipus Rex” and Ovid’s “Metamorphoses.”

The list also features several middle and high school standards. Kurt Vonnegut’s “Slaughterhouse Five” and Sandra Cisneros’ “The House on Mango Street” are both featured, as are three novels from Toni Morrison: “Beloved,” “Home” and “The Blues Eye.” Three Tennessee Williams plays – “A Streetcar Named Desire,” “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” and “The Glass Menagerie” – also appear.

Materials put on the list mean that a parent can opt their student out of learning that text and instead be taught alternative texts with no cost to a student’s grade.

The list, the first that the county’s school system has developed, is the result of state law passed during the 2022 General Assembly. The Republican-backed law won enough Democratic support in the state Senate to eventually be signed into law by Gov. Glenn Youngkin, mandating that the Virginia Department of Education develop guidelines on sexually explicit materials and that local school boards adopt the new policies in preparation for the 2023-24 school year.

Per the school division’s ensuing policy,

“Sexually explicit content means (a) any description of or (b) any picture, photograph, drawing, motion picture film, digital image or similar visual representation depicting sexual bestiality, a lewd exhibition of nudity, as defined in this policy, coprophilia, urophilia, or fetishism.”

The policy stipulates that materials “shall not be designated as sexually explicit based solely on the sexual orientation of the characters therein,” but several books featuring gay protagonists – like Casey McQuinn’s “Red, White & Royal Blue” – made the list for meeting parts of the division’s explicit definition.

The policy could also affect how art history classes are taught to some students in the division, as one textbook, “Modern Art: A History from Impressionism to Today,” is featured on the list, presumably for depictions of nudity.

Under the state law, instructional material featuring sexually explicit material that could be used instructionally must be identified, and school principals must provide written notice to parents or guardians of such material at least 30 days prior to it being used.

The vast majority of the texts included on Prince William’s list are used only in high school curricula, although 10 middle school texts also met the division’s standard, including Upton Sinclair’s “The Jungle,” Stevenson’s “Just Mercy,” Cisneros’ “The House on Mango Street” and Tupac Shakur’s “The Rose that Grew from Concrete.”

ly, we haven’t put forth any new changes on cell phones, but it is something that we are exploring,” McDade told InsideNoVa as the new school year got underway Monday.

Some school systems around Virginia are beginning to adopt more radical approaches. Most notably, Charlottesville City Public Schools has implemented a blanket ban on student cell phone use during the day, requiring phones to be placed in magnetic pouches for the duration of school hours.

“We know that our students are hooked on their phones. They can’t put them down,” Charlottesville Superintendent Royal Gurlley told parents, according to the Daily Progress. “Our educators say cell phones are just a disruption to teaching and learning.”

But the new policy there has garnered backlash from parents who say they need to be able to reach their students in case of emergency.

At Osbourn Park High School outside Manassas, senior Katie Scharlat agreed a blanket ban could post a problem in the event of an emergency. “Personally, I don’t have an issue with not using my cell phone in school,” she told InsideNoVa. “But it’s a way for students to communicate with their families.”

That concern isn’t stopping some teachers at Osbourn Park. For the first time this year, Principal Lisamarie Kane said, teachers will be given boxes in which, if they so choose, they can lock up phones for students who are “repeat offenders” of using

their phones in class.

“Our teachers have the option of letting their students use cell phones for instruction or not. If they’re not used for instruction or we don’t want them, we just have the kids put them in their backpacks,” Kane told InsideNoVa. “And we have different measures in place for students that can’t do that, because we’re all addicted to our phones a little bit.”

Even outside the classroom, some educators are increasingly concerned about the effect phones are having on how students socialize and how online conflicts can find their way into the school building. That’s led some schools, like Benton Middle School outside Manassas, to ban all phone usage without express permission from a teacher for the entirety of the school day, though they don’t confiscate all phones like in Charlottesville.

According to School Board Chair Babur Lateef, cell phones are an issue that some on the board want to be more proactive about.

“There’s a number of us on the board that think that [a division-wide policy] is a good idea. ... We don’t have any formal policy that we plan on voting on, but I know a number of School Board members have brought it up with the superintendent as far as, ‘It does concern us,’” Lateef said. “If our goals are to engage a student in classroom work and ... increase learning, we have to get them off these devices where they’re not necessarily doing things that will help them academically.”