

## Focus on the FOCUS Act - Hoover City Schools

The Alabama FOCUS Act created challenges for school systems across our state this past summer. Hoover City Schools recognized early that proactive communication and engagement with our school community would be important for a smooth rollout of the district's new policies and expectations. Rather than just sending out information, HCS decided to listen, educate, and involve the community every step of the way.

Rather than relying on one-way communication, HCS developed a strategic campaign centered on listening, transparency, and community involvement. Through research, community engagement, targeted messaging, and ongoing evaluation, HCS successfully prepared students, families, and employees for the rollout of the FOCUS Act.

Research - Hoover City Schools began the process with extensive research to better understand how the legislation would impact the school community and what information would be most needed. The district organized a series of focus groups that included district leadership, school administrators, teacher teams, high school students, and parents representing multiple grade levels. These sessions served several purposes:

- Provide a clear explanation of the legislation
- Identify common questions and areas of confusion
- Gather feedback on potential implementation challenges
- Determine the most effective ways to communicate with different audiences

These discussions revealed that the legislation would affect each community group differently and that communication would need to be tailored for each audience. Participants emphasized the need for clear, transparent communication and requested specific guidance on district expectations. Some focus group participants also suggested adjustments to existing procedures to allow for flexibility in implementing the FOCUS Act, helping district leaders refine policies while maintaining compliance with the law.

To ensure accuracy, district leaders also reviewed the legislation with the district's board attorney and executive leadership team to determine which components were mandated by state law and which elements required district policy decisions.

Based on the feedback gathered, HCS expanded the focus groups to include:

- Central Office administrators
- School administrators (principals and assistant principals)
- Secondary administrators (additional focus group due to greater impact on secondary campuses)
- Elementary teacher groups
- Secondary teacher groups
- Parent representatives from each school
- Student leaders from Hoover High School and Spain Park High School

These conversations helped the district better understand community concerns and informed the development of a strategic communication plan.

Planning - Information gathered during the research phase guided the development of a comprehensive communication plan designed to educate the community and prepare them before the law took effect. The communications department established the following strategic goals:

- Provide clear and simple information to all audiences
- Ensure the community understands the difference between state legislation and district policies
- Provide staff and students with the resources needed to comply with the new expectations
- Model accountability by establishing expectations for staff, even though the legislation focused primarily on students
- Reduce confusion and disruptions once the law went into effect

The plan identified several key target audiences:

- School administrators
- Faculty and staff
- Parents and families
- Students
- Community members

The communications team developed a phased rollout strategy that allowed the district to share information in stages while also remaining responsive to new questions as they emerged. Key tactics included:

- Targeted staff communications through ParentSquare
- Dedicated informational publications for parents and students (digital and printed)
- A centralized FOCUS Act website
- Student-led video messaging on social media was developed by the district
- Districtwide graphics and posters customized for each school

This approach ensured that the same core message could be delivered across multiple platforms while still reaching each audience in the most effective way.

Implementation - Once the district finalized its policies and expectations, Hoover City Schools began rolling out the communication plan to staff, students, and families.

Staff Communication - Faculty and staff received two targeted communications through ParentSquare explaining district expectations and policy details. ParentSquare analytics allowed the district to monitor message reach and engagement to be sure staff received the information over the summer break.

Parent and Student Resources - Multiple district publications were created:

- An introduction explaining the FOCUS Act legislation
- A guide explaining HCS policies and procedures
- An additional information message that included frequently asked questions
- The messages above were then included in all district and school newsletters as reminders to family members and students

These resources helped families clearly understand both the state law and the district's implementation plan.

Dedicated Website - Hoover City Schools launched a centralized FOCUS Act website that served as a hub for information. The site included:

- Frequently asked questions
- Detailed explanations of district policies
- Additional resources for students and families

The website was updated regularly as new questions emerged from the community.

Student Voice and Social Media - During focus groups, students emphasized that peer-to-peer communication would be most effective in reaching other students regarding this sensitive subject. In response, the district produced student-led videos and social media reels featuring student leaders explaining expectations and modeling compliance.

These videos achieved record engagement:

- Spain Park High School reel received 26,000+ views, the school's highest performing standalone post
- Hoover High School reel received nearly 17,000 views

School-Level Messaging - To reinforce messaging across campuses, the communications department created districtwide graphics and posters customized with each school's branding. These materials were distributed to every school and displayed leading up to the first day of school. This consistent visual messaging helped reinforce expectations for students throughout the district.

Evaluation - Hoover City Schools used several methods to evaluate the effectiveness of the campaign.

Communication Analytics

- ParentSquare analytics showed high open rates and strong engagement with staff communications.
- The dedicated website experienced significant traffic and repeat visits, demonstrating that families and employees were using the site as an ongoing resource.

Social Media Metrics

The student-led videos achieved record-breaking reach, confirming that peer-driven messaging was highly effective in communicating expectations to students.

Teacher Feedback

The district also surveyed teachers across all schools this spring to gather feedback on how the implementation of the FOCUS Act was impacting classrooms. Because of the proactive communication leading up to the start of the school year, survey responses from teachers across the district were overwhelmingly positive. Many educators reported that students were well-informed about expectations, which helped reduce confusion and allowed classroom instruction to continue with minimal disruption.

Operational Impact

The district also monitored FOCUS Act-related violations and classroom disruptions as a measure of implementation success. Early results indicated that the proactive communication strategy helped reduce confusion and allowed schools to implement expectations smoothly at the beginning of the school year.

HCS Lessons Learned and Future Application - This initiative reinforced the importance of student voice and community engagement in school communications. Moving forward, Hoover City Schools plans to continue incorporating focus groups and student-led messaging when introducing policies that directly impact students.

By approaching the rollout of the FOCUS Act as a strategic communications initiative rather than a simple announcement, we were able to build understanding, reduce confusion, and prepare the community for change.

Through research-driven planning, community engagement, targeted messaging, and ongoing evaluation, the district successfully navigated a complex and potentially divisive topic while strengthening relationships with students, families, and staff.

This campaign demonstrated that when school systems listen first and communicate with transparency, even challenging policy changes can become opportunities to build trust and strengthen community partnerships.

# Disconnect to Connect: The Impact of the FOCUS Act on School Cell Phone Use

Data gathered from school staff across multiple grade levels reveals a high level of satisfaction with strict cell phone restrictions. The transition to "bell-to-bell" prohibition has reportedly reduced classroom distractions and increased peer-to-peer social interaction.

## Policy & Implementation Standards



### Bell-to-Bell Prohibition

The vast majority of schools prohibit phone use for the entire instructional day.



### Secure Storage Requirements

Phones are primarily stored off-person in lockers or kept out of sight in backpacks.



### Essential Medical Exceptions

Policies allow exceptions for students requiring devices for medical monitoring, such as diabetes.

## Impact & Staff Sentiment



### Near-Universal Staff Approval

Most respondents report being 100% satisfied with the current restrictive cell phone policies.



### Reduced Classroom Distractions

Teachers report significantly fewer interruptions and higher levels of student engagement during lessons.



### Empowered Enforcement

Staff cite the FOCUS Act state law as providing crucial legal support for enforcement.

## BEFORE & AFTER THE FOCUS ACT

### Pre-FOCUS Act Reality

#### Staff Enforcement



Inconsistent/Teacher-dependent

#### In-Class Usage



Prevalent/Hidden in pockets

#### Social Interaction



Phone-centered breaks



FOCUS Act Implementation

### Post-FOCUS Act Reality

#### Staff Enforcement



Strict/District-wide consistency

#### In-Class Usage



Near 0% reported by most staff

#### Social Interaction



Increased peer-to-peer socialization