



**House Education & Health Committees
Informational Meeting- Cell Phones in Schools
November 17, 2025, at 10am, 60 EW**

10:00am Call to Order
 Committee Member Introductions
 Opening Remarks- Chairman Schweyer and Chairman Frankel

10:10am **Panel 1- Health Perspective**

Dr. Beth J. Sanborn, Ph.D., President
PA Association of School Resource Officers; School Safety Coordinator, Montgomery County

Dr. Mitch Prinstein, Ph.D., ABPP, Chief of Psychology American Psychological Association *
John Van Seters Distinguished Professor of Psychology & Neuroscience Co-Director, Winston
Center on Technology & Brain Development, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Ms. Lisa Graham, School Counselor
Seneca Valley Intermediate High School

10:45am **Panel 2- Education Perspective**

Mr. Jeff Ney, Vice-President
Pennsylvania State Education Association

Ms. Laura Morton, Director of Policy Services
Pennsylvania School Boards Association

11:20am **Panel 3- Local Perspective**

Dr. Amy Arcurio, Superintendent
Greater Johnstown School District

Mr. Matthew Davis, Teacher – AP Psychology
Penn Manor School District

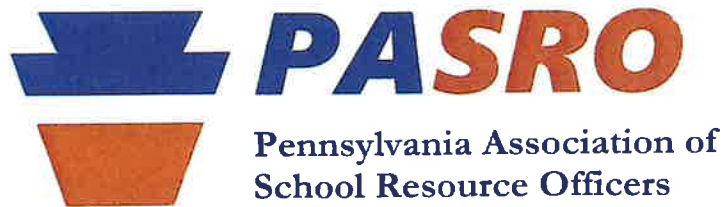
11:50am Closing Remarks/Adjournment

Written Testimony:

Education Commission of the States
Teach Plus
PA Unplugged
Dr. Hillman- Penn Medicine
Mr. McLeod, ADHD & Executive Function Specialist
Ms. Haff, Parent
Ms. West, Student
Mr. Walls, Guidance Counselor
Pennsylvania Department of Education

* Virtual

All times are approximate and include time for questions. Live streamed at www.pahouse.com/live



Beth Sanborn, President John Aston, 1st Vice President Aaron Skrbin, 2nd Vice President

October 31, 2025

**Written Testimony of Dr. Beth J. Sanborn
President, Pennsylvania Association of School Resource Officers (PASRO)
Impact of Bell-to-Bell Cell Phone Ban on School Safety in Pennsylvania Schools**

Chairperson and Members of the Senate Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the Pennsylvania Association of School Resource Officers (PASRO). As a career law enforcement professional, educator, and now President of PASRO, I have dedicated nearly three decades to the safety and well-being of Pennsylvania's students. Our members serve in schools every day, standing shoulder to shoulder with educators, administrators, and families to create safe, nurturing environments where children can learn and grow.

From a school safety perspective, PASRO has seen the impact of cell phone usage, and abuse, in K-12 schools across the Commonwealth. Cell phone usage impacts almost every facet of the school day, from growth and maturation, to education, to transportation complications. Bell-to-Bell cell phone ban policies ensure that personal electronic devices remain inaccessible to students during the entire school day, not just during classroom instruction, and are a necessary step toward restoring focus, connection, and safety in our schools.

In moments of crisis, such as an active threat or school shooting, *every second counts*. Students must be fully aware of their surroundings, what they see, hear, smell, and feel while maintaining the ability to respond calmly to the direction of trusted adults. Their attention must remain on what is happening in the moment, not on screens or social media.

When students reach for their phones, they risk sharing inaccurate or incomplete information, which can cause panic both inside and outside the building. A single misinformed post can lead to chaos, interfere with first responders, and spread fear among parents and the community. Furthermore, a phone's screen light or vibration can reveal a student's location, endangering not only that child but everyone near them.

While I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the deep anxiety parents feel when they cannot immediately reach their child, it's critical to remember that inability to contact a child does not

make that child less safe. In fact, it makes them safer. School safety professionals and law enforcement officers are trained and equipped to manage these situations. The most effective emergency response environments are calm, quiet, and controlled. They are guided by trained adults, not distracted students clutching their phones.

Imagine, if you could, a stressful situation where you fear for your life. Cell phones, with potential service interruptions, slow service, and an inability to contact someone are not calming factors. Instead, we rely on eye contact, breathing exercises, hugs, hand holding, and personal connection. Cell phones don't reduce anxiety; they fuel and intensify it.

Although emergencies highlight the most serious safety risks, the everyday consequences of constant connectivity are equally concerning, if not more so. Long before the first bell rings, students are already immersed in online conversations that often carry over into their school day.

Before cell phones, a disagreement between students might come to a head and then fade away. Today, those same disagreements are prolonged and amplified online. Friends and peers add oxygen to the embers of conflict, making it nearly impossible for tensions to cool. Students cannot detach or decompress. They live in a constant state of social pressure, where reputations are managed in real time and mistakes are broadcast for all to see. Imagine being so hyper focused on what your peers were doing, what they were saying, where they were going, who was invited (*why wasn't I invited?*), look at how happy they are (*I wish I were happy*), they're so lucky (*I never get lucky*), their lives are so perfect (*I hate them*), why do all the good things happen to everyone else (*What wrong with me?*), is that **another** new pair of sneakers (*Why do they deserve nice things?*), nobody cares about me, nobody gets me, I'll bet no one would care if I disappeared.....

As a result, many of our young people are missing out on critical life skills, like the ability to have real conversations, to disagree respectfully, to resolve conflict, and to build empathy and resilience. They are losing the opportunity to practice human connections and experience emotional well-being. They are missing out on skills like interpreting non-verbal body language, observing subtle cues, and the nuances of connectivity.

Beyond distraction and social drama, the digital landscape presents more insidious dangers. Students are being targeted for exploitation and recruitment through their devices, not unexpectedly during the school day.

We have seen cases of human trafficking attempts initiated through gaming and chat platforms, and recruitment into nihilistic violent extremist groups such as "764," which lure vulnerable youth through online spaces disguised as harmless communities. These are not abstract concerns; they are happening here, in our schools, and they are exacerbated by unrestricted access to personal devices. Students who feel disconnected and are unable to express themselves or engage in personal connections, find solace in 'recruiters' who prey on those desperate to find connections. These recruiters hone their skills to identify children who feel lost and unseen, and manipulate them through the guise of care, connection and love. This manipulation is often confused for caring, loving, healthy relationships and can result in dangerous outcomes like running away, self-harm, or brainwashing to create a new reality.

**Written Testimony
of
Mitch Prinstein, PhD, ABPP
Chief of Psychology
American Psychological Association
Protecting Our Children Online
Before the Pennsylvania House Education and House Health Committees**

November 17, 2025

Members of the Pennsylvania House Education and House Health Committees, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the online dangers facing our children and teens. I am Dr. Mitch Prinstein, Chief of Psychology at the American Psychological Association (APA). APA Services, Inc. is the companion organization of the American Psychological Association, which is the nation's largest scientific and professional nonprofit organization representing the discipline and profession of psychology, as well as over 173,000 members and affiliates who are clinicians, researchers, educators, consultants, and students in psychological science. Through the application of psychological science and practice, our association's mission is to use psychological science and information to benefit society and improve lives.

I am grateful you have joined policymakers from across the country in drawing attention to youth and the online environment. Our youth are struggling in many ways, largely due to our society's failure to adequately attend to child and adolescent mental health. The testimony below represents one largely adapted from my testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee in February of 2023. Unfortunately, very little has changed in the last two years.

My testimony is broken down into the following sections to help inform the Committee about the complexities of the challenges before us and to help shape policy solutions:

- Overview pg. 2
- Online/ Social Media Behaviors and Youth Mental Health pg. 6
- Psychological Effects of Lost Opportunities While Youth Are Online pg. 17

Overview

We are seeing the repercussions of our underinvestment and lack of focus on children's mental health. Depression rates for teens doubled between 2009 and 2019 and suicide is the second leading cause of death for U.S. youth, up 4% since 2020, with one in five teens considering suicide during the pandemic and eating disorder emergency room admissions for girls 12 to 17 years old doubling since 2019 ¹. Furthermore, since the start of the pandemic, over 167,000 children have lost a parent or caregiver to the virus ². This kind of profound loss can have significant impacts on the mental health of children, leading to anxiety, depression, trauma, and stress-related conditions ³. Faced with such data, in December 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory calling for a unified national response to the mental health challenges young people are facing ⁴. The rarity of such advisories further underscores the need for action to help stem the mental health crisis of children and adolescents.

¹Radhakrishnan, L. (2022). Pediatric Emergency Department Visits Associated with Mental Health Conditions Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, January 2019–January 2022. *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 71(8). <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7108e2>; Curtin, S. (2022). Vital Statistics Rapid Release Provisional Numbers and Rates of Suicide by Month and Demographic Characteristics: United States, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr024.pdf>; Daly, M. (2021). Prevalence of Depression Among Adolescents in the U.S. From 2009 to 2019: Analysis of Trends by Sex, Race/Ethnicity, and Income. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.08.026>; Suicide. (n.d.). National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Retrieved February 10, 2023, from

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide#%3A~%3Atext%3DSuicide%20is%20a%20leading%20Cause%20of%20Death%20in%20the%20United%20States%2C->

[According%20to%20the%26text%3DSuicide%20was%20the%20second%20leading%20Cause%20of%20Death%20in%20the%20United%20States%2C-](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide#%3A~%3Atext%3DSuicide%20is%20a%20leading%20Cause%20of%20Death%20in%20the%20United%20States%2C-According%20to%20the%26text%3DSuicide%20was%20the%20second%20leading%20Cause%20of%20Death%20in%20the%20United%20States%2C-)
%2044; Yard, E. (2021). Emergency Department Visits for Suspected Suicide Attempts Among Persons Aged 12–25 Years Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, January 2019–May 2021. *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 70(70(24);888–894). <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7024e1>.

² Hidden Pain: Children Who Lost a Parent or Caregiver to COVID-19 and What the Nation Can Do To Help Them | COVID Collaborative. (n.d.). [www.covidcollaborative.us](https://www.covidcollaborative.us/initiatives/hidden-pain). <https://www.covidcollaborative.us/initiatives/hidden-pain>.

³ Almeida, I. L. L., Rego, J. F., Teixeira, A. C. G., & Moreira, M. R. (2021). Social isolation and its impact on child and adolescent development: a systematic review. *Revista paulista de pediatria : orgao oficial da Sociedade de Pediatria de Sao Paulo*, 40, e2020385. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1984-0462/2022/40/2020385>.

⁴ Richtel, M. (2021, December 7). Surgeon General Warns of Youth Mental Health Crisis. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/07/science/pandemic-adolescents-depression-anxiety.html#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20surgeon%20general>.

There are many reasons why youth are experiencing this crisis today, and it is likely that there are simultaneous contributors to the outcomes presented above. Today, we are here to talk about whether youths' engagement with social media, and other online platforms, may be a relevant factor. Many psychological scientists, including myself and my colleagues, have been asking this same question for years. We seek to understand how this new context in which youths' social interactions occur may be related to development, including potential benefits or risks that may be conferred by the online environment. As the discipline with expertise on all of human behavior, our work has been broad in scope; and to date, our focus has been on the adolescent period, during which more complex and mature behaviors are developed through intricate and precise interactions among neural, biological, social, contextual, and social systems. Today, although this remains a relatively nascent body of research, I would like to share what we know so far, so policymakers, educators, parents, caregivers, and youth can learn from what we are beginning to discover and make choices that will ensure the safety of youth.

In this testimony, I outline emerging research with findings that have begun to suggest possible benefits, and as well as possible adverse effects of technology and social media use on adolescent development. I also present legislative and regulatory solutions that if enacted, would represent positive steps towards learning more about, and hopefully solving this problem. I am calling for new legislation and regulations that increase research funding and provide education on how children can use online platforms without experiencing the most harmful impacts; legislation that creates a requirement that social media companies protect the well-being of child users; legislation that prohibits problematic business practices and prevents companies from tricking and manipulating users; and bills that provide more leverage for government regulators to clamp down on known harmful impacts while building internal expertise to prepare to tackle newly discovered harms. APA supported these efforts in the past and commits to work to see these proposals enacted because, as I present below, scientific data are beginning to suggest areas of serious concern that must not be allowed to continue unchecked.

Before we discuss specific impacts of online platforms or solutions, it is important to acknowledge that causal data are not available for many of these issues, since the experimental designs needed to make cause-and-effect statements would be considered unethical or require

access to currently inaccessible data. This underscores the need for increased access to data and funding for high-quality research. However, as with non-causal research revealing the effects of childhood adversity on mental health, or the effects of combat on PTSD among veterans, extant, rigorous science can nevertheless allow us to reach reasonable conclusions that can shape policy.

It also is important to acknowledge that technology and social media may not, in themselves, be problematic for child development, as each device and platform offers a multitude of features and communication opportunities that users can choose from. Extensive research has demonstrated that the amount of screentime alone is not likely associated with negative psychological outcomes among youth ⁵. Moreover, not all youth exposed to identical stimuli are affected in the same ways. Thus, the most appropriate question is: what specific online *behaviors, features, or content* may be associated with benefit or risk to which youth. This is the focus of the most recent work among psychological scientists, yielding some comforting, but also some worrying results.

But first, to understand the role of social media in youths' development, it is necessary to understand the role of social interactions more generally at this critical developmental stage.

Children's interactions with peers are not merely for fun. It is within the social context that most children's education occurs; thus, peer interactions significantly affect cognitive development. The peer context also is the milieu in which children learn social rules, norms, and expectations; develop emotional competence and morality; and in which all of children's behaviors are consistently reinforced (or corrected), thus influencing long-term behavioral development. Indeed, numerous studies have revealed that children's interactions with peers have enduring effects on their occupational status, salary, relationship success, emotional development, mental health, and even on physical health and mortality over 40 years later ⁶. These effects are stronger than the effects of children's IQ, socioeconomic status, and educational attainment. These enduring effects likely occur because of remarkably powerful and reciprocal interactions between

⁵ Odgers CL, Jensen MR. Annual Research Review: Adolescent mental health in the digital age: facts, fears, and future directions. *J Child Psychol Psychiatry*. 2020;61(3):336-348. doi:10.1111/jcpp.13190.

⁶ For a review, see; Prinstein, M. J., & Giletta, M. (2020). Future Directions in Peer Relations Research. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 49(4), 556–572. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2020.1736299>.

youths' social experiences and their biological development. Children's brains and peripheral nervous systems influence how they interact with peers, and in turn, those experiences change the development of their brain structures, neural pathways, and even how their nervous system responds to stress throughout their lives.

Our brains, our bodies, and our society have been evolving together to shape human development for millennia, influencing our communities, our culture, and our society. Within the last twenty years, the advent of portable technology and social media platforms is changing what took 60,000 years to evolve. We are just beginning to understand how this may impact youth development.

I will first discuss the potential effects of technology and social media use on youth mental health. This will include an outline of five main issues emerging from the research, including the risks of pre-adulthood use of social media, the ramifications that come from unmonitored (and "liked") content online, the potential effects of digital stress, the encouragement of social comparisons, and research demonstrating benefits of social media use among youth. In the following section, I will discuss the psychological effects of opportunities lost while youth spend time online. Last, I will discuss potential solutions and policy recommendations.

Online/ Social Media Behaviors and Youth Mental Health

Pre-adulthood use of technology and social media may be particularly concerning. There is reason to be significantly concerned about the age at which many youth begin using technology and social media. Developmental neuroscientists have revealed that there are two highly critical periods for adaptive neural development. Aberrations in our brain growth during these periods may have lifetime implications. One of these is the first year of life. The second begins at the outset of puberty and lasts until early adulthood (i.e., from approximately 10 to 25 years old). This latter period is highly relevant, as this is when a great number of youths are offered relatively unfettered access to devices and unrestricted or unsupervised use of social

media and other online platforms ⁷. Within the age range of 10-25 years, change occurs gradually and steadily; thus risks likely are greater towards the beginning of this range and become attenuated as youth mature. Herein, this period is referred to as “pre-adulthood.”

At the outset of puberty, adolescents’ brains begin developing in a specific, pre-determined sequence. Generally, sub-cortical areas shared with many mammalian species mature before areas at the top layer of the brain, which is responsible for many of our more human capabilities, such as premeditation, reflection, and inhibition. Among these initial areas developing among most youth, typically starting at the ages of 10-12 years old, are regions associated with our craving for “social rewards,” such as visibility, attention, and positive feedback from peers. In contrast, regions involved in our ability to inhibit our behavior, and resist temptations (i.e., the prefrontal cortex) do not fully develop until early adulthood (i.e., approximately 10-15 years later). In other words, when it comes to youths’ cravings for social attention, they are “all gas pedal with no brakes.” Adolescence is thus a developmentally vulnerable period during which youth may be especially motivated to pursue social rewards, and not yet fully capable of restraining themselves.

Research suggests that technology and social media use may exploit this biological vulnerability among youth. Data reveal that social media stimuli, such as receiving “likes” or followers activates the social reward regions of the brain ⁸. In other words, these features of social media capitalize on youths’ biologically based need for social rewards before they are able to regulate themselves from over-use. This has at least four significant implications for youth mental health.

Social Media and Loneliness. Although ostensibly social media platforms are built to foster interpersonal contacts and connections, they are not designed primarily to foster meaningful and mutually rewarding relationships that confer psychological benefits. Relationships are most beneficial to youths’ psychological development when they are characterized by support, emotional intimacy, disclosure, positive regard, reliable alliance (e.g., “having each other’s

⁷ Vogels, E. A., Gelles-Watnick, R., & Massarat, N. (2022, August 10). Teens, social media and technology 2022. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/>.

⁸ Sherman, L. E., Hernandez, L. M., Greenfield, P. M., & Dapretto, M. (2018). What the brain ‘Likes’: neural correlates of providing feedback on social media. *Social cognitive and affective neuroscience*, 13(7), 699–707. <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsy051>.

backs”), and trust ⁹. It is possible to use social media to foster exactly these types of relationship qualities, such as through direct messaging features. However, these are not the functions that are highlighted on most platforms. More typically, users are directed towards the number of “likes,” followers, or reposts they received, often without immediate access to the identity of those who engaged with their profile or content. In other words, platforms are more apt to motivate users towards one’s metrics than people themselves, which has led many youth to upload curated or filtered content to portray themselves most favorably. Note that these features of social media, and the resulting behaviors of those who use social media create the exact opposite qualities needed for successful and adaptive relationships (i.e., disingenuous, anonymous, depersonalized). In other words, social media offers the “empty calories of social interaction,” that appear to help satiate our biological and psychological needs, but do not contain any of the healthy ingredients necessary to reap benefits. Anecdotally, teens’ behavior reflects this issue – the “Finsta” phenomenon reflects digital natives’ attempt to find more honest and intimate relationships with one another, but without experience in doing so first offline. Scientific data also support this claim; research reveals that in the hours following social media use, teens paradoxically report *increases* rather than decreases in loneliness ¹⁰.

Heightened Risk for Negative Peer Influence. Adolescents frequently are exposed to content online depicting illegal, immoral, dangerous, and unethical behavior. The architecture of many social media platforms allows users to like, repost, or comment on this content. Emerging data suggest that these features of social media present a significant risk to adolescents’ mental health. Specifically, data reveal that social media may change adolescents’ susceptibility to maladaptive behavior through both biological and psychological pathways. Research examining adolescents’ brains while on a simulated social media site, for example, revealed that when exposed to illegal, dangerous imagery, activation of the prefrontal cortex was observed suggesting healthy inhibition towards maladaptive behaviors. However, when these same images were shown

⁹ Furman, W., Bukowski, W. M., Newcomb, A. F., & Hartup, W. W. (1996). The company they keep: Friendship in childhood and adolescence. Cambridge studies in social and emotional development. In W. Bukowski, A. Newcomb & W. Hartup (Eds), *The measurement of friendship perceptions: Conceptual and methodological*, (41-65).

¹⁰ Armstrong-Carter, E., Garrett, S. L., Nick, E. A., Prinstein, M. J., & Telzer, E. H. (2022). Momentary links between adolescents’ social media use and social experiences and motivations: Individual differences by peer susceptibility. *Developmental Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001503>.

with icons indicating that they were “liked” on social media, there was a significant decrease in activation of the brain’s inhibition center, suggesting that the “likes” may reduce youths’ inhibition (i.e., perhaps increasing their proclivity) towards dangerous and illegal behavior.¹¹ This is evidence that social media features are changing how youths’ brains respond to images in ways that confer risk for the development of maladaptive behavior.

There also is evidence that these features of social media may promote a psychological affinity for dangerous and risk-taking behavior. For instance, a study of young high school students revealed that adolescents’ exposure to “liked” posts depicting alcohol use was associated with changes in teens’ perceptions of their peers’ acceptance of alcohol use, which in turn predicted these same teens’ early engagement in heavy episodic drinking (i.e., five or more drinks on a single occasion)¹². Related research has demonstrated that individuals are more likely to “like” a post that they see others have “liked” before them, and this may increase the likelihood of exposure to similarly themed-posts, via AI-derived algorithms¹³. These findings illustrate clear and powerful ways that the features embedded in social media platforms may have an important and highly concerning effect on youth mental health. Note, it is also possible that these same processes can be used to influence peers towards positive behaviors; however, this has not been adequately investigated.

Risks for Addictive Social Media Use. Youths’ biological vulnerabilities also have significant implications for “problematic social media use” or addictive behaviors; note that the regions of the brain activated by social media use overlap considerably with the regions involved in addictions to illegal and dangerous substances¹⁴. As noted above, the developing brain is built

¹¹ See for example, Sherman, L. E., Hernandez, L. M., Greenfield, P. M., & Dapretto, M. (2018). What the brain 'Likes': neural correlates of providing feedback on social media. *Social cognitive and affective neuroscience*, 13(7), 699–707. <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsv051>.

¹² Nesi J, Rothenberg WA, Hussong AM, Jackson KM. Friends’ Alcohol-Related Social Networking Site Activity Predicts Escalations in Adolescent Drinking: Mediation by Peer Norms. *J Adolesc Health*. 2017;60(6):641-647. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.01.009.

¹³ Egebarck J, Ekström M. Liking what others “Like”: using Facebook to identify determinants of conformity. *Exp Econ*. 2017;21(4):1-22. doi:10.1007/s10683-017-9552-1.

¹⁴ De-Sola Gutiérrez, J., Rodríguez de Fonseca, F., & Rubio, G. (2016). Cell-Phone Addiction: A Review. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 7(175). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00175>; Griffiths, M. D., Kuss, D. J., & Demetrovics, Z. (2014). Social networking addiction: An overview of preliminary findings. In K. P. Rosenberg & L. Curtiss Feder (Eds.), *Behavioral addictions: Criteria, evidence, and treatment* (pp. 119–141). Elsevier Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-407724-9.00006-9>; Kirby, B., Daport, A., Ash, C., Malley, K., & West, R.

to increase a desire for social rewards (that social media delivers abundantly), without the ability to show the capacities of inhibition and restraint capable among adults. This suggests that youth may be at risk for extraordinarily frequent uses of social media. Several bodies of research reveal that this indeed may be a very significant concern. For instance, data suggest that almost half of all adolescents report that they use social media “almost constantly”¹⁵. Research also has compared social media use to diagnostic criteria for substance use dependencies, revealing that many adolescents report an inability to stop using social media, even when they want to, remarkable efforts to maintain access to social media, the use of social media to regulate their emotions, a need for increasing social media use to achieve the same level of pleasure (i.e., tolerance symptoms), withdrawal symptoms following abstinence, a significant impairment in their daily educational, social, work routines. A recent study revealed that over 54% of 11–13-year-old youth reported at least one of these symptoms of problematic social media use¹⁶. About 85% of youth report spending more time than intended online and 61% reporting failing when trying to stop or reduce their use of social media¹⁷.

Alterations in Brain Development. Youths’ biological vulnerability to technology and social media, and their resulting frequent use of these platforms, also has the potential to alter youths’ neural development since our brains develop in response to the environment we live in. Recent studies have revealed that technology and social media use is associated with changes in structural brain development (i.e., changing the size and physical characteristics of the brain). In addition, research with my own colleagues at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill recently has revealed that technology and social media use also is associated with changes in how the brain works). Our data has revealed that youth indeed spend a remarkable amount of time

(2020). Smartphone pathology, agency and reward processing. Lecture Notes in Information Systems and Organisation, 321-329. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-60073-0_37.

¹⁵ Vogels, E. A., Gelles-Watnick, R., & Massarat, N. (2022, August 10). Teens, social media and technology 2022. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/>.

¹⁶ Boer M, Stevens GWJM, Finkenauer C, van den Eijnden RJJM. The course of problematic social media use in young adolescents: A latent class growth analysis. *Child Dev.* 2022;93(2):e168-e187. doi:10.1111/cdev.13712

¹⁷ The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens. (2021).

https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_0.pdf.

using their devices ¹⁸. Objective data measured by teens' phones themselves indicated that the average number of times that youth in sixth grade picked up their phones was over 100, with some interrupting daily activities to pick up their phones over 400 times a day. On average, adolescents also reported an average of 8.2 hours of time on their devices each day, with some logging double this amount ¹⁹. The phone "apps" adolescents picked up their devices to use most often were popular social media platforms. Our research using annual fMRI brain scans revealed that more frequent uses of adolescents' devices (i.e., predominantly for social media) was associated with changes in how their brains developed. More phone "pickups" were associated with unique development of brain regions. In short, results found that high social media users may have promoted brain development in a way that may make adolescents more inclined to focus on social rewards (e.g., attention from peers) and altered self-control ²⁰.

Youth's Exposure to Unmonitored Content Poses Potential Risks. There are two domains of problematic content online that many youth are exposed to. Research demonstrates that this also likely contributes to mental health difficulties among children and adolescents. One domain pertains to content that actively showcases and promotes engagement in psychologically disordered behavior, such as sites that discuss eating disordered behaviors (i.e., "pro-Anna" sites that encourage fasting, laxative use, excessive exercise) and pro-cutting sites depicting nonsuicidal self-injury ²¹. Research indicates that this content has proliferated on social media sites, not only depicting these behaviors, but teaching young people how to engage in each, how to conceal these behaviors from adults, actively encouraging users to engage in these behaviors, and socially sanctioning those who express a desire for less risky behavior ²². Moreover, in some cases this content is not removed nor are trigger warnings included to protect vulnerable youth from the effects that exposure to this content can have on their own behavior. This

¹⁸ Armstrong-Carter, E., Garrett, S. L., Nick, E. A., Prinstein, M. J., & Telzer, E. H. (2022). Momentary links between adolescents' social media use and social experiences and motivations: Individual differences by peer susceptibility. *Developmental psychology*.

¹⁹ Maza MT, Fox KA, Kwon S-J, et al. Association of habitual checking behaviors on social media with longitudinal functional brain development. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2023;177(2):160-167. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2022.4924.

²⁰ See above.

²¹ Lewis, S. P., Heath, N. L., St Denis, J. M., & Noble, R. (2011). The scope of nonsuicidal self-injury on YouTube. *Pediatrics*, 127(3), e552–e557. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2010-2317>.

²² Whitlock JL, Powers JL, Eckenrode J. The virtual cutting edge: the internet and adolescent self-injury. *Dev Psychol.* 2006 May;42(3):407-17. doi: 10.1037/0012-1649.42.3.407. PMID: 16756433.

underscores the need for platforms to deploy tools to filter content, display warnings, and create reporting structures to mitigate these harms.

A second area of concern regarding online content pertains to the frequency of online discrimination and cyberbullying, including youths' posts that encourage their peers to attempt suicide. Research demonstrates that online victimization, harassment, and discrimination against racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities is frequent online and often targeted at young people²³. LGBTQ+ youth experience a heightened level of bullying, threats, and self-harm on social media. One in three young LGBTQ+ people have said that they had been sexually harassed online, four times as often as other young people²⁴. Brain scans of adults and youths reveal that online harassment activates the same regions of the brain that respond to physical pain and trigger a cascade of reactions that replicate physical assault and create physical and mental health damage²⁵. Moreover, research has revealed that online discrimination often is harsher and more severe than offline discriminatory experiences. Results reveal that the effects of online discrimination and bullying on youths' risk for depression and anxiety are significant above and beyond the effects of experiences that these same youth experience offline. The permanence, potential for worldwide dissemination, anonymity, and the like, repost, and comment features afforded on most social media platforms seem to contribute to youths' mental health difficulties. As with other forms of harassment and associated harms, new policies and processes are needed to blunt the impact of these harms.

The Potential Effects of Digital Stress. Social media platforms frequently include a variety of features designed to maintain users' engagement online, or encourage users to return to the app. Psychological theory and research have begun to reveal that this has become a significant source of stress. This is highly relevant since stress is one of the strongest predictors of children's and

²³ Moreno, M. A., Chassiakos, Y. R., Cross, C., Hill, D., Ameenuddin, N., Radesky, J., Hutchinson, J., Boyd, R., Mendelson, R., Smith, J., Swanson, W. S., & Media, C. C. (2016). Media use in school-aged children and adolescents. *Pediatrics*, 138(5). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-2592>; Tynes, B. M., Giang, M. T., Williams, D. R., & Thompson, G. N. (2008). Online racial discrimination and psychological adjustment among adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 43(6), 565-569. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2008.08.021>.

²⁴ Out Online: The Experiences of LGBT Youth on the Internet. (2013). GLSEN. <https://www.glsen.org/news/out-online-experiences-lgbt-youth-internet>.

²⁵ Cannon, D. S., Tiffany, S. T., Coon, H., Scholand, M. B., McMahon, W. M., & Leppert, M. F. (2007). The PHQ-9 as a brief assessment of lifetime major depression. *Psychological Assessment*, 19(2), 247-251. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1040-3590.19.2.247>.

adolescents' mental health difficulties, including suicidal behavior. "Digital stress," is characterized by a youth's a) connection overload (i.e., notification and implicit social requirements to participate on social media platforms), b) the fear of missing out on conversations and other social interactions taking place exclusively online, c) the need to remain constantly available to others online, and d) approval anxiety (i.e., concerns about the response to one's own posts) are each notable factors influencing the way youth think about their connection to online platforms ²⁶. Nearly half of all young people participating in online platforms report experiencing digital stress. Research demonstrates that higher levels of digital stress are associated with greater increases in depressive symptoms among adolescents ²⁷.

Social Media Encourages Social Comparisons. The quantitative nature of social media, combined with the use of visual stimuli, creates a fertile ground for social comparisons. Adolescence, a period defined by psychologists as a process of identity development via reflected appraisal processes (i.e., evaluating oneself based on feedback from peers) are especially likely to engage with social media in ways that allow them to compare their appearance, friends, social activities with others with what they see online, especially when those in their own social network are commenting and "liking" these same posts. The opportunity for constant feedback, commentary, quantitative metrics of approval, and 24-hour social engagement is unprecedented among our species. Research suggests that these social comparison processes, and youths' tendency to seek positive feedback or status (i.e., more "likes," followers, online praise) is associated with a risk for depressive symptoms ²⁸. In addition, psychological science demonstrates that exposure to this online content is associated with lower self-image and distorted body

²⁶ Steele, R. G., Hall, J. A., & Christofferson, J. L. (2020). Conceptualizing Digital Stress in Adolescents and Young Adults: Toward the Development of an Empirically Based Model. *Clinical child and family psychology review*, 23(1), 15–26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-019-00300-5>.

²⁷ Nick, E. A., Kilic, Z., Nesi, J., Telzer, E. H., Lindquist, K. A., & Prinstein, M. J. (2022). Adolescent Digital Stress: Frequencies, Correlates, and Longitudinal Association With Depressive Symptoms. *The Journal of adolescent health : official publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, 70(2), 336–339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.08.025>.

²⁸ Choukas-Bradley, S., Nesi, J., Widman, L., & Galla, B. M. (2020). The Appearance-Related Social Media Consciousness Scale: Development and validation with adolescents. *Body Image*, 33, 164–174. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2020.02.017>; Hawes, T., Zimmer-Gembeck, M. J., & Campbell, S. M. (2020). Unique associations of social media use and online appearance preoccupation with depression, anxiety, and appearance rejection sensitivity. *Body Image*, 33, 66–76. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2020.02.010>; Nesi, J.L., & Prinstein, M.J. (2015). Using social media for social comparison and feedback seeking: Gender and popularity moderate associations with depressive symptoms. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 43(8), 1427–1438.

perceptions among young people. This exposure creates strong risk factors for eating disorders, unhealthy weight-management behaviors, and depression ²⁹. As with other impacts of online platforms, evidence indicates that these body image issues are particularly prevalent in LGBTQ+ youth. Leaving these youth more predisposed to eating disorders, depression, bullying, substance abuse and other mental health harms.

Potentially Beneficial Effects of Social Media Use. It is important to acknowledge that research on social media use and adolescent development is relatively new, as are many social media platforms. In addition, there has been remarkably little funding designated for research on this topic. Consequently, the long-term effects of social media use on youth development is relatively uncharted. For instance, above I discussed some of the potential effects of technology social media use on brain development. Yet, it is unknown whether adolescent brain development, known for its plasticity, may “correct” some of the alternations in brain structure or function, whether compensatory neural processes may develop, or whether these alterations may confer unknown future strengths.

In addition, there is some research demonstrating that social media use is linked with positive outcomes that may benefit psychological development among youth. Perhaps most notably, psychological research suggests that young people form and maintain friendships online. These relationships often afford opportunities to interact with a more diverse peer group than offline, and the relationships are close and meaningful and provide important support to youth in times of stress ³⁰. The buffering effects of social support from peers has been well documented in

²⁹ Carrotte, E. R., Vella, A. M., & Lim, M. S. (2015). Predictors of “liking” three types of health and fitness-related content on social media: A cross-sectional study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 17(8), e205. <https://doi.org/10.2196/jmir.4803>; <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2011.11.011>.

³⁰ Anderson, M., & Jiang, J. (2018, November 28). 2. Teens, friendships and online groups. Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech; Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/11/28/teens-friendships-and-online-groups/>; Charmaraman L, Hodes R, Richer AM. Young Sexual Minority Adolescent Experiences of Self-expression and Isolation on Social Media: Cross-sectional Survey Study. *JMIR Ment Health*. 2021;8(9):e26207. doi:10.2196/26207; Massing-Schaffer M, Nesi J, Telzer EH, Lindquist KA, Prinstein MJ. Adolescent Peer Experiences and Prospective Suicidal Ideation: The Protective Role of Online-Only Friendships. *J Clin Child Adolesc Psychol*. 2022;51(1):49-60. doi:10.1080/15374416.2020.1750019; Marciano L, Ostroumova M, Schulz PJ, Camerini A-L. Digital Media Use and Adolescents’ Mental Health During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Front Public Health*. 2021;9:793868. doi:10.3389/fpubh.2021.793868; Baskin-Sommers A, Simmons C, Conley M, et al. Adolescent civic engagement: Lessons from Black Lives Matter. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA*. 2021;118(41). doi:10.1073/pnas.2109860118.

the psychological literature ³¹. This may be especially important for youth with marginalized identities, including racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender minorities. Digital platforms provide an important space for self-discovery and expression for LGBTQ+ youth.

Research also suggests that during the COVID-19 lockdown from 2020-2021, the use of one-on-one (i.e., direct messaging) on social media and sharing funny content reduced stress among youth . There also is some evidence that youth are more likely to engage in civic activism online than off ³².

A growing area of research has also focused on the use of youths' interest in online activities as an opportunity for digital-based intervention ³³. Adolescents report high levels of comfort with, and a preference for, online communication, especially when discussing mental health. Studies also show that adolescents commonly use the internet for mental health information ³⁴. These elements, taken together, present the possibility that digital modes of treatment and other health interventions may be particularly effective for young people.

Research into the field of digital mental health interventions is growing and the existing information is heavily skewed toward more established modalities (e.g., telehealth, online/web-based interventions). Evidence supports the use of videoconferencing as an effective form of treatment for youth mental health across a range of problems ³⁵. While many computerized programs and internet-based treatment programs were found to be of moderate to high quality, a

³¹ Cohen, S., & Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98(2), 310–357. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.98.2.310>.

³² Marciano, L., Ostroumova, M., Schulz, P. J., & Camerini, A. L. (2022). Digital Media Use and Adolescents' Mental Health During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Frontiers in public health*, 9, 793868. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2021.793868>.

³³ Bradford, S., & Rickwood, D. (2015). Young people's views on electronic mental health assessment: Prefer to type than talk? *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24(5), 1213–1221. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-014-9929-0>.

³⁴ Intervention and Prevention in the Digital Age. (2022). In J. Nesi, E. Telzer, & M. Prinstein (Eds.), *Handbook of Adolescent Digital Media Use and Mental Health* (pp. 363-416). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108976237.019; Park, E., & Kwon, M. (2018). Health-Related Internet Use by Children and Adolescents: Systematic Review. *Journal of medical Internet research*, 20(4), e120. <https://doi.org/10.2196/jmir.7731>.

³⁵ Myers, K. M., Valentine, J. M., Melzer, S. M. (2007, Nov). Feasibility, acceptability, and sustainability of telepsychiatry for children and adolescents. *Psychiatric Services*, 58(11), 1493-1496. <https://doi.org/10.1176/ps.2007.58.11.1493>; Nelson, E. L., Cain, S., & Sharp, S. (2017, Jan). Considerations for conducting telemental health with children and adolescents. *Child Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 26(1), 77-91. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chc.2016.07.008>.

systematic review of the literature found that the inclusion of a therapist or clinician improved outcomes in adolescents with depression and anxiety over those that were self-paced ³⁶. Young people with a history of suicidal ideation often prefer to initially seek and receive healthcare online ³⁷. Even when individuals have strong support systems offline, they may struggle to access that support in times of need ³⁸. Early indications that online support may be appealing because of its immediate nature and because the interactions are among peers with shared experience and experiential knowledge ³⁹. Yet, it is crucial for young people to have access to in-person screenings and clinician support.

Psychological Effects of Lost Opportunities While Youth Are Online

Every hour youth spend online is an hour that is not being spent on alternative (“in real life”) activities. In some cases, this may protect adolescents’ exposure to peer contexts in which substance use and sexually risky behaviors occur. However, youths’ online activities also may preclude engagement in activities necessary for successful maturation and psychological adaptation. Perhaps most concerning is the extent to which research has demonstrated that technology and social media use is interfering with youths’ sleep.

³⁶ Clarke, T. C., Black, L. I., Stussman, B. J., Barnes, P. M., & Nahin, R. L. (2015). Trends in the use of complementary health approaches among adults: United States, 2002-2012. *National health statistics reports*, (79), 1–16.; Wozney L, McGrath P, Gehring N, Bennett K, Huguet A, Hartling L, Dyson M, Soleimani A, Newton A. eMental Healthcare Technologies for Anxiety and Depression in Childhood and Adolescence: Systematic Review of Studies Reporting Implementation Outcomes. *JMIR Ment Health* 2018;5(2):e48. <https://mental.jmir.org/2018/2/e48>; Hollis, C., Falconer, C. J., Martin, J. L., Whittington, C., Stockton, S., Glazebrook, C., & Davies, E. B. (2017). Annual Research Review: Digital health interventions for children and young people with mental health problems - a systematic and meta-review. *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry, and allied disciplines*, 58(4), 474–503. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12663>.

³⁷ Frost, M., Casey, L. M., & O’Gorman, J. G. (2017). Self-injury in young people and the help-negation effect. *Psychiatry Research*, 250, 291–296. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2016.12.022>.

³⁸ Kruzan, K. P., Whitlock, J., & Bazarova, N. N. (2021). Examining the Relationship Between the Use of a Mobile Peer-Support App and Self-Injury Outcomes: Longitudinal Mixed Methods Study. *JMIR Mental Health*, 8(1), e21854. <https://doi.org/10.2196/21854>; Lavis, A., & Winter, R. (2020). #Online harms or benefits? An ethnographic analysis of the positives and negatives of peer-support around self-harm on social media. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, and Allied Disciplines*, 61(8). <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13245>.

³⁹ Marchant, A., Hawton, K., Stewart, A., Montgomery, P., Singaravelu, V., Lloyd, K., Purdy, N., Daine, K., & John, A. (2017). A systematic review of the relationship between internet use, self-harm and suicidal behaviour in young people: The good, the bad and the unknown. *PLOS ONE*, 12(8), e0181722. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0181722>; Thoits, P. A. (2011). Mechanisms Linking Social Ties and Support to Physical and Mental Health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 52(2), 145–161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146510395592>.

Research has supported the link between technology use and sleep in several ways. Perhaps most compelling are data from meta-analyses (i.e., a statistical integration of findings from across an entire body of research) indicating that 60% of adolescents report using technology in the hour before bedtime, and more screen time is associated with poorer sleep health and failure to meet sleep duration requirements set by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, partly due to delayed melatonin release, delayed bedtimes, and increases in overstimulation and difficulty disengaging from online social interactions. Interventions to reduce nighttime screen use are successful in increasing sleep duration ⁴⁰.

This has critical implications for adolescent development. Research suggests that insufficient sleep is associated with poor school performance, difficulties with attention, stress regulation, and increased risk for automobile accidents. Neuroscientific research has demonstrated that inconsistent sleep schedules are associated with changes in structural brain development in adolescent years. In other words, youths' preoccupation with technology and social media may deleteriously affect the size of their brains ⁴¹.

In addition, note that youth also engage with online and social media apps *while participating* in other activities. Indeed, early studies show that when youth are engaging in schoolwork, they often are doing so alongside the use of social media platforms, a phenomenon called “media multitasking” ⁴². Research clearly demonstrates that most humans cannot multitask, but rather are rapidly task-shifting – a process associated with poorer memory and comprehension among youth ⁴³. Evidence shows that these phenomena only worsen with heavier use of social

⁴⁰ Telzer EH, Goldenberg D, Fuligni AJ, Lieberman MD, Gálvan A. Sleep variability in adolescence is associated with altered brain development. *Dev Cogn Neurosci*. 2015;14:16-22. doi:10.1016/j.dcn.2015.05.007.

⁴¹ Achterberg M, Becht A, van der Crujisen R, et al. Longitudinal associations between social media use, mental well-being and structural brain development across adolescence. *Dev Cogn Neurosci*. 2022;54:101088. doi:10.1016/j.dcn.2022.101088.

⁴² Jeong, S.-H., & Hwang, Y. (2012). Does Multitasking Increase or Decrease Persuasion? Effects of Multitasking on Comprehension and Counterarguing. *Journal of Communication*, 62(4), 571–587. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01659.x>; van der Schuur, W. A., Baumgartner, S. E., Sumter, S. R., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2015). The consequences of media multitasking for youth: A review. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 53, 204–215. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.06.035>; L. Mark Carrier, Larry D. Rosen, Nancy A. Cheever, Alex F. Lim, Causes, effects, and practicalities of everyday multitasking, *Developmental Review* (2015), doi: 10.1016/j.dr.2014.12.005.

⁴³ Ralph, B. C., Thomson, D. R., Cheyne, J. A., & Smilek, D. (2014). Media multitasking and failures of attention in everyday life. *Psychological research*, 78(5), 661–669. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00426-013-0523-7>.

media, with more common symptoms such as mind wandering and higher levels of impulsivity among young adults who use social media more frequently ⁴⁴.

Potential Solutions and Policy Implications

The internet and the introduction of social media platforms have literally changed our species through new forms of social interaction, new rules for discourse, the rapid spread of information, and concomitant changes in the types of relationships that previously had defined the human race for millennia. This is an extraordinarily high priority area for additional scientific research; however, this work has been woefully underfunded. Currently, government agencies lack both the direction, expertise, and dedicated funding to adequately research both the positive and negative impacts of online platforms. Tech companies responsible for these platforms employ dozens of researchers focused on designing products and observing how users engage with them. Governments must match or exceed this commitment to ensure the public has an adequate understanding of how these platforms work and how users, especially children, are using these platforms and their impact. The research that is needed should be longitudinal to allow for long-term follow-up. Research should capture the experience of diverse samples, utilize the benefits of technology to capture objective measures of behavior, include technology (e.g., fMRI) to study biopsychosocial effects, and importantly, should make use of the data available to social media companies to fully understand the effects of social media and protect the common good. This effort must be paired with required increases in transparency and access to data for researchers to further understand online activity. New transparency and reporting requirements should ensure user privacy, while creating new mechanisms for researchers and policymakers to understand how these online spaces operate.

⁴⁴ Ophir, E., Nass, C., & Wagner, A. D. (2009). Cognitive control in media multitaskers. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 106(37), 15583–15587.

<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0903620106>; Ralph, B. C., Thomson, D. R., Cheyne, J. A., & Smilek, D. (2014). Media multitasking and failures of attention in everyday life. *Psychological research*, 78(5), 661–669.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00426-013-0523-7>; Baumgartner, S. E., Weeda, W. D., van der Heijden, L. L., & Huizinga, M. (2014). The Relationship Between Media Multitasking and Executive Function in Early Adolescents. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, 34(8), 1120–1144. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431614523133>; Baumgartner,

Susanne & van der Schuur, Winneke & Lemmens, Jeroen & te Poel, Fam. (2018). The Relationship Between Media Multitasking and Attention Problems in Adolescents: Results of Two Longitudinal Studies. *Human Communication Research*. 44. 3-30. 10.1093/hcre.12111.

harms of social media are impacting our children today, and more must be done to communicate and mitigate the impacts of online social media use. Educating young users and their caregivers about how best to use the platforms to mitigate negative impacts is an essential intervention that can start today. A public education campaign should include information about the specific dangers social media poses to adolescents, how parents and caregivers can best navigate learning more about these dangers, how best to communicate the risks with their children, and ultimately how to educate their children on the best methods for using social media in a safe way.

APA also advocates for policymakers and government agencies to require social media companies to do more to combat this issue. Platforms can create and provide new tools aimed at mitigating the harms associated with platform use. Requiring social media companies to provide children and their caregivers with options to make changes to their social media settings can promote mental health by protecting their information, disabling features that are particularly addictive, and opting out of algorithm processes that serve up problematic or harmful content. Social media companies can also be required to set defaults to address harms to young users.

Warnings on harmful content should also be considered to reduce exposure of young people to content that may negatively impact their mental health or well-being and companies should be held accountable for the proliferation of this content. Social media companies should acknowledge known impacts of their platforms, providing warnings and resources to parents and caregivers of young users, develop plans to mitigate known harms, and determine whether these warnings and plans were effective, with iterative updates based on these findings. Social media platforms must work to prevent and mitigate harmful content, such as promotion of self-harm, suicide, eating disorders, substance use and sexual exploitation. Independent audits can assess risks and determine whether platforms are taking meaningful steps to prevent damage and these must be paired with enforcement actions and accountability mechanisms for when platforms fail to effectively mitigate harms to children.

As discussed throughout this testimony, more must be done to specifically protect those children belonging to traditionally marginalized and minoritized communities. Mental health and other harms can disproportionately fall on LGBTQ+ youth, and resources should be dedicated to

ensuring a reduction in these harms. More must be required of platforms to discourage and prevent cyberbullying and other forms of online hate and discrimination. Reporting structures should be more robust to allow for instances to be tracked and discouraged. Reforms to platform user experience should be prioritized to ensure members of these communities are protected from disproportionate harm.

APA is heartened by the focus on mental health in these Committees, and eager to work with this committee and its members to develop legislation and enact the bills cited above. Your actions now can make all the difference in how our young people interact with and are impacted by online spaces. Together, psychology, other scientific disciplines, parents, caregivers, teachers, tech companies, and policymakers can work to solve this serious problem. APA is a ready partner and looks forward to working with the committee to put in place critical changes to our current system that improve the lives of our children and the flourishing of online spaces.

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Written Testimony of Mrs. Lisa Graham, MSCP

School Counselor, Seneca Valley Intermediate High School
Presented to the Pennsylvania Senate Education & Health Committees

November 12, 2025

Subject: "Bell-to-Bell" Cell Phone Policy in Pennsylvania Public Schools

Introduction

Chairs Schweyer, Cutler, Frankel and Rapp and members of the Education and Health Committees, thank you for hearing my testimony regarding the positive effects of implementing a "bell-to-bell" cell phone policy in the Seneca Valley School District. My name is Lisa Graham, and I am one of four school counselors at Seneca Valley Intermediate High School for students in grades nine and ten.

I have been a teacher and school counselor in the Seneca Valley School District since 2006 and have witnessed our district's student technology policies, including cell phones, evolve over the last twenty years. I hold a bachelor's degree in Elementary and Special Education and a Master of Science degree in Counseling Psychology, along with Pennsylvania school counseling certification.

"Bell to Bell" Policy Impact

To start the 2025-2026 school year, Seneca Valley implemented a "bell-to-bell" cell phone policy where students are not permitted to use their cell phones from the first bell to the last of the school day. Prior to this school year, our students in grades 9-12 were permitted to use cell phones during the school day for educational purposes and during non-instructional times. This included the mornings before students reported to first period, during study halls, during lunch, and in the hallways. At teacher discretion, students were also permitted to use their cell phones during class for instructional purposes for things like answering questions on digital educational platforms. Students may also have been

permitted to use cell phones during classes when assigned work was completed at the classroom teacher's discretion.

Three months into the new "bell-to-bell" policy, the impact has been noticeable and overwhelmingly positive. One of the first changes observed by staff was a significant increase in face-to-face communication among students. This was most obvious in the cafeteria and during classroom downtime or independent work time. Last school year, students spent most of their lunch period on their phones. Staff frequently commented on how discouraging it was to see entire tables of students sitting together yet interacting with no one.

This year, the lunchroom feels completely different. Students are talking, laughing, and playing games. Some have started card games such as Uno, while others have started their own version of "show and tell," bringing in something interesting from home to share with their table. In classrooms, when students finish their work, they engage with each other rather than immediately reaching for a device.

Because of these increased in-person interactions, students are developing stronger social and communication skills. They are forming new friendships and building a greater sense of belonging, which will ultimately benefit their mental health. Students have reported that they are meeting new people, making new friends, and stepping outside their comfort zone because they "don't have a screen to hide behind."

We have also seen a positive academic impact. One of our art teachers shared that "students' art is better this year." In the past, students often rushed to complete projects so they could use their phones. Now, without that distraction, they are taking more time to refine and improve their work. Students have also shared that they no longer feel anxious during class time about checking their cell phones, which allows them to stay focused and present during class.

In addition, at the start of the school year I had several students request to add electives to replace their study halls. They reported that since phones could not be used in study hall, they were bored and would rather take an academic class. Cell phones are no longer competing with learning.

I have also observed a significant decline in reports of bullying and peer conflict. Last year, I met with students two to three times per week regarding issues that stemmed from cell-phone communication. Most concerns involved social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, or text messaging. This year, I have received only two such reports, and both incidents occurred outside of school hours. I have not received a single report of cyberbullying, whereas these concerns were reported weekly last year. I also received multiple complaints last year about students being photographed without their consent in hallways, classrooms, and the cafeteria. This year, I have not received one. The absence of cell phones has clearly created a safer school environment.

Teachers and students alike report that this has been a great school year. The climate of the building feels more positive; people seem happier. Without the constant distraction of cell phones, students and staff are more present and connected to the people and environment around them. A cell phone-free environment has had clear social, emotional, and academic benefits for both students and staff.

I understand there has been debate about a true “bell-to-bell” cell phone policy versus allowing individual teacher discretion. Our experience shows that a partial or class-by-class approach is not effective and is not in the best interest of students. Different rules in different classrooms resulted in inconsistency and mixed messages for students. Likewise, permitting cell phone use during non-instructional time, such as study halls, lunch, or between classes, does not help students build new neural pathways or develop positive coping strategies for situations such as boredom or conflict. Turning to a phone for escape or distraction prevents students from practicing the self-regulation and social skills they need to grow into healthy, resilient adults.

The nuances of these policies matter. A consistent, building wide “bell-to-bell, no cell” expectation reinforces the idea that we are all in this together. Students and staff alike put their phones away, focus on learning and one another. And that is good for all of us.

“Bell-to-Bell” Policy Transition

When the new policy was first announced during the summer of 2025 teachers and school staff were excited about the concept but concerned about how students and families would respond and how the policy would be implemented. Administrators held a summer training with teacher representatives from each of our secondary buildings (grades 7-12). They also dedicated about an hour of professional development time before the first day of school to ensure that all staff clearly understood the expectations of the policy, how to explain it to students, and the process to follow if a student violated it.

Students were taught the policy on the first day of school, and it went into effect on the second day. The expectation was simple: cell phones could not be used or visible at any point during the school day. If they were, the phone would be confiscated and held in the office until the end of the school day. The number of violations decreased drastically after just the first week. The process has been manageable for both teachers and administrators.

Additionally, some students with IEPs, 504 plans, or health plans previously used cell phones for accommodations such as listening to music, managing time or assignments with specific apps, or monitoring health needs. Counselors, nurses, and special education staff collaborated with families to revise these accommodations so students’ needs would continue to be met without requiring cell phone access. In most cases, this was easily addressed by using a district-issued laptop instead. For example, students with accommodations to listen to music during independent work time use plug-in headphones on their school laptop. Students who used earbuds for noise cancellation were able to

transition to earplugs that are designed to look like earbuds. Additionally, English language learners who may have previously used cell phones for translation now use school laptops or other hand-held translation devices.

The only exception to the policy applies to a small group of students (three out of 1,114 in grades 9–10) with medical plans related specifically to diabetes. These students are permitted to have their cell phones on during the school day so medical alert alarms can sound, and they may check their phones as needed to monitor and respond to medical information.

Seneca Valley Demographics and Relevant Technology Policies

Demographics

Seneca Valley School District is a suburban district located in Jackson Township, Southern Butler County, Western Pennsylvania. It is 30 minutes north of Pittsburgh. There are 1,114 students currently enrolled in our Intermediate High School, grades 9-10. In the Seneca Valley School District, we have over 7,500 students.

Personal Technology (cell phone) Policy (August 2025-Present)

To start the 2025-2026 school year, Seneca Valley implemented a “bell-to-bell” cell phone policy. The board policy language is currently as follows:

The Board permits students to bring smartphones or other personal technology resources to school but they must be stowed on your person and out of sight or stored in a locker or backpack. These devices should be turned off, placed in silent or vibrate mode during the school hours.

In addition:

- 1. For grades K-12, devices may not be used during the school day.*
- 2. For extracurricular activities, device use would be left to the discretion of the coach or sponsor.*

For staff implementing the policy to start the school year, a progressive discipline response plan was enacted as follows:

First Incident

Device will be sent to the main office for the student to pick up at the end of the school day. The parent/guardian will be notified.

Second Incident

Device will be sent to the main office for the student to pick up at the end of the school day. The parent/guardian will be notified. Additionally, the student will be seen in the main office to review the policy.

Third Incident

Device will be sent to the main office for the parent/guardian to pick up at the end of the school day. Additional discipline may be assigned and can result in consequences which range from detention to in-school suspension at the secondary (grades 7-12) level, and lunch detention to in-school suspension at the elementary (grades K-6) level.

Ongoing Incidents or Insubordination of Policy

Device will be sent to the main office for the parent/guardian to pick up at the end of the school day. Additionally, the student will be seen in the main office to review the policy. Progressive discipline will take place at this level and depend on the scope

Personal Technology Policy (January 2013-July 2025)

In January 2013, Seneca Valley adopted a Bring Your Own Technology (BYOT) policy. A letter sent to parents at this time included the following communication about school board policy:

The Board permits the use of personal technology resources in the following situations:

- *During instructional time:* students are permitted to use personal technology resources during class time **for educational use only** and with teacher permission.
- *During extracurricular time:* students are permitted to use personal technology resources during extracurricular time **for educational use only** and with coach/sponsor permission.
- *During school-related free time:* students are permitted to use personal technology resources during free time **for educational use**, family communication, or **appropriate** personal use in such a manner as not to create disruption or annoyance to others.

It's also important to note that the use of social media is strictly prohibited for non-educational use, and students will continue to be educated about responsible and ethical use of technology.



**Testimony of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Join Public Hearing Regarding
Cell Phones in Schools**

**Presented to the
House Education and House Health Committees
November 17, 2025**

**By
Jeff Ney
PSEA Vice-President**



Good morning, My name is Jeff Ney and I am vice-president of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). I appreciate the invitation to testify this morning on cell phones in schools. We are thrilled that the House has undertaken this stakeholder process to inform potential consideration of legislation regulating students' personal mobile devices in schools.

Let me begin by saying that I am speaking to you today as an educator and as a person who represents many different viewpoints among my 177,000 members. Let me also acknowledge what many of us know:

- **Our country has a youth mental health crisis.** Smart phones are, of course, not the only factor driving this crisis, but the precipitous rise in mental health issues—like depression, anxiety and a lack of emotional regulation—corresponds with young people's access to mobile devices and social media.
- **Mobile devices disrupt students from learning.** Think of how many notifications you get in a day and how distracting they can be. Well, your average teen gets 237. We at least have fully developed brains that can do a better job of compartmentalizing these distractions. Teenagers who have never known a world when they don't have a Pavlovian response to a "ding" are not so lucky. Students are socially isolated. They engage in more peer interaction via texts and apps than in-person interaction. They walk down halls with their heads down, staring at screens, rather than actually mingling with classmates and friends.
- **Access to cell phones facilitates peer-to-peer cyber bullying.** As I said, children's brains are still developing and they can't always control their worst impulses when they have constant access to a device that can be used to easily relieve frustration or other feelings.
- **It's about more than cell phones.** Mobile digital distractions arise from devices like smart watches and personal tablets, as well as smartphones.

Over the last 18 months, our members have spoken with the elected members of PSEA's Legislative Committee and Board of Directors and have had more conversations about what the appropriate statewide public policy should be as it relates to mobile devices in public schools than about any other subject. These discussions started in earnest as legislators introduced bills in early 2024 and more research was released as part of Dr. Jonathan Haidt's book, "The Anxious Generation." The confluence of that research, educators' growing frustration, and some public school entities adopting policies to limit and/or prohibit students' possession and use of mobile devices encouraged our ongoing discussions about policy.

It would be accurate to say PSEA's legislative position has evolved since April 2024. And I can only explain that evolution by saying while our members have always wanted mobile devices out of classrooms, they didn't always believe it was possible, or they questioned whether it was the state's role to take such legislative action. On the one hand, they questioned if we, as society, missed our window of opportunity to put the genie back in the bottle – i.e., get smartphones out of schools because students, and perhaps ESPECIALLY parents, have become so accustomed to

students having mobile devices over the last 15 years. On the other hand, they recognize all of the downsides of youth use of mobile devices, as I previously shared with you.

But somewhere over the last 18 months, with the confluence of a myriad of factors, and as a growing number of states and school districts took more strident action on their own, our members started to believe that Pennsylvania could and should put the genie back in the bottle, as they say.

Last month, PSEA announced our support for Senate Bill 1014 in a hearing before the Senate Education Committee. As introduced, the bill almost entirely reflects all components that PSEA believes are necessary for a comprehensive state law to establish a minimum foundation for the regulation of students' personal mobile devices in schools, while also providing the opportunity for school entities to tailor their policies based on the feedback of their communities.

Some might argue that we need a law that prohibits both student possession and use of personal mobile devices on school property. Others might say that we should simply let school entities figure it out on their own, as Pennsylvania has a rich history of local control. PSEA respectfully argues the solution is in the middle – one that protects students and respects the needs of local communities – and one that is represented currently in Senate Bill 1014.

PSEA believes the following components are essential for any statewide law:

1. **Restrict possession and prohibit use.** School entities should be required to adopt bell-to-bell policies that restrict student possession and prohibit student use of mobile devices during the school day while on school property. This needs to be the basis of every policy adopted by a school entity. Some people may argue that local control should apply for any cell phone policy. We respectfully disagree. Almost two decades of local control for the regulation of student possession and use of mobile devices in schools has NOT worked. Three memories stand out to me and keep in mind – I am 5th grade teacher. One of my students, who sat in the front row of my class, would text the answers to my students in the back row with his phone in the pocket of his hoodie. I remember the girls who would take pictures of other girls and share the photos with classmates making fun of their clothes and appearance. The victim of the photo sharing came to my room sobbing. And then there was the kid who ordered pizza via his cell phone and had it delivered to the side door of the school.

Teachers and administrators are doing their best, but we need help. We need a law that provides a consistent foundation for school policies. Student access to and use of mobile devices results in too many negative things that are harmful to students to allow over 500 vastly different policies.

2. **The definition of “mobile devices” should include more than smartphones.** We would urge a broad definition of personal mobile devices (i.e., not school-issued) capable of

connecting to the internet that includes cellular phones, smartphones, various types of smart watches, and tablets. I want to emphasize the importance of including watches in this definition. Any teacher can tell you that one of the most common gifts students receive over the holidays is a smartwatch or fitness tracker. You cannot eliminate distractions during the school day if students have a device on their wrist that is pinging with messages throughout the school day.

3. **How possession is restricted should be decided by each individual school entity.** We shouldn't interfere with school entities that have already successfully restricted student possession of mobile devices. Some require students to keep the mobile devices in their lockers or bookbags, some require the phones to be put in classroom phone caddies or cubbies. Some schools might use magnetic pouches that can be unlocked by educators at the end of the day. Our members are creative. One of our teachers retrofitted a briefcase with individual slots for student cell phones – making it easy to keep mobile devices out of sight, but also convenient to take with them in an emergency. But at the same time, we could have school entities and their communities that decide that they don't want students to even bring mobile devices to schools. State policy should provide latitude to do that.
4. **Students, parents, school employees, and local communities should be part of the conversation before school entities adopt their policies.** As school entities prepare to adopt policies, there needs to be a process to solicit input from stakeholders. The most effective local initiatives prioritize student, parent, employee, and community feedback during policy development. Ensuring there is the opportunity to present evidence and research on how mobile devices impact children and youth today, why schools and states are taking action, and what schools can do to assuage the concerns of parents leads to better policies and buy-in. PSEA wants to be sure that that the feedback of students, parents, and employees occurs during development of the policy.
5. **There should be limited exceptions for the use of smartphones during the school day.** Our members acknowledge that there are certain situations where student possession and use of mobile devices are necessary. We believe that students with medical conditions, students with IEPs or 504 plans, and students who are English language learners and require translation assistance should be permitted to have and use their devices. PSEA is also open to including an exception for firefighters or EMS volunteers, as they have been included in other proposals.

We would also urge policymakers to maintain an exception for limited instructional circumstances that are infrequent and approved by a school principal in advance. First, our members recognize that there could be opportunities for educators to teach students the responsible and safe use of technology, and most importantly, how such technology can be a tool for learning. Secondly, depending on the subject and devices offered by schools to students, teachers sometimes use smartphones to aid instruction. For example, in business and technology classes, teachers incorporate use of Adobe apps (i.e.,

Photoshop, Illustrator, Firefly) into their lesson plans. Yearbook classes allow students to have and use their phones to take pictures.

6. **The policy requirement should begin with the start of a new school year.** The most effective and efficient time to start a new school-wide policy. While it is not impossible, beginning a bell-to-bell policy in the middle of a school year would be chaotic for students and educators. It would be much simpler to go through the proposed stakeholder process during one school year and then implement the new policy the following school year. Students, parents, and educators would be better prepared to adjust habits with a fresh school year.
7. **Parents need to be consistently informed.** Consistent communication to parents about the policy is important; but so is information on how a parent/guardian can reach their child during the school day. We can't pretend like the last 15 years didn't happen. Parents have become accustomed to being able to reach their children. Ensuring that schools have a phone number that is staffed by a school employee, where parents can reach their children in the event of an emergency can provide peace of mind as communities go through this transition. In addition, nothing would prevent a parent from reaching their child via their school email during the school day on their school-issued device.

We appreciate the attention and priority level given to this issue today. We would urge the House to prepare legislation that reflects these seven principles. PSEA looks forward to conversations with House members and stakeholders who presented their thoughts here today.

In closing, I would say that it is possible for us to do better for young people in the future. Today, we are armed with data and research that clearly show the negative impact unrestricted access to, and use of mobile devices have on our youth and the behavioral challenges that occur in classrooms. Other states are planning to take, or have already taken, action to get a handle on students' use of and access to mobile devices during the school day. Pennsylvania should follow suit. Thank you for your consideration of PSEA's comments. I will be happy to take your questions.



TESTIMONY OF THE

PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

BEFORE THE HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE NOVEMBER 17, 2025

LAURA MORTON

PSBA DIRECTOR OF POLICY SERVICES

Chairman Schweyer, Cutler, Frankel, and Chairwoman Rapp, and members of the House Education and Health Committees, thank you for inviting the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) to testify today on cell phones in schools on behalf of the 5,000 local public school leaders we represent across the Commonwealth. My name is Laura Morton, and I am the Director of Policy Services for the Pennsylvania School Boards Association.

As educators and policymakers, we share a common goal – to create a school environment conducive to learning and academic achievement that is safe for all students. While innovations in technology have proven to be an asset in the educational field, the use of cell phones in schools by students has caused significant challenges in achieving the goal of maintaining an appropriate learning environment.

Cell phones and other electronic devices, with their notifications, social media apps, and online games, distract students, disrupt the educational process and make teaching more difficult for school staff. Teachers are often the individuals responsible for implementing strategies to restrict students' use of electronic devices during classes. As an eighth-grade math teacher, my sister has had to come up with creative solutions to limit her students' use of electronic devices in her class. One technique she employed was to place classroom calculators in a hanging shoe holder and when a student needs a calculator, they place their cell phone in the holder from which they took the calculator. This ensures that the student is not distracted by their device but would still have access to it if necessary. Teachers regularly encounter challenges in balancing instructional responsibilities with evolving expectations from parents, including direct access to their children during the school day and differing views on the enforcement of school policies regarding students' use of electronic devices.

Overview of PSBA Policy Services

I wanted to begin with a brief description of PSBA policy services and the typical policy adoption process. PSBA offers a variety of policy services which are available to members of PSBA. Those services range from a policy maintenance program where PSBA provides recommended updates to PSBA policy guides (which are customizable template policies) based on changes to laws, regulations, or court decisions to a policy manual development where PSBA will assist the school entity in developing an entire new policy manual from scratch. Currently, 491 of the 500 school districts in Pennsylvania choose to subscribe to at least one of PSBA's policy services.

Policies from PSBA, whether drafted for the school entity or PSBA policy guides, are intended to be reviewed and customized locally by the administration, school solicitor, and school board based on local practice and needs before being presented at a public school board meeting. Once presented at a public school board meeting, students, parents, staff, and members of the public have time to review and provide feedback on the proposed policy prior to its formal consideration by the school board at a future public meeting.

Policy guides issued by PSBA are broken into four (4) categories: mandated; recommended for legal liability; PSBA recommendation; and optional. Mandated policies are those required by state or federal law or regulations such as a policy related to bullying which is required by section 1303.1-A of the PA School Code. Policies recommended based on legal liability are not required by law or regulations, but are intended to ensure that school entities have policies in place which are intended to meet federal and state requirements and/or protect the school from potential sources of liability. PSBA recommended policies are those which PSBA has in place to address common issues which the school board may want to provide guidance on such as a policy on comprehensive planning. Optional policies are purely up to the school entity as to whether they want to create a policy on a given topic such as a policy outlining how class rank will be determined.

It is important to note however that there is no requirement for school entities to utilize PSBA for their policy needs. Also, PSBA is not responsible for the adoption or implementation of board policy, nor is PSBA a government agency with oversight or authority over school boards and their policies.

PSBA Policy on Electronic Devices

To assist school entities with managing the use of cell phones and other electronic devices, PSBA has developed a policy guide on electronic devices that has been provided to school entities as a baseline for creating their own policy. Within the policy guide, electronic devices are broadly defined to encompass "all devices that can take photographs; record, play or edit audio or video data; store, transmit or receive calls, messages, text, data or images; operate online applications, or provide a wireless, unfiltered connection to the Internet."¹ PSBA's definition of electronic devices is written with the goal of providing school entities with a general statement that would not necessitate frequent updates as advancements are made in technology. School boards can revise the definition as desired to best fit their local needs.

Pennsylvania does not currently have a law or regulation which requires school entities to establish a policy dealing with electronic devices. PSBA categorizes the electronic devices policy guide as "recommended for legal liability purposes" as the policy calls for an annual notification about the policy to students, parents/guardians, and employees. If a school board adopts the policy with the annual notification language, they would then be bound to the enforceable standards of the policy. The policy guide also contains a multitude of optional sections and language that can be included, removed, expanded upon and customized by the school entity. The policy guide can be tailored by the school entity to strictly prohibit all use of electronic devices, authorize use of electronic devices at any time during the school day, or prohibit/allow use anywhere in between those two ends of the spectrum. School entities can also choose to develop their own policy on electronic devices, as several have done.

Statewide Implementation

¹ PSBA Policy Guide 237: Electronic Devices

PSBA estimates that approximately 425 Pennsylvania school districts have adopted an electronic devices policy, although the contents of the policies vary based on their local requirements and procedures. Included below is a list of Pennsylvania school districts across the state that have either recently adopted or modified their electronic devices policy and their approach to either allowing or prohibiting such devices.

Northwestern Lehigh SD – approved Feb 2025 and includes bell to bell prohibitions for elementary and middle school students; for high school students the ban is for instructional time.

Phoenixville Area SD – approved June 2025 and prohibits use of electronic devices for all students in instructional spaces during the school day.

Salisbury Township SD – approved Sept 2025 and authorizes use of electronic devices in accordance with any school-specific rules which may vary among the elementary, middle, and high schools.

Kiski Area SD – approved Sept 2025 and authorizes use of electronic devices in classrooms for educational purposes and while under the supervision of district staff.

Lower Dauphin SD – approved June 2025 and includes bell to bell prohibitions for elementary and middle school students; for high school students the ban is for instructional time.

Jeannette City SD – approved April 2023 and generally prohibits the use of electronic devices but also authorizes them when used in accordance with any applicable school rules that are set by the building principals.

Tulpehocken Area SD – approved Dec 2022 and prohibits use of electronic devices during the entire school day.

West Allegheny SD - approved June 2024 and authorizes use of electronic devices in accordance with any school-specific rules which may vary among the elementary, middle, and high schools.

Norwin SD – approved Aug 2025 and authorizes silent use of electronic devices during the school day and includes language that approval is subject to school-specific rules which may vary among the elementary, middle, and high schools.

Of these districts that prohibit use of electronic devices, all of them make exceptions for students who require devices because of an Individualized Education Plan or 504 Service Agreement and several also note exceptions for health, safety, and/or emergency reasons. However, as evident from these examples, school entities around the state are developing and implementing policies on cell phones that work for their school community.

Nationwide Trends

Based on our research, at least nineteen (19) states, plus the District of Columbia, have passed laws or issued an executive order regarding the use of cell phones and other electronic devices in schools. Of these, seventeen (17) states require districts to adopt a policy regarding cell phones, and thirteen (13) of those dictate a ban on devices with notable exceptions. The exceptions vary but are primarily related to a

student's need for an electronic device to monitor their health; if it is required by an Individualized Education Plan of 504 Service Agreement; for emergencies; and/or to assist with any language barriers. The legislation in these states has primarily been recent adoptions, passing in 2024 and 2025, with many requiring school districts to have a policy in place prior to the start of this school year (2025-2026) or by the start of the 2026-2027 school year. The legislation in these states differs as some mandate a policy enforcing a "bell to bell" ban where students cannot use unauthorized electronic devices from the start of the school day until the final bell rings; while others only require a ban during instructional time, allowing schools to permit students to use their devices during specific parts of the day, including lunch periods.

At least two (2) of these states acknowledged in the legislation the rights of parents and students to communicate with each other during the school day and concerns that parents may not be able to reach their children during an emergency. Arkansas included general language that the aim of the bill is "to provide safe school environments that are conducive to learning while also protecting the rights of students and parents to freely and openly communicate."² Tennessee provided more explicit protections by including language to "establishes a process...to ensure that the absence of, or restricted access to, wireless communication devices during the school day does not prevent parents from receiving notice of an emergency or possible emergency."³

The following states have either passed legislation on this topic or issued an executive order: Arizona; Arkansas; California; Colorado; Florida; Idaho; Maine; Minnesota; New Hampshire; New Mexico; New York; North Carolina; North Dakota; Oklahoma; Oregon; Tennessee; Vermont; Virginia; Wisconsin.

Recommendations

Any legislation proposed or enacted needs to provide school entities with clear guidance on what is expected and/or required of them. Legislation should also provide school entities with flexibility to allow locally elected school leaders to make decisions regarding cell phones which best suit their school communities. Though not all may agree with those decisions, the school directors elected by their neighbors to make those decisions are best suited to hear the concerns of their students, parents, teachers, and administrators and formulate a policy which works for their schools.

Legislation should also not require a board policy to go into too much detail. Much like legislation, where the General Assembly will establish broad, general rules which are then to be implemented by regulations or state agencies, board policies are meant to operate the same way. The Board will establish broad, general statements of policy which are then implemented by the school administration.

PSBA stands ready to work with the General Assembly and administration on legislation

² AR Senate Bill 142, 95th General Assembly, Regular Session, 2025

³ TN House Bill 932; approved 28 March 2025

which meets those criteria.

Conclusion

Public schools across the state and nationwide are united in their goal of providing a safe and orderly educational environment for students in which to thrive. One aspect to achieving this is regulating students' use of personal electronic devices during the school day. Managing the use of electronic devices is not meant to deny students access to technology but rather to set appropriate boundaries for its use to ensure students' overall well-being. PSBA thanks the committee for their time and attention to this matter and working to create the best solution for students and school entities.



Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators

Testimony to the House Education Committee

Monday, November 17, 2025

Cellphone Ban in PA Schools

Dr. Sherri Smith, Executive Director, PASA

Good morning Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Cutler, and members of the House Education Committee. I am Dr. Amy Arcurio, Superintendent of the Greater Johnstown School District and here today representing the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators (PASA). Thank you for convening this hearing and for inviting PASA to share the perspective of more than 1,100 members, including over 600 currently serving as school superintendents, assistant superintendents, and executive directors across the Commonwealth.

My testimony today aims to highlight the growing evidence and concerns of excessive cellphone use by students during the school instructional day. Concerns include the interference with learning, social development, and mental health. We agree that we must address these growing concerns to protect the integrity of the learning environment and student well-being.

At the same time, PASA urges the Senate to ensure that any statewide - policy preserves local flexibility—allowing school districts to tailor implementation based on their unique communities, resources, and student populations.

Local flexibility ensures that the intent of a cellphone restriction - reducing distraction and improving focus— can be achieved in ways that are practical and sustainable for each district.

A successful policy requires attention to practical and financial realities:

- Some districts use locking pouches like *Yondr*, which cost approximately \$20 per student annually.
- Others use classroom storage bins, secure lockers, or technology-based monitoring systems.
- Many lack the staff or facilities to collect and store thousands of phones each morning.

Without flexibility, a cellphone ban risks becoming an unfunded mandate that burdens staff and disrupts daily school operations. District leaders must retain discretion to choose methods that are feasible, cost-effective, and aligned in local capacity.

As school leaders, we understand that successful policies require community trust. Families, students, and teachers must feel that rules are reasonable and responsive to their realities.

Effective policies are rooted in community engagement and shared ownership. Local autonomy allows school leaders to:

- Partner with parents, teachers, and school boards to design policies that reflect community expectations.
- Phase in restrictions gradually, allowing time for communication and adjustment.
- Develop consistent, fair, and developmentally appropriate enforcement practices.

Policies created with our local community input are far more likely to be followed than those imposed upon them. Flexibility allows our school leaders to cultivate that buy-in, ensuring the policy's long-term success.

A uniform ban may unintentionally disadvantage certain students:

- Those who rely on translation apps, health monitoring, and/or accessibility tools on their phones.
- Students who need to contact parents about work schedules, transportation, and/or safety after school.
- Families without reliable home communication systems, particularly in rural areas.

District flexibility allows us to provide **clear, compassionate exemptions** that protect safety and accessibility while maintaining instructional focus.

While restricting phone use during instruction may be essential to improve focus and social connections, we must also teach responsible technology use. Many districts are experimenting with balanced approaches, such as allowing limited use in designated classes or during non-instructional times of the school day.

Flexibility allows schools to integrate digital citizenship and self-regulation education, ensuring that students not only learn *without* phones—but eventually learn *how to manage* them responsibly.

Flexibility should not mean the absence of accountability. The state can set clear expectations:

- Require every district to adopt a cellphone policy addressing instructional time use.
- Mandate annual public reporting on implementation and outcomes.
- Provide grants, professional development, or technical assistance for best practices.

This framework preserves local control while ensuring consistent statewide progress toward healthier, more focused learning environments.

A school-day cellphone ban can improve academic focus, reduce distractions, and support student well-being —particularly for students most affected by distraction—but it should be implemented with common-sense exceptions (e.g., health needs), clear enforcement, and paired with digital-literacy and mental-health initiatives to maximize impact.

As school leaders, we see daily how deeply technology affects our students' attention, relationships, and well-being. It is time to reduce distractions during the school day for the welfare of our students.

However, the success of any statewide policy will depend on how it's implemented at the local level. Districts must have the flexibility to choose the tools and strategies that make sense for their schools, families, and communities. A one-size-fits-all mandate risks unintended consequences; a flexible framework guided by shared goals ensures both effectiveness and fairness.

Thank you for your attention and your continued commitment to public education system. We would be happy to answer any questions.

Addendum A: Greater Johnstown School District – Cellphone Ban Policy Story

Testimony 11/17/25 Dr. Amy Arcurio, Superintendent, Greater Johnstown School District

The Greater Johnstown School District began serious discussions regarding the increase in student cell phone use shortly after the pandemic. When our learners returned to face-to-face learning, we immediately noticed an increase in cell phone use during instructional time. We initially tried to teach our students the correct way to use cell phones and to manage them appropriately. We did not want the battle over cell phones to be the priority. However, our teachers were engaged with students —, sometimes several — during the class period, as they struggled to put their phones away and pay attention to the lesson. This would often end with a call to security guards to report to a classroom due to the student's disruption: the student would not follow verbal directives and would become confrontational with the teacher.

Our first approach in the 2021-2022 school year was to create a procedure for students to follow that provided clear guidelines on when cell phones could be used at school. This was done at our high school. Students were allowed to use their cell phones in the hallways before the start and after school, during class exchanges, and in the cafeteria during lunch periods. Cell phone use was banned in all instructional areas, including classrooms, theory rooms, vocational shops, the library, and the auditorium. Unfortunately, this did not support the educational processes, and students continued to use their cell phones at will.

Eventually, our teachers literally gave up trying to enforce the rule, as the confrontation and disruption created an environment of unlearning for all students. Our students, who were following the rules, were losing valuable instructional time every period when teachers tried to enforce the policy.

In the 2022-2023 school year, the procedure was changed so that all cell phones must be kept in the student's individual lockers, which are secured with a combination code, during the school day. Again, the same situation occurred: many students failed to follow the procedure and kept their cell phones with them throughout the day. The conversations continued with the school board, school leaders, and teachers as to how we could best respond to the serious issues we were confronting. Students often would not relinquish their phones. The procedure went so far as to call parents to come to the school to meet and hold a due process hearing, as frequent violators were now being suspended for their behavior. During these meetings with families, we often heard that our families disagreed with the procedure. They were suspicious that the district was trying to hide what was actually occurring at our high school, as students could no longer video physical altercations and teachers' verbal confrontations with students. We also realized that for many of our students, the cell phone was often their most expensive and prized possession.

At the same time, we purchased cell phone lockers for all homeroom teachers at our middle school. Students at the middle school were also beginning to increase their cell phone use during instructional time, and their lockers were not secure because they were storage cubicles. This approach worked much better at the middle school, as our younger students were amenable to the process. Parents also supported our initiative, as they too wanted the phone kept safe. They also shared their concerns about their students' safety walking to and from school and to and from the bus stop, which served as their rationale for their child having a phone. We agreed that this is a necessary safety tool in our ever-challenging society.

The 2023-2024 school year continued to present the same challenges as the previous year, with high levels of physical aggression between students, challenging behaviors associated with student cell phone use during instruction, and overwhelming numbers of these videos shared on social media.

We knew the 2024-2025 school year needed a change regarding our approach to cell phones at our middle and high schools. We began investigating the use of cell phone pouches for both middle and high school students. It was also at this time that we learned that an improving mental health grant through PCCD would be available, and that the YONDR cell phone pouches (costing \$65,341 in expenses to date) for school districts were an allowable expenditure. The school board of directors immediately directed that this initiative be implemented as soon as possible. The launch date of January 6, 2025, was determined with messaging to our school community to begin in December, before the holiday break.

There was initial pushback from our families on social media. The biggest concern was reaching their child in a family emergency. The second issue was reaching their child during a school emergency, such as a shelter-in-place or lockdown. Both problems were responded to with care, concern, empathy, and facts.

- Please call the main office in the event of a family emergency, and counselors will support you during this difficult time.
- Students must be able to carefully follow very detailed instructions from school personnel during a school emergency. If they are on their phone, their safety could be jeopardized.

A few families attended the January 2025 school board meeting to address the same concerns and were received with the same communication and details. We have had no additional pushback since that time.

Johnstown Middle School: Impact of Yondr Implementation

How the Yondr Program Works at Greater Johnstown Middle School

The Yondr system is designed to be simple, secure, and non-punitive. The following is how a typical day goes for a student using the Yondr pouch:

Upon arrival, the students enter the building through one entrance. The students form two lines and wait to proceed through the metal detectors. When the students reach the metal detector, they power off their phones and hand them to the security guards. The security guard gives the phone to a staff member, who then inserts it into the Yondr pouch, fastens the pouch, and hands it back to the student. Every student, with or without a phone, must receive a pouch. This is their ticket to their homeroom. They hold onto this until getting to their homeroom. When they enter their homeroom, the students go directly to the computer station, take out their computers for the day, and place them in their Yondr pouches.

During the School Day: Phones stay in the locked computer cart until dismissal.

At Dismissal: Our staff members go from homeroom to homeroom, unlocking YONDR pouches, and the students leave for dismissal.

In Case of Emergency, Parents and guardians can always contact their children through the main school office. This ensures that urgent messages are delivered promptly without disrupting the learning environment.

Overview

Data Table

Month	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
January	584	250	0
February	605	383	0
March	446	540	0
April	655	375	0
May	423	373	0
June	0	40	0
July	0	0	0
August	32	51	23
September	302	434	345
October	539	547	464
November	508	468	181
December	487	262	0
Totals:	4,581	3,723	1,013

Damaged Pouches: 37 damaged pouches to date out of a total of 700 in circulation. This is mainly due to the specific cleaning process for the pouches. Students simply do not have them in their possession for long; less than 20-30 minutes a day. During entry and dismissal procedures, students have their pouches.

Social Shifts: Teachers and staff have noticed a clear and positive shift in student social behavior. Without constant access to their phones, students are engaging more in face-to-face conversations, building stronger peer relationships, and showing greater empathy and awareness toward others. Lunchtimes and transitions have become more interactive, with students talking, laughing, and connecting rather than isolating themselves on screens. Teachers report that group work and classroom discussions feel more authentic, as students are fully present and contributing to the moment. The Yondr pouches have helped reestablish a sense of community within the school, encouraging students to communicate, collaborate, and form meaningful social connections that extend beyond the digital world.

-“Since introducing Yondr pouches, we’ve witnessed a transformation that goes far beyond managing cell phones-it has reshaped the spirit of our school. Without screens in their hands, students are more present, more engaged, and more connected to one another and their learning. The change is visible in every hallway and classroom: calmer energy, stronger relationships, and a renewed sense of respect and focus. Behavioral issues have declined, but even more importantly, our students are talking, laughing, and learning together again. What began as a simple idea to reduce distractions has become a movement that restores what matters most in education-genuine human connection, belonging, and the joy of learning.”

Johnstown High School: Impact of Yondr Implementation
Data Comparison:

- **Before Yondr:** August 26 – December 31, 2024
(First 76 days of school)
- **After Yondr:** January 6 – May 6, 2025
(Second 76 days of school)

Summary

Since introducing **Yondr phone pouches** in December 2024, **Johnstown High School** has seen marked improvements in student behavior, focus, and engagement. Discipline incidents have decreased, classrooms are calmer, and teachers report greater student participation and fewer distractions. The data indicate that Yondr has strengthened the school’s academic climate and overall learning environment.

Key Quantitative Results (SWIS Data)

Category	Change After Yondr
Total Discipline Logs	↓ 10.2%
Fighting / Physical Aggression / Threatening Behavior	↓ 29.3%
Disrespect / Disruption / Abusive Language / Defiance	↓ 34.6%

Interpretation:

These reductions reflect a clear improvement in student conduct and a more positive school culture within just one semester of implementation.

Narrative Testimonials & Anecdotal Evidence

The most compelling evidence for the Yondr program comes from the stories of those experiencing it daily.

Student interview: Alayna Morrison, JMS 7th-grade student

-“The Yondr pouch when we first started them, I was very mad, I felt like I had to have my phone, but by the end of the year, I realized that my phone was not necessary to get me through the day. I am not happy that I do not have it because all it did was cause me trouble. I have changed so much because of this.”

Teacher Testimonial: Mr. Brian Hockensmith, JMS 7th Grade Science Teacher

-“The use of Yondr pouches at Johnstown Middle School has removed the constant distraction of students' personal electronics while increasing the focus on the educational process of school. I am still surprised at how well the process is working here at the middle school. The administration and staff have instituted a routine that has become accepted by all students at JMS. Students enter the building and collect a Yondr pouch - where their small personal electronics are secured. Then, students are provided breakfast and then instructed to report to their assigned homeroom classroom. Students arrive in their homeroom and exchange their Yondr pouches for school-issued Chromebooks. The pouches are securely stored in a locked cart until the end of the school day. Prior to dismissal, the pouches are opened by our security personnel and Chromebooks are returned to the cart for overnight charging. Student personal electronics are returned to each child upon dismissal from school. The use of Yondr pouches has been a game-changer for students and staff at JMS.”

School Police Officer Testimonial: Mr. Jeff Janciga, JMS School Police Officer

-“The implementation of Yondr pouches has had a positive impact on behavior within the school. Previously, it was thought that many of the altercations that were occurring were a result of cell phone communication (texts, different apps, etc) during the school day. Once strict compliance with the program was achieved (almost instantly), the number of fights decreased dramatically. Further, the Yondr pouches have caused a lack of access to cell phones, a significant distractor, during the school day. The lack of this distraction should cause more attention to subject matter being instructed. This should result in more learning and an improvement in test scores. Finally, Yondr pouches prevent immediate communication with parents by students. Such communication had previously-resulted in parents appearing at our school knowing about incidents which we had yet to learn about. We now have time to address issues, in some cases, preventing an angered parent from arriving at our school. I have no negative thoughts regarding this implementation.”

Administrator Testimonial: Mr. Ross Houston, JMS Principal

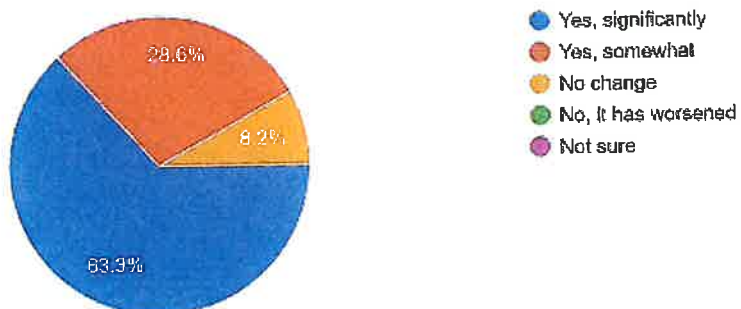
Teacher Survey Findings (Winter 2025 – 49 Responses)

Overall Themes:

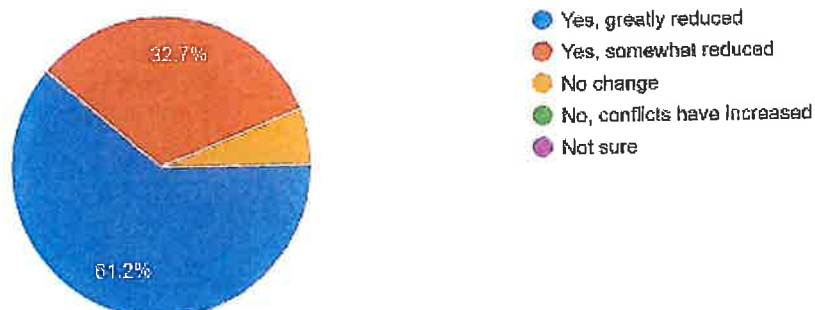
- **Improved classroom behavior:** Most teachers report calmer, more respectful classes.



- **Better focus and attention:** Students are more engaged without phone distractions.



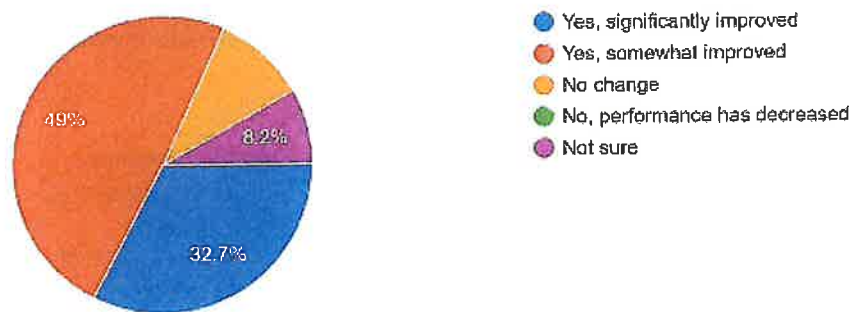
- **Fewer conflicts:** Noticeable drop in phone-related arguments and disruptions.



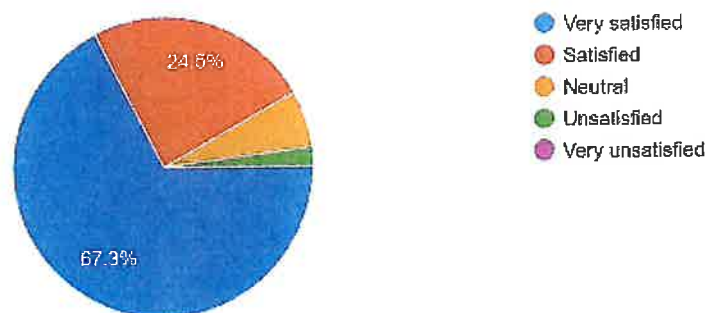
- **Increased participation:** Students more actively engage in discussions and lessons.



- **Academic improvement:** Many teachers note better work quality and completion rates.



- **High satisfaction:** The majority of teachers support continuing Yondr in future years.



Conclusion

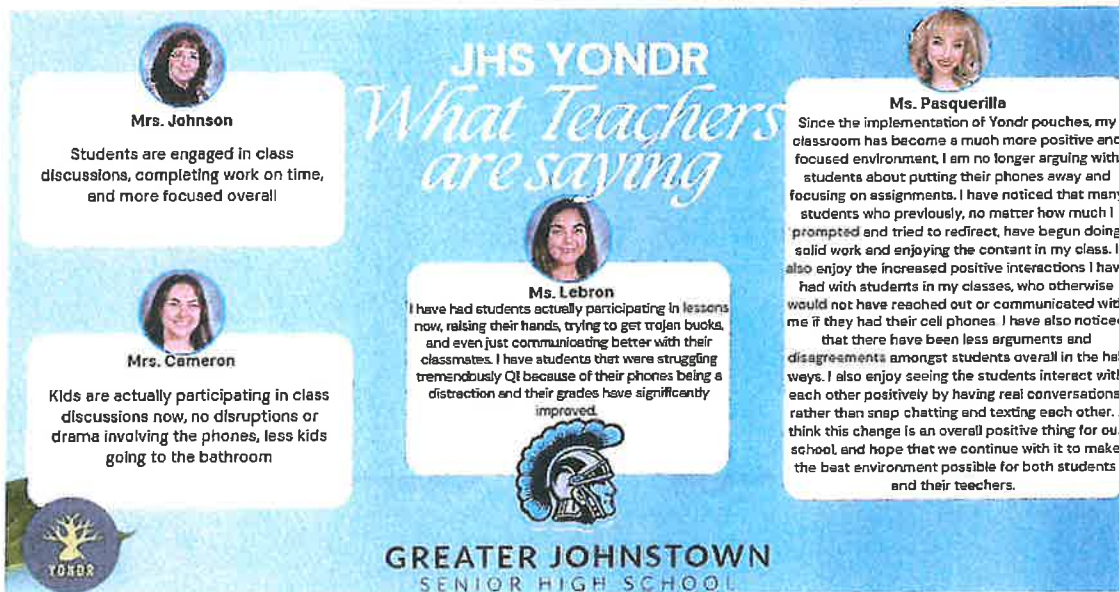
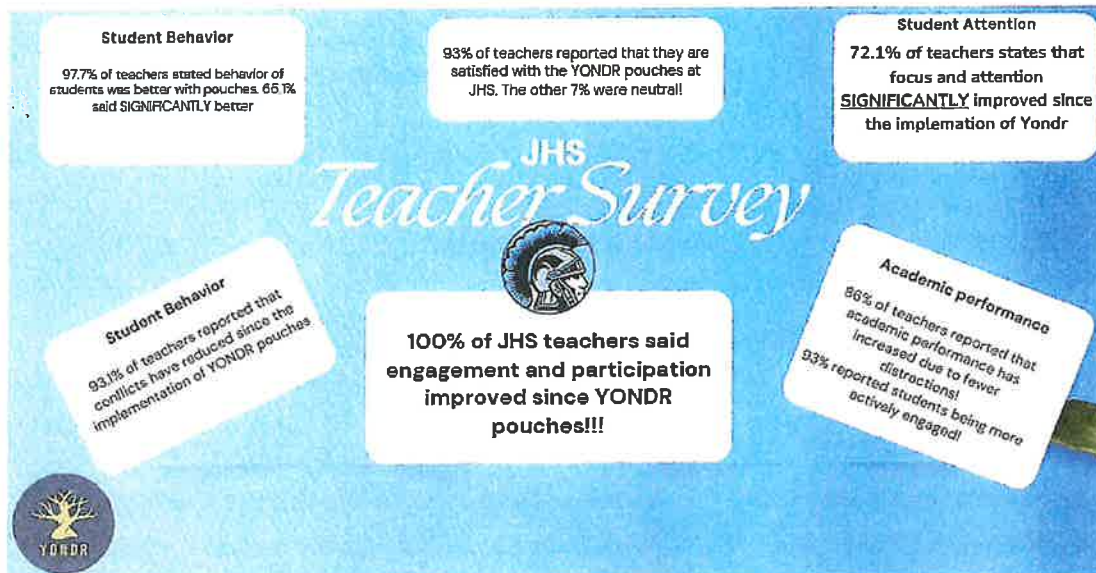
The implementation of Yondr pouches at Johnstown High School has been a **successful initiative** that:

- ☐ Reduces negative behaviors and conflicts
- ☐ Promotes focus, respect, and participation
- ☐ Strengthens academic performance and engagement
- ☐ Improves overall school climate

Yondr has proven to be an effective, research-supported tool for fostering a learning environment where students are present, engaged, and ready to learn.

Student Statement:

"My name is NaLonai Tisinger, and I am a senior who attends Greater Johnstown High School. Since implementing Yondr pouches and the new phone procedures, I've noticed a significant improvement in my focus and social interactions. I'm more attentive in class because I'm not distracted by my phone all day. During lunch, I'm able to have meaningful conversations and even share a good laugh with my friends, since everyone is truly engaged. Although there was some disagreement about these procedures at first, I believe they have brought us together and helped us grow as students. I highly recommend these changes because they really make a positive difference."



Chairman Schweyer and members of the Education and Health Committees,

It is a tremendous honor to speak with you today and I appreciate your time and efforts in the service to students of Pennsylvania. I began teaching in public high schools in Lancaster County in 2004, and I hope to offer valuable perspective to your discussion. Obviously the use of technology in schools has drastically shifted over my 22 years in the classroom with school wide 1 to 1 initiatives and the ubiquity of students owning smartphones.

One of the courses I have the privilege to teach is Advanced Placement Psychology where we explore the human mind and behavior. It has been through the teaching of this course that I have gained a more in depth understanding of the science of attention which has, in turn, influenced the way I teach in general. We know students have limited resources when it comes to their “attention flashlight” and that the presence of personal cell phones can serve to tax those resources leaving less ability to focus on academic tasks.

To help students find success, I have implemented a policy in my classroom in which students put their phones in a designated pocket at the start of class where it remains for the entirety of the period. I want to highlight a few important improvements that I have seen since starting this expectation. First, students tend to produce more quality work when they can be singularly focused on that task. In the past, I have witnessed students rushing through assignments and activities with one eye on their phone, even when policies dictated those phones be kept in backpacks. When phones are in close proximity to students, the temptation to check in was often too great and took priority over student work. My observations are not unique as the mere presence of a smart phone nearby has been shown to reduce cognitive abilities.¹

Another anecdotal improvement I have seen is the level of interaction between students. Without access to their phones, students have typically been more productive in collaborative work sessions. I see more positive face to face interactions between students creating a better classroom environment for all. Even in situations where only some use their phones, all students suffer from distraction and a less connected classroom.

It seems as though this legislature has already begun to account for the potential distraction of momentary glances at a phone with a recent update on the state’s driving law, specifically “Paul Miller’s Law.” I would liken a brief glance at a phone while stopped at a red light to a brief glance during or between classes. In both cases, there will likely be a delay in time to refocus on the task at hand.

For me, implementation of my classroom policy has been relatively easy. I have to concern myself with, at most, 28 learners at a time and I can build individual rapport with students to help with buy-in. I can only imagine, however, a policy banning or limited phones in school on a much larger scale would present several obstacles. Statewide, students and

¹ <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/691462>

parents are sure to have concerns about being out of touch for a significant part of the day. In my individual classroom, consistency is key for much that we accomplish, and school districts are sure to appreciate support from the legislature so that any statewide mandate can be consistently implemented.

Recently, I was curious to find student perspectives on this issue so I offered a non-scientific survey to my students, 52 of whom responded. The most relevant question was, "What do you notice (good or bad) in classes when you have to turn in your phone? This could be related to the class environment as a whole, your own individual focus and attention, group work, individual work quality, grades, behavior, etc." In rating students' responses, I categorized them as positive, neutral or negative. Results and example responses in each category and attached in Appendix A below.

Despite the relatively small sample size, I found it interesting that students often matched my observations. In classes where they have to put their phone away in a designated location, students noted more focus, higher quality work and more productive class discussion.

One final example is a demonstration I recently did in my AP Psychology class during a lesson on change blindness, a form of inattentional blindness, or the tendency to miss one stimuli while focusing on another. During the 80 minute class block, I wore an orange tie for the first 40 minutes. I then made an excuse that I had to check on something in the hallway and, while out of sight of students, switched to a blue tie. (See appendix B) For the last 40 minutes of class, I wore the blue tie as I engaged with students and presented information. Not one of the 21 students present that day gave any hint they had noticed the change. At the end of class, I prompted students with the question, "Did anyone notice something change during class today?" After a minute looking around the room, one student offered, "Did you change your tie?" Many students were still unconvinced until I showed them both ties together. This is another indication that we tend to miss things while paying attention to something else. In this case, it was good news. Students were paying attention to the lesson and activities of the class and did not notice the unimportant switch right in front of them. However, if a stimulus on their phones had been competing with the lesson of the day, I can only assume that the lesson would have been the stimuli suffering from inattentional blindness.

When I was training to be a teacher, one of the catchphrases that would often come up was that we needed to prepare to teach the "whole child". This idea that we need to go beyond academic instruction, but also allow space for students' social and emotional lives to grow has always been an important part of my role in education. While there is clear evidence that phones have potential to impede academic achievement, we also must recognize the harm that can be done to the human capacity of the adolescents we serve. The rise in anxiety and depression since 2010 amongst teens is well documented and we see this shift all too often in the hallways throughout our school system. There is almost no class activity that can give students the dopamine rush that various apps on their phones produce regularly, which helps to explain the frequent use of phones despite negative consequences. For that reason, it is incumbent on those of us in education to help students navigate their relationship with various

forms of technology. For me, a significant break from phones has been a great way to mitigate some of these negative consequences. I appreciate the work of this committee and I hope this hearing helps to create positive changes in the service of students in our great Commonwealth.

Appendix A

Student Survey (52 responses)

Positive Evaluation	Neutral	Negative Evaluation
29	17	6

Example Positive Evaluations:

"I feel as though when phones are away, everyone is more focused and less distracted by their phones. Having a space where you're just learning without the distraction of a phone going off of wanting to respond to a message helps me get my work done much more efficiently and it seems to be similar for others as well. I prefer not having my phone on me when I'm working because it is more of a temptation. While people would like to have their phone on them, I've noticed classrooms becoming more talkative and engaged with the lesson."

"I get work done faster and don't have to do as much work after the school day."

"Most often I do enjoy turning in my phone because it forces me to have no distractions and I can focus a lot better. Even though I can usually focus with my phone I just feel like its [sic] a lot better when our phones are out of sight and out of mind, leading us to focus solely on our work."

Example Neutral Response:

"For me, compared to last year when we could have phones in class, I don't really see a difference. If I were to use my phone it would probably be to text someone back or to put on music. I think phones can help you focus if you're using it for music, so I do think they can be beneficial. Although there should be restrictions on how much you use it during class if you are allowed to have it out, so people don't get too distracted."

Example Negative Evaluations:

"I personally feel slightly annoyed since I am a good student, very responsible, and I have a good work ethic so I just feel like I am not being trusted even though if I had my phone I wouldn't use it."

"Putting my phone away in class does not help my attention because I get bored more easily and it is harder to pay attention in class when I am not able to have any distraction [sic] for a minute. I think it is important to be focused and not on your phone when the teacher is lecturing or giving instructions [sic], but it is nice to have my phone during independent work. It is nice to check my phone for a minute or to and then refocus, because my focus is stronger."

Appendix B

Shirt and tie combination #1 (first half of class)



Shirt and tie combination #2 (second half of class)





Testimony for the Pennsylvania House Education Committee

Erin Whinnery, Senior Project Manager

Cell Phones, Social Media and Student Mental Health

A recent [national scan](#) on cell phone policies found that at least 32 states and the District of Columbia require schools to restrict or prohibit student cell phone use. Much of the debate over student access to cell phones centers around disruptions to the learning environment, communication with parents and family members in case of emergency, and [social media impacts](#) on student mental and behavioral health.

The American Psychological Association (APA) has issued a [health advisory](#) on adolescent social media use, and outlines several considerations and recommendations. The APA notes that using social media is not inherently beneficial or harmful and recommends social media use be preceded by training in social media literacy.

Research on adolescents and social media has shown that youth:

- are [particularly sensitive](#) to [social feedback cues](#) similar to follower and like metrics, and [stimuli](#) such as alert notifications that are [popular](#) on social media.
- may be at [some risk](#) for aggressive or sexualized attention online.
- can [benefit](#) from restricted screen time in the evening.
- [can benefit from](#) online friendships and interactions.

While [some states](#) are broadly targeting social media platforms for new regulations, it is more common for states to consider restricting student access to cell phones while engaged in school activities. Such restrictions have the dual impact of minimizing exposure to social media and cell-phone disruptions in class. Below, we review recent state legislative action in this area.

State Legislative Action

In the 2025 legislative session, Education Commission of the States has identified over 100 bills in 44 states and the District of Columbia that address cell phones and social media. Thirty-four of those bills have been [enacted or vetoed](#).

This year, we have observed a noticeable shift in policy; bills from previous legislative sessions tended to direct the state education agency (SEA) to develop a model cell phone policy for local education agencies (LEA). This year, legislative



bodies have taken a greater role in developing such policies, often directing the SEA or LEAs to adopt a policy expressly prohibiting student use or possession of cell phones. These bills allow exceptions for Individualized Education Plans or medical requirements. Some states require that cell phones are inaccessible during instructional time, while others have adopted bell-to-bell policies that prohibit cell phones throughout the entire school day.

Additionally, we have identified a growing interest in disciplinary responses to cell phone policies. Some bills require an LEA to outline disciplinary responses, and others prohibit suspension/expulsion as a disciplinary response for violating a cell phone policy. Examples of these legislative trends are below, followed by other state actions to limit access to social media.

Evolution of the State Role in School Cell Phone Policies

Arkansas [S.B. 142](#) (2025, enacted) amends existing statute. By the 2025-26 school year, each public school district and open-enrollment charter school must (rather than may) establish a cell phone policy. The policy must (rather than may) restrict possession and use of cell phones during the entire school day.

Ohio [H.B. 96](#) (2025, enacted) amends cell phone use policy requirements. Previously, local boards of education were directed to adopt a policy emphasizing that cell phone use was to be as limited as possible. Current law requires that the policy prohibits the use of cell phones during the instructional day.

Texas [H.B. 1481](#) (2025, enacted) amends existing statute. The law makes open-enrollment charter schools subject to cell phone policy provisions. Previous law required school governing bodies to adopt a policy prohibiting a student from possessing a paging device while on school property. Governing bodies must now implement and ensure school compliance with a policy that prohibits cell phone use during the school day. Governing bodies are now required (rather than allowed) to establish disciplinary measures. The policies may prohibit a student from bringing a cell phone on school property or designate a storage method.

Cell Phones and Disciplinary Policies

Nebraska [L.B. 140](#) (2025, enacted) directs school boards to adopt a policy that prohibits cell phone use while on school property or while attending a school instructional function. The policy may include discipline and enforcement mechanisms that limit a student's access to their cell phone.

Nevada [S.B. 444](#) (2025, enacted) amends existing statute. Currently, each school district is required to adopt a cell phone policy. This bill requires the policy to

include a progressive disciplinary scale based on the number and seriousness of a violation.

New York [S.B. 3006C](#) (2025, enacted) requires school districts, charter schools and boards of cooperative educational services (BOCES) to adopt a cell phone policy. The policy must include one or more methods for storage. School districts, charter schools and BOCES must annually report on the enforcement of the policy and include non-identifiable demographic data on students who have faced disciplinary action. The bill specifies that a student may not be suspended if the sole offense is a cell phone policy violation.

Virginia [S.B. 738](#) (2025, enacted) directs each elementary and secondary school to implement a cell phone policy. At a minimum, the policy must restrict cell phone possession and use on school property during the entire school day. The bill specifies that a violation of this policy is not sufficient cause for suspension or expulsion.

Social Media and Education

Kentucky [H.B. 208](#) (2025, enacted) amends existing statute regarding cell phone policies. Local boards of education must now adopt (rather than develop) cell phone policies. At minimum, the policy must prohibit cell phone use during instructional time. The bill also updates limitations on internet access; social media is added to the list of materials that must be made inaccessible through school technology.

North Carolina [H.B. 959](#) (2025, enacted) requires local boards of education to adopt internet safety policies which prohibit and prevent students from accessing social media platforms on devices or internet services provided by the school. The bill also requires a standalone course on social media, and its effects on social, emotional and physical health. Instruction must be provided to students once in elementary school, once in middle school and twice in high school. Instruction must address:

- the negative side effects of social media, including addiction,
- the distribution of misinformation,
- methods of manipulating behavior using social media,
- the permanency of information shared online,
- how to maintain personal security,
- how to identify cyberbullying, predatory behavior and human trafficking,
- how to report suspicious behavior, and
- personal skills and character education that mitigates or reduces risk-taking or harmful behavior.

Governing bodies are also required to establish a cell phone policy that, at minimum, prohibits students from using, displaying or having a cell phone turned on during instructional time.

Tennessee [H.B. 0825/S.B. 0811](#) (2025, enacted) establishes the Teen Social Media and Internet Safety Act. The department of education is required to develop social media and internet safety curricula for students in grades 6-12 and update the curricula as necessary. Beginning with the 2026-27 school year, LEAs and charter schools must instruct 6-12 grade students using the curricula. The curricula must address:

- time management and healthy behaviors on social media,
- the negative side effects of social media on mental health,
- the distribution of information on social media,
- how social media manipulates behavior,
- the permanency of sharing materials online, and
- how to use social media safely.

The curricula may include the benefits of social media use, which are defined and limited to:

- career and resumé building,
- sharing information with family and friends, and
- safely connecting with people with similar interests.

Vermont [H.B. 480](#) (2025, enacted) directs the secretary of education to develop and annually review a model policy prohibiting cell phones during the entire school day. Beginning with the 2026-27 school year, each school board is required to adopt and enforce a cell phone policy at least as stringent as the model policy. Additionally, schools, school districts and supervisory unions are prohibited from:

- using social media to communicate directly with students, unless the platform is approved for such purpose, and
- requiring students to use social media for out-of-school academic work, sports, extracurricular clubs or other sponsored activities.



**Written testimony of Teach Plus PA before the House Education Committee
Monday, November 17, 2025
Harrisburg, PA**

Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Cutler, and Esteemed Education Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on behalf of Teach Plus Pennsylvania for today's informational hearing on cell phone use in schools.

Teach Plus PA is an education nonprofit that empowers excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to lead on key policy and practice issues that advance equity, opportunity, and student success. In pursuing our mission, we are guided by our Student Opportunity Mandate: all students should have the opportunity to achieve their potential in an education system defined by its commitment to equity, its responsiveness to individual needs, and its ability to prepare students for postsecondary success.

As Former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy [has cautioned](#), social media and digital overuse among youth is akin to "having children in cars with no seat belts, airbags, or traffic lights." Just as we've created guardrails for cars, we must create thoughtful guardrails for technology use in schools.

Teach Plus PA's Position

Teach Plus Pennsylvania supports a statewide framework for structured, developmentally appropriate student cell phone policies that:

- Restrict student phone use from bell to bell, including during lunch and passing periods;
- Are shaped through local input and community engagement;
- Provide clear exemptions for medical, accessibility, or caregiving needs; and
- Pair restrictions with digital literacy and wellness education so students build self-regulation and healthy habits.

We believe such policies should be locally designed but state-required, ensuring equity, consistency, and protection of instructional time. We base this position on both national research and the lived experience of Pennsylvania educators.

About Our Research

To inform this testimony, Teach Plus PA surveyed more than 70 educators from across Pennsylvania, representing all grade levels and a range of communities. Top-line findings include:

- **52%** reported their schools already have "bell-to-bell" restrictions.
- **48%** said current policies are ineffective at reducing distraction.
- **91%** support a districtwide or statewide restriction during instructional time.

II. The Impact of Cell Phones on Learning, Behavior, and School Culture

Across the country, educators are sounding the alarm about the impact of smartphones on students' ability to focus, learn, and connect socially. What was once considered a classroom management issue has escalated into a systemic barrier to both learning and student well-being.

Impact on Learning and Attention:

Research is clear: cell phones disrupt learning. [UNESCO reports](#) that banning cell phone use in schools leads to measurable improvements in academic performance, with the largest gains seen among

lower-achieving students. Even when not actively in use, the mere presence of a phone reduces cognitive capacity and focus, equating to several weeks of lost learning time per year.

[A meta-analysis](#) presented at the American Educational Research Association found that off-task multitasking with mobile phones reduces reading comprehension, reading speed, lecture recall, and overall academic performance. Similarly, [a study](#) by the London School of Economics showed that schools prohibiting mobile phones experienced a 6% increase in test scores, with the largest gains among struggling students.

Recent research extends these findings beyond test scores to attention and motivation. Angela Duckworth's recent ["Phones in Focus" study](#) of 20,000 educators found the happiest teachers work in schools with the strictest cell phone policies. In these environments, students are on task, classrooms are calmer, and teachers report higher satisfaction and fewer disruptions.

Duckworth's [research](#) underscores that self-regulation isn't merely about willpower—it is a matter of [design](#). As she notes, ["Willpower is overrated."](#) The structure of the environment determines whether students can resist distraction. This conclusion aligns with Ward et al.'s ["Brain Drain" study](#), which demonstrated that even the physical proximity of a phone affects focus and cognitive performance. Students who keep their phones farther away — such as in lockers or another room — earn higher GPAs than those who study with phones nearby.

Emerging evidence also suggests that widespread smartphone use may be contributing to declines in student achievement on a larger scale. Data from the [2022 Program for International Student Assessment \(PISA\)](#), which evaluates 15-year-olds across nearly 80 countries in math, reading, and science, shows that students who spend more time on phones tend to perform worse academically and report higher levels of distraction and lower well-being. These patterns — along with research linking phone use to reduced attention and disrupted [sleep](#) — suggest that the rise of smartphone use has contributed to declining academic focus and outcomes.

Beyond classroom performance, there is growing evidence that excessive digital engagement affects students' cognitive development. A 2025 [study](#) in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) found that 9- to 13-year-olds with higher social media use scored up to four points lower on reading, memory, and vocabulary tests compared with peers who had used social media minimally or not at all. The researchers note that constant notifications and rapid app switching train the brain to seek novelty, eroding students' capacity for sustained attention and deep learning.

These findings are reflected in educators' day-to-day experiences across the state:

"Students are constantly distracted by their phones. I waste a great deal of time monitoring and confiscating students' phones and emailing parents about phone use. Even when they're not physically on their phones, they're disconnected through earbuds."

"No matter how engaging my lessons are, they can never compete with the 10-second bursts of videos on TikTok. Students' attention spans have declined dramatically."

"Cell phones are disrupting the learning experience. Having taught for close to thirty years, I see a sharp decline in students' ability to focus."

Taken together, this evidence demonstrates that structured cell phone policies are not punitive; they are protective learning design. These policies serve as essential guardrails that help students build the focus, self-control, and cognitive habits that underpin lifelong learning and well-being.

The latest national data reinforce what Pennsylvania educators are seeing on the ground. [The School Pulse Panel survey](#), conducted by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education

Statistics (NCES), found that more than half of public school leaders (53%) say cell phones hurt academic performance. NCES Commissioner Peggy Carr summarized the findings:

“The latest School Pulse Panel data underscore that school leaders see cell phones as more than just a classroom distraction. With 53% of school leaders reporting negative impacts of cell phone use on academic performance, and even more citing negative impacts on students’ mental health and attention spans, schools are facing a critical issue. Schools are responding with practical solutions, like banning or restricting phone use.”

Impact on Mental Health and School Climate:

The consequences extend beyond academics. [A large U.S. study](#) found that higher screen time correlates with lower self-control, emotional stability, and curiosity—and higher rates of anxiety and depression. Notably, the rise in teenage anxiety, depression, [suicidal ideation](#), and [suicide](#) coincided with the period when more than [50% of teens](#) adopted smartphones, around 2012-2013. [Reduced sleep](#) is another critical factor: research shows that children today get less sleep than before smartphones and social media became widespread, and [insufficient sleep](#) is closely linked to [poorer mental health](#) outcomes.

[A survey](#) conducted by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that 72% of public school leaders report negative effects on students’ mental health.

Pennsylvania teachers echo these findings:

“Cell phones in schools are not only impacting academic achievement, but **they are also the cause of so many significant behavior issues**, especially in middle and high school.”

“**Phones are the root of almost every fight.** Kids film one another, post videos, and it leads to conflict.”

National data confirm these observations. A [2025 Pew Research Center survey](#) found that 48% of teens say social media has a mostly negative effect on people their age, and more than 70% report feeling “happy or peaceful” when separated from their phones.

Restricting phone access during the school day not only reduces distractions but also restores opportunities for face-to-face connection, emotional presence, and social learning, skills that are critical to students’ overall development.

At the same time, reducing distractions alone is not enough. Research shows that pairing restrictions with digital literacy and wellness education maximizes benefits. The 2023 U.S. Surgeon General’s [Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#) emphasizes that digital literacy instruction equips students to recognize and manage online risks, including cyberbullying, misinformation, and excessive use, thereby strengthening digital resilience and well-being. Similarly, a [2024 rapid review](#) by Böttger and Zierer found that smartphone bans yield the greatest improvements in social well-being when accompanied by digital literacy education, which reduces misuse, improves school climate, and promotes long-term self-regulation.

These findings underscore that structured policies work best when paired with intentional instruction that helps students use technology responsibly and build lasting self-regulation skills.

Impact on Teachers:

A [2022 Pew Research Center survey](#) found that 72% of high school and 33% of middle school teachers report cell phone distractions as a *major classroom problem*. [Common Sense Media reports](#) that 97% of students use their phones during the school day with some checking their phones nearly 500 times a day.

Educators in our Pennsylvania survey echoed these findings:

“Teachers are **tired and frustrated with policing phone use** in their classroom. The mere presence of a phone is a distraction.”

“Students will often ask to ‘use the restroom’ to check their phones. I regularly find students in the restroom taking photos and videos of one another during class time.”

These distractions drain teacher morale and instructional time. Structured, consistent policies free teachers to focus on teaching rather than enforcement.

III. Policy Responses and National Momentum

Pennsylvania is not alone in confronting this challenge. At least 31 states and D.C. now require schools to fully ban or limit phone use during the day. Four states—Florida, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Utah—have a single, statewide policy, while others require districts to adapt local plans within state guidelines.

Three broad models have emerged:

1. **Bell-to-Bell or Full-Day Bans:** Phones are secured for the entire school day, whether in lockers, storage pouches, secure boxes in the office, or homeroom classrooms. These bans are proven most effective for reducing distraction and rebuilding student connection. Twenty-two states—including Texas, Alabama, and New York—require this approach.
2. **Instructional-Time Restrictions:** Phones are restricted only during instructional periods, with use sometimes allowed during lunch, study halls, or other designated times. Enforcement can be more complicated due to accessibility needs and varying classroom rules. States such as Indiana, New Mexico, and North Carolina implement this model.
3. **Teacher-Discretion Models:** In these models, phones are allowed at individual teacher discretion. While flexible, this approach is often inconsistent and can create stress for teachers and students.

Research and educator feedback favor full-day bans with equitable exemptions. For example, Florida’s recent statewide ban led to modest gains in attendance and performance. However, initial rollout challenges caused a spike in suspensions, particularly among Black students in the policy’s first year, underscoring the need for clear implementation guidance and community buy-in. Pennsylvania can avoid these pitfalls through thoughtful rollout, clear guidance, and active engagement with students, teachers, and families.

Educator Perspectives:

Pennsylvania teachers overwhelmingly support consistent statewide guidance:

“A statewide ban would give schools the backing they need. Parents push back when policies vary, but statewide consistency gives the policy more teeth and levels the playing field.”

“It has to be mandated by the state, or districts will cave to parent pressure.”

Teachers in schools with strong restrictions report striking improvements:

“Since our school implemented phone pouches, **students are more engaged during instructional time and social with their peers.**”

“Since we began collecting cell phones, **the increase in student engagement has been remarkable.**”

“Having students be away from their phones for most of the day **has built their social and emotional regulation skills.**”

As districts and states move toward structured restrictions, co-creation with families and educators is essential. Policies that are developed *with* the school community—rather than *for* it—build trust, buy-in, and shared understanding.

IV. Addressing Concerns: Safety and Local Control

Safety and communication can be maintained without every student carrying a device all day. As Dr. Michael Milham of the Child Mind Institute [notes](#), “classroom phones, teacher radios, and main office lines ensure families can reach students when necessary—without undermining instructional focus.” [Research](#) from the National School Safety and Security Services shows that widespread phone use can complicate crisis response, spread misinformation, and impede first responders and parent-student reunification efforts.

Our proposal preserves local control: districts would design their own bell-to-bell policies within a consistent state framework, ensuring flexibility while maintaining fairness and clarity.

V. Recommendations

To protect learning and strengthen school climate, Teach Plus PA recommends the following actions:

1. **Adopt a statewide framework** requiring districts to prohibit student phone use from bell to bell, including during lunch and passing periods.
2. **Issue model policies and guidance** through PDE to ensure consistency, equity, and clarity.
3. **Provide professional learning** on non-punitive enforcement and community engagement.
4. **Co-create policies** with students, families, and educators to build trust and buy-in.
5. **Pair restrictions with digital literacy education** to foster responsible technology use and self-regulation.
6. **Monitor implementation** to assess impact on equity, learning, and well-being.

VI. Conclusion

This issue is not about control—it’s about restoring the conditions for learning. The opportunity cost of constant connectivity is immense. When phones dominate attention, students lose the organic education that happens in hallways and cafeterias, where empathy, problem-solving, and friendship take root.

Structured cell phone policies protect learning, mental health, and authentic student connection.

Teach Plus Pennsylvania stands ready to partner with this Committee, the Department of Education, and local school leaders to develop smart, equitable, evidence-based policies that honor both educator expertise and student well-being.

Thank you for your time and commitment to Pennsylvania’s students.

PA UNPLUGGED



INFORMATION FOR PA LEGISLATORS ABOUT PHONE-FREE SCHOOL POLICIES

PA Unplugged supports the best practice of bell-to-bell phone-free school policies for all Pennsylvania school districts.

Bell-to-bell policies encourage academic & social emotional success and create the safest school environment.

SUPPORT PA STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

"BELL-TO-BELL" PHONE-FREE SCHOOL POLICIES ARE BEST FOR:

Academic Success	Mental Health	School Safety
• Allow teachers to teach, rather than "police" devices • Reduce classroom <u>distractions</u> • Increase <u>focus & cognitive performance</u> • Improve <u>grades & test scores</u> • Decrease cheating • Eliminate "partial presence" on phones, which <u>reduce cognitive ability</u>	• Create space to build real-life social skills, and grow school <u>connectedness</u> • Encourage emotional resilience, independence, and problem-solving skills <u>without texting or calling home</u> • Reduce <u>cyberbullying</u> & social media drama in the school building	• Maintain calm in emergency situations and help kids focus on teachers' instructions (best practice according to school <u>safety experts</u>). • Keep communication lines clear for first responders • Protect kids from online harms such as <u>sexual predators</u> & <u>access to drugs</u> while at school

OTHER POLICIES PRODUCE POOR RESULTS

INSTRUCTIONAL TIME ONLY POLICIES HAVE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

For Teachers: Teachers are burdened with phone storage as well as "policing" device use. This wastes valuable instructional time and teacher energy. Teachers should be free to teach!

In Emergencies: Phones distract students from safety instructions and can reveal their locations.

Academically: Research shows true focus is only possible when devices are completely removed from the learning environment. Maximizing focus increases academic achievement.

Socially: Phones block opportunities to build critical social skills throughout the day – at lunch, in the halls, and during free periods. These skills require practice & are foundational for future success.

Emotionally: Intermittent access tethers kids to social comparisons & pressures. It limits chances to build independence and problem-solving skills.

BELL-TO-BELL HAS BROAD SUPPORT

Teachers want this. The PSEA supports a bell-to-bell policy. 83% of NEA teachers support bell-to-bell.

Taxpayers want this. Up to 25% of school day is lost to smartphone use = taxpayer \$ wasted.

School Safety/Resource Officers want this. PASRO & NASRO support bell-to-bell.

Parents want this. Support for bell-to-bell is growing.

Students need this. Their well-being and future work prospects are at stake.

17 states have bell-to-bell policies.
Don't let PA fall behind!

PA UNPLUGGED 

www.paunplugged.org
pennsylvaniaunplugged@gmail.com

PA UNPLUGGED MISSION

PA Unplugged is a statewide coalition working toward a cultural shift in the approach to electronic devices & social media during childhood and adolescence. We believe technology can be a powerful tool when used intentionally and with purpose.

We partner with national experts and nonprofit organizations, including Distraction-Free Schools Policy Project and Smartphone Free Childhood US. Our state coalition is made up of local grassroots efforts, Wait Until 8th groups, M.A.M.A. chapters, and other initiatives across Pennsylvania. We are made up of 18+ groups in over eight counties, representing over 3,000 parents.

A cultural shift does not happen in a silo. We recognize that parents & caregivers, educators, and community members must work together to effect change. That is why PA Unplugged's advocacy efforts span across our homes, schools, and communities.

By joining together we amplify our voices, benefit from sharing resources, and synergize strategies so that we can effect positive changes for all children across the Commonwealth. We are focused on providing support for parents, inspiring community-wide events, as well as advocating for policy changes in schools and in state-wide legislation.



www.pennsylvaniaunplugged.org
pennsylvaniaunplugged@gmail.com
[@pa_unplugged](https://twitter.com/pa_unplugged)

DEFINITIONS OF COMMON TERMS

Bell-to-Bell: A phrase referring to the time period spanning from the first bell of the school day to the last bell of the school day, making up the entire 6-7 hour school day. This is the language used by PA Unplugged and in best-practice policies.

Away For The Day: A phrase used by many schools that have had early adoption of bell-to-bell phone policies. Schools that do this tend to follow a first bell to last bell policy.

Instructional Time Only: A term indicating the teacher-led, instructional periods of a school day. Often used to distinguish other periods of the academic day such as between classes, lunch period and study hall.

Personal Electronic Device (PED): Any personally owned, non-school issued electronic device including but not limited to phones, iPads, smart watches, earbuds, electronic glasses, gaming devices, etc.

"Off and away": A phrase used to describe that PED must be turned off and stored away. Many schools use this term when using storage solutions like collection procedures or lockable pouches.

1:1 Device: This refers to a school-issued device such as an iPad or Chromebook that a student is given each year to use for school both in-class and outside of class.

PA UNPLUGGED SUPPORTS SB 1014

- SB 1014 proposes the best practice, bell-to-bell approach limiting use of personal electronic devices during the entire academic day.
- Includes limited, but necessary exceptions (IEPs, 504, medical requirements).
- Gives flexibility and local control to school districts to determine right method for containment of PEDs and right enforcement policies that align with their district needs.
- Best studied and available approach to limit distractions for students during the academic day, while providing ample opportunities for social, emotional and academic development.

WHAT IS A "BELL-TO-BELL" POLICY?*

- All personal electronic devices are inaccessible throughout the school day- from first bell to last bell.
- The school district decides on the optimal phone storage for their situation. There are a variety of zero to low-cost solutions. ([Phone Storage Examples](#)).
- Consequences are clearly stated, and a policy evaluation process is in place.
- Teachers, staff and (most importantly) administration support each other for 100% policy enforcement.

THIS IS A NATIONAL MOVEMENT

PA Unplugged works with a growing coalition of grassroots organizations that support "bell-to-bell" phone-free school policies.

- [Distraction Free Schools Policy Project - FAQs](#)
- [Smartphone Free Childhood US](#)
- [The Becca Schmill Foundation](#)
- [Fairplay.org](#)
- [The Anxious Generation](#)
- [Phone Free Schools Movement, Administrator Toolkit](#)
- [Mothers Against Media Addiction \(M.A.M.A.\)](#)

THE PSEA SUPPORTS BELL-TO-BELL



PSEA president to testify in support of legislation prohibiting student use of cellphones and mobile devices in Pa. public schools

Evolving position

In his testimony, Chapin notes that PSEA's position on legislation banning cellphones and mobile devices in schools has evolved over the past 18 months.

Educators have long wanted cellphones out of classrooms but have had some concerns about whether it was the state's role to take such legislative action, Chapin says. New research, growing frustration among educators, and the decision of some school districts to adopt cellphone-free policies prompted PSEA to reassess its position and to support Senate Bill 1014.

"With the confluence of a myriad of factors, and as a growing number of states and school districts took more strident action on their own, our members started to believe that Pennsylvania could and should put the genie back in the bottle, as they say," Chapin says.

PA SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS SUPPORT BELL-TO-BELL



Students Safer Without Cell Phones During School Emergencies

National School Safety Organization Issues Statement on Phone Bans

Published Monday, October 27, 2025 8:00 am



Oct. 27, 2025 – Hoover, Ala. – The nonprofit National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) issued a statement today that supports school policies and legislation that bar cell phone access for K-12 students during instructional time. The following statement may be attributed to NASRO executive director Mo Canady:

Access to phones during the school day reduces student safety in normal and especially emergency situations. During normal days, phone access promotes social media drama and cyberbullying and makes it easier for students to plan physical altercations, all of which

hinder student safety.

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Beth Sanborn, President John Astor, 1st Vice President Aaron Skirbin, 2nd Vice President

October 17, 2025

Written Testimony of Dr. Beth J. Sanborn
President, Pennsylvania Association of School Resource Officers (PASRO)
In Support of Bell-to-Bell Cell Phone Ban Policies in Pennsylvania Schools

Chairperson and Members of the Senate Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the Pennsylvania Association of School Resource Officers (PASRO). As a career law enforcement professional, educator, and now President of PASRO, I have dedicated nearly three decades to the safety and wellbeing of Pennsylvania's students.

From a school safety perspective, PASRO strongly supports legislation establishing bell-to-bell cell phone ban policies in all K-12 schools across the Commonwealth. These policies ensure that personal electronic devices remain inaccessible to students during the entire school day, not just during classroom instruction.

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA & ANGELA DUCKWORTH

"PHONES IN FOCUS" SURVEY INITIAL REPORT

Phones in Focus



Over 20,000 Educators Share Insights on School Cell Phone Policies as Part of Landmark Research Initiative

The early findings were released today by [Phones in Focus](#), a nonpartisan research initiative supported by the National Governors Association (NGA). The project, led by psychologist Angela Duckworth and a team of leading economists, aims to provide evidence-based recommendations for school phone policies that optimally support academic learning, healthy social relationships, and emotional well-being.

"So far two patterns stand out: The stricter the policy, the happier the teacher and the less likely students are to be using their phones when they aren't supposed to. For example, 'bell-to-bell' (also called 'away for the day') policies are linked to more focused classrooms," Duckworth said. "We're also finding that focus on academics is higher in schools that do not permit students to keep their phones nearby, including in their backpacks or back pockets. Our team looks forward to diving deeper and, in longitudinal analyses, establishing how changes in policies over time predict changes in outcomes like attendance and academic performance."

TEACHERS & ADMIN HAVE POSITIVE FEEDBACK ABOUT

“

Teachers say the ban is having a positive effect on their ability to teach effectively. Counselors are dealing with less "drama," and students are interacting more between classes and at lunch, according to a recent survey conducted by the school administration. A very overwhelming majority of our teachers feel that has had a great impact.

ERIE-MCDOWELL MIHS PRINCIPAL

”

“

At first, I was so mad about the policy. Over the first few weeks of school, I could see the change: less distraction, way less pressure coming from the drama in my phone, and more conversations with my friends.

SHADYSIDE ACADEMY STUDENT

”

“

Phone free during the school day is the way to go. Can't give an inch either. Has to be from start to finish. No lunch use, no study hall use, no use during the day. It has changed the environment for the better.

MONTOURSVILLE SUPERINTENDENT

”

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"INSTRUCTIONAL TIME ONLY" POLICIES FAIL PA STUDENTS

These policies often fail to show results academically, socially and emotionally:

- **ACADEMICALLY:** Even when phones are "away" in a bag or a caddy, **research shows their presence distracts students and reduces cognitive capacity.** True focus is only possible when devices are fully removed from the learning environment.
- **SOCIALLY:** Students need consistent opportunities to **build critical social skills during the entire school day**, including lunch, hallway passing, and free periods. Phones disrupt these opportunities for development.
- **EMOTIONALLY:** Constant access to smartphones means **no break from cyberbullying, social pressure, or mental fatigue.** Students also miss chances to build independence and problem-solving skills when they text parents for immediate support.
- **FOR TEACHERS:** Phone policing is **exhausting** and wastes valuable instructional time. Teachers shouldn't have to spend their days enforcing device rules instead of focusing on teaching.
- **FOR STUDENTS:** **1:1 school-issued devices are available** for educational needs; phones are not necessary.

*Students store phones in lockers, bags, or classroom caddies at the start of class and retrieve them after instruction ends.

ISN'T IT TOO EXPENSIVE TO STORE THE DEVICES?

No. There are zero to low-cost solutions available.

For example, Sto-Rox School District & Clairton City School District have been successfully practicing a bell-to-bell policy since 2022. Their students place devices in a bin with manilla envelopes every morning, which is then locked away for the entire school day. Students collect phones at the end of the day.

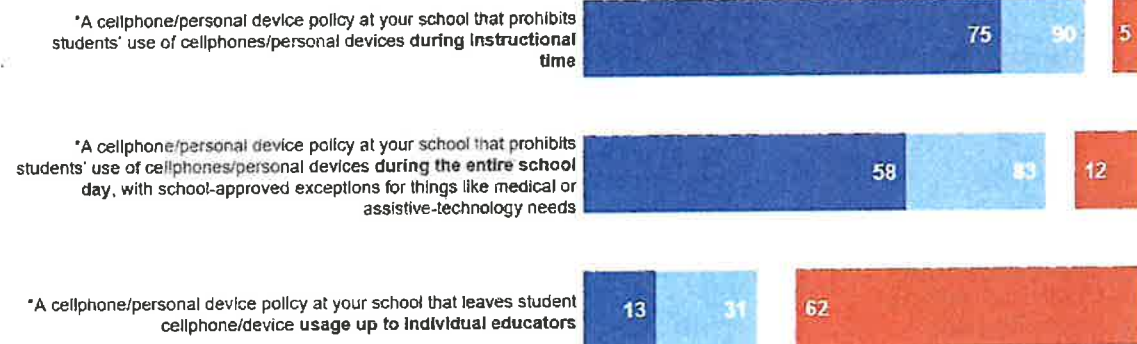
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NEA REPORT: IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND PERSONAL DEVICES ON MENTAL HEALTH AUGUST, 2024

Phone Policy Proposals

● Strongly Support ● Total Support ● Total Oppose

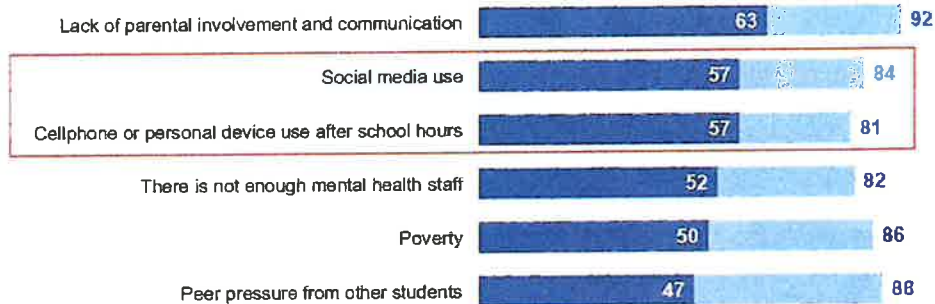
*Split



Mental Health Factors

Please rate how much each of the following factors contribute to mental health issues among students at your school.

● Contributes A Lot ● Total Contributes

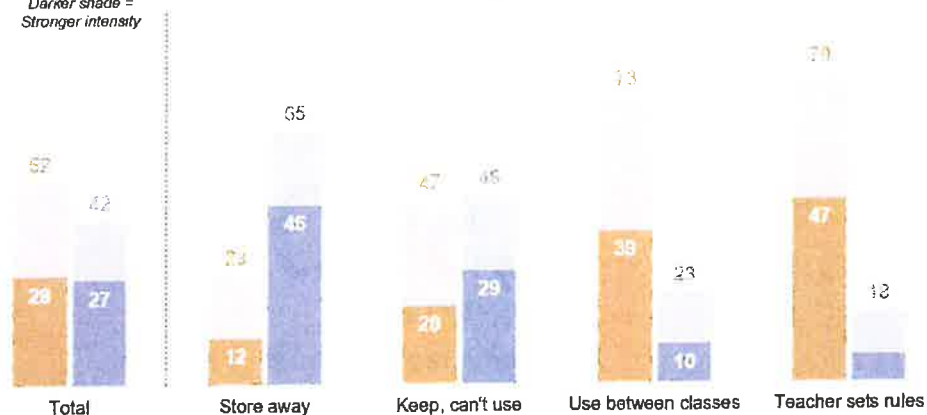


Disruptive

Darker shade = Stronger intensity

How disruptive is student use of cellphones/personal devices during instructional time for you?

● Disruptive ● Not Disruptive



Source: <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/impact-social-media-and-personal-devices-mental-health>

Research Infographic

97%

**OF STUDENTS
USE PHONES
DURING SCHOOL**

An average of 43 minutes per day, spent primarily on social media, YouTube, and gaming



Common Sense Media

**SOCIAL MEDIA IS
NEARLY UNIVERSAL**

40%

of 8 – 12 year olds are on social media

95%

of teenagers are on social media

Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health

Teens spend nearly **5 HOURS** a day on social media apps.

American Psychological Association



3+ Hours



PER DAY ON SOCIAL MEDIA doubles the risk of poor mental health including experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety

Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health

NEA POLL

**83% of
teachers**

**support an all day
phone-free policy**

National Education Association



72%

**OF HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS
REPORT CELLPHONES ARE
A MAJOR DISTRACTION
IN THE CLASSROOM**

The Mere Presence of a Cell Phone May be Distracting

50%+

of kids get
**237 NOTIFICATIONS
PER DAY**

Some receive as many as

4,500

EVERY DAY!

23% occur during school

Common Sense Media

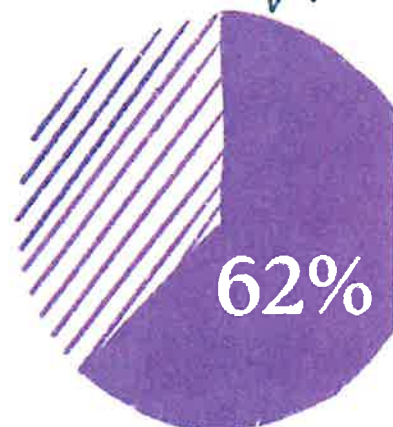


**PHONES PREVENT FACE
TO FACE COMMUNICATION**

Research suggests that face to face communications are linked to better mental health.

Psychology today

Students not using their phones during class wrote down **62%** more information.



They also scored a full letter grade and a half higher on a multiple choice test

The Impact of Mobile Phone Usage on Student Learning

**RATES OF SCHOOL
loneliness have**

X2

SINCE 2012

Worldwide Increases in Adolescent Loneliness



Since 2010

134%  Increase in anxiety

106%  Increase in depression

The Anxious Generation



OF TEENS WITH THE HIGHEST SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE rate their overall mental health as poor or very poor

American Psychological Association

 35% OF TEENS ADMIT TO USING THEIR CELLPHONE TO cheat

Common Sense Media

 22% OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS HAVE SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED Suicide IN THE PAST YEAR

 10% HAVE ATTEMPTED Suicide IN THE PAST YEAR

CDC, 2023

Adolescents who experienced cyberbullying were more than

Four Times

as likely to report thoughts of

Suicide & Attempts

as those who didn't

National Institutes of Health

 Each additional hour of total screen time increases the odds of suicidal behaviors

Science Direct

STEEP DROP IN BULLYING

46% & 43% OF GIRLS OF BOYS

experienced a reduction of bullying after smartphone bans were enacted.

Smartphone Bans, Student Outcomes and Mental Health

Pornography Exposure

1/3 of all teens

reported that they have been exposed to pornography during the school day



Common Sense Media

YOUTH REPORTING

LONELINESS

are also more likely to **DROP OUT OF SCHOOL AT THE AGE OF 16**

Loneliness During the School Years

 95%

OF TEACHERS SAY ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION ARE A PROBLEM IN PUBLIC K-12 SCHOOLS

National Education Association

 87%

of teachers said bullying is a problem in Public K-12 schools

34%

of middle school teachers call bullying a major problem

National Education Association

 **"Brain Drain"**

The mere presence of one's own smartphone reduces available cognitive capacity

Brain Drain

Frequently Asked Questions

1

Why is our school excited about adopting a phone-free policy?

We're glad to be joining the growing wave of schools in the U.S. and Canada going phone-free. The school day is when students need to be able to focus, learn, interact with each other, build in-person community, and engage with teachers. Study data shows that having a cell phone, even turned off in their backpack, decreases student test scores. A phone and social media free school gives students back many needed opportunities for development.

2

What is included in a cell phone and personal electronic device definition?

- Cell phones (both phones that connect to the internet and non-internet connected phones that send and receive text messages, and make phone calls)
- Personal electronic devices such as electronic tablets and video games
- Airpods, earbuds and Bluetooth connected headphones
- Smartwatches and fitness trackers that connect to the internet

3

What if my child needs their phone in case of a crisis or lockdown at the school?

School security experts say phones can make children less safe in crisis situations for the following reasons:

- **Students must focus on adult instructions.** Phones distract from life-saving guidance given by teachers or first responders.
- **Phones compromise hiding and lockdown efforts.** Light and sound from phones can reveal student locations to an assailant.
- **Emergency communication channels must stay clear.** Mass calls or texts can overwhelm networks, delaying first responder coordination.
- **Parents rushing to school can delay emergency access.** Traffic caused by concerned parents may block or slow emergency vehicle response.
- **Crowds create confusion.** More people near the building increase risks and may complicate identification of threats.
- **Schools are equipped to manage emergency communications.** Trained personnel handle information flow and reduce misinformation.

For more information: [National Association of School Resource Officers](#)



4

How do I contact my student during the school day?

(i.e. schedule change, after-school activity)

Parents and/or guardians who need to contact their student during the school day and or change the pick-up time of your child, may do so by calling the main office. Contacting your child via their cell phone during the school day distracts them from their studies and the needed in-person interaction with their teachers and peers. By having 24/7 access, we prevent growth opportunities that our children need educationally, socially, and developmentally. If students text their parents every time they have a question, they miss the opportunity to think for themselves and develop problem solving skills.

5

What if my child needs to contact me during the school day?

If the student needs to contact their parent or guardian during the school day, a phone will be available in the main office.

6

Why can't teachers be in charge of the class and collect the phones?

Children need consistency and one policy for the entire school benefits all students. Teachers benefit by regaining classroom instructional time instead of having to police phones, as monitoring phones takes time and energy away from teaching and supporting students. If there is a consistently enforced building-wide policy in place then students are less likely to push back on the policy.

7

Why is it important to allow our children to be independent during the school day?

Students need to be given independence from their parents or guardians during the school day to develop foundational skills. Constant contact can fuel a cycle of anxiety for both students and parents. Research shows encouraging independence fosters a child's self-confidence, resilience, problem-solving ability, and mental health.

8

What if my child has a medical condition that must be monitored by their cell phone?

A school shall require documentation from a licensed medical professional to support an exemption such as diabetes or seizure monitoring. This exception is specific to the need only and still prohibits cell phone use for any other purposes.

9

What if my child has an IEP/504 plan?

It is extremely rare for a cell phone to be required for an IEP/504 plan. But if the situation did arise, documentation is required and the exception is specific to the need only and still prohibits cell phone use for any other purposes.

10

Will it be harder for students to make connections and friends if they are offline all day?

Social media tends to foster asynchronous interactions leading to greater levels of anxiety, loneliness, and depression. In-person socializing forms far stronger connections and supports the development of healthier social and emotional skills.

11

Don't some students benefit from having social media?

Even for students who use social media for connection and activism, it is still a distraction during school hours. As a school community, we work hard to foster a culture of inclusion. Our goal is to limit use during the school day to minimize disruption and mitigate the potential harms of social media dependency and exposure to harmful content.

12

Isn't it better to teach kids to use phones responsibly rather than take them away?

Brain science research and expert psychiatrists say the adolescent brain is not able to manage the addictive pull of cell phones and social media. The social media platforms and games that young people spend much time on were deliberately designed to be addictive. Additionally, part of teaching responsible use is creating phone-free zones that help students understand that phones are a tool to be used at specific times in specific ways, rather than being something that is on and used 24/7.

November 12, 2025

Dear Ms. Fricke and Ms. Retter,

I am a mother, grandmother, and a Philadelphia doctor, specializing in Adolescent Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. Over my 40 years in practice, I have watched the emotional despair of my patients skyrocket to unprecedented proportions. While my Millennial patients worried about college admissions, peer pressure, and fitting in, my Gen Z patients are worried about cyberbullying, having an awkward photo spread over social media in seconds, and exposure to information that is often developmentally inappropriate and potentially harmful. I now see my Alpha Gen patients literally transfixed by their devices, relying on the internet and social media for validation and affirmation. I am truly shocked every day to hear that kids can spend over 12-20 hours a day on their devices.

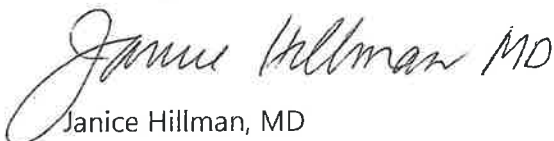
The immediate short-term complications of digital overuse are vast: disrupted sleep, decreased attention span, slower academic progress and increased mental health disorders of anxiety, depression, and lower self-esteem. The long-term complications are likely not fully realized yet but include impaired social and emotional intelligence, social isolation, technology addiction and consequences of physical inactivity and sleep disruption.

We are all stakeholders in this technology addiction and we will each create our own journey for less reliance on devices. But we are the trusted adults in the room and we must help our children and young people now.

As our state legislators, we are asking for your help to support these efforts; By limiting access to devices during school hours, students will learn to be more self-reliant, to engage in real-world conversations and activities and to be ready and engaged to learn.

Please support the "Bell to Bell" phone free policy.

Sincerely,



Janice Hillman, MD

Founder, Penn Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine



Submitted to:

Pennsylvania House of Representatives Health Committee
Hearing on Phone-Free Schools
c/o Erika Fricke, Senior Executive Director, Pennsylvania House Health Committee

Submitted by:

Michael McLeod, MA, CCC-SLP
ADHD & Executive Function Specialist
Founder, GrowNOW ADHD

Dear Chairman Frankel and Members of the House Health Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on this important issue. My name is Michael McLeod, an ADHD & Executive Function Specialist and founder of GrowNOW ADHD, a clinical practice and training organization based in Pennsylvania, which has multiple locations across the country. We are focused on helping children and adolescents develop the executive function and self-regulation skills that form the foundation for lifelong success. GrowNOW began our Internal Skills Model Training for students and Fully Personalized Parent Training in 2016. Since then, we have been privileged to work with over 1,500 families. I have also had the privilege of providing Professional Development to over 300 school districts across the country.

I have spent my career working directly with children, families, and schools to understand how the brain develops the capacity for focus, self-motivation, self-regulation, and problem-solving, self-awareness. These abilities, known collectively as executive functions, are the very skills that allow students to thrive in classrooms, relationships, and life. Executive functions skills are the greatest predictor of success for human beings.

And I am writing to state, unequivocally: students having access to their phones during the school day profoundly undermines the development of executive functions, especially for children with ADHD and other neurodiverse profiles.

The ADHD Brain and the Importance of the "Pause"

The prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for planning, organization, impulse control, and motivation, develops gradually throughout childhood and does not fully mature until around age 25. We know from decades of research that children with ADHD experience a developmental delay of roughly 30% in these self-regulatory capacities. That means a 12-year-old with ADHD often has the executive functioning of an 8-year-old.

These students struggle to pause before reacting, to sustain motivation without immediate reward, and to organize their thoughts and behaviors toward a future goal. In my work, helping



children strengthen this “pause” is the heart of executive function intervention. It is in this space, between impulse and action, that growth occurs.

Smartphones obliterate that space. They are designed to bypass the pause, to deliver instant gratification, constant novelty, and an unending stream of emotional stimulation. For the ADHD brain, which is already wired to seek high dopamine rewards and quick hits of engagement, this is a perfect storm.

The result is neural interference with the very systems children need to build and strengthen.

Phones in Schools: A Daily Barrier to Learning and Growth

When phones are present during the school day, students, especially those with ADHD, are forced into a constant battle with their own attention systems. Even the mere presence of a phone, studies show, reduces working memory and cognitive capacity. For neurodiverse learners, that mental tug-of-war can be debilitating.

This is not a discipline problem. It’s a brain development problem.

These devices disrupt the neurological conditions necessary for sustained thought, internal motivation, and emotional stability. **When these devices are allowed to coexist with instruction, we are effectively asking our children to learn self-control while holding the very object that hijacks it.**

For Neurodiverse Students, This Is a Matter of Equity

For children with ADHD, autism, or anxiety disorders, smartphones are not simply distractions, they are developmental obstacles. These students already experience difficulty with delayed gratification and emotional regulation. Smartphones deliver the opposite of what their brains need: immediate, high-intensity stimulation and social volatility.

A truly equitable educational environment gives these students the structure and calm necessary to build self-regulation. **A phone-free school experience is not punitive. It is therapeutic.** It removes the constant neurological interference and restores the conditions for focus, play, and human connection – the core ingredients of executive function growth.

Phones Are Replacing the Experiences That Build the Brain

Executive functions are built through experience. Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child has shown that these skills develop through relationships, varied experiences, and manageable



challenges. Yet when students can fill every quiet moment with a screen, those experiences disappear.

Screens are experience killers. Without boredom, curiosity cannot take root. Without unstructured social interaction, empathy and problem-solving cannot develop. Without moments of stillness, the brain cannot consolidate learning. A phone-free school day restores the conditions that allow these essential developmental processes to occur.

I urge the Committee to support legislation establishing phone-free schools across Pennsylvania, thus ensuring all children have access to learning environments that protect developing brains, strengthen executive functioning, and support the mental health of all students, especially those who need it most.

By removing phones from the school day, we are not taking something away from children. We are giving them back their focus, creativity, relationships, and peace of mind.

Thank you for your time and commitment to the health and future of Pennsylvania's children.

Respectfully submitted,
Michael McLeod, MA, CCC-SLP
ADHD & Executive Function Specialist
Founder, GrowNOW ADHD

To the Chairpersons and Members of the House Education and Health Committees:

Without a shadow of a doubt, a strong bell-to-bell, phone-free policy, is a necessary strategy to protect our kids mental and physical health. I have a story to prove it along with much evidence from other students and studies.

My daughter's freshman year of high school was a tough one partly because of the allowance of cell phones in the school, and partly due to the school's lack of backbone and conviction in administering consequences.

My daughter was introduced to a sophomore boy at the beginning of the school year, they exchanged Snapchat numbers and began to talk. She quickly realized that he was interested in things she was not. He began talking about not only the sexual acts that he wanted to do but then progressed to promising, not just threats, but promising to hurt her along with those sexual acts. The more she expressed her disinterest in those things the harder he pushed. This interaction went on for about three weeks in and outside of school until her final straw when she saw him in school and said "do not talk to me anymore". He did not take that well and proceeded to tell her to "go kill herself". At that point, my daughter learned that there were two other girls, he had been pursuing in the same exact way for the last few weeks. He told one of the other girls the night previous that he "was going to bring a gun to school and kill her" after she told him to leave her alone. The three of them went to the office and reported his behaviors that included these threats, nude photos, and a video telling the girls he was going to beat the F*** out of them.

That day after school when I heard what had been happening, I immediately emailed the school administrators to notify them what was happening. I also told them that I would not be sending Lexi to school until I knew that the threat was taken care of and addressed.

Long story short, Lexi never went back to school and I soon enrolled her in cyber school, which she has been happily attending and is now in her senior year.

The school brought this young man straight to the office first thing the next day to question him of his behavior. He denied everything. The school let him continue with his phone and without consequences - even after three girls gave their testimony. How many girls would it take to bring their testimony, in order for there to be consequences?!", I asked.

In addition to filing a police report, I pursued other students' experiences specifically with this boy, but also in general concerning the use of cell phones during the school day. They expressed that they regularly receive nude photos of other classmates and porn throughout the day. That it's normal for them to be on social media and Snapchat throughout the day and that people are regularly

being filmed, bullied, and cyber bullied with the phones. They expressed that they have the fear of missing out on communications, happenings and/or knowing if something is being passed around about them; be it a photo, a video or a rumor.

My husband and I later had the opportunity to meet with these boys parents to which we were met with protective denial of his behaviors. When we shared with him the video of him telling her that he was going to beat the F out of her they said, "well he was just joking".

The school did nothing.

And this boy (and others) continued in this behavior, harming, not only others but himself.

When I've spoken or interviewed kids about their experience in school, they share how distracting having phones is a constant anxiety.

Of the schools that have a phone-free policy, every student has expressed that they feel much less stress, knowing that nobody is on their phone during the day therefore they don't have to fear what might come through and don't have to fear if they're missing out on something.

The benefits of not having phones in school far out way the risks and dangers of having them. The evidence, over and over, is clear and consistent.

Without a doubt, I believe along with the majority, that there needs to be a strong bell to bell, phone free policy in every school. Just as two parents must be aligned in their parenting tolerances in order for it to be effective, school administration and teachers need to be aligned with this policy. It is weak and ineffective otherwise. Due to the detrimental effects and activities that are happening throughout the school day, even allowing phones in the hallway and during lunch, is like allowing our kids to consume drugs only at certain times of the day. Yes, it is that serious. The ever-increasing depression and suicide rate is here to prove it.

This issue cannot be something to sit on any longer. I'm certain my daughter could have been apart of those statistics had I not pulled her out of school.

I asked the school and I ask you: How bad will things need to get before we do something drastic to protect our kids? When you see the numbers, they cannot be denied. The evidence is clear.

Thank you for your time and consideration in this very pervasive issue.

Sincerely,
Stephanie Haff

To the Chairpersons and Members of the House Education and Health Committees:

I am here to share my personal story about an ongoing cyberbullying event that changed the course of my life. Hopefully this story will shed light on what is happening at schools through text and social media platforms throughout the entire school day. The state needs to pass a bell-to-bell phone-free ban to protect students from experiencing what I did.

It was my ninth grade year of school. I had simply been introduced by a close friend at the time, to a sophomore who had appeared way older than he actually was. He was tall, very muscular and considered good looking. To me, it had seemed innocent in the moment. I was often introduced to people a lot of the time, considering that I like good humans and meeting new people. The bell was going to ring soon, so I had walked away to get to my class and them too as well.

A new day has come, and I noticed how a little friendship had started to spark but I did consider myself mutual with everybody within the school, so it didn't seem strange to me. He came across as funny, very extroverted, and popular. As days, weeks went on I started to notice my day to day interactions with him; he was often interested in taking me to my next period, then sometimes making him late to his class. I had taken it as him just being friendly, maybe a slight interest but nothing more. But then I would notice the way he would aggressively touch me "as a joke," or say intimidating, sinister comments "as a joke." I had been raised to always speak up for myself and do what's right. With him, that didn't matter.

I started to notice a negative behavioral pattern, in which I often would confront him to not say that or to not touch me in that way; his response would be, "I like your attitude." Things had escalated quickly from the moment I met him. Somebody had given him my number and I had received multiple threatening texts in school and out of school. I had received, in particular, a threatening self-taped video quoting, "if you don't do what I tell you to do, I will bring a gun to the school and shoot you." Apparently when that was brought up to him, that was a joke as well.

As things started to get worse, I would notice that he was catching on to my fear as much as I tried to not show it. Multiple students, guys and girls had confronted me that they had seen him trailing me and that he is, "a bad person." I took note, and started to notice that he would follow me. Doing as I've been raised to do, I confronted him once again. He denied that he had ever been following me.

I had got the courage to talk to my parents about what had been going on the past several weeks and that something is absolutely wrong with this and I don't feel safe in the school. It was time we brought this to the school. Doing so, it was horrific and exhausting. None of the literal evidence or fear that we had brought to the school was enough. My words should've been enough.

This boy was sent to the office and talked to, and not being surprised, he had denied everything and even the video he had recorded of himself, saying that it was "a joke" and that he would "never hurt anyone." Knowing my experiences with his aggressive touching, I knew that was false.

Things just continued to only get worse and escalate. The threatening text messages I would receive from him while in school and even pictures that had been taken of me as everyone started to catch on to my dread and dragging of my feet while in school because of this situation. I was in the counseling office at least three times a day crying my eyes out and wanting this to end.

Blocking his number was never an option. I continued to receive threatening texts from ominous numbers throughout my day. Proceeding to go to school, he had humiliated me in front of several people and yelled at me to "just go kill yourself."

When I had got to the point where the police got involved and I had testified, it had felt like, even my testimony was not enough, that no matter how much evidence I shared, it was never going to satisfy the school and police. It felt like they were waiting for something to actually happen to me for my words to be believable.

He was let go freely and I had never received justice. The school and police let him move on to his next victim. In which he did. For this reason, my mom pulled me out of the school. I share this because as dreadful as it was, I am much more confident, discerning, purpose driven, and stronger.

I share this because the government needs to take action, to protect all of us as one of those things that had a huge role in my testimony, was the phones. The many threatening texts, pictures and videos I had received in school, pulling me away from learning and becoming a huge distraction. I took pride in having good grades and learning something new every day; so had seen my grades drop dramatically and character shift to darkness from something that can simply be put away during the day, is telling.

Again, I urge you to enforce a bell-to-bell phone-free policy. A policy that is proven to improve the well being, safety and education of students.

Thank you for the time you have taken in reading my testimony.

Alexis West

To the Chairpersons and Members of the House Education and Health Committees:

My name is James Walls and I have been a guidance counselor at Quaker Valley High School for the last 28 years. I write to you today to advocate for a school-wide ban on the use of cell phones during the instructional day, and to ask for your support in encouraging policy changes at the state and district level. Over the years I have observed a dramatic evolution at how mobile devices are interacting with the learning environment, and I believe the data and practical experience strongly support a prohibition of personal cell phones in school settings.

When my fellow educators and I entered the profession in the late 90's, students did not carry smartphones in the way they do now. At that time, few students had any mobile device at all; those who did often used flip-phones for brief calls and it was uncommon for students to use them during school hours. Fast-forward to today, and nearly every high school student owns a smartphone, carries it on their person during school hours, and has instantaneous access to social media, texting, video, gaming apps and more.

This transformation means that the school environment has changed drastically: what was once a rare distraction is now ubiquitous. The fact that every student has access to a mobile device means the "temptation" is constant, and the management of those devices by the school becomes a significant burden.

In my role I see how quickly students become *addicted* (or at least heavily habituated) to their cell phones. What once might have been passing notes or side-conversation has now evolved into non-stop school distractions: social media feeds, notifications pinging, video clips, texting threads, group chats. The cell phone is now a perpetual companion.

There is substantial empirical evidence supporting the idea that when students are freed from the constant distraction of personal mobile devices, their learning is enhanced, focus improves, and retention goes up. For example:

- A study by Rutgers University found that when students were allowed to use phones, tablets or other devices for non-academic purposes during lectures, their final exam performance dropped by at least 5 percent (about half a grade) compared to when devices were banned. The study also found that even students not actively using devices in class but seated among students who were using them performed worse. [Rutgers University](#)
- One survey found that about 80 % of students admitted to using their phones in class at least once per week; approximately 34 % reported using them for non-educational activities during class time (texting, social media, gaming). [California Learning Resource Network](#)
- According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 72 % of U.S. high-school teachers say cell-phone distraction is a major problem in their classroom. [Pew Research Center](#)
- Research indicates that multitasking with phones or simply *having* a phone present reduces cognitive attention and memory retention, thereby degrading learning outcomes. [University of Calgary Journal Hosting+2Turcomat+2](#)
- Data from the National Center for Education Statistics show that more than half of public-school leaders feel student cell-phone usage has negatively impacted academic

performance (53 %) and that 73 % believe it has harmed attention spans. [National Center for Education Statistics](#)

Given this research, it stands to reason that a school environment where cell phones are banned is one in which student learning is maximized.

I fully understand and respect the argument many parents make: they want their child to carry a cell phone in case of an emergency. In an era where school safety—such as the threat of an active shooter or other crisis—is sadly part of the conversation, the idea that a student can call or text their parent or emergency services is compelling.

However, the presence of cell phones during an emergency can itself create serious complications in a school setting:

1. **Disruption of coordinated emergency protocols.** During a lockdown or evacuation, having students simultaneously making calls, texting parents, posting on social media, or streaming video can hamper the ability of school officials or first responders to communicate clear instructions and execute an orderly response.
2. **False alarms / conflicting information.** A student may record video or post live updates on social media before following official safety instructions, potentially spreading misinformation or generating chaos.
3. **Inequity and distraction during critical minutes.** Instead of focusing on instructions from staff, students fiddling with their phones may miss important safety cues.
4. **Interference with communication channels.** If every student is transmitting simultaneously (calls, texts, data), there may be network congestion or disruptions in the school's internal systems for paging or alerting.

For these reasons, many schools that have banned personal cell-phone access rely on teacher/administrator communication systems, landlines, walkie-talkies, or designated school-issued devices for emergency coordination. A clear, consistent policy that bans personal phones during the school day does *not* mean no communication: it means controlling and standardizing how communication in emergencies is managed—rather than leaving it unstructured. Before every student had a cell phone, if parents/guardians needed to contact their child, they called the main office. If a student had to talk to their parent or guardian, they used the phone in the office or the nurse's office. Those communication means are still in place.

Another dimension of the problem is the constant access to social media apps and internet content during the school day. It is one thing for a student to glance at the phone; it is another for them to be caught up in group chat drama, cyberbullying, streaming, gaming, or live-posting. The ease of distraction escalates:

- Social media feeds can trigger anxiety, peer-comparison, impulsive checking, and emotional reactions—all of which distract a student from the class task at hand.
- The use of phones to document class activities, share unauthorized photos or videos, or initiate viral posts can undermine classroom management and teacher authority.

- When one student is distracted, the ripple effect can impact nearby students and the teacher, reducing the effectiveness of instruction for the whole class (as the Rutgers study indicated).
- The “always-on” nature of smartphones means that many students feel compelled to check notifications, respond instantly, and thus interrupt attention spans repeatedly during the instructional period.

In short: even if the phone is not being used explicitly for non-class work, its mere presence and potential for use imposes a cognitive load that reduces learning efficiency.

One of the most frustrating realities in my role is the lack of consistent policy and enforcement when cell-phones are technically “allowed but discouraged” rather than explicitly banned. In many schools:

- There may be a policy that says “phones should remain off or in backpacks,” but without clear, enforceable consequences, it becomes a suggestion rather than a standard.
- Teachers are often put in the position of policing phones on top of teaching, which interrupts instructional time, creates conflict, and sows inconsistency across classrooms.
- When enforcement varies by teacher, by period, by subject, or by grade level, the message to students becomes: “as long as you don’t get caught,” which erodes the authority of the policy.
- Without a binding legal regulation (state or district) behind the school policy, parents and students may push back, citing rights to access or “emergency use.” This leaves staff vulnerable and the policy weak.
- I’ve seen first hand the “tug of war” that happens when a student refuses to put their phone away and a teacher demands possession of the phone. The student refuses to follow the soft policy and it holds the rest of the class hostage until an administrator can show up in person and remove the student from class. Nebulous policies are the same as having no policies.

In my view, moving toward a legislative or regulatory solution—such as a statewide ban on smartphone use during school hours—would give clarity, fairness, consistency and backing for schools. Without such a backing, each school, each teacher, and each student negotiates individually, which undermines accountability and effectiveness.

In my years of service as a guidance counselor, I have seen countless students struggle with focus, impulse control, social media stress, and attention fragmentation. My colleagues and I are united in seeing that the constant presence of a personal smartphone in every student’s pocket—or on every student’s lap—poses a serious barrier to engagement, classroom culture, and academic success. Banning cell-phone use during school hours is not merely a disciplinary step—it is an educational imperative.

I believe that your organization has the influence and the capacity to help shape public policy in this domain. With your support, we can help restore schools to a learning-first environment, where technology serves instruction rather than undermines it.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter. I would be glad to meet or discuss further how we can craft legislation or policy language, and how the real-world experience of schools can inform best practices. I look forward to working with you to ensure that our students have the focused, interruption-free environment they deserve.

Sincerely,

James Walls
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Quaker Valley High School
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COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**House Education Committee and House Health Committee
Joint Informational Hearing on Cell Phones in Schools
Dr. Dana Milakovic, PsyD, NCSP, Assistant Director
Office of School Climate and Well-being, PA Department of Education
November 17, 2025**

Introduction

Good morning, Chair Schweyer, Chair Cutler, Chair Frankel, Chair Rapp, and members of the House Education and Health Committees. My name is Dr. Dana Milakovic, and I am the Assistant Director of the Office of School Climate and Well-being at the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). I have served at the department for six and a half years. With more than 20 years of experience in the mental health field, including roles as a school psychologist, mental health evaluator, crisis responder, pediatric neuropsychology specialist, and school administrator, I bring a broad perspective to supporting student and school community well-being.

On behalf of the department, thank you for the invitation to provide testimony about student wellness and cell phones in schools. PDE is committed to advancing effective, evidence-based practices that foster safe, supportive, and healthy school environments for all students. We appreciate the opportunity to share insights and recommendations with you as you consider policies to support the well-being of Pennsylvania's youth.

Overview of the Office of School Climate and Well-being

The Office of School Climate and Well-being (OSCWB), within the Pennsylvania Department of Education, is committed to ensuring that every student in the Commonwealth has access to a safe, supportive, and healthy learning environment. Guided by our mission to promote the physical, emotional, and social well-being of all students, OSCWB staff work to empower school communities to create environments where every child feels valued, respected, and ready to learn.

OSCWB's vision is that every Pennsylvania school will foster a climate in which students, staff, and families experience a true sense of belonging, safety, and connection. The office recognizes that emotional and psychological wellness are at the core of academic achievement, and we strive to provide schools with the leadership, resources, and guidance necessary to address the full spectrum of student needs.

Through collaborative partnerships, professional development opportunities, and evidence-based resources, OSCWB supports schools in implementing trauma-informed practices, positive behavior supports, and comprehensive mental health initiatives. By prioritizing holistic well-being, we help school communities create environments where students can grow academically, develop resilience, and build the foundations for lifelong success.

Cell Phone Use in Schools

The debate around cell phones in schools is an important part of a larger conversation about student well-being, mental health, and academic success. While cell phone policies are one tool, a more comprehensive approach is needed to address the complex factors influencing student outcomes. Since the introduction of cell phones in the 1980s, schools have continually adopted policies to address the evolving challenges and opportunities these devices present. Early bans focused on basic pagers and cell phones, with concerns about distraction and safety. As technology advanced, smartphones brought internet access, social media, and a host of applications into students' hands, making policy decisions increasingly complex. By 2009, 91 percent of public schools across the country reportedly banned cell phones; this dropped to 66 percent by 2015, then rose to 76 percent by 2021, reflecting shifting attitudes and technological changes. Over the last two years, 29 states have passed legislation restricting cell phone use in K–12 schools, with most districts now having some form of cell phone policy.

Recent state actions have varied widely. Some states, like Florida, Louisiana, and Indiana, have adopted comprehensive policies, often with exemptions for medical needs and students with disabilities. Others, such as Minnesota, Ohio, and California, require districts to develop their own policies, recognizing the importance of local decision-making. These approaches reflect a long history of balancing safety, equity, and educational priorities in the face of rapidly changing technology. Successful policies pair restrictions with investments in infrastructure, digital literacy, and transparent family communication. Most policies allow for district-level flexibility, enabling adaptation to local needs and priorities.

Survey research (Pew Research Center, 2024) found that 74 percent of U.S. adults support restrictions on phone use during classroom time for middle and high school students, but only 46 percent support all-day bans. Safety remains the top concern, with younger adults and adults of color less likely to support bans, reflecting generational and cultural differences in technology use and trust. Experts caution that bans may be reactionary rather than preventative and emphasize the importance of fostering healthy relationships with technology.

Meta-analyses and quasi-experimental studies of cell phone bans reveal mixed results. Some report no significant impact of bans on student mental health or social well-being, while others note increased anxiety and discomfort. Research on bullying and cyberbullying is similarly divided, with some studies showing reductions among certain age groups and others indicating higher rates of online victimization where bans are in place. Academic benefits following cell phone bans are also mixed—most gains are seen among students who are impulsive or distracted, while high-achieving students show no change.

Regardless of the policy being implemented, stakeholder engagement is critical. Engaging families and students in policy development is vital for success and helps address concerns about safety, equity, and mental health. Uniform statewide policies undermine local buy-in and fail to address the unique needs of diverse school communities.

School Climate and Infrastructure

Schools that have invested in cultivating a supportive, safe, and inclusive climate are demonstrably better positioned to implement cell phone policies with minimal disruption and greater community acceptance. In these environments, students and families trust that communication will be timely and transparent, that bullying and harassment will be addressed promptly and effectively, and that every student has access to safe, caring adults who can respond to their needs. When these foundational supports are in place, students feel secure and connected, reducing their reliance on cell phones as a primary source of safety, support, or

communication. Creating a positive school climate is essential not only for successful cell phone policies but also for fostering student resilience, engagement, and overall well-being.

Conversely, in schools where these supports are lacking, students and families may experience heightened fear and anxiety. They may feel compelled to keep their phones close as a lifeline for help during emergencies, a tool for navigating unsafe social situations, or a way to reach trusted adults outside the school environment. In such contexts, a cell phone ban can exacerbate feelings of vulnerability and opposition, undermining both student well-being and the effectiveness of the policy.

To create a positive learning environment that supports neurocognitive functioning and reduces resistance to cell phone policy, schools should invest in evidence-based strategies that foster safety, trust, and connection. This begins with enhancing communication systems so families can reliably reach the school and receive timely updates, especially during emergencies. Comprehensive bullying prevention efforts, including staff training and clear reporting procedures, help students feel confident that their concerns will be addressed. Building trauma-informed and restorative practices further ensure emotional safety, encourages strong relationships between students and adults, and provides safe spaces for support. Integrating social-emotional learning into the curriculum strengthens students' self-awareness, resilience, and healthy peer interactions, while access to mental health resources and referral systems offers confidential support without stigma. Engaging families and students in policy development through forums, surveys, and advisory groups increases buy-in and ensures policies reflect the community's diverse needs.

Digital literacy education empowers students to use technology responsibly and understand the reasons behind restrictions. Establishing trusted adult relationships through mentoring and advisory periods gives every student someone to turn to in times of need. Finally, regularly monitoring and evaluating school climate with surveys and feedback helps identify areas for improvement and celebrate successes. By prioritizing these approaches, schools lay the groundwork for successful cell phone policies, ensuring that policy changes are accepted as part of a broader commitment to student well-being and academic achievement.

Benefits of Cell Phones in Schools

Cell phones, when intentionally integrated into the learning environment, can offer important benefits. These benefits highlight the importance of considering cell phone policies within a broader framework of student support and access.

- **Access to Social and Emotional Supports:** For marginalized students—including LGBTQ+ youth, adolescent girls, and those experiencing social isolation—cell phones are a lifeline to supportive peers and networks. Restricting access may reduce opportunities for students to seek help or connect with resources in moments of need.
- **Safe2Say Something Reporting:** Safe2Say Something allows students, educators, and administrators to anonymously report individuals who are at risk of hurting themselves or others to the Office of the Attorney General. Of the more than 33,000 tips received by Safe2Say Something during the 2024-25 school year, 22,692 of them were reported through phone call, the Safe2Say Something mobile application, or mobile web browser. Access to the Safe2Say Something hotline should be considered when developing cell phone policies.
- **Support for Neurodiverse Students:** Many neurodiverse students, including those without formal 504 plans or Individual Education Plans (IEPs), rely on mobile devices for self-regulation, organization, and communication. Smartphones offer built-in accessibility

tools, such as voice-to-text, calculators, and zoom readers, critical for learning and well-being.

- **Medical and Language Needs:** Cell phones are vital for students with medical conditions or language support needs, enabling timely communication and access to accommodations.
- **Family and Caregiver Communication:** Direct contact between students and families, especially older adults unfamiliar with school communication systems, is crucial during emergencies. The September 2024 National Parents Union poll found 78 percent of parents want their child to have a phone for emergency use.
- **Digital Literacy and Responsible Use:** Local policies allow for digital literacy programming, teaching students responsible technology use, a skill increasingly important in today's world.
- **Norms Across Environments:** Students often use the same device at home, school, and in the community, making personal technology a consistent support tool.

Challenges of Cell Phones in Schools

Despite these advantages, cell phones can present significant challenges. Addressing these challenges requires not only thoughtful cell phone policies but also investments in mental health services, bullying prevention, and other supports.

- **Potential for increased anxiety and psychological distress among students.** Recent meta-analyses and studies, such as Campbell, Edwards & Nguyen (2024), have found mixed results regarding the impact of cell phone bans on student mental health, with some evidence suggesting that removing phones can heighten discomfort and anxiety. For example, Tricoli (2022) observed students experiencing mental breakdowns after being separated from their phones, particularly following heavy reliance on these devices for online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Wike (2020) similarly found that lack of access to mobile phones was a source of anxiety for students. These findings are reinforced by quantitative research showing high levels of stress and social loneliness among high school students who use their phones extensively, especially females. The phenomenon of "nomophobia"—the fear of being without a mobile phone—has been linked to increased stress, loneliness, and anxiety. While some studies found no causal relationship between bans and student well-being, others noted trends toward negative impacts, suggesting that abrupt removal of cell phones may exacerbate psychological challenges for certain groups of students. This highlights the need for schools to address underlying mental health and social supports before implementing restrictive cell phone policies.
- **Distraction and Classroom Disruption:** Cell phones can fragment attention, undermining learning, retention, and meaningful in-person connections. Principals report positive impacts on school climate (70 percent), reduction in inappropriate use (67 percent), and decreased cyberbullying (54 percent) with cell phone policies in place.
- **Cyberbullying Risks:** While bans may reduce in-school cyberbullying, incidents often occur outside school hours, and bans do not address after-hours risks. Research is mixed—some studies show reductions in bullying, particularly among adolescent girls and boys in private schools; others found increased online victimization in schools with bans.
- **Emergency Communication Concerns:** Parents and students report anxiety about not having direct access to each other during emergencies. While cell phones can facilitate communication, their use during crises can distract students, overload cellular networks,

and spread misinformation. These drawbacks must be weighed against their potential benefits in emergency situations.

Important Considerations for School and Student Wellness when Considering Bans

Cell phone policies require intentional planning, including considering:

- **Operational and Logistical Costs:** Implementing a comprehensive ban is expensive. Schools must ensure a 1:1 student-to-device ratio for instructional purposes, purchase secure storage solutions (such as phone pouches costing \$10–\$30 per student), and manage daily collection and redistribution. For Pennsylvania’s largest districts, costs could exceed a million dollars. States like New York have allocated more than \$13 million to support implementation, but this is not universal.
- **Local Policy Flexibility and Consistency:** Most state policies (80 percent) require districts to create their own plans, which promotes local decision-making but can result in inconsistent enforcement and equity concerns. Local flexibility also enables digital literacy education and more tailored approaches.
- **Enforcement and Definitions:** Risks include unintentional enforcement by staff unfamiliar with student accommodations and ambiguity in the definition of “mobile device,” complicating the policy for smartwatches and tablets.
- **Reporting and Capacity:** Annual impact reports on discipline, attendance, and school safety are required to be submitted to the department, but broad state-wide implications regarding cell phone usage would not be possible due to differences in reporting and the inability to verify data.
- **Barriers for Neurodiverse Students:** Comprehensive bans may create additional challenges for neurodiverse students who rely on technology for self-regulation and organization. Providing alternative supports can be financially difficult for schools.

Cell Phone Policies and Crisis Situations

Cell phones play a complex role during school crises. While many parents and students view phones as essential for emergency communication, experts caution that they can distract, impede situational awareness, and spread misinformation. Effective emergency notification systems should integrate multiple modes of communication—including texts, digital signage, radio, and verified statements from school leaders—rather than relying solely on cell phones. The rarity of school crises must be weighed against the broader impacts of cell phones in daily school life.

Conclusion

The conversation around cell phones in schools highlights a fundamental need for intentional, evidence-based policy that prioritizes the holistic well-being of every student. Crafting effective policy requires balancing the goal of a focused academic environment with the diverse needs of our students, particularly those who rely on personal devices for accessibility, communication, and critical social-emotional support. A uniform, top-down approach risks overlooking these nuances and the importance of a positive school climate, which is the true foundation for student success. Ultimately, cell phone policies should be viewed as one component of a broader strategy to support student mental health, academic achievement, and overall well-being. This requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of student challenges and invests in evidence-based interventions.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education looks forward to continuing to work with the General Assembly, schools, and communities to ensure policies are developed with local input and support the unique needs of each learning environment.

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