

Testimony in SUPPORT of [House Bill No. 2641](#)

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- Overland Park resident
- Parent of 2 teenagers that attend Shawnee Mission South High School
- For the last 2 years I was co-chair of the Screens in Schools work group with the [Screen Time Action Network](#) at [Fairplay](#) whose mission is to protect childhood from commercialization and big tech.
- Recently I co-founded the [Phone-Free Schools Movement](#) whose mission is to provide youth with the freedom to excel academically and develop socially without the distractions, pressures and harms of phones and social media during the school day.
- Last fall I co-authored a [letter to the Secretary of Education](#) urging him to issue an advisory on phone-free schools.

I am extremely concerned about our kids today. Are you? We all see them staring down at their phones at family dinners, in restaurants, while walking down the street, even when they are hanging out with a group of friends. So what do you think they are doing at school? You got it. Staring at their phones. In class. During passing periods. At lunch. And in the restroom. Today's kids go to the restroom to be on their phones, not because they need to actually use the restroom. They can NOT resist the undeniable pull of their phones. Many adults can't, so how do we expect kids whose brains are NOT fully developed to resist the urge to check their phones. They don't stand a chance against the addictive pull of manipulative algorithms and the predatory business model of social media.

Children and youth need our help. What can you do? It's simple. Follow the research and pass House Bill No. 2641 that requires schools to limit access to privately owned electronic communication devices, i.e. phones, during the school day.

The school day is a time to learn academically. Learn to focus, learn how to study, develop a longer attention span, and develop comprehension skills. The school day is also a time for kids to interact with their peers, learn social skills, practice face to face communication, and create a community. Do you think these things are happening in our schools today? They are not. I have 2 teenagers in high school. I'm currently in the trenches. Kids are struggling. Teachers are struggling. They are struggling to keep their students' attention. It's extremely challenging to compete with the fast pace videos on youtube and tiktok as well as the intense pull of social media. [One teacher shared](#) that student's attention spans have decreased so much that lessons must be taught in 3-5 minute increments to keep students engaged. In her theater class, she noted that "students are also more hesitant to take risks in class because they fear that they will be recorded, the video will be posted online and then they will be judged."

Teachers constantly have to police phones. Teachers have shared that they are losing 5-10 minutes per class period to policing phones. And what are administrators doing about it? Most are doing nothing. They aren't putting in place effective all day phone-free policies that are needed to support teachers and to allow students the full opportunity to learn.

According to the Common Sense Media report, [Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use](#), "Phone use during school hours is nearly universal but varies widely, reflecting a patchwork of different school policies." 97% of participants used their phones during school hours for an average of 43 minutes per day. That 43 minutes was spent primarily on, you guessed it - social media, YouTube, and gaming. Phones are a deterrent to learning.

One [study](#) revealed that students who were NOT using mobile phones during a class lecture "wrote down 62% more...notes, took more detailed notes, were able to recall more detailed information from the lecture, and scored a full letter grade and a half higher on a multiple choice test than those students who were actively using their mobile phones." Phones are a deterrent to learning.

According to the [London School of Economics](#) study, banning mobile phones at school leads to an increase in student performance. The results indicate that after schools banned mobile phones, test scores of students increased by 6.4% of a standard deviation. This is equivalent to adding five days to the school year or an additional hour a week. The effects were twice as large for low-achieving students. Given the results, banning phones could be a low-cost way for schools to reduce educational inequality.

In a [study published in the journal Educational Psychology](#), the students were divided into two groups and taught the same material by the same instructor, in the same classroom at roughly the same time of day. The only difference was one group was allowed to have laptops and cell phones open for non-classroom purposes, and the other group wasn't. "The group using devices scored about a half a letter grade lower on exams -- the difference between passing or failing for some students. Of note, students who didn't use a device but were in the same classroom with those who did also scored lower. This was likely due to distraction from surrounding devices."

Problematic phone use can no longer be considered an individual decision. In a school environment, it negatively impacts the community as a whole. These issues spill over to the non-users. Like second-hand smoke, bystanders in class, or in the lunchroom are also exposed to the distractions and harmful content. According to one study, the mere presence of a smartphone by a neighboring student lowers a non-phone student's test performance by ~6%. Just like second-hand smoke, others are negatively impacted, not just the student with the phone.

Phones and social media aren't only negatively impacting [academic performance](#) but also children's mental health. Excessive smartphone and social media use have also been linked to rising rates of teenage [depression](#), emotional distress and self-harm.

As the Surgeon General stated in his advisory on [Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#) released in May of last year, "We have gaps in our full understanding of the mental health

impacts posed by social media but at this point cannot conclude it is sufficiently safe for children and adolescents.” According to the [2022 KIDS COUNT Data Book](#), “children in the United States are experiencing a mental health crisis, with rates of anxiety and depression at unprecedented levels.” Dr. Murthy has declared we have no time to waste. “Our children and adolescents don’t have [that] luxury.... Their childhoods and development are happening now.... At a moment when we are experiencing a national youth mental health crisis, now is the time to act swiftly and decisively to protect children and adolescents from risk of harm.” These are the words of our nation’s top doctor. I repeat “Now is the time to act swiftly and decisively to protect children and adolescents from the risk of harm.” You can do this by voting in favor of House Bill No. 2641.

The benefits of bell-to-bell phone-free school policies are clear.

Benefits of all day phone-free school policies that school administrators have shared:

- Improved focus, attention and comprehension leading to higher grades.
- More engagement in the classroom, as well as engagement with peers outside of the classroom.
- Teachers report being ahead of schedule on their lesson plans because they aren’t spending time policing phones and students are completing classwork and assignments faster.
- Attendance has improved because students aren’t texting their parents to call them out of class.
- Lunchrooms are loud because students are having face-to-face conversations with their peers. Students are also eating lunch instead of falling into social media on their phones.
- Less cyberbullying, fewer fights and an overall decrease in drama leading to fewer discipline referrals.
- Students report being less stressed.
- Restrooms are used much less because students aren’t going to the restroom to use their phones.
- More books are checked out of the library (50% more at one Kansas school).
- Less cheating.

The disadvantages of bell-to-bell phone-free policies are also clear. There are none.

Disadvantages of all day phone-free school policies that administrators have shared:

- Zero

Please do your part and support House Bill No. 2641. Kids are missing out on developing the essential foundational skills that they need to flourish. They won’t get this time back. The time for you to act is NOW. Thank you.



Phone-Free School Policy Myths, FAQs & Resources

Myths:

If students have their phones at school then teachers can teach them how to use phones/social media responsibly.

This is a “digital world” – we need to teach our children how to responsibly manage digital devices.

False. Social media was not designed for children. The best brain science research and expert psychiatrists tell us the adolescent brain is not able to manage the addictive pull of portable devices and social media products. For-profit companies that sell these products, hire experts in addiction and behavior to design the products to be so addictive that it is nearly impossible for children to resist constantly checking their phones. One experienced high school teacher refers to social media as the “digital drug” that she has to compete with. It is not a fair fight.

Many teachers are fighting the constant battle of students being distracted (forever elsewhere) on their phones and not paying attention in class. Teachers have become the phone police and many are leaving the profession because they are tired of battling phones.

What teachers are having to teach now is face-to-face social skills because students aren’t learning these skills naturally through interactions with their peers.

Another example: We do not allow or encourage children to drink in moderation so they are prepared to drink when they turn 21. Likewise we should not allow or encourage children to be on social media so we can teach them how to use it in moderation before their brains are fully developed.

My child needs their phone in case of a crisis or lockdown at the school.

False. School security experts say phones can actually make children *less safe* in a crisis situation:

- 1-Using phones in an emergency situation can distract children from following the directions of their teachers.
- 2-The sound of the phone, whether ringing or on vibrate, could alert an assailant to a hiding place.
- 3-The shooter could be monitoring the event themselves on social media and find more victims or elude capture that way.

4-Victims and worried family members trying to get through can jam communications, interfering with first responders.

Reference: Washington Post - [Even after shootings, experts warn against cellphones in schools](#)

Teachers will have to police phones if there is an all-day phone-free policy in place.

False. If there is a building wide policy supported by administration and consistently enforced then phones become a nonissue. However, when there isn't a policy being enforced and it's up to every teacher to decide how to address phones, there is so much inconsistency that students push back and teachers have to police phones every day.

Parents will push back on phone policies.

False. According to a [study](#), 82% of middle school parents do not want their kids to use cell phones during school. Administrators with all day phone-free school policies in place in Kansas and across the nation have shared they have had very little parent pushback and instead have received praise for instituting said policies.

Phone-free schools seem like a big burden for teachers and administrators.

False. Once this policy is in place a lot of burdens that are currently on teachers are significantly decreased. There is less fighting, less in school bullying and a more overall positive atmosphere that is conducive for students to learn and thrive.

Schools have a huge microphone for the community in terms of health messaging and product endorsement. What schools endorse or do not endorse in terms of health practices is heard and seen by the community. If schools stop endorsing phones and harmful online products such as social media and video games, parents and the community will take this cue from schools.

FAQs:

Why should schools have a phone-free policy in place?

The school day is when students need to be able to focus and have opportunities to learn and to interact with each other, build in person community, and engage teachers. Study data shows that having a cellphone, even turned off in their backpack, decreases student test scores. A phone & social media free school gives students back many needed opportunities for development.

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

We know that all children need consistency. One policy for the entire school benefits all students. Additionally, teachers benefit as well. They regain classroom instructional time instead of having to police phones. It should NOT be the teacher's job to monitor phones. This takes away from their most important job of teaching and supporting students. If there is a consistently enforced building policy in place then students are less likely to push back on the policy.

What do children and teens need?

Technologies change. *Children's development needs do not.* They are the same today as they were 50 years ago. Children and teens need many opportunities to connect in person and have face to face interactions without the interference and distraction of digital media products. Children need vigorous movement and time outside every day. They also need 9-10 hours of sleep every night. Sadly phones, social media and video games are replacing these important activities needed for healthy development.

This is a “digital world” – don’t we need to teach our children how to responsibly manage these digital devices?

Our best brain science research and expert psychiatrists tell us the adolescent brain is not able to manage the addictive pull of portable devices and social media products. For-profit companies that sell these products, hire experts in addiction and behavior to design the products to be so addictive that it is nearly impossible for children to resist constantly checking their phones. One experienced high school teacher refers to social media as a digital drug that she has to compete with. It is not a fair fight.

How do I contact my student during the school day?

Parents and guardians who need to contact their student during the school day may do so by calling the office administration number. The same goes if you need to change the pick up time of your child. Contacting your child directly via their phone during the school day distracts them from their studies and the needed in person interaction with their teachers and peers.

What if my child has a medical condition where the electronic device is needed such as for diabetes and seizure monitoring?

A licensed medical provider can write a note for accommodations when there is a medical need to carry a device for health concerns such as diabetes or seizure monitoring.

Research/Resources:

The Case for Phone-Free Schools: Social Psychologist Jonathan Haidt

The research is clear: Smartphones undermine attention, learning, relationships, and belonging.

<https://jonathanhaidt.substack.com/p/phone-free-schools>

- Children do not have a mature frontal cortex to help resist checking a phone that is delivering constant notifications in their pocket.
- Mobile devices not only distract students from schoolwork but prevent them from engaging with each other. Studies show that the heaviest smartphone and/or social media users are the most [depressed](#) and [lonely](#).
- Providing lockable phone pouches or phone lockers at school are the most likely way to produce substantial educational, social, and mental health benefits of a phone-free policy because they allow students a full school day away from their phones.

SmartPhone Addiction: Teens use smartphones mostly for social media, youtube viewing and internet access. With social media comes gossip, comparison and problematic content.

Research informed article about why it is best to avoid phones for children and teens:

<https://screenstrong.org/phoneaddiction/>

Smartphones are not smart for teens, especially 8th graders: Melanie Hempe, BSN, Founder of ScreenStrong.org and Dr. Adriana Stacey, MD explain the science behind brain development and why smartphones aren't smart for teens.

<https://screenstrong.org/why-smartphones-not-smart-for-teens/>

ScreenStrong Student Course: Explains brain development and how digital screens and online products interrupt healthy brain development.

<https://screenstrong.org/student-course/>

Phone-Free Schools Movement: Their mission is to provide youth the freedom to excel academically and develop socially without the distractions, pressures and harms of phones and social media during the school day.

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