

Brian Nelson Testimony H5598 Cell Phone Policy

April 23, 2025

Good evening, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak tonight. My name is Dr. Brian Nelson, and I am a proud educator in the South Kingstown School District. In addition to teaching middle school mathematics, I serve as the local co-president of NEA/South Kingstown and as the Assistant Treasurer of NEA Rhode Island.

We live in a time when cell phones are incredibly powerful tools. However, in the classroom, they often become distractions that hinder focus, engagement, and meaningful learning. Every day, educators like myself see how notifications, social media, and games compete for students' attention, even during critical moments of instruction.

This year, the South Kingstown School District implemented a clear and consistent cell phone policy, ensuring that phones are not present during school hours. The results have been remarkable. Without the distractions of cell phones during class, we've seen significant improvements in focus and participation. Students are engaging more deeply in discussions, collaborating more effectively with their peers, and fully immersing themselves in the learning process like never before.

The benefits extend far beyond academics. During non-instructional times, such as lunch, we've observed students reconnecting in meaningful ways. Instead of being absorbed in their devices, students are talking, laughing, and building stronger relationships with one another. Kids are acting like kids again.

Social media, while connecting us in many ways, can also amplify anxiety and create harmful comparisons. By establishing phone-free spaces during the school day, we've created an environment that encourages real connections and offers students a break from the pressures of the digital world. The math here is simple: a cell phone policy is good for both learning and student mental health.

Teaching is an incredibly challenging job, demanding creativity, patience, and relentless dedication. Being the “cell phone police” should not be part of it. The clear boundaries set by this policy free educators to focus on what we do best: teaching and supporting our students.

Well-designed cell phone policies, like the one we have implemented in South Kingstown, create classrooms where focus, collaboration, and growth can truly flourish. Extending similar initiatives across Rhode Island will provide all students with the chance to learn in environments that foster both academic success and overall well-being.

Thank you for your time and for considering the positive impact this approach can have on students and teachers statewide.