

Emily E. Skeehan
40 Cutler Ct., Portsmouth RI

Representative Joseph M. McNamara
House Education Committee
82 Smith Street
Providence RI

Re: Emily Skeehan's Testimony [Rhode Island House Bill 5598](#)

Dear Honorable Representative McNamara and Members of the House Education Committee,

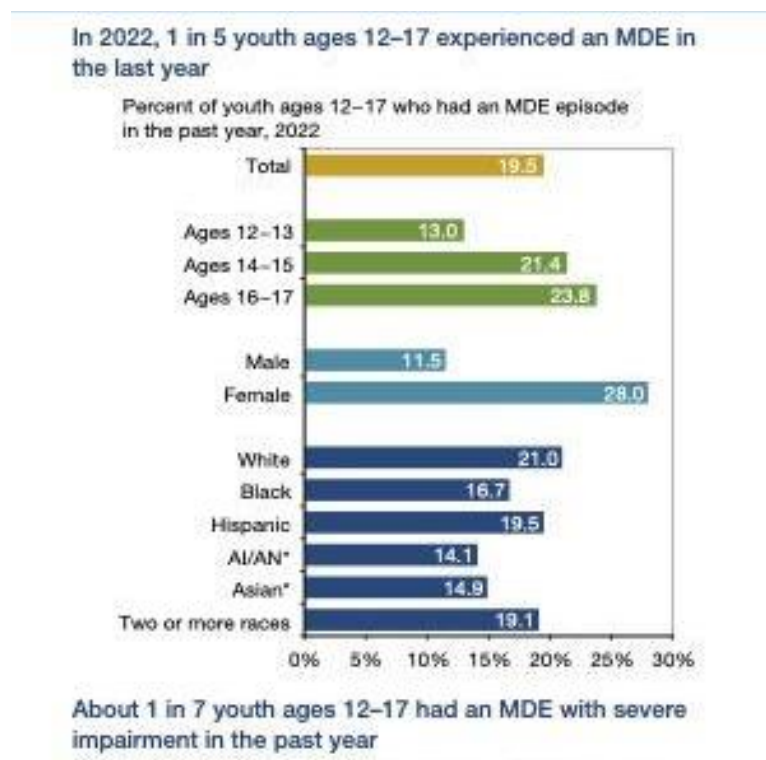
I am writing in support of [Rhode Island House Bill 5598](#) because I believe every school district in the state should have a policy that includes but is not limited to “a prohibition on physical access to a personal electronic device by students during the school day.” The increasing use of personal electronic devices during the school day has been shown to contribute to distractions in the classroom, impacting student engagement and academic achievement. H 5598 provides a framework for schools to implement clear policies regarding the use of personal electronic devices while ensuring necessary accommodations for students with individualized education plans (IEPs), 504 plans, medical needs, and multilingual learning support. I have completed a review of LEAs across Rhode Island and reviewed their cell phone policies and handbook language and found a wide variety cell phone use practices (Appendix A). To create equitable access to teaching and learning across the state, I urge you to pass H 5598.

In most school districts there is no sense of urgency to address the overuse of personal devices in school, while science and medical literature point to the harmful effects of these devices. Even worse, vast amounts of literature provide examples of the positive effects of banning cell phones in our schools. The Surgeon General of the US stated in his Advisory in 2023, “While more research is needed to determine the full impact social media use has on nearly every teenager across the country, children and adolescents don't have the luxury of waiting years until we know the full extent of social media's effects on them” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

There are hundreds of examples where School Districts across the country have banned cell phones and the results have had a corresponding positive impact. Governor Kathy Hochul (NY) just announced a statewide plan to restrict the use of devices, such as smartphones, in K-12 schools throughout the school day to protect the mental health of children and improve student learning by limiting distractions in the classroom. New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy backed a plan to direct New Jersey school districts to adopt policies to ban cellphones in schools, citing phones as a contributor to a distraction to learning and a fuel in cyberbullying. Officials in other states — including New Hampshire, Indiana, California and Florida (see Appendix B) — have announced similar proposals to ban cellphones in schools or already signed legislation.

Mental Health Context: Since the early 2010s, coinciding with the development of smartphones, we have witnessed a [global decline in academic performance](#) among young

people and a [rise in school loneliness](#) (Twenge, 2021). In 2013, pre-teens and teens, especially girls in America, became more anxious, depressed, and self-harming, (Haidt, 2024). Although the pandemic exacerbated these negative trends, they began long before it. The worsening scores are occurring among both boys and girls, low-income and high-income youth, and white and Black students; academic declines are often [more severe](#) for teens from historically marginalized groups (Barshay, 2024). Psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Jean Twenge reported an alarming relationship between cellphones and student achievement. They concluded that the math assessment results were linked to obsessive cell phone use inside and outside of school equal to four times greater than pandemic learning loss (Thompson, 2023). There has also been a dramatic increase in the rates of anxiety, depression, and self-harm among adolescents starting in the early 2010s. This increase is particularly pronounced among girls, with significant rises in reported cases of major depressive episodes and self-harming behaviors.



The graphics show that 1 in 5 youth between the ages of 12 and 17 had a major depressive episode (MDE) in 2022 (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2024). Generation Z, those born after 1996, are spending a growing amount of time on their mobile devices which has been positively correlated with a growth in anxiety and depression among this group. According to a 2023 Pew Research Center survey, 95% of 13- to 17-year-olds have access to a smartphone. Smartphone ownership is nearly universal among teens of different genders, ages, races and ethnicities, and economic backgrounds (Anderson et al. 2024). U.S. teenagers spend an average of 9 hours a day on their devices, not counting the school day. This includes 5 hours on social media, plus 4 hours of schoolwork and other screen time (Rideout et al. 2022).

Nearly all teens in the U.S. have access to a smartphone

% of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 who say they have access to the following devices at home

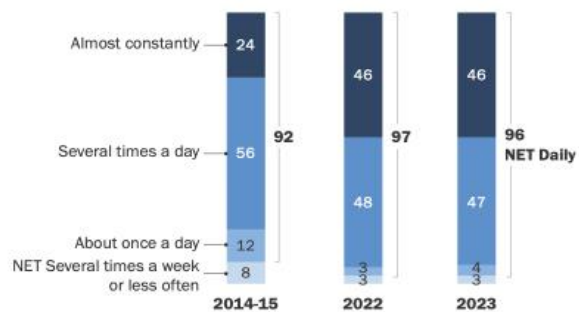


Note: Those who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. teens conducted Sept. 26-Oct. 23, 2023.
"Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The share of teens who say they are online 'almost constantly' has roughly doubled since 2014-2015

% of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 who say they use the internet ...



Note: Figures may not add up to NET values due to rounding. Those who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. teens conducted Sept. 26-Oct. 23, 2023.
"Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Nearly half of teens say they use the internet "almost constantly." This is on par with results from 2022 but roughly double the percentage from students surveyed between 2014-2015 (Anderson et al., 2024).

Learning Environment: A study released last fall by Common Sense Media shows that 97% of kids use their phones at school (Radesky, 2023). The average student gets about 60 notifications during school hours in a single day and spends 43 minutes – about the same length as a full class period – on their phone (Radesky, 2023). The School Superintendents Association's 2022 survey of school district leaders nationwide, found that 45 percent of respondents reported teacher burnout as the principal cause of the educator shortage. Based on a staff survey in Columbia, Mo., the teachers' union points to cell phones as a major reason for teachers' emotional burnout and departures. Based on a survey of their union members, 61 percent listed cell phones as the working-condition issue of greatest concern, even bigger than salary (Stiepleman, 2024).

According to Jonathan Haidt's latest book, *The Anxious Generation*, widespread use of smartphones and social media between 2010 and 2015 fundamentally changed the landscape for students (Haidt, 2024). This period, termed the Great Rewiring, saw a rapid adoption of smartphones, transforming how children and adolescents interact with the world and each other. Gen Z have attention fragmentation issues as a result of constantly checking their phone. The problem is not just transient distraction, though any distraction in the classroom will impede learning. Heavy phone or social-media use may also have a cumulative, enduring, and deleterious effect on adolescents' abilities to focus and apply themselves. Nearly half of American teens say that they are online "almost constantly," and such continuous administration of small pleasures can produce sustained changes in the brain's reward system, including a reduction of dopamine receptors. This shifts users' general mood toward irritability and anxiety when separated from their phones (especially for people with ADHD), and it reduces their ability to focus. As the neuroscientists Jaan Aru and Dmitri Rozgonjuk put it in a recent review of the literature: "Smartphone use can be disruptively habitual, with the main

detrimental consequence being an inability to exert prolonged mental effort.” Implementing phone-free school policies (as states in the language of Bill 5598) allows all students to take a break from their devices during the school day which helps build students’ stamina to focus on a task without interruption from cell phone notifications.

According to a survey in 2023 by Pew Research, more than 70 percent of high school teachers say student phone distraction is a “major problem” (Luona et al. 2024). Over 20 States have legislation or are introducing legislation to create phone-free learning environments (see Appendix B). Based on interviews in school districts where cell-phone bans have been in place for some time, teachers say that phone bans in the classroom have helped improve students’ ability to concentrate on their lessons and work in groups (Singer, 2024). Some schools have also found the bans decreased phone-related bullying and student fights. There's a growing list of [testimonials](#) from teachers and administrators of the benefits of banning phones. As more states develop bans, more quantified outcomes (test scores, self-harm rates, fight occurrences, etc.) will be made available. Principal Doemel in the Bethlehem Central High School in Albany, N.Y. implemented a total mobile phone ban last year; he said he hadn’t realized what a burden the phones had been to the students, some of whom told him they were relieved not to have to respond to posts and texts during the school day (Cohen, 2024).

The language in House bill 5598 suggesting “a prohibition on physical access to a personal electronic device by students during the school day” represents a crucial step in protecting our students' educational experience, mental health, and social development. The evidence clearly demonstrates that these devices significantly impair learning, concentration, and meaningful human connection. By establishing a consistent statewide policy, we eliminate the patchwork of inconsistent rules and provide clarity for all education stakeholders. While change may initially face resistance, we must prioritize what decades of research and educational expertise tell us is best for our children's development. I urge you to support this legislation as a commitment to creating learning environments where students can truly thrive—free from the constant distractions and documented harms of smartphones. Our children's future success and wellbeing depend on the courageous decisions we make today.

Sincerely,
Emily Skeehan

References

Anderson, M., Faverio, M., & Gottfried, J. 2024. [Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023](#). Pew Research Center.

Barshay, J. 2024. [What the New PISA Results Really Say About U.S. Schools](#). Future Edu.

Cohen, K. 2024. [Visiting schools that ban cell phones is like going back in time](#). Washington Post.

Faguy, A., Blasey, L. & Morris, R. 2024. US states want to ban phones in schools. It might be a challenge. BBC News.

Haidt, J. 2024. [Get Phones Out of Schools Now: The Case for Phone-Free Schools](#). The Atlantic.

Haidt, J. 2024. The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness.

Jolly, J. 2024. [School is no place for cellphones, and some states are cracking down](#). USA TODAY

Luona, L., Parker, K., Menasce Horowitz, J. 2024. [Challenges in the classroom](#). Pew Research Center.

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. 2024. [Major Depressive Episodes \(MDE\) Among Youth](#), 2022/ NCJ Number 309140.

Radesky, J., Weeks, H.M., Schaller, A., Robb, M., Mann, S., and Lenhart, A. (2023). [Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use](#). San Francisco, CA: Common Sense.

Rideout, V., Peebles, A., Mann, S., & Robb, M. B. (2022). [Common Sense census: Media use by tweens and teens](#), 2021. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense.

Singer, N. 2024. [Why Schools Are Racing to Ban Student Phones](#). New York Times.

Stiepleman, P. 2024. "A Mindshift Over Cell phones in Schools." School Administrator Magazine, Vol. 81, #6, pp. 28-33.

Thompson, D. 2023. [It Sure Looks Like Phones Are Making Students Dumber](#). The Atlantic.

Twenge JM, Haidt J, Blake AB, McAllister C, Lemon H, Le Roy A. 2021. Worldwide increases in adolescent loneliness. J Adolesc. 2021 Dec;93:257-269. doi: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2021.06.006.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy Urges Action to Ensure Social Media Environments are Healthy and Safe, as Previously-Advised National Youth Mental Health Crisis Continues" 23 May 2023.

Appendix A

[illegible]

Appendix B

State Policies

- Schools from Seattle to St. Louis are jumping on the no-cellphone bandwagon, and at least **seven states** are going all-in to keep phones out too. Ohio, Indiana, Oklahoma and Florida have some degree of prohibition on phones in schools (Jolly, 2024)
- Several other states are weighing similar legislation, including New York – home to the largest school district in America – and California. As of right now, 11 states either restrict, or ask schools to restrict, cellphones from “bell to bell.” (Jolly, 2024)
- The Phone-Free Schools Act, a bipartisan bill introduced by California Assemblyman Josh Hoover (R-Folsom), sailed through the Legislature and requires all public schools to devise a policy by July 1, 2026, to limit or prohibit smartphones during the school day. It would force distracted, smartphone-obsessed students to do something many haven't been willing to do on their own: Put their phones away in class. The legislation is expected to be signed by Gov. Gavin Newsom, who urged educators as the academic year began to enact restrictions, citing the "mental health, scholastic, and social risks" of phone use in classrooms. California would be the fifth state to require school districts to limit students' phone usage, joining Indiana, Minnesota, Ohio and Virginia (Jolly, 2024).
- Several states have statewide laws banning student cell phone use either during class or throughout the entire school day including **Florida, Indiana, Louisiana and South Carolina** (Singer, 2024). At the beginning of the 2023-24 school year, Florida's legislature banned cell phone possession at school. The spring of 2024 **Indiana's** governor signed into law a classroom ban, set to begin in the autumn.
- Districts in **Texas** and **California** have embraced the use of Yondr to create cell phone-free schools. In California, two school districts saw something similar. In Atwater, Lobao says her school district first piloted a phone-free policy with their 5th through 8th graders at two schools. The impact was noticeable. With a bright smile, she reports, “Before we went phone-free, students were just silently scrolling, and now kids actually started playing during recess. It's so fun to watch them play basketball and not to be huddled around each other trying to sneak a look on a phone. I love it.” Further, she says the counselors and aides she had hired to build relationships with children took on more significant roles. They no longer were policing cell phones.
- Individual districts in **Maine** are instituting stronger rules surrounding phone use.
- Governor Glenn Youngkin (R - **Virginia**) has called on school districts around the Commonwealth to adopt policies that would essentially ban students from having cell phones in classrooms. Mental health is one of reasons why Governor Youngkin pushed a "cell phone-free education" in Virginia's public schools. In newly-released draft guidance, the Department of Education said:
At the elementary school level, students would not be allowed to have cell phones in the building or on school grounds. In middle and high schools, students would not be allowed on their phones during instructional time, lunch, or between periods. More flexibility would be allowed both before and after school

(<https://www.wtvr.com/news/local-news/virginia-new-school-cell-phone-rules-aug-16-2024>).

- In **Massachusetts**, the state education agency issued guidance and made funds available for schools to become phone-free utilizing Yondr pouches.
 - Fall River prohibiting cellphone use in schools for grades 6 to 12.
 - Diman Regional Vocational Technical High School requires students to turn off smartphones and smartwatches during the school day, and confiscates them if students are seen using them.
 - Atlantis Charter School already uses Yondr pouches to limit cellphone use.
 - Middle schoolers at Argosy Collegiate Charter School must turn in their phones and smartwatches, and get them back at the end of the day. Argosy high schoolers can keep them all day, but can't use them during class time.
 - Somerset Berkley Regional High School's handbook requires students to place devices in a cellphone holder in each classroom, and students can retrieve them when leaving.
- **Pennsylvania** recently allotted millions of dollars in grants for schools to purchase lockable bags to store pupils' phones while **Delaware** recently allocated \$250,000 for schools to test lockable phone pouches.
- **Oklahoma, Vermont, Kansas** and **Missouri** have introduced phone-free legislation, and the governors of **Connecticut** and **Utah** have formally encouraged action.
- New laws in **Minnesota** and **Ohio** will require schools to adopt policies to limit cell phone use next year. Gov. Gavin Newsom of California and Gov. Kathy Hochul of **New York**, each said they would work with state lawmakers on legislation to tackle student phone use in schools (Faguy et al., 2024; Stiepleman, 2024). Some districts are encouraging parents to put software on their kids' phones that block internet access during certain hours of the school day but it only works if everyone does it.