

Dear House Education Committee,

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about the pressing concerns and challenges regarding cell phones in our schools.

My name is Justin Aromin. I live in Cranston and currently am employed as a Social Studies teacher at North Smithfield High School, a position I have held since 2010. I am also honored to be the President of the North Smithfield Teachers' Association, representing 155 hard working, dedicated fellow professionals. I am also a parent of two amazing children, one of which is entering his teenage years. Provided the multiple roles I am lucky to play, I feel I have significant insights and perspectives to share with the committee.

As an educator, I am used to and all too well aware of the challenges facing our students and teachers, and the overall state of the education system. Any time there is education news coverage, the trend is to look for some magic antidote to fixing all of our students' and schools' problems, whether they be based in reality or not. Many of these challenges require nuisance and complex solutions. During my tenure, these topics change every couple of years and often result in the default, talking point that "our schools should just focus on reading and math" as if this has not been the goal of every school classroom since the dawn of education. While I am not here to further the over-simplicity of this talking point, I am here to advocate for what the majority of educators have known, and have consistently identified as a major impediment to our students' academic growth, success and mental health: cell phones. For this topic, there is a simple solution.

This is not anti-technology advocacy. Like any technological advancement, the benefits have to be weighed against the disadvantages and an honest forum for debate should be encouraged. For education purposes, cell phones provide far more disadvantages. Cell phones in the classroom and school setting have increased distractedness, bullying, poor social norms, and an overall setback to the learning community. One need not enter any Rhode Island high school without a cell phone specific policy, or a lax cell phone policy, to witness the varying problems that result. Most of our Rhode Island middle and high schools provide students with some one-to-one service, whether Chromebook or tablet. There is no need to have a cell phone in the classroom with these tax-payer or grant funded devices available. If we can create laws to prevent cell phone distractedness while driving, then we should do the same for our most vulnerable, developing population as well in the school environment.

The teaching profession is widely and statistically considered one of the most trusted professions in our country. If this is really the case, we should listen to what the majority of teachers have to say when it comes to educating our youth and the policies that guide the classroom. According to a published Pew Research Center study, 72% of high school teachers say cell phone

distraction is a major problem in the classroom. Reading and math scores cannot go up if students are distracted. Reading and math scores cannot go up if students feel uncomfortable about what is being put on social media via cellphone, or if they fear being recorded or photographed in the classroom by another student's cell phone. When school districts have attempted to implement policies regarding, most create unenforceable policies that are the responsibility of the classroom teacher to enforce. The mish-mash of cell phone policies from district to district, school to school in Rhode Island have created too many grey areas for acceptable use and enforcement. While the teaching profession requires many unwritten roles to serve, cell phone policemen should not be one of them. I strongly urge the committee to consider Bill #5598 that requires Rhode Island school districts create a clear, uniform cell phone policy lawfully enforced by the school district and its administrators, and not the classroom teachers. Bill #5598 will additionally protect our students' and teachers' privacy and return the focus of our school environment and classrooms to their original intent, developing the academic and social progress of our students.

I care deeply, both as a parent and as a classroom educator, about the future of our school environment and classrooms. I ask for your help and please support Bill #5598. I appreciate your time and consideration.

Kindly,
Justin Aromin
Cranston, Rhode Island