



RHODE ISLAND
FEDERATION OF TEACHERS AND
HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AFT
AFL - CIO

To: House Education Committee
From: Maribeth Calabro, President *Maribeth K Calabro*
Date: April 23, 2025
Re: **School Personal Electronic Device(s) Policy**
Testimony in **support** of H 5598 (Representative Casimiro, et. al.)

The RIFTHP, supports H 5598, related to personal electronic device (s) in schools. By removing phones from the classroom, schools can help reduce distractions, support mental health, encourage in-person social interactions, and ensure that students focus on learning and recovery.

As we all know, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted traditional learning environments, and as schools transition back to in-person classes, there are additional challenges that have emerged, such as increased attentional issues and a rise in mental health concerns like depression. In this context, banning cell phones in schools becomes even more crucial for supporting students' academic success and well-being.

The shift to online learning during the pandemic led to an increase in distractions as students were often left to manage their own time and attention with limited adult supervision. This has had lasting effects on their ability to stay focused in a traditional classroom setting. Studies, such as those from the University of California, Irvine (2021), show that students returning to in-person learning after extended online education struggle with maintaining sustained attention, often due to habits formed during remote learning, such as multitasking and frequent breaks.

In the post-pandemic world, many students are still grappling with the overstimulation caused by constant digital interaction. Banning cell phones can help mitigate these issues by removing the temptation to check notifications, social media, or games during class, fostering better concentration. Research by Stanford University (2022) found that students' attentional capacity significantly improves when smartphones are removed from the classroom, as it reduces cognitive overload and increases the brain's ability to focus on academic tasks.

The pandemic led to increased reliance on social media as a primary source of connection, which, for many students, exacerbated feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety. According to a study by the American Psychological Association (2021), adolescents who spent more time on social media during the pandemic reported higher rates of depression and anxiety, and this was linked to the negative effects of constant comparison, cyberbullying, and the pressure of digital personas.

Research suggests that limiting screen time, especially in the school setting, can have a positive impact on students' mental health. A 2019 study published in the Journal of Abnormal Psychology showed that students who reduced their screen time experienced a decrease in symptoms of anxiety and depression. By banning phones, schools can help students disconnect from the pressures of social media and digital interactions, creating a healthier environment where students can focus on face-to-face relationships and in-person connections.

356 SMITH STREET PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02908-3761 (401) 273-9800 FAX (401) 331-8815

• Maribeth Calabro, President • Bonnie Horta, Executive Assistant • Maria Manzi, Administrative Assistant •
• Michael J. Mullane, Field Representative • James A. Parisi, Field Representative •
• Christopher Lambert, Field Representative • Jeremy Sencer, Field Representative •

The pandemic led to extended periods of social isolation for many students, which hindered their social and emotional development. In-person interactions, which are key for developing emotional intelligence and peer relationships, were absent.

Limiting cell phone use can encourage students to interact more meaningfully with their peers, strengthening these vital social skills and promoting emotional well-being. A 2022 study from Harvard University highlighted that in post-pandemic classrooms, students who engage in more direct, unmediated communication showed significant improvements in emotional resilience and peer relationships.

Banning phones can help create a classroom environment that fosters positive mental health by reducing the social comparison that often happens through social media. With phones out of sight, students are more likely to focus on building real-world friendships and emotional support networks, which are crucial in the post-pandemic recovery phase. In the post-pandemic world, students may still face heightened concerns about health and safety. In emergencies (whether health-related, like a pandemic resurgence, or a school safety issue), it is critical for students to focus on instructions from teachers or emergency personnel without distraction. Banning phones can help ensure that students pay attention to safety protocols and are less likely to be focused on their phones and more focused on receiving directions and updates during a crisis.

The pandemic has also shown how quickly misinformation can spread, particularly through social media. Banning phones in schools can reduce students' exposure to stress-inducing rumors or misinformation that can be especially overwhelming for those already struggling with anxiety or depression. During a crisis, it is critical that lines of communication are free from interruption so that emergency personnel and first responders can communicate efficiently and effectively optimizing student and staff safety. Overloading networks with excessive cell phone use, calls, and videos, interferes with critical communication systems being used in crisis situations. The National Institute of Standards and Technology has conducted research into communication technologies during emergencies and highlighted the challenges mobile networks face in large scale events.

In a post-pandemic learning environment, where students are dealing with increased attentional issues, mental health challenges, and disrupted social development, banning cell phones in schools is more essential than ever. By removing phones from the classroom, schools can help reduce distractions, support mental health, encourage in-person social interactions, and ensure that students focus on learning and recovery.

Furthermore, passage of the bill will assist emergency personnel and school leaders in maintaining order and clear, efficient communication in a crisis. This approach not only promotes academic success but also prioritizes students' well-being, providing them with a healthier, more supportive environment as they navigate a post-pandemic world.

Thank you for your time and consideration.