



February 2, 2024

To: The Vermont Senate Education Committee

From: Chelsea Myers, Associate Executive Director, Vermont Superintendents Association

Re: S. 284 - electronic devices; social media; digital and online products

Thank you for inviting testimony from the Vermont Superintendents Association (VSA) on S.284. Mental health and data privacy are extremely important to both schools and society. In fact, VSA has identified mental health as one of the top priorities for advocacy and is eager to collaborate statewide on solutions to help support the wellbeing of all of Vermont's students. With that said, in speaking to close to 50 superintendents at an Association meeting yesterday, not one superintendent was supportive of the bill as written.

The following points were raised by superintendents in response to the legislation:

1. All of the superintendents that I spoke with yesterday indicated that their school districts have limitations on students' access to cell phones. In some instances, students are required to turn off their phones for the entire day, in other cases, cell phone use is allowed very narrowly with specified limitations (such as at lunch only).
2. Technology in schools is essential for fostering a dynamic and interactive learning environment, enhancing students' digital literacy. Technology facilitates personalized learning experiences, catering to individual learning needs and interests, ultimately preparing students for success in the technologically-driven world they will navigate beyond the classroom.
3. Social media serves as a powerful tool for community engagement with schools. Through popular social media platforms schools can share achievements, events, and important updates, creating a dynamic narrative that showcases the district's story and reaches a broader audience. Though schools can and do use other communication channels, by using social media they are able to reach a broader audience, meeting community members where they are at.
4. Superintendents at the meeting shared their social media use policies, procedures, and handbook language for students and staff. VSA has provided training on this topic in past years.
5. An opt-out policy as outlined in the bill would have significant implications for how schools function. Schools rely on technology for testing, communication,

feedback, personalized learning, literacy and math skill development, foreign language support, and so much more. If just one student were to opt out partially or fully educators would be required to create a parallel track to learning absent technology each day, significantly increasing the workload of educators or requiring additional staff at a time when budgets are under tremendous pressure. The bill says, “Schools shall not penalize or withhold an educational benefit from a student who opts out of any program or activity...” In some cases, there is no non-technological equivalent to the experience and depth technology can provide.

6. If a teacher were to opt out and provide a fully non-digital curriculum, groups of students would not be afforded the same learning opportunities that prepare them for the digital world that we live in today as their peers that are in a classroom with a teacher that has not opted out.
7. Encouraging responsible use of electronic devices in schools allows students to develop essential digital skills for the modern world. In the words of one superintendent, “This is the world now, it is our job to prepare them for it.” Schools are embedding responsible use instruction throughout the learning experience. There are a number of resources available to support this work (for e.g. International Society for Technology in Education). Additional high-quality training and resources could be beneficial to the field.
8. Data privacy poses a concern for all of society. Efforts to ameliorate data privacy concerns should focus on requirements for the organizations who collect and utilize the data. Superintendents prioritize the safety and privacy of students every day. In speaking with a technology director, she provided me with the following examples and resources of how districts protect student data privacy.
  - a. Vermont is a member of the [Student Data Privacy Consortium](#) and has its own data privacy agreement (DPA), modeled after the national version that districts use. Instead of relying on a vendor or platform's privacy policy and terms of service which are always subject to change, vendors sign data privacy agreements from the district. This outlines what they can and can't do with data, especially that of students. Here is an example of a [protocol for requesting new technology](#) at the school level.
  - b. Here is an example of a [student data privacy page](#) on a district website that outlines the steps they take to protect students, pertinent laws, and additional resources.

Thank you for your time today.