

From: Jay Nichols , Executive Director
Date: February 2, 2024
Subject: S. 284 Cell Phones/Electronic Devices

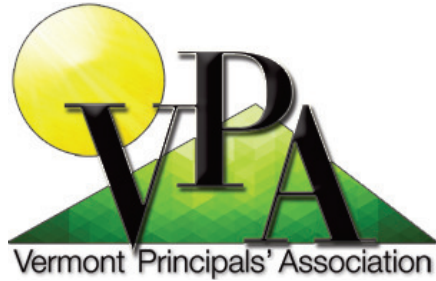
For the record, Jay Nichols, Executive Director the Vermont Principals' Association.

In preparation for testimony on this and related issues, the Vermont Principals' Association (VPA) conducted a survey to ascertain what current policies and procedures are in place in Vermont schools. We put out this [quick survey](#) and had over 100 responses from school leaders. There is a link below with a lot more information including graphic charts for your review. Please look at the aggregate data and don't focus too much on the comments as only a small percentage of individuals actually left comments. I have also talked to teachers, curriculum specialists, technology integrationists, and other interested parties.

On January 19, 2024, the VPA Executive Council discussed the issue of banning cell phones in schools. We did not review this specific bill as we did not know the tenets of it at that time. However, the conclusion of the Executive Council, who serve as the governing body and representatives of principals throughout the state is clear. **The VPA does not believe that banning cell phones outright in schools as a state law is the correct course of action.** In Vermont, we have a long tradition of local control. In most cases, having individuals closest to the local school making the decisions that impact that school and community is the best course of action.

Specific comments regarding various aspects of the bill:

- Mental health issues for students are a real crisis. Social media and technology are likely contributing factors in many cases. Already, most schools have social media and cell phone access completely or significantly restricted during the school day. Providing the mental health resources that students need when they need them is probably a better approach to addressing mental health needs in students than banning cell phones and social media from schools
- Every aspect of society uses social media as a communication tool and resource. Almost all schools use social media to reinforce information that goes out from schools -to families and students in a quick, timely manner. Robocalls to cell phones, automated text messaging, facebook & instagram postings among many other social media communication tools are used regularly by schools and are expected by our families and



communities. Not allowing schools, school districts, and supervisory unions to communicate through social media is a nonstarter for us. Our parents are used to this instant messaging communication format, and frankly, expect it.

- Tools like the Google classroom suite of products that are free for schools are used daily by tens of thousands of students and teachers in Vermont. Programs such as powerschool and blackboard that allow parents and students to check grades and assignments in real time as well as the google platform have become everyday tools in schools. To ban them would only hurt the progress of students who will be looking for jobs and pursuing higher education in our increasingly digital world.
- Our students need to be able to use digital devices. Allowing students to completely opt out of all digital device use is not part of what public education should be teaching in the current world; in fact, our students are required to take federally mandated assessments online and many of our local assessment systems rely heavily on formative assessments that are digital in nature. Requiring schools to have paper copies for students in advance of instruction is a huge burden to schools and not necessary. It is not appropriate to allow students to simply opt out of learning how to use technology in today's world. And the idea of separating students by whether or not they are allowed to use technology or not does not make sense in the inclusive classroom we strive to create.
- In the modern school, educating students to become savvy and critical users (and creators) of digital tools to help them become informed and integrative effective communicators and collaborators in our increasingly digital world is a key skill.
- Parents like the security they feel, and the practicality in communication that they have when their students have access to cell phones before and after school. Schools can limit and fully restrict them during the school day and many do; however, we believe completely banning them from school property before and after school by statutory decree is a bridge too far.
- Allowing students responsible use of cell phones or school issued devices in some contexts also help students develop essential skills, such as digital literacy, responsible internet use, and understanding online etiquette. If these skills are not taught in school then they are often likely to not be taught at all.

Recently, I talked to two different educators who utilize cell phones on a pretty regular basis actually in their classrooms with students. One is a physics teacher who often has students use their cell phones during experiments, recording the experiment, tracking data, linking resources and actually sharing video productions of the process. Another is a physical education teacher who has students use a fitness tracker on their cell phones to encourage physical activity and



movement. Now, many educators (and many schools) do not allow students to bring cell phones into the classroom or require students to turn them in at the beginning of the school day or in a given class. The VPA fully supports this but again believes this should be a local decision.

Finally, in terms of the bill itself, we support any steps that the legislature and perhaps more importantly, the U.S. Congress can take in order to protect student privacy data from being used by corporations. We support any federal action in this regard provided it does not impose more burdensome and unreasonable duties on our already overtaxed public school systems. We also support any legal efforts to end childhood exploitation that takes place through social media. In fact, oftentimes it is school officials that find out about childhood exploitation situations and notify local law enforcement and families.

If necessary we can bring in many principals and other school system personnel that can describe how some of the requirements of the bill are untenable and not appropriate for our current day public education delivery system. Please let us know if you would like to do that should this bill in its current form be given any real serious consideration.

In conclusion, The VPA and its members are on the frontline with the negative impacts of digital addiction and social media. Our members work every day with students and families affected by the related anxiety, depression, school refusal, and bullying that this technology contributes towards. Our membership and their school communities have been increasingly proactive in teaching about the risks and limiting or eliminating access during the school day and we support the Attorney General's office class-action lawsuit related to this concern. However, we do not support this bill as written for the reasons listed above.

Thank you.

- [Member Survey, Full Results Responses](#)
- [Opinion Piece in District Administration](#)

SELECTED GRAPHS FROM THE VPA MEMBER SURVEY (23-24)

Does your school have an official expectation for phone use among students?

102 responses

