

TO: Senate Committee on Education

FROM: Colin Robinson, Political Director, Vermont-NEA

DATE: February 6, 2024

SUBJECT: S.284 – Electronic Devices, Social Media and Online Products in Schools

Good afternoon and thank you for allowing us to comment on Sen. Williams' bill, S.284.

Vermont-NEA's 13,000 members – classroom teachers, school counselors, paraeducators, bus drivers, behavioral interventionist – work with students in schools across the state every day and have seen the direct impacts of cell phone use on students' learning, attention, and mental health. As you have heard from other witnesses, the mental health challenges facing students are real and growing. There is no one source point, however there is little doubt that the use of cell phones and social media are a contributing factor. The reality is students can't focus on learning in the classroom – and educators struggle to teach them – if they are distracted by cell phones or are being bullied on social media. We have several specific comments on the bill to share.

Cell Phones

- As a matter of state policy every school district should limit the use of cell phones during instructional hours so students can focus on learning and educators can have their full attention to teach. This could be accomplished through statute or requiring the AOE, in consultation with schools, to adopt a model policy for local implementation. Statewide consistency on this matter is important; the model policy construct as utilized for school branding may be worth exploring.
- Limiting use of cell phones outside of instructional hours or on school grounds is neither reasonable nor practical. Parents should be able to communicate with their children via cell phone in the hours before and after school.

Social Media

- Last May, US Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued an advisory about the effects of social media on youth mental health that stated: *"While social media may offer some benefits, there are ample indicators that social media can also pose a risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents. Social media use by young people is nearly universal, with up to 95% of young people ages 13-17 reporting using a social media platform and more than a third saying they use social media 'almost constantly.'"*
- We know that a significant amount of student-on-student bullying and harassment is conducted online through social media. This happens during all hours, including the two-thirds of a 24-hour day that students aren't physically in a school building.
- We believe S.289, known as the Kids Safe Code bill, would be a critical and important step toward protecting young Vermonters on the internet. Modeled after laws adopted several years ago in the UK,

it would require big tech companies to remove the addictive constructs of the internet for children under 18 while also protecting their data.

- We cannot ignore the practical realities of how social media is used as a communications tool in our society. Communication by school leaders with parents and the community is critical and they should be allowed to use all appropriate and reasonable methods to share this information. Limiting the use of social media for communication purposes does not seem appropriate in an era where digital communication is the norm.

Student Data and Opt-Out

- We must ensure that student data is protected, and the internet and social media are as safe as possible. We believe S.289, the Kids Safe Code bill, is a more comprehensive way to tackle what S.284 is trying to address and as a policy matter will ensure that children and youth are protected online wherever and however, they access it and not just in a school setting.
- Technology is deeply integrated into how our schools function and teach students. Providing an opt-out for students on the use of technology in schools is not practical. Indeed, it is not practical for teachers and other educators, as it will add significant complexities and unnecessary burdens to how they teach all their students.