

TO: House Committee on Education  
FROM: Colin Robinson, Political Director, Vermont-NEA  
DATE: May 8, 2025  
SUBJECT: H.54 – Cell Phone Free Schools

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Good afternoon and thank you for allowing us to comment on draft 2.1 of H.54.

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 social media, technology and 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 major 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.

Vermont educators prioritize the health and well-being of their students above all else. This is why we have insisted upon our students having access to a school nurse in every school, why we support universal school meals, why we are advocating for more affordable housing, and why we are calling for additional mental health services within our school communities.

It is no exaggeration to claim that young lives are being ruined by the unhealthy use of social media and over experience delivered by digital companies over the internet. Cellphones and other digital devices have created overwhelming distraction from student learning. Over the last decade, too many students have become addicted to their cellphones are suffering the consequences of sleep deprivation, lower academic achievement, and the deterioration of personal relationships<sup>1</sup>. On a daily basis, our educators see the direct result of this deterioration which has contributed to the very real need for more counselors and social workers in our schools and communities.

According to the Pew Research Center, 95 percent of U.S. teens have access to a smartphone. 46 percent of teens report that they are online "almost constantly". 98 percent say they are online daily<sup>2</sup>.

It is for these reasons that we support H.54 and appreciate the updates reflected in draft 2.1. We have some specific comments on the current draft.

- §582(a) – Policy Requirement – The first sentence names both cell phones and personal electronic devices, however the second sentence only refers to personal electronic devices. Cell phones should be added to the second sentence.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6449671/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2023/12/11/teens-social-media-and-technology-2023/>

- §582(a)(2) – Exceptions – These exceptions seem appropriate. One additional exception to explore would be for English language learners.
- Effective Dates – We would like to note the current draft has an effective date of July 1, 2026. We understand the need for school districts and educators to have time to implement new policies and to do it well while also aligning with the beginning of a school year. However, we are concerned, given where we are in the legislative session, that unless language moves quickly, there may be requests or desire to push out the effective date to 2027 or beyond.

As a final point, we know that a clear and consistently utilized policy, from bell to bell, that is fully understood by the whole community – including parents and students – is critical to effective implementation. We must not have different community expectations from one place in a school to another. Strong and effective implementation will allow educators to focus on teaching their students and not constantly having to enforce policies adopted related to cell phone use.