

Background

Meghan is the director of communications at the Colchester School District in Colchester, Vermont. She served as the president of the New England Chapter of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) from 2021 to 2024 and was recognized nationally by NSPRA in 2024 with a Front Runner award for her leadership and work in the field of school communications. She previously worked in public safety as an emergency dispatcher and in broadcast journalism, where she was a news photographer and editor.

General Support

I want to start by expressing my support for the general idea behind this proposed bill. We all share the goal of creating a focused, safe, and academically supportive environment in our schools. Limiting the use of personal electronic devices during instructional time is a reasonable and important strategy to reduce distractions and keep students engaged in learning.

At the same time, I urge the committee to consider the important and constructive ways that school districts, educators, and even students currently use technology as part of their official communication, instruction, and career preparation efforts.

School Communication: Reaching a Broad and Diverse Audience

Public schools do not operate in a vacuum. We communicate with a wide array of audiences, each with different needs, priorities, and preferred methods of communication. Understanding and reaching these audiences is essential to building trust, transparency, and support for public education.

Employees are the bedrock of the organization. In many communities, including ours, the school district is one of the largest employers in town. Teachers, administrators, paraeducators, bus drivers, custodians, and other staff not only shape the internal culture of our schools, they also influence the district's identity and reputation in the broader community. They must be kept informed through internal channels and clear, timely messaging. They are our front-line communicators, and strong internal communication supports strong external communication.

Parents and guardians are essential partners in student success, but they are busier than ever. Many are part of two-parent working households or are single parents juggling full-time employment, childcare, and other commitments. Schools must compete for their time and attention, so we must communicate efficiently, clearly, and in an accessible way.

Additionally, our families represent a range of literacy levels, English language proficiency, and access to technology. Accessibility is not optional - it is central to effective communication. Messages should be:

- Delivered in **multiple modalities** (email, text, website, translated paper flyers, etc.),
- Written in **plain, jargon-free language**, and
- **Translatable** for non-English speaking households.

Students, when developmentally appropriate, should be included in school and district communication. Keeping students informed not only fosters a sense of inclusion, it also ensures consistency in messaging between school and home. In Colchester, for example:

- Starting in **grade 6**, students receive school and district newsletters through their district email address.
- From **grade 9 onward**, students also begin receiving emergency communications and relevant follow-up messages through their district email address. They can also opt to provide their cell phone to receive text messages. Whenever possible, we schedule high school messaging to send after the bell. Our mass notification system also offers a student companion app, a secure platform for direct one-way and two-way communication between students and athletic coaches and club advisors.

Other audiences are equally vital to the public education ecosystem. They often require specific, targeted communications based on their roles and responsibilities in the district. These include:

- School board members
- Local first responders
- Partnering agencies
- Coaches and extracurricular advisors
- Parent-teacher organizations
- Local government leaders

Finally, we serve the **greater community**, which includes all residents and taxpayers, especially those who do not have a direct or current connection to our schools. They may not receive school newsletters or email updates, but they pay attention to what they see online, in the newspaper, or when driving past our buildings. For these residents, **social media and platforms like Front Porch Forum are often their only window into what's happening inside our schools**. Maintaining that visibility through public-facing platforms builds goodwill, dispels misinformation, and sustains community support.

Platform Selection is Strategic, Not Random

Each audience has different informational needs, communication preferences, and levels of engagement. To serve these audiences well, districts must take a **multi-channel, strategic approach** to communication, delivering the right message in the right way to the right audience at the right time.

- **Email** is reserved for timely, essential messages such as event reminders, newsletters, schedule changes, or significant updates.
 - Over using email leads to information fatigue—people tune out, overlook, or delete messages without reading.
 - By limiting emails to important items, we signal that when we do send one, it's worth opening.
- **Text messaging** has become the **preferred communication method for most families**. Our surveys confirm this trend, and when choosing a new mass notification platform, it was a priority that it could text mobile numbers.
- **Phone calls** are now reserved **only** for emergencies, school closures, or live conversations with a staff member (e.g., a nurse or teacher).
 - A decade ago, robo-calls were common, even for minor reminders like spirit week themes. But habits and expectations have shifted. Through parent feedback, we learned that routine calls were being ignored. Families had stopped answering or listening, assuming it wasn't important.
 - This presented a **safety risk**. What if we needed to call about an emergency and no one answered? Today, our practice is clear: **robo-calls are reserved for urgent matters only**.
- **Social media** is used for community-building and celebratory messaging. It's where we share good news, spotlight students and staff, promote events, and show our school culture. These are not time-sensitive or critical, but they are crucial to building trust and pride.

This level of **intentionality in communication strategy** helps ensure that when we reach out, our community knows the communication is relevant and worth their attention.

Social Media as a Tool for Transparency, Trust, and Engagement

Social media is not a luxury or a trend, it is a modern public communication tool. Through our district-approved accounts, we can share student achievements, showcase staff excellence, and

highlight the culture and climate of our schools. These channels allow us to promote a sense of connection between the community and the public school system.

For many in our community, social media is their main view into the day-to-day life of our schools. Eliminating this window would disconnect the broader community from the students and educators working hard within those walls every day.

Some recent examples of community-building social media posts:

- **February 2025**
 - Video of an entire school staff **surprising a beloved custodian celebrating her 80th birthday**. *Reached over 5K users, had 741 likes and reactions, and 65 comments.*
 - *“Happy Birthday! What a sweetheart! Made me tear up!”*
 - *“Happy 80th Elsie! Thank you for all the ways you help take care of our community!”*
 - Your Vote Matters video series that **explains the proposed school budget**. One video is hosted by the superintendent and the other is made by a high school senior. *Combined reach over 4K users, had 235 likes and reactions, and 8 comments.*
 - *“Beautiful, Rylee. Nice job displaying and showcasing the heart and soul of the Colchester School District!”*
 - *“Great information.”*
- **March 2025**
 - Our middle and high schools each have a tradition of hosting a **staff vs students basketball game**. *The combined posts reached nearly 8K users, had 599 likes and reactions, and 7 comments.*
 - *“Great photos! Love all the smiles! It was such a fun night!”*
 - *“Happy to see the unified team seniors repping out there.”*
 - We announced that one of our employees was recognized as Vermont’s Middle School Health Teacher of the Year and highlighted her impact on students. *The post reached 3.6K users, had 242 likes and reactions, and 4 comments.*
 - *“Ms. Wilson is the best. CMS is so lucky to have her. Congratulations!”*
 - *“She’s sooo good!”*
- **April 2025**
 - We’ve been doing weekly **Throwback Thursday** as part of our 50th anniversary of Colchester High School. *The post for the Class of 1993 reached nearly 3K users, had 115 likes and reactions, and 8 comments.*
 - *“This brought back so many memories!!”*
 - *“Wow! 93 girl here! This is great, such babies then!”*
 - Photos of a new skateboarding unit in PE. *Reached nearly 4K users, had 141 likes and reactions, and 4 comments.*
 - *“This has to be the most Colchester thing I’ve ever seen. Love it.”*
 - *“I think I actually would have gone to gym if this had been around between ‘04-’08”*

Colchester School District Social Media Channels:

- Facebook: [Colchester School District](#)
 - Instagram: [@colchester_schools](#)
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Protecting Student Privacy

We understand that privacy is a legitimate concern. That's why our district maintains a **clearly defined and strictly enforced media opt-out policy**. All parents/legal guardians are asked for photo permission every year. Those who do not want their child's image or name shared on external platforms can opt out or in at any time, and those preferences are honored across all school and district communications. This system ensures we protect individual rights while still celebrating school community success.

Social Media as a Learning Opportunity

Beyond communication, social media is also an important **tool for learning and career preparation**. Digital media, marketing, and communications are legitimate and rapidly growing career fields. Having the opportunity to teach students how to navigate these spaces responsibly and professionally can give them skills that will be essential in many future workplaces.

One example from our own community is Colchester High School, where students in the yearbook publishing class recently launched a teacher-supervised Instagram page. These students:

- Photograph school events,
- Edit and curate images for public sharing,
- Write engaging captions, and
- Analyze post engagement through basic data analytics.

This is real-world, standards-aligned learning in a safe, guided environment.

A full ban on social media communication would not only impact district transparency and engagement but could also **remove valuable educational opportunities** for students interested in journalism, marketing, communications, or business.

A Balanced Approach

I respectfully recommend a **balanced approach** that supports the underlying goal of reducing distractions while preserving the positive, intentional, and educational use of technology. That includes:

- Supporting limits on personal cellphone use by students during instructional time as recommended by experts;
- Allowing school and district use of official, approved social media accounts for communication and community engagement;
- Permitting teacher-guided and curriculum-aligned student use of social media for instructional purposes;
- Affirming the importance of existing privacy and opt-out protections for families.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak. I'd be happy to answer any questions or provide examples of how schools are using these tools responsibly and effectively to benefit both students and the broader community.

Respectfully submitted,

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