

Recent H.54 (with New Additions)

Good afternoon, Senators.

My name is Ben Clark.

I am a public school teacher, a Vermont school board member, and a parent.

I am here today to speak to you in strong support of the spirit behind H.54, and to offer suggestions to make this bill not just a good idea, but a successful one.

We know what's happening in our schools.

Our students are struggling — mentally, socially, academically.

And while there are many causes, one cause stands out clearly:

The omnipresence of personal technology during the school day.

I work in a district that has already adopted phone-free policies.

I serve on a school board that has taken the same steps.

I have seen firsthand the dramatic difference it makes:

- Fewer discipline issues,
- Less bullying,
- More focused learning,
- Better mental health outcomes.

The Legislature is right to act on this.

The need is urgent.

The benefits are real.

You will hear *legitimate* caution points raised.

I respect those concerns.

For example:

- Vermont values local control.
- First Amendment considerations exist, even around emergencies.
- Schools are already stretched thin.
- Equity and accessibility must be considered carefully.
- Poorly drafted mandates could expose districts to lawsuits.

But none of these are reasons to walk away.

They are reasons to **build a better bill**.

You will also hear some **Weak Excuses**:

- “*Students need phones all day at school.*” — No, they don’t.
 - “*It’s unenforceable.*” — That’s simply not true.
 - “*It will make schools unsafe.*” — That’s false.
 - “*It’s government overreach.*” — That notion is misapplied.
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The truth is there is also **no legitimate emergency argument** to keep phones in students' hands during the day.

Today, most classrooms are already equipped with:

- An intercom system linked directly to the office,
- A classroom computer with email access,
- A hardline classroom telephone,
- Student-assigned school computers with student email accounts,
- A teacher's personal cellphone that the office can often reach in seconds.

That's **five separate methods** for schools to communicate with students during emergencies.

We do not need a sixth, seventh, or eighth path that **distracts from learning** or **endangers lives** when attention is divided.

In fact, during real emergencies, having hundreds of students pulling out phones **makes situations less safe** — spreading panic, misinformation, jamming communication lines, and pulling attention away from survival-critical instructions.

Instead of blind mandates or open chaos, H.54 should be amended to:

1. Assign Implementation to a Task Force

- Charge the Vermont Agency of Education with creating model policies, enforcement guidelines, and due process protections.

2. Provide Model Language and Templates

- For example:

“All personal communication devices must be powered off and stored out of sight from the first starting bell to the dismissal bell (without breaks eg lunchtime).

Devices found in use may be confiscated without warning and held for parental

retrieval during normal school hours.”

3. **Grant Legal Immunity for Good Faith Enforcement**

- Protect staff following approved policies from personal liability.
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And finally, the heart of it:

It is worth noting:

One out of every three voters in the last Vermont election was 65 years or older.

The wise elders of our Vermont community did not grow up with smartphones.

They did not grow up with the internet.

They know — instinctively — that this is a social disease. It does not take them long to come to this conclusion and they do not qualify it for the listener.

And they know the only cure is **clear, unapologetic removal of devices from our classrooms.**

Younger parents know it too.

But they hesitate — caught between guilt and fear.

They use the devices, they bought the devices for their kids. So did I frankly.

They see the consequences.

They want action — but they don’t want to be the bad guy.

They need the schools and the state to be courageous on their behalf.

AND THIS NEEDS TO BE SAID, **the few loud voices demanding full device access**, cannot point to **any** evidence of improved health, achievement, or safety for students.

They can only argue for personal possession — much like smokers once did for cigarettes.

But **the freedom of the individual cannot infringe on the right of all to learn.**

That right — **uninterrupted, uncompromised** — is one the state has a clear **duty of care** to defend.

We do not have enough counselors, administrators, or dollars to heal the damage done by **unrestricted** technology.

But we **do** have the ability to stop making it worse.

By drawing a clear, fair, enforceable line —

- *Use only district-issued educational devices during the school day.*
- *All other personal devices are home devices to be used outside of the school day.*

We reclaim the childhood, the focus, and the learning environment that every Vermont child deserves. Down to the lunchtime, hallway, homeroom conversations they have with their peers. The noise is the point.

We tell our students:

When you see a problem, don't just complain — bring solutions.

That is what I am doing today.

H.54 is an opportunity not just to react —

but to lead.

Please amend H.54 wisely.

Don't just pass a good idea.

Pass a **clear, enforceable, sustainable** solution that protects our educators, our students, and our schools.

We don't need more ways to communicate.

We need fewer ways to distract and endanger.

Vermont must lead — not just in banning phones, but in giving our schools the roadmap to heal.

Thank you.
