

TO: Senate Committee on Education
FROM: Colin Robinson, Political Director, Vermont-NEA
DATE: May 13, 2025
SUBJECT: H.54 – Cell Phone Free Schools

Good afternoon and thank you for allowing us to comment on draft 5.1 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 relationships¹. 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 daily².

In May of 2023, former 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

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

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

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. In 2023, 16% of high school students reported that they had been bullied through social media³. This happens mostly during two-thirds of a 24-hour day that students aren’t physically in a school building but has significant impacts on student’s educational experience.

Vermont educators take seriously the important role they play in the lives of their students, but they also know that the learning, growth and development, and emotional maturation of their students are influenced tremendously by their experiences outside the classroom. Social media is increasingly part of that broad experience and this is why the social media sections are just as important as the cell phone provisions in draft 5.1. Pairing this language with the language in the passage of S.69, Age Appropriate Design Code is so important.

Vermont educators work hard every day to protect their students from harm. A student’s health and well-being will always be an educator’s top priority. 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.

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/yrbs/dstr/index.html>