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Thank you for allowing me to testify today. I speak on behalf of the nearly 2000 Vermonters around the state who have joined the VT Coalition for Phone and Social Media-Free Schools efforts over the past year. We are made up of parents first and foremost. Many of the parents in our group are the wisest of all parents—the grandparents of Vermont. We are also teachers, school nurses, primary care providers, psychologists, social workers, and even –yes, some students! I myself am a mother of three—ages 12, 18, and 20 and a lifelong educator, working over 18 years with kids from preschool up to high school and now with adults.

Cell phones and social media have hijacked much of our attention and ability to focus as adults but the impact on us is nothing compared to the impact on our children—as Dr. Strokoff will have surely shared with you during his testimony. We have collectively, as a society, neglected our job as the adults. These phones crept in as Trojan horses into our homes and into our schools as useful tools that make life easier, but now the story is much different. Now they are using us and waging a war on time, focus and mental health and our children are the ones hit the hardest.

These companies have the most sophisticated designers who are drawing on developmental vulnerabilities of the youth and dopamine cycles to make us addicted to our own bodies' chemicals. The social media apps have features that incentivize you to stay on more. Children love seeing their Snap Score grow. They compare to see who has more friends on Snapchat. They can grow their Snap Score if they accept the Quick Add recommendations that Snap Chat sends them. They incentivize the youth to accept these friend requests, and let's be clear—these "friends" are total strangers. They are often all manners of people you don't want your kid talking to. Often pretending to be kids when they are not. Within a year of joining Snap Chat many youth are offered drug menus on a regular basis.

The school issued devices have blockers on them to help shield students from the unsavory characters and content on the internet. They are there for a really important reason. Even those blockers do not block everything we want them too. But as long as students have their own personal devices, there are no blockers. Students in middle school cafeterias have watched livestreams of suicides and murders via apps like Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, X and Telegraph. Social media companies do have policies to take down such violent videos, but when thousands of viewers have recorded them it can take awhile, and when they allow livestreams, that can quickly gather hundreds of thousands of viewers, there's no undoing what young users—or users of any age for that matter have seen.

We need a tectonic shift – not only with schools but absolutely with holding these tech companies accountable for the harmful algorithms they let loose on our kids. And yes, us as parents do need to work in collaboration and set limits as we're able. We need to educate one another and find ways to support each other through the storms of screaming and crying that happen when we set healthy limits. But it can start with the schools as models. It can start with you keeping this bill before you as strong as possible. Because schools are where we parents look for best practice. If schools have phones stored away from bell-to-bell, and students—once they adjust—feel how good that actually feels, it makes it easier for families to follow suit—setting screen-free Saturdays, or Christmas Eves or seders where phones are away starting late afternoon.

And this really is an equity issue. In our middle class family with two parents, we have decided to prioritize nearly any activity that is not on screens. We have a cupboard constantly stocked with every sort of ingredient for baking. Our three kids ski and snowboard all winter, engage in a myriad of team sports, and we pay for our daughter to be part of a local theater program. I am embarrassed to tell you how much I have spent on yarn at JoAnn Fabrics to satisfy a crochet habit! The kids have rich summer experiences with a few weeks of summer day camp or even overnight camp.

But I feel for all the families without those means. I worked for Central VT Refugee Action Network for a year and a half. The asylum seekers I worked with from South America were doing their best to provide for their kids, but they—like many of us—couldn't stand up to the addictive nature of cell phones. They were often working long night shifts and while there were usually adults in the house, they were often getting much needed sleep. 2 year olds up through teenagers lived non-stop on YouTube and other apps playing videos non-stop. Their devices went wherever they went. For those children, and the children born here in VT but whose parents don't have the means for a rich life of extracurricular activities a school day break of 6-7 hours will be the only break they have. This is important to give them.

That is why it needs to be from the state. Some may call it "top down" but most anyone paying attention will call a spade a spade as my grandmother would say and this is a mental health crisis for our teens. Most Vermonters will call it leadership because it is unfair to let the most struggling kids be in the grips of their phones 18 hours a day. The schools with phones away bell-to-bell are clearly thriving—bullying is down 70-85% and academics are up. Students report the schools feel happier and that they can "breathe again" at school. Their social lives are better. Teachers feel like they're able to teach again and are completing much more of the curriculum than in past years.

For us parents, it's been a frustrating game of keep away. When we come here, some legislators say this needs to be a question for local control. Then, when we set up a meeting with the superintendent they say they are neutral and want the principals to decide, since it will fall on them to enforce it. The principals already get enough heat from angry parents for any number of reasons, and are nervous about setting off a new firestorm. They say they need it to come from the School Board, the school boards are weary from heated discussions over budgets. They don't have the energy for what they fear will be very controversial and make meetings run until midnight. They want it to come from the state. So, when we circle back here, it's hard to be told yet again that you want it to be local control! It sends us desperate parents in circles with no one willing to be "the bad guy" (aka the responsible policy maker) that our youth so desperately need!

If you notice, the districts that have adopted this policy are from some of the higher socioeconomic communities in VT. Thetford Academy, Sharon Academy, Harwood in the Mad River Valley, Lamoille South which includes Stowe. Now Montpelier High School for next fall, and likely Middlebury. It has been like a part-time job this year getting Montpelier High School to adopt this policy. Getting up early in the morning for each month's Coffee with the Principal to keep the conversation going. Leaving food on the table for the kids while we jet to the Parent Council meeting. Paying for color copies of infographics and handouts, setting up one-on-one meetings with school counselors and others who are allies on the faculty or staff to build a coalition of support that can withstand the outlier parent voices who are not for this. Reserving library rooms for public panels with local experts. It's just too big a lift and too much to expect most communities to have a team of parents who can do that.

I'll close by mentioning that a principal at a phone-free school in Maine gave testimony to the Agency of Ed. He said one of his students commented on how much more students were talking. "This is the year of Hello!" he told the principal. It sounds so simple but there's such warmth, hopefulness and potential in that. Exactly what middle and high school should be full of. Please help give hopefulness and potential back to our kids!