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Committee Assistant Daphne Kinney-Landis

Members of the Vermont Senate Education Committee

- **Chair:** Sen. Seth Bongartz (D-Bennington)
- **Members:** Sen. David Weeks (R), Sen. Keshia Ram Hinsdale (D), Sen. Nader Hashim (D), Sen. Terry Williams (R), Sen. Steven Heffernan (R).

Vermont State House Montpelier, Vermont

**IN RE: Senate Bill S. 259 (Introduced- Sen. Wendy Harrison)**

**OPPOSED**

Dear Senators,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding proposals to expand asynchronous instruction. I write as an authority on driver education and traffic safety.

One of our central concerns with expanded asynchronous instruction is its documented impact on social-emotional learning, particularly for adolescents. During the COVID-19 pandemic, educators across Vermont observed a measurable decline in student engagement, accountability, communication skills, and self-regulation as learning shifted from instructor-led environments to isolated, screen-based formats.

Students were physically present but cognitively absent. They logged in, but they were not meaningfully connected to their teachers, peers, or the learning itself. Educators observed increased procrastination, incomplete work, reduced help-seeking behavior, and diminished resilience when tasks became challenging. These observations were widespread and consistent across disciplines.

In response to these challenges, the Vermont Legislature took intentional and commendable action, Act 72. In the most recent session, you acted to bolster social-emotional learning by restricting cell phone use in schools, recognizing that excessive screen time undermines attention, emotional regulation, and meaningful human interaction. That action sent a clear message: learning environments matter, and convenience should not outweigh developmental needs.

The proposal to expand asynchronous instruction, while well-intentioned in its aim to increase convenience and access, risks undermining that same objective. Asynchronous learning further normalizes learning in isolation, reduces real-time human interaction, and increases reliance on screen-based engagement, the very conditions Vermont educators have worked hard to reverse.

This creates a policy tension. On one hand, Vermont has taken steps to reduce digital distractions in order to strengthen focus and student well-being. On the other, the legislature is considering an instructional model that relies heavily on self-directed, screen-mediated learning, often without immediate feedback, accountability, or relational support.

Nowhere is this concern more pronounced than in driver education. Driver education is not a content-delivery course. It is a behavioral, judgment-based, safety-critical learning experience. It requires students to manage risk, regulate emotion, interpret social cues, and make decisions with real-world consequences. These skills are developed through guided discussion, instructor modeling, peer interaction, and immediate correction, which cannot be replicated in a fully asynchronous format.

Young people are asked to demonstrate maturity, impulse control, and responsibility behind the wheel. Yet asynchronous instruction presumes a level of executive functioning, time management, and self-discipline that many adolescents are still developing. Pandemic-era instruction demonstrated that when structure and connection are removed, the students who struggle the most are often those who need support the most.

Convenience and accessibility are important policy considerations. However, convenience should not be mistaken for effectiveness, and access should not come at the expense of student development or public safety.

It is also important to address the underlying premise used to justify this legislation. The proposal has been advanced largely at the urging of entities with a commercial product to sell, and it rests on the assumption that students and families in Vermont face difficulty accessing driver education and traffic safety instruction. That assumption does not reflect the current reality on the ground. Vermont schools are already mandated to provide driver education and traffic safety instruction to students enrolled in Vermont high schools, as well as to eligible homeschooled students.

It is important to acknowledge that in the immediate post-COVID period, there were temporary backlogs in some districts and, in some cases, delayed access to driver education. That disruption was real and understandable given staffing shortages, scheduling constraints, and the broader challenges schools faced statewide. However, that backlog has since been addressed. Programs have stabilized, access has been restored, and schools are once again meeting their statutory obligation to provide driver education. Importantly, these temporary backlogs were known to the Vermont State Board of Education at the time, then chaired by retired Senator John Carroll, and its members. The Board deliberately chose to prioritize instructional quality and student safety over expediency and convenience during that recovery period, a decision grounded in professional judgment and public safety thus the temporary backlog.

Access is no longer the problem; weakening instructional quality is the risk.

Asynchronous instruction is not a replacement for instructor-led or synchronous learning, particularly in disciplines where outcomes are measured not in test scores, but in injury prevention, fatality reduction, and the formation of lifelong safety habits.

Vermont has shown leadership by prioritizing social-emotional learning and student well-being. As you consider this legislation, we respectfully urge the Committee to ensure that policy decisions align with those values and do not unintentionally reverse the progress educators have worked hard to restore since the pandemic.

There are no shortcuts to safety, and there are no shortcuts to human development.

Thank you for your time and thoughtful consideration of this perspective. I would welcome the opportunity to answer questions or provide additional information if called upon.

Respectfully submitted,

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