



**Testimony of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA)**

**Join Public Hearing Regarding
Cell Phones in Schools**

**Presented to the
House Education and House Health Committees
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**By
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Good morning. My name is Jeff Ney and I am vice-president of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). I appreciate the invitation to testify this morning on cell phones in schools. We are thrilled that the House has undertaken this stakeholder process to inform potential consideration of legislation regulating students' personal mobile devices in schools.

Let me begin by saying that I am speaking to you today as an educator and as a person who represents many different viewpoints among my 177,000 members. Let me also acknowledge what many of us know:

- **Our country has a youth mental health crisis.** Smart phones are, of course, not the only factor driving this crisis, but the precipitous rise in mental health issues—like depression, anxiety and a lack of emotional regulation—corresponds with young people's access to mobile devices and social media.
- **Mobile devices disrupt students from learning.** Think of how many notifications you get in a day and how distracting they can be. Well, your average teen gets 237. We at least have fully developed brains that can do a better job of compartmentalizing these distractions. Teenagers who have never known a world when they don't have a Pavlovian response to a "ding" are not so lucky. Students are socially isolated. They engage in more peer interaction via texts and apps than in-person interaction. They walk down halls with their heads down, staring at screens, rather than actually mingling with classmates and friends.
- **Access to cell phones facilitates peer-to-peer cyber bullying.** As I said, children's brains are still developing and they can't always control their worst impulses when they have constant access to a device that can be used to easily relieve frustration or other feelings.
- **It's about more than cell phones.** Mobile digital distractions arise from devices like smart watches and personal tablets, as well as smartphones.

Over the last 18 months, our members have spoken with the elected members of PSEA's Legislative Committee and Board of Directors and have had more conversations about what the appropriate statewide public policy should be as it relates to mobile devices in public schools than about any other subject. These discussions started in earnest as legislators introduced bills in early 2024 and more research was released as part of Dr. Jonathan Haidt's book, "The Anxious Generation." The confluence of that research, educators' growing frustration, and some public school entities adopting policies to limit and/or prohibit students' possession and use of mobile devices encouraged our ongoing discussions about policy.

It would be accurate to say PSEA's legislative position has evolved since April 2024. And I can only explain that evolution by saying while our members have always wanted mobile devices out of classrooms, they didn't always believe it was possible, or they questioned whether it was the state's role to take such legislative action. On the one hand, they questioned if we, as society, missed our window of opportunity to put the genie back in the bottle – i.e., get smartphones out of schools because students, and perhaps ESPECIALLY parents, have become so accustomed to

students having mobile devices over the last 15 years. On the other hand, they recognize all of the downsides of youth use of mobile devices, as I previously shared with you.

But somewhere over the last 18 months, with the confluence of a myriad of factors, and as a growing number of states and school districts took more strident action on their own, our members started to believe that Pennsylvania could and should put the genie back in the bottle, as they say.

Last month, PSEA announced our support for Senate Bill 1014 in a hearing before the Senate Education Committee. As introduced, the bill almost entirely reflects all components that PSEA believes are necessary for a comprehensive state law to establish a minimum foundation for the regulation of students' personal mobile devices in schools, while also providing the opportunity for school entities to tailor their policies based on the feedback of their communities.

Some might argue that we need a law that prohibits both student possession and use of personal mobile devices on school property. Others might say that we should simply let school entities figure it out on their own, as Pennsylvania has a rich history of local control. PSEA respectfully argues the solution is in the middle – one that protects students and respects the needs of local communities – and one that is represented currently in Senate Bill 1014.

PSEA believes the following components are essential for any statewide law:

1. **Restrict possession and prohibit use.** School entities should be required to adopt bell-to-bell policies that restrict student possession and prohibit student use of mobile devices during the school day while on school property. This needs to be the basis of every policy adopted by a school entity. Some people may argue that local control should apply for any cell phone policy. We respectfully disagree. Almost two decades of local control for the regulation of student possession and use of mobile devices in schools has NOT worked. Three memories stand out to me and keep in mind – I am 5th grade teacher. One of my students, who sat in the front row of my class, would text the answers to my students in the back row with his phone in the pocket of his hoodie. I remember the girls who would take pictures of other girls and share the photos with classmates making fun of their clothes and appearance. The victim of the photo sharing came to my room sobbing. And then there was the kid who ordered pizza via his cell phone and had it delivered to the side door of the school.

Teachers and administrators are doing their best, but we need help. We need a law that provides a consistent foundation for school policies. Student access to and use of mobile devices results in too many negative things that are harmful to students to allow over 500 vastly different policies.

2. **The definition of “mobile devices” should include more than smartphones.** We would urge a broad definition of personal mobile devices (i.e., not school-issued) capable of

connecting to the internet that includes cellular phones, smartphones, various types of smart watches, and tablets. I want to emphasize the importance of including watches in this definition. Any teacher can tell you that one of the most common gifts students receive over the holidays is a smartwatch or fitness tracker. You cannot eliminate distractions during the school day if students have a device on their wrist that is pinging with messages throughout the school day.

3. **How possession is restricted should be decided by each individual school entity.** We shouldn't interfere with school entities that have already successfully restricted student possession of mobile devices. Some require students to keep the mobile devices in their lockers or bookbags, some require the phones to be put in classroom phone caddies or cubbies. Some schools might use magnetic pouches that can be unlocked by educators at the end of the day. Our members are creative. One of our teachers retrofitted a briefcase with individual slots for student cell phones – making it easy to keep mobile devices out of sight, but also convenient to take with them in an emergency. But at the same time, we could have school entities and their communities that decide that they don't want students to even bring mobile devices to schools. State policy should provide latitude to do that.
4. **Students, parents, school employees, and local communities should be part of the conversation before school entities adopt their policies.** As school entities prepare to adopt policies, there needs to be a process to solicit input from stakeholders. The most effective local initiatives prioritize student, parent, employee, and community feedback during policy development. Ensuring there is the opportunity to present evidence and research on how mobile devices impact children and youth today, why schools and states are taking action, and what schools can do to assuage the concerns of parents leads to better policies and buy-in. *PSEA wants to be sure that that the feedback of students, parents, and employees occurs during development of the policy.*
5. **There should be limited exceptions for the use of smartphones during the school day.** Our members acknowledge that there are certain situations where student possession and use of mobile devices are necessary. We believe that students with medical conditions, students with IEPs or 504 plans, and students who are English language learners and require translation assistance should be permitted to have and use their devices. PSEA is also open to including an exception for firefighters or EMS volunteers, as they have been included in other proposals.

We would also urge policymakers to maintain an exception for limited instructional circumstances that are infrequent and approved by a school principal in advance. First, our members recognize that there could be opportunities for educators to teach students the responsible and safe use of technology, and most importantly, how such technology can be a tool for learning. Secondly, depending on the subject and devices offered by schools to students, teachers sometimes use smartphones to aid instruction. For example, in business and technology classes, teachers incorporate use of Adobe apps (i.e.,

Photoshop, Illustrator, Firefly) into their lesson plans. Yearbook classes allow students to have and use their phones to take pictures.

6. **The policy requirement should begin with the start of a new school year.** The most effective and efficient time to start a new school-wide policy. While it is not impossible, beginning a bell-to-bell policy in the middle of a school year would be chaotic for students and educators. It would be much simpler to go through the proposed stakeholder process during one school year and then implement the new policy the following school year. Students, parents, and educators would be better prepared to adjust habits with a fresh school year.
7. **Parents need to be consistently informed.** Consistent communication to parents about the policy is important; but so is information on how a parent/guardian can reach their child during the school day. We can't pretend like the last 15 years didn't happen. Parents have become accustomed to being able to reach their children. Ensuring that schools have a phone number that is staffed by a school employee, where parents can reach their children in the event of an emergency can provide peace of mind as communities go through this transition. In addition, nothing would prevent a parent from reaching their child via their school email during the school day on their school-issued device.

We appreciate the attention and priority level given to this issue today. We would urge the House to prepare legislation that reflects these seven principles. PSEA looks forward to conversations with House members and stakeholders who presented their thoughts here today.

In closing, I would say that it is possible for us to do better for young people in the future. Today, we are armed with data and research that clearly show the negative impact unrestricted access to, and use of mobile devices have on our youth and the behavioral challenges that occur in classrooms. Other states are planning to take, or have already taken, action to get a handle on students' use of and access to mobile devices during the school day. Pennsylvania should follow suit. Thank you for your consideration of PSEA's comments. I will be happy to take your questions.