

Becca Schmill Foundation  
Phone-Free Schools Model Legislation

**An Act to Protect Children’s Learning, Focus, and Emotional Health During School Hours**

Statement of purpose of bill as introduced: This bill proposes to prohibit access to personal electronic devices and social media in public schools, independent schools, high school career and technical centers, and prekindergarten programs. It also proposes the creation of a state Commission to study the efficacy and data collection practices of educational technology products currently used in [state] K-12 classrooms.

**[OPTIONAL INCLUSION]:** Whereas the deferred operation of this act would tend to defeat its purpose, therefore it is hereby declared to be an emergency law, necessary for the immediate preservation of the public convenience and the health and welfare of students in [state]

*Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:*

**SECTION 1. FINDINGS**

The [state] Legislature finds that our children are experiencing a mental health crisis and social media is a primary contributor, and:

(a) Virtually all teens (95%) ages 13 to 17 use social media, with more than 1 in 3 reporting that they use it “almost constantly.” While most U.S. social media platforms require users to be at least 13 years old, **nearly 40% of kids ages 8 to 12 use social media.** Annie E. Casey Foundation – June 23, 2024

(b) Numerous studies show that higher levels of social media use among children and adolescents is linked to adverse effects: depression and anxiety; inadequate sleep (which can disrupt neurological development and lead to depression and suicidal behaviors); low self-esteem; poor body image; eating disorder behaviors; and online harassment. Annie E. Casey Foundation – June 23, 2024

(c) Members of historically marginalized groups are proportionately impacted by cyberbullying online.

- Black teens are more likely than Hispanic or White teens to say they have been cyberbullied because of their race or ethnicity.  
[https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/12/15/teens-and-cyberbullying-2022/pi\\_2022-12-13\\_teens-cyberbullying\\_0-05-png/](https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/12/15/teens-and-cyberbullying-2022/pi_2022-12-13_teens-cyberbullying_0-05-png/)
- Black and Hispanic teens are far more likely than White teens to say online harassment and bullying are a major problem for people their age.  
[https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/12/15/teens-and-cyberbullying-2022/pi\\_2022-12-13\\_teens-cyberbullying\\_0-06-png/](https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/12/15/teens-and-cyberbullying-2022/pi_2022-12-13_teens-cyberbullying_0-06-png/)

(d) Underscoring the youth mental health crisis in the U.S., staggering increases in clinical diagnoses of anxiety (134% since 2010); depression (106% since 2010); anorexia (100% since 2010); and substance abuse and addiction (33% since 2010) have been documented in the 2024 book, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, written by renowned social psychologist Jonathan Haidt.

(e) Social media platforms have evolved to include addictive features that pose a significant risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents.  
[Addictive Features of Social Media/Messenger Platforms and Freemium Games](#)

(f) In his June 2024 NYT opinion piece, Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy discussed the link between social media and mental health harms to adolescents and called for warning labels on social media to address, "the defining public health challenge of our time." <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/17/opinion/social-media-health-warning.html>

(g) There is growing evidence that unrestricted use of personal electronic devices and access to social media by students at elementary and secondary schools interferes with the educational and social development mission of schools, lowers student performance (particularly among low-achieving students), promotes cyberbullying, contributes to higher rates of academic dishonesty (i.e., plagiarism and cheating).  
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1287931.pdf>

(h) The Matthew Effect would suggest that communities that are already disadvantaged would be further left behind as phones disrupt classroom instruction. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10409289.2010.549443>.

(i) A 2020 study of Norwegian schools that had banned smartphones, found that:

- Banning smartphones reduces the number of consultations for psychological symptoms by about 2–3 visits per child, per year.
- Banning smartphones lowers the incidence of bullying for both girls and boys.
- Banning smartphones results in girls making gains in both their GPA and externally graded mathematics exams, on the order of 0.22 standard deviations. For comparison, Abrahamsson notes that reducing class size by one student correlates to an improvement of about 0.00–0.05 standard deviations.
- These benefits are particularly strong for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.
- The effects are particularly strong at schools with the strictest bans, requiring students to hand in or lock away their phones, not just place them on silent mode. Abrahamsson notes that, even on silent mode, phones can still pull at a student's attention, distracting them as they wonder if someone messaged them, liked their status, or whatever else.

(j) According to school safety experts cell phones make children less safe in a school emergency. According to school safety expert Ken Trump:

- Student use of cell phones during an unfolding emergency can distract their attention from safety and emergency response directions being given by school staff;
- Cell phone use by students can hamper rumor control and, in doing so, disrupt and delay effective public safety personnel response;
- Cell phone use by students can impede public safety response by accelerating parental and community arrival at the scene of an emergency during times when officials may be attempting to evacuate students to another site.

(k) School should be a safe environment for all students - where social development, learning, and the ability to focus are nurtured and prioritized. It is in the public interest, and is, therefore, the responsibility of this body, to ensure a physically, emotionally, and

psychologically safe school environment for every child in [state] -- one where students can thrive and optimize their future potential.

## **SECTION 2. DEFINITIONS**

(a) "Personal electronic devices" means any electronic equipment capable of collecting, processing, or transferring data or that can access the Internet and is owned by a student. Includes but is not limited to Smartphones, cellular phones, tablets, wearables, and gaming devices.

(b) "Educational technology" or "Edtech" means any digital technology used by a school with the intent to facilitate learning.

(c) "Parent" means a parent or legal guardian of a student who is legally authorized to make education decisions for the student.

(d) "School" means any public school, independent school, career and technical center in [state] that provides full-time education programs for any grade from K-12.

(e) "School-related program" means any school-sponsored or approved activity, event, or function on or off school premises where students are under the jurisdiction of the School District or during any period when school employees are supervising students on behalf of the School District.

(f) "Social media" means a web-based or mobile technology that allows users to connect and interact socially with each other by creating a profile, sharing social connections, and posting content viewable by other users or; a platform where users can construct a public profile, populate a list of connections, and create content for others to see.

(g) "Gaming app" means a software program that allows users to play games on their mobile devices, tablets, or computers.

(h) "Student" means an individual currently enrolled or registered at a school as defined under subdivision (d) of this section.

## **SECTION 3. PROHIBITION OF PERSONAL ELECTRONIC DEVICES AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

### **3.1 Prohibition During School Hours and Activities**

(a) Each school board or governing body shall develop, adopt, and ensure implementation of and make available to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education a policy that requires all personal electronic devices (cell phones, smart watches, earbuds, AirPods, fitness trackers, and Bluetooth connected headphones, etc.) be turned off, securely locked away, and inaccessible to students for the entire school day -- from “first bell to last bell” -- or while under the supervision of an employee of the school district for a school-related program, and an annual report on the impact of the policy. Examples of storage devices include lockable pouches that students cannot unlock, locked phone lockers, pencil pouches, or manilla envelopes stored in a secure location.

(b) Notwithstanding subsection (a) of Section 3.1, a student shall not be prohibited from possessing or using a personal electronic device under any of the following circumstances:

(1) When a licensed physician determines that the possession or use of a personal electronic device is necessary for the health or well-being of the student (such as diabetes monitoring),

(2) When the possession or use of a personal electronic device is required in a student’s Individual Education Plan (IEP), or Section 504 Accommodations Plan,

### **3.2 Prohibition of Integration of Social Media Platforms into Education**

(a) Schools, school districts, school employees and volunteers are prohibited from:

(1) Utilizing social media for communication with students directly or indirectly,

(2) Allowing students to access social media or gaming apps while they are on school property or while under the supervision of a school employee,

(3) Allowing students to access social media on school-issued electronic devices. School-issued devices shall be set up to block social media sites.

(4) Utilizing social media to communicate with students about out-of-school academic work, homework, school sports, extracurricular clubs and any other school-sponsored activities,

(5) Exceptions: This prohibition does not apply to work that requires shared documents, texting, emails, or the use of the Internet for the completion/enhancement of homework assignments, and the electronic submission of assignments.

(b) Schools shall have in place measures to prevent students from accessing social media while on school-issued digital devices and while under the supervision of the school.

**[OPTIONAL INCLUSION] SECTION 4. EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY COMMISSION STUDY**

(a) An Education Technology Commission is hereby created to study the efficacy and data collection practices of Edtech currently used in [state] schools.

(b) The Commission shall consist of no more than 15 persons including the following persons or their designees:

- Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, who shall serve as chair,
- Secretary of Education,
- Attorney General,

A representative from each of the following organizations:

- State Teachers Association,
- State Association of School Superintendents,
- State Association of School Committees,,

The following persons appointed by the Governor:

- State secondary school administrator,
- Representative of non-profit organization specializing in children's digital wellness and/or privacy,
- Parent of student currently attending elementary school,
- Parent of student currently attending middle school,
- Parent of student currently attending high school,
- Two representatives with relevant experience and knowledge of Edtech and/or children's online privacy.

(c) Not later than December 31, 2025, the Commission shall submit a detailed report with its findings and recommendations to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Executive Office of Education. The report shall include a list of approved Edtech that is posted online where available to all [state] school districts.

**SECTION 5 EFFECTIVE DATE:** This act shall take effect upon enactment.