



April 8, 2025

Testimony in Support of SB 158 with key definition recommendations.

Chairman Brenner, Members of the Committee, and Senator Timken,

My name is Christine Vineis and I am CEO of Unite for Safe Social Media of Columbus. Unite is the Ohio lead organization of a national partnership recommending a **bell-to-bell device-free school day across the country** —a policy that would ensure students can learn, engage, and thrive without the constant distraction of personal electronic devices, (including **cell phones, smartwatches, tablets, and other non-school-issued devices.**) Research from the **Phone-Free Schools Movement, Fairplay, the Anxious Generation and leading medical studies** overwhelmingly supports the goals of SB 158 with an expansion of its application to incorporate a distraction-free entire school day (or bell to bell) across the State. Here's why:

1. Personal Devices Are a Major Distraction

Teachers across the country report that **phones, smartwatches, and other personal devices** disrupt learning. **83% of teachers support a bell to bell device free day.** Why? **72% of high school teachers** say phones are a significant distraction in class¹, and studies show that just the presence of a smartphone reduces students' ability to focus². If we want students to succeed, we must remove the distractions that compete for their attention.

2. Academic Performance Suffers

Ohio's math and reading scores continue to drop. Research shows that students who have access to devices during school score **a full letter grade lower** on exams³. Additionally, **35% of students admit to using devices to cheat**⁴. To foster academic integrity and achievement, we must create an environment where students can concentrate and retain information.

3. Teachers' Challenges Are Only Resolved with Bell-to-Bell Restrictions

When devices are not kept out of reach for the entire school day, teachers are forced into a disciplinary role that undermines their primary purpose—teaching. As Scott DiMauro, President of the Ohio Education Association, puts it, *"The system that does not work is leaving it up to the individual teacher in the classroom. Teachers don't want to be the cell phone police."*

Without consistent, school-wide restrictions, educators must constantly enforce policies on their own, losing valuable instructional time. This added responsibility takes a toll on teacher morale—some even leaving the profession altogether.

Distractions caused by phone use are not limited to the classroom. A provocative TikTok text received in the hallway can derail a student's focus for up to 20 minutes, making it far more difficult for teachers to re-engage them in learning.

Partial restrictions—such as only in instructional time - don't solve the problem.

Research from the National Education Association found that in schools where phones are permitted during non-instructional time, 73% of teachers still report disruptions during class. In contrast, schools with full-day phone-free policies see significantly better outcomes: only 28% of teachers in those environments report classroom disruptions.

4. **Social Media and Digital Platforms Are Designed to Be Addictive**

Platforms like TikTok and Instagram are engineered to hijack students' attention, exploiting their developing brains. The US Surgeon General has called for warning labels on social media platforms due to the inappropriate, intentionally addictive and harmful content for young brains. Expecting young people to self-regulate against billion-dollar algorithms is unrealistic. A **comprehensive device-free policy** ensures that school remains a place for learning—not for endless scrolling, texting, or gaming⁵.

5. **Devices Undermine Social-Emotional Learning**

Schools aren't just for academics; they are where students learn essential life skills.

Without devices, students **engage more with peers, develop communication skills, and build meaningful relationships**. Laughter and energy return to the cafeteria. When personal electronics are allowed—even outside of class—these opportunities are lost to screens⁶.

6. **Mental Health Is Declining as Device Use Averages 6 Hours/day**

Starting in 2015 with the explosion of social media platforms delivered by the iPhone, research links high social media and screen use to **increased rates of anxiety, depression, and loneliness**—especially among adolescents. **Students who spend more than three hours a day on social media are twice as likely to experience mental health issues⁷**. Almost 2/3 of teenage girls' report feeling chronically sad or hopeless. Removing personal devices from the school day allows students to be present, reducing stress and improving well-being.

7. **Devices Interfere with Executive Functioning – A Workforce Development Concern**

Developing problem-solving, decision-making, and self-regulation skills is critical for young people to become capable, confident adults. However, constant device access during the school day can hinder this growth by promoting passive scrolling and distraction rather than active learning and critical engagement.

Employers are already facing challenges in hiring young workers who lack essential cognitive and academic abilities. With students receiving up to 300 notifications a day, their capacity to focus, think critically, and manage complex tasks is being compromised. Schools must adopt policies that limit non-essential device use to help students build the executive functioning skills necessary for success in both academics and the workforce.

8. **Personal Devices Pose Serious Safety Risks**

In emergencies, **device use can create chaos—spreading misinformation, overwhelming emergency communication lines, and distracting students from critical safety instructions**. Additionally, cyberbullying, privacy violations, and

exposure to harmful content all increase when students have unrestricted access to personal devices⁹. **A bell-to-bell device-free policy** enhances both physical and emotional safety.

9. **A Complete Device-Free Policy Supports the Whole Child**

Limiting device use only during instruction is **not enough**. Students still experience distractions, social withdrawal, and increased anxiety during breaks. A **full-day policy covering all personal electronic devices** allows them to be fully present in their education, friendships, and personal development—setting them up for success¹⁰.

We thank Senator Timken for drawing attention to saving our children with the singular focus of S. 158.

Ohio can lead by ensuring that schools are environments of **focus, learning, and well-being**. Implementing a **bell-to-bell device-free policy** is a proven, research-backed solution that will **improve academic outcomes, strengthen social skills, and protect student mental health**.

We look forward to working with Senator Timken and the committee to ensure **this critical extension to the entire school day** and that **the policy cover** not just cellular telephones but **all personal electronic devices** to ensure a truly distraction-free learning environment, except where devices are needed for medical or IEP reasons.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions you may have.

Footnotes

1. Pew Research: "72% of U.S. High School Teachers Say Cellphone Distraction is a Major Problem in the Classroom."
 2. "Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity."
 3. "Dividing Attention in the Classroom Reduces Exam Performance."
 4. "35% of Teens Admit to Using Cell Phones to Cheat."
 5. Common Sense Media: "Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use."
 6. "Social Media and Youth Mental Health."
 7. "Children who spend more than three hours per day on social media are at double the risk of experiencing depression and anxiety."
 8. "Children's Developing Executive Function."
 9. National School Safety and Security Services: "Emergency Response Risks Related to Student Smartphone Use."
 10. Phone-Free Schools Movement & Fairplay Toolkit, 2024.
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