

The following is an op-ed authored by Michael Mercier, President of Screen Education ([www.ScreenEducation.org](http://www.ScreenEducation.org)), and published in *The Toledo Blade* on May 5, 2025 ([To the editor: Enforcement loopholes could undermine school phone ban | The Blade](#)). It is being submitted as testimony for the May 12, 2025, hearing regarding S.B. 158.

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### **Enforcement Loopholes Could Undermine Timken's School Phone Ban Bill**

On April 1 Ohio State Senator Jane Timken introduced a bill ([S.B. No. 158](#)) that would ban cell phones from Ohio public schools.

I whole-heartedly support this bill, having long advocated for school phone bans. Since 2016 I've conducted 25 research studies on digital addiction, and for years I have given a talk titled *How to Create a Digital Wellness School Culture* to parents, teachers, administrators, and students, and at educational technology, school librarian, and digital wellness conferences. This talk is built around the core idea of banning cell phones at schools.

While school phone bans have the potential to be transformational, their success isn't guaranteed. Many phone bans fail at implementation for a variety of reasons.

One reason phone bans fail is inconsistent enforcement by teachers. For example, one junior high teacher told me many teachers in her school refused to enforce their phone ban. As a result, students freely used their phones in these teachers' classrooms, and then, emboldened, began using them in the classrooms of teachers who were earnestly enforcing the ban. This created resentment, tension, and conflict.

Another reason phone bans fail is lack of support by school administrators. Many administrators have told me, "These kids are going to have to learn to control their phone use when they become working adults, and if we artificially restrict their access to phones they won't develop that ability on their own." This lack of enthusiasm can result in lax enforcement.

Another challenge can result from phone bans also not applying to teachers. As one student told me, "I'm not allowed to use my phone because it's distracting, yet my teachers leave their phones on their desk and pause class when they get an alert so they can check the message. They also watch movies and play games while students do classwork or take exams." Some students resent this perceived double-standard and vent their frustration by selectively defying the ban. As one student stated, "If the teacher uses their phone during class, then I use my phone. If the teacher doesn't use their phone, then I don't use my phone. Other students do this too."

Parents can pose another challenge because they often are divided about the need for phone bans. For example, some parents accept compulsive phone use as the new normal and therefore oppose phone bans. Other parents oppose phone bans because they want to coordinate after-school plans

with their kids. Other parents want to be able to contact their kids during emergencies, such as the oft-cited “school shooting” example.

In order to mitigate these implementation risks, Senator Timken should make the following changes to S.B. No. 158:

- Define who is accountable for enforcing the phone ban, be it teachers, school administrators, or district administrators;
- Define how those responsible for enforcing the ban will be held accountable for its success;
- Remove the clause permitting phone use for “educational purposes,” as its breadth invites exploitation in interpretation by school boards, administrators, and teachers;
- Require schools to establish detailed communication protocols regarding after-school transportation logistics and crisis communications;
- Restrict teacher phone use during class time to avoid distractions;
- Provide a policy template to ensure consistency across Ohio’s hundreds of school districts.

Making these changes will increase the likelihood that S.B. No. 158 will be optimally impactful and not relegated to the status of symbolic legislation that failed to fulfill its purpose.

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