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STATE SENATOR • 19TH SENATE DISTRICT

Testimony before the Senate Committee on Education

Senator Rachael Cabral-Guevara

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Hello, members of the Senate Committee on Education. Thank you for allowing me to provide testimony on Senate Bill 29 (Assembly Bill 2), a proposal that will reduce classroom distractions and improve student outcomes.

The exponential increase of personal technology in our schools has been staggering. According to Common Sense Media, ninety-seven percent of our kids use their phones during the school day. This has led to a decrease in focus, declining educational outcomes, and demonstrated links to an increase in both bullying and cyberbullying.

As a mom of four, I've seen this first-hand with my own kids. Phones are so addictive that my kids have asked me to hold on to their devices while they are working on homework and other classroom assignments.

This bill intends to add Wisconsin to the list of at least eight states, both red and blue, that are taking steps to get distracting technology out of the classroom. California and Florida may not agree on much, but they have agreed that cell phones and other technology can be distracting and lead to worsening outcomes.

By ensuring school boards adopt a policy within a uniform state standard, we have an opportunity to improve not only test scores, but student morale as well. A study from the London School of Economics found that schools which restricted cell phone use saw a 6.4 percent improvement on test scores over to schools that did not. Beyond those benefits, there is also evidence that we can improve social interactions and reduce social ills that have plagued our schools as a result of this new technology.

Some benefits of technology in the classroom would not be prohibited under this bill. More specifically, the proposal exempts prohibitions for instructional purposes, to help manage a child's medical condition, or for perceived threats.

I am hopeful you will support this important step forward to support our teachers, kids, and parents. Thank you for your time.



JOEL KITCHENS

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 1ST ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony for the Committee on Science, Technology, and AI Assembly Bill 2/Senate Bill 29 March 12, 2025

Cell phones can be a distraction for all of us, but it's even worse for students. The interruptions and the pressures of social media are detrimental to children's mental health as well as to their education. Assembly Bill 2 will require schools to ban cell phones and other electronic distractions during class time.

Since smartphones and social media became prevalent in 2010, the mental health of young people across the world has rapidly declined. The impact on young girls has been particularly severe. Suicide among girls has nearly tripled during that time.

You have testimony from Jonathon Haidt, the author of the New York Times number-one bestseller, *The Anxious Generation*. Dr. Haidt's book has been incredibly influential in bringing awareness of this crisis to the world. In their testimony, you can read about the impacts on mental health further.

The impact on educational success is nearly as troubling. For fifty years, academic achievement in the U.S. has been steadily climbing. Since 2012, it has steadily declined. The average high schooler spends between 7 and 9 hours per day on their phone, leaving little time for school work and socialization and robbing them of their ability to focus.

Removing them during class time will certainly not solve all these problems. Technology is not going away, but we must teach young people to use it responsibly. Part of that is putting it aside when there is work to do.

Dr. Haidt will argue that phones should be removed for the entire school day and I agree with him. Resistance is strong, however, particularly among parents and I do not believe it is politically possible in Wisconsin right now. Removing them during class time is an important first step.

Nearly every school district in Wisconsin already has a policy in place. At the CESA 7 meeting last week, when the superintendents were asked to raise their hands if they had a policy, every hand went up. The problem is enforcement. In spite of 90 percent of districts having a policy, 71 percent of high school teachers say phones are a major

problem in their classrooms. Without a strong, unified approach to the problem, most teachers eventually throw their hands up.

The goal of these bills is to provide that unified approach. By applying the power of state law behind these restrictions, we are giving support to our schools. This is not something we are doing *to* the school districts; it is something we are doing *with* them. The vast majority of superintendents with whom I have spoken, including all of those at CESA 7, are appreciative that we are willing to stand with them on this.

AB 2 does not usurp local control. Each district will have its own policy and it will determine how best to restrict phones, as well as how to enforce the policy in its district. I would expect the policy in every district to allow for the use of technology for educational purposes. Additionally, exceptions may be granted for the monitoring of medical conditions like diabetes and for emergency situations. We deliberately drafted the bill to be as open as possible, so that districts can make their own policy on what constitutes an emergency, for instance, and who has to give approval.

The Wisconsin Association of School Boards, the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators, and DPI are all vehemently protective of local control, yet none of these groups opposes the bill.

Districts are free to restrict phone use beyond what is required in the bill, and it is hoped that many will elect to ban them during lunchtime or for the entire school day. There was some concern about that, so we have drafted an amendment to make it very clear.

Resistance to cell phone restrictions comes primarily from parents. Many feel the need to be able to reach their children 24 hours a day. If they are only banned during class time, they could still reach their kids between classes. Schools will write into their policy how they can be reached in cases of emergency.

Whenever I discuss this bill, someone says that kids need phones in case of a school shooting. Law enforcement is unanimous in saying that in cases of an active shooter situation, the last thing they want is for kids to be on their phones, drawing attention to themselves. They should be running and hiding and listening to directions. They do not want their 911 line to be tied up with dozens of conflicting accounts.

The results of cell phone bans in schools have been universally positive in the U.S. and across the world. In Orlando, schools report that students are more engaged, with less bullying and early reports show a dramatic improvement in test scores.

One study compared schools that ban phones against schools that do not. Test scores of 16-year-olds jumped 6.4% in the schools that banned phones. The study also found the positive effects of a ban were twice as large for low-achieving students.

Reports find that, while there may be some resistance initially, students support the policies. They do not mind being away from their devices, as long as everyone else is too.

This is truly a nonpartisan issue. In the last few weeks, the governor of New York issued an executive order to implement an all-day ban policy. When implemented, they will join Louisiana in having the strictest policies in the country. When have those two states ever been united politically?

To our shame, Wisconsin is the only state in the nation where this has been a partisan issue. On the same day that we passed it out of the Assembly along party lines, Governor Pritzker of Illinois announced his support in his State of the State address, to a standing ovation from both sides of the aisle. Two days later, Governor Whitmer of Michigan announced support to a similar bipartisan response. In Florida, it passed unanimously.

It's time for Wisconsin to join the growing list of states that have taken steps to limit cell phones and teach responsible technology use.

Dear Wisconsin Legislators,

We are writing to support current efforts to support phone free schools in Wisconsin. However, we think that the current bill can and should be made stronger, by clarifying that schools should adopt a policy that applies throughout the school day, rather than just during classroom time, in addition to a few further suggestions that we elaborate on below.

We are the author and primary researcher of the book, *The Anxious Generation*, which documented the negative effects that smartphones and heavy use of social media has had on youth around the globe. The book has spent more than 35 weeks at the top of bestseller lists and has been used to motivate grassroots mobilization of students, teachers, administrators, and parents for phone free schools. Technology can certainly provide benefits to young people, but the current business incentives and practices of some tech companies are leading them to cause vast harm to children and adolescents. Protecting kids from online harm is non-partisan, and supported by the majority of Americans. Legislators have the opportunity to take clear decisive action, joining the bi-partisan movement to protect kids' mental health, attention, and relationships by supporting phone-free schools.

The proposed legislation would be an important step in giving kids a break from harmful and addictive technology for the 6-7 hours each weekday that they are at school. This is critically important for students, as well as for teachers and administrators. Schools influence 13 years of critical child development and can help students establish lifelong patterns of healthy behavior. Based on our research, we believe that phone free policies are likely to provide substantial academic, socio-emotional, safety, and economic benefits for schools.

Phone-free schools are likely to reduce distraction and increase student focus. Recent studies have found that students receive an average of 237 notifications each day. Just during the school day, students spend an average of 90 minutes on their phones, with 25% spending more than 2 hours. Experimental studies have found that student use of devices reduces subsequent academic performance. 35 percent of students admit to using their phones to cheat. Many instances of bullying and fighting begin with electronic communications.

Teachers, who are most qualified to comment on the effects of phones in schools, see the problem. 84% of educators believe that social media contributes to mental health issues among students at their schools. 91% said social media has negatively impacted how students treat people in real life.

The problems have reached a tipping point. Teacher morale is plummeting and some teachers have been driven to quit. 88% of teachers believe that smartphones make their students more distracted or tired, while 74% believe they make students more depressed, anxious, or lonely and 85% believe they increase student conflict and bullying. 72% of high school teachers say that cell phone distraction in their classes is a major problem. 83% of teachers support a policy that prohibits phone use for the entire school day.

Although there are many strengths to the current bill, we believe that this important legislation could be made even stronger in several ways. We would ask that any policy have these five essential features, as elaborated in this model bill:

1. **Require all schools in the state to comply.** - This eliminates any confusion across districts, sets a norm for an entire community, and allows students to relax, knowing that they will not be missing activity from friends at other schools. We believe that this bill should set a strong uniform policy now, while the issue has legislative attention.
2. **Physically separate students from all personal devices.** - The regular use of devices in school is a distraction to students, whether a device is a smartphone or is just used to receive text messages. We would encourage you to add this specification within the current bill.
3. **Ban phones for the entire school day.** A classtime-only rule also doesn't give teachers as much benefit as they might expect. Research from the National Education Association found that 73% of teachers in schools that allow phone use *between* classes report that phones are disruptive *during* class. In contrast, of the several policies examined, only the phone-free or "away for the day" policy produced good results with only 28% of teachers in such schools saying that phones were disruptive during their classes. It is only when students have 6-7 hours away from their phones that they fully turn to each other and to their teachers. This provision is critically important and so we would encourage you to add this specification as mandatory across districts within the current bill.
4. **Stop schools from requiring smartphones and social media use.** Schools should not use social media as a primary communications tool, to allow parents the freedom to make individual choices about whether or not to use social media, both for themselves and their kids. We feel that this would be an important addition to consider.
5. **Include two (and only two) important exceptions.** While it may be tempting to add many exceptions to placate parent fears, there are only two that we have found to be widely necessary: medical needs, and special education needs. Some students may have a legitimate health or educational need that requires access to their own smartphone. On the other hand, a common exception that gets included in many bills is mandating that students should have access to their phones in case of emergencies. But these exceptions are problematic because while it makes perfect emotional sense for parents to want to talk to kids during an emergency, experts suggest that kids should be focused on listening to instructions during emergencies, not on calling parents. We appreciate that the current bill does indeed limit exceptions but would encourage the removal of the exception for emergencies, given the recommendations of school safety experts.

While we strongly support this effort to legislate phone-free schools in Wisconsin, we hope you will take advantage of the momentum that exists and join other jurisdictions in passing a strong "bell to bell" statewide phone free policy.

We have yet to find a school that earnestly tries to go phone free and regrets it. Students, teachers, and administrators are reporting a wide range of positive benefits, from in-person

socialization and laughter in the hallways to reduced distraction and improved student engagement.

We thank you for your efforts to protect kids in Wisconsin and would be glad to follow up further.

Jonathan Haidt
Zach Rausch



March 13, 2025

Senate Committee on Education

**Department of Public Instruction Testimony
2025 SB 29**

I want to thank Chair Jagler and members of the committee for the opportunity to give testimony on SB 29. My name is Sara Knueve and I am the Assistant Deputy State Superintendent for the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and with me today is Amanda Albrecht, the Digital Learning Consultant for the DPI.

We are here to testify for information only on SB 29. Toward the conclusion of our testimony, we will be making one recommendation for consideration.

The DPI's vision is for engaged learners that create a better Wisconsin together. This bill gets to the heart of the word "engaged." What does it mean to be an engaged learner and how do wireless communication devices affect students' ability to pay attention, connect with others, and learn? This is a complex question and our response requires flexibility, responsiveness and clear expectations. We hold two big ideas at once on the topic of wireless communication devices:

Idea Number 1: Technology is here to stay, and it is the role of educators to equip students with the digital learning skills necessary to compete and thrive in today's society.

Idea Number 2: We understand and need to mitigate the negative impact electronic communication devices can have on both student mental health and learning.

This proposed legislation aims to address the negative and disruptive impacts caused by wireless communication devices during instructional time. By limiting their use, the aim is to create a more focused and productive learning environment that enhances student engagement, academic performance and well-being.

Understanding the complexity of this issue and the need for input from educators, families and other partners, the DPI held a series of listening sessions in October 2024. These sessions provided a space to discuss the role of electronic communication devices in the classroom and gather valuable perspectives from those who are directly impacted. The DPI hosted four virtual listening sessions, where we heard from more than 125 participants, including educators, school administrators, DPI staff, school nurses, parents, students, mental health professionals, community members, and the State Superintendent's Family Advisory Council for Engagement.

The first question we asked was, "What is your current local policy regarding cell phones?"

As reported in the 2024-25 State Digital Learning Survey taken by 320 out of the 421 public

districts in Wisconsin, approximately 90% of districts that responded to the survey already have some sort of restrictive cell phone policy in place. Fewer than 10% of districts checked the box that read "no restrictions on cell phone use (teacher discretion)." Our hunch is that districts that reported in this way likely did so because their policies are more nuanced, context dependent and teacher dependent.

Cell phone policies across Wisconsin schools vary significantly. In general, middle and high schools tend to have some form of restriction, while elementary schools usually enforce a "no phones during the day" policy. To manage devices, some schools use strategies like "phone hotels" or caddies for storage.

Recent discussions have highlighted the need for case-by-case accommodations, such as allowing students with visual impairments to use phones for accessibility or other students needing devices for medical monitoring. Parental concerns about student safety often shape policies, especially in urban areas. Additionally, some educators stress the importance of teaching students how to use devices responsibly, rather than implementing outright bans.

The last question we asked was "What might be helpful for a cell phone policy from a statewide perspective?"

Many district leaders, educators and community members favor district-specific policies instead of state-wide mandates, reflecting Wisconsin's long-held belief in local control. Many also suggest that the DPI offer model policies, best practices, and research to support local decision-making. Flexibility is crucial to accommodate diverse student needs, to keep up with rapid technological advancements, and to respond to the unique contexts of different communities.

While many prefer local control, most who attended listening sessions called for each district to have clear policies related to cell phone use that are district-wide, developmentally appropriate and concisely communicated to families.

Policies in other States that Restrict Cell Phones during Instructional Time

In addition to listening sessions held in Wisconsin, we also evaluated policies from other states regarding cell phones. Currently, approximately 14 states have laws in place that restrict the use of these devices in schools. A study by the Education Commission of the States found that most states' policies are flexible enough to address cell phone use at the local level, allowing school districts to develop and implement policies that best suit the collective needs of their students.

In addition to policies related to cell phones, districts understand their role in effectively integrating educational technology to prepare students for success in an ever-changing digital world. When technology is woven into curriculum, educators can create interactive and engaging learning experiences that encourage critical thinking and problem-solving. Teaching students how to use these tools responsibly and effectively helps them develop the skills they need for future careers. By emphasizing digital literacy and citizenship, we ensure that students aren't just passive users of technology, but informed, ethical participants in the digital world.

Any restrictions on electronic communication devices should allow for flexibility, giving educators the ability to let students use these tools for learning when it's appropriate. Device policies should also go hand in hand with a strong focus on digital citizenship, both at school and at home.

Impact on Mental Health

One of the primary advantages of the restricted use of mobile electronic communication devices is the potential for improved academic focus and performance. Studies have demonstrated that cell phone use, particularly for non-academic purposes like social media or texting, can disrupt students' concentration and hinder their ability to retain information.

Additionally, reducing access to cell phones during school hours has been associated with positive social and behavioral impacts. Unstructured use of phones often leads to issues like cyberbullying and social isolation, as highlighted by the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, which explores how cell phones can exacerbate feelings of exclusion and anxiety, especially through social media use¹. Schools that have implemented cell phone bans during instructional time have reported declines in bullying incidents and improvements in student engagement and behavior. This suggests that district-implemented restrictions can provide a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere that prioritizes students' well-being.

Recommendations for 2025 SB 29

The department wants to thank Representative Kitchens for listening to our hopes for this policy and making adjustments to best serve students. The department believes the goal of limiting technology disruptions during instructional time is wise. Our recommendations take the approach of setting a statewide policy goal of restricting non-district issued electronic devices and leaving the local implementation of the policy up to school boards and communities.

We recommend eliminating the reporting requirement. All local school board policies are public and easily accessible if one needed to pull that information. Districts do not need one additional reporting requirement in their already stressed systems. Districts need the time to implement these policies and engage their community on their goals for the betterment of student learning.

We recognize issues around cell phone use and etiquette go far beyond the classroom. SB 29 addresses a small part of the time our youth have access to this technology, and today's discussion highlights the need to tackle these broader societal challenges.

In closing, the Department of Public Instruction is dedicated to offering the necessary model policy guidance and support our districts' need to manage electronic communication devices in their schools in a way that enhances learning and minimizes their impact on student mental health. We appreciate Senator Jagler for his open communication throughout this process and look forward to working with him on the suggestion we've shared today.

Thank you for your time and attention. We would be happy to take any questions you have at this time and our copy of our submitted testimony includes my email address to direct any future questions: sara.knueve@dpi.wi.gov

March 13, 2025

Dear Members of the Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of Assembly Bill 2. My name is Christina, and I am testifying today in support with amendments. While this bill is a good start, I am advocating for schools to be phone-free the entire day, not just during instructional time.

I am a Milwaukee-based mom of two young daughters, ages 6 and 3. Smartphones and social media are not a problem for my kids yet. But when parents of older kids tell me about their constant struggles over phones, it feels like I'm watching a slow speed train crash that's headed right for us. I don't want my daughters to grow up in a world where it is accepted that kids average over 1.5 hours on their smartphones during school, not to mention many more hours on their phones outside of school. Where kids use their phones to cheat at rates that were unimaginable when I was in school. Where school lunch rooms and the hallways between classes are quiet because everyone's looking down at their phones. Where girls in particular are suffering from skyrocketing rates of anxiety and depression due in large part to the phones.

But I don't want to spend my whole testimony on the negatives. Instead, I want to focus on the ways in which life gets so much better for kids who have the privilege to attend schools that are phone free for the entire day. Kids at schools that have implemented such policies have reported major improvements in mental health, grades, and socializing.

One student at a school in Vermont that recently went phone free for the whole day said this about the change: "It's been incredible. My grades have been up across the board; I feel like I focus more and am more productive... Before, [during] tests, I'd try to go quick so I could get it done and be on my phone. Obviously, now you can't do that, so I find myself double checking every answer on all my tests. Because of that, my grades are going up."

Another student said, "More people talk, more people hang out, they're less distracted, and I think they're just genuinely happier."

And here's one last student quote: "I just see a lot more conversation, a lot more social behavior, and it just seems like a happier environment."

At the risk of bringing politics into this, I wanted to mention that I've been a democratic voter for pretty much my entire adult life. I know my fellow democrats in the Wisconsin legislature care deeply about the mental health of children, as do I. That's why I was surprised when I found out that no democratic representatives voted in favor of Assembly Bill 2 when it was brought to the state assembly a few weeks ago. I believe getting phones out of schools would have an immediate positive impact on the mental health of kids, and so I hope we can have bipartisan support for phone-free school legislation in Wisconsin, just as there is in many other parts of the country.

I know there are concerns about this bill infringing on local control. But in my view, every child deserves to access the benefits of a phone-free education. If we leave this issue up to local control, many students will be left behind, and that's not equitable.

I also understand there are concerns about costs, but here's why I think this is unwarranted. First, phone-free school policies can be implemented at a very low cost. At South Division High School in Milwaukee, they use a system of simple plastic bins and manilla envelopes, and it's effective. Second, looking at the bigger picture, any cost of implementing this policy will surely pale in comparison to the mounting healthcare costs of the youth mental health crisis. And that's not even getting into the incalculable cost to society of a generation entering the workforce whose reading and math abilities are far below that of prior generations because they were too distracted by their phones during their school years to master these critical skills. In short, getting phones out of schools will cost very little now and will pay dividends in the long run.

Many of the problems that you debate in this room are incredibly complex, costly, and difficult to solve. Good news: this problem isn't like that. We can take a very simple step right now at little to no cost that will make an enormous positive impact on the mental health, academic success, and general wellbeing of our kids. We can follow the courageous example set by states as politically diverse as California and Louisiana, among many others, of getting phones out of our schools so our kids can thrive.

Former surgeon general Vivek Murthy said, "The moral test of any society is how well it protects its children." When we first started giving our kids smartphones and allowing this addictive, distracting technology into our schools, we didn't understand the harms. But now we do, and it's time to act. Thank you.

Recommended Amendments to AB2 based on Phone-Free School Model Legislation:

- **Extend the policy to be bell-to-bell (for the entire school day including lunch and passing periods), and physically separate students from all personal devices.** Studies have found that the mere presence of a cell phone, even when it is silenced and stored out of sight, reduces cognitive capacity. Free from devices, kids are able to spend more time focusing on teachers and their fellow peers.
- **Expand definition of "wireless communication devices" to include Bluetooth-enabled devices and smartwatches and other wearables.** These devices also cause distraction, taking kids away from learning.
- **Eliminate exceptions for instructional time, emergencies, and school-board determinations.** There are two important exceptions that are already in this bill and that should remain: medical needs and special education needs. Exceptions for instructional time, emergencies, and school-board determinations should be removed for the following reasons. Instructional time - because no teacher should require a student to use a distracting device like a smartphone for the purpose of learning. Emergencies - because experts say that kids should be focused on listening to instructions during emergencies, not on calling parents. School board determinations - for the reasons stated previously.
- **Require school boards to adopt policy that prohibits use of social media platforms for student and parent communication.** Schools should not use social media as a primary communications tool because parents should have the freedom to make individual choices about whether or not to use social media, both for themselves and their kids.

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