

Dear Members of the Kansas Legislative Committee on Education,

I am writing to express my strong support for the proposed legislation to reduce the use of cell phones in Kansas schools. As an advocate for educational excellence and student well-being, I believe that this measure is crucial for enhancing the learning environment, promoting mental health, and safeguarding our students.

My career began in the classroom with a Bachelor of Arts in Education where I spent two years in the public schools followed by three years in a private school setting. After my time in the education system, I decided to return to school and concentrate on a degree in mental health, something that I saw great need for while teaching. In May of 2019 I graduated with a Master of Education in Counseling with a Graduate Certificate in Child Play Therapy. I then began a career at a mental health center working alongside teachers in classrooms, families of students in need, and the students themselves, to help develop better emotional regulation in the classroom, in the home, and in the community. It is my professional opinion that technology, especially the unmonitored access to cell phones at all hours of the day, is causing a deep disruption in our youths' ability to develop age-appropriate social skills, regulate emotions, and engage in a classroom setting with an educator and peers.

Educational Distraction

A common teacher complaint – and something I can attest to myself from my years in education – is the high number of students who are unable to stay on task for periods of time. Evidence indicates that excessive screen exposure can be detrimental to developing brains. Adolescent brains are still being internally wired and will not reach maximum development until the age of 25. While there are many studies being conducted regarding the damaging health effects that cell phones are having on our youth, one study done through Harvard suggests that high frequent digital use appears to increase the risk of ADHD symptoms by about 10%. The result is classrooms full of children from a very young age who are unable to sit in with their peers to learn. Hyperactive students also distract other students from absorbing information and require excessive amounts of teachers' time and energy to be expended on constantly refocusing the child and the classroom rather than educating. Now, not only do teachers have to deal with the adverse symptoms of screen usage, but we allow the cause of the issue to follow them into the school setting, adding more distraction. Having a cell phone free environment would greatly reduce distractions, allow students to experience a richer atmosphere, conducive to higher academic outcomes, and minimize the impulsivity to being electronically connected all day.

Mental Health Concerns

The startling links between excessive cell phone use and declining mental health should be sounding alarms. The pressure to be constantly available on social media and the exposure to cyberbullying are significant stressors in society as a whole. But these are particularly dangerous to child development because children do not have fully developed emotional regulatory skills. Depressive moods, anxiety, loneliness, and other mood disorders have been linked to individuals with excessive cell phone use. Teen mental health appears to have begun deteriorating significantly around 2008 and while many will blame a plethora of things, it is an astonishing coincidence that the iPhone was introduced in 2007 and we have never seen a teenage mental health crisis like today.

Research shows that mobile cell phone addiction is regulated by the same brain circuits as other behavioral addictions, such as alcohol addiction. This means we are knowingly sending our students, who have not developed complete regulatory skills and are more susceptible to being drawn into addictive behaviors, into our classrooms with a highly addictive, unmonitored piece of equipment, that is known to cause adverse mental health effects. A simple but highly effective step to help mitigate these stressors would be limiting cell phone access during school hours. By creating a cell phone-free environment, schools can provide a safer, more supportive atmosphere for students to learn and grow.

Safety and Privacy

While cell phones are often touted as essential tools for safety, their misuse can compromise both safety and privacy within the school environment. In my experience adolescents are unaware of the consequences both long and short term that come from cheating using a cell phone, unauthorized photo sharing among their peers, and other violations of privacy that are facilitated by easy access to mobile devices. Students are often unaware of the threat that they become to themselves or those around them through using unfiltered social media and the access that they allow to those with abysmal intentions. Limiting cell phones in a school setting would help address these concerns, fostering a culture of integrity and respect for the student and their peers.

Fostering Social Interaction

Finally, the reliance on cell phones has eroded students' ability to engage in face-to-face social interactions, an essential skill for personal and professional success. Cell phones have become the proverbial "security blanket" for our students. When students are stressed, anxious, or feel alienated in social situations they often retreat into their phones. Using this tactic stunts social development by allowing the student to disengage from the discomfort instead of overcoming the social obstacle. To be a healthy functioning adult in society we must use our adolescent years to learn how to have healthy, respectful relationships with individuals and in group settings. It is through in-person social interactions that we master those skills. If opportunities are never

created for students to work on their social skills they will most certainly be affected in their daily interactions as adults. By limiting cell phone use, schools can create more direct communication, collaboration, and the development of social skills that are essential to be a healthy and productive adult.

In conclusion, we have an opportunity to make a positive impact on our students now by reducing cell phone use in Kansas schools. This bill represents a proactive step towards prioritizing educational outcomes, protecting student mental health, ensuring safety and privacy, and promoting social interaction. I urge the committee to consider the long-term benefits of this policy for the well-being of our students, the quality of education, and the career opportunities for our adolescents in Kansas.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

Katherine Eck