

Dear Chair Heinert and members of the Committee,

We are writing in support of SB 2354 and in support of phone free schools in North Dakota. We applaud the “bell to bell” device separation mandate that applies to all schools and the overall strength of the amended bills.

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.

In general, we recommend that any policy have five essential features:

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 appreciate that the current bill sets a strong 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 appreciate that the current bill does this.
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. We appreciate that North Dakota' bill is indeed "bell to bell" in that it mandates separation for the entire school day.
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.
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 has limited exceptions.

In summary, we support this effort and applaud North Dakota' efforts that will be aligned with best practices across the nation.

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 North Dakota and would be glad to follow up further.

Sincerely,
Jonathan Haidt & Zach Rausch

