

TESTIMONY ON SB 2354
HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
Wednesday, March 26, 2025
By: Kirsten Baesler, State Superintendent
701-328-4570

Chairman Heinert and members of the House Education Committee,

For the record, my name is Kirsten Baesler, and I serve as the Superintendent of the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction. Thank you for the opportunity to speak in strong support of House Bill 1160 and Senate Bill 2354. These bills provide a much-needed, statewide framework to address the use of personal electronic devices in our schools — a step that is both practical and urgently needed.

As North Dakota’s State Superintendent for more than a decade, I’ve had thousands of conversations with our teachers, students, and school leaders. Every year, those conversations grow more concerning. I continue to hear — with increasing frequency and urgency — that our teachers can’t even teach the basics anymore because student mental health challenges have become so overwhelming in our classrooms.

Each legislative session, we see multiple bills requesting more funding for schools to hire additional counselors, social workers, and psychologists. These are good and necessary asks — but at some point, we must ask ourselves: Are we also willing to take the steps that would *prevent* the crisis from getting worse in the first place?

If we're not prepared to support a policy that will absolutely help curtail the mental health epidemic affecting our children, then we shouldn't continue to ask for more resources to deal with its consequences.

These bills give us that opportunity. By limiting access to personal electronic devices during school hours — with appropriate exceptions for medical and learning accommodations — we are giving our students the gift of attention, connection, and presence. We are removing the constant pull of comparison and distraction and replacing it with space to learn and grow.

We've seen this approach work in other states. Arkansas passed the “Bell to Bell, No Cell” Act, and Virginia has moved forward under Executive Order 33 to guide schools toward cell phone-free learning environments. These states are acting on the overwhelming research — like what is presented in Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation* — that the constant presence of smartphones and social media in our children's lives is rewiring their brains, disrupting healthy development, and feeding an epidemic of anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

This isn't just a policy issue. This is a moral and developmental one.

In my regular conversations with members of the North Dakota State Superintendent's Student Cabinet, I've learned that even when schools *do* have phone policies, they're often left to individual teachers to enforce. Some do, and

some don't. That inconsistency creates confusion for students and frustration for staff. Worse, it erodes the effectiveness of the policy itself.

We often talk about taking things off teachers' plates. Here's our chance to act on that. Teachers are meant to teach, not to police cell phone use. By passing these bills, we relieve them of that impossible burden — and we do it in a way that is fair, consistent, and transparent.

This bill is about doing right by every student in every zip code and in every classroom. Don't all of our children deserve to know that we are looking out for their mental health just as seriously as we protect their physical health? We have laws that prevent harmful chemicals, unsafe equipment, and environmental hazards from entering our schools. Why wouldn't we do the same for the digital forces we now know are damaging our children's emotional and psychological well-being? Health is health — and it's time our policies reflected that truth.

This is not a ban on technology. It is a re-centering of school as a place for learning, relationships, and growth — free from the addictive tug of digital distractions.

I urge you to support SB 2354 as amended with the Governor's request. Let's take this step forward — for our students, our educators, and the future of North Dakota.

Respectfully submitted,

Kirsten Baesler

North Dakota State Superintendent of Public Instruction