

Good morning, Chair Heinert, Vice Chair Schreiber-Beck, and members of the House Education committee. My name is Katie Cashman Fitzsimmons and though I serve as the Director of Student Affairs for the North Dakota University System, today I present to you as a parent. I have taken a keen interest in youth phone use as those youth eventually head to our campuses. But also, my intentions are selfish; I hope we have the debate about kids' phone use in schools buttoned up for good before my kids hit middle school. This is why I am encouraging the committee to adopt the amendments to SB 2354 and ultimately a Do Pass recommendation on the bill.

I enjoyed a nearly perfect college experience at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. Facebook was not yet invented, no one had cell phones, you called home once a month with a phone card, and we all managed to survive and thrive. I started my career in higher education in 2005 and until I left the field in 2011, the conversation swirled around how entitled students were; that they wanted to be treated like paying customers who were always right instead of like students that needed to be held accountable. When I returned to higher ed five years later in 2016, I expected more of the same, but instead, the everything had completely shifted. "Everyone is anxious! Everyone is depressed! Everyone is suicidal!" I was completely shocked. Many NDUS campuses had provided 40% more mental health services in the span of just three years. Alcohol use rates were dropping, but things didn't seem sunnier. Everyone was stressed and lonely. Our NDUS campuses have done their best to meet the needs of students not only to retain and graduate them, but truly to serve them as people and provide real care. I think our campuses have done a spectacular job, but some days, it feels like a Sisyphean task.

When I read Jonathan Haidt's book *The Anxious Generation* a year ago, it was like a giant plot twist was revealed to me. One that was in front of me the whole time. Literally, in front of my own face for hours a day. Cell phones. Simply put, North Dakota can make bold changes for our children's health with a bell-to-bell ban on cell phones.

Of course, mobile devices are not the only piece to the puzzle of loneliness, depression, anxiety, suicide, bullying, and attention spans, but they play a very large role. MIT Professor Sherry Turkle said about smartphones in 2015 that because of them, "we are forever elsewhere." When you are growing up, there's no more important place to be than right where you are. Passing this bill will bring many students back to where they need to be.

After reading *The Anxious Generation* and countless other resources on the topics of dopamine, brain development, the effects of technology on the brain, mental health, and school policies, I couldn't stop talking about it and it quickly morphed into a presentation for the Suicide Prevention Coalition Annual Conference in September 2024. I spoke alongside a School Resource Officer, a Police Youth Bureau staff member, and a

professional counselor. They each had valuable insight into the dangers of youth cell phone use; they spoke of the things of nightmares (suicide, sextortion, grooming, trafficking) and I spoke of sadness and a lack of connection. That presentation evolved into a two-hour parent program at my kids' school, which then turned into a parent group (ironically enough housed on Facebook) called "Hold the Phone!". We have dozens of parents like me who want a community that will foster in-person connections for kids and will stay committed to keeping kids off smartphones and social media for as long as possible. I've continued to present to other groups over the last few months as the appetite exists everywhere but people don't know how to reverse current trends.

Here are a few morsels from said presentation that look directly at the data from the American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA) that was deployed across all NDUS institutions in February 2024:

- 43% of students across the North Dakota University System report being lonely more often than not. National stats range as high as 65%
- 54.2% of NDUS students reported feeling that they lacked companionship
- 60.5% reported feeling left out
- 55.7% felt isolated from others
- When you look at how these emotions impact our staffing and services, look at the accessibility offices. For one campus, in 2014, 25% of their education accommodations were rooted in emotional needs (test anxiety, depression, etc.) while 75% of classroom accommodations were intellectual or physical (dyslexia, mobility, etc.). That same campus saw a complete shift in requests (75% emotional needs; 25% intellectual/physical) by 2019, just five years later.

Our daughter will be ten this summer, our oldest son will be eight next month, and our youngest just turned five. Our daughter closed out her Girl Scout cookie season this week having sold 1000 boxes by talking to strangers, fearlessly knocking on neighborhood doors, and genuinely thanking customers while looking them in the eye. My daughter was able to display more "soft skills" than some of our college graduates who have been hiding behind phones for a decade. My husband and I aim to raise our children to relish the ordinary, be kind, be patient, be empathetic, and be genuine. Those values run entirely incongruent with a life that's lived online, especially during the school day. We want kids to have the best chance to succeed at school with minimal interruptions and plenty of opportunities to be kids, with other kids, in real life, or IRL, as they say. Please support our students, teachers, and schools by approving the presented amendment and giving SB 2354 a Do Pass recommendation. I thank you for your time and your service; I will stand for questions.