

Written Testimony of J. Patrick Traynor

The Battle for our Attention

My name is Pat Traynor and I am the Executive Director of the Dakota Medical Foundation. We are a foundation that serves ND & northwest MN whose mission seeks to build the healthiest, most generous region on the planet. With our roots embedded in healthcare dating back to 1962, we are committed to doing everything in our power to improve the health of our state's citizens.

With that as background, I applaud the efforts of those who are looking to limit or ban smartphone use in the schools. This is a very important policy dialogue that will profoundly improve the future of our state's school-aged children for decades to come.

Today, I have prepared testimony outlining why our organization believes that limiting screen use in the schools is absolutely necessary for the healthy development of our children. I was invited to testify by bill sponsors to provide background about our organization's efforts in this area and why we're encouraging others to get involved.

Current US Legislative Initiatives to Ban Smartphones at School

According to the Associated Press, as of 1/16/2025:

- Nine states have a statewide ban/restriction in place.
- 14 states have formally proposed a ban.
- 7 states have policy recommendations and/or a pilot program in place.
- New York Democratic Gov. Kathy Hochul unveiled her plans to ban smartphones at schools.
- Illinois Democratic Gov. JB Pritzker proposed a statewide ban on cellphones in classrooms.

Additionally, on January 29, 2025, Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders announced a bill to make every Arkansas school go phone-free from bell to bell.

Local Efforts

On the first day of the 2023-24 school year, Shanley High School in Fargo, ND, implemented a policy where cell phones need to be shut off during the school day and stored in a locker, car, or backpack. After a full year with the ban in place, administrators are pleased with the results.

"From the first day of school, in the lunchroom, the volume was elevated. It was elevated for the right reasons. They were talking with each other, they weren't just playing games, they weren't just scrolling on their social media feeds, they were talking with each other, they were laughing, they were rehashing discussions in the classroom," said Father Kyle Metzger, the principal of Shanley High School.

Why the Push for Legislation is Happening

Danger #1 - Smartphones and Screens are Designed to be Irresistible

I believe that the reason policymakers, leaders, superintendents, teachers, parents, and other concerned citizens are pursuing these kinds of policies is because it is now widely understood that the makers of these digital devices, apps, and social media platforms have designed their products to be **irresistible**—and this is especially true for children.

In 2023, DMF hosted a statewide summit featuring Stanford University psychiatrist and author of Dopamine Nation, Dr. Anna Lemke, who outlined exactly how digital devices have been engineered to stimulate a dopamine rush with every touch, swipe, and click.

Dopamine Treadmill

By way of background, dopamine is the brain's ultimate "feel-good" chemical and any time a person receives a rush of dopamine (which is exactly what happens every time someone taps, swipes, or clicks on a digital device), this chemical encourages you to repeat the behavior.

And many believe that this is why American teens now use their devices on average **nine hours per day** (Adults average 7 hours per day). Common Sense Media research tells us that this kind of use translates into children and teens checking their phones hundreds of times each day – with some checking them as many as 500 times per day. About ¾ of teens and half of parents say they feel the need to immediately respond to texts, social media messages, and other notifications.

All this interaction can easily translate into tapping, swiping, and clicking thousands and thousands of times each day. Astonishingly, experts estimate that the typical digital device user will now **scroll more than a mile each day!** And with every interaction comes a dopamine boost—increasing the likelihood that the pattern will continue.

Tech Executives Limit Their Children's Smartphone & Screen Usage

It is also worth mentioning that a recent high-profile article appearing in the New York Times revealed that "Tim Cook, the C.E.O. of Apple, would not let his nephew join social networks. Bill Gates banned cellphones until his children were teenagers, and Melinda Gates wrote that she wished they had waited even longer. Steve Jobs would not let his young children near iPads." Mark Zuckerberg, Founder of Facebook and CEO of Meta has shared, "I don't generally want my kids to be sitting in front of a TV or a computer for a long period of time."

The parenting priorities of the world's most powerful tech executives should be a wake-up call for the rest of us.

The Largest Companies in the World are Working to Capture our Attention

While it is hard to imagine the powerful hold that digital devices have on children, it is

important to understand that the six largest companies in the world—Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, Microsoft, and NVDA (with a collective market cap of some \$16 trillion)—are focused on capturing (and keeping!) 100% of our attention. In fact, these six companies employ more than 2 million people who are working 24/7 to reengineer every aspect of our lives for the purposes of capturing interest, creating followers, selling products, accumulating and selling our behavioral data, dominating attention, and making fortunes.

Danger #2 - Excessive Smartphone Use is Linked to Serious Health Problems

While it cannot be argued that there are positive outcomes that result from the careful use of digital devices as helpful tools, recently emerging evidence indicates that over-reliance on the use of digital devices by children and young adults often leads to both serious physical and psychological issues including anxiety, depression, and self-harm. Other studies demonstrate how smartphone use during the school day can also lead to social isolation, lower self-image, decreased pursuit of healthy activities, poor nutrition, and cyberbullying.

Alarming data/trends:

- Teen anxiety and depression are at record highs and every single indicator of mental health among kids is getting worse.
- According to one study, users who spent more time on social media were more than 5 times more likely to report that they suffered from depression.
- Teens who use screens for more than five hours per day were 20% more likely to have suicidal ideation.
- About half of teens say they're addicted to their mobile devices.
- Over the past decade, there has been a 300% increase in youth admissions to emergency room hospital visits because of self-harm, suicide attempts, and severe mental and emotional distress.
- More than 80% of American adults and children don't meet the guidelines of 30 minutes of physical activity.
- 57% of Americans regularly question their life's purpose and meaning.
- A socially underdeveloped childhood caused by digital devices leads, almost inexorably, to a socially stunted adulthood.
- Young people are less likely than in previous decades to get their driver's license, to go on a date, to have more than one close friend, or even hang out with their friends at all.
- The share of boys and girls who say they meet up with their friends almost daily outside school hours has declined by nearly 50 percent with the sharpest downturn beginning in the 2010s.

North Dakota Data

It is interesting to note that since the introduction of cell phones in 2007, the rates of adolescent mental health consequences have skyrocketed. And this is true in North Dakota as well.

According to the 2023 North Dakota Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 35% of our high school-aged students felt sad or hopeless almost every day for more than two weeks in a row so that they stopped doing some of their usual activities. Even more concerning is the fact that 17.5% of our high-school aged children seriously considered attempting suicide and 15+% actually put a plan in place as to how they would do it.

This data is confirmed by the fact that a recent Dakota Medical Foundation survey uncovered that one of the greatest concerns among many of the state's mental health providers is the excessive use of smartphones among children.

Emergence of Digital Addiction Treatment Centers

The first digital addiction treatment center was introduced in the US in 2013.

Today, there are hundreds and hundreds of such centers across the US. Many focus on "wilderness therapy." Many of these programs are within existing substance abuse/addiction treatment centers. These programs treat internet addictions such video gaming, gambling, pornography, sexting, and social media which is often to escape symptoms of mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety. We need to reflect as a society when we feel safer having our kids in the middle of nowhere than we do having them at home or in school?

Danger #3 – Academic Performance Suffers when Smartphones are Used in School

Recent results of a meta-analysis of cell phone use and academic performance among young people revealed that the greater the use of a phone while learning and studying, the greater the negative impact on learning and academic achievement.

For example, one study found that "students who were not using their mobile phones wrote down 62% more information in their notes, took more detailed notes, were able to recall more detailed information from the lecture, and scored a full letter grade and a half higher on a multiple-choice test than those students who were actively using their mobile phones."

According to many studies, banning cell phones in school settings also produces a whole host of other benefits:

- Improves teacher-student relationships
- Reduces the distraction factor
- Promotes face-to-face interaction

- Teaches responsibility and self-control
- Reduces cheating
- Reduces cyberbullying
- Encourages physical activity

Danger #4 – Excessive Smartphone Use Leads to a Distracted Mind *Smartphone Ban Encourages our Children to Think for Themselves*

The future of our children relies on their ability to not only think, but to think deeply; to be able to concentrate for long periods of time so that they can analyze information in order to form well-reasoned conclusions.

So important is this skill that it will determine not only the quality of our children's lives but their integrity, their character, their personal growth, their self-awareness, their creativity, their innovation, their resilience, and their freedom in that they won't blindly accept what some algorithm feeds them. Whatever information you put in your head, determines your thoughts. Your thoughts determine your actions. Your actions determine your habits. Your habits determine your life.

A great education is the one thing that no one can take away from our children. We owe it to them to give them their best chance to develop their human potential.

Is Simply Turning Off Their Phones a Sound Alternative?

In study after study, researchers randomly assign some students to turn off their phones and put them face down on a desk, and others to leave their phones outside of the room. The mere presence of phones (even turned off, face down) resulted in lower performance on attention tests.

Common Objections to Banning Smartphones in Schools

There are still those who will resist the positive step of eliminating cell phones from the school environment. According to a study, 61% of parents agree they would support banning them, there are still others that would resist this through leveling two major objections:

Objection #1: My child needs their phone in case of a crisis or lockdown at the school.

School security experts quoted in a Washington Post interview on 6/1/2022 report phones can make children *less safe* in a crisis situation:

1. Using phones in an emergency situation can distract children from following the directions of their teachers.
2. The sound of the phone, whether ringing or on vibrate, could alert an assailant to a hiding place.

3. The shooter could be monitoring the event themselves on social media and find more victims or elude capture that way.
4. Victims and worried family members trying to get through can jam communications, interfering with first responders.

Objection #2: If students have their phones at school, then teachers can teach them how to use phones/social media responsibly.

The best brain science research and expert psychiatrists tell us the adolescent brain is not able to manage the addictive pull of portable devices and social media products.

The Summary

I believe that banning smartphones during the school day is a move that will give our children their best opportunity to succeed.

In fact, I believe this so strongly that our Foundation has made a substantial long-term commitment to addressing excessive digital device use among all sectors of our state's population.

We recently created and launched a new curriculum, Leading with LIGHT, where one of the pillars deals with Honoring Health: Body, Mind, and Spirit. One of our first sessions targeted how to assess our current smartphone and screen usage patterns and if excessive, ways to carefully unplug and detox. Through these trainings—which will continue for years to come—we are preparing our leaders to create environments where those around them will have more opportunities for deeper thinking and meaningful human interaction rather than isolation and the other negative health effects associated with excessive screen use. We'd like to invite you to "Battle for our Attention" training held on May 7th from 9 – 11 a.m. at Dakota Medical Foundation. The training will zero in on what we can do as leaders to overcome the daily distractions of digital devices.

Also in May, we are launching a training for youth pastors statewide. During these trainings we will provide critical resources for our clergy so that they will be better equipped to create the conditions for youth to develop healthy relationships with digital devices and each other.

We are also making investments in parent education by partnering with childcare providers to create and offer a model curriculum for parents to navigate the difficult issues associated with child development and phone and screen usage.

Today, we know that our youth are spending nine plus hours a day on digital devices. This means that the typical North Dakota child will spend 136 days a year (106 days for adults) interacting with a digital device—much of it mindlessly scrolling.

In closing, there is no doubt in my mind that we are standing at the crossroads. As leaders, parents, teachers, administrators, clergy, policymakers, and concerned citizens, I believe that we have a better future in mind for our kids.

Thank you!

Healthy Tech Assessment



	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1. I carry a digital device with me everywhere I go.	5	4	3	2	1
2. My digital device is turned on.	5	4	3	2	1
3. I use my digital device(s) for three+ hours a day	5	4	3	2	1
4. I look at my digital device within 10 minutes of waking up.	5	4	3	2	1
5. I check my digital device frequently throughout the day.	5	4	3	2	1
6. I look at my digital device in the bedroom before going to sleep.	5	4	3	2	1
7. I look at my digital device when I am with people I care about. (e.g., kids, co-workers, etc.)	5	4	3	2	1
8. I look at my digital device in social situations (e.g., restaurants, movies, church, etc.)	5	4	3	2	1
9. I spend 30+ minutes on social media per day.	5	4	3	2	1
10. I like to stream music, podcasts, or other content while I'm working.	5	4	3	2	1
11. I play games on my digital devices.	5	4	3	2	1
12. I use my digital device while driving (texting, emailing, talking, etc.)	5	4	3	2	1
13. Digital devices cause pain in my hands, wrists, neck, back, eyes, or head.	5	4	3	2	1
14. After spending a lot of time on my digital device(s), I feel empty.	5	4	3	2	1

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Healthy Tech Assessment



Enter Assessment Score Here

