



**TESTIMONY OF THE**

**PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION**

**BEFORE THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE OCTOBER 21, 2025**

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Chairwoman Culver, Chairwoman Williams, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for inviting the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) to testify today on students' use of cell phones in schools on behalf of the 5,000 local public school leaders we represent across the Commonwealth. My name is Laura Morton, and I am the Director of Policy Services for the Pennsylvania School Boards Association.

As educators and policymakers, we share a common goal – to create a school environment conducive to learning and academic achievement that is safe for all students. While innovations in technology have proven to be an asset in the educational field, the use of cell phones in schools by students has caused significant challenges in achieving the goal of maintaining an appropriate learning environment.

Cell phones and other electronic devices, with their notifications, social media apps, and online games, distract students, disrupt the educational process and make teaching more difficult for school staff. Teachers are often the individuals responsible for implementing strategies to restrict students' use of electronic devices during classes. As an eighth-grade math teacher, my sister has had to come up with creative solutions to limit her students' use of electronic devices in her class. One technique she employed was to place classroom calculators in a hanging shoe holder and when a student needs a calculator, they place their cell phone in the holder from which they took the calculator. This ensures that the student is not distracted by their device but would still have access to it if necessary. Teachers regularly encounter challenges in balancing instructional responsibilities with evolving expectations from parents, including direct access to their children during the school day and differing views on the enforcement of school policies regarding students' use of electronic devices.

### **Overview of PSBA Policy Services**

I wanted to begin with a brief description of PSBA policy services and the typical policy adoption process. PSBA offers a variety of policy services which are available to members of PSBA. Those services range from a policy maintenance program where PSBA provides recommended updates to PSBA policy guides (which are customizable template policies) based on changes to laws, regulations, or court decisions to a policy manual development where PSBA will assist the school entity develop an entire new policy manual from scratch. Currently, 491 of the 500 school districts in Pennsylvania choose to subscribe to one of PSBA's policy services.

Policies from PSBA, whether drafted for the school entity or PSBA policy guides, are intended to be reviewed and customized locally by the administration, school solicitor, and school board based on local practice and needs before being presented at a public school board meeting. Once presented at a public school board meeting, students, parents, staff, and members of the public have time to review and provide feedback on the proposed policy prior to its formal consideration by the school board at a future public meeting.

Policy guides issued by PSBA are broken into four (4) categories: mandated; recommended for legal liability; PSBA recommendation; and optional. Mandated policies are those required by state or federal law or regulations such as a policy related to bullying which is required by section 1303.1-A of the PA School Code. Policies recommended based on legal liability are not required by law or regulations, but are intended to ensure that school entities have policies in place which are intended to meet federal and state requirements and/or protect the school from potential sources of liability. PSBA recommended policies are those which PSBA has in place to address common issues which the school board may want to provide guidance on such as a policy on comprehensive planning. Optional policies are purely up to the school entity as to whether they want to create a policy on a given topic such as a policy outlining how class rank will be determined.

It is important to note however that there is no requirement for school entities to utilize PSBA for their policy needs. Also, PSBA is not responsible for the adoption or implementation of board policy, nor is PSBA a government agency with oversight or authority over school boards and their policies.

### **PSBA Policy on Electronic Devices**

To assist school entities with managing the use of cell phones and other electronic devices, PSBA has developed a policy guide on electronic devices that has been provided to school entities as a baseline for creating their own policy. Within the policy guide, electronic devices are broadly defined to encompass “all devices that can take photographs; record, play or edit audio or video data; store, transmit or receive calls, messages, text, data or images; operate online applications, or provide a wireless, unfiltered connection to the Internet.”<sup>1</sup> PSBA’s definition of electronic devices is written with the goal of providing school entities with a general statement that would not necessitate frequent updates as advancements are made in technology. School boards can revise the definition as desired to best fit their local needs.

Pennsylvania does not currently have a law or regulation which requires school entities to establish a policy dealing with electronic devices. PSBA categorizes the electronic devices policy guide as “recommended for legal liability purposes” as the policy calls for an annual notification about the policy to students, parents/guardians, and employees. If a school board adopts the policy with the annual notification language, they would then be bound to the enforceable standards of the policy. The policy guide also contains a multitude of optional sections and language that can be included, removed, expanded upon and customized by the school entity. The policy guide can be tailored by the school entity to strictly prohibit all use of electronic devices, authorize use of electronic devices at any time during the school day, or prohibit/allow use anywhere in between those two ends of the spectrum. School entities can also choose to develop their own policy on electronic devices, as several have done.

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<sup>1</sup> PSBA Policy Guide 237: Electronic Devices

## **Statewide Implementation**

PSBA estimates that approximately 425 Pennsylvania school districts have adopted an electronic devices policy, although the contents of the policies vary based on their local requirements and procedures. Included below is a list of Pennsylvania school districts across the state that have either recently adopted or modified their electronic devices policy and their approach to either allowing or prohibiting such devices.

Northwestern Lehigh SD – approved Feb 2025 and includes bell to bell prohibitions for elementary and middle school students; for high school students the ban is for instructional time.

Phoenixville Area SD – approved June 2025 and prohibits use of electronic devices for all students in instructional spaces during the school day.

Salisbury Township SD – approved Sept 2025 and authorizes use of electronic devices in accordance with any school-specific rules which may vary among the elementary, middle, and high schools.

Kiski Area SD – approved Sept 2025 and authorizes use of electronic devices in classrooms for educational purposes and while under the supervision of district staff.

Lower Dauphin SD – approved June 2025 and includes bell to bell prohibitions for elementary and middle school students; for high school students the ban is for instructional time.

Jeannette City SD – approved April 2023 and generally prohibits the use of electronic devices but also authorizes them when used in accordance with any applicable school rules that are set by the building principals.

Tulpehocken Area SD – approved Dec 2022 and prohibits use of electronic devices during the entire school day.

West Allegheny SD - approved June 2024 and authorizes use of electronic devices in accordance with any school-specific rules which may vary among the elementary, middle, and high schools.

Norwin SD – approved Aug 2025 and authorizes silent use of electronic devices during the school day and includes language that approval is subject to school-specific rules which may vary among the elementary, middle, and high schools.

Of these districts that prohibit use of electronic devices, all of them make exceptions for students who require devices because of an Individualized Education Plan of 504 Service Agreement and several also note exceptions for health, safety, and/or emergency reasons. However, as evident from these examples, school entities around the state are developing and implementing policies on cell phones that work for their school community.

## **Nationwide Trends**

Based on our research, at least nineteen (19) states, plus the District of Columbia, have passed laws or issued an executive order regarding the use of cell phones and other electronic devices in schools. Of these, seventeen (17) states require districts to adopt a policy regarding cell phones, and thirteen (13) of those dictate a ban on

devices with notable exceptions. The exceptions vary but are primarily related to a student's need for an electronic device to monitor their health; if it is required by an Individualized Education Plan of 504 Service Agreement; for emergencies; and/or to assist with any language barriers. The legislation in these states has primarily been recent adoptions, passing in 2024 and 2025, with many requiring school districts to have a policy in place prior to the start of this school year (2025-2026) or by the start of the 2026-2027 school year. The legislation in these states differs as some mandate a policy enforcing a "bell to bell" ban where students cannot use unauthorized electronic devices from the start of the school day until the final bell rings; while others only require a ban during instructional time, allowing schools to permit students to use their devices during specific parts of the day, including lunch periods.

At least two (2) of these states acknowledged in the legislation the rights of parents and students to communicate with each other during the school day and concerns that parents may not be able to reach their children during an emergency. Arkansas included general language that the aim of the bill is "to provide safe school environments that are conducive to learning while also protecting the rights of students and parents to freely and openly communicate."<sup>2</sup> Tennessee provided more explicit protections by including language to "establishes a process...to ensure that the absence of, or restricted access to, wireless communication devices during the school day does not prevent parents from receiving notice of an emergency or possible emergency."<sup>3</sup>

The following states have either passed legislation on this topic or issued an executive order: Arizona; Arkansas; California; Colorado; Florida; Idaho; Maine; Minnesota; New Hampshire; New Mexico; New York; North Carolina; North Dakota; Oklahoma; Oregon; Tennessee; Vermont; Virginia; Wisconsin.

## **Recommendations**

Any legislation proposed or enacted needs to provide school entities with clear guidance on what is expected and/or required of them. Legislation should also provide school entities with flexibility to allow locally elected school leaders to make decisions regarding cell phones which best suit their school communities. Though not all may agree with those decisions, the school directors elected by their neighbors to make those decisions are best suited to hear the concerns of their students, parents, teachers, and administrators and formulate a policy which works for their schools.

Legislation should also not require a board policy to go into too much detail. Much like legislation, where the General Assembly will establish broad, general rules which are then to be implemented by regulations or state agencies, board policies are meant to operate the same way. The Board will establish broad, general statements of policy which are then implemented by the school administration.

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<sup>2</sup> AR Senate Bill 142, 95<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, Regular Session, 2025

<sup>3</sup> TN House Bill 932; approved 28 March 2025

PSBA stands ready to work with the General Assembly and administration on legislation which meets those criteria.

### **Conclusion**

Public schools across the state and nationwide are united in their goal of providing a safe and orderly educational environment for students in which to thrive. One aspect to achieving this is regulating students' use of personal electronic devices during the school day. Managing the use of electronic devices is not meant to deny students access to technology but rather to set appropriate boundaries for its use to ensure students' overall well-being. PSBA thanks the committee for their time and attention to this matter and working to create the best solution for students and school entities.