



www.paunplugged.org | pennsylvaniaunplugged@gmail.com

Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee
C/O Cindy Urban, Executive Director

Dear Madam Chair and Senate Education Committee members:

We are submitting written testimony on behalf of PA Unplugged, a statewide coalition of parents working toward a cultural shift in how we approach screens and social media during childhood and adolescence. This grassroots effort is made up of over 20 local groups, spanning nine counties, and representing over 3,000 Pennsylvania parents who believe this is a public health and education crisis. We are urging legislators to pass legislation requiring Pennsylvania schools to establish bell-to-bell phone-free policies.

Every moment in school is a learning opportunity

It is important to emphasize that the entire school day is instructional time—not just time spent in formal lessons. Social and emotional development is a fundamentally critical part of education and our policies should reflect this reality. Bell-to-bell phone-free policies are the most effective way to protect this time, supporting students' well-being, focus, and academic engagement. When these devices are present, they interrupt not only learning but also the face-to-face interactions that help students grow socially and emotionally.

Device use during the school day is pervasive

Evidence from both research and direct experience makes one thing clear: personal device use during the school day has become a pervasive problem. Recent research has shown that, on average, students are spending [60 minutes on their devices per day](#) for non-educational activities. This not only undermines academic focus, but also wastes valuable instructional time and taxpayer dollars. This study also clearly showed that the majority of this time on their devices was to access social media apps. We know what this looks like in practice: students scrolling through social media, texting, playing games, and watching videos during class.



www.paunplugged.org | pennsylvaniaunplugged@gmail.com

Safety experts agree: bell-to-bell policies are best practice

The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) has formally endorsed bell-to-bell phone-free school policies. In its letter of support, NASRO identifies bell-to-bell policies as the best-practice approach to ensuring the safety of students during emergencies, allowing for undivided attention to trained adults, following protocol, and eliminating spread of misinformation.

School should be a safe place, free from danger and distraction

Smartphones and social media platforms are intentionally engineered using persuasive design—the same psychological mechanisms that make nicotine addictive. These products deliver frequent hits of dopamine, training the brain to crave more. But unlike nicotine, these tactics are aimed at 12- and 14-year-olds, not adults. Features like constant notifications, likes, and in-game rewards are built to capture and hold children’s attention for as long as possible. The result is addictive levels of use that displace the real-world activities and experiences essential for healthy development. Young brains are especially vulnerable to these manipulative design features and urgently need a break from their constant pull.

These companies could make their products safer, but until they do, it is incumbent upon legislators to protect children from the distraction and harms that these devices bring by making schools phone-free.

Research shows more restrictive policies = more focus, less disruption, happier teachers

Data and research continue to point towards the best practices for phone-free policies in schools. Dr. Angela Duckworth, researcher, psychologist, and author at the University of Pennsylvania, found through her [national Phones in Focus](#) study that stricter personal device policies are linked to less disruption, higher teacher morale, and more focused classrooms.

We’ve heard the same message echoed across Pennsylvania. Through our advocacy efforts, we’ve spoken with administrators who recognized the growing problem and implemented bell-to-bell



www.paunplugged.org | pennsylvaniaunplugged@gmail.com

phone-free policies in their schools. Every one of them reports the same outcome: these policies have transformed their school communities—restoring focus, improving classroom culture, and supporting student well-being.

Bell-to-bell policies will ensure equitable access to a distraction-free education and deliver a small, but significant, step towards addressing the mental health crisis facing our teens. Legislation, such as SB1014, will have positive effects on the entire school environment: academic achievement, social emotional health of students and teachers, and school safety will all improve. Our students will be more prepared for the future workforce with better social emotional skills, and taxpayer money will be fully utilized for its intended purpose: to educate PA youth for the future.

For these reasons, we are strongly advocating for phone-free school policies in Pennsylvania. More than 17 states have already passed legislation on this issue; it is time for Pennsylvania to join them. Our students deserve the same opportunity for a distraction and danger-free learning environment.

Sincerely,

Kelly Marsh, PhD, Allegheny County

Kristen Beddard, Allegheny County

Alex Bird Becker, MEd, Delaware County

Kirstin McGowan, Bucks County

Katie Talarico, Allegheny County