

Colleagues,

We believe a statewide policy regarding student cell phone use is imperative.

How did we reach this conclusion?

While listening to student testimony during the 2024 Student Voices Day in the Education Policy Committee, a recurrent theme emerged regarding problematic student cell phone use during the school day. In response, Sen. Alice Mann led statewide roundtable discussions with legislators and stakeholders, learning that many students, teachers, administrators, and caregivers across Minnesota agreed that a comprehensive cell phone policy would bring several benefits to our students, teachers, and families — our school communities as a whole. We traveled statewide, hosting roundtable discussions with the Edina, Bloomington, Mankato, Rochester, Northfield, Minneapolis, St. Paul and St. Cloud districts.

Each roundtable began with two minutes allotted per person to share their name, title, connection to public schools, and their initial thoughts on the issue. Participants included teachers, students, administrators, caregivers, and school board members. After that, Sen. Mann asked follow up questions to the initial thoughts, and participants chimed in with additional insights. Participants were also allowed to ask questions of one another.

Three common themes emerged during these discussions:

1. Cell phone use greatly damages student concentration. This occurs not only due to the device itself, but also constant notifications interrupting the class.
2. Cell phone use greatly damages student participation.
3. Cell phone use causes conflict between students and educators. Teachers do not want to regulate cell phone use at the classroom level.
4. Education about proper cell phone/internet use is imperative.
 - a. Many of the participants, across the districts, believe there needs to be some sort of education piece to these policies – for both students and parents. Many teachers expressed that we need to teach students how to safely and appropriately use cellphones and social media.

Respondents informed us that student cell phone use had negative impacts regarding academic rigor, critical thinking skills, mental health, student self-image, and social skills. Cell phone use also contributed to issues related to eating disorders and cyberbullying, participants reported.

Dr. Anne Tierney, a psychologist and parent, informed us about the various mental health issues she sees in our youth that can be linked to usage of cellphones and social media. She is concerned about the long-term impact to students' cognitive function and predicted a potential epidemic of eating disorders due to social media and cyberbullying. "It is unreasonable to expect children to self-regulate their cell phone usage", she said, "especially since adults struggle with that themselves".

Several districts mentioned issues with students sending around inappropriate images of

themselves and classmates. At the Mankato roundtable, a teacher remarked how this has become commonplace. The teacher asked the students, "Is it safe to say that seeing a nude photo of a student on social media was no longer shocking?" The group of students nodded yes, with one reporting that "it is something that we see a lot."

Students had mixed feelings about the use of cell phones. Many of the students that participated in the roundtables agreed that cell phone use was problematic in their schools, with a few suggesting cell phones should be banned entirely for all grades. Others said the ban should be in effect during class time only. Other students stated that they would not be able to get through the school day without using their cell phones. Reasons stated included that 1. This is their primary way of socializing 2. They feel anxious without access to it. 3. They like knowing that they can text a parent at any time.

Students also told us that parents are also a part of the problem — some parents regularly text their students throughout the school day. When that concern was brought up, many teachers and administrators agreed with that assessment.

What is happening in schools now?

In 2023, legislation was passed requiring districts to have a cell phone policy in place by March 2025. Most of the school districts we interacted with were just beginning to enact their cell phone use policies, with the exception of the St. Cloud Area School District. St. Cloud Schools began its cell phone use policy two years ago.

These policies were all fairly similar, modeled by the toolkit developed and released by the associations of Minnesota's elementary and secondary school principals. The main cell phone limitation in the tool kit is: cell phones "away for the day" in kindergarten through eighth grade, and no cell phones during instructional periods for high school students.

In St. Cloud, elementary and middle school teachers reported that the new cell phone policy has had a positive impact on their school environment. They have seen students interacting more face to face, they have seen more participation in class, and less conflict in the hallways.

While opinions varied about the best way to limit student cell phone use, there was widespread agreement that without a schoolwide or districtwide policy, teachers were left to enforce cell phone use themselves at the classroom level. This caused conflict between teachers and students, as well as between different classrooms when different teachers enforced different expectations.

A student in Edina Public Schools, who was participating in a district-led cell phone use task force, tracked the cell phone use of his classmates, as well as the responses of different teachers. He found that because policy enforcement varied by classroom, students discovered which classes they could freely use their phones. Lack of a uniform policy reduced both student adherence, and also teacher enforcement, the student found.

We heard on several occasions that the schools would feel supported if the state backed up their policies. We also heard on a couple occasions that parents would feel more empowered to limit cell phone use at home, if the state did not allow them at school. The Minneapolis school district was concerned that this would be an unfunded mandate.

What is part of the solution?

Following the initiatives that most of the schools we talked to have already started - we feel that the State should back up the school districts by supporting limitations of cell phone use throughout the school day for kindergarten through eighth-grade students, and during instructional periods for ninth-grade through 12th grade students.