



## OREGON PSYCHIATRIC PHYSICIANS ASSOCIATION

Date: May 12, 2025

To: The Honorable Chair Lew Frederick  
The Honorable Vice-Chair Suzanne Weber  
Members of the Senate Education Committee

From: Daniel Nicoli, DO, Chair  
Oregon Psychiatric Physicians Association

RE: Support for HB 2251 School district policies on students' electronic devices

Chair Frederick, Vice-Chair Weber and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the Oregon Psychiatric Physicians Association in strong support of House Bill 2251, which would prohibit student cellphone use in schools. As a psychiatrist dedicated to child and adolescent mental health, I have seen firsthand the impacts of excessive smartphone use on young people's well-being. This legislation addresses a growing concern in our classrooms and hallways. I write today to share evidence-backed insights into how limiting cellphone use can improve students' mental health, focus, and social development.

### **Impact on Mental Health and Self-Esteem**

Research indicates that ubiquitous access to social media through smartphones can negatively affect young people's mental health. A 2016 systematic review found that frequent use of social networking sites is associated with body image issues and disordered eating behaviors (pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). The constant exposure to curated, idealized images online encourages unhealthy appearance comparisons and can erode a student's self-esteem. In one experiment, just 10 minutes of Facebook use led to a more negative mood and greater dissatisfaction with one's appearance among young women, compared to peers who browsed a neutral website (pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). This illustrates how quickly social media interactions can impact youths' emotional well-being. By reducing phone-based social media access during the school day, HB 2251 would create a healthier environment that protects students from these detrimental influences on mood and self-image.

### **Effects on Attention and Academic Performance**

Smartphones are powerful distractors that can undermine students' ability to focus and learn. Notably, researchers have shown that even the mere presence of a silenced cellphone can impair cognitive performance. In one study, participants who left their phones in another room

significantly outperformed those who kept phones on their desk during attention-demanding tasks ([news.utexas.edu](http://news.utexas.edu)). This “brain drain” effect occurs even when the phone isn’t being used, as the mind struggles to tune out the potential of notifications ([news.utexas.edu](http://news.utexas.edu)). It is no surprise, then, that teachers overwhelmingly find phones disruptive to learning. According to the Pew Research Center, 72% of U.S. high school teachers say that students being distracted by cellphones is a major problem in their classrooms ([pewresearch.org](http://pewresearch.org)). When students are preoccupied with texting, social media, or games, they have less attention available for lessons and active participation in class. By removing this source of distraction, HB 2251 would help students be more present and engaged academically.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that heavy screen use is correlated with poorer academic outcomes. A recent international study of adolescents across 38 countries found that excessive screen time was associated with increased school-related stress and lower satisfaction with school ([pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)). Similarly, a Canadian study reported that adolescents with problematic levels of technology use had lower academic performance and felt less connected to their school community([mdpi.com](http://mdpi.com)). These findings underscore that limiting cellphone use isn’t just about reducing distractions—it is also about fostering better academic engagement and a more positive attitude toward school. HB 2251 would support students’ ability to focus on coursework and improve their overall school experience.

### **Strengthening Social Interaction and School Connectedness**

Developmentally, school is a critical venue for face-to-face social interaction and relationship-building among peers. Smartphones, however, often interfere with in-person connection. Research provides the first evidence that phone use can undermine the enjoyment of real-world social interactions: in a field experiment, groups of friends at a restaurant who were asked to keep their phones on the table felt more distracted and enjoyed their time together less than those who put phones away([researchgate.net](http://researchgate.net)). In the school context, when students turn to their screens during lunch or free periods, they miss opportunities to converse, empathize, and bond with classmates. Over time, this can weaken their sense of belonging. In fact, the same study mentioned above found that excessive device use corresponded with lower levels of school connectedness – students feeling less “part of” their school ([mdpi.com](http://mdpi.com)). By enacting a school-wide cellphone ban, we can re-center students’ attention on the people in front of them, encouraging richer peer engagement and a stronger, more inclusive school community. Learning to communicate without a phone in hand will also help youth develop essential social and emotional skills.

### **Addressing Anxiety and Communication Concerns**

I acknowledge that some parents and students worry that not having immediate access to a phone could cause anxiety or pose logistical challenges. The fear of being without one’s phone – often called nomophobia – is real, but it can be overcome. Mental health experts note that gradual exposure to being separated from one’s phone can reduce this anxiety over time ([healthline.com](http://healthline.com)). In other words, consistent enforcement of phone-free school hours can actually help students build resilience and extinguish the phobia of not having a phone in a safe en-

vironment. Initial discomfort typically gives way as students adjust and realize they can function and stay connected in person. Additionally, schools can implement common-sense support measures to ease the transition. For example, students can be permitted to check phones or voicemail after the final bell, and school offices can facilitate urgent communications between parents and students during the day. Many Oregon schools already have protocols for this. With appropriate school-based supports and education, we can address concerns about safety and coordination without compromising the intent of the bill.

In summary, HB 2251 is a prudent and compassionate step to protect the mental health and improve the academic environment of Oregon's students. By curbing in-school cellphone use, this bill would reduce distractions, bolster attention and performance, support healthier self-esteem, and strengthen peer connections. Equally important, it helps young people be present – to learn in class, to engage with friends, and to develop into well-adjusted adults. On behalf of Oregon's psychiatric physicians, I urge you to vote YES on HB 2251 for the benefit of our children and schools. Thank you for your leadership on this issue and for considering our perspective.