

Submitter:

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On Behalf Of:

Committee:

Senate Committee On Education

Measure, Appointment or Topic:

HB2251

My name is Ami Formica, and I co-founded Well Wired, a healthy tech advocacy group and family community in Central Oregon. I am also a former middle school and high school teacher, and I am currently pursuing my master's in clinical mental health counseling. In the last two years since we started Well Wired, we have surveyed nearly 1,000 families about tech policy in our school district, and 93 percent of the parents we surveyed support phone-free schools. We have had over a thousand Central Oregon families register for our talks, workshops, and panel discussions – teachers from our school district have come as well. Most of these people are struggling with and concerned about smartphone use in their homes and schools.

We have been attending school board meetings, meeting with school district administrators, and advocating in our district for phone-free schools K-12 with anyone who would listen. We have presented data on the success of phone-free schools to administrators and the school board. This data shows the clear benefits of phone-free schools for students' academic, social, and emotional well-being, clear benefits to student-teacher connectedness, clear benefits to the school environment. Yet the district did not take action.

When a local child psychologist presented a Letter of Concern to our school board last June, we listened and took note. The letter of concern was signed and endorsed by over 135 healthcare providers in Central Oregon who work with children and teens – pediatricians, child psychologists, family therapists, the list goes on. That letter of concern advocated for phone-free schools throughout the district, recommended this policy change, and urged for it quickly. That was a year ago, and the slow wheels of change in the district have not turned to make this recommended shift, again no action.

This is why we need state-wide legislation. Left to their own devices, no pun-intended, individual school districts like ours have struggled and will continue to struggle to activate around what we now know is the best practice policy for our kids: phone-free schools K-12. We need to help them move forward, help them make change, by creating a state-wide policy (which of course leaves room for districts to implement it in their own unique ways, with their own common-sense exceptions).

I have heard stories from hundreds of families, stories about the impact of smartphones in schools. I have heard about middle school friends, walking down the hall innocently holding hands, whose photo got snapped and posted for all to see,

turned into a joke, turned into prolonged cyber bullying about sexual identity. I have heard about a teacher, secretly filmed by her students during a lecture, the video circulated to dozens of students with insulting comments and cut downs before she realized what had happened. These are the extreme stories from schools (and there are many more), but even the more regular, habitual, student checking of phones is just as troubling. Students with heads glued to phones walking down the hallways, spending lunch periods huddled in circles preoccupied with whatever happens on their devices, mentally distracted in class while waiting for the bell to ring, waiting for the next moment to check a message or notification. Is this the life we want for our kids at school?

I spoke to the superintendent of a phone-free high school recently, who told me that year after year, since having implemented this policy, it is the one policy that every teacher agrees on one hundred percent during end of year check ins.

We know smartphones are designed to be addictive and adults can hardly set limits around them. The school day is a time to prioritize academic learning, social connection in real life, and to give all of our kids a much-needed break from the all-consuming and addictive impacts of smartphones/personal devices on their lives and their development. Act now to make schools phone-free.