

## Smartphones & Screentime in Utah Schools

Rich K. Nye, PhD

Senior Advisor for Education

Office of the Governor: Utah

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## Introduction

Chairman Kiley, Ranking Member Bonamici, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today, and thank you for tackling such an important topic. My name is Rich Nye. I serve as the Senior Advisor for Education Policy to Utah Governor Spencer J. Cox. Prior to this position, I served as the superintendent of Granite School District, one of the largest districts in the State of Utah, serving 60,000 students across 87 schools.

In schools across the country, cell phones are a pervasive reality for K-12 students. What started as a simple communication device has become a powerful, multi-functional tool, integrating social interaction, information access, and entertainment. This constant presence of smartphones in daily life inevitably extends into schools, significantly impacting student behavior, learning, and overall well-being. The introduction, prevalence, and appropriateness of these devices in the hands of children have generated extensive interest among educators, parents, and policymakers regarding their intended and unintended consequences.

The complexity of the smartphone issue in schools is evident in its potential impacts on children. On one hand, smartphones offer unparalleled access to information, multifaceted communication, engaging educational applications, and technologically enhanced learning opportunities. On the other hand, they present significant challenges related to relentless distraction, academic integrity, cyberbullying, sextortion, and isolation, leading to overwhelming evidence of mental and behavioral health implications.

Education stakeholders across Utah have recognized the effects of smartphones in schools and have engaged in the policymaking process. This process aims to establish a course of action that addresses the negative impacts associated with smartphone use among students, while also acknowledging the reality of living in the information era.

## Smartphones and Distraction

The widespread use of smartphones among students poses a significant challenge in educational settings. [Nearly 97%](#) of students with smartphones report using their devices during the school day, with adolescents spending an average of [8.5 hours daily](#) on screen based media. The constant stream of distractions is clear: an average student receives [237 daily notifications](#), with some checking their phones an astounding [498 times a day](#). This habitual engagement severely hinders learning, causing students to [lose classroom focus](#) almost immediately upon arriving to the classroom—a problem most [teachers identify](#) as a major disruption to teaching and learning.

## Smartphones and Mental Health

One of the most insidious negative social consequences is [cyberbullying](#). Smartphones provide a pervasive platform for harassment and intimidation through social media and messaging apps. The anonymity and wide reach of these platforms can intensify the severity and persistence of bullying, making it more damaging than traditional forms. This, coupled with the potential for overuse on various social media platforms, highlights the serious safety concerns posed by the inappropriate and prevalent use of smartphones.

Furthermore, excessive smartphone use can hinder the development of essential interpersonal skills by reducing face-to-face interactions. When student attention is fixated on smartphones, opportunities for genuine communication are limited. This can lead to:

- [Social isolation](#)
- Impaired [communication](#) abilities
- Formation of exclusive cliques based on online interactions, potentially exacerbating peer pressure and anxiety.

The addictive nature of cell phones is a critical concern. [Experts](#) compare cell phone usage to other process addictions, where brain mechanisms associated with pleasure and reward are exploited, leading to compulsive use. Students may experience "screen addiction," characterized by withdrawal symptoms and difficulty disengaging from their devices. All of this collectively demonstrates that the overuse of smartphones compromises students' academic and general well-being. Educational stakeholders, including parents, educators, lawmakers, and students themselves, have acknowledged these negative implications and sought a better path forward—one that ensures student attention at school is focused squarely on learning and developing durable skills.

## Utah Takes Action

On January 4, 2024, Governor Spencer J. Cox sent a letter to every school and district leader urging them to "remove cell phones from classrooms by creating a collaborative and cohesive LEA-wide policy framework that reaches every classroom." Many schools and districts had antiquated "appropriate use policies" for school devices, but these policies generally did not address smartphones and smartwatches in classrooms.

Fortunately, a few schools and districts had proactively acknowledged these concerns and began implementing cell phone restrictions earlier, already observing positive impacts on students. One junior high school that implemented a "bell-to-bell" restriction on smartphones reported that "learning has improved...bullying and fighting have decreased...[and] students connect with each other in a more meaningful way." While this proof of concept was being realized across a handful of schools and districts, other schools throughout the state were grappling with the negative effects of smartphones in the classroom.

Educational stakeholders continued to observe that more needed to be done to implement a statewide expectation regarding smartphone use in schools. As such, Governor Cox and legislators began working together to identify potential legislative solutions. During the 2025 General Legislative Session, Senator Lincoln Fillmore introduced Senate Bill 178, "Devices in Public Schools," representing a collaborative effort to define statewide expectations for the appropriate use of smartphones in schools.

Senate Bill 178 passed with overwhelming bipartisan support. The bill prohibits students from using cellphones, smartwatches, or emerging technology during classroom hours. Local education agencies (LEAs) may create policies for exemptions to the prohibition for educational purposes. The bill also allows LEAs to determine if more restrictions are warranted in local contexts.

The new statute recognizes instances where a smartphone may be necessary. For example, a student would still be allowed to use their smartphone in exigent circumstances, such as responding to an imminent threat, a school-wide emergency, or using the Safe UT Crisis Line. The bill also allows student access to their device when required by their Individualized Education Program (IEP), Section 504 Plans, or a medical necessity.

Additionally, local education agencies have begun to prioritize restricting smartphones in schools, and they are also evaluating the amount of screentime students spend on district-provided devices during instruction. The overuse of screentime on district-provided devices (laptops, tablets, etc.) is also a concern. One LEA has reported that their elementary students will now only spend an average of 30 minutes a day on district-provided devices. While the flood of technology has largely benefited the learning and teaching process, great care should be taken to find a better balance.

## **Conclusion**

My primary message today is that smartphones are an enormously destructive force in education and states should do everything they can to support policies that keep them away from students, not just in the classroom but from being used at all during the school day, as we say from "bell to bell". We're proud of Utah's leadership in working towards this goal.

The integration of smartphones into the daily lives of K-12 students has presented both opportunities and significant challenges within school environments. While offering unparalleled access to information and educational tools, the pervasive use of these devices has demonstrably led to distractions, compromised academic integrity, and exacerbated mental health concerns such as cyberbullying and social isolation.

Recognizing these profound impacts, Utah stakeholders, led by Governor Spencer J. Cox and the passage of Senate Bill 178, have taken decisive action to implement statewide restrictions on smartphone use during classroom hours. This approach aims to re-center student attention on learning, foster healthier interpersonal interactions, and mitigate the documented negative

consequences, ultimately creating a more conducive and supportive educational setting for all students.