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Proponent Testimony in Support of HB 2421: Prohibiting Cell Phones during School Hours
Presented to the House/Kansas Senate Education Committee

January 16, 2026

Madame Chair and Members of the Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 2421, an important tool to improve student academic outcomes, social interaction and engagement during school, and long-term mental health for Kansas students.

The presence of smartphones in classrooms has become a profound distraction and a driver of developmental harm. Research and expert commentary — most notably *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* by Jonathan Haidt — document how pervasive phone use has reshaped children’s lives and contributed to rising rates of anxiety, depression, and social fragmentation. Haidt explains that today’s youth experienced a “great rewiring” of childhood when smartphones became ubiquitous, with adverse effects on mental health, social interaction, focus, and development. Haidt recommends *bell-to-bell* phone-free environments and notes that schools which implement full-day bans, with phones secured upon entry, often see better student social engagement and reduced disciplinary issues.

In addition, there are dozens of reputable studies — including large longitudinal investigations, meta-analyses, and systematic reviews — have documented links between cell phone/social media use and a range of negative emotional, behavioral, and psychological outcomes for kids. The weight of evidence provides compelling arguments to rethink how we allow our kids to engage with cell phones and social media.

Recently, I had a conversation with a middle school teacher who shared 100% support (as well as many other teachers I’ve communicated with on both sides of the aisle) for the “ban.” She shared these comments:

- Upon arriving to middle school, students struggle to properly use lined paper for writing assignments and have to be taught that the lines on the paper represent the base for each letter written, or the “floor.”
- Students struggle to engage with lecture-style instruction without media. However, if multimedia is used for delivery – they become transfixed.
- Recommended an elimination of laptops in K-5/elementary schools except for keyboarding and limited engagement.

I've also heard from school board members who have successfully implemented school phone bans. However, these instances have most often included storing the phones in lockers and/or allowing access to phones in passing period or during lunch. Studies show, and commonsense would support these findings, that temptation and access are too great and too easy. For this bill to be successful, the phones must be inaccessible. A school locker, though less accessible than a student's pocket, is still accessible.

It is clear with a decade of declining outcomes in math and ELA, that status quo policies, including cell phone polices, must be reviewed and revamped with student outcomes as our #1 priority. It's my hope we can get back to the basics and rebuild from a solid foundation.

To be clear, this bill does not seek to remove access to communication or end parental contact; rather, it ensures that school hours are dedicated to education and healthy social development. Phones can be returned to students at dismissal, preserving safety and logistical communication without sacrificing instructional time and emotional well-being.

HB 2421, a companion bill to the Senate version, has a few minor changes. One change includes the expansion of approved healthcare professionals to include a mid-level practitioner. And change two allows an IEP or 504 plan, or healthcare recommendation, to include a cell phone remedy only when it is an "intervention of last resort" with "no other reasonable alternative option available."

In closing, there is *mounting evidence* that smartphones in schools are not a benign convenience but a source of distraction, attention disruption, and developmental harms that disproportionately impact our kids' mental health and capacity to learn. Passing this bill is a step in the right direction to put a focus on student success and well-being. It's time to be unified on a phone-free school solution that most Kansans, educators, and parents can agree on – get kids off their phones!

Thank you for your consideration.

Gratefully,

Rep. Kristey Williams
Chair of Select Committee of Government Oversight
Vice Chair of Appropriations
Majority Caucus Chair