

Senate Education Committee

Ryan Meleedy 271-4151

SB 206-FN, requiring public schools to adopt policies to limit the use of cell phones by students.

Hearing Date: February 4, 2025

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Ward, Sullivan, Abbas, Prentiss and Altschiller

Members of the Committee Absent : None

Bill Analysis: This bill requires school districts to adopt policies governing student cell phone use in schools.

Sponsors:

Sen. Ricciardi
Sen. Innis
Sen. Gannon

Sen. Lang
Sen. Birdsell

Sen. Carson
Sen. Fenton

Who supports the bill: 141 People signed in support of SB 206-FN. To see the full list of sign-ins, please email the committee aide (ryan.meleedy@gc.nh.gov).

Who opposes the bill: 6 People signed in opposition of SB 206-FN. To see the full list of sign-ins, please email the committee aide (ryan.meleedy@gc.nh.gov).

Who is neutral on the bill: No one signed in neutrality to this bill.

Summary of testimony presented in support:

Senator Denise Ricciardi

- Senator Denise Ricciardi introduced Senate Bill 206 to limit student cell phone use in schools.
- Senator Ricciardi introduced the bill because she felt that there is now increased support around the idea of limiting cellphone use. Senator Ricciardi felt that this bill is a proactive step in improving educational outcomes and student well-being by requiring public schools to adopt policies limiting cell phone use during the school day.
- Senator Ricciardi pointed to research that shows excessive cellphone use in schools contributes to distraction, reduced academic performance, increased social anxiety, and cyberbullying.

- Senator Ricciardi expressed her belief that this bill will allow students to remain engaged while learning and developing healthier technology habits.
- Senator Ricciardi highlighted the bill's flexibility by citing the exceptions for medical disabilities and language support needs. She also mentioned that schools will have the freedom to tailor the policies to their specific needs.
- Senator Ricciardi explained that the bill will enhance collaboration between educators and parents.
- Senator Sullivan expressed concern that the word "prohibit" would not allow the school districts to control the use of cellphones and that students will not be able to use their phones for research when district technology is not available (i.e. Chromebooks).
- Senator Sullivan explained that she was aware that the bill intends to curb bullying and distraction but believed that there needs to be more flexibility for school districts to control their policy and ensure students can use their cell phones as learning devices.
- Senator Ricciardi replied that this bill allows schools the flexibility to incorporate this language into their policies and added that cellphones have contributed to the mental health issues.
- Senator Ward explained that she knew of several companies producing storage facilities for cell phones in the classroom which could benefit this bill's implementation.

Barret Christina (New Hampshire School Board Association)

- Mr. Christina expressed that the New Hampshire School Board Association supports the concept of this bill, which provides support to teachers and school administration.
- Mr. Christina believed the bill should have some flexibility and referenced Representative Ladd's bill, which limits cellphone use during instructional time, but allows for their usage outside of the classroom.
- Mr. Christina recalled a story from Providence, RI in which a middle school with a 2-year cell phone restriction saw instances of bullying decrease, fewer physical altercations, improvements in student attendance, increased time on learning, and increased student achievement.
- Senator Sullivan asked if there are school districts in New Hampshire that have not adopted policies around cellphone usage.
- Mr. Christina replied that his organization sends out model policies to districts but does not track all of the policies districts that choose to adopt. He added that the NHSBA model policy also includes smartwatches.
- Senator Ward mentioned an article that highlighted Finland's student scores worsening after the introduction of cell phones.

- Senator Abbas inquired if the NHSBA's sample policy addresses concerns over cellphone use in emergency situations.
- Mr. Christina said that their sample policy does not address emergency situations. The sample policy only provides carve-outs for medical and special education services.

Deborah Howes (American Federation of Teachers – New Hampshire)

- Ms. Howes supports the bill because it gives educators and students distraction-free learning time in the classroom. The distraction that comes with cell phones in the classroom for all-aged students is challenging.
- Ms. Howes explained that school systems where cell phone policy is left up to the individual classroom teacher are flawed because it is too great of a burden on the teacher to enforce. Ms. Howes believed that this causes a behavior management issue and power struggle with teens.
- Ms. Howes referred to a study, which said nearly half of all teens are on the internet almost constantly, including school hours.
- Ms. Howes also referred to a study which reported that the average teen receives 237 notifications on their phone every day. She continued that each notification is a distraction, and if you multiply that by the number of students in a classroom, it takes that student, the students around them, and the teacher off task. The report also said that students spend an average of 43 minutes on their phone during school hours, with some spending much more than the average. 7 Out of 10 high school teachers say student's phones in the classroom are a huge problem.
- Ms. Howes provided that cell phones are having a large impact on learning, behavior, students' sense of well-being, inter-student conflict, and inflaming cyberbullying.
- Senator Sullivan asked how this bill helps teachers enforce existing technology policies limiting cellphones, and if an amendment specifying the administrator's role in the enforcement be beneficial.
- Ms. Howes believed this bill provides teachers with the means to enforce cell phone policies, and that we need consistent district-wide policies; it cannot be left to the individual classroom teacher.
- Senator Ward asked Ms. Howes if parents are generally in favor reduced use of cell phones. Ms. Howes responded that she has heard from parents on both sides of the issue, most being in favor.

Brian Hawkins (NEA NH)

- Mr. Hawkins testified in support of Senate Bill 206 because his organization conducted a national survey of its members. The survey found that over half of its members say phones are very disruptive. It also found cyberbullying impedes social skill development and disrupts instructional time. The survey also found educators want a schoolwide policy, with 90% supporting a restriction on cell phone use during instructional time and 83% supporting a limit during the entire school day.
- Mr. Hawkins believed that since Governor Youngkin's executive order, directing schools to limit cell phone usage in the classroom, it has become popular nationwide. Mr. Hawkins provided that at least 15 states have passed laws or policies that ban or restrict student use of cellphones nationwide and 7 out of the nation's 20 largest districts limit cell phone usage.
- Mr. Hawkins also shared that New Hampshire teachers in schools without phone usage policies tend to desire one, and the teachers in districts with cell phone policies wish that it be extended to cover the entire school day.
- Mr. Hawkins believed cell phone usage restrictions improve school climate and student social interaction.
- Mr. Hawkins believed that Senate Bill 206 creates a standard for school districts and that policies will be uniform. Mr. Hawkins also believed the bill is flexible, leaving the operational details to the local districts.
- Senator Sullivan was concerned with the issue of local control and the classroom control teachers have. Senator Sullivan added that nothing prohibits teachers from limiting cell phone usage in their classrooms now. Senator Sullivan asked how Mr. Hawkins saw this policy being implemented and supported in the classroom.
- Mr. Hawkins believed that this bill would create clear policies that are consistently applied. Mr. Hawkins also believed when policies are not uniform, it is more challenging.
- Mr. Hawkins also addressed the emergency situation issue and said that school districts have emergency response plans. He said that he would want his child to pay attention to the adult in the room carrying out the safety plan and not to their phone.
- Senator Ward asked Mr. Hawkins who made the policy in districts that have already adopted policies limiting cell phone use.
- Mr. Hawkins believed that it varies between the principal, school board, and various grassroot efforts but this bill provides a minimum standard.
- Senator Ward asked if this bill would reduce the burden off the classroom teachers.

- Mr. Hawkins believes the bill would provide a minimum standard and guidance which would be helpful for educators, school boards, and administrators alike.