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**Testimony of**  
**Kate Dias & Joslyn DeLancey**  
**Connecticut Education Association**  
**Before the**  
**Education Committee**

**Re:**

**HB 5035 AA Requiring School Districts to Ban Cellular Phones in the Classroom**  
**HB 5149 AA Concerning Phone-Free Schools**

Dear Honorable Chairs, Vice Chairs, Ranking Members and distinguished rank & file members of the education committee. We are Kate Dias and Joslyn DeLancey, President and Vice President of the Connecticut Education Association (CEA), which represents educators in 155 school districts across Connecticut.

We appreciate the efforts of both the Education Committee and Governor Lamont to address the growing issue of cell phones and other personal electronic devices in schools. HB 5035 and HB 5149 both offer meaningful steps forward in the effort to reduce distractions in the classroom, improve educational outcomes, and protect our students. With that said, we believe there is more work to be done in the spirit of crafting a holistic framework to address the chronic disruptive impact of cell phone usage and other personal electronic devices in schools.

The science on this issue is staggering. There is a growing body of peer reviewed, published research telling us that constant student access to personal electronic devices is addictive. The effects negatively impact students' ability to focus and learn, create unwanted distractions in the classroom, and are detrimental to youth mental health. Now more than ever, educators, academics, and pediatric health professionals are calling for clear restrictions on students' access to these devices during instructional time.

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While both bills would address the impact of cell phones in schools, the two approaches differ in a few notable respects. They would also benefit from clearer guidelines surrounding six important categories: (1) notification of and communication of district policies, (2) stakeholder input and reporting, (3) safe and secure storage of students' cell phones, (4) alternative means of contact between parents and students, (5) school activities where prohibitions of cell phone usage are in-effect, and (6) necessary exemptions around the use of appropriate electronic devices during instructional hours. Each of these six areas are articulated below.

We recommend that the process of developing district-wide policies be transparent and inclusive of parents, students, teachers, health professionals, law enforcement, and the leaders of collective bargaining organizations representing school employees. This will make for a more robust policy that is tailored to the needs of a given school district.

Stakeholder input is necessary to address the concerns of families and other members of the school community, and it supports the establishment of clear metrics for data collection, impact measurement, and annual evaluation of district policies. This will create a positive feedback loop that enables school districts to adjust their policy and develop an action plan for addressing disparities and enforcement barriers moving forward.

Furthermore, as we have learned from other states and some Connecticut school districts, cell phone prohibition policies benefit from a rollout involving community conversations. Communication across the school community with students and parents is key. Rollouts should include clear, transparent, and easily accessible posting of the policy via the web. Versions should also be made available in the twelve most common non-English languages spoken by English learners in Connecticut.

While HB 5035 stipulates annually notifying students and their guardians about active policies regarding the prohibition of cell phones in schools, clearer guidelines should be established to ensure a more comprehensive rollout, with language accessibility to provide for wider parental reach.

Developing a framework that is effective and supports successful implementation of a "phone-free schools" policy informs an array of further policy recommendations. Specifically, this means clearly spelling out the guidelines and base content for such a policy. Both HB 5149 and HB 5035 note the necessity for storage of phones, but understanding the immense importance of the personal property of students and families, we also recommend the inclusion of language of securely locking away phones, and offering a suggestive range that includes but is not limited to secure lockable pouches, phone lockers, pencil pouches, or manila envelopes. There may be other means of safe and secure storage, but again, we want to make clear that CEA takes seriously the security of student property.

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Moreover, we know that a leading concern for parents is how they might be able to reach their child should the need arise. To this end, legislation should make explicit that school districts must develop policies that: (1) provide one or more methods for a parent or guardian to contact the student during the school day and provide for written notification of these methods at the beginning of each school year and upon enrollment, and (2) ensure that a student may contact their parent or caregiver during the instructional day, as needed, by using a school telephone made available to the student in a manner and location determined by the school.

One common concern raised in dialogue about bell-to-bell bans is parents' ability to contact their child in the event of a school emergency. If a school emergency were to occur, as parents, we would want to be able to speak with our loved ones. As educators, we want to be sure students are not distracted; instructions can be followed, and that silence can be maintained if necessary. We recognize that this is a sensitive and important discussion that is best suited to a holistic community conversation when the details of district cell phone policies are under development.

While HB 5149 and HB 5035 both allude to the school day in broad terms, we recommend defining the instructional day more clearly. For example, the recently enacted New York law defines the school day as beginning when the first bell rings at the start of the school day and ending when the dismissal bell rings at the end of the day.

Additionally, consideration should be given to the use of such devices during other school-related activities. This was also addressed in the New York law, which includes any school sanctioned event or function occurring outside of the instructional day where students are under supervision of the school, whether on or off school premises.

As written, the bill could benefit from further clarification on exemptions. Each provides exemptions for IEPs and Section 504. However, HB 5035 further exempts cell phone usage for instructional purposes, and if warranted for the documented "health and well-being of such student." Neither addresses the potential need for students to be accessible as a caregiver.

As of the date of this hearing, as many as 35 states have enacted legislation limiting cell phone use during instructional time, including the states of New York, New Hampshire, Georgia, Virginia, Florida, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas and Oregon, which have all implemented strict "bell-to-bell" prohibitions on cell phones in schools. Connecticut should move swiftly and decisively to enact a clear, consistent set of expectations to ensure that every school environment that is free from the potentially harmful effects and unwanted distractions caused by personal electronic devices.

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Much of what we all have come to understand on this issue was learned from the groundbreaking research by Jonathan Haidt in his book, *The Anxious Generation*. CEA is an active member of the Phone-Free CT coalition, along with AFT Connecticut, The Anxious Generation Movement, Distraction Free Schools Policy Project, and the Becca Schmill Foundation. This group developed comprehensive legislative language modeled on the New York law, which is included in our testimony. Additionally, we have included a checklist comparison of provisions HB 5035, HB 5149, and those in the Anxious Generation version.

We applaud Governor Lamont and the Education Committee for taking on this challenge and urge the committee to pass legislation establishing a bell-to-bell prohibition on personal electronic devices during instructional time, without delay.

**Table Comparison: HB 5035, HB 5149 and Anxious Generation Proposal**

	<b>5035 Governor</b>	<b>5149 Education Committee</b>	<b>Phone-Free CT Coalition</b>
<b>Requires BOE policy</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Bell to Bell</b>	<b>Yes</b>	N/A	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Prohibition during Non-Instructional School-related Activity</b>	N/A	N/A	<b>Yes</b>
<b>IDEA/504 Exemption</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Emergency Use Provision/Exemption</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Storage of Phone</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Alternative Parental Contact of Student Provision</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Caregiver Exemption</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Medical Exemption</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Instructional Exemption</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Stakeholder Input</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Notifying Parents of Policy</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Data Collection &amp; Reporting</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Discipline &amp; Enforcement</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Prohibits Violation as Sole Grounds for Student Suspension</b>	N/A	N/A	<b>Yes</b>

**An Act to Create Phone Free Education in PreK-12 Schools** Statement of purpose of bill as introduced: This bill proposes to prohibit access to personal

electronic [communication](#) devices in public schools, education centers, charter schools, or training programs; providing pre-kindergarten, elementary, or secondary education [for the entirety of the instructional day](#) .

*Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:*

## SECTION 1. DEFINITIONS

(a) “Instructional Day” means “the time from when the first bell rings at the start of the school day until the dismissal bell rings at the end of the school day, including but not limited to any structured or unstructured learning experiences like recess, lunch periods, time in between classes, and field trips.”

(b) “Parent” means “a parent or guardian of a student who is authorized to make education decisions for the student.”

(c) “Personal Electronic Communication Device(s)” means “any portable electronic equipment capable of providing voice, messaging, or other data communication between two (2) or more parties or devices, or capable of connecting to a smartphone, the internet, or a cellular or Wi-Fi network, including but not limited to smartphones, cellular phones, bluetooth enabled devices, tablets, smartwatches or other wearables, and gaming devices.”

Personal electronic communication devices do not include:

- (1) School-owned devices provided to the student in accordance with the limitations placed herein;
- (2) Portable devices which meet the definition of a medical device under Section 201(h) of the Food, Drug & Cosmetic Act.

(d) “School” means “any public school, education center, charter school, or training program, providing pre-kindergarten, elementary, or secondary education.”

(e) “School grounds” shall mean “in or on or within any building, structure, athletic playing field, playground, or land contained within the real property boundary line of a district public school, education center, charter school, or training program providing pre-kindergarten, elementary, or secondary education.”

(f) “School-related activity” means “any school sanctioned activity, event, or function, occurring outside of the instructional day, where students are under supervision of the school, whether on or off school premises. School-related activities may include bus rides, field trips, sporting events, and school dances.”

(g) “Student” means “an individual currently enrolled or registered at a school as defined under subdivision (d) of this section.”

## SECTION 2. PROHIBITION OF PERSONAL ELECTRONIC

### COMMUNICATION DEVICES 2.1 Prohibition During the Instructional Day

(a) Each ~~school district or applicable governing body~~ local and regional board of education shall adopt and implement a policy for schools that:

- (i) requires all personal electronic communication devices in possession of a student anywhere on school grounds be turned off, securely locked away, and inaccessible to students during the instructional day, except as otherwise exempted in subsection (b) of this section;
- (ii) ensures that students do not have access to personal electronic communication devices, by providing one or more methods for on-site storage where students may store their devices during the school day, including but not limited to requiring them to be locked and stowed away in secure lockable pouches, phone lockers, student lockers, pencil pouches, or manila envelopes, or other inaccessible locations;
- (iii) provides that schools may limit student access to personal electronic communication devices outside of the instructional day, during school related activities;
- (iv) includes enforcement provisions to ensure strict compliance with the policy by students and school employees; and
- (v) provides (1) one or more methods for a parent or guardian to a student to contact the student during the school day and provide for written notification of these methods to such parent or guardian to a student at the beginning on each school year and upon enrollment, and (2) that a student may contact their parent or caregiver during the instructional day if needed by using a school telephone made available to the student in a manner and location designated by the school.

(b) Notwithstanding subsection (a), a student shall not be prohibited from possessing or using a personal electronic communication device under any of the following circumstances:

- (i) if authorized by a teacher, administrator, or other certified school official in such school for instructional purposes or translation services;
- (ii) when a licensed physician determines that the possession or use of a personal electronic communication device is necessary for the health or well-being of the student;
- (iii) in the event of an emergency;
- (iv) on a case-by-case basis, upon review and determination by a school psychologist, school social worker, or school counselor, for a student caregiver who is routinely responsible for the care and wellbeing of a family member;

(v) where required by law; and

(vi) when the possession or use of a personal electronic communication device is required by a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) , or Section 504 Accommodations Plan.

(c) Each local and regional board of education shall consult local stakeholders, including but not limited to the employee organization representing each bargaining unit within the school building, parents, and students, in the development of such policy prior to its adoption.

(d) No later than August 1, 2026, each local and regional board of education shall adopt and publish in a clearly visible and accessible location on its website the personal communication device policy established pursuant to subdivision two of this section. Translation of such policy into any of the twelve most common non-English languages spoken by English learners in the state, based on the data in the most recent American community survey published by the United States census bureau, shall be posted and provided upon request by a student or persons in parental relation to a student.

(i) On or before June 30, 2026, and each year thereafter, each local and regional board of education ~~District~~ shall collect data annually to measure the impact of its device policy on student behavior, mental health, disciplinary incidents, school attendance, and academic performance.

(ii) No later than July 1, 2027, and each year thereafter, each local and regional board of education shall publish an annual report of data collected pursuant to subparagraph (i) on its website detailing enforcement of the policy within each of the schools under its jurisdiction in the prior school year, including non-identifiable demographic data of students who have faced disciplinary action for non-compliance and analysis of any demographic disparities in enforcement of the policy. If a statistically significant pattern of disparate enforcement impact is identified, such report shall include an action plan to mitigate such disparities.

(iii) No local or regional board of education shall permit the suspension of a student if the sole grounds for the suspension is that the student accessed a personal communication device in violation of the policy adopted and implemented pursuant to subdivision two of this section.