



D.C. STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION TESTIMONY

PRESIDENT & AT-LARGE REPRESENTATIVE DR. JACQUE PATTERSON

“Bill 26-0073 – Heads Up! Distraction-Free Learning Amendment Act of 2025”

Committee of the Whole Public Hearing

March 25, 2025

Written Testimony Submitted April 8, 2025

I. Opening

Chairman Mendelson, members of the Council, and staff: My name is Dr. Jacque Patterson, and I am the President and At-Large Representative of the D.C. State Board of Education (State Board). I am pleased to present this written testimony on behalf of the State Board in support of Bill 26-0073, the *Heads Up! Distraction-Free Learning Amendment Act of 2025*.

II. State Board Focus on Cellphones in Schools

Since 2024, the State Board has been actively engaged with the local community on the topic of cellphones in schools. We have convened a public meeting panel of expert witnesses, gathered feedback from students across the District to better understand how schools and educators should address the issue, and published a blog post. At the September 9, 2024 and February 10, 2025 Student Advisory Committee (SAC) meetings, students shared their experiences with cellphone policies within their schools, weighed the pros and cons of cellphone usage, and provided feedback on what decisionmakers should consider when enacting and enforcing District-wide cellphone policies.^{1,2} SAC members described cellphones as sources of classroom distractions, expressed that cellphones were necessary during emergencies, and shared concerns about cellphones being used to instigate cyberbullying. The SAC recommended considerations for building flexibility in any District-wide policies and taking a more structured approach when collecting and returning cellphones during the school day.

¹ See the September 9, 2024 SAC report here: <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/yq153f3ajtakwelkhuz6w/2024-09-09-SAC-Report.pdf?rlkey=5kpeabhqghhk6n501t1qpxm&st=1lvcupdg&dl=0>.

² See the February 10, 2025 report here: <https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/yq153f3ajtakwelkhuz6w/2024-09-09-SAC-Report.pdf?rlkey=5kpeabhqghhk6n501t1qpxm&st=1lvcupdg&dl=0>.





During our December 11, 2024 public meeting focused on the topic of cellphones in schools, expert³ and public witnesses shared testimony in favor of District-wide policies that prohibit students’ access to cellphones during class time. Witnesses also promoted practices to mitigate concerns over banned cellphones—including inquiry-based learning, improved communication between parents and students during emergencies, and implementing a social media literacy program.⁴

To further engage and inform our constituents, the State Board published a blog post entitled *To Ban or Not to Ban Cellphones in District Schools?* on our new policy blog, The State Board Slate.⁵ This piece provides a landscape analysis of other states’ approaches to cellphones in schools, considers the pros and cons of cellphone usage based on research and public feedback, and summarizes expert and public witness testimony from our December 2024 public meeting. The blog post concludes with a call for digital equity in the District.

III. State Board Recommendations

The State Board took the feedback received from expert and public witnesses at the December 2024 public meeting and synthesized it for inclusion in our state resolution SR25-2, *Calling for the Elimination of Student Cellphone Usage During the School Day*, which passed in February 2025. The resolution calls for the following:

- A school day-long, student cellphone-use ban to be implemented District-wide for the 2025-26 school year.
- The Office of the State Superintendent, D.C. Public Schools and the D.C. Public Charter School Board to strengthen policies concerning emergency communications with students’ parents or guardians.
- D.C. Council to pass Bill 26-0073, *Heads Up! Distraction-Free Learning Amendment Act of 2025*, introduced in January by Councilmember Brooke Pinto (Ward 2).

Notably, SR25-2 strongly agrees with the provision in Bill 26-0073 that ensures no student shall be prohibited from the use of a device included in the student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) or that is required to accommodate a physical disability or manage a health care condition. The resolution also recommends two amendments to Bill 26-0073—developed through

³ Dr. Annette Campbell Anderson (Deputy Director, Johns Hopkins Center for Safe and Healthy Schools), Harry Hughes (Instructional Superintendent, Cluster 7, District of Columbia Public Schools), Aaron Smith (Chief Technology Officer, Loudoun County Public Schools), Nicole Travers (Senior Director of School Support and Program Data, DC Charter School Alliance), and Erin Whinnery (Senior Project Manager, Education Commission of the States).

⁴ All expert and public witness testimony is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cARXP4Km_E.

⁵ See <https://educationindc.com/2024/12/16/to-ban-or-not-to-ban-cellphones-in-district-schools/>.





discussions with the State Board’s Student Advisory Committee (SAC)—that would enable LEAs to set their own policies on whether to allow the following:

- The use of smartwatches and personal student laptops.
- Student retrieval of cellphones at the end of classes for the day, even if this occurs before the end of the school day.⁶

We believe that these recommendations, combined with ongoing cross-agency collaboration and community engagement, will help achieve the ultimate goal of ensuring that the District’s public school students can thrive in a distraction-free environment.

IV. Closing and Thank You

The State Board looks forward to continued collaboration with the DC Council to ensure that our students across the District experience world-class, distraction-free learning. We ask the Council to review our resolution,⁷ which is attached as an appendix, and leverage the State Board’s expertise and community connections as we work together to create actionable solutions. We want to thank the Chairman and Councilmembers for considering our testimony. If you have any questions or would like to discuss our testimony further, please contact me at Jacque.Patterson@dc.gov.

⁶ Ward 3 Representative Eric Goulet testified in his individual capacity at the March 25, 2025 Committee of the Whole Hearing. His testimony echoed the recommendations outlined in SR25-2 and suggested amendments for B26-0073. His full testimony is available at <https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/733>.

⁷ Note: SR25-2 was amended at on the dais at the February 2025 public meeting. The attachment is the final version of the resolution as amended.





1 State Board of Education Resolution
2 Calling for the Elimination of Student Cellphone Usage During the School Day
3 SR25-2
4

5 WHEREAS, the D.C. State Board of Education (State Board) heard testimony from an expert
6 panel of witnesses on the use of cellphones in schools at its December 11, 2024 public meeting;

7
8 WHEREAS, Harry Hughes, DC Public Schools (DCPS) Instructional Superintendent for Cluster
9 VII (middle schools), testified that thirteen of the DCPS middle schools¹ restrict cellphone use
10 during the school day, from the time students arrive until dismissal;^{2,3}

11
12 WHEREAS, Instructional Superintendent Hughes stated that eliminating cell phone use during
13 the day at DCPS middle schools has resulted in the following improvements: fewer distractions
14 during the school day; students are more likely to talk with one
15 another in positive ways during lunch, in the hallways, and at other times during the school day;
16 and teachers do not need to enforce the expectation in the classroom because phones are collected
17 at the start of the day, preserving valuable instructional time;

18
19 WHEREAS, Instructional Superintendent Hughes testified that, "In emergencies, cellphone usage
20 would make our students less safe", and he described how restricting cellphones allows students
21 to pay attention to and follow the direction of trusted adults during an emergency;

22
23 WHEREAS, in March 2024, the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) published the report
24 "Strengthening School Safety in Washington, DC," based on input from DCPS staff, parents, and
25 students, which found that social media drives conflict and escalates situations,⁴ with Hughes
26 noting that restricting cellphones helps prevent conflicts from escalating over social media";

¹ This includes Brookland Middle School, Deal Middle School, Eliot-Hine Middle School, Hardy Middle School, Hart Middle School, Ida B. Wells Middle School, Jefferson Middle School, Johnson Middle School, Kelly Miller Middle School, Kramer Middle School, MacFarland Middle School, Sousa Middle School, and Stuart-Hobson Middle School. However, McKinley Middle School and other education campuses are not part of Cluster VII and fall outside the jurisdiction of Instructional Superintendent Hughes.

² Instructional Superintendent Hughes testified that for most schools, this means DCPS staff collect cell phones at arrival, secure them during the day, and return them to students at the end of the day. In some schools, students deposit their phones in a magnetically sealed pouch that prevents usage while allowing the phones to remain in lockers during the school day.

³ Testimony available at: https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/ipgkuivzostn3p6sx1phw/AJhxnkUKCVnYLvY2r_Ue8ls/2024/2024-12/2024-12-11%20Public%20Meeting/VI.%20Panel%20on%20Cellphones%20in%20Schools/a.%20Live%20Testimony/ii.%20Harry%20Hughes?preview=24.12.11+-+Harry+Hughes+Testimony+on+SBOE+Panel+re+Cell+Phones.pdf&rlkey=6qa05ai16c0ju6smyhhsnh3ue&subfolder_nav_tracking=1&st=a8pz7qfy&dl=0

⁴ The DME convened a School Safety Enhancement Committee that conducted multiple focus groups and





27
28 **WHEREAS**, Aaron Smith, Chief Technology Officer for Loudon County Public Schools, testified
29 to the importance of a single, division-wide policy, and “that consistency was needed from
30 classroom-to-classroom and school-to-school.”;⁵

31
32 **WHEREAS**, Erin Whinnery, Senior Project Manager at Education Commission of the States,
33 testified that a recent poll of members of the National Education Association (NEA) found that 90
34 percent of teachers support policies prohibiting access to cellphones during instructional times and
35 83 percent would expand that to the entire school day;⁶

36
37 **WHEREAS**, Annette Campbell Anderson, Ph.D., Deputy Director of the Johns Hopkins Center
38 for Safe and Healthy Schools, testified that “high rates of cell phone usage in schools are noted as
39 a major instructional distraction, simultaneously adding to increased rates of anxiety and
40 depression among school-aged teens.”;⁷

41
42 **WHEREAS**, Dr. Anderson testified that, nationwide, “students are on their phones for about 43
43 minutes per school day receiving, on average, up to 237 notifications from various apps or gaming
44 sites each day, with about 60 of those notifications during school hours.”;⁸

45
46 **WHEREAS**, Dr. Anderson testified further that “there is some growing data that suggest that
47 cellphone usage does impact academic outcomes” and “One study suggests that students who did

Reviewed safety data. See page 26 for findings related to social media:
https://dme.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dme/publication/attachments/Strengthening%20School%20Safety%20in%20Washington%2C%20DC_1.pdf

⁵ Testimony available at:
https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/ipgkuivzostn3p6sx1phw/AE318KYgHFrWUKWxe7kHQkk/2024/2024-12/2024-12-11%20Public%20Meeting/VI.%20Panel%20on%20Cellphones%20in%20Schools/a.%20Live%20Testimony/iii.%20Aaron%20Smith?preview=Aaron+Smith+Testimony+12-11-2024.pdf&rlkey=6qa05ai16c0ju6smyhsh3ue&subfolder_nav_tracking=1&st=zi1sk8eh&dl=0

⁶ National Education Association (2024). *Take cellphones out of the classroom, educators say*
<https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/take-cellphones-out-classroom-educators-say>

⁷ Testimony available at: [https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/ipgkuivzostn3p6sx1phw/AMubY-yZFrk-KWSXGY8OE30/2024/2024-12/2024-12-11%20Public%20Meeting/VI.%20Panel%20on%20Cellphones%20in%20Schools/a.%20Live%20Testimony/i.%20Dr.%20Annette%20Campbell%20Anderson?preview=Annette+Campbell+Anderson+Comments+Before+the+DC+State+Board+of+Education+121124+\(1\).pdf&rlkey=6qa05ai16c0ju6smyhsh3ue&subfolder_nav_tracking=1&st=wcubt7rv&dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/ipgkuivzostn3p6sx1phw/AMubY-yZFrk-KWSXGY8OE30/2024/2024-12/2024-12-11%20Public%20Meeting/VI.%20Panel%20on%20Cellphones%20in%20Schools/a.%20Live%20Testimony/i.%20Dr.%20Annette%20Campbell%20Anderson?preview=Annette+Campbell+Anderson+Comments+Before+the+DC+State+Board+of+Education+121124+(1).pdf&rlkey=6qa05ai16c0ju6smyhsh3ue&subfolder_nav_tracking=1&st=wcubt7rv&dl=0)

⁸ Common Sense Media. *Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person’s Smartphone Use*. 2023.
https://www.common Sense Media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/2023-cs-smartphone-research-report_final-for-web.pdf





48 not use cellphones and actively took notes, had greater recall and scored a full letter grade and a
49 half higher than those who were actively using cellphones in the same instructional setting.”;⁹and
50

51 **WHEREAS**, on January 27, 2025, DC Councilmember Brooke Pinto, along with
52 Councilmembers Charles Allen, Matthew Frumin, Anita Bonds, Zachary Parker, and Chairman
53 Phil Mendelson, introduced Bill 26-73, the “Heads Up! Distraction-Free Learning Amendment
54 Act of 2025, which directs local education agencies to adopt and implement a personal wireless
55 communication device policy that prohibits a student from using a personal wireless
56 communication device during the full school day.¹⁰

57
58 **NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED**, that DC public school students deserve to be able to
59 learn in a distraction-free environment;

60
61 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that the D.C. State Board of Education calls for implementing
62 a District-wide policy prohibiting the use of cellphones by students throughout the school day for
63 School Year 2025-2026; provided that no student shall be prohibited from the use of a device
64 included in the student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) or that is required to
65 accommodate a physical disability or manage a health care condition, and that LEAs should be
66 allowed to set policy to allow students to retrieve cellphones at the end of classes for the day, even
67 if this occurs before the end of the school day.

68
69 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that the State Board calls for the Office of the State
70 Superintendent (OSSE), DC Public Schools (DCPS), and DC Public Charter School leaders to
71 review and strengthen polices for promptly communicating with parents in the event of an incident
72 or emergency to mitigate any concerns parents may have with students not being able to
73 communicate directly with parents during the school day;

74
75 **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that the State Board calls on Mayor Muriel Bowser and the
76 Council of the District of Columbia (DC Council) to include one-time, non-recurring sufficient
77 funding in Fiscal Year 2025 revised budget legislation, or a budget reprogramming, to pay for
78 equipment or fixtures necessary for the secure storage of cellphones during the school day at all
79 DCPS and DC public charter schools; and

80
81 **BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED**, that the State Board calls on DC Council to adopt Bill 26-73, the
82 “Heads Up! Distraction-Free Learning Amendment Act of 2025,” in time for implementation
83 before School Year 2025-2026; provided that the State Board of Education recommends that the
84 Council amend the introduced version of the legislation to allow individual LEAs to set policy on
85 the use of Smart Watches and personal student laptops, and to allow LEAs to set policy to allow

⁹ Kuznekoff, J. and Titsworth, S. (2013). *The Impact of Mobile Phone Usage on Student Learning, Communication Education*, 62:3, 233-2523. See <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2013.767917>

¹⁰ <https://lms.dccouncil.gov/Legislation/B26-0073>





86 students to retrieve cellphones at the end of classes for the day, even if this occurs before the end
87 of the school day.

88
89

90 Date Adopted: February 19, 2025 Signed: _____
91 *Jacque Patterson, President*

