



To: House Committee on Education
From: Mary Barden, Executive Director
Date: April 23, 2025
Re: H5598 RELATING TO EDUCATION -- HEALTH AND SAFETY OF PUPILS

Dear Chairman McNamara and Members Committee on Education,

I am writing on behalf of the National Education Association Rhode Island and our 12,000 members to express support for House Bill 5598 sponsored by Representative Casimiro.

Student health and well-being is a top priority of NEARI's legislative agenda as is this particular bill. This legislation is one piece in the puzzle of improving student mental and behavioral health in our schools.

Rhode Island's young people are in crisis. In 2022, a cohort of pediatricians and psychiatrists declared a state of emergency in child and adolescent mental health here in the Ocean State. Removing or restricting cell phones in public schools is one of many necessary steps to support our students academically, socially and emotionally – helping them learn and thrive.

We know that cell phones are a distraction to learning. Restricting the use of cell phones in school will reduce distraction, improve mental health, and strengthen the learning environment.

Currently, [25 states](#) have passed laws, enacted policies, or mandated that districts make recommendations that ban or restrict cell phone use in the classroom. Here in Rhode Island, several districts and schools have already developed strong policies in collaboration with families, social workers, educators, and administrators.

The results are positive: students in these communities are more attentive, engagement has improved, and behavioral problems have drastically declined. Beyond the classroom, there is eye contact in the hallways, loud chatter has returned to the lunchroom, and social connections are thriving again.

This legislation correctly makes exceptions for students who need their electronic devices for individualized learning plans, multilingual learning support, or medical purposes. Importantly, enforcement would be handled by administration, not left to teachers, allowing educators to focus on instruction without the burden of policing phone use.

NEARI's own polling shows that 76% of our membership believes a cellphone policy prohibiting use during instructional time would prove very or somewhat effective in curbing challenges regarding student behavior. In addition, the RI AFL-CIOs recent public polling also shows that a strong majority of Rhode Islanders support a cell phone policy in schools.

There is certainly no one-size-fits-all policy and this bill allows districts flexibility to tailor the policy to the needs of their students and community with input from educators, parents and students.

This legislation will ensure that every school district has a consistent district wide policy on personal electronic devices and that enforcement of the policy is not left to classroom teachers alone.

Please pass House Bill 5598 and take a step toward improving learning environments for our students.

Thank you,

Mary Barden, Executive Director