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DRAFT Minutes

Blue Ribbon Task Force on Student Screen Time August 29, 2024

The second meeting of the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Student Screen Time began at 4:00 p.m. on August 29, 2024. The meeting was virtual.

Co-Chairs: Principal Brian Houghton and Student Ava Gustin.

Excused absences: Carole Budde, Alexa Hernandez, Lori Barnes

Purpose

Develop guidance/recommendations, based in research, on:

- students' personal device use in school,
- screen time and mental health, and
- parental oversight of district-owned devices.

These recommendations will be presented to the state board for consideration by November, with final action possible in December.

Introduction

Commissioner Watson welcomed the task force members and asked the Co-Chairs Principal Brian Houghton and Student Ava Gustin to run the meeting. He shared that there are minutes from the first meeting that will be sent out for the members to approve. There will also be bios sent out along with a survey question, giving all members the chance to give feedback on the task force.

Research

Payton Lynn, KSDE staff, gave a presentation sharing some research on personal device policies in schools across the country.

Ms. Lynn shared types of personal device policies:

- Bell to Bell
- Stored with the student (Yondr pouches, backpack)
- Stored separately from student (e.g., Locker, pouches at classroom entrance)

Welcome
00:00

Research on
Policy
02:07

- Permitted during certain times of day: passing period and lunch
- Teacher's discretion (each teacher sets the rules for their classroom)

States that considered a bill banning cell phones (but did not pass):

Arizona
Connecticut
Kansas
Maine
Maryland
Oklahoma
Utah
Vermont
Washington

Law/executive Order prohibits cellphones

Florida – Legislation
Indiana – Legislation
Virginia – Executive Order (created guidance document on cell-phone free schools)

State Boards encourages districts to limit cell phone use

Alabama
Connecticut
Louisiana
Minnesota
New Hampshire

Laws that encourage or require districts to adopt a policy

California – encourages
Ohio – requires
South Carolina – Requires minimum policy

Senator Blasi shared information about California passing a bill on August 28, 2024, to limit student cell phone use.

Kim Whitman, parent, shared that the Arkansas Governor provided a grant for *Yondr* pouches. Seventy-five percent of Arkansas schools have signed up.

Gabrielle Hull, KSDE legislative coordinator, noted that Representative Scott Hill is part of the task force, and he authored the bill that was introduced in the Kansas House last year via the House Education Committee. The bill was not passed out of committee, but it did have a hearing.

- a. Kelly Bielefeld, Superintendent, USD 259 Wichita
- b. Kara Belew, US History and Government Teacher, USD 385 Andover
- c. Brent Wolf, Principal, USD 260 Derby Elementary

Brent Wolf is a principal at Derby Elementary School. They do not have a problem with cell phones at school. All students are required to have them in their locker or backpack. In the past 5 years, there have been no problems with having a policy of no personal devices used during school time, bell to bell.

Kelly Bielefeld, Superintendent in Wichita, the largest district in Kansas, shared that Wichita moved away from building decisions. Last year the school board passed a clear policy that in middle school personal devices must be kept in a student's locker for the entire day. In high school, students are allowed to use their phones during passing periods and at lunch time. The Wichita school board did pass a strong policy concerning recording actions in the hallway, essentially recording violence among minors and posting it online. Enforcement has been a mixed bag.

Kara Belew teaches at one of the two high schools in Andover. At her high school, the phone policy is at the teacher's discretion. In middle school, students must have their phones in lockers all day. Her personal experience as a teacher, is that after Covid things were more challenging. There are two sides to phone use, for instance using a phone with air pods or earphones can help students concentrate; but they are distracting when she is trying to instruct a group or give a test. She finds herself constantly asking students to put their phones away or asking a student to stay outside in the hall until they end their conversation and then can enter the class. It is a power struggle when a teacher asks a student to put a device away. Sometimes it feels like asking them to give up part of their body. She noted that the device is so much more than a phone.

She shared the story of a friend who teaches in a school with a "no-phones at all policy" reports that it has made a dramatic difference. Ms. Belew is working on a doctorate on this issue. She shared an experience of a recent class she was teaching where a young woman came into class upset about something on her phone that offended her. The student would not stop talking about it and it took Ms. Belew five minutes to re-focus the class and start teaching. To pull students' attention away from their phones is exceedingly difficult. When her students heard that she was going to be involved in this task force, they told her "Tell them not to do it!" because they want to have their phones in case there is a crisis. There was a chemical spill in a school laboratory and so the building was evacuated. The principal told her that all the phones caused chaos, parents panicking, stories going out, and it was hard to direct the actual need to the people who could help.

She started teaching before technology was so all consuming, before Google Classroom,

and she finds herself taking things off Canvas and Classroom, because kids think they can stay home and do the assignments, and they do not have to attend class. She is doing more with paper and pen (which is being recommended by research as a better way to learn).

In sum, she can enforce whatever policy she wants in her classroom. If students ask, "Can I listen to my headphones?" she will allow that. However, she believes the struggle is a tough one for teachers. Social media is hard to compete with.

Superintendent Bielefeld added that the privacy aspect does not get talked about enough. When a parent sends their student to school, where every student has a camera and can record and post, they do not expect to have pictures of their child's feet – underneath a bathroom stall – to be posted on Instagram. These devices are an invasion of student privacy. He also noted parents think they want their child to have a phone in case of emergency, but in fact the last thing a student should be thinking about in an emergency is their phone. They need to be listening to their teacher so the teacher can keep them safe. A phone does not keep a child safer; it may give the parent a sense that they might be able to communicate, but the reality is the worst thing for a student to do in an emergency is to text or use their phone.

Miss Gustin asked whether the panelists felt the policy in their school was effective.

Principal Brent Wolf served on his local school board for eight years, during which they were developing policy on personal devices. They had a great deal of resistance from parents who were against any kind of cell phone policy. Many parents wanted 24 hour, 7 day a week access to their child. The school board started with a teacher discretion policy, but they found that the newer teachers were having the most difficulty managing it, because they did not have those courses or management strategies taught to them in college.

A piece of the puzzle will be that while it is a school problem/opportunity, it is also a parent piece. The parents are a huge piece of this, because the school cannot control what happens at home. It will be an uphill battle. They tried the lunchroom/hallways policy, but kids would ask to go to the bathroom and then go check their message on a device in their locker. He felt the reliance of the students on that action was extremely high.

It is vitally important to acknowledge that teachers/schools are child development experts. Educators understand what is developmentally appropriate, how learning occurs, what the ingredients are necessary for a classroom to be effective, and he believes schools need to lean into this expertise and practice. We do not go to the doctor and tell them what will heal us, we trust the doctor to provide us with medical expertise. Teachers also have expertise, practice, and training. He believes the community, including parents, need to

trust that.

Kim Whitman, parent, agrees we have forgotten who the expert is and who knows what is best for children. There is a gap in the education of parents, and administrators need to be transparent about what is happening in the school, so the parent understand that it is not just their child answering what they might want for dinner, but that allows a child to check the two hundred other notifications they are receiving. It would be good to evaluate how the schools are educating the parents on the disruptive nature of these devices upon learning. She is curious about smart watches, which are more of an issue in younger children, and in her area the sixth grade teachers are having trouble with their students using these devices.

Mr. Wolf agreed that watches are personal devices and need to stay out of the child's reach. The watches do tell time, but they also do most things that the cell phones do. At his school, these devices are kept in backpacks all day.

Kara Belew added that she was surprised that smart watches are not specifically included in her school's policy.

Erika Sheets, parent, added she feels "trust me - we are the experts" may not be true. She feels that parents are the experts on their children and are responsible for their minor children. She does not like the expert card. When policies are created, it may not be right for every individual child. There needs to be more conversation around why cell phones are a safety device for young people in schools. She feels starting with the goal of banning personal devices, as if that is the best outcome, is missing an opportunity for education and looking at the larger picture. She believes transparency and accountability lead to trust.

Mr. Wolf agreed that the teachers are not the only experts, and they cannot do it alone, and they are not the most important, but he believes the voice of educators matter. He apologized for saying or inferring that the teachers are THE experts. They are one of the pieces to help kids develop.

Erika Sheets thanked him for that, and she acknowledged that the teacher's voice does matter, and she super-appreciated his response.

Sue Bolley, local school board member in Topeka, asked the Wichita superintendent that after a year of the policy in place, is there data on student performance and are you continuing citizenship on the use of technology in all types of areas, during school and beyond?

Mr. Bielefeld shared that academic performance is up from last year, however, he is not

Panel
discussion
with Task
Force
members
29:23

sure he wants to put that onto the policy. They have not analyzed exactly what is changing that. All interruptions into instructional time breaks concentration. That includes cell phones, calls from the office, etc. As for digital citizenship, all Wichita middle schools are *common sense media certified* (digital literacy skills, cyberbullying) nationwide program.

Amy Warren, parent from Wichita, questioned the use of the phrase “phone bans” and offered the idea of “phone-free” (hopefully bell to bell which has shown the best outcomes). What is the tipping point that would encourage Wichita schools to go phone free bell to bell?

Superintendent Bielefeld answered saying that research does show the benefits of bell to bell, and he referenced the power struggle that Kara Belew spoke of, between teacher and student, and even between parent and child (taking away a child’s cell phone for the weekend is the highest punishment these days). He noted that social media is highly disruptive, the rumors, the bullying, and it is hard to quantify but in the middle school spaces where there are no phones during lunch there is much more activity between students, and they have time to work on their social skills. It might be a louder lunchroom, but it is positive.

Amy Warren, parent, asked are we creating new social norms?

Teacher Kara Belew answered that kids are amazing humans, and it takes schools and aunts and uncles and faith traditions to raise them. The phrase “phone-free” is a much better way to look at it. Today’s adults were not raised with phones, but they do not always think about how texting affects kids. She shared a recent experience of a parent who texted her daughter in math class and told her that her aunt had just died. The parent might not have thought of the consequences – and the trauma for the child hearing such difficult news without supports around her – and the ripple effect in the class. She emphasized parents need to look at the big picture and think about where kids are and how the phone is being used.

Jose Martinez, teacher at Hamilton middle school in Wichita, relayed a scenario from earlier in the week. Wichita shut down some schools last year and many students are starting at new schools. Hamilton is a “welcoming school” and there are new students arriving. The first few weeks have been rough because they do not have relationships with these new students/families. This week a parent came in and Mr. Martinez told the parent that his daughter has been using her cell phone in class. The parent responded, “I don’t know you; I don’t have a relationship with you. I don’t know if I trust you.” Why would a parent feel that way? Is it based on reality or the media and national news? One of the basic points of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs – a primary need is safety. The parent is concerned about safety and messaging “I don’t trust the school, or the teachers and I need my child to have this phone so they will be safe.” Are phones masking some of the deeper issues of feeling

unsafe? Are we looking at the deeper questions here? What does the phone represent?

Co-chair Ava asked about some kids who might need phones to help them learn. How flexible are the policies to help kids who have special needs?

Superintendent Bielefeld noted that is a great question, because like any policy, it does not fit everyone. In Wichita they are 1:1 (one digital device is provided to each student) that is on a secure network, so they prefer students use the district devices. He acknowledged however that there are exceptions. For instance, there are 112 languages spoken in Wichita, and the schools cannot have translators for everyone, so there are times when a phone needs to be used to translate.

Senator Blasi commented that he has read many articles and much testimony, and Ms. Belew brought up some very interesting points that he had not seen. He appreciated that. He asked whether any schools use Yondr bags? In terms of enforcement do Yondr bags work? He is curious because they are quite expensive, and he would like to know if they are effective.

Teacher Ms. Belew answered we do not use Yondr bags. Superintendent Bielefeld noted the cost of devices must be part of the conversation and how do we keep the expensive phones and watches safe from harm. Principal Wolf has not heard of Yondr bags. He feels educating the students on the child protection act, social media constructs and local laws are important.

Superintendent Bielefeld noted that if we see this as a health issue for kids, so education must be a big part of the issue. If we equated this with smoking, for instance, if there is a smoke free zone, people do not smoke there simply because it is a law, but mostly because they have learned that smoking is a dangerous choice with serious health consequences. The schools need to educate the students, family, and community that these devices have real consequences, what are the dangers of these devices for kids at different ages, this must be part of the solution.

Commissioner Watson explained that in Kansas there are two constitutional bodies – the State Board and the Legislature. There are local school boards, which are given autonomy for their local communities. The State Board has a relationship with the local boards, but it is on the local level that policies are set. Therefore, the State Board offers guidance, but does not enforce a single policy on all 286 school districts.

Principal Houghton thanked the panelists for taking the time to speak with the task force and he posed the following discussion question for the breakout groups:

If the state board were to issue guidance for districts on a personal device/cell phone

policy, what should this policy state? (For example, should it be a bell-to-bell ban, teachers' discretion, only allowed during lunch, etc.)

Closing

Principal Houghton stated the KSDE staff will have the notetakers compile all the suggestions and main points from the breakout room discussions and present some of those back to the whole group at the beginning of our next meeting.

Senior student Ava warmly thanked everyone for being here again this week. She looks forward to the next meeting on September 5th, when the task force will start the discussion on screen time and mental health.

