



TERRA LAWSON-REMER
SUPERVISOR, THIRD DISTRICT
SAN DIEGO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: August 27, 2024

23

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

SUPPORTING SAN DIEGO'S SCHOOLS WITH SOLUTIONS TO THE YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS AND SMARTPHONE ACCESS DURING SCHOOL HOURS (DISTRICTS: ALL)

OVERVIEW

In schools across San Diego County, the widespread use of smartphones among students raises urgent concerns over its impact on youth mental health and [influence](#) on academic performance. Constant access to messaging apps, social media, and games fosters a pervasive environment of distraction and social pressure, including the escalation of cyberbullying. These dynamics affect students' well-being, creating barriers to positive mental health, emotional resilience, and learning.

In recent months, schools have increasingly expressed concerns about the impact smartphone access and extensive usage are having on the academic and social outcomes of school age youth, especially during hours of instruction. On average, 8 to 12 year olds are [reporting](#) 5 hours worth of screen time per day with teens reporting an average usage of 7.5 hours per day. A recent [study](#) by Common Sense Media found that 97% of teenagers use cell phones during the school day. In 2023, [a study](#) revealed that students received an average of 237 notifications per day, many occurring during school hours. And, one third of K-12 public school teachers [recently reported](#) that smartphones are a major problem for students in their classrooms. The continuous checking for messages, scrolling, watching videos, playing video games, getting into conflicts with peers through texting and social media, and videotaping teachers and fellow students are just a few of the trends reportedly interfering with peer-to-peer connections, academic performance, school culture, and discipline.

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In addition to the concerns smartphones present during instruction time, researchers and mental health experts have continued to express growing concerns about the overall effects extensive usage is having on the well-being of school age youth. The [U.S. Surgeon General](#) and the [American Psychological Association](#) have issued health advisories warning about the connection between frequent usage, specifically social media, and rising levels of depression and anxiety among youth. The [Cyberbullying Research Center](#) reports an upward trend in cyberbullying and the Pew Research Center [found](#) 59% of U.S. teens have experienced some form of abusive online behavior. Simultaneously, [the CDC](#) reports that over the past decade, feelings of persistent sadness and hopelessness—as well as suicidal thoughts and behaviors—have increased by 40% among young people. [And, a survey of 1,400 clinicians](#) found that social media was the single biggest driver of mental health issues among their patients. Other studies show a [strong correlation](#) between increased screen time and social media use with worsening youth mental health outcomes including depressive symptoms and higher rates of suicide among adolescents.

The urgency of this issue is underscored by a growing movement among policymakers and educational leaders to limit or ban smartphone usage in schools to mitigate the detrimental effects of unregulated smartphone use on students' mental health and academic performance. Last month, Los Angeles Unified School District, the second largest school district in the nation, approved a ban on smartphone and social media use during school hours to curb distractions and improve students’ mental well-being. Governor Gavin Newsom has also voiced strong support for measures aimed at curbing excessive smartphone use in schools. The County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency (HHS) has been working with all 42 school districts in San Diego County to assess their School Wellness Policies to ensure they best promote the health and well-being of students, staff, and the school community, which includes the consideration of smartphone access and usage during instruction time. These and [other initiatives](#) at state and local levels reflect a growing consensus on the need for practical solutions to mitigate the negative impacts of smartphones on young people. However, the reality is that we cannot eliminate phones, but we can help promote smart use. Teaching youth how to use their phones responsibly is crucial, as it empowers them to manage their mental health effectively amidst the pervasive presence of digital technology. By fostering healthy phone habits, we can help young people balance screen time with real-world interactions, thereby enhancing their overall well-being and resilience in a tech-driven world.

In District 3, we are taking swift action to initiate one of these promising solutions by providing grant funds to enable some schools within the district to try lockable smartphone pouches and to test their efficacy in the coming months. This simple product is already popular in the entertainment industry and [rapidly gaining traction](#) in the educational setting. A key advantage of this approach is the lockable pouches allow students to maintain possession of their phones while

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still limiting access during instruction time. With this support, some schools in District 3 can begin to observe and evaluate how smartphone policy guardrails can improve learning environments, minimize distractions, and bolster youth mental health in educational settings.

Today’s Board action will build upon this first step in District 3 by directing the Chief Administrative Officer to collaborate directly with the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) to explore ways the County can leverage its extensive resources to support schools and school districts in their efforts to develop and implement solutions that address the unrestricted use of smartphones and the growing youth mental health crisis.

A clerical error occurred during the regular docketing process that resulted in this item not being docketed properly, as planned for the August 27th, 2024 Board Meeting. The requested item must be placed on the August 27 Board Meeting agenda as a delayed vote on the proposed policy would severely limit our County’s ability to respond timely to Governor Newsom’s urgent request on August 13th, 2024, for California schools to restrict smartphone usage in classrooms. The San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) and San Diego County’s Health and Human Services Agency (HHS) are actively exploring opportunities to strengthen the region’s response to the youth mental health crisis and the use of smartphones in schools. The timing of this Board Letter and the proposed recommendations are strategically aligned with these efforts to maximize impact for the region, including but not limited to, orienting schools to these issues at the start of the academic year, initiating critical stakeholder engagement, and leveraging the County’s extensive resources to support these efforts.

**RECOMMENDATION(S)
SUPERVISOR TERRA LAWSON-REMER**

1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to collaborate with the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) to explore ways the County can support schools and school districts in their efforts to develop and implement solutions to address the unrestricted use of smartphones during school instruction hours. The exploration should include a range of options to limit smartphone access, distractions and cyberbullying; training and other ongoing support strategies for teachers and staff administering these options; resources for students and parents to encourage a phone-free school culture and environment, and implementation support as needed and return to the Board by March 31, 2025 with a progress report on the collaboration and status update on the County’s plan(s) to provide support to the SDCOE including any fiscal impact(s) associated with the plan(s).
2. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to explore opportunities to leverage existing work within the County of San Diego’s Health and Human Services Agency to support local

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school district School Wellness Policies with best practices to address youth mental health and smartphone usage.

3. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to leverage the Office of Evaluation, Performance, and Analytics (OEPA) to provide technical support, as needed, to the SDCOE in any efforts to evaluate the identified solutions and their impact on student behavior (i.e. discipline, bullying/harassment), social connectedness, mental health outcomes, and academic performance.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Today’s actions support the social and emotional wellbeing of San Diego’s youth throughout the region. By leading this effort and co-creating solutions with local school districts, the County would work with the San Diego County Office of Education to begin to address the negative impacts of smartphones in schools and their contribution to the current youth mental health crisis. The program acknowledges that youth from marginalized communities, including those from low-income families, racial and ethnic minorities, and those with disabilities, may face disproportionate mental health challenges exacerbated by social media and smartphone overuse. By implementing school-based solutions, resulting programs can aim to reduce distractions, alleviate social pressures, and foster a more inclusive environment that supports the well-being of all students, particularly those who are most vulnerable. Engaging with community stakeholders, including parents, educators, and mental health professionals, will be essential to the program's success. Input from these groups will be sought to ensure that the program is responsive to the needs and concerns of the diverse communities it serves.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Today’s actions promote healthy and safe school environments for San Diego’s youth. Youth ages 8 to 18 spend a majority of their days in a school setting. With the rise of smartphone access and usage among youth, the County must proactively respond to current research and explore the potential threats created by smartphones in San Diego’s schools and the potential opportunities to address and protect youth mental health. The program supports social sustainability by addressing the mental health needs of students, creating a more balanced, focused, and healthy school environment. By mitigating the mental health challenges exacerbated by excessive smartphone use, the program contributes to the overall well-being of students, which is essential for the long-term social sustainability of communities. Healthy, well-

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adjusted students are more likely to become engaged, productive members of society, furthering the goals of social sustainability.

FISCAL IMPACT

Funds for this request to implement recommendations 1 – 2 to engage with the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE), explore opportunities to leverage existing work within the Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA), and return with the County’s plan(s) to provide support to the SDCOE including any fiscal impact(s) associated with the plan(s) are included in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2024-25 Operational Plan in the Health and Human Services Agency. This work will leverage existing resources, forums, and channels available within the HHSA to promote this initial collaborative work. As engagement occurs with partner organizations, additional costs may be identified, which will be included in the return to the Board. At this time, there will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

N/A

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

Over the last decade, cell phone usage among pre-teens and teens has become ubiquitous. A recent, nationally representative [survey](#) of media use among children ages 8 to 18 years of age found that 53% of youth now own a smartphone by age 11 and, by age 12, more than two-thirds (69%) do. Not surprisingly, increased access to cell phones has resulted in increased usage patterns. On average, 8 to 12 year olds are [reporting](#) 5 hours worth of screen time per day with teens reporting an average usage of 7.5 hours per day.

As usage has increased, researchers and mental health experts have expressed growing concerns about the effect extensive screen time is having on youth mental health. The [U.S. Surgeon General](#) and the [American Psychological Association](#) have issued health advisories warning about the connection between frequent usage, specifically social media, and rising levels of depression and anxiety among youth.

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In recent months, schools have increasingly expressed concerns about the impact smartphone access and usage are having on academic and social outcomes, especially during hours of instruction. A recent [study](#) by Common Sense Media found that 97% of teenagers use cell phones during the school day. The constant checking for messages, scrolling, watching videos, playing video games, cyberbullying and/or getting into conflicts with peers through texting and social media, and videotaping fellow students and peers are just a few of the trends reportedly interfering with academic performance, peer-to-peer connections, school culture and discipline.

As school districts navigate the complexities of smartphone access during hours of instruction they must find solutions that balance the desire to limit distractions while being sensitive to the need to maintain connection in the event of an emergency. Seventy-two percent (72%) of U.S. high school teachers and 33% of middle school teachers [said](#) smartphone distractions were a major problem in classrooms. And while parents reportedly do want to limit cell phone usage to avoid distractions, a majority of them ([56%](#)) want their children to have some access to their smartphones during the school day, with reasonable limits on when the devices could be used.

A number of initiatives are circulating at the federal, state, and local levels ranging from complete bans to offering education on how to use technology responsibly. The Governor of California recently [announced](#) support for initiatives that tackle this issue in California schools. As the variety of initiatives are being implemented throughout the U.S., data on their impact and efficacy will be critical.

Locally, there are a number of organizations that have aligned their efforts to address the impacts of social media on children's mental health. The County of San Diego (County) has partnered with the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) on the [Community Schools Initiative](#), a collaborative, community-centric approach to serving students that is anchored in the shared responsibility to build and create conditions for San Diego County children and families to thrive.

Within the County Health and Human Services Agency (HHS), there is the [Live Well Schools initiative](#) led by the Office of Strategy and Innovation in collaboration with County and external partners, which is part of the broader [Live Well San Diego](#) regional vision to create healthy, safe, and thriving communities. One of the focus areas for Live Well Schools has been working with all 42 school districts in San Diego County to assess their School Wellness Policies to ensure they best promote the health and well-being of students, staff, and the school community. As this work evolves, there is opportunity for the County to recommend data-informed, innovative policies regarding smartphone usage in schools and mitigation strategies as part of these policies.

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In 2023, SDCOE and HHSA began exploring opportunities to further strengthen this partnership and align resources and expertise under the Community Schools effort to be more responsive to the needs of the students and families served by both organizations. Included as part of these efforts is the joining of forces to host the annual [Live Well Advance and School Summit](#), a regional gathering of community leaders, school representatives, partner organizations, and County staff who come together to advance key initiatives in addressing community issues including children’s mental health and the impacts of social media. With support from the Alliance Healthcare Foundation, the 2024 conference will feature a plenary session with the lead researcher of *The Anxious Generation*, the New York Times bestseller on teen mental illness and the impacts of the “phone-based childhood,” along with a panel of representatives from various community sectors with calls to action on how to take a community-based approach to this issue.

In addition to the annual conference, on-going opportunities for dialogue will be convened as part of the partnership between SDCOE, HHSA, *Live Well San Diego* partners, and many other key stakeholders, including students and parents. Key to these discussions will be understanding best practice programs and tools available to schools, communities, and families for addressing the epidemic of children’s mental illness and the impacts of social media and smartphones. These convenings can serve as ideal venues for stakeholders to learn more about existing strategies around smartphone use in schools, and how next steps can be identified to fit the specific needs of children and families that may vary across different schools.

Lockable smartphone [pouches](#) are already widely used to securely store smartphones during entertainment performances to prevent unauthorized recordings. District 3’s action to provide grant funds to enable some schools within the district to try lockable smartphone pouches accelerates the exploration of these devices as a solution that might offer the balance between limiting distractions while still permitting access in the event of an emergency as teachers would have the ability to unlock the pouch using an unlocking base.

Today’s Board action will build upon this first step in District 3 by directing the Chief Administrative Officer to collaborate directly with the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) to explore ways the County can leverage its extensive resources to support schools and school districts in their efforts to develop and implement a variety of solutions that address the unrestricted use of smartphones in local educational settings and the growing youth mental health crisis.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today’s proposed action supports the Empower and Community Strategic Initiatives in the County of San Diego’s 2024-2029 Strategic Plan by injecting into the community

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an innovative solution to address the youth mental health crisis and inviting the participation of school districts as partners in the effort to improve quality of life for San Diego's youth and families.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Terra Lawson-Remer', with a stylized flourish at the end.

TERRA LAWSON-REMER
Supervisor, Third District

ATTACHMENT(S)
N/A