Date of Hearing: April 22, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
Darshana R. Patel, Chair
AB 1644 (Muratsuchi) – As Amended March 19, 2026

SUBJECT: Pupils: use of smartphones: prohibition

SUMMARY: Requires the governing board of a local education agency (LEA) to adopt a policy to prohibit the use of smartphones by its students, thereby creating a bell-to-bell ban on smartphone use. Specifically, **this bill**:

1) Repeals, on July 1, 2027, existing law that:

    a) Requires LEAs to create a policy that limits or prohibits smartphone use on schoolsites by July 1, 2026, except under specified conditions, and update the policy every 5 years thereafter;

    b) Requires LEAs to include stakeholder input to ensure the policy is responsive to the unique needs and desires of students, parents, and educators in each community; and

    c) Authorizes the policy to include enforcement mechanisms.

2) Requires, no later than July 1, 2027, the governing body of an LEA to adopt a policy that prohibits students from using smartphones while the students are at a schoolsite or under the supervision and control of an employee or employees of the LEA.

3) Requires development of the policy to involve significant stakeholder participation in order to ensure that the policy is responsive to the unique needs and desires of students, parents, and educators in each community. Authorizes the policy to include enforcement mechanisms that restrict access to smartphones.

4) Requires the policy to be updated every five years.

5) Requires a pupil to not be prohibited from possessing or using a smartphone under any of the following circumstances:

    a) In the case of an emergency, or in response to a perceived threat of danger;

    b) When a teacher or administrator of the school district, county office of education (COE), or charter school grants permission to a pupil to possess or use a smartphone, subject to any reasonable limitation imposed by that teacher or administrator;

    c) When a licensed physician and surgeon determines that the possession or use of a smartphone is necessary for the health or well-being of the pupil; and

    d) When the possession or use of a smartphone is required in a pupil's individualized education program (IEP).

6) Clarifies that the governing board of an LEA may be subject to monitoring and auditing by the California Department of Education (CDE) to ensure compliance with the requirements of this section. Requires an LEA to make the policy available to the department upon request.

7) Clarifies that these provisions do not authorize monitoring, collecting, or otherwise accessing any information related to a pupil's online activities.

EXISTING LAW:

1) Requires, no later than July 1, 2026, an LEA to adopt a policy to limit or prohibit the use by its pupils of smartphones while the pupils are at a schoolsite or while the pupils are under the supervision and control of an employee or employees of that school district, COE, or charter school. Requires this policy to be updated every 5 years. Requires a pupil to not be prohibited from possessing or using a smartphone under any of the following circumstances:

   a) In the case of an emergency, or in response to a perceived threat of danger;

   b) When a teacher or administrator of the school district, COE, or charter school grants permission to a pupil to possess or use a smartphone, subject to any reasonable limitation imposed by that teacher or administrator;

   c) When a licensed physician and surgeon determines that the possession or use of a smartphone is necessary for the health or well-being of the pupil; and

   d) When the possession or use of a smartphone is required in a pupil's IEP. (Education Code (EC) 48901.7)

2) Authorizes the governing board of each school district, or its designee, to regulate the possession or use of any electronic signaling device that operates through the transmission or receipt of radio waves, including, but not limited to, paging and signaling equipment, by pupils of the school district while the pupils are on campus, while attending school-sponsored activities, or while under the supervision and control of school district employees. (EC 48901.5)

3) Requires that no pupil may be prohibited from possessing or using an electronic signaling device that is determined by a licensed physician and surgeon to be essential for the health of the pupil and use of which is limited to purposes related to the health of the pupil. (EC 48901.5)

FISCAL EFFECT: This bill has been keyed as a possible state-mandated local program by the Office of Legislative Counsel.

COMMENTS:

Need for the bill. According to the author, "AB 1644 builds upon existing law by requiring schools to adopt clear, consistent 'bell-to-bell' policies that limit student use of smart phones throughout the school day, with appropriate exceptions for safety, health, and educational purposes."

Current law requires LEAs to develop phone policies with significant community engagement by July 1, 2026. In 2024, the Legislature required all LEAs to develop a policy that would limit or prohibit cell phone use in schools (AB 3216 (Hoover), Chapter 500, Statutes of 2024). When crafting these policies LEAs are required to solicit significant stakeholder input to ensure the final policy meets the unique needs of students, parents, and educators in their community. This bill would replace these locally-developed policies with a statewide requirement for all LEAs to prohibit smartphone use during school by July 1, 2027.

Reports indicate that many LEAs invested significant time and resources, and solicited extensive stakeholder engagement, when crafting policies. For example, Poway Unified School District distributed a survey to students, families, and staff when developing their phone policy, and held focus groups with the Parent-Superintendent Advisory Council and the Student-Superintendent Advisory Council. A report released in April, 2026 revealed the survey received over 12,000 responses.

Similarly, a press release issued on July 8, 2025 by San Diego Unified lists the following forms of community engagement that went into their phone policy:

- A survey administered during the final week of school gathered feedback from 2,236 respondents, generating 1,647 qualitative data points;
- 60 students participated in focus groups and policy development sessions through the Student Advisory Board;
- Extensive collaboration with the Parent Teacher Association; and
- Staff input on policy framework development.

The final policy adopted by San Diego Unified included a bell-to-bell ban for K-8th grade students; for high school students, cell phone use is banned during instructional time but allowed during lunch and passing periods.

Examples from California schools demonstrate the variety of current phone policies. In a 2026 amicus curiae brief for *TIKTOK INC vs Rob Bonta, Attorney General for California* (case number 5:25-cv-09789-EJD), the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA) interviewed various school district administrators across the state. They surveyed, among other items, school polices surrounding cell phone use and the school environment. A sampling of these policies is described below, without endorsement, to demonstrate the variety of ways districts are designing and implementing phone policies:

- Large Suburban District located in the Inland Empire: Their policy prohibits cellphone use for middle school students at all times, and limits use for high school students during non-instructional periods.

  District administrators expressed concerns about having the ability or tools to limit phones in school, despite the problems phones create on campus. An administrator shared that "the problem is social media" because it creates a distraction in the learning environment, "even when phones are not in the classroom."

Several schools in the districts reported positive effects of having a cellphone policy. Prior to implementing a cellphone use policy, administrators reported having "over 100 expulsions" throughout the year. After implementing the cellphone use policy, districts saw a decrease in disciplinary matters. Several students shared that they did not realize how much of a distraction phones had become in their daily lives. Without their phones, the administrator observed that students could enjoy group projects and build friendships with each other.

While the district expected parents to be upset about the restrictions, they did not receive complaints or resistance.

- Large Urban District located in the San Francisco Bay Area: This district shared that its school board would be presented with options to implement a formal district-wide student smartphone ban in March 2026.

  The district ran a pilot program at one of its middle schools that required students to keep their phones in their bags the entire day "from bell to bell". The district conducted a parent survey to explain the reason behind the pilot program. None of the district administrators received complaints from parents about the restrictions.

  Since implementing the pilot, principals reported a "significant decrease" in disciplinary referrals and incidents involving cyberbullying and social media activity during unstructured time. Additionally, students now "noticeably engage with each other" during non-instructional time.

- Small Rural District in Southern California: Their policy limits cellphone use for students during the day. The district shared that the cellphone device itself was not an issue, but rather what the phone enabled, including access to social media.

  While parents were mostly supportive of limited phone use during instructional time, some parents still wanted their children to have their phones for emergencies.

- Large Suburban District in Southern California: Their policy restricts cell phones during instructional periods but allows students to access their phones in case of emergencies. In addition to phones, the district required smart watches to always be in airplane mode. Their policy was informed by responses to a community engagement survey.

- Small Suburban District in Southern California: Their policy reduces cellphone use during instructional periods.

- Small Urban District in the San Francisco Bay Area: This district implemented a phone policy for the first time during the 2025 – 2026 school year. While implementation began smoothly, issues arose involving students with health issues, specifically students who needed access to their phones for medical reasons or IEP support.

  Nearly 100 days into the change, staff observed improved student interactions and a decline in physical fights. Staff also noted the disappearance of harmful TikTok challenge incidents that posed safety risks. Some staff expressed the view that schools

should treat smartphone usage like smoking and advocate for a "zero-tolerance" approach.

- Medium Urban District in the San Francisco Bay Area: Their initial policy restricted phone use to instructional time. The district intends to change the policy to restrict phones from "bell-to-bell." Without the full restrictions, children experienced difficulty interacting with others "outside of their devices."

  Students did not seem to be aware of how much they used their phones and the seriousness of the impact. An administrator shared that the "vast majority" of issues reported to her involved phone-related incidents, primarily with social media postings carrying into in-person conflicts. During lunch time, students appeared isolated because they were on their phones. The district managed incidents involving viral trends, including the trend that encouraged students to vandalize school property. For example, students posted videos online of themselves tearing paper towel dispensers off the bathroom walls and shattering mirrors.

- Large Rural District on the Central Coast: Their policy stipulated "no phone during instruction." Administrators expressed particular concern about the impact of social media on students in special education, including those with physical and emotional disabilities. These students may be more vulnerable to distraction and less equipped to exercise judgment when exposed to violent, sexual, or otherwise inappropriate content.

As these policies are largely new, research on the breadth and impact of school cell phone and smart device policies is lacking. Careful consideration of which policies have been tried, and to what effect, would be instrumental in developing best practices and evidence-based recommendations. ***Staff recommends the bill be amended to*** require the CDE to study the variety of smartphone school policies California and their impacts on student outcomes and the school environment.

A noticeable trend in existing polices is that multiple school districts changed their policies after initial implementation. To ensure LEAs remain able to respond to make changes as they see fit, ***staff recommends the bill be amended to*** allow LEAs to update their smartphone policies more frequently than every five years.

The role of stakeholder input is unclear. In keeping with current law, this bill requires LEAs to solicit significant stakeholder input when crafting cell phone policies, and to consider the unique needs of students, parents, and educators in their community. However, considering that there is only one outcome of the proposed policy – a prohibition on cell phone use during school hours – it is unclear what role the stakeholder input would play.

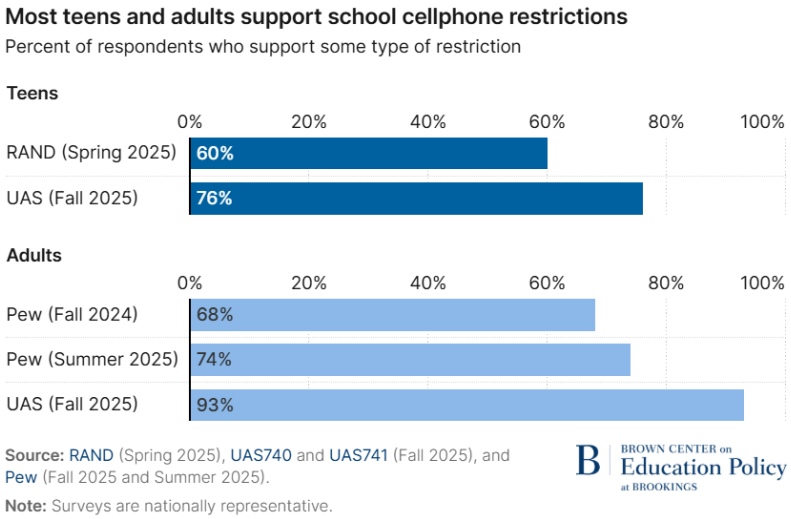
Numerous states enacted bell-to-bell phone bans in 2025. Most states have policies that seek to limit phone use in school to some extent, and states without full bans typically allow schools to set their own policies, which may include bans. A national survey of 1,100 parents and 400 teenagers by the Brookings Institute found that, as of October 2025, 98% of teens attend school with some phone restrictions and 55% attend a school with bell-to-bell phone bans (Saavedra, 2026).

In 2025, at least 10 states implemented versions of a bell-to-bell phone ban in schools:

State	Ban	Date	Relevant Law	Notes
Texas	Bell-to-Bell	2025-26 SY	HB 1481	Made $20 million available for schools for implementation
New York	Bell-to-Bell	2025-26 SY	FY2026 budget agreement	Made $13.5 million available for schools for implementation
Virginia	Bell-to-Bell	2025-26 SY	Executive order 33	Sought extensive stakeholder input before developing guidance on implementing "phone free education"
Louisiana	Full Day	2024-25 SY	SB 207/Act 313	
Georgia	K-8 Bell-to-Bell	Jan 2026	HB 340	A 2026 bill to expand the ban to high schools passed both houses and is pending the Governor's signature
Alabama	Full Day	2025-26 SY	HB 166	Includes mandatory social media training for 8th grade students. Followed a 2024 bill encouraging districts to limit or restrict phones.
Nebraska	Full Day	2025-26 SY	LB 140	
North Dakota	Bell-to-Bell	2025-26 SY	HB 1160	Includes smartwatches, tablets, and other devices
Arkansas	Bell-to-Bell	2025-26 SY	Act 122	Followed a successful pilot program
Oregon	Bell-to-Bell	2025-26 SY	Executive order 25-09	Followed a 2024 bill encouraging districts to limit or restrict phones.

Sources: Civic IQ; Ballotpedia. SY: school year

Support for cell phone restrictions appears to be growing. The Brookings Institute recently reviewed multiple surveys on cell phone use in school (Saavedra, 2026). Perhaps surprisingly, they found 76% of teens expressed a preference for some form of restrictions on phone use during the school day, compared to 93% of adults. Over the last 2-3 years, interest in cell phone restrictions has increased.



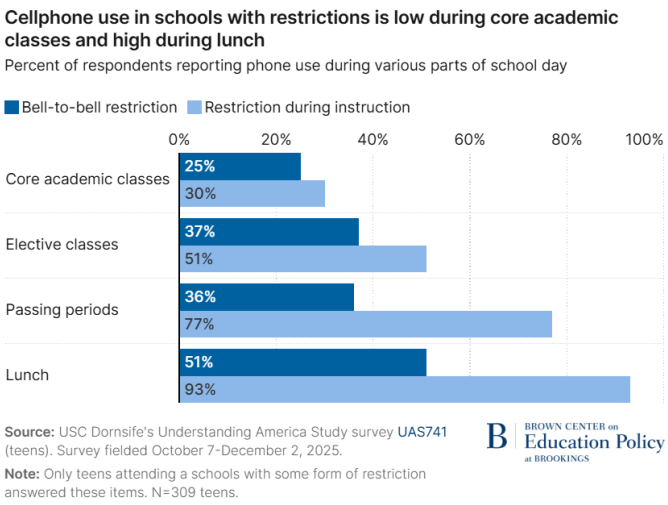
A 2025 Rand Survey found that 60% of students support some restrictions on cell phone use during classes. However, only 10% of surveyed students supported a full bell-to-bell ban on smartphone use in school.

Proposed ballot initiative would require limiting smartphone use in schools. In November 2025, a statewide initiative titled "The California Kids AI Safety Act" was proposed. The Act would, among other provisions, prohibit students from using internet-enabled devices such as smartphones "during instructional time or while the pupils are under the supervision and control of an employee or employees of [the LEA]." The initiative has received media attention but has not yet reached the required number of signatures to be included on the ballot.

Enforcement of smartphone policies remains a challenge. A key issue in school smartphone policies is enforcement. The public-market firm Civic IQ identified three common ways schools enforce phone policies, including pouches or lockers that students secure phones in when entering or leaving school; phone caddies in individual classrooms; or policy only (e.g., "off-and-away")

Investment in phone-storage solutions, such as pouches and lockers, can be very expensive for districts. However, relying on teachers to police phones in classrooms creates a higher burden for educators and takes away from instructional time.

Regardless of policy and enforcement methods, students will likely find ways to circumvent the rules. For example, students who are required to place their phones in pouches sometimes bring in "dummy phones" that are broken or outdated, and place these in the pouches while keeping their real device on their person. Research provided by the Brookings Institute shows that 25-30% of teenagers use phones during core academic classes, despite school restrictions (Saavedra, 2026). However, the same study suggests that schools with harsher restrictions, such as bell-to-bell bans, may see fewer policy violations.



Research demonstrates the impact of smartphone use on children. The U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory in 2023 about the impact of social media use on the mental health of young people. The Surgeon General called for urgent action from policymakers, technology companies, researchers, families, and young people to better understand the full impact of social media, maximize its benefits, minimize its harms, and create safer online environments to protect children.

A 2019 Pew Research study found that most U.S. teens consider anxiety and depression to be significant issues among their peers, regardless of whether they experience these conditions (Horowitz and Graf, 2019). Concern about mental health is widespread across gender, racial, and socio-economic lines.

Furthermore, a 2020 article in the Journal of Affective Disorders indicated that more time spent on social media was linked to an increased risk of self-harm and depression, as well as lower self-esteem among 13–15-year-old girls (Barthorpe et al., 2020). Similar findings were observed for both weekday and weekend use.

Some researchers have suggested a correlation between increased technology and smartphone use and the rising rates of teenage anxiety and depression. The widely cited book *iGen*, authored by San Diego State psychology professor Dr. Jean Twenge, presents evidence of an increase in depression and suicide among American teenagers that may be caused by increased mobile device screen time and social media use.

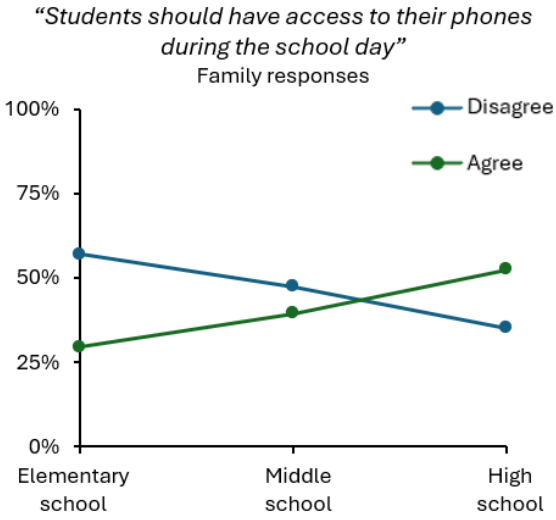
Moreover, an increasing body of research focuses on the impact of technology on student outcomes in grades K-12. A 2015 Discussion Paper from the London School of Economics and Political Science, Center for Economic Performance, explored the effects of banning cell phone use in English city schools in 2013. The paper found that student test scores improved following the ban, particularly among the most disadvantaged and underachieving pupils. The data suggests that low-achieving students are more likely to be distracted by mobile phones, while high achievers are less affected by the mobile phone policy.

The risks and benefits of smartphone use vary by grade level. Some research suggests that young children may be particularly affected by smartphone use. Reporting by Common Sense Media shows that 25% of children have a personal cell phone by age 8, and 91% of a personal cell phone by age 14. Research in the journal *Pediatrics* demonstrated that children who own a smartphone earlier in life are at a higher risk of depression, obesity, and sleep deficits (Barzilay et al., 2025). One study in adolescents aged 12-18 found an association between prolonged smartphone use and experiencing loneliness and depressive mood, which was stronger in middle school students than in older teenagers (Kim et al., 2026). The research coalition Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) found that increased use of social media, which is often accessed by smartphone, is significantly associated with a thinner cerebral cortex – the part of the brain responsible for attention, memory, and emotional control – in children aged 10-13 (Nagata et al., 2026). The national campaign *Wait until 8th* advocates for parents and children to put off getting a smartphone until at least 8th grade.

Research also suggests that teenagers are negatively impacted by smartphone use, especially as it relates to social media (Barthorpe et al., 2020; Twenge, 2017). However, high school students are also more likely to rely on a smartphone for social connection with their peers, or communication with parents or guardians as they become more independent.

In developing its smartphone policy, Poway Unified School District (PUSD) surveyed over 7,000 families on their opinion on smartphone use. They found that at the elementary level, only 29% of parents and guardians agreed that students should have phone access during the school day. However, at the high school level, 52% agreed. The authors summarize their data:

> Family support for student cell phone access increases as students progress through grade levels. Family responses show a clear upward trend in agreement [with school-day cell phone use] from elementary to high school. At the elementary level, most families express disagreement (56.9%), while agreement increases at the middle level and becomes more evenly distributed. By high school, agreement (52.4%) surpasses disagreement (35.1%), indicating that families are more supportive of student access as students mature. This pattern suggests that family perspectives on cell phone use are closely tied to developmental expectations and increasing student independence.



	Elementary	Middle	High
Strongly disagree	26.0%	21.0%	14.0%
Disagree	30.9%	26.3%	21.1%
Neither agree nor disagree	13.4%	13.2%	12.3%
Agree	18.3%	21.9%	27.6%
Strongly agree	11.1%	17.4%	24.8%

Data re-graphed from *Student Cell Phone Use in Schools: Stakeholder Feedback and Considerations for Policy Development.* PUSD, 2026

To account for the differing needs of younger and older students in their communities, some California schools have adopted policies that prohibit smartphone use in younger grades and limit smartphone use in high school (see example polices above). To protect the most vulnerable students, while still allowing LEAs to accommodate the needs of older students if desired, ***staff recommends the bill be amended to*** require a bell-to-bell ban on smartphone use for schools serving children in kindergarten through 8th grade, and recommend a bell-to-bell ban for schools serving children in 9th through 12th grade.

Arguments in support. According to the organization TechNet, "Smartphone use among students is nearly universal, with 95% of teens having access and many reporting constant online activity. This has become increasingly disruptive in schools, as device use during class and throughout the day reduces attention, learning, and peer interaction. While California authorized restrictions through AB 272 and now requires schools to adopt policies by July 1, 2026, under AB 3216, enforcement remains inconsistent. Other states have moved toward stricter, schoolwide limits, including bell-to-bell restrictions.

Excessive smartphone use is strongly linked to negative academic and mental health outcomes, including reduced focus, increased anxiety and depression, and lower overall well-being. The U.S. Surgeon General has warned of significant risks associated with youth social media use, and even the presence of a phone can impair attention. Early evidence shows that clear, consistently enforced restrictions improve academic performance, reduce behavioral issues, and support student well-being, underscoring the need for stronger, uniform policies.

AB 1644 establishes clear boundaries on smartphone use during the school day to support student focus, strengthen school climate, and improve academic outcomes. By limiting device use, it reduces distractions that undermine learning, mental health, and meaningful student engagement."

Arguments in opposition. According to the Association of California School Administrators, "Our organization's engagement on student smartphone use policies reflects extensive consideration for student mental health and well-being, local educational agencies' (LEAs) responsibility for school site safety, as well as local school community concerns. Regrettably, AB 1644 would reverse the work now being completed by many LEAs pursuant to a recently enacted law with fewer considerations for differences in grade levels, stakeholder voices, and time needed to implement additional changes.

LEAs have just recently completed, or are finalizing, their mandatory policy adoption process for student smartphone use pursuant to AB 3216 (Hoover; Chapter 500, Statutes of 2024). It included extensive stakeholder engagement, as required, and the adoption of board policies with a July 1, 2026 deadline. LEAs shared they have worked intentionally to refine their policies based on pilot program outcomes, feedback from parents, students and staff, academic studies on student smartphone use, as well as cost analyses to purchase and maintain tools such as pouches, lockers or other access-restricting devices during part or all of the school day. Despite these deliberate and resource-intensive processes, AB 1644 creates a 'do-over' just one year later, creating unnecessary frustration and confusion for those stakeholders and administrators in LEAs that did not establish "bell to bell" smartphone restrictions for all grade levels."

Recommended Committee amendments. Staff recommends that the bill be amended as follows:

- Limit the bell-to-bell-ban to schools serving students in transitional kindergarten through 8th grade. Require the policy to include at least one method by which parents and guardians can contact students during the school day. Prohibit K-8 instruction from requiring the use of a smartphone by students.

- Strongly encourage high schools (9-12) to adopt a bell-to-bell ban that complies with the K-8 ban provisions.

- Authorize schools to update their phone policies every five years or sooner, as needed.

- Require the CDE to conduct a report on existing smartphone policies. Require the report to include a description of stakeholder engagement that went into development, enforcement methods of the policy, and initial challenges or successes that arose from policy enactment. Require the CDE to issue recommendations by Jan 1, 2028, of best practices for smartphone policies based on their report.

Related legislation AB 1700 (Lowenthal) of the 2025-26 Session would establish an eSafety commission responsible for online safety.

AB 272 (Muratsuchi), Chapter 42, Statutes of 2019, provides that a student shall not be prohibited from possessing or using a smartphone under specified circumstances, and authorizes governing bodies to adopt a policy to limit or prohibit the use of smartphones by students while at school.

AB 3216 (Hoover), Chapter 500, Statutes of 2024, requires, rather than allows, a governing board of an LEA, COE, or a charter school no later than July 1, 2026, to develop, adopt, and update every five years a policy, as specified, to limit or prohibit the use by its pupils of smartphones while the pupils are at a schoolsite or while the pupils are under the supervision and control of an employee of that LEA, COE, and charter school.

SB 976 (Skinner), Chapter 321, Statutes of 2024, prohibits operators of "internet-based services or applications" from providing "addictive feeds," as those terms are defined, to minors without parental consent and from sending notifications to minors at night and during school hours without parental consent, as provided. This bill requires operators to make available to parents a series of protective measures for controlling access to and features of the platform for their

children. This bill also requires reporting on data regarding children on their platforms, as specified.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Technet
American Academy of Pediatricians, California
39 individuals

Opposition

Association of California School Administrators

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