

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
STATE OF MONTANA

GREG GIANFORTE
GOVERNOR



KRISTEN JURAS
LT. GOVERNOR

August 22, 2024

Dear District Superintendents and Trustees,

I want to welcome you to the start of the 2024-2025 school year and thank you for your service to Montana's students, parents, educators, and communities.

As educators prepare for a new class of learners, it's our responsibility as leaders to ensure that they're prepared to help every student reach his or her full, outstanding potential. For our students to do that, we should seek to remove distractions and disruptions in our schools, a place where students should be focused on learning. Unfortunately, cell phones distract students and disrupt the learning environment, and according to studies, it leads to learning loss and lower grades.

Given the gravity of the situation, I ask you, and all school districts throughout our state, to consider adopting policies that create "cell phone-free" schools. Schools across the country that have enacted policies to make schools "cell phone-free" have seen increased student engagement and improved academic outcomes. Many school districts in Montana have already taken this step to ensure that teachers can teach, and students can learn, free from the distractions of cell phones.

Studies and data point to the urgent need to act. Since the advent of smartphones about 20 years ago, students' use of these devices, including in schools, has increased. As of 2021, nearly nine out of 10 teenagers and 43 percent of 8- to 12-year-olds own a smartphone. Ninety-seven percent of 11- to 17-year-olds use their cell phone during school, including to text, access social media, play games, and watch videos. They receive an average of more than 50 notifications per day on their phones during school hours.

Between 2015 and 2021, teens' daily use of screen media has grown by two hours, to eight hours and 39 minutes per day, and daily use of screen media by 8- to 12-year-old children has grown by an hour to over five-and-a-half hours per day. Nearly 40 percent of 8- to 12-year-old children use social media, with nearly one in five reporting they use social media every day. Eighty-four percent of teenagers have used social media, and on average, they spend nearly an hour and a half using it each day.

As I talk with educators and parents throughout our state, they often tell me about the negative impacts of cell phones in the learning environment. Nationally, and in Montana, we see academic performance declining and rates of mental health disorders, from anxiety and depression to eating disorders, among young people increasing. As educators, you see firsthand

the strong correlation between time spent on smart devices and these problems, and growing bodies of research prove it.

That's why I urge you and all Montana school districts to consider adopting policies to make our schools "cell phone-free." For the education and health of our students, I believe it's critical for all Montana schools to adopt such a policy.

In the immediate term, my office is prepared to assist you as you work to consider and adopt a "cell phone-free" school policy. My office will begin to work with education leaders and health officials in developing resources to assist school districts with evaluating and implementing effective policies for "cell phone-free" schools.

I will follow up with you to see how the development and implementation of a "cell phone-free" school policy are going.

In the meantime, please feel free to contact me or my team with any questions, thoughts, or experiences you may wish to share.

I wish you a successful start to the school year, and I look forward to visiting many of your schools as I meet with Montanans throughout our state.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Greg Gianforte", followed by a large, stylized blue star or asterisk symbol.

Greg Gianforte
Governor

cc: Rob Watson, Executive Director, School Administrators of Montana
Lance Melton, Executive Director, Montana School Boards Association