

ALBANY

Teachers union backs cellphone restrictions

BY CHAD ARNOLD

New York state's top teachers union is calling for "bell-to-bell" restrictions on smartphones and other personal electronic devices as a way to improve student engagement in the classroom.

The New York State United Teachers union announced Tuesday that its 83-person board of directors unanimously approved a resolution last week calling for "a statewide law or policy" restricting smartphones and devices like smartwatches and earbuds during the school day, with limited exceptions for "instructional purposes and student health and safety needs."

The vote was held Friday, immediately after the union hosted what it called a "Disconnected Conference," where more than 500 educators, students, parents and policymakers — including Gov. Kathy Hochul — gathered to discuss the effects of cellphones, social media and technology on learning and mental health in schools, according to a news release.

"Our Disconnected Conference confirmed what we've heard from our members across the state: the constant disruption of dealing with cell phone use and social media-related distractions is working against the primary mission of our schools, which is to educate our children," NYSUT President Melina Person said in a statement.

The resolution calls for restrictions to be designed lo-

cally, with input from parents, educators and other stakeholders, and should also address "alternative communication methods and systems for parents and caregivers."

Educators should not "bear the sole or primary responsibility" for implementing and enforcing the policies and the state should provide resources so that districts are not "financially burdened" by the cost of implementing whatever policy is adopted, the union said.

Earlier this month, the union conducted a poll that found 85% of its members support banning cellphones and personal electronic devices for the entire school day with approved exceptions, according to the release.

"NYSUT members reported that students' use of cellphones is a major factor in the challenges affecting schools today, including: students not developing adequate social skills (88% major factor), bullying (81%), students being distracted in class (80%), students having difficulty learning (79%) and students struggling academically (78%)," the release states. "Additionally, 71% said cellphones are responsible for driving a negative or unhealthy school culture."

During a recent statewide listening tour around mental health issues in schools, Hochul has floated the idea of legislation restricting cellphones in schools.

"This is an option I'm considering with legislation," Hochul said during an Aug. 5 stop

in Yonkers, when asked about potentially banning cellphones in the classroom. The governor went on to say school districts can take action on the issue on their own.

Reached for comment on the union's proposed policy, a spokesperson for the governor referred to comments Hochul made during the Disconnected Conference, where she again backed the idea of restricting cellphones in schools.

"Our job is to raise adults, fully-functioning adults, who emerge from childhood with the social skills that they develop in school settings," Hochul said during the summit. "They're being denied that now, because the cellphone has taken over human interaction."

JP O'Hare, a spokesperson for the state Education Department, said the department "is committed to addressing the complex challenges of our rapidly evolving technological landscape with a comprehensive strategy."

That strategy includes bolstering media literacy in order to teach students how to better understand traditional and social media, while working with the state Office of Mental Health and Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services to protect children from online dangers and strengthen the rules around parental consent and data privacy and protection.

"Educating students on responsible cellphone use and media literacy is essential as it prepares them for digital



PETER R. BARBER

Schoharie Central School District Superintendent David Blanchard demonstrates the locking Yondr cell phone pouch students are required to use during school hours on Friday.

etiquette and responsibility," O'Hare said. "These initiatives aim to provide educators with the resources necessary to foster informed and resilient digital citizens."

Meanwhile, school districts throughout the Capital Region and Mohawk Valley have taken steps to limit cellphone usage in the classroom in recent weeks by passing varying regulations.

At the Greater Amsterdam School District, a new policy is set to go into effect this month requiring high school students to place their devices in magnetic pouches that

can be unlocked at the end of the day. The policy mirrors one that has been in place at the Schoharie Central School District for two years.

The Schenectady City School District and Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake Central School District have new policies this year requiring high school students to place their phones in a designated cubby before each class.

"Schools that have implemented a 'bell-to-bell' ban, tailored to local needs and concerns, have seen signifi-

cant improvements in student focus, classroom engagement, children's relationships and school safety," Person said. "NYSUT will always advocate for what is best for kids and our school communities, and that means restricting these devices to prioritize students' mental health, distraction-free learning environments, and positive interactions with peers."

Contact reporter Chad Arnold at: carnold@dailygazette.net or by calling 518-410-5117.

AMSTERDAM

Liberty ARC celebrates direct support professionals

Liberty ARC took part in a week-long celebration of their direct support workforce during National Direct Support Professional Recognition Week from Sept. 8-14.

Liberty ARC, as well as agencies across the nation, thanked Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) for their unwavering commitment to providing top-quality supports and services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities throughout the designated week. The American Network of Community Options and Resources (ANCOR) endorses the national week-long recognition of DSPs and their accomplishments.

"Our DSPs deliver each and every day on our mission. Together we support people with disabilities to achieve a quality of life each person values," said Jennifer Saunders, Liberty ARC's CEO, in a news release. "They ensure the people we support are a member of their community, have a valued role, and get to live their best lives. This week is a wonderful time to thank DSPs for all that they do each and every day."

DSPs provide support 24 hours a day, seven days a week in residential homes, as well as in the agency's days support programs and community settings working with people of different ages and abilities. Their selfless roles include providing physical assistance, helping people fulfill their goals in life, and finding ways to engage the people they support with their community. It is a rewarding job where close relationships are formed between the people supported and the DSPs.

This year's theme was, "Stronger Together," signifying and recognizing the unification between Montgomery and Schenectady Counties.

"We would like to thank our DSPs at Liberty ARC. The hard work and compassion that they bring to their jobs every day is immeasurable," said Liberty ARC's Chief Operating Office Candace Opalka in the release. "We are so grateful for each of our DSPs. This year is a special year as we welcome DSPs from Schenectady County as part of our team, and as we become



PHOTO PROVIDED

Direct support staff at Liberty ARC enjoy a luncheon during National Direct Support Professional Recognition Week in Schenectady County.

one, working together towards the goal of providing the highest quality of supports and services to people with disabilities. We truly are stronger together."

Liberty ARC thanked their DSPs throughout both counties in special ways for the top-quality support they provide with a week full of activities, including a coffee bar, a luncheon, apple cider and donuts, a t-shirt giveaway, a scavenger hunt, and several raffles.

ABOUT LIBERTY ARC

Liberty ARC, the Montgomery County Chapter of The Arc New York, is a not-for-profit agency that provides top-quality supports and services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Montgomery and Schenectady Counties. We are proud of our six decades of bringing these innovative and valuable programs to those most vulnerable in our communi-

ty. While staying committed to our framework the agency has grown our employment, residential, day supports, family support and health-related programming throughout the years. Our mission- Together we support people with disabilities to achieve a quality of life each person values - together with our Values make up the foundation on which our culture is framed. We are extremely proud to be a pioneering agency, which coupled with a dynamic workforce and our person-centered mission makes Liberty ARC a stand-out in our field.

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