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Boston City Council Hearing on the Harms of Social Media and Cellphone Use in Schools

August 12, 2025

Dear Chairperson and members of the Council,

Thank you for the opportunity to send you testimony. My name is Dr. Jhilm Biswas, and I am the President of the Massachusetts Psychiatric Society (MPS). Our members are physicians specializing in the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of mental illness as well as the promotion of mental health and wellbeing, and we are deeply concerned about the escalating youth mental health crisis.

The Massachusetts Psychiatric Society supports implementing personal smartphone restrictions in schools. Research indicates that unregulated smartphone use during the school day distracts students from academic time, contributes to cyberbullying, exposes kids to inappropriate content, and reduces opportunities for healthy, in-person social interaction and physical activity—all of which are critical to healthy adolescent development.

Research consistently shows that problematic smartphone use in youth is associated with increased rates of depression, anxiety, poor sleep quality, stress, and diminished academic performance. A 2019 meta-analysis of over 41,000 young people found that “problematic” use was linked to more than threefold higher odds of depression and anxiety, and more than double the odds of poor sleep. The U.S. Surgeon General and the American Academy of Pediatrics have issued urgent advisories citing these risks, and local surveys—such as Sociedad Latina’s work with Tufts University—indicate that many Boston students are spending six or more hours per day on their phones, often during school hours.

Excessive in-school smartphone use not only impacts academics; it amplifies exposure to cyberbullying and online harassment, disrupts peer relationships, and can displace engagement in physical activities, learning and face-to-face socialization, all of which are protective factors for mental health.

We also recognize the importance of clear, practical guidance for implementation. The Massachusetts Attorney General’s Office Cellphone Policy Toolkit, built with support from the Shah Foundation and many others could be a valuable starting point for school leaders. It offers strategies for reducing distractions, supporting teacher enforcement, and ensuring equity in how policies are applied. These tools should be leveraged by Boston Public Schools to implement consistent, effective cellphone restrictions districtwide.

We acknowledge that some students may need access to communication for emergencies or for health reasons. This can be addressed by providing flip-phone and email stations or designated areas where students can make calls when necessary, coupled with digital literacy and citizenship curricula to prepare them for safe, responsible technology use outside of school hours.

In closing, the Massachusetts Psychiatric Society supports the Boston City Council taking decisive action by adopting a smartphone restriction policy across all Boston Public Schools. Doing so will help safeguard student mental health, foster engagement in learning, and create a school environment where children can be fully present, connected to one another, and be more supported in their growth.

Thank you for your attention and for your commitment to the well-being of Boston's young people.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jhilam Biswas, MD". The script is fluid and cursive, with the letters "J", "B", and "M" being particularly large and stylized.

Jhilam Biswas, MD, FAPA
President, Massachusetts Psychiatric Society