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*Acknowledge the right of the people  
to get from the newspaper both sides  
of every important question.*

G. B. Dealey

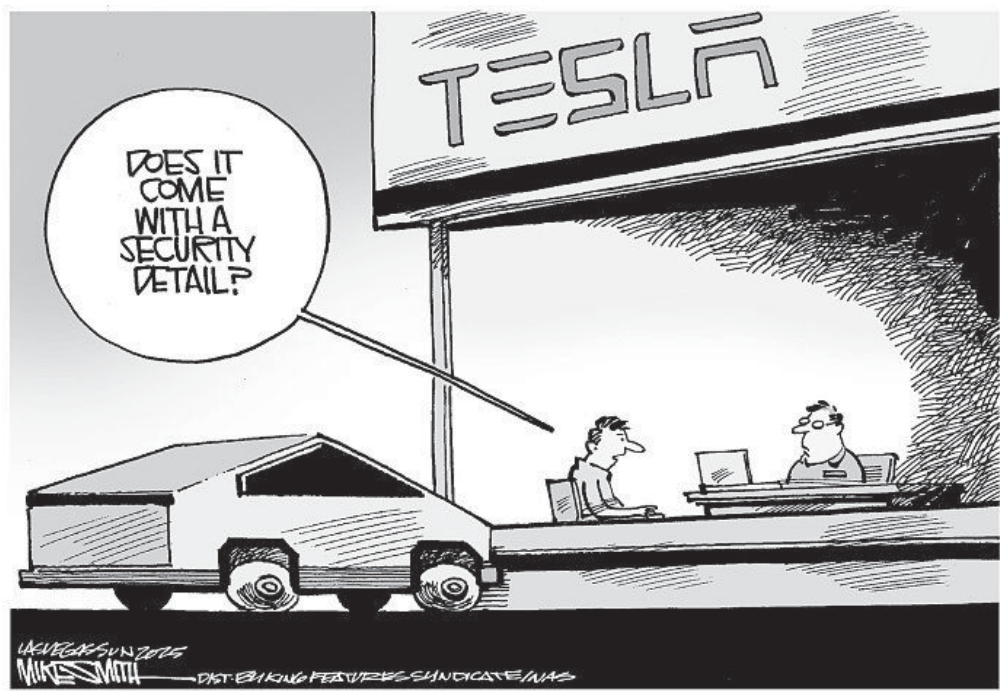
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## EDITORIALS

# Let's Discuss School Cellphone Ban

Texas House proposal is first step in a broader conversation about kids and screens

Here's an experience most adults are familiar with: You're focused on a task or a conversation when the phone in your pocket buzzes. Snap! Your focus is broken, and even if you choose to ignore the noise, that momentary lapse throws you off.

If that's all it takes to distract an adult, how can we expect kids to be focused on learning when they have the same devices with them all the time?

Texas House Bill 1481, filed by 26-year-old Rep. Caroline Fairly, R-Amarillo, would require Texas public school districts and charter schools to adopt policies that prevent the use of "personal wireless communication devices during instructional time."

Cellphones and other internet-enabled devices that aren't provided by the school for instructional purposes would be covered under the bill. Each district would have to ensure that classrooms have a secure, out-of-sight area for storing devices during class time. It's likely the bill's language will be refined as it moves through the legislative process.

There are many people who oppose phone bans, and there's myriad reasons they do. A statewide phone ban in schools will be an experiment, and you can expect some hiccups.

But the expected benefits outweigh the concerns. There's no question that the unhealthy relationship most students have with their devices leads to class disruptions and lost focus. If it's possible to at least limit the

damage done to the kids, it's worth a shot. Passing this bill is some of the most important work lawmakers can do this session.

Even now, most districts don't allow students to use phones in class. But enforcing such policies is a problem. The teachers who try spend too much time getting students to put them away. The more lax ones get a reputation for being "cool" even though the distractions mean students get less out of that class.

Either way, that's lost time students should spend learning.

At campuses like those in Richardson ISD that have gone phone-free, the benefits have been clear. More person-to-person interactions, increased instruction time, less cyberbullying, fewer discipline instances and in some cases, even better teacher retention.

One note of caution is that lawmakers should help schools meet the requirements under this proposal. We assume that creating a "secure, out-of-sight area" in every classroom will cost some amount of money. And if legislators plan to start funneling money into private schools, it should think about how this proposed statewide policy would apply to those schools.

House Bill 1481 is a good starting point. It gives schools the cover they need to enforce cellphone bans and allows them to tailor policies to their needs. We hope to see this bill start a broader conversation about the role of screens in education, especially for younger kids.

## LETTERS

### Dispense justice

Five years ago, the COVID-19 pandemic threatened the physical health of our nation. In March 2025, President Donald Trump's flouting of court orders and degradation of the Justice Department is a pox on our constitutional health.

We beat COVID through the dispensation of lifesaving vaccines. The antidote to the current crisis is the dispensation of justice for all. This remedy won't come from scientists, but rather relies on a legislative branch with the courage to rebuke a chief executive overstepping his bounds.

*Ann Madonia Casey, Fairview*

### Congress, do your job

It's time for Congress to wake up and grow a spine. The president is closing the Department of Education that was created by Congress. He is trying to change the Constitution by ignoring the 14th Amendment. He wants to have judges who rule against him impeached.

Congress is a separate branch of government and it's time its members start doing their job.

*Don DePuy, Richardson*

### Solve housing crisis

Re: "On Housing, Mayor Is Right On The Money — As he told a Senate panel, this is a market problem and a public health problem," March 17 editorial.

As executive director of the Texas Affiliation of Affordable Housing Providers, I agree with Mayor Eric Johnson. The private sector plays a key role in developing housing supply to temper the rising cost of mortgages and rents. However, history shows that the private sector does not, without incentive, produce housing that residents who earn less than an area's median income can afford on their own.

Adding to the difficulty of providing safe, quality, affordable housing, I've seen local leaders and communities push back against housing that benefits certain workforce sectors — including veterans and seniors — using petition campaigns to block such developments, an issue currently under review in the Texas Legislature.

The lack of affordable housing is a local, state and national crisis. It requires all policymakers and private stakeholders to commit to sustainable solutions, such as expanding the highly effective public-private partnerships used in the federal Housing Tax Credit Program.

Texas and our economy deserve more than promises with respect to needed housing. We need committed, sustainable solutions driven by the combined power of private industry and public leadership.

*Roger Arriaga, Austin*

### Stirring Social Security fear

"The Democrats are the party that says the government will make you smarter, taller, richer, and remove the crabgrass on your lawn. The Republicans are the party that says government doesn't work and then they get elected and prove it." — P.J. O'Rourke

A case in point is the fear, confusion, mischaracterization and lack of empathy leveled by Elon Musk and the Trump administration toward the Social Security Administration and its beneficiaries.

I began working and paying Social Security taxes in my teens. I retired at age 66, deferred my benefits until 70 and since I was always self-employed, paid double into the system. Should I and millions of Americans be subject to even the threat of taking a "chain saw" to a program that has provided so much for so many? My interface with Social Security and the excellent civil ser-

vants who work there has been excellent.

Should any of us have to face stress and fear because two ultra-rich men, with absolutely no empathy, want to tear working programs completely apart? They do not have a mandate. The damage they are doing is inhumane.

*Larry Brown, Dallas/Preston Hollow*

### Vouchers wrong answer

Re: "Who's pushing school choice? Parents. Their argument is that school districts aren't teaching the basics," by Ronell Smith, March 16 Opinion.

Smith stating that parents want schools to teach the basics is right on point, but his argument in favor of school vouchers misses the point. Diverting public funds to private schools does not lead to better outcomes, especially for low-income students. Research consistently demonstrates that increased funding for public schools leads to improvements in student achievement, especially among low-income students.

Research by the Learning Policy Institute indicates that increases in per-pupil spending led to substantial improvement in reading and math achievement, reductions in grade repetition and higher graduation rates.

States with universal voucher programs struggle with escalating costs and a lack of transparency and accountability. Notably, up to 70% of vouchers are used by families with children already enrolled in private schools, thereby diverting funds from public schools without benefiting the intended recipients.

In Texas, about 75% of private schools that students attend are religiously affiliated. This trend raises concerns about public funds supporting religious education, potentially undermining the separation of church and state.

*Katherine Bock, Dallas/Lake Highlands*

### Save Fair Park museum

Re: "Kicking Fair Park to the curb...again," by Robert Wilonsky, March 16 Opinion.

Seldom mentioned in the discussion of Fair Park's cultural treasures is the limestone-clad museum of painting and sculpture facing the Leonhardt Lagoon. It houses 49 large-scale Texas landscapes by Dallas-born artists trained in Chicago and New York. It contains more than a hundred life-sized Texas animal sculptures whose creator left Dallas to study in Germany and Switzerland but returned to devote the rest of his career to the Dallas Museum of Natural History.

Master taxidermist Willie Mayer textured his creations with scales, feathers and fur so skillfully that many Texas artists used them as models for their own work. Backed by landscape murals and expertly crafted accessories, Mayer's animals became part of an irreplaceable collection of wild-life dioramas intended to increase appreciation for the natural heritage of Texas now threatened by habitat destruction and global warming.

The building that houses that collection is recognized as a historic landmark. It is time for its purpose, contents and current relevance to be recognized and utilized as well.

*Walt Davis, Dallas/White Rock*

## LETTERS POLICY

We value reader submissions. We receive far more than we can print and publish a representative sample. Letters should not exceed 200 words. **Please include the source of your information.** Letters are edited for length and clarity. Include your name, address with ZIP code and daytime phone number. Submissions become property of *The Dallas Morning News*.

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We cannot accept letters via postal service.

# Housing Comes First in Park Fee Debate

Dallas can ease burden on developers and still keep city green

Earlier this month, Mayor Eric Johnson told a group of U.S. senators that the solution to the housing shortage in Dallas and elsewhere is to cut bureaucratic red tape and make it easier for builders to build.

A dispute over Dallas park fees will give the mayor an opportunity to show he means it.

In February, the City Plan Commission considered a request to increase the fees that developers must pay to Dallas in lieu of dedicating parkland as part of their projects. City staff brought the proposal forward in light of a state law that caps how much large cities can demand in parkland or charge in park acquisition fees.

Under the state law, cities can charge a flat fee per dwelling unit of no more than 2% of the median family income. Dallas city staff proposed raising the park fee to the maximum 2%. Most developers opt for paying this fee rather than building parks themselves.

Currently, a developer must pay \$1,165 in park fees for a single-family home. Raising the fee would take that number to \$1,308. Apartment builders, however, would feel the increase more acutely. A developer building a complex with 250 apartments of two or more bedrooms would go from paying \$229,250 in park fees to \$327,000. That's an increase of 42.62%.

The plan commission wisely interrogated the park fee increase and decided it would be better to halve it instead.

At least two park board members have

blasted the move, one calling it "appalling." They framed it as a setback, and one noted that Dallas' park fees are among the lowest in the region.

That may be the case, but Dallas is also trying to dig itself out of a reputational hole for being a bureaucratic nightmare for developers. Keeping its fees low where it makes sense should be its strategy.

The use of the park development money collected so far doesn't make a compelling argument for raising the fees, either. As our colleague Devyani Chhetri reported, the park acquisition fund has collected \$17 million since it started in 2019 but has only used about \$2.3 million to acquire land in northern Dallas.

Part of the problem has to do with rules about how the money is allocated among seven different zones. City staff is proposing reducing the number of zones to five to make it easier to acquire parkland, which makes sense.

Raising the fee, however, is another matter. Dallas voters approved \$345 million in bond money for parks last year. There's no need to be appalled about a move to lower park fees.

The matter is now expected to move to the City Council. Members should take a measured look at the facts and make a decision consistent with their stated commitment to build more housing in Dallas. It's not a zero-sum game. The city can make life easier for housing developers while working with the private sector to expand and improve parks.