

Written Testimony in Support of LD 1234 – An Act to Ban Cellular Telephones from Public School Classrooms

Dear Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of LD 1234. While this bill primarily addresses issues within education, as a psychiatrist, I see the impact of cell phones on the mental health of our Maine youth and adults every day.

Availability of moment to moment, round-the-clock social feedback, from people both known and unknown by the individual, has profoundly changed the experience of childhood development. Negative social feedback and bullying have always been a component of childhood. However, the phenomenon of cyberbullying, which is strongly linked to anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidality, is fundamentally different from school yard bullying. There is no natural reprieve when children return home. The comments, disembodied from face-to-face relationships, are often crueler, ubiquitous, and unrelenting.

There has been a surge in children, teens, and adults seeking evaluation for ADHD. Some of these individuals do benefit from treatment for ADHD. However, many are simply experiencing the effects of living in a world where distractions abound. Among my first line recommendations to most children and adults I treat is to limit media exposure and phone use. Unrestricted use during the school day is a major challenge to educators, and even students tell me they would welcome restrictions, if the restrictions were universally enforced.

Teenagers report spending up to 10-12 hours per day on screens, an amount of time that suggests they are on their phones during the school day, and/or sacrificing critical sleeping hours. Psychiatric medication cannot cure the effects of social media, cyberbullying, and destructive impact on attention that stems from spending this much time on screens. Prevention is key. Pediatricians, therapists, school counselors, teachers and school administrators are all advocating for a reduction in the amount of time young people spend on screens. Teachers feel hopeless to “police” phone use on their own. **This bill offers a rare opportunity to support our educators by making schools phone-free.**

School systems that have adopted phone free schools have seen bullying and cyberbullying rates fall to one-quarter of their previous levels prior to school-wide phone bans. Adolescents tell us they would be relieved to have a phone-free school environment, but feel pressure to not be left out.

Implementing phone-free schools is a resource-saving measure. Prevention is more cost effective than crisis interventions and intensive treatments after psychiatric

conditions have developed. Making schools phone-free is a straightforward, impactful policy decision that can help create safer, healthier environments where students can focus, learn, and build stronger relationships face to face.

Parents and caregivers are critical partners in teaching children about responsible technology use. Schools can partner with parents and caregivers by role modeling limit setting around technology use, and supporting the efforts of families to foster learning environments in which children can thrive. You can support our students, educators, and parents by supporting LD 1234.

Sincerely,

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