

Dear Senator Rafferty, Representative Brennan, and Honorable Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of LD 1234, “An Act to Promote Phone-Free Schools.”

My name is Dr. Kristina McElhinney, and I am a board-certified family physician practicing in Yarmouth, Maine. I am also a mother of three children enrolled in Maine public schools. I write today as both a clinician and a parent who has seen the harmful impact of smartphones on young people—in my exam room, in my community, and in my home.

In my practice, I care for children and adolescents who are increasingly anxious, distracted, and emotionally dysregulated. Many describe feeling tethered to their phones—unable to focus, unable to sleep, and often overwhelmed by social media pressure, group chats, and online drama. These are not isolated concerns; they reflect a wider mental health crisis that is being worsened by excessive and unregulated smartphone use.

Recent research confirms what I see in clinic every day:

- The CDC’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2021) found that nearly 60% of teen girls and 30% of teen boys report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, and that time on social media is a key contributing factor.
- A 2023 study in JAMA Pediatrics linked more than 3 hours of daily screen time in early adolescence to measurable changes in brain development related to attention and impulse control.
- On average, U.S. teens now spend over 8 hours per day online, much of it on social media or entertainment platforms.

Evidence also shows that students in phone-free schools do better. Studies from the U.K. and U.S. have shown higher test scores, especially among lower-achieving students, after school-wide phone bans. Phone-free environments also support more meaningful social interaction, greater physical activity, and a noticeable reduction in anxiety, cyberbullying, and classroom distraction. When phones are removed, students tend to be more present, more connected to their peers, and more focused on learning.

This is why LD 1234 is so important. A universal, consistent no-phone policy provides students with a clear and equal standard. It removes the ambiguity that comes with classroom-by-classroom enforcement and supports a culture where being present, engaged, and connected in real life is the norm.

When no one has access to their phone, students are more likely to:

- Focus more deeply on academic tasks
- Engage in face-to-face communication
- Reduce feelings of exclusion and anxiety tied to social media
- Participate in recess and physical activity more freely

Families like mine are doing our best to set boundaries at home, but we need school environments that reinforce—not undermine—those efforts. Phone-free schools are not about punishment; they are about protecting children’s developmental needs, restoring attention, and encouraging in-person socialization, which is critical for mental health and academic success.

I strongly urge you to support LD 1234 and help establish a statewide policy that prioritizes the focus, safety, and well-being of Maine’s children.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to Maine families.

Sincerely,

Kristina McElhinney, DO
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