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In support of LD 1234

I am a parent of two students at Scarborough Middle School. We moved to Scarborough from out-of-state at the beginning of their 5th and 6th grade years. Prior to our move to Maine, my kids had not had phones, not been exposed to social media, and had attended a phone-free K-8 public school. Over the past 12 months, they have each gotten phones so they can communicate with me and my husband while we are at work. That was our intention, but of course, since we are at work, they use their phones for so much more than communicating with us. That's the nature of smart phones in this day and age.

While my children are “successful” in school as far as achieving good grades and having solid social circles, the struggle to keep them on that path is daunting. Scarborough Middle School and Wentworth Intermediate School have made their best efforts, as far as we as parents can tell, to limit phone use during the school day, including at lunch and during class transitions. We were hoping for the same at Scarborough High School (SHS) but due to small but loud local opposition, that is not going to be the case. Without going through the arguments that have been presented that convinced our local school board that students, some 14 years old when they start high school, need access to their phones during lunch and class transitions, I can say that none of them are founded in science – biological or social. Science shows us that these devices and the apps on them are highly addictive and impact brain development. To have schools allowing their use during the school day feels like the schools are not watching out for my kids’ well-being.

The tales I have heard and acts I have actually witnessed of children – peers and friends of mine own children- being bullied directly via electronic communication and/or on social media – abound. “__smells like sh-t.” “I’m going to beat __ up at the park after school.” “He’s a fat f---g---t.” While some of this takes place outside of school hours and not on school grounds, some of it takes place during the school day and/or on school grounds. It is nearly impossible to police. Why would a school allow one more venue, and a nearly impossible to monitor one, for bullying when we know how damaging bullying can be?

In addition to bullying, distraction and social withdrawal from personal device use is well-documented. These students already have well-documented gaps in social and academic development due to COVID-19 and being kept out of school for months on end (or years, depending on where they lived at the time.) Being a teenager is widely recalled by adults – and we all went through it – as a fragile time. It is so difficult to get through adolescence pain free, without ever having a moment of questioning one's self-worth, one's intelligence, one's "coolness." Why would the school allow, and in a sense, promote, further estrangement, questioning of confidence, withdrawal and stunting of social skills?

Picture a lunchroom, or a school hallway, filled with kids looking at their phones rather than at each other. As adults, we see this in the grocery store checkout line, in the airport, etc, - and we **all** bemoan it. We say things like, "What a shame that no one talks to one another anymore." And we are adults. We are meant to lead the way for our kids.

Again, I have two middle schoolers, with one starting high school/9th grade in August. Like many families in our state, we as parents are not available to constantly monitor our children's phone use. I would hope that the place they spend +7 hours a day would prioritize their emotional growth, mental health and general well-being. Since our school district isn't willing to do that at the high school level, where kids have no less of a need for emotional growth and mental health, I beg the state to take action with legislation that applies across the board. Please prioritize our children.