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Scarborough
LD 1234

Hello,

My name is Kim Cooper. I was born and raised in Maine, and I'm now raising my four children ranging from ages 3-8 in Scarborough while pursuing my nursing degree. I'm here today to speak in strong support of LD 1234—a bell-to-bell phone-free school day.

We've heard for years about the dangers of addiction, but now we're seeing it in the new form of digital addiction. Research shows that smartphone and social media use in teens closely mirrors patterns seen in drug and alcohol addiction. The adolescent brain is still developing, and it's particularly vulnerable to overstimulation. Constant phone use disrupts dopamine regulation—which is the brain's reward system—leading to decreased motivation, focus issues, anxiety, and depression. These dopamine-driven habits don't just affect academic performance; they lay the foundation for future struggles with substance abuse, gambling, and other risky behaviors.

To be honest—expecting teens to self-regulate in systems literally designed to be addictive is unfair. Even adults with fully formed pre frontal cortex's struggle with this. The school day can and should offer something unique: It's a valuable opportunity for a daily reset. Six to seven hours a day without personal devices will help students socially, emotionally and behaviorally and begin to rebuild healthy habits.

Now, I know we'll hear counterarguments many of which will claim that kids may need their phones for various coping mechanisms. And we don't want to dismiss this—but there are healthier ways to cope that foster growth and development mentally and emotionally. We are stripping away opportunities from our youth to build relationships and rely on human comfort and interactions by giving them access to these devices that live at their fingertips. We are also depriving them the opportunity to learn that they can be uncomfortable. Mental and emotional discomfort is part of life and managing how to navigate that is a core foundation for mental health longevity. We need to be fostering independence to ask for help and teaching coping mechanisms that don't involve screens. That being said, this bill does wisely allow for exemptions based on medical or defined emotional needs, clearly outlined in IEPs or 504 plans.

And then there's cyberbullying. It's not just a side issue—it's a major component of this student mental health crises. As smartphone and social media use has risen, so have rates of cyberbullying, sextortion, anxiety and self-harm. A phone-free school day doesn't eliminate these risks—but it gives kids a break. It allows kids to be silly, and candid and make mistakes without the fear of being documented and shared. It makes school a safer, more emotionally stable space.

We all want our children to be safe. But always being instantly reachable robs kids of something essential: autonomy. Learning how to handle small problems on their own is a key part of growing up and determining a strong, positive sense of self.

Autonomy helps kids find their place and importance in the world. And of course, in emergencies, schools have reliable systems to ensure communication.

A bell to bell phone free school day gives our students the chance to unplug, focus, connect in real life, and develop healthier habits. Because when it comes to phones, we're not just fighting for attention spans—we're fighting for mental health and emotional safety that every child deserves.