

My name is Dr. Darlene Peterson, and I'm writing in strong support of a bell-to-bell, device-free school day. I am a parent of two children and I am also a family medicine physician.

Part 1: Brain Health & Addiction

Dr. Anna Lembke, a Stanford addiction specialist, compares smartphone and social media use in teens to drug and alcohol addiction. The adolescent brain is still developing—making it especially vulnerable to overstimulation.

Research suggests that constant phone use dysregulates dopamine, the brain's reward chemical, which can lead to reduced motivation, focus issues, anxiety, and depression. Teens reliant on dopamine release from devices may be more prone to addiction later—substances, gambling, and other risk-taking behaviors.

There are concerns about children's abilities to self-regulate in systems designed to addict—even adults struggle. Some kids report 10–12 hours of screen time per day—including time at school. Schools offer a unique opportunity: six to seven hours a day without personal devices are thought to help reset brain chemistry and reduce dependence.

Phone-free schools aren't about punishment—they're about public health. This is a brain health issue, not just a behavioral one. LD 1234 is a smart, science-backed step to protect mental wellness.

Part 2: Cyberbullying & Mental Health

Depression and suicide are complex, but one clear and consistent driver is cyberbullying. As smartphone and social media use increased, so did cyberbullying—and with it, anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidality.

Phone-free schools are proving to be one of the most effective, low-cost interventions we have. In parts of Scandinavia, bullying rates dropped by 75% after school phone bans. The results are striking—and achievable.

In Conclusion

In medicine, prevention is our most powerful tool. Adolescence is a critical window when brains are both resilient and vulnerable. Schools must be safe, supportive spaces, where we optimize attention and mental health.

LD 1234 is a public health-informed, common-sense step to protect Maine's youth. All students in Maine deserve the benefit of a device free school and we can't afford to wait for each school district to enact this on their own. This has to happen at the state level and the time to act is now.

Thank you,

Darlene Peterson, MD

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