

To the 132nd Maine Legislature's Committee on Education & Cultural Affairs,

Thank you to Rep. Campbell and Senator Brenner for spearheading this potential legislation and important conversation, **one that is ultimately about the purpose of education, the role of public schools in civil society and the adult duty of care to young people.** I'm writing in support of LD 1234 today and would have gladly come to the statehouse with more notice and ability to change conflicting travel. For what it's worth, I know many people in the same position.

fig. 1 "Ready for School"



*Bringing an iPhone to school is like hauling a phone, a computer, a tv, a stereo, a video game console, broadcasting equipment, a homing device, a surveillance system, a shopping cart, a mirror, a trophy, friends, family, strangers—and so much more—to school every day. We need to see the situation for what it really is: Too heavy of an attentional load with too much outside interference to have any place near a lunchroom, let alone a classroom. (image by the author)*

As this committee is well aware, our public schools aren't just about delivering test scores and the workers of tomorrow, they're also about social and emotional learning, citizenship and norm-setting. Public schools are civic institutions that shape individuals and societies in deep and lasting ways. Bills that relieve classrooms of personal communication devices (several of which have passed or are in progress in other states) deliver a huge public service, helping educators, parents and students push

back against the powerful marketing and design forces of well-resourced tech companies to **reclaim the sanctity of school as well as young people's attention, agency and healthy development.**

This bill has the potential to change our collective future for the better. LD 1234 would greatly improve the efficacy of education in Maine. In addition to reducing the more obvious harmful effects of smart-gadget use such as disruption, distraction, bullying and other forms of fear-mongering, removing personal communication devices from the school day is an **under-appreciated lever for enhancing student connectedness (a crucial foundation for learning), teacher retention (and recruitment), and enhancing well-being for young people and everyone who cares for them—both at school and at home.**

**Because giving Maine students a 6.5-hour break (~32 hours across a week) from the internet, from social media, from texting, from the constant stimulation designed to exploit developing brains for profit (while mining their data and manipulating their behavior to create a new consumer class of children) is a massive public health initiative and a great equalizer.** It gives kids and families a fighting chance against addictions they frequently want to break, while enhancing nearly all the positives and power of our public schools, including giving kids social experiences that are vital and necessary to their development as a people, as community members, and ultimately: as citizens.

And importantly for the middle and high school demographic: It reduces the immense pressure to keep up and perform in the virtual world—which never stops—not even during the school day. For teachers, it reduces the demand to deliver lesson plans in the attentional equivalent of a Vegas casino.

*For citations on the research behind these issues and more, [please see this open letter from national experts to the U.S. Secretary of Education](#) written back in 2023 and/or the [Anxious Generation's Tech and Society Lab's website](#), which includes popular media, a walk-through of current research and continuously updated collaborative review documents, including rebuttals.*

When I was a student at a rural Maine elementary school in the 90s, a classmate brought in a shiny new Christmas present after winter break. Absolutely none of us were surprised when our (beloved) teacher talked to the student right away, then announced to the rest of us that he'd be keeping that student's *portable television* locked in his desk for the day.

**Because that's what an iPhone is: It's a portable television and so much more. The fact that smartphones disappear into pockets and backpacks disguises the absurdity of what we're allowing into schools. If we could all hold the same image in mind while having this discussion, we could share a laugh about the absurdity before getting to work on the practicality of solutions. See *fig. 1*.**

Speaking from the perspective of parents who are informed about these issues, we are counting on legislators and school leaders to help us get there as quickly as possible. Our children won't stop growing, exploring, or pushing boundaries while we wait—nor should they. That's their role in the world. But adults have an important role—a duty really—here too.

It's worth spelling out that the digital divide has already been flipped on its head: We did a good job solving the connectivity problem. And then we went too far. We are in fact more online than is healthy (as true for adults as for children), especially considering the opportunity costs of what we give up when we stare into a phone for hours on end. The best way to level the playing field—for all students to reclaim their executive function and free access to education—is to give them the gift of time away from personal

devices and with each other, fully present, during the 32+ waking hours a week that they're together. (And in an ideal world, on buses and in afterschool activities too.)

**Because the new digital divide comes up between students who have adults in their lives who can help keep tech use consistently balanced—and those who don't.** This is a huge task even in the most well-resourced of circumstances and we're all aware that this differs greatly from home-to-home even within the same town. But we have a huge opportunity (in the form of 32-waking hours a week) to make the same changes across all Maine schools and accelerate everyone's progress at once.

**Importantly: No district needs to cede local control over their academic tech decisions. This is only about personal electronic communication devices, not academic choice.** And the reality is, no big spend is necessary. Most schools already have tech carts and closets that lock or are able to allocate funding for a few hundred manila envelopes. Non-profit organizations such as the [Phone-Free Schools Movement](#) and [Fairplay](#) offer free toolkits and online trainings to address storage issues affordably, following working models across U.S. schools (see addendum at the bottom). If any members of the committee have follow-up questions about these low-cost solutions, I hope you will use myself or another ambassador as a resource.

As a parent of 3 Maine children now, I can tell you that the marketing forces of tech companies affect us as much as our kids. **For parents, there is a strong message that constant contact is necessary in today's world, that we might in fact be failing our kids if we don't keep them tethered to us, even during the school day. Tech marketers love that we parents have taken this up as a cultural norm: It makes their jobs easier. But it's also making teachers' jobs harder.**

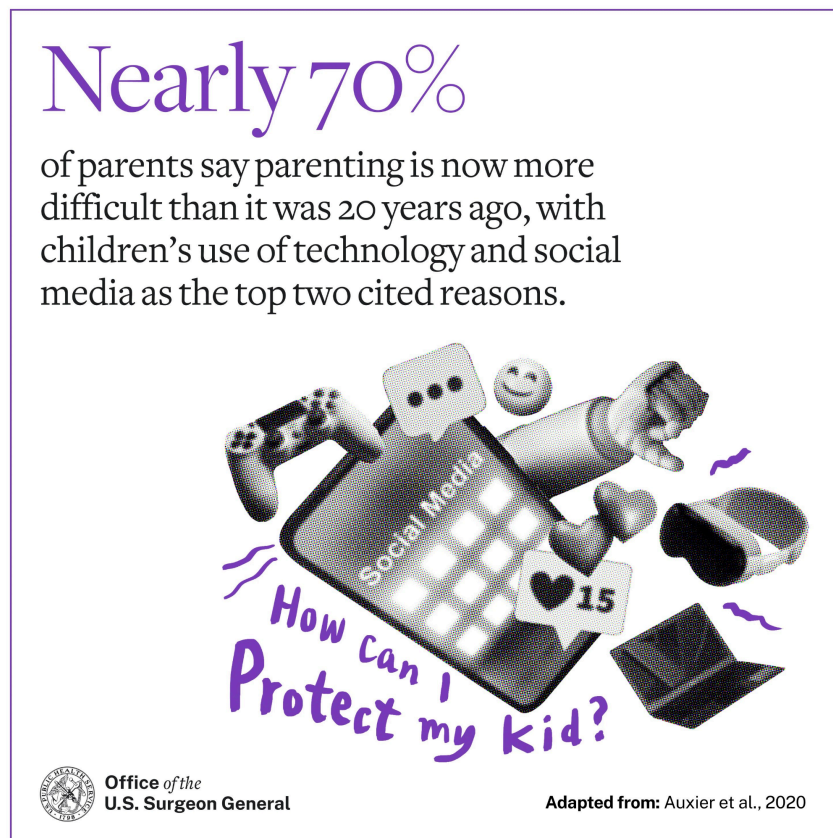
In our elementary school, the biggest issues with smartwatches haven't come from kids: It's been parents pinging their children during class time. We (parents and caregivers) were collectively requested to stop multiple times over many months before smartwatches were ultimately banned from wrists. We were lucky that happened in our district, but not all schools are ready to be so bold as to use limited time and resources on an issue that can light up parental fears and passions, despite its positive effects.

As a specific example of the pressures and sticky decision-making challenges for parents: [Gabb](#) is a company that markets their smartphones and smartwatches as "safe" alternatives to more popular brands. Their devices don't have social media and there are (limited) parental controls. However, if you're a parent questioning the necessity of buying a smartphone (or the age at which to do so), just visiting the Gabb website bombards you with the message "Protect Your Kids" and reinforces a mantra of "connected and protected" over and over again, playing into—even preying on—natural parental instincts and fears, which can be hard to contain in a school day, particularly every time another violent school-based incident makes the news.

Anxiety is often brought up as a reason children need personal communication devices at school—used in an elastic enough way to disguise the direction in which that anxiety frequently starts. Oftentimes it's parents who are buying and sending these devices to school before their children even begin to petition for them. Parents need outside assistance in recalibrating this norm—and if not from our schools (believe me, we've been asking)—then from our legislators. The urgency of this change is too crucial for individuals to fight alone.

In addition: There is a huge parental need for support that's been going unaddressed. While much has been made of young people's mental health in relation to tech and social media overuse in the last year, it

was also in 2024 that [Parents Under Pressure: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Mental Health and Well-Being of Parents](#) was published, which includes this stat:



(image in the public domain - free use)

One of the stunning things you realize when exploring these issues is that there is an important nuance simmering below the surface: **The difference between a sense of security and true safety. Again, if we could see this situation visualized for what it is, we'd realize that allowing all of the outside world into our schools is not making them safer, even if the initial impulse is staying in touch with a child.** Just as one example: In Greater Portland, we had an incident where misinformation spread across district lines, one which had kids believing their friends' and family's schools were under threat from an active shooter, making it incumbent upon them to warn their loved ones immediately. **Allowing phones into the school day opens the door to unnecessary chaos and trauma just from rumors and misinformation alone.**

Even when we're fortunate enough for a true crisis situation *not* to materialize, the threat *experience* is the same for educators, students and families until it's clear that there's been a terrible mistake. This causes its own trauma and ongoing hypervigilance. As you've already heard, the best practice in public safety is to simply not have personal communication devices involved, thus preventing misinformation, panic, chaos, or worse: the unnecessary jamming of both communication and road networks in the rare event a serious situation does unfold.

**Ultimately, we need to return a sense of trust to the school day; a trust in our educators as worthy caregivers, a trust that the outside world will not disrupt the course of focused learning and a**

**trust that our kids are learning independence from us (parents) in a developmentally appropriate way.** Phone-free is the way private schools such as Portland's own Waynflete School are going—it's what informed parents are looking for from educational settings and *will* become the norm. Again, we have a huge opportunity here to give all of our schoolchildren the same advantage at the same time. Right now, we have a chance to be ahead of that curve. But if we don't act during this session, we will be on the downside of that bend.

We simply need to remind people that if there is a true need to, say alter pickup plans, they can get in contact with the main office, as always. Of course, LD 1234 is also written with room for exceptions for medical needs. As one example: There are incredible apps for diabetes management. **Individual districts will be responsible for responding with fidelity and sensitivity to the medical needs of their communities. There is still room for local control.**

But big picture: Our children need to know that they are OK “on their own” during school. Because of course, they're not actually *on their own*. We all know countless educators who take their duty of care seriously and we want to cultivate caring, connected communities among students as well. **But for young people to even begin to relate to and trust those around them, to solve problems on their own, to handle the natural rise and fall of feelings, we need to cut what Jonathan Haidt has called, “the world's longest umbilical cord”: The tech-tether between parents and children that is currently growing and strangling independence during the school day.**

Schools can be that scissor. They can play a powerful role both in returning children and teen's school-day agency, independence, and communication skills and give them the gift of time to experience an alternative to an always-on life—one which students are free to return to (but might see differently) when their tax-payer funded education period ends. Across a whole state these two things will have massively positive side effects. We've already run the alternative experiment, to everyone's detriment.

As people who work on issues in education are aware, our schools have a duty of care, one that is largely fulfilled on an individual basis by the dynamic and hardworking educators of Maine. But when you look at policy using the framework of: *How can we do the most good and the least harm here?* The answer is both obvious and simple: You set aside all phones and smart gadgets during the school day. Securely, from the first bell to the last and across the state to level the playing field for everyone, all at once.

***And in doing so, you return school to a sacred space of social cohesion with the potential for true connection and deep attention. Learning is accelerated through focus. Pressures drop away. Outside interference and invisible bullying evaporate. Playfulness shows up again. Student voice is freed from the paranoia of being bullied or broadcast without consent. And kids aren't shamed for lack of the latest iPhone. Families regain some space for other kinds of connection too. Our very relationship to school and community is re-paired.***

Let's keep our heads up and our eyes clear. Let's support intellectual, emotional, relational and attentional development. Let's support teachers. Let's support parents letting go and letting their kids learn to trust themselves and others. Let's support kids hearing their own thoughts and finding their own way.

Let's create a bright dividing line between generations by reclaiming the best aspects of childhood and education in the real world, balanced with the intentional and healthy use of technology, following the best practices of education today. Let's support a culture that asks good questions about how we're using technology in education and how we can help create the best humans to rise to tomorrow's challenges, today. Let's take personal communication devices out of the school day.



Thank you for taking the time to listen and to educate yourselves about these issues in considering this important, truly future-changing legislation.

Sincerely,

Chelsea DeLorme, Ed.M.

[Yarmouth Slow Tech](#) cofounder

[Turn the Tide Coalition](#) cofounder

[Phone-Free Schools Movement](#) ambassador

[FairPlay for Kids Screen Time Action Network](#) member

*addendum:*

*samples of low-to-no-cost phone/device storage options in practice at U.S. schools [can be found here](#):*



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