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Dear Committee,

Like many parents, educators, and health professionals, I am deeply concerned about the impact of social media on our children's developing minds and mental health. However, I would like to focus here on an equally pressing concern within this landscape: the role that smartphones and mobile devices play in disrupting the learning process itself.

Research shows that mobile devices serve as distractions in the classroom - even when out of sight in a backpack or pocket. Because these devices are designed to capture attention, our brains have essentially been trained to anticipate and shift focus with every ping, vibration, or silent notification from a text message or social media app. A student (or anyone for that matter) does not need to be actively checking their phone/device to be distracted. Instead, the brain remains in a state of alertness which divides attention and increases cognitive load. In effect, they are multitasking just by having the device nearby/accessible. This undermines concentration and can impair working memory, which is the system responsible for initially holding and manipulating information. When working memory is disrupted, so is the flow of information into short-term memory and, ultimately, long-term memory. Why does this matter? When this process is disrupted repeatedly throughout the day, research has shown that students are less able to absorb new material, follow complex instruction, or build on prior knowledge. Over time, these small interruptions can translate into lower academic performance, weaker retention of core concepts, and widening gaps in learning.

Device usage during the school day does not affect all students equally. Students with attention or executive functioning challenges, such as ADHD or anxiety, are especially vulnerable to distraction. Additionally, students experience different levels of dependency on their devices, and for some, that dependency can significantly interfere with attention, impulse control, and ultimately, learning. A consistent, schoolwide approach to device usage supports all students, especially those who need structure and fewer distractions in order to learn effectively.

Couple all of this with the burden placed on teachers to manage device-related disruptions in the classroom; it doesn't affect just one student it interrupts the learning process for everyone. Critically, research shows that it can take students anywhere from 5 to over 20 minutes to fully refocus on academic tasks after a distraction, depending on the complexity of the task. Each small distraction can add up quickly, resulting in a substantial loss of instructional time and disruption of students' ability to process and retain information. This isn't unique to school. We see similar patterns in the workplace, where each distraction or need to context switch reduces productivity. In the school setting, productivity is our students' learning.

More recently, national assessment data shows clear and concerning learning deficits among U.S. students. Unfortunately, Maine is no exception. We have a responsibility to foster the most effective and equitable learning environments possible. One evidence-based way that we can play a role is by effectively managing mobile device usage in schools. Creating consistent policies to minimize unnecessary distractions can help give our students the best opportunity to focus, learn, and succeed.

Thank you for your time and for considering this line of evidence as you shape policy that supports our students.

Sincerely,
Stephanie Fraone, PhD (Cognitive and Perceptual Psychology)
Parent of a middle school child, Maine