

Distraction-Free Schools



POLICY PROJECT

Testimony in SUPPORT of Maine LD 2212

re: [Section GG](#) of the supplemental budget - writing in support of a bell-to-bell phone/personal communication device ban for Maine schools / Phone-Free Schools for ME

Sen. Rotundo and Rep. Gattine and esteemed members of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee,

We applaud the past work of the Education & Cultural Affairs Committee and Governor Mills for taking a strong leadership role in introducing legislation requiring a bell-to-bell phone/personal communication device prohibition for all Maine schools.

We write as the leaders of the national [Distraction-Free Schools Policy Project](#) where for the past two years we have been curating independent research to inform policy as it relates to phones and personal devices in our nation's classrooms. The Distraction-Free Schools Policy Project is a joint initiative of the [Becca Schmill Foundation](#) and [Smartphone Free Childhood U.S.](#)

We are thrilled that Section GG of LD 2212 aligns with our best practice model legislation by prohibiting phones for the entire school day, from arrival to dismissal. Some states have adopted legislation that prohibits students from using phones during instructional time; however, this falls short of best practice and students won't experience the benefits of a full school day free from the pressures of phones and social media. When this bill becomes law, Maine will join 19 other states plus the District of Columbia in supporting student learning for the entire school day.

Studies have found that:

- 97% of students use phones during the school day and most of that time is spent on social media, YouTube and gaming.
- Students spend an average of 70 minutes per school day on their phones.
- One third of teens report being exposed to pornography at school.
- 35% of teens admit to using their phone to cheat.
- 65% of students admit to being distracted by digital devices in class.

- And according to the Pew Research Center, 72% of U.S. high school teachers say cell phone distraction is a major problem in the classroom.

And that is backed by research. In 2017 the Brain Drain Study found that:

- The mere presence of a cell phone, even when it is silenced and stored out of sight, reduces cognitive capacity.
- Students performed best when the phone was in a separate room.
- They found this to be important when taking tests but even more crucial when learning something new.

The majority of teachers want phones out of the classroom as well. In 2024, the National Education Association conducted a poll on Social Media, Personal Devices and Mental Health.

The survey identified that:

- 83% of the members support prohibiting cell phone and personal device use during the entire school day, meaning from the first bell to the last bell.
- Over 90% of educators feel student mental health is a serious issue at their school and a majority also say there has been a significant increase in concerns related to student mental health in the past few years.

And here's why:

- 95% of teenagers are on social media and 40% of 8-12 year olds are as well.
- Teens spend nearly 5 hours per day on social media apps.
- According to the American Psychological Association, when teens spend more than 3 hours per day on social media, their risk of poor mental health DOUBLES. Meaning they are twice as likely to become depressed or anxious.
- And not surprising, we have seen a steep incline in both anxiety and depression since 2010. There has been a staggering 134% increase in teen anxiety and a whopping 106% increase in teen depression.
- Another alarming statistic is the rate of loneliness in school has DOUBLED between 2012 and 2018.
- In 2012 which is the year Facebook bought Instagram and there was a tremendous growth in social media use, there was also a sharp increase in self harm and suicide among US adolescents.

Again, these are the same platforms that on average teens spend nearly 5 hours a day on and as stated earlier we know that spending over 3 hours per day on these platforms doubles the risk of poor mental health.

In June of this year the U.S. Surgeon General wrote an Op Ed in the NY Times, calling for social media platforms to have warning labels. In that essay, he stated **“Schools should ensure that classroom learning and social time are phone-free experiences.”**

This bill would do just that. Ensure students are free from distractions not only during class but during important social times like lunch and passing periods as well and without undue exceptions that would weaken this legislation.

We also strongly encourage that the phones and personal devices are inaccessible to the student, using a dedicated storage solution provided by schools. Because of the addictive design, students cannot resist the pull of constant pings and notifications. For maximum benefit, of which there are many (detailed in the addendum), devices must not be accessible to the student from first bell to last bell, from arrival to dismissal.

We strongly encourage this committee to support LD 2212, part GG, Phone-Free Schools for ME.

Sincerely,

Deb Schmill

[Becca Schmill Foundation](#)

Kim Whitman

[Smartphone Free Childhood US](#)

Laura Derrenderinger

[Smartphone Free Childhood US](#)

ADDENDUM

The benefits of an all day phone-free policy are numerous:

The whole school day is vital to student learning and development. So when a school implements an all-day policy we see a dramatic increase in benefits, provided exceptions are limited to IEPs and 504 plans. (Additional exceptions erode benefits and introduce confusion and inconsistencies in implementation, returning the burden to teachers yet again).

- Development of social emotional skills

Face to face engagement among peers improves. Administrators and teachers share that lunch rooms are loud and more vibrant because students are actually talking to one another, which is important for developing social emotional skills.

- Mid-class absenteeism decreases

Students don't request to use the restroom as often when they don't have their phones.

- All-day attendance improves

Students can no longer text their parents and claim they aren't doing anything in their afternoon classes and ask them to call them out of school for the rest of the day.

One of my own kids has tried this on me...to no avail, but many students are successful.

- Students get to practice independence

Experiencing independence from their parents in a safe and controlled school environment fosters a child's self-confidence, resilience, and problem-solving ability.

Which are all needed skills to be successful in adulthood.

Being tethered to parents can actually fuel a cycle of codependency leading to increases in anxiety.

- Safety Improves

Many schools report that 75-95 percent of discipline referrals are related to phones and social media. With a bell-to-bell phone-free policy discipline referrals decrease significantly, including cyberbullying, physical fights and privacy violations.

- Teacher morale and retention goes up

The burden of having to police phones is removed from the teacher and teachers report greater job satisfaction and in turn teacher retention improves.

- There are additional benefits in the Classroom as well.

When students have access to cell phones and social media in between classes it is difficult for them to shift their focus back to learning.

For example, if during the passing period a student views a troubling text message or sees drama playing out on social media, they are not likely to be ready to focus and learn in the following class.

- Mental health improves

Providing students with 6-7 hours free from their phone and social media is a well needed break from being “on” all the time. It also allows students to engage with each other face to face which results in happier students that have a greater sense of belonging.

Because these policies are relatively new in the U.S. anecdotal evidence regarding all day phone-free policies inspires further research:

- Teachers report being ahead of schedule on their lesson plans because they aren't spending time policing phones. One district we work with said teachers are saving 5-10 minutes per class period. That adds up!
- Students are completing classwork and assignments faster. Students have even reported getting an A for the first time in their math class.
- There are more books checked out from their libraries! One district had 4 times as many books being checked out after their bell-to-bell policy was in place.
- Lunchrooms and hallways are markedly louder because students are having face-to-face conversations with their peers
- School counselors are seeing a decrease in the rate of mental health related student visits
- Administrators report spending significantly less time on discipline referrals
- Peer conflicts are deescalating quicker as social skills improve
- More after school club participation. One district that went bell to bell this year shared they have record numbers participating in after school activities.
- Teachers have more job satisfaction because they are doing what they love instead of policing phones. This results in improved teacher retention.