

Testimony Before the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee In Support of Funding for Bell-to-Bell Phone-Free Schools

Dear Legislators,

I am writing to speak about the fiscal case for bell-to-bell phone-free schools. **This is not just an education issue. It is a return-on-investment issue.**

Maine invests significant taxpayer dollars each year to educate our students. Yet during the school day, 97% of students report using their phones, and students receive an average of 237 notifications per day. Research shows it can take up to 20 minutes for the adolescent brain to fully refocus after a distraction. Seventy-two percent of high school teachers report that cellphones are a major classroom distraction.

Every hour a student spends texting, scrolling, coordinating social media drama, or watching videos during the school day is an hour Maine taxpayers have funded for learning — but not received.

The fiscal question before you is simple: **Are we maximizing the public's investment in education?**

The evidence shows that phone-free schools:

- Improve academic engagement and classroom efficiency
- Reduce bullying and disciplinary incidents
- Reduce mid-class absenteeism
- Improve attendance
- Improve teacher morale and retention

When teachers are not managing phones 7,000 times per day in a 1,000-student school — 1,000 students multiplied by 7 periods — instructional time increases. Assistant Superintendent Katie Joseph in RSU 1, Bath, Maine, reported that collecting phones at the start of the day actually saves administrative time. Fewer fights. Fewer social-media-fueled conflicts. Less disruption.

This is not theoretical. RSU 1 implemented a bell-to-bell policy in Fall 2024 and reports more effective teaching, improved classroom climate, and emerging academic gains.

From a fiscal perspective, consider the cost of doing nothing:

- Increased mental health visits during the school day
- Administrative time spent on cyberbullying investigations
- Discipline referrals tied to filming, social media escalation, and online harassment
- Teacher burnout and turnover — which carry enormous financial costs
- Lost instructional time that compounds achievement gaps

The social and emotional data are equally compelling. Schools with bell-to-bell bans report reductions in bullying — 46% of girls and 43% of boys reported less in-person bullying after implementation. When bullying decreases, so do investigations, suspensions, and staff time diverted from instruction.

Now let's talk about cost. Device storage solutions are affordable.

A high school in Dayton, Ohio serving 800 students spent approximately \$1,400 over two years using simple manila envelopes stored alphabetically in crates. Other schools use pencil pouches, calculator organizers, or repurposed mail sorters. There is no single required vendor and no requirement for expensive technology.

This is not a high-cost mandate. It is a low-cost structural shift.

Even when schools choose higher-end storage options, the investment is modest compared to the cost of one staff vacancy, one major discipline investigation, or one year of chronic absenteeism rates rising.

Appropriations decisions are about tradeoffs. **The question is not whether we can afford to support bell-to-bell phone-free implementation. The question is whether we can afford not to.**

We cannot control what happens in students' homes. But we can ensure that for 6 to 7 hours each day, the environment Maine funds is optimized for learning.

This is a rare intervention that benefits students across the academic spectrum. It supports struggling students who have difficulty with self-regulation. It protects neurodivergent students who are more vulnerable to digital distraction. And it removes an enforcement burden from teachers.

Clear, statewide policy also prevents inefficiencies created by district-by-district battles that consume administrative time and legal resources.

Bell-to-bell phone-free schools protect Maine's educational investment, strengthen classroom efficiency, reduce downstream costs, and improve outcomes — all with minimal implementation expense.

For a relatively small upfront cost, Maine can reclaim millions of dollars' worth of instructional time and strengthen the return on every education dollar we already spend.

I respectfully urge you to support funding and implementation resources for bell-to-bell phone-free schools.

Thank you for your time and your commitment to Maine students.

Andrew Jones, Parent, Scarborough, ME

