

Good afternoon Senator, Representative, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is Ellen Coughlin-Quinn. I hold a Master of Public Health, am a mother of three, and am the co-founder of the Scarborough Alliance for Thoughtful Tech and the Turn the Tide Coalition, where we advocate for healthier, more thoughtful technology use among youth.

I am here today to ask for your help—and to urge you to pass a strong, bell-to-bell phone-free school policy.

In my own town, more than 400 parents signed a letter supporting bell-to-bell policies in just four weeks. Parents and supporters attended school board meetings and roundtables. We called and emailed school board members. We even purchased books and shared research articles. Yet meaningful change stalled. Our school board and administrators are stretched thin, navigating budget constraints and staffing shortages. Decisions were driven by emotion and anecdote rather than evidence. It has been discouraging and disheartening.

And this experience is not unique. My Turn the Tide colleagues in other Maine towns report the same pattern. Across Maine, hundreds of parents have publicly supported bell-to-bell policies, yet progress has stagnated. **District-by-district battles are inefficient and divisive. This problem is bigger than any one community.**

Other states—including Vermont, North Carolina, Kansas, Oregon, Connecticut, New York, and Arkansas—states that also value local control—have enacted statewide policies recognizing that consistent standards benefit students, teachers, and families alike.

Maine's academic data underscore the urgency. The 2024 results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) shows Maine as one of the states with larger declines in reading and math since 2019, in some categories performing **below the national average. We cannot risk falling further behind if we don't enact a strong statewide mandate as other states have done.**

I urge you to listen to the experts and follow the research. **Specifically, I urge you not to weaken this bill by adding broad or unnecessary exceptions. The following are examples of exceptions that should not be included in the policy:**

The policy should not include broad emergency exceptions. Safety experts consistently warn that during a crisis, thousands of student phones can spread misinformation, escalate panic, and complicate law enforcement response. Secure storage is safer than unlocked devices in students' hands.

The policy should not rely on teacher discretion. Asking individual teachers to police phone use creates inconsistency, inequity, and unnecessary conflict. Clear, uniform expectations protect teachers as much as they protect students. Teacher testimony in support of this bill corroborates this.

The policy should not include exceptions allowing personal devices for “academic purposes.” Smartphones should not be required for public education; students already have school-issued technology for academic purposes.

The policy should not create a blanket exception for English language learners. While smartphones may offer translation apps, educators report they often increase distraction and limit authentic conversation practice. School-managed devices provide translation tools without the addictive pull of personal phones.

The appropriate exceptions to a bell-to-bell ban should be limited to documented health needs or accommodations within an IEP.

I urge you to pass a strong, clear bell-to-bell phone-free school policy without dilution. We, as parents, have tried to make this change in our local districts, and despite overwhelming evidence and broad community support, progress has stalled. We need your leadership and your help.

Every Maine student deserves the benefit of a phone-free school day, regardless of their area code.

Thank you for your time.

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