

State of Maine
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Testimony of Beth Lambert, Chief of Teaching and Learning, Maine Department of Education

Neither For Nor Against: L.D. 170, L.D. 643, L.D. 1234

Resolve, Establishing a Pilot Program to Reduce Personal Electronic Device Distractions During the School Day

Resolve, to Study the Effects of Artificial Intelligence, Cellular Telephones and Social Media on Public Education

An Act to Ban Cellular Telephones from Public School Classrooms

Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

Sponsored by: Representative Mathieson; Representative Brennan; Representative Campbell

Date: April 16, 2025

Senator Rafferty, Representative Murphy, and Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs:

My name is Beth Lambert, and I serve as the Chief Teaching and Learning Officer at the Maine Department of Education. I am here today representing the Department speaking neither for nor against L.D. 170, Resolve, Establishing a Pilot Program to Reduce Personal Electronic Device Distractions During the School Day, L.D. 643 Resolve, to Study the Effects of Artificial Intelligence, Cellular Telephones and Social Media on Public Education, and L.D. 1234 An Act to Ban Cellular Telephones from Public School Classrooms.

The presence and use of personal electronic devices during the school day is a complex issue that poses real challenges for our schools. The Department recognizes a growing body of national and international research showing that cell phones can be disruptive in classrooms, affecting students' attention, academic engagement, peer relationships, and emotional well-being. Educators and families are working to address these challenges in thoughtful ways, and we understand that the desire to act comes from a shared commitment to helping students succeed.

That said, we urge caution in how we frame the problem and the solutions we consider. Cell phone use is a symptom of a broader shift in how we live, communicate, and learn in a digital world. Singling out phones for elimination may offer short-term relief, but it may impact students' ability to manage technology responsibly. Our goal should be to help students navigate, not avoid, the digital complexities of their lives.

It is important to note that Maine schools already have the authority to implement policies that limit or restrict personal device use during the school day. Many districts across the state have developed local policies ranging from full-day phone bans, to tech-free Tuesdays, to structured classroom-based rules, to schoolwide agreements on digital citizenship and responsible use. These policies are based on community values, student needs, and staff capacity. In fact, some schools have already piloted solutions such as lockable pouches or designated phone-free zones. We should study and learn from these efforts before launching a new pilot that could inadvertently limit the range of solutions considered. Schools are implementing policies in real time, and their success and struggles hold valuable lessons.

We caution against framing one model, such as locking phones away during the school day, as the preferred or only path forward as proposed in L.D. 170. Doing so may unintentionally establish a precedent that undermines local flexibility and equity. Additionally, some of the most appealing strategies may be costly and the least future-proof, raising concerns about sustainability long term and uneven experiences for students across the State.

We also have concerns about the emphasis on “evidence-based technology solutions.” At present, there is no clear, established research that supports a specific product, such as locking pouch systems, as an effective school intervention. In fact, some of the companies that market these products are actively promoting legislation in multiple states, despite a lack of independent evaluation. This should give us pause, particularly when public funds are involved.

Any proposed exemptions for students with medical or IEP needs, while well-intentioned, are too vaguely defined to be consistently enforceable. This also raises questions about students with 504 plans, emergent anxiety, or caregiving responsibilities at home. Without clear guidance, school staff, especially teachers, will be left to interpret these policies on the ground, which introduces variability, inconsistency, and the potential for harm. We must avoid putting staff in the position of enforcing vague policies that could unintentionally cause harm.

All of the proposals before the Committee speak to a growing concern about the role of technology in learning and underscore the need for a coordinated, forward-looking approach. A statewide study could provide a valuable opportunity to hear from educators, students, families, and experts. However, we continue to urge caution around broad mandates. Requirements that remove local discretion or are not backed by clear evidence and implementation guidance may create more challenges than solutions, especially for under-resourced schools.

The Maine Department of Education is already engaged in this kind of learning through “Phones in Focus,” a national, nonpartisan initiative led by psychologist, Dr. Angela Duckworth, in collaboration with Stanford economists. Maine is participating by encouraging educators and administrators to complete a short survey about their current phone policies and implementation fidelity. The resulting data will provide a nationwide comparison of which practices are linked to positive student outcomes in academics, social development, and emotional well-being. This kind of research-informed, low-burden participation may offer better long-term insights than a stand-alone, time bound pilot.

Finally, as we consider the future, we must be mindful that cell phones are only the beginning. What happens when smartwatches become more powerful? Or when smart glasses, already in development, enter classrooms? Personal tablets and wearable devices have the same capacities as phones and often fly under the radar. Policies that target only phones risk becoming obsolete before they are even evaluated. Instead of chasing devices, we need to teach discernment. That means investing in digital literacy, privacy awareness, and self-regulation skills. Skills that will serve our students in any tech environment they encounter.

We appreciate the Committee's thoughtful attention to this issue and recognize your commitment to student well-being and effective learning environments. We hope that any solution considered prepares students not just to avoid technology, but to lead with intention in a world that is full of it.

For these reasons, the Department of Education is neither for nor against L.D. 170, Resolve, Establishing a Pilot Program to Reduce Personal Electronic Device Distractions During the School Day, L.D. 643 Resolve, to Study the Effects of Artificial Intelligence, Cellular Telephones and Social Media on Public Education, and L.D. 1234 An Act to Ban Cellular Telephones from Public School Classrooms. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have, and I will be available for work sessions on these bills.