



Stacy Brenner
Senator, District 30

THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

3 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

Co-sponsor testimony of Senator Stacy Brenner in support of
LD 170, LD 643 and LD 1234
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs

April 16, 2025

Representative Murphy, Senator Rafferty and esteemed members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. I am Senator Stacy Brenner, representing Senate District 30 which includes all of Gorham and most of Scarborough. I am before you today to testify in support of **LD 170**, *Resolve, Establishing a Pilot Program to Reduce Personal Electronic Device Distractions During the School Day*, **LD 1234**, *An Act to Ban Cellular Telephones from Public School Classrooms* and **LD 643**, *Resolve, to Study the Effects of Artificial Intelligence, Cellular Telephones and Social Media on Public Education*. These bills will take a measured step toward addressing a growing concern in our classrooms—cellphone use.

We know both from national and local educators that personal electronic devices such as smartphones and tablets are a persistent challenge in our classrooms. Beyond the potential for distraction, we are increasingly learning about their link to the rising mental health struggles among our young people.

Our students are learning less, being less sociable and overall having negative impacts from constant cellphone use. Apps such as TikTok and Instagram have been increasingly leading to anxiety and fragility in students since 2012. Social media has had a negative on Generation Z and those born after the year 2000. Research suggests that social media is a significant barrier to student engagement and academic success.

The internet is not social media. The internet is wonderful, and although there are bad elements, the benefits surely outweigh its downsides. Students use the internet for research, demonstrations, and use their technology to develop software and learn how to code. You'll hear from folks today who have these personal experiences in the classroom and how technology is not the issue at hand. LD 1234 proposes a bell-to-bell classroom cellphone ban which would establish a consistent statewide policy that teachers and school administrators can enforce. This gives schools a policy to support student attention, reduce classroom disruptions and foster healthier in-person interactions among students.

As a parent, a legislator, and someone deeply concerned about the mental health of Maine's youth, I believe we have a responsibility to explore evidence-based solutions to support their



Stacy Brenner
Senator, District 30

THE MAINE SENATE
132nd Legislature

3 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

well-being. Reducing personal device distraction during the school day is one such step. The bills before you today are reasonable, research-informed approaches that allow us to learn from experience and shape policy accordingly.

I urge the committee to vote to pass one of these 3 bills: LD 170, LD 1234, or LD 643 to help our teachers and school administrators know we are committed to a student body that is less distracted and more available for learning in the classroom.

Thank you for your time and I'm happy to answer any questions.

Stacy Brenner
State Senator, District 30

An Act for Safe, Attentive, and Focused Education for Maine (SAFE for ME)

SECTION 1. Findings

The Maine state legislature finds that our children are experiencing a mental health crisis and the heavy use of smartphones and social media is a primary contributor. At the same time, academic results in Maine are declining, with student performance in reading and math reaching historical lows, and:

(a) There is growing evidence that unrestricted use of personal electronic devices and access to social media by students at elementary, middle, and secondary schools interferes with the educational and social development mission of schools, lowers student performance (particularly among low-achieving students), promotes cyberbullying, contributes to higher rates of academic dishonesty (i.e., plagiarism and cheating). Cell Phones, Student Rights, and School Safety: Finding the Right Balance, Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, 2021.

(b) Recent studies indicate that Maine students' academic performance has declined significantly compared to national averages. The 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as the Nation's Report Card, reveals that Maine's fourth and eighth graders have recorded their lowest scores in three decades for both reading and math. **This decline positions Maine among 14 states performing significantly below the national average.**

Fourth Grade Performance:

- **Math:** Maine's average score was 233, below the national average of 237. Only 33% of Maine fourth graders tested at or above grade level, compared to 39% nationally.
- **Reading:** The state's average score was 210, with just 26% of students reading at grade level, a significant drop from 36% in 2019.

Eighth Grade Performance:

- **Math:** Maine's average score was 273, slightly above the national average of 272. About 25% of students performed at grade level, showing a marginal improvement from 24% in 2022.
- **Reading:** The average score was 255, with only 26% of students reading at grade level, down from 36% in 2019.

These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions such as this legislation to address learning loss and improve academic performance among Maine students. National Assessment of Educational Progress, Maine Department of Education, 2024; Maine Students Record Lowest Average Math and Reading Scores in Three Decades, Maine Public, January 30th, 2025.

(c) Research links improved outcomes to the later age at which young adults first own a smartphone or tablet, most notably showing improved self-confidence, stronger relationships, and fewer suicidal thoughts. Delaying device use in childhood may enhance mental well-being and underscores the value of phone-free social time, such as during school lunches. Age of First Smartphone/Tablet and Mental Well-Being Outcomes, Sapient Labs, 2023.

(d) Virtually all teens (95%) ages 13 to 17 use social media, and more than 1 in 3 report that they use it “almost constantly.” Even though most social media platforms set 13 as the minimum age requirement, **nearly 40% of kids ages 8 to 12 use social media.** Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024; Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022; The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2021.

(e) Studies have shown that higher use among children and adolescents is linked to adverse effects: depression and anxiety; inadequate sleep (which can disrupt neurological development and lead to depression and suicidal behaviors); low self-esteem; poor body image; eating disorder behaviors; and online harassment. Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2023. It's often the most vulnerable youth who are most affected by these adverse effects, increasing disparities.

(f) In Jonathan Haidt's 2024 book, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, he documents the staggering increases since 2010 in clinical diagnoses of anxiety (134%); depression (106%); anorexia (100%); and substance abuse and addiction (33%). The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness, 2024.

(g) The U.S. Surgeon General has emphasized the link between social media and mental health harms to adolescents. He has called for warning labels on social media to address “the defining public health challenge of our time,” and has stated that “the risk of not acting could be someone's life.” Surgeon General: Why I'm Calling for a Warning Label on Social Media Platforms, The New York Times, 2024.

(h) Social media and gaming platforms have evolved to include manipulative and addictive features that pose a significant risk of harm to the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents. Prevalence and Characteristics of Manipulative Design in Mobile Applications, 2022; Addictive Features of Social Media/Messenger Platforms and Freemium Games against the Background of Psychological and

(i) Members of historically marginalized groups are disproportionately impacted by cyberbullying online.

- Black teens are more likely than Hispanic or White teens to say they have been cyberbullied because of their race or ethnicity. Black and Hispanic teens are far more likely than White teens to say online harassment and bullying are a major problem for people their age. *Teens and Cyberbullying 2022, Pew Research Center, 2022.*
- According to the 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, LGBTQ+ students were almost twice as likely (25% compared to 16%) than cisgender and heterosexual students to be electronically bullied. *Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report 2013-2023, US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024.*

(j) A New York Times review of more than 400 fight videos from more than a dozen states — as well as interviews with three dozen school leaders, teachers, police officers, pupils, parents, and researchers — found a pattern of middle and high school students exploiting phones and social media to arrange, provoke, capture and spread footage of brutal beatings among their peers. In several cases, students later died from the injuries. *An Epidemic of Vicious School Brawls, Fueled by Student Cellphones, New York Times, 2024.*

(k) A 2020 study of Norwegian schools that had banned smartphones, found that:

- Banning smartphones lowers the incidence of bullying for both girls and boys,
- Banning smartphones results in girls making gains in both their GPA and externally graded mathematics exams, on the order of 0.22 standard deviations. For comparison, the author notes that reducing class size by one student correlates to an improvement of about 0.00–0.05 standard deviations,
- These benefits are particularly strong for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds,
- The effects are particularly strong at schools with the strictest bans, requiring students to hand in or lock away their phones, not just place them on silent mode. The study's author notes that, even in silent mode, phones can still pull at a student's attention, distracting them as they wonder if someone messaged them, liked their status, or whatever else,
- Banning smartphones reduces the number of consultations for psychological symptoms by about 2–3 visits per child, per year.

(l) According to school safety experts, cell phones make children less safe in a school emergency. When students use cell phones during an unfolding emergency, it can distract them from important instructions from school staff and safety professionals. Cell phone use can also make a student easier for a person who intends harm during an emergency to be heard or seen. Phone-free schools protect kids during emergencies, 2024.

(k) School should be a safe environment for all students - where social development, learning, and the ability to focus are nurtured and prioritized. It is in the public interest, and is, therefore, the responsibility of this body, to ensure a physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe school environment for every child in Maine - - one where students can learn, make friends, optimize their future potential, and otherwise thrive.

SECTION 2: An Act to Create Phone-Free Education in PreK-12 Schools

This bill proposes to prohibit access to personal electronic devices in public schools, education centers, charter schools, or training programs, providing pre-kindergarten, elementary, or secondary education.

Be it enacted by the People of the State of Maine as follows:

1. Definitions. As used in this Act, unless the context otherwise indicates, the following terms have the following meanings:

A. Instructional time. "Instructional time" means the time from when the first bell rings at the start of the school day until the dismissal bell rings at the end of the school day, including but not limited to any structured or unstructured learning experiences such as recess, lunch periods, time in between classes and field trips.

B. Parent. "Parent" means a parent/caregiver/guardian of a student who is authorized to make education decisions for the student.

C. Personal electronic communication device. "Personal electronic communication device" means any portable electronic equipment capable of providing voice, messaging or other data communication between two or more parties or devices, or capable of connecting to a smartphone, the

Internet or a cellular or Wi-Fi network, including but not limited to smartphones, cellular phones, Bluetooth-enabled devices, tablets, smartwatches or other wearables and gaming devices.

Personal electronic communication devices do not include:

1. School-owned devices provided to the student in accordance with the limitations placed in this Act; or
2. Portable devices that meet the definition of a medical device under the federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, Section 201(h).

D. "School" means all public schools in the State of Maine providing prekindergarten, elementary or secondary education

E. Student. "Student" means an individual currently enrolled or registered at a school as defined under subsection D

2. Storage and Limits of Use. The use of personal electronic communication devices is prohibited during instructional time. Each school administrative unit shall adopt and implement a policy that:

A. Requires all personal electronic communication devices to be turned off, securely locked away and inaccessible to students during instructional time;

B. Ensures that students do not have access to personal electronic communication devices by requiring them to be locked or stowed away in secure lockable pouches, phone lockers, pencil pouches, manila envelopes or other inaccessible locations;

C. Provides that schools may limit student access to personal electronic communication devices outside of instructional time during school-related activities;

D. Includes enforcement provisions to ensure strict compliance with the policy by students and school employees; and

E. Provides that a student may contact the student's parent or caregiver during the school day if needed by using a school telephone made

available to the student in a manner and location designated by the school.

3. Exceptions. Notwithstanding section 2, a student may possess or use a personal electronic communication device under the following circumstances:

A. When a licensed physician determines that the possession or use of a personal electronic communication device is necessary for the health or well-being of the student; or

B. When the possession or use of a personal electronic communication device is required by a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or Section 504 Accommodations Plan.

SUMMARY

This bill requires the Department of Education to adopt rules restricting the use of personal electronic communication devices by students. This bill requires all public schools to implement a policy prohibiting student access to personal electronic devices during instructional time and school-related activities. The policy must require devices to be turned off, securely stored and inaccessible to students, with certain limited exceptions for medical and educational needs.