

Oral Testimony to support LD 1234: Bell to Bell Phone Free Schools

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Chairpersons and Members of the Education committee-

My name is Ellen Coughlin-Quinn. I live in Scarborough with my three school-aged children, and I hold a Master's in Public Health. I'm also the co-founder of the Scarborough Alliance for Thoughtful Tech and the Turn the Tide Coalition. This issue is deeply personal to me, and it's one of the most urgent public health crises of our time.

Many schools say they have phone bans, but most only apply during class or instructional time—leaving phones accessible during lunch, hallways, and bathrooms. That's not a true ban, and experts agree it's not enough to reduce harm.

The amendments to LD 1234 establish a bell-to-bell policy—covering the entire school day. This protects both learning and the social-emotional fabric of school life.

Some ask, "Why not just put phones away during class?" Research shows that even the presence of a phone reduces focus. And **school is more than academics—students need to be present to build friendships, feel belonging, and form healthy habits.**

Some worry bell to bell phone free schools require expensive phone storage solutions. But across the country, **schools are already doing it on a budget.** A D.C. middle school uses pencil pouches. A Vermont school uses an old mail sorter. A high school in Ohio uses manila envelopes in milk crates. These systems are simple, effective, and reduce the need for teachers to police phones during the day.

And it's not just teachers who benefit—administrators do, too. Assistant Superintendent Katie Joseph here in Maine at RSU1/Bath said that collecting phones at the start of the day actually saves her time throughout the day. Principal Catrina Bailey from Dunbar High School in Ohio agrees. Fewer fights. Fewer discipline issues. Fewer social media-fueled conflicts. Better school culture.

The amendments to LD 1234 were modeled after legislation developed by leading experts in research, education, and public policy. Contributors include the Becca Schmill Foundation, The Anxious Generation (inspired by Jonathan Haidt's bestselling book), the USC Neely Center for Ethical Leadership and Decision Making, Fairplay (the nation's leading nonprofit focused on helping children thrive in a screen-saturated culture), and the Phone-Free Schools Movement. In Maine, the **Turn the Tide Coalition—a network of parents and advocates from local towns working to reduce screen-based childhood across the state**—ensured the bill is tailored to our state's unique needs.

That's why this legislation is so well-written, comprehensive, and thoughtful. The amendments to LD 1234 do not ban school-issued or medical devices, and they include clear exceptions for students with health conditions, IEPs, or 504 plans.

What the bill does not include are vague carve-outs like "teacher discretion" or undefined "emergencies." Those kinds of loopholes lead to inconsistent enforcement and weaken the policy. And as experts have pointed out, personal phones do not make students safer during emergencies.

While this bill sits in the Education Committee, **its impact goes far beyond education.** This is a health issue. A workforce issue. Our kids need to be ready—socially, emotionally, and academically—for life beyond school.

This isn't without precedent. Maine once had a law to ban pagers in schools. Maine also mandated masks during the 2020-2021 school year. We've done this before. And now, we have even more evidence and urgency to act.

And this can't be handled district by district. Many of us have tried—only to be dismissed or discouraged. School boards and school leaders are stretched thin and have competing priorities. Further, a loud minority can create the illusion that parents are against this, but the numbers tell a different story.

In Scarborough, over 400 parents signed a letter in support of phone-free days—and that was collected in just four weeks. In Cape Elizabeth, more than 450 parents signed a Change.org petition. In Falmouth, hundreds of parents also signed a letter of support. That's over 1,200 parents from just three towns—and yet no meaningful change has happened in any of them.

We know changing norms is hard, and we must continue educating parents and community members. But that can—and should—happen in parallel with bold, school-based policies like LD 1234.

Every Maine student deserves the benefits of a device free school.

Thank you.

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Scarborough Alliance for Thoughtful Tech
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*This testimony is from a student who has asked to be kept anonymous for fear of bullying.

I am writing to express my full support for a complete ban on cell phones during the school day in high schools. Cell phones have become a major source of distraction and disruption in the classroom, preventing students from focusing on learning and building meaningful social connections.

Despite school rules, many students continue to use their phones during class time. In my own class, we use a phone hotel system—students are supposed to put their phones in a hanging organizer at the start of class. But some students have started setting their phones to record, then placing them in the phone hotel to secretly film the entire class. From their recording spot in the back of the room, their phones capture what every other student is doing while facing the teacher. And what do those recordings show? Most of the students are not paying attention at all—they're scrolling through Instagram, completely disengaged from the lesson. This is then used as “blackmail” and turned into online clips.

One particularly striking incident involved a student who was clearly on Instagram during class. When confronted, she quickly switched her screen to an image of a calculator and claimed she was just using her calculator for schoolwork. She had even gone so far as to match her phone case to her actual calculator to make her excuse more believable.

Another troubling story involves the emotional and social consequences of constant phone access. One student got angry at another and was so tempted by the immediacy of social media that she posted something hurtful on Snapchat. She quickly regretted it and deleted the post—but not before someone else had already screen-recorded it. That one impulsive moment led to her suspension and damaged relationships that are unlikely to repair.

On top of that, students are constantly sending each other reels and memes during class. Instead of talking to the people sitting next to them, they communicate through DMs, likes, and shares. The result is a room full of teenagers who are physically present but socially and mentally checked out.

Phones are not helping students learn, and they're not helping them grow socially either. If anything, they are making it harder. For these reasons, I believe cell phones should not be allowed during the school day at all. They should be kept out of sight entirely. If we want students to engage with learning, and with each other, we need to remove the most powerful distraction in the room.