

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2025 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

Senate Bill 29 (Senators Waldstreicher and Ready)
Education, Energy, and the Environment

Education - Phone-Free Schools Pilot Program - Establishment

This bill establishes the Phone-Free Schools Pilot Program in Carroll and Montgomery counties to collect data to determine the effect of local school system policies that limit student use of cell phones during the school day on academic achievement, student classroom engagement, student social interactions, and student behavior and discipline. Eligible counties must each select one middle school and one high school in the county to participate in the program. By September 1, 2026, each eligible local school system must submit a report to the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) and the General Assembly on the effectiveness of the program. **The bill takes effect July 1, 2025.**

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: MSDE can support the implementation of pilot programs and data collection as needed with existing resources. Revenues are not affected.

Local Effect: Eligible local school systems in Carroll and Montgomery counties can likely implement the pilot program with existing resources, as discussed below. Revenues are not affected.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Bill Summary: Each eligible school system (Carroll and Montgomery counties) must select one middle school and one high school in the county to participate in the program. Each eligible local school system must develop and implement a policy that prohibits cell phone use during instructional time and establish procedures to enforce the policy,

including appropriate disciplinary measures for violation. Instructional time includes any time during the school day, except a student's lunch period. The policy may not prohibit a student from using a cell phone (1) for any purpose documented in the student's individual education program or Section 504 plan; (2) to monitor or address a student's documented health issue; or (3) when directed by an educator or administrator for educational purposes.

Each eligible school system must collect data regarding the student cell phone use policy including (1) academic achievement of students in the school; (2) student classroom engagement; (3) student social interaction, including bullying, cyberbullying, and harassment; (4) student behavior and discipline; (5) enforcement challenges; and (6) student, teacher, and parent or guardian feedback on the policy. Such cell phone use policy data must be included in the report to MSDE and the General Assembly required by September 1, 2026.

Current Law: Many local school systems have policies governing the use of cell phones in schools or on school grounds, which are aligned with local codes of discipline. According to MSDE, at least 19 of Maryland's 24 local school systems have recently updated or adopted new student cell phone use policies as of September 2024. Additional local school systems are in the process of reviewing and updating policies. Policies vary across local school systems and schools and typically cover definitions, guidelines, compliance procedures, and consequences for violations. They also generally cover procedures for notifying parents and staff and the responsibilities of school administrators and may provide differing levels of flexibility for elementary, middle, and high school students.

MSDE advises that the agency is in the process of convening the Task Force on Student Cell Phone Use in Schools. Comprising teachers, administrators, parents, students, superintendents, and other educational experts across all grade bands, the task force will review current policies across the State on allowable student use of cell phones in schools. MSDE anticipates the task force will generate a set of policy recommendations to support school districts in addressing student cell phone use by April 2025. In December 2024, the U.S. Department of Education released [Planning Together: A Playbook for Student Personal Device Policies](#) to help school district and school leaders develop policies on the use of personal devices in schools.

Local Fiscal Effect: Carroll County Public Schools and Montgomery County Public Schools can likely collect the specified data and report that data to MSDE using existing resources.

Montgomery County Public Schools advises that the bill would require the purchasing of calculator pocket charts and charging equipment for each of the approximately 8,000 secondary classrooms in the district. At a cost of \$25 per pocket chart plus an

additional \$37.50 per classroom for charging equipment, Montgomery County Public Schools anticipates spending \$500,000 in fiscal 2026 to acquire such equipment with additional out-year costs for the replacement of units and purchase of additional units to keep pace with enrollment growth.

The Department of Legislative Services advises that the bill requires only one elementary school and one high school in each eligible county to participate in the pilot program. Assuming such policies are only applied to one middle school and one high school in each local school system, any potential costs are significantly less. Further, the bill does not mandate that phones be stored in calculator pouches with charging infrastructure, only that school districts develop a policy prohibiting student cell phone use during instructional time with appropriate disciplinary measures for violations. Given the limited scope of the pilot program and the requirement that eligible districts only develop a policy on cell phone use, Carroll County Public Schools and Montgomery County Public Schools systems can likely meet the requirements of the bill using existing resources. Any expenditures for equipment to store cell phones are therefore at the discretion of each local school system, likely limited to the one middle school and one high school participating in the pilot program, and not a direct result of the bill.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has not been introduced in the last three years.

Designated Cross File: None.

Information Source(s): Maryland State Department of Education; Maryland Center for School Safety; Carroll County Public Schools; Montgomery County Public Schools; Department of Legislative Services

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