

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2026 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

House Bill 525
Ways and Means

(Delegate Boafó, *et al.*)

**County Boards of Education - Student Electronic Communication Device Use
Policy - Establishment (Maryland Phone-Free Schools Act)**

This bill requires each local board of education to develop and implement, by the 2027-2028 school year, a policy to limit the use of “electronic communication devices” by students during the academic school day, defined as any structured or unstructured learning experience that occurs between the first and last bell of the school day, including instructional periods, lunch, recess, passing periods, and transitional periods. During the academic school day, local policies must prohibit the use of devices, require students to store devices as specified, and prohibit a student from using social media applications and websites determined by the county board. Local policies must (1) also require administrator approval for the use of personal devices for educational purposes when a school-issued device is unavailable and (2) include appropriate disciplinary measures as specified. Policies may not prohibit a student from using devices in certain specified situations. Each local board of education must engage families and publicize the policies. Lastly, the bill specifies reporting requirements for local boards and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) related to policy implementation. **The bill takes effect July 1, 2026.**

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: MSDE can report on local policies, including collecting information, verifying local data, and providing technical support to local school systems as needed, with existing resources. Revenues are not affected.

Local Effect: Local boards of education can likely develop, adopt, publish, implement, and report on policies as specified with existing resources, as discussed below. Revenues are not affected.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Bill Summary: Under the bill, “store” is defined as securing in a manner determined by the local board to ensure the electronic communication device is not carried on the student’s person during the academic school day. “Electronic communication device” means any portable electronic device carried or transported by a student to receive, send, or record voice, image, or text content, including cell phones, tablets, laptops, smart watches, wireless earbuds or headphones, geolocation devices, and any other device with communication functions. “Electronic communication device” does not include a device provided by a local board of education for instructional purposes.

The policy may not prohibit a student from using a device (1) for any purpose documented in the student’s individualized education program or Section 504 Plan; (2) to monitor or address a student’s documented health issue; (3) during an emergency event; (4) when directed by an education or administrator for educational purposes; (5) to access language translation tools to ensure educational equity for multilingual students when school-issued electronic communication devices are not available or sufficient for this purpose; or (6) for the purpose of meeting caregiving responsibilities, as approved by a principal.

Disciplinary measures must be tiered, enforced by an administrator, and not include suspension or expulsion solely for a violation of the policy.

Annually beginning September 1, 2027, and ending September 1, 2032, each local board of education must submit a report to MSDE on the impacts of policy implementation, including a description of the policy as specified, documentation of stakeholder engagement, certain compliance and enforcement data, description of the impacts on the school environment, equity and accommodation data, and any anticipated policy revisions for the upcoming school year. Annually beginning July 1, 2028, and ending July 1, 2023, MSDE must publish a report that compiles and synthesizes reports from local boards, including enforcement challenges and technical assistance models and policies.

Current Law: Most 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. Policies vary across 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 and the State Board of Education convened the Task Force on Student Cell Phone Use in Schools in spring 2025 to review policies across the State on allowable student use of cell phones in schools and develop guidance and recommendations. In August 2025, the

State Board passed a [resolution](#) reinforcing the recommendations from the task force's [guidance document](#) and encouraging local school systems to regularly revisit and assess their current policy to ensure it satisfies community needs and aligns with task force recommendations; and requesting that school systems clearly define expectations for their student cell phone use policies.

Additionally, MSDE advises that the agency has partnered with Phones in Focus, a national research study that gathers educators' input on school cell phone policies, with a goal of developing evidence-based recommendations for policies that support academic learning, social well-being and student focus.

Local Expenditures: Local boards of education can adopt the required policy or adapt existing policies in accordance with the requirements of the bill using existing resources. Local boards can also likely report on device use policies with existing resources. This analysis assumes local boards of education can establish storage locations for student devices using existing resources and school infrastructure. Local school systems in Baltimore City and Anne Arundel, Montgomery, Frederick, Prince George's, St. Mary's, and Wicomico counties advise that they already have policies governing the use of cellular phones in schools, though minimal adjustment may be required conform to the requirements of the bill. Some local school systems may incur additional costs to report on the policies; however, it is assumed that any costs are minimal and absorbable.

Additional Information

Recent Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has been introduced within the last three years. See HB 57, HB 147, HB 192, and HB 630 of 2025; SB 29, SB 130, SB 368, and SB 897 of 2025; and SB 112 of 2024.

Designated Cross File: SB 928 (Senator Harris, *et al.*) - Education, Energy, and the Environment.

Information Source(s): Maryland State Department of Education; Anne Arundel County Public Schools; Baltimore City Public Schools; Frederick County Public Schools; Montgomery County Public Schools; Prince George's County Public Schools; Wicomico County Public Schools; St. Mary's County Public Schools; Department of Legislative Services

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Analysis by: Michael E. Sousane

Direct Inquiries to:
(410) 946-5510
(301) 970-5510