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of Howard County**

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**Board of Education of Howard County
Testimony Submitted to the Maryland Senate,
Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee
January 29, 2025**

SB0368: UNFAVORABLE

Student Cellular Phone Use Policy - Establishment (Maryland Phone-Free Schools Act)

The Board of Education of Howard County (the Board) opposes **County Boards of Education - Student Cellular Phone Use Policy - Establishment (Maryland Phone-Free Schools Act)** as a mandate on local school system policy that takes away our ability to make a balanced decision on the use of cell phones in schools.

This body has several bills to review this session on the topic of school system cell phone policies. Each requires a local school system to develop and implement a policy to limit the use of cellular phones by students. Some contain definitions of cellular devices, some address the time of day a student can and cannot use these devices. Others contain specific parameters on how to secure phones during instructional time, exemptions for when a student can use their devices, and require the inclusion of disciplinary measures for violations of the policy. What should be evident from the many variations of the bills similar to SB0368 being heard by this Committee is that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to be legislated.

Many factors go into the development of a local policy regarding the use of personal technology devices by students in school. Teachers and administrators want to ensure that student focus is on instruction and cell phones and/or social media can be a major distraction which impacts that focus. Parents want to have a direct connection with their student in case of emergency or other personal needs. Balancing these perspectives and providing for consistency in the implementation of local policies and procedures ensures all stakeholders are engaged in a way that allows the resulting policy to be carried out with fidelity.

As a growing body of national evidence points to the negative impacts of personal technology devices and social media on youth mental health and the local classroom, the Board has committed to looking for ways to reduce the distraction of cell phones. Through months long processes and deliberations, including staff presentations, stakeholder surveys, and public hearings, on January 30, 2025, the Board [approved adjustments](#) to *Policy 8080 - Responsible Use of Technology, Digital Tools, and Social Media*, and the *Student Code of Conduct* intended to reduce the use of personal devices by students during the student day. The new policy in Howard County will go into effect on March 3, 2025, and will require that student cell phones be away, silent, and not cause distractions in the classrooms, hallways, or lunch room for all students at all levels. Additionally, the Maryland State Department of Education also currently has a workgroup reviewing existing school system policies to make future recommendations.

As a legislative priority, the Board supports local decision making in the development of policy that accounts for a balance of educational practices, available resources, public input, and local accountability. Given potential solutions for Howard County could result in additional costs to the school system – such as phone lockers or pouches – support from funding sources after a local implementation decision is made would be preferred to legislative mandates for a policy.

For these reasons, we urge an UNFAVORABLE report on SB0368 from this Committee.