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BILL: HB 630

TITLE: County Boards of Education - Student Cellular Phone Use Policy -
Establishment (Maryland Phone-Free Schools Act)

DATE: February 12, 2025

POSITION: Oppose

COMMITTEE: House Ways and Means Committee

CONTACT: Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director, PSSAM

The Public School Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM), on behalf of all twenty-four local school superintendents **opposes** House Bill 630.

This bill requires each local board of education to develop and implement, by the 2026-2027 school year, a policy to prohibit the use of cellular phones by students during instructional time, which includes any time during the school day, except a student's lunch period. The policy must also require students to store their phones in a secure place during instructional time and prohibit a student from using social media applications and websites as determined by the local school board during school hours. The policy may not prohibit a student from using a phone (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; or (4) when directed by an education or administrator for educational purposes. The policy must also establish administrator-enforced disciplinary measures for violations, beginning with a warning for a first offense. The bill takes effect July 1, 2025.

Maryland superintendents appreciate the good intentions of this bill; however, PSSAM steadfastly opposes any legislation that imposes statewide mandates on local school systems or local boards of education, especially on policies that have previously been deliberated at the local level with all affected stakeholders, such as the case regarding student uses of cellphones.

In the past several years, superintendents, school boards and advisory groups in 19 out of the 24 Local Education Agencies (LEAs) have taken proactive action to establish, update, or study district-wide cell phone policies. These efforts include establishing new policies specific to the use of cell phones, updating board policies, revising the district's code of conduct or student handbook regarding the use of technology to include cellphones or "smart" technology, and/or introducing pilot programs. Currently, 5 LEAs also have pilot programs underway to study the impact of varying levels of cell phone restrictions during the school day. Much of the local work was done through surveys to parents, teachers, and students, as well as extensive public meetings.

In addition, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), under the State Superintendent's leadership, has recently convened a broad workgroup of stakeholders, including superintendents, to study the use of cell phones in schools with the goal of recommending guidance for State Board adoption in the next several months. We support the workgroup and its on-the-ground membership to study this complex issue. The workgroup will be reviewing the newly released guidance from the U.S. Department of Education, as well as reflecting on the experiences of the local school districts who have already reached deep into their communities to determine the appropriateness of cell phone use and "smart technology" in the classroom and in schools.

PSSAM remains committed to focusing on empowering local decision-making to ensure that education policies are relevant, flexible, and reflective of the unique needs of each community. Again, we appreciate the bill's good intentions, but we ask the Legislature to continue to allow the education experts at the local level, as well as the MSDE-convened workgroup, to continue to examine this issue to determine the most effective public policies.

For these reasons, PSSAM **opposes** House Bill 630 and kindly requests an **unfavorable** report.