

March 4th, 2026

Esteemed members of the Maryland General Assembly,

My name is Mickie Chandra and I am a resident of Montgomery County, Maryland. I am an active member of the PTA at the local, county (MCCPTA), and state (FSPTA) levels. My testimony is provided to support the Maryland Phone-Free Schools Act (SB928).

As a mother of two children in public school, an advocate for school communities, and an educator with significant classroom experience, I have witnessed first hand the consequences of substandard school cell phone policies. Despite the push by school districts to address the distractions introduced during the school day by cell phones and other personal mobile devices (PMD), outcomes to upgraded policies this school year have failed to fulfill what they were designed to do. We need a policy that can be realistically enforced.

My testimony offers perspectives and evidence that underpin the various facets of what has been a complex environment to navigate in order to restore the integrity of instructional time and achieve distraction free schools.

2025 as a Turning Point

Districts universally have reached a turning point in the awareness of the totality of harm children face online and the spillover effects in every aspect of home and school life. We now have the data to back it up. A report released by Phones in Focus, author and researcher Angela Duckworth embarked on a project that involved collecting data from educators on school cell phone policies with the goal of developing longitudinal evidence on the specific policies that produce the best student outcomes. Governors reviewed the survey and unanimously agreed that we must take existing policies further: Governors Focus on Distraction-Free Learning - National Governors Association.

There is agreement that the benefits of a phone policy that works results in:

- Fewer distractions = better learning and participation
- Teachers can teach without interruptions
- Research shows that less screen time promotes social-emotional well-being
- Classrooms run more smoothly
- Everyone benefits from a more respectful, focused environment

In 2025 school districts across Maryland renewed their efforts to uphold or update preexisting policies around students' use of cell phones¹. While attempting to address the growing distractions in the classroom and threats to safety, updates to policy also broadly aim to support the academic, physical, emotional, and mental health of students by reducing the impact of social media and phone usage on their well-being.

In retrospect, the response to these policy updates has varied. At best, some schools and classrooms improved only later to regress. Where the school policy did not produce intended

results during instructional time, or in the classroom, the difference was due to the accessibility of the cell phone. Storage methods for devices matter to the effectiveness of any policy, including bell-to-bell. As Dr. Duckworth presented to Governors: “Findings suggest that where phones are stored during the school day may matter as much as when students are forbidden from using them, and in terms of teacher satisfaction: the stricter the policy, the better.”

Use Case Review Based on Regulations and Cell Phone Policy Updates in 2025

A Superior Storage Model - The Bell-to-Bell Cart Model -

Advocates in Montgomery County who cast a wide net in receiving feedback on the updated cell phone regulation in that district reported that the school with the most success in implementation had the foresight of the unique needs of the students and teachers at the school to know that nothing less than a bell-to-bell policy was needed. The storage for that school is known as the “cart model”, where cell phones are administratively gathered before the first bell and secured until the student retrieves the phone after the last class. Further, cell phone policies that support overall student well-being must consider the ongoing inappropriate uses during lunch and transitions. Allowing cell phone access during on-campus lunch provides opportunities for bullying and harassment.

The Typical Storage Mechanism for District Policies - Off and Away -

Looking at one generic policy known as Off And Away, PMDs are required to be turned off and out of sight and reach, typically placed in a backpack or caddy in the classroom. In contrast to the intentions of this particular policy, it was observed that cell phones were increasingly neither off nor away for a significant portion of the time as the school year progressed. In other words, PMDs became easier to access and use during instructional time. The policy did not work as intended, as it could not rely on students to self-enforce, and the burden of addressing violations was left to the teachers. Off And Away, though well intended, became unenforceable.

In contrast to Off And Away, policies that were the most successful solved both issues of (1) student proximity to the PMD and (2) ease of access. Therefore, the policy must include an effective means of storage in order to enforce the intent of the policy, specifically to address unauthorized PMD use.

Teachers and SROs Fail at Tracking Devices Within and Outside of the Classroom

In response to the report produced by Phones in Focus, Maryland State Governor Wes. Moore stated: "We can't afford to ignore what educators are telling us. This survey makes it clear that the people closest to our students are sounding the alarm about the impact of phones in the classroom—and they're pointing us toward solutions that work. In Maryland, we are committed to putting educator voice at the center of our decisions, and we'll continue to act urgently to make sure our classrooms are places where students and educators alike can focus and thrive."

Teachers overwhelmingly support a bell-to-bell policy as the most tenable cell phone policy, as managing student adherence to policy is inherently flawed due to the difficulty of carrying out instructional duties and managing classroom behavior that includes the third factor of managing devices that are within reach of students.

SROs Contest the “Safety” Argument.

SROs in addressing positions that support Off and Away and similar policies, have confirmed that anything other than a policy that resolves the Proximity and Accessibility issues detailed earlier in this bill leads to a reduction in student safety. The following statement was officially announced by the National Association of School Resource Officers last month: “NASRO is extremely supportive of a statewide bell-to-bell and social media free policy for grades K-12. We do not support an exception for emergencies. We know that schools, students and staff are safer when student cell phones and personal devices are not present during the school day. For this reason, if students are allowed to bring personal devices to school they should be securely locked away and inaccessible to the student from the first bell to the last bell of the school day.”

Signed Statement of Mo Canady, Executive Director of NASRO Closing the Loophole of Admissible Cell Phone Use

Instructional Use - Authority is granted to the principal or certain school administrators to allow limited cell phone use during class time if the use supports instruction. The difficulty in verifying proper use is apparent when instructional use becomes personal use. The instructional use of cell phones is a “gateway” to unauthorized use where the student would be in violation if caught. An example setting where this occurs is a photography class where the teacher does not have enough school provided supplies and therefore allows students to use the camera app on the smartphone.

E-hallpass App - Schools that use an electronic hall pass system where a student checks out and back in from a main kiosk may not use a system that requires students to download an app that serves as the digital “permission slip”. Examples of permissions include visits to the nurse’s office or to use the restroom. Some students find it difficult to hold themselves accountable to return to the class in time when they are distracted by the apps on the phone.

Lunch and Class Transitions

Policy allowing the use of cell phones at certain times of the day does very little to prevent bullying, and particularly doxing. Students have found an incentive in orchestrating fights in advance with the intention of capturing the fight on their cell phones and uploading this content to the internet.

Access to Social Media

The use of social media is highly disruptive to a student’s ability to focus in the classroom and engage with peers. Districts have placed limits on access to social media platforms through the school’s technology networks. However, these deterrents are not foolproof, particularly when access to cell phones is an issue. Access to phones means access to social media.

Providing Media Literacy - While removing cell phone access during the school day, better education around device and social media use can teach children to be proactive. In accordance with HB1110 (Effective 2019) Health and Safety Best Practices – Digital Devices school districts are encouraged to integrate into their K-12 curriculum age-appropriate instruction and discussion regarding how digital media, including social media, the internet, AI,

and other emerging digital and online technologies, can be built and designed to be manipulative and addictive. The media literacy curriculum should promote to students how they can protect and enhance critical thinking, conduct risk-benefit analysis, and work towards understanding the potential mental and physical health consequences, including disrupting healthy child and adolescent development, that arise from use of social media.

Discipline and Expectations

It should be a requirement to state that students are expected to understand and follow the school cell phone policy responsibly. There must be a clearly defined disciplinary approach if a student violates the school's cell phone policy and steps to re-establish expectations for student behavior.

The Ask: Please pass the Maryland Phone-Free Schools Act (SB928)

Prior to the start of the 2026-2027 school year, school districts must have a plan for enforcing cell phone policy that aims to prevent unauthorized use of cell phones in the classroom. Implementation of this policy and adherence to proper device storage should take effect on the first day of school in fall of 2026. We do not have any more time to lose. Please support the legislation that will help us move the needle now, the Maryland Phone-Free Schools Act (SB928).

Thank you for this opportunity to share my experience and for investing your time to read my testimony.

Sincerely,
Mickie Chandra