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Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee

SB 79 County Boards of Education - Student Technology Use Policy - Requirements

Bill Hearing Date February 4th, 2026

Position: Favorable

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and Honorable Committee Members,

My name is Michael Butkiewicz. I am an author and civic-education researcher from Montgomery County, and my work has appeared across regional outlets. I write today in support of SB 79, not because the bill is flawless, but because Maryland urgently needs a policy framework that relies on intentional design rather than intuition to shape the conditions under which students learn.

I want to be candid about the limitations. The bill's decentralized approach to secondary-school standards raises legitimate concerns about uneven implementation. If one jurisdiction adopts a looser device policy and a student's academic performance suffers as a result, we are effectively tying educational outcomes to ZIP codes rather than establishing a uniform baseline that protects all students. This matters especially because the median lower-income student is already about 16% less likely to enroll in postsecondary education within a year of graduation.¹

Research published by ETRD identifies major technology-based distractors like constant notifications, social media, pop-ups, device alerts, and cyberloafing.² Lower-income students are disproportionately affected because they are more likely to use older, slower, and less customizable devices that generate more notifications, more intrusive ads, and fewer built-in controls than those available in higher-income households.

Despite its imperfections, SB 79 establishes a necessary foundation for improving learning conditions, particularly in civics. The bill's statewide restrictions on personal-device use in elementary and middle school directly address the structural issues highlighted in the Maryland READS report, which warns of a

¹ Source: Baltimore Community Foundation and Education Trust report on inequities in Maryland educational opportunity.

² Source: Educational Technology Research and Development (ETRD) study on digital distractions and student attention.

“literacy crisis,” and in the 2024 NAEP results, which show only 29% of eighth graders reaching proficiency.³ These deficits make it harder for students to engage with complex statutory and civic texts that demand inference, interpretation, and sustained attention.

Maryland’s educators do extraordinary work, but they can only be as effective as the system that surrounds them. They deserve a framework that strengthens, not undermines, the conditions for learning.

While concerns about decentralization remain unresolved, SB 79 is a meaningful step forward. It is especially important for students in primary school and for lower-income Marylanders, who stand to benefit most from a learning environment that supports long-term civic understanding. By improving the conditions under which students develop literacy, focus, and judgment, we move closer to a system in which all Marylanders, regardless of income, are equipped to understand their civic institutions, recognize their stake in them, and make their voices heard.

Please report favorably on SB 79.

Thank you.

³ Source: 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Grade 8 Reading results.