

SB928 – County Boards of Education – Student Electronic Communication Device Use Policy – Establishment (Maryland Phone-Free Schools Act)

Written Testimony (Favorable)

Submitted by: James Frank

Members of the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee:

Thank you, Senators Harris, Charles, A. Washington, and Carozza, for bringing SB928 forward. I testified before Ways and Means two weeks ago in support of the cross-filed House Bill 525. The amendment requiring devices to be inaccessible during the instructional day is what makes this policy effective. Without bell-to-bell clarity, enforcement becomes inconsistent and the policy loses all effectiveness.

I am the parent of two children at Catonsville Middle School, a lifelong educator, and now the director of a fully outdoor, tech-free summer camp. I support this bill because I have seen, across multiple settings, what digital access does to attention, behavior, and development.

Attached is a photograph taken in the lobby of my children's school. The sign clearly states, "Cell phones should be off and out of sight. Earbuds/headphones are prohibited." The expectation is visible and well-intentioned.

But after more than two and a half decades of working with children, I can assure you that the word "should" has a very specific response in adolescent language. It roughly means, "challenge accepted."

Kids are highly attuned to the difference between a firm boundary and a hopeful suggestion. "Should" invites negotiation. "Must" signals clarity and consequences. If devices remain in pockets and backpacks, students understand that the rule ultimately depends on whether an adult happens to notice. They turn in "dummy phones" at the door, hide the real device in their lap, or, as I've seen in some classrooms, simply use them openly during a lesson. Giving a building full of hundreds of adolescents the space to interpret the word "should" is not an effective strategy.

This is not a failure of teacher leadership. It is a systemic problem. When devices remain physically accessible to students throughout the day, the temptation and social pressure to use them persist. "Off and out of sight" is difficult to monitor and enforce consistently in a busy school building. In fact, our principal recently shared with the PTSA that nine out of ten behavioral incidents in the building involve cell phone use in some way.

In 2005 as a teacher at BCPS, I saw exactly how phones can escalate conflict. Early in November, students coordinated a fight during the school day through text messaging. It

was the seventh time they'd done so that year. In each instance, by the time adults were aware, it was already unfolding. I was injured intervening when one erupted in my homeroom. This is all to point out that when students have a hidden, real-time communication channel in their pockets, situations can intensify faster than staff can respond. Bell-to-bell inaccessibility removes that parallel communication system and keeps schools safer and classrooms focused.

Students do not need personal electronic devices during the school day. Previous generations relied on school staff when off-site communication was necessary. That structure reinforced trust between families and schools and required children to work through normal stress and peer conflict within the building.

When a child can immediately text home during moments of discomfort, they bypass opportunities to practice self-regulation and independence. This is why at my summer camp children have no access to devices- It's a break from how things are at school. When challenges arise, they speak directly with peers and supervising adults. Parents are contacted by staff when appropriate. What develops is resilience, maturity, and stronger interpersonal competence. Parents also appreciate the communication and third-party insight they gain from speaking with their children's caregivers. Everyone wins.

My experience in public education over more than 20 years reinforces the benefits of reduced access to technology. When I began teaching in Baltimore County in the early 2000s, technology was intentional and limited. Laptops were locked in carts and used for specific projects. Post-COVID, routine daily device access expanded dramatically. My "tween" sons do not have phones, but even they have experienced declining grades when devices were made regularly available to them in the classroom. They and their friends constantly figured out workarounds to access games and videos during class on their school-issued laptops. The result was failing grades across the board. Once the devices were removed and paper-based work resumed, their performance rebounded. When the computers were reintroduced, grades declined again. This is to demonstrate the effect that digital access has overall, and if school-issued devices are difficult to manage, personal cell phones with their endless supply of distractions present even greater challenges.

If we truly believe Maryland's students deserve focused classrooms and safer schools, then cell phones simply do not belong there with them.

I respectfully urge your support of SB928 as it provides the clarity children need for focus and success in school, and in life.

Bell-to-bell. Inaccessible. Consistent.

Attachment: Image of reminder message in school lobby

