

SB79 - County Boards of Education - Student Technology Use Policy - Requirements

Written Testimony (Favorable With Amendments)

Submitted By: Betsy Tao, MCCPTA & Distraction Free Schools Maryland

Dear Members of the Education, Energy and Environment Committee,

My name is Betsy Tao and I am a parent of two daughters attending Montgomery County Public Schools, in 3rd and 7th grades. I am also the Chair of the Technology Committee of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs, where I advocate for issues relating to the impacts of technology on learning in MCPS schools, including the negative impacts of addictive personal devices. In addition, I am a parent volunteer with the Distraction Free Schools Policy Project, which is a joint project with national organizations working on phones-in-schools legislation across the country.

I am grateful to Senator Benson for continuing to put forward a phones-in-schools bill this session. Maryland is only one of four states [earning an “F” grade](#) for not having any legislation requiring a policy relating to the use of personal mobile devices – including addictive smartphones – in schools. HB163 as written would get Maryland to a “C” grade, but I think Maryland can do better. I strongly recommend a bill like HB163 with amendments that would move Maryland to an “A”.

Such a bill would prohibit the use of personal mobile devices throughout the entire instructional day – including transition times, lunch, and recess - as SB79 does, but for K-12 rather than just K-8. Some believe that high schools are of an age where they need to learn to manage their devices, but I disagree. Surveys show that [almost 50% of adults admit to being addicted to their devices](#). Surveys also show that [teenagers spend on average 8 plus hours on screens for passive entertainment a day](#), and average screen time is even higher for certain demographics, such as students from low-income households, black, and Hispanic students. The school day is the only time where many children can get a break from addictive devices in order to learn, and that’s as true for high school students as well as elementary and middle school students.

An “A” bill would also require school districts to include their policies storage options that ensure devices are inaccessible to students during the instructional school day. School districts can retain the discretion to device which storage solution works with their operating budgets, as options range for higher-cost options like phone lockers, to low-cost options like storing devices in the first or last period class in a locked cabinet or closet. Numerous studies by neuroscientists and psychologists show that *where* the device is stored is just as important as whether a policy exists, including findings from [Dr. Angela Duckworth’s Phones-in-Focus Study, which received over 7000 responses from Maryland Educators](#). Studies also show the stricter the policy, the happier the educator, which makes sense to anyone inside a school. Failure to mandate storage just means enforcement will fall to teachers, leading to teacher burnout, inconsistent or lack of enforcement, disciplinary issues, safety issues, and more.

Finally, an “A” bill would contain exceptions for documented IEPs, 504 plans, and medical needs, but not for instructional use or most importantly, emergencies. The National Association of School Resource Officers has come out strongly in favor of a strict phone policy, noting that phones may allow some parents to *feel* more safe, but they make students less safe. I have had conversations with MCPS leaders who confirm this to be true.

The investments that Maryland is making to improve educational outcomes, such as investing in literacy coaching, will have limited impact if technology continues to be a distraction to learning. Removing addictive personal mobile devices from the school environment, where they never should have been introduced, is an important first step. Proficiency rates for English and math continue to fall; an astonishing low percentage of graduates are college and career ready; post-secondary stakeholders continue to report that graduates are showing up on college campuses and workplaces without basic cognitive and non-cognitive skills. In the age of rampant artificial intelligence, we have to ensure that our students are armed with the skills necessary to navigate this quickly shifting landscape, and the core skills have not changed: strong cognitive reasoning; strong reading and writing ability; socio-emotional and relationship skills. Technology – especially smartphones – have proven to be major obstacle to students developing these skills, and schools remain the one place where phone-free policies can have a significant positive impact on *all* students.