

Testimony HB755/HB525 Cell phone ban in Maryland Schools.

Chair, Vice Chair, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your willingness to engage on this important issue.

My name is Jason Stoddard. I am the President of the National Council of School Safety Directors (NCSSD) and currently serve as a School Safety Director in Maryland. NCSSD is the largest membership-based organization in the world dedicated to school safety professionals. A core part of our mission is to work in state houses and on Capitol Hill to educate policymakers and advocate for common-sense, effective, and fiscally responsible school safety legislation—laws that genuinely enhance safety and reduce risk, rather than simply creating the appearance of action.

In July 2024, NCSSD convened school safety and education professionals from across the country to discuss the implementation of cell phone restrictions in schools, lessons learned, and leading practices. The data is clear: cell phones and other mobile technologies can negatively affect student development and significantly distract from learning. Our members generally agree that limiting cell phone use in schools is worth serious consideration. However, our experience also makes one thing equally clear passing a ban without addressing the practical details and real-world impacts rarely results in effective or sustainable policy.

NCSSD's approach to school safety is grounded in four pillars:

- Positive school culture and climate
- Strong relationships between staff and students
- Well-trained staff and students
- Consistent and fair application of the student code of conduct, with both reflection and accountability

School safety cannot simply be purchased, and it cannot be achieved through performative legislation. Laws that fail to support these four pillars seldom result in real improvements in safety or learning conditions. We must move beyond optics and the impulse to “just do something,” and instead focus on policies that can actually be implemented effectively in real schools.

To strengthen Maryland's proposed legislation on cell phone use, NCSSD respectfully asks the General Assembly to consider four critical areas:

First, parent support must be addressed.

Some data suggests that up to 70 percent of parents do not currently support cell phone bans in schools. For this policy to succeed, the State should invest in coordinated, statewide public outreach and education—through MSDE or MCSS—to build understanding and support among families. Local school systems do not have the staffing or funding to take on this responsibility alone. A patchwork of uncoordinated messaging will undermine both compliance and confidence in the law.

Second, the legislation must be properly funded.

Several years ago, the Safe Schools Grant Program was reduced from \$10 million annually to approximately \$600,000, leaving each local education agency with about \$25,000. This made Maryland one of the few states to reduce school safety funding since 2018. Simply adding new authorized expenses to this grant without restoring funding will create another unfunded mandate, forcing districts to divert resources from core educational needs and potentially from teacher salaries. Reestablishing the \$10 million annual funding level would demonstrate the State's commitment to responsibly supporting safe school initiatives.

Third, the law must include clear and workable accountability.

Laws and rules without meaningful, progressive accountability are, in practice, only suggestions. Repeated violations should result in escalating, logical consequences, up to and including out-of-school suspension when appropriate. If legislation restricts schools' ability to maintain safe and orderly environments, enforcement will become inconsistent, and the law will be viewed as largely symbolic rather than effective.

Fourth, school staff must be protected.

Enforcing any new restriction increases the likelihood of conflict. All staff responsible for maintaining safe and orderly schools, especially designated school safety employees—should be equally protected from retaliation by students or parents. NCSSD urges that these staff be provided appropriate protections under Maryland Statutes Courts and Judicial Proceedings Title 2 - Court Personnel Subtitle 6 - Officers of the District Court Section 2-608.

In closing, NCSSD believes Maryland has a real opportunity to lead with a smart, balanced, and effective approach to this issue—one that strengthens learning environments while supporting the educators and safety professionals who serve our students every day. With thoughtful adjustments, proper funding, and a focus on implementation, this legislation can move beyond symbolism and produce real, measurable benefits for students, families, and schools across the state. Thank you for your time, your leadership, and your commitment to the safety and success of Maryland's students.

Mr. Jason Stoddard

President, National Council of School Safety Directors

Jstoddard@zeronow.org