

HB0525 - County Boards of Education - Student Electronic Communication Device Use Policy - Establishment (Maryland Phone-Free Schools Act)

Written Testimony (Favorable) before Ways and Means Committee

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

Dear Chair Wilkins, Vice Chair Feldmark, and esteemed members of the committee,

My name is Betsy Tao and I have two children in Montgomery County Public Schools. I represent the Montgomery County Council of PTAs as the Chair of its Technology Committee. I am also part of the Distraction Free Schools Policy Project, which is a nation-wide grassroots coalition of parents, educators, and policymakers who are concerned about the negative impact of technology in schools, including addictive personal devices. Over 900 Maryland residents have signed a community letter in support of a strong phone-free schools bill and shared their testimonials with legislators.¹

I am honored to testify in support of House Bill 525. This bill represents what Maryland needs: a K-12 prohibition on personal mobile devices throughout the entire school day, mandating inaccessible storage to take the pressure off of teachers, with only limited exceptions to take the pressure off of administrators. As Chief Superintendent Wright pointed out in her presentation to the State Board of Education last August, this is by far the most effective policy for learning and for educators.² The inaccessibility requirement is especially important - in Montgomery County where a prohibition on devices was extended to middle schools this year without a storage requirement, classroom device holders stand empty, and my phone - which my daughter also uses - pings during the school day with text messages from my daughter's friends.

I am so very grateful to Delegate Boafu, as well as the sponsors of other similar bills, for continuing to take action on this critical issue. As a parent and PTA member, I am deeply concerned that only a small percentage of our students - as low as 9% of 10th graders - are

¹ Distraction Free Schools Maryland, [Community Letter of Support Testimonials](#) (continuously updated).

² Carey M. Wright, Ed.D., State Superintendent of Schools, [State Board Resolution on Cell Phone Use in Schools](#) (Aug. 26, 2025).

considered on track to be College and Career Ready.³ These statistics are supported by the many reports from colleges that students - even at elite schools - struggle to read a book, think critically and write coherently. All around me I see evidence of why: once children receive personal devices, they spend the majority of their day scrolling. Data shows that students spend an average of 6-8 hours on passive screen entertainment a day.⁴ The numbers are even higher for students from low-income, black and Hispanic backgrounds. That is why it is absolutely critical that we protect the school day as a space where *all students* are liberated from the distractions of addictive personal devices so they can be free to learn, socialize, and connect with peers and teachers. This is the only way they can develop the cognitive and socio-emotional skills necessary to face an uncertain future filled with emerging technology like generative and agentic artificial intelligence.

Maryland is making a number of strong investments in education. However, those investments will not have the intended effect if students are distracted by addictive personal devices. House Bill 525 is aligned with the science of learning, aligned with what the majority of what parents and educators want,⁵ and provides a consistent policy for all Maryland's school districts. Therefore, I urge this committee to support this bill. Thank you.

Betsy Tao
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³ Adam Pagnucco, Montgomery Perspective, [MCPS's Shocking Performance on College and Career Readiness](#) (Apr. 4, 2024).

⁴ American Academy of Pediatrics, [Average Amount of Screen Time for Children and Young Adults](#) (Jan. 21, 2026).

⁵ Institute for Families & Technology, [Public Opinion Survey on Voters' Views on Phones in Schools](#) (Jan. 20, 2026).