

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

Written Testimony (Favorable)

Submitted By: Jessica Garratt, representative of Smartphone Free Childhood UP (University Park, Prince George's County, MD)

Dear Members of the Ways and Means Committee,

My name is Jessica Garratt and I am a parent of one daughter attending a Prince George's County Public School, in 4th grade. In addition, I am part of a community of 64 concerned parents called Smartphone Free Childhood UP, in our University Park, MD, neighborhood. This group strives to foster community for kids around outdoor play, increased freedom for kids to explore and socialize in age-appropriate ways that don't involve screens, and create community among parents for whom solidarity helps to navigate the screen-dominant culture we increasingly live in. Our group was inspired and motivated by the mental health toll smartphone access has had on our youth as documented in [*The Anxious Generation* by Johnathan Haidt](#).

Our group is grateful to Delegate Boaf and fellow co-sponsors for putting forward a phones-in-schools bill this session. Maryland is only one of very few 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. The recently amended bill now presented as HB0525 would thankfully get Maryland to an "A" grade.

We are very heartened that such a bill would prohibit the use of personal mobile devices throughout the entire instructional day – including transition times, lunch, and recess – 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 we 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 and 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. Even at the elementary school level, we've witnessed kids being absorbed in their smart watches and devices both outside of school and during school hours including recess, interrupting times meant for learning and spontaneous play.

Smartphone Free Childhood UP also believes that an important new feature of HB0525 is the one that requires school districts to include in their policies storage options that ensure devices are inaccessible to students during the instructional school day. School districts can retain the discretion to devise 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.

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 astonishingly 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 cultivating the skills necessary to navigate this quickly shifting landscape. 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.

As parents, teachers, and concerned community members, we urge you to support this legislation to create boundaries on personal mobile devices. We want to see our children and schools thrive.

With gratitude for your work,

Jessica Garratt for Smartphone Free Childhood UP
University Park, MD