

SB928 - County Boards of Education - Student Electronic Communication Device Use Policy - Establishment (Maryland Phone-Free Schools Act)
Written Testimony (Favorable with Amendments)
Submitted By: Amanda Garratt, Catonsville Unplugged

My name is Amanda Garratt. I am a parent of two children in Baltimore County Public Schools and the founder of Catonsville Unplugged, a parent-led advocacy group working to improve child well-being by shifting norms around smartphone use.

I am writing in strong support of Senate Bill 928 as passed unanimously by the Senate, and to urge the Committee to **reject amendments that weaken the bill's effectiveness**, specifically:

1) Maintain Removal of the "Instructional Use" Exception

The House version proposes allowing student phone use when directed by a teacher. This exception should not be included.

- **It undermines the purpose of the bill.**
Personal smartphones are not neutral tools—they are designed to capture attention. Even brief instructional use increases the likelihood of distraction, task-switching, and off-task behavior.
- **It creates an equity issue.**
Not all students have smartphones. Allowing instructional use of personal devices inherently advantages those who do. Schools—not families—should provide any technology required for instruction.
- **It is unnecessary.**
There is no instructional need that requires a personal smartphone. Schools already provide laptops, tablets, or shared devices when technology is appropriate.
- **It weakens implementation.**
If phones are permitted for "instructional use," schools will be less likely to adopt strong storage systems. This creates ambiguity and makes enforcement inconsistent.

2) Restore a Strong Definition of "Store" (Inaccessible During the School Day)

Both versions of the bill weaken the definition of "store," removing the requirement that devices be **inaccessible** to students. This change significantly reduces the effectiveness of the policy.

- **"Off and away" (e.g., in backpacks or pockets) is not effective.**
Research shows that even the mere presence of a phone—on a desk or in a pocket—reduces working memory and attention (Ward et al., 2017). Students do not need to be actively using phones for them to impair learning.

- **It shifts the burden onto teachers.**
When phones remain accessible, teachers must constantly monitor and enforce usage. This is not a reasonable expectation. Teachers consistently report higher satisfaction when schools implement **clear, enforced, phone-free environments**.
- **It allows circumvention.**
If phones are in pockets or backpacks, students can easily access them in hallways, bathrooms, or during transitions, leading to persistent distraction and social media use throughout the day.
- **State education guidance does not support weak storage.**
The Maryland State Department of Education has indicated that “off and away” policies are among the least effective and least preferred by educators.

3) Effective, Low-Cost Storage Solutions Are Widely Available

Concerns have been raised about cost and instructional time. These concerns are not supported by real-world implementation.

Schools across the country successfully use **low-cost, efficient storage systems**, including:

- **Magnetic locking pouches (e.g., Yondr-style systems)**
 - Cost: approximately \$15–\$30 per student (often reusable year to year)
 - Students keep phones on their person but cannot access them during the day
 - Unlocking takes seconds at dismissal
- **Classroom phone caddies or wall organizers**
 - Cost: ~\$20–\$40 per classroom
 - Students place phones upon entering class; takes under 30 seconds
- **Centralized lockboxes or secure storage bins**
 - Low-cost bulk solutions used at the classroom or grade level
- **Locker-based storage policies**
 - No additional cost when lockers are available

These systems **do not meaningfully reduce instructional time**. In fact, they **increase instructional time** by eliminating ongoing disruptions, redirection, and enforcement.

4) Lessons from Other States

States and districts that initially implemented weaker “off and away” policies have found them difficult to enforce and less effective in improving student focus and school climate. Many have since moved

toward **clearer, more restrictive storage requirements** to ensure consistency and reduce the burden on teachers.

The takeaway is clear:

Policies only work when they remove access—not just visibility.

Conclusion

Senate Bill 928 presents an opportunity for Maryland to implement a **clear, effective, and equitable** policy that supports student learning and teacher well-being.

To achieve this, I respectfully urge the Committee to:

- **Maintain the Senate version removing the instructional use exception**
- **Restore a definition of storage that ensures devices are inaccessible during the school day**

A weakened bill will not solve the problem—it will simply preserve the status quo while placing additional burden on teachers.

Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to Maryland's students.

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