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We're parents and teachers. Maine must ban cellphones in schools. | Opinion

From failing grades to failing health, the issue is a serious one for our state's students. Portland schools now have the opportunity to lead.

By David Burke and Stacy Taylor

Maine's children are in crisis. Our students rank [among the bottom 14 states](#) in academic performance, and nearly one in six young adults has been diagnosed with anxiety — among the highest rates in the country. We're watching the floor fall out from under our kids — academically, emotionally and developmentally. Maine needs high-impact, low-cost solutions. One is already within reach: a ban on student cellphone use in Maine public schools.

Portland Public Schools can take a lead on this in June, when the school board will vote on [implementing a bell-to-bell cellphone ban](#) in schools across the city. It's time to say yes.

The effect of cellphones on kids' mental health cannot be overstated. What began as a tool for maps and calculators has evolved into a portal to curated content, relentless notifications and addictive digital platforms. Social media has been linked to rising rates of anxiety, depression and isolation. Parents and caregivers of children and teens are on alert, looking for solutions. These platforms aren't just distracting — they're engineered to exploit attention and undermine self-regulation. Even turned off, their mere presence on a desk or in a back pocket has been proven to reduce focus and spike stress.

Recent research shows students spend [an average of 1.5 hours](#) of the school day on their phones. That's nearly a quarter of the day, and a quarter of Maine taxpayer dollars, diverted from learning to scrolling. Step into any school lunchroom and you'll see it firsthand: kids hunched over screens, silent and disconnected.

A full-day phone ban — from the first bell to the last — is a straightforward, effective solution. It safeguards instructional time and fosters genuine face-to-face connections. During breaks and lunch, students talk, laugh and engage with one another, learning empathy, active listening and how to navigate conflict.

Unlike partial bans that leave room for interpretation, bell-to-bell policies are clear, enforceable and fair. They also relieve teachers of the near-impossible task of constantly monitoring phone use, while preserving the social-emotional fabric of school life.

More states are adopting bell-to-bell phone bans to keep students focused during the school day. As of 2025, New York, Florida, Georgia, Nebraska and several others have implemented policies that prohibit phone use from the first bell to the last. Here in Maine, schools like Morse High School in Bath and the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences are leading the way with full-day bans — reporting stronger student engagement and a revived sense of community.

Some argue students should “learn responsible use.” But managing a smartphone isn't like learning to drive a car. These devices are designed to override self-control, especially in developing brains. Expecting a 14-year-old to ignore a buzzing phone in math class isn't a lesson in responsibility — it's a daily battle against billion-dollar algorithms. It's a test most adults struggle to pass.

Removing phones prevents rapid escalation of conflicts, reduces bullying and lowers behavioral referrals, creating a safer school environment. While some raise safety concerns about a bell-to-bell policy, experts agree that phones in hands of students during emergencies often do more harm than good — distracting from instructions, spreading misinformation and disrupting protocols. In a crisis, clear, coordinated plans — not panicked texts — should guide the response.

Equity concerns, especially for multilingual learners, are often raised. But conversations with immigrant and multilingual families reveal a consistent message: phones are more often a barrier than a bridge. If translation tools are needed, schools should provide them — not rely on students' personal devices. And of course, students with medical or accessibility needs requiring a device should be accommodated. Equity doesn't mean unlimited phone use; it means classrooms where every child can learn freely, away from digital distractions.

Doing nothing isn't neutral. Every day we delay action is another day students fall further behind. Every hour lost to TikTok in the cafeteria is one our kids won't get

back. Every disrupted lesson is a blow to Maine's future — and a waste of taxpayer dollars.

Let's act. If you live in Portland, contact the Portland Board of Education ahead of its vote and its members to support a bell-to-bell phone policy in Portland's schools. In other districts, reach out to your superintendent or local administrators and advocate for change. Families, educators and citizens across Maine all have a role to play in restoring learning and connection in our schools.

Every Maine student, regardless of ZIP code, deserves a focused, phone-free school day.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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[Link to story here.](#)