Phone-Free Schools in Massachusetts: Comparing the Bills

Senate S.2581 and House H.5366: what the conference committee must reconcile

Finish in '26 Forum | Thursday, November 19, 10:00–11:30 AM ET | Finish-in-26.org Based on the published bill texts.[1,2] The House version replaces the Senate text in full, so the conference committee is reconciling two complete bills.

Where the Bills Agree

- **Device definition:** Phones, tablets, laptops, smartwatches and Bluetooth devices; school-issued learning devices excluded.
- **Statewide policy:** Every public district must ban student device use for the whole school day.
- **DESE's role:** Writes guidance and a model policy, takes public input, posts it online and updates it yearly. The model policy applies if a district has none by Sept. 1.
- **Required elements:** No personal use of school devices; secure storage options; at least one way for parents and students to reach each other, with emergency plans; safeguards against unfair discipline.
- **Core exceptions:** IEP or 504 plans, ADA accommodations, and medical needs documented by a health care provider.
- **Filing and local authority:** Districts file their policy with DESE by Sept. 1 each year and may set stricter rules outside the school day.

Differences to Resolve

Issue	Senate: S.2581	House: H.5366
Scope	Schools only	Schools plus a new youth social media law (Chapter 93M), a new title and an emergency preamble so it takes effect immediately
Possession	Bans use and “actual possession, strictly on their person”	Bans use; each district names its access method: secure storage, phone-disabling technology or a DESE-approved method
Discipline	No suspension or expulsion for violations	No suspension or expulsion “solely due to” violations
School day	Names recess, lunch and passing time	Detailed definition: first arrival to last dismissal, including counselor meetings and school-sponsored activities; after-school activities excluded
Other exceptions	Travel to early college, dual enrollment or vocational sites; DESE targeted exemptions for compelling need; grade-level variations	Emergencies; language access approved in writing by the superintendent; every exception limited to “only the extent necessary”
Public process	Public hearing on DESE guidance; public input before the school committee approves the policy	Public input on DESE guidance; school committee writes the policy with the superintendent (charter schools: board of trustees)
Family notice	Each school notifies families by Sept. 1 and posts the policy online	DESE sets the schedule, at least once a year
Programs	Not included	One-year pilot in 10 districts of phone-disabling technology (911 access, student privacy protections); required instruction on social media risks
Social media rules	Not included (the Senate passed separate rules in S.3175)[3]	No accounts under 14; parental consent for ages 14–15; safe default settings; no addictive feeds or 12–6 a.m. notifications; age verification; attorney general enforcement, fines up to $5,000 per violating account
Dates	Policies before the 2026–27 school year; DESE report by Dec. 31, 2027	Filing by Sept. 1, 2026; social media rules Oct. 1, 2026; DESE reports by Sept. 1, 2028. All 2026 deadlines have passed and need new dates

Key Decisions for the Conference Committee

1. Ban possession, or require districts to block access?

2. Rule out suspension entirely, or only when the violation is the sole reason?

3. Which added exceptions to keep?

4. Keep social media rules in this bill, or move them separately?

5. Keep the 10-district pilot and social media instruction?

6. Set new deadlines; the session ends Jan. 5, 2027.

Sources: 1. S.2581 text, https://malegislature.gov/Bills/194/S2581.pdf 2. H.5366 text, https://malegislature.gov/Bills/194/H5366.pdf 3. WWLP, https://www.wwlp.com/news/massachusetts/after-meta-deal-campbell-urges-beacon-hill-to-go-further/ Background: LockedIn, https://www.lockedinapp.co/resources/phone-free-school-laws-massachusetts. Summary for discussion; not legal advice.