

FULL STATEMENT:

For a Public Hearing on:

Protecting Children from Harmful AI

Before the Pennsylvania Senate Majority Policy Committee

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Introduction

Good afternoon Chair Pennycuick, Vice Chair Martin, Senator Baker, and distinguished members of the committee. Thank you for convening this important hearing on how we can protect our children from potential harms and misuse associated with artificial intelligence.

My name is Christian Pinedo, and I serve as Vice President of External Affairs at The AI Education Project (aiEDU). aiEDU is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit devoted to making sure that all students are ready to live, work, and thrive in a world where AI is everywhere. We work with education systems to advance AI literacy and AI readiness through high-quality curriculum, professional development, and strategic partnerships with states, school districts, and other systems.

We believe that education is the strongest long-term safeguard against the harms of emerging technology. As AI becomes embedded in children's daily lives—from classrooms to social media feeds—it is essential that we equip young people, educators, and families not just to use AI, but to understand it, question it, and recognize when it's being used against them.

The Emerging Landscape of Harmful AI

In just two years, generative AI has moved from the research lab into the hands of millions of students. Tools that can fabricate text, images, voices, and entire personalities are now available on every smartphone. This unprecedented accessibility has introduced new categories of risk that affect both children's safety and the integrity of our schools.

We are seeing the consequences nationwide:

- **Deepfake and “nudification” tools** have been used by students to create explicit images of classmates, spreading them online or through messaging apps. These cases, already reported in multiple states, are devastating for victims and difficult for schools or law enforcement to contain ([New York Times report](#)).
- **AI companion apps** like *Character.AI*, *Replika*, and social media bots such as *Snapchat's My AI* are reaching millions of minors. These apps mimic friendship and intimacy—sometimes with deeply inappropriate results. Investigations and risk assessments have documented chatbots that encouraged risky behavior, normalized sexual relationships between adults and minors, or validated suicidal thoughts ([Common Sense Media risk assessment, with input from Stanford](#); [Utah v. Snap complaint](#)).

- **Educators** are beginning to see the ripple effects in their classrooms—students distracted by AI-generated entertainment, exposed to deepfakes, or using chatbots to avoid doing their own thinking. Many districts are unprepared to respond, lacking clear policies, training, or resources to guide teachers and parents.

The problem extends beyond individual misuse. It's a systemic gap: technology has advanced faster than our schools, communities, and laws can keep pace.

What the Research Shows

The risks of unregulated AI use among children are not speculative—they are measurable and growing.

- **Psychological Impacts:** Studies by Stanford and Common Sense Media found that children and teens who regularly engage with AI companions often become more lonely and dependent over time ([Stanford / Common Sense Risk Assessment](#)). These systems are designed to be emotionally responsive but cannot provide empathy, boundaries, or accountability.
- **Cognitive Effects:** A 2024 MIT Media Lab study (preprint) found that students who used ChatGPT to assist with writing tasks exhibited significantly lower brain activity and engagement, suggesting over-reliance on AI can diminish learning and creativity ([study summary in TIME, linking to the preprint](#)). Researchers cautioned against introducing AI tools too early in cognitive development. Researchers cautioned against introducing AI tools too early in cognitive development.
- **Real-World Tragedies:** Several recent cases have linked teen suicides to extended interactions with AI chatbots. Courts have allowed such claims to proceed, including a Florida case alleging a Character.AI bot contributed to a 14-year-old's death ([The Guardian](#); [Reuters — court ruling allowing suit to proceed](#); see also [Washington Post coverage](#)).

The evidence is clear: children are interacting daily with systems that can shape their thoughts, emotions, and behavior—without safeguards, oversight, or understanding.

The Impact on Schools

School systems are at the front lines of this challenge but have not yet been given the tools to respond.

Most educators recognize that AI is now part of their students' world, but few feel prepared to guide them. Recent data show many districts and educators lack preparation: in fall 2024, only 48% of districts reported having trained teachers on AI (RAND) and many teachers report limited guidance or policy ([RAND](#); [The 74](#)). Districts are struggling to define appropriate use, establish digital safety protocols, or provide professional development that goes beyond basic warnings.

Meanwhile, incidents involving AI-generated misinformation, bullying, or harassment are growing. Teachers report students submitting AI-written assignments without understanding the ethics or implications. School counselors are encountering students affected by online content that blends real and fake imagery, fueling anxiety and confusion.

The education system's response so far has been fragmented—some schools banning AI outright, others experimenting without clear guidelines. What's missing is a coordinated strategy that prepares educators, parents, and students to navigate AI safely and responsibly.

Why AI Readiness Matters

At aiEDU, we define AI literacy as the skills and knowledge required to understand, ethically use, and critically evaluate artificial intelligence. AI readiness is the point at which students, teachers, and systems can apply that literacy to real-world decisions.

AI readiness is not about coding or engineering; it's about developing critical human skills:

- **Awareness and Detection:** Recognizing when an image, video, or message has been generated or manipulated by AI.
- **Ethical Use:** Understanding consent, privacy, and the consequences of sharing or misusing AI content.
- **Resilience and Empathy:** Building the social and emotional skills that help young people resist manipulation, isolation, and online exploitation.

We have seen that when educators are equipped with the right tools and training, they can turn fear into agency. In Ohio, California, Virginia, Colorado, and Hawaii, aiEDU has partnered with state education departments to deliver large-scale teacher training and student-facing lessons on AI ethics, media literacy, and digital citizenship. These programs show that prevention begins with understanding.

Recommendations

To protect Pennsylvania's children, we recommend a balanced approach that combines protective regulation with educational empowerment:

1. **Invest in Educator Professional Development:** Ensure teachers receive training on AI safety, ethics, and digital literacy—so they can detect misuse and guide students confidently.
2. **Integrate AI Literacy into State Standards:** Include AI literacy within Pennsylvania's digital citizenship and technology standards, ensuring all students learn how to identify deepfakes, evaluate sources, and understand data privacy.
3. **Promote Family and Community Awareness:** Support statewide parent and caregiver education on AI risks, privacy, and mental health impacts.
4. **Establish Clear School Guidelines:** Encourage districts to adopt evidence-based AI policies that balance innovation with child protection, including protocols for handling AI-generated harassment or explicit content.
5. **Support Cross-Sector Collaboration:** Bring together educators, technologists, and child-safety organizations to align standards and share emerging best practices.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence is transforming every aspect of our lives, and our children are the first generation to grow up immersed in it. The question is not whether they will use AI—but whether they will understand it enough to use it, criticize it, and thrive in a world where AI is everywhere.

Legal safeguards are essential, but education is the only lasting protection. By investing in AI literacy and readiness, we can ensure that Pennsylvania's students are not only shielded from harm but also prepared to thrive in the age of intelligent technology.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for your leadership in confronting this critical issue for our schools and our children.