



Testimony of the Berks County Intermediate Unit

Senate Majority Policy Committee
Breaking the Scroll: Protecting Youth from Social Media Harm

October 15, 2026

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Chairman Argall and Members of the Senate Majority Policy Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the important and interconnected issues of student mental health, social media, and increased digitalization. It is a privilege to provide testimony today at the invitation of Senator Pennycuik.

My name is Russell Del Rosario, and I serve as the Safety and Security Program Administrator for the Berks County Intermediate Unit (BCIU), which supports 18 public school districts, two career and technology centers, and 80 nonpublic schools serving nearly 70,000 students across Berks County. While schools and educational service agencies throughout Berks County, Montgomery County, and the Commonwealth have made substantial investments in school safety through the use of tools, resources, training, prevention strategies, and collaborative initiatives, ensuring safe learning environments requires continued commitment and support, as important work remains to be done.

From a school safety perspective, student mental health has become one of the most significant challenges facing schools today. Educators are seeing increasing levels of anxiety, depression, social isolation, emotional dysregulation, and crisis situations that directly impact student well-being, learning, attendance, and school engagement.

The 2025 Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS) provides important local data that helps place these challenges in context. In Berks County, 13,821 students in grades 6, 8, 10, and 12 provided responses. Of those responses, 26.7% of students reported feeling so sad or hopeless that they stopped doing their usual activities. More concerning, 15.1% reported seriously considering suicide, 12% reported making a suicide plan, and 5.2% reported attempting suicide.

These data points reinforce an important reality: mental health and school safety are inseparable. Students who feel connected, supported, and emotionally healthy are more likely to succeed academically, engage positively with their peers, and seek help when they need it. When mental health needs go unaddressed, the effects can be seen in attendance issues, behavioral concerns, academic struggles, substance use, and crises that impact the entire school community. These local findings reinforce the need for prevention, early identification, accessible supports, and coordinated responses across schools, families, and community partners.

At the same time, schools are confronting the realities of a rapidly changing digital environment. Technology has expanded educational opportunities, strengthened communication, and provided greater access to information. But those benefits have also come with new challenges. Social media and digital technology can create pressures and risks for students that increasingly extend into the school environment.

According to the 2025 Berks County PAYS, more than 90% of students have an internet-capable phone, nearly 80% have their own social media account, and one-quarter spend four or more hours on social media during a typical school day. Students shared similar concerns during Attorney General Dave Sunday's teenTALK event in Berks County, describing both the benefits of social connection and the negative effects on their stress, mood, and relationships.

School leaders regularly encounter concerns involving cyberbullying, social comparison, online harassment, exposure to harmful content, anonymous threats, and conflicts that begin online and eventually surface in our schools.

The survey data confirm these concerns. More than 28% of Berks County students reported being bullied during the previous year, and nearly 7% reported staying home from school because they were worried about being bullied. These issues affect attendance, engagement, and student well-being, and they increasingly require coordinated responses from schools, families, and community partners.

The reality is that schools cannot address these challenges alone. Student mental health, social media, and digital wellness require collaboration among educators, families, healthcare providers, community organizations, policymakers, and technology companies.

As policymakers consider future investments and strategies, the Berks County Intermediate Unit respectfully offers five recommendations:

1. Expand School-Based Mental Health Capacity

Schools need continued investment in counselors, psychologists, social workers, and behavioral health partnerships to ensure students have timely access to prevention, intervention, and crisis support services.

2. Enhance Regional Collaboration Through Intermediate Units

Intermediate Units are uniquely positioned to connect schools with mental health providers, law enforcement, healthcare organizations, and community partners, creating coordinated systems of prevention and response.

3. Advance Digital Wellness, Media Literacy, and Family Education

Students are seeking earlier education on social media and its impact. Schools should be supported in providing instruction on digital citizenship, online safety, media literacy, cyberbullying prevention, and healthy technology use, while also offering resources to help parents reinforce these skills and habits at home.

4. Strengthen Digital Security and Online Threat Prevention

As schools become increasingly reliant on technology, investments in digital security tools are essential to protecting students and staff. Support for firewalls, cybersecurity systems, content monitoring, and technologies that can identify indicators of self-harm, suicidal ideation, threats of violence, and cyberbullying can help schools respond proactively to potential risks. These tools should be coupled with appropriate intervention protocols, staff training, and student support services.

5. Continue Investments in Educator Training and Threat Assessment Programs

Teachers, administrators, school resource officers, and support staff are often the first to recognize signs of distress or emerging safety concerns. Providing them with ongoing training and evidence-based tools helps schools identify concerns early and connect students to the appropriate supports.

In closing, the data from Berks County make clear that student mental health, social media, and digitalization are interconnected. These challenges require a balanced approach that leverages the benefits of technology while protecting student well-being and strengthening school communities.

Safe schools are not defined solely by physical security measures. They are built on strong relationships, supportive environments, early intervention systems, engaged families, and access to mental health resources.

The Berks County Intermediate Unit has a long-standing commitment to Keeping Kids Safe (see supplemental attachment) and stands ready to continue partnering with the General Assembly, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, schools, community organizations, and families to ensure every student has access to a safe, supportive, and healthy learning environment.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our perspective. I would be pleased to answer any questions.