

Testimony on Youth Mental Health, Social Media and Increased Digitalization

Submitted to: Pennsylvania Senate Leadership Policy Committee, Public Hearing on Mental Health, Social Media and Increased Digitalization

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Chairman Argal and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.

My name is Kirstin McGowan. I am a parent of two children in Central Bucks School District, and I am a co-founder with PA Unplugged. PA Unplugged is a statewide coalition of parents, caregivers and community members with more than 190 lead advocates and 33 local groups in 32 counties across Pennsylvania. We are not anti-technology. We are asking for something simpler: that the adults responsible for children, including this body, put limits in place that our kids cannot set for themselves.

I urge the Senate to do three things before this session ends: pass bell-to-bell phone-free schools legislation, set real limits on children's access to social media and AI products (both at school and at home), and make Pennsylvania a national leader in protecting children online.

What Pennsylvania students are telling us

Our own state data shows that Pennsylvania children are saturated with screens, and that the heaviest users are struggling the most. In fall 2025, the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS) collected 267,379 responses from students in grades 6, 8, 10 and 12. For the first time, it asked about devices and social media:

- **97%** of students have a phone that can go online, and **81%** have their own social media account.
- **24%** spend four or more hours on social media on a school day, and **36%** spend four or more hours on a device.
- Only **28%** say their parents often or always make them follow screen-time rules, meaning **72%** of students have little to no technology and screen-time rules.

The U.S. Surgeon General has warned that more than three hours of social media a day roughly doubles a young person's risk of depression and anxiety symptoms. One in four Pennsylvania students is past that line on school days alone.

The mental health picture has improved since the pandemic, and that progress deserves credit. But **one in three students (33%)** is still at risk because of depressive symptoms, and **14%** seriously considered suicide in the past year. PAYS also found that by 2025, sixth graders were reporting mental health concerns and suicide risk at rates similar to or higher than older teens. Our youngest students are not being spared.

PA Unplugged analyzed the PAYS data to compare middle schoolers by daily recreational screen time. The gap is stark:

PA middle schoolers	1 hour or less a day	5+ hours a day
Felt sad or hopeless for 2+ weeks	18.2%	38.3%
Seriously considered suicide	10.3%	25.4%
Harmed themselves	11.4%	26.8%

Roughly 57,000 Pennsylvania students fall in that five-plus-hours group. A one-time survey cannot prove cause, but the pattern holds on every measure, in middle and high school.

National research now goes beyond correlation. In the 2026 World Happiness Report, NYU social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Anxious Generation*, and his colleague Zach Rausch reviewed seven independent lines of evidence and concluded that social media is not safe for adolescents. Randomized experiments show that cutting back on social media for a week or more reduces depression and anxiety. Even Meta's own 2020 experiment found that people who stepped away from Facebook for one week reported less depression, anxiety and loneliness.

There is good news in the data, too. Middle schoolers whose parents always enforce screen-time rules were far less likely to feel sad or hopeless (19% vs. 31%), to consider suicide (11% vs. 21%), or to be approached online about sex (6% vs. 13%). Limits work. Yet only one in five middle schoolers, and one in fourteen high schoolers, lives with rules that are always enforced. Parents cannot hold that line alone when every school, app and platform is pulling the other way.

Ask 1: Finish the job on phone-free schools

The Senate has already led on this issue, and I thank you for it. SB 1014, the Phone-Free Schools Act, passed this chamber 46–1. The House passed its own bell-to-bell bill, HB 1814, by 126–75 on June 1, and it has been waiting in the Senate Education Committee since June 5.

Governor Shapiro has repeatedly said he wants this legislation on his desk. If neither bill passes by November 30, 2026, both die and the work starts over.

I respectfully ask the Senate Education Committee to reconcile the slight changes to SB1014/HB1814 and make sure it gets to the Governor's desk for signature this fall. ~~move HB 1814 and the full Senate to pass it this fall.~~ Both bills require every school to keep personal devices put away from the first bell to the last by the 2027–28 school year, including lunch and recess, with exceptions for medical needs, IEP and 504 plans, and English learners.

Bell-to-bell matters because half-measures do not work. A 2026 JAMA study found teens use their phones about 70 minutes during the school day, mostly on social media, YouTube and games. Common Sense Media found the typical teen gets 237 app notifications a day, each one a pull away from learning. When phones are banned only during class, teachers become enforcers and lunch becomes a screen break instead of a conversation. Angela Duckworth's *Phones in Focus* survey of more than 68,000 educators found that the stricter the policy, the happier the teachers and the less students used phones. The Pennsylvania State Education Association and the National Association of School Resource Officers both support bell-to-bell.

Pennsylvania is falling behind. Twenty-four states and D.C. now require bell-to-bell policies statewide, and the national Phone-Free Schools State Report Card grades Pennsylvania "Incomplete." Meanwhile, 48 Pennsylvania schools have gone bell-to-bell on their own. Every child in the Commonwealth deserves the same protection, not just those in districts that acted first. Many districts want a state-wide standard to help set clear precedent for personal electronic devices and help give them support as they implement these important policy changes and practices.

The screen in school is not only the phone. In a PA Unplugged survey of 1,843 parents from 145 districts, 78% said there is too much screen time on school-issued devices, and 81% supported prohibiting recreational screen use during the school day. The learning cost is real: Protect Young Eyes, a national family digital-safety organization whose founder has testified before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, highlights OECD data showing that students on devices five to seven hours a day score 49 points lower, about two school years behind, than students on screens less than an hour. One Westmoreland County parent reported that their kindergartner said "most of his friends watch YouTube on the school iPad." A Philadelphia parent described a son who went from straight A's to failing nearly every class, playing web games during lessons and borrowing extra school devices so he could keep going after his parents took his laptop at night. These families did everything right at home, and the school device undid it. I ask the Senate to also pass SB 378's student data protections and to set clear limits on recreational use of school-issued devices, especially in the early grades.

Ask 2: Limit children's access to social media and AI

The platforms our children use are designed to keep them scrolling, and no parent can out-engineer them alone. Most social media platforms already have AI embedded into the experience as chatbots or other elements. Four in five Pennsylvania students already have their

own social media account, even though most of these platforms set 13 as their minimum age. Families need the law on their side. Haidt and Rausch found that girls appear most sensitive to social media's effects at ages 11 to 13, and boys at 14 to 15. That is why they recommend a minimum age of no less than 16, the standard Australia adopted in 2025 and the age SB 22 uses. Timing matters for phones, too. A Sapient Labs study of nearly 28,000 young adults, highlighted by Protect Young Eyes, found that 74% of young women who got a smartphone at age 6 reported mental health struggles, compared with 46% of those who waited until 18.

I urge the Senate to act on these bills this session:

- **SB 22, Protection of Minors on Social Media.** It would require parental consent for social media accounts for children under 16, let parents close those accounts, and ban mining or selling minors' data. It has sat in the Communications and Technology Committee since January 2025. Please give it a hearing and a vote.
- **SB 603, Internet Protections for Minors.** It requires age verification for sites dominated by content harmful to minors, and bars platforms from keeping that identifying data. It is on second consideration; please pass it.
- **AI chatbots and companions.** Children are now forming relationships with AI apps that can manipulate them emotionally or expose them to sexual content. Common Sense Media's 2025 national survey found that nearly three in four teens have used AI companions, and one in three has chosen one over a person for a serious conversation. Common Sense recommends that no one under 18 use them. The Senate passed SB 1090 to set safeguards for chatbots used by minors. I ask you to press for its final passage and to take up the House's AI Companion Safety Act (HB 2006) when it arrives.
- **HB 2176, Social Media Literacy.** It teaches students how algorithms and data collection work. It is in the Senate Education Committee and should move alongside HB 1814.

The PAYS data showed that middle schoolers whose parents always enforce limits are half as likely to be approached online about sex. Laws that back up parents make those limits possible in every home, not just in the homes with the time and know-how to fight the apps. Our kids are only as safe as their friend or classmate with the weakest digital rules and protections.

Ask 3: Lead

Pennsylvania has the data, the public support and the bipartisan votes to lead the nation in protecting children. This chamber has already shown it: adopting SR 244 to create a Task Force on Child Protection in the Digital Age, and passing the SHIELD Act (SB 1368) against AI nudification apps. I ask you to build on that by:

1. Funding **Alicia's Law** (HB 1098 / SB 1335), now in Senate Appropriations, so Internet Crimes Against Children task forces have the resources to stop online predators.
2. Asking the SR 244 task force to report on screen time, social media and AI in schools, using PAYS as its baseline - this includes YouTube and Gemini AI (it's experimental and dangerous) on school issued devices.

3. Keeping the PAYS screen-time and technology use questions in every future survey, so this Committee can measure whether the policies it passes are working.

Conclusion

The Pennsylvania Youth Survey tells us that one in three students is at risk from depressive symptoms, that our sixth graders are now struggling as much as high schoolers, and that limits at home are linked to healthier, safer, more connected kids. Parents are trying. Teachers are asking for help. Forty-eight schools have already acted on their own.

What is missing is a statewide standard. Please pass HB 1814 before November 30, move SB 22 and SB 603, and make Pennsylvania a place where childhood happens in the real world first. Thank you for your time and for your service to Pennsylvania's children.

Respectfully submitted,

Kirstin McGowan, Parent and Co-Lead, PA Unplugged

Sources

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- Jonathan Haidt and Zach Rausch, [Social media is harming adolescents at a scale large enough to cause changes at the population level](#), World Happiness Report 2026, Chapter 3; see also [jonathanhaidt.com](#)
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