



Likes vs. Learning

The Real Cost of Social Media for Schools

Educators, Parents, Students & Child
Advocates Demand Platform Changes



A Union of Professionals



**AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION**



fairplay
childhood beyond brands



ParentsTogether

Our schools are in crisis.

The American Federation of Teachers and our partners, the American Psychological Association, Design It For Us, Fairplay, and ParentsTogether, have witnessed, firsthand, the dramatic disruption in the teaching and learning ecosystems of all our nation's schools—both public and private.

We now know that social media is one of the root causes of this problem. While we acknowledge that social media has both great benefits and great limitations, the principles set forth in this document focus squarely on its limitations.

Students are experiencing an unprecedented decline in their mental health and well-being. The community of people who work to ensure students have a safe and supported environment in school—educators, paraprofessionals, mental health counselors and school health professionals, among others—are overwhelmed by the disruption that is playing out daily in our educational settings. Even community schools, which are specifically designed to provide holistic support for students and their families, are inundated with an increase in demand for mental health services.

Today we are calling on social media platforms to make fundamental changes to their products that could dramatically improve the day-to-day experiences of millions of students and educators—both online and in schools.

Companies that design and deliver their products to students must incorporate five key principles:

- **Prioritize safety for children**
- **Protect students from overuse and addictive-like behavior**
- **Protect students' privacy**
- **Protect students from risky algorithms**
- **Directly engage and work with schools and families**



Disrupted Learning: How Did We Get Here?

The Mental Health Crisis

Social media is having a detrimental impact on the mental health and well-being of our nation's youth. The U.S. surgeon general's recent advisory, [Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#), identifies recent research on the impact of social media on youth mental health and finds justification for "additional scrutiny" of how social media is affecting our children. The surgeon general says that **"adolescents who spent more than 3 hours per day on social media faced double the risk of experiencing poor mental health outcomes including symptoms of depression and anxiety."**¹ Reams of research support this conclusion, and "nearly all researchers now agree that there are correlations between ... time spent using social media and ... mental health problems."² This includes a recent [health advisory](#) put forward by the American Psychological Association.³ The experts are coming to understand and document what nearly every educator has been seeing firsthand in their classrooms around the country.

The scale of this unprecedented crisis has not been missed. President Joe Biden, in both his 2022 and 2023 State of the Union addresses, focused attention on the impact that social media is having on the youth mental health crisis. In his most recent address, he outlined a key imperative to "do more on mental health, especially for our children," noting this means we must **"hold social media companies accountable for the experiment they are running on our children for profit."**⁴ To this end, grieving families have pleaded with Congress to take action, talking about their children who have been lost to the harms of social media.⁵ Teachers and paraprofessionals have sounded the alarm, warning about the impact of social media platforms on the ability of schools to educate students.⁶ We know that social media platforms themselves understand these harms. As former Facebook engineer Frances Haugen revealed in her whistleblowing revelations about Instagram, these companies are fully aware of the harms their platforms cause.⁷

At a time when we are politically polarized, this is an important issue that unites us. Republicans and Democrats are working together to protect our children from the greed that is driving social media companies. In Congress, **Republicans and Democrats have joined together to host numerous hearings highlighting the damaging effects on children from social media and have introduced bipartisan legislation.** In states across the country, politics are being cast aside by state legislators when it comes to protecting kids online. State legislators are also demanding that children in their states receive the same protections as those provided in Europe. In 2022, California passed the Age Appropriate Design Code with bipartisan support—a law based on the U.K.'s protections for children online, and several other states are now working hard to replicate their efforts.



Disrupted Learning

School districts across the country are experiencing significant burdens as they respond to the youth mental health crisis and the rising challenges presented by social media. **They have had to recruit and hire additional mental health professionals, provide additional training to teachers and paraprofessionals to better support students' mental health, and develop new mental health resources.** Schools are also grappling with an increase in dangerous and disruptive behavior. Districts report having to develop new policies and resources to address the increase in bullying and harassment by students, and directed at students, that is taking place on social media. Viral challenges are also having a traumatic impact. The “devious licks” (destroying school property) and “slap a teacher” TikTok challenges were certainly concerns for schools. The “swatting” challenge encourages students to make hoax calls to law enforcement to falsely report school shootings, creating fear and confusion among students, staff and families. These challenges are unfolding on playgrounds, school buses, in school hallways and during the extracurricular activities at school. Some challenges can even be deadly, such as the “choking game.”

All this effort to address the impact of social media on youth is diverting time and resources from instructional activities at a time when schools are desperately trying to help students recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Dealing with social media-related issues detracts from the primary mission of our schools, which is to educate our children.**

In January 2023, Seattle Public Schools became the first school district to sue multiple social media platforms for their role in the expanding youth mental health crisis. Since that time, hundreds of school districts across the country have joined in these lawsuits. Individual district complaints are being combined in two separate lawsuits—one in the [California state court system](#) and one in the [federal district court system](#) in the Northern District of California. **Every week, the wave of litigation grows, as more and more school districts join these lawsuits.** The complaints echo what we hear from students, educators, medical professionals and families across the country.

“Mental health staff in our district building have seen an increase in the number of students experiencing anxiety, depression and self-harm ideation. Often, when we talk with these students about their situation, they report the root cause for their struggles as being related to social media. Many times, the problem arises from group chats or social media posts that involve harassing or bullying behavior toward the student. When students are experiencing the negative social and emotional stressors of social media, we often see issues with attendance and behavior, dropping grades, and poor social interactions with teachers and peers. All of these things can have a direct impact on academic success.”

Kelly C., Social Worker, New York

Impact of Social Media on Schools

School districts have borne increased costs and expenses in response to the impacts of social media. Among other things, schools have had to:

Address Mental Health Issues

- Hire additional personnel, including school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and other medical professionals to address mental, emotional and social health issues.
- Develop additional mental health resources, such as mental health programs, classes and guest speakers.
- Increase training for teachers and school staff to identify students exhibiting symptoms affecting their mental, emotional and social health.

Educate Students About Social Media

- Develop lesson plans and teach students about the dangers of using social media products.

Address Student Behavior

- Spend more time confiscating phones and other devices students use to access social media applications during classes.
- Increase disciplinary services and hire additional personnel to respond effectively to the explosion of bullying and harassment incidents occurring on social media.
- Change school policies, which requires school staff to spend time updating student handbooks and distracts from education-related activities.

Address Damage and Threats to School Property, Staff and Students

- Repair or replace damaged school property caused when students act out because of social media-related mental, social or emotional problems.
- Investigate and respond to hoaxes and false threats that are encouraged through social media challenges such as “swatting,” which diverts school staff from other important responsibilities.

Divert Valuable Family Engagement Time

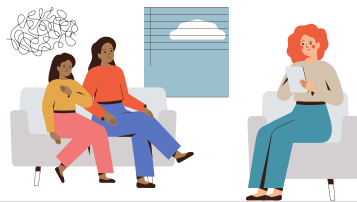
- Divert time and resources from instructional activities to notify families of students’ use of their phones to access social media or their social media-related disruptive behavior.
- Meet with students and their families to address these actions rather than working with families on instructional & wellbeing issues.

Sources: Complaint, [Bucks County v. TikTok](#), No. 4:22-md-03047 (N.D. Cal.), Mar. 14, 2023; Complaint, [San Mateo County Board of Education v. YouTube](#), 4:23-cv-01108 (N.D. Cal.), Mar. 13, 2023; Complaint, [Seattle School District No. 1 v. Meta Platforms](#), 2:23-cv-00032 (W.D. Wash.), Jan. 6, 2023.

School districts have borne increased costs and expenses in response to the impacts of social media.

SCHOOL

Address Mental Health Issues



Address Damage and Threats to School Property, Staff and Students



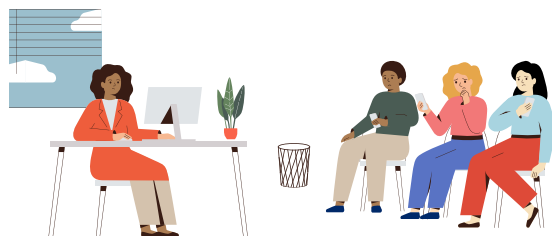
Educate Students About Social Media



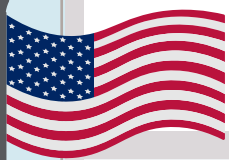
Divert Valuable Family Engagement Time



Address Student Behavior



WELCOME



Social Media Companies Must:

**PRIORITIZE
SAFETY FOR
CHILDREN**

**PROTECT
STUDENTS FROM
OVERUSE AND
ADDICTIVE-LIKE
BEHAVIOR**

**PROTECT
STUDENTS'
PRIVACY**

**PROTECT
STUDENTS
FROM RISKY
ALGORITHMS**

**DIRECTLY
ENGAGE AND
WORK WITH
SCHOOLS AND
FAMILIES**

These principles call for fundamental changes that social media platforms have the ability to implement today—if they choose. They know how to do this, they are able to do it, and they should do it.

“

I compare personal technological devices to power tools. Just as a circular saw can help accomplish cuts with incredible accuracy and efficiency, so too can our tech devices augment our learning in wonderful ways. However, in both cases, there are tradeoffs. If improperly used, power tools can maim the user. This is why guards and safety shutoffs were added to modern power tools. Now that we know the dangers of social media, it is incumbent upon us to add the necessary safety features to protect our students.

”

Nick J., High School Teacher, Minnesota

Principles for Platform Change

The burden so far has fallen to students, families and educators to protect learning. Weak parental control tools and multimillion-dollar public relations campaigns won't change these outcomes. We need fundamental reforms.

There is a growing global movement to protect children online. In 2020, the U.K. implemented the Age Appropriate Design Code, which provides children with higher privacy protections and prohibits adult strangers from contacting them. A year ago, in July 2022, the European Parliament adopted the Digital Services Act, which also includes greater protections for children online, including a ban on targeted advertising to children and increased regulation of algorithms. In April 2023, the European Commission identified 19 platforms that would be required to comply with that law; these include the most egregious offenders and favorites among children, adolescents and young adults in America—Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube.

While the United States lags behind Europe in regulation, California did pass its own groundbreaking California Age-Appropriate Design Code, modeled on the U.K.'s law, in 2022. And two federal bills with bipartisan support—the Children and Teens' Online Privacy Protection Act and the Kids Online Safety Act—are currently advancing through Congress.

But America's children and schools should not have to wait for Congress to act. Along with regulatory action, we must join together and take collective action to call on social media companies to fix their products that place our children in harm's way. Social media platforms must recognize their responsibility to prioritize the safety of our children over their own profits. Social media companies make choices every day about how to deploy their product. It is time that these companies stop fighting common sense changes that are needed to protect our students; they must work with us to ensure the safety of our school systems before it's too late.

Social media companies have shown us that they have the expertise to design their products to achieve specific goals. We call on them to focus that expertise on the safety of children instead of on elaborate strategies that prioritize profit. Following are just a few examples of steps that can be taken to protect our children.



It's time for companies to act in the best interest of children. This includes, for example:

Undertaking independent assessment and evaluation of the risks posed by platforms.

Independent data and safety impact assessments could proactively identify and mitigate the risks platforms pose to children. Making them public,

such as by including the findings in the companies' annual reports, would also improve accountability.

Implementing effective age assurance. Social media can pose additional risks to young people under 18, which is why social media companies should enforce their terms of service and keep younger children off their platforms.⁸

Removing illegal content from platforms. Platforms must scan for illegal content and remove it from their platforms, paying special attention to the crime of child sexual abuse. Explicit and narrow exceptions for keeping evidence of illegal content would apply for responding to judicial processes, providing information to law enforcement agencies, or investigations on a matter related to public safety.

“ *Social media use, functionality, permissions and consent functions should be tailored to youths' developmental capabilities and companies should take the recommendations put forward by APA's Health Advisory and supported by this report to place safety at the heart of children's experience on social media. Psychological science tells us that adolescents' exposure to problematic content on social media has the potential to cause harm and exposure to this content must be minimized by the platforms.* ”

Mitch Prinstein, PhD, Chief Science Officer, American Psychological Association

**PROTECT
STUDENTS FROM
OVERUSE AND
ADDICTIVE-LIKE
BEHAVIOR**

Students around the country are affected by overuse and addiction. Platforms can reduce this by, for example:

Stopping the training and leveraging of algorithms to maximize short- and long-term view times. Algorithms can be trained to optimize almost anything, from the amount of content you see from “friends,” to promoting different types of content. But currently, social media platforms train

their algorithms to primarily maximize users’ time on an app, facilitating overuse and addictive-like behavior.

Eliminating autoplay and infinite scroll. Endless scroll and autoplay enable overuse and compulsive behavior. When a user is “up to date” or has finished watching a video, they don’t need another 1,000 images or videos added to their feed.

Stopping the sending of push notifications to students. Social media platforms do not need to send students push notifications during the school day and in the evening when they are sleeping. If children are logged out of a platform, deactivate the vibrating push notifications that are carefully designed to entice them back.

“ *As a school nurse, I see the impact constant social media and online engagement is having on kids every day. It is nonstop, they receive notifications all the time. Not only does something they see on social media distract them from their learning and sometimes change the entire course of their day, but I also see a hierarchy being created where kids are comparing themselves to and competing with their friends and online accounts to no end. Students come into my office having increased anxiety or in the middle of a panic attack because of a post or photo they just saw. They can’t help but compare themselves to content that has either been touched up, taken out of context or targeted specifically to them. Schools are trying their best to install guardrails and help kids cope with the negative ramifications, but we can’t do it alone; we need social media companies to work with us to help keep kids safe and healthy.* ”

Beverly S., School Nurse, Ohio

PROTECT STUDENTS' PRIVACY

Social media platforms collect massive amounts of data from children's social media accounts. Teachers, paraprofessionals and students are deeply concerned about their privacy, and there is widespread agreement that children deserve heightened protections. Platforms could improve this by, for example:

Defaulting young users' accounts to the most private settings. Private accounts protect students' privacy and stop unwanted stranger contact. All social media accounts for children and teens under 18 years old should have high privacy settings turned on by default.

Stopping excessive data tracking and harvesting. Platforms should implement data minimization principles for users under 18. This would mean limiting data collection to only what is required for a service to function.

Stopping excessive data transfers, including sharing and sale. Platforms must prohibit the transfer, sharing or sale of data about children under 18 unless it is essential to the service's operations or is in a child's best interests.

Stopping the delivery of personalized, data-driven marketing to minors.

Targeted advertising can be used to exploit young people's vulnerabilities (e.g., their dissatisfaction with their bodies). It also incentivizes platforms to collect excessive data and maximize the amount of time young users spend on their platforms.





**PROTECT
STUDENTS
FROM RISKY
ALGORITHMS**

The algorithms that social media platforms use are affecting students' mental health and harming their education. Platforms can improve this by:

Stopping the training of “content recommender” algorithms to push harmful and traumatic content to students. Social media platforms' algorithms are trained to suggest provocative and attention-grabbing content, which often means

the content they recommend is harmful and traumatic to students, including dangerous online challenges, pro-eating-disorder content, and content related to self-harm and suicide. Algorithms are made by humans and can easily be changed. When deep-learning algorithms are utilized to recommend content, exclusion of harmful and traumatic content from recommendation inventories should be prioritized over engagement and any other training metric. When content recommendation algorithms are created or modified, such changes should be consistent with best practices, such as those in Australia's Safety by Design principles.⁹

Giving students the choice to turn off or reset content recommender algorithms.

Some young people may want to escape rabbit holes or filter bubbles, especially if they have become problematic. Social media platforms should allow young users the choice to turn off or reset content recommender algorithms.

Identifying and demoting misinformation and disinformation. Platforms should work with trusted third parties to prevent disinformation and misinformation, especially as it relates to health and election issues, from being promoted to minors.

“

My boy goes into his bedroom saying he's going to do his homework and practice piano and hours later, nothing is done. Not a note heard. I'm out of ideas ... I'm tired of the poor kid beating himself up because instead of finishing his work, he gets sucked down the YouTube rabbit hole.

”

Karla, Parent, Los Angeles, CA



**DIRECTLY
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Along with young people themselves, educators and schools are some of the most knowledgeable experts about the issues students experience and how platforms could pivot to adopt safer practices and designs. Decisions should be transparent, and students, parents* and educators should have a voice in decision-making.

Platforms should work with the school's community by, for example:

Connecting with the school community. Platforms should commit to engaging with students, parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers and the broader school community to understand how their products are undermining students' well-being and learning as part of their risk-mitigation practices. Currently, it is nearly impossible to get a timely response from a platform when there is a social media-enabled crisis.

Providing schools, educators and students with a response mechanism or contact point they can use to seek support and redress if something goes wrong on a social media platform.

Providing researchers and educators access to data. Policies and regulations must be informed by research. Social media platforms should provide access to data sets for academic, nongovernmental organizations and education researchers for public interest research.

ENDNOTES

1. Office of the Surgeon General, [Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory](#) (2023), page 6.
2. Jonathan Haidt and Jean Twenge, [Social Media and Mental Health: A Collaborative Review](#), unpublished manuscript, New York University (ongoing).
3. American Psychological Association. (2023). [Health advisory on social media use in adolescence](#).
4. Joe Biden, "[Remarks of President Joe Biden – State of the Union Address as Prepared for Delivery](#)," Feb. 7, 2023.
5. Kristin Bride, "[My Son Died after Being Cyberbullied. Congress Must Hold Social Media Giants Accountable](#)," USA Today, March 3, 2023.
6. Leroy Triggs, "[Education Experts Speak on Social Media Impact](#)," KSNB Local 4, June 14, 2023.
7. "[The Facebook Files: A Wall Street Journal Investigation](#)" Wall Street Journal.
8. Federal Trade Commission, "[Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule: A Six-Step Compliance Plan for Your Business](#)," June 2017.
9. Australian eSafety Commissioner, "[Safety by Design: Principles and Background](#)."

* In this report, the term "parents" is used to include primary guardians and various family structures.

Conclusion

Parents, along with students, families, teachers and school employees, are on the frontlines of the youth mental health crisis. That's why it's so clear to us that social media companies have put profits over users' safety—a fact that hidden internal research has confirmed.

And the consequence is that social media, no matter how helpful it can be in other ways, causes real harm to students' mental and physical health. We will continue to fight for more mental health professionals in schools, increased training and staffing, community schools and wraparound services, and other supports, but the onus cannot rest on schools and families. Just as we require seatbelts in cars or lead paint to be removed from kids' toys, social media companies must employ basic safety measures for their products to keep kids safe. Social media companies bear responsibility as one of the biggest drivers of youth mental health problems in our country.

“

We are glad to work with parents, students and families on this set of recommendations, but it is not enough for us to recommend. Social media companies must act to ensure their products are designed with our kids' safety in mind and reflect the challenges kids face at home and in the classroom.

”

Randi Weingarten, President
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO



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