

Testimony by Emily Cherkin, M.Ed.
Kentucky Senate, Interim Joint Committee on Education
Monday, July 6, 2026

Hello and thank you for the opportunity to testify today-

My name is Emily Cherkin. I am a parent, author, speaker, and teacher. My goal is to protect children, education, and democracy by resisting the onslaught of EdTech products into schools. I have been fighting for this for nearly a decade. This January, I provided testimony to the United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Technology on this topic.

I am grateful to see continued interest from lawmakers wanting to learn more about the impact of technology on children. I would like to state up front that *I do not accept any funding from tech companies for the work I do.*

As I said to the Senators in Washington in January, I come with an urgent warning: Technology is fundamentally changing childhood, and in the process, undermining parents, ruining education, and threatening the very health of our democracy.

I'll start with one anecdote: a teacher recently told me that while assessing children for kindergarten readiness, the four-year-olds could correctly identify their ABCs and the numerals 1-10. When they got to identifying "11," however, the children said: "Pause." (As in an "11" looks like what they recognize as a pause button on a screen.)

It is great that as of one month ago, [44 states have enacted policies on student phone use at school](#). However, as schools tell students that phones are distracting and harm learning, they are putting laptops and iPads into their backpacks and expecting them to learn.

This is what I am here to talk to you about today.

In my professional opinion, one of the most harmful things we have done to children in American schools is to give them internet-connected devices built by for-profit technology companies and call it "educational," then act surprised when [test scores plummet](#), [mental health declines](#), and [skill building and cognition erode](#).

Higher-ed instructors are [seeing the fallout](#) from the EdTech rollout: college students who cannot articulate an independent thought without consulting ChatGPT or sustain focus long enough to write a research paper or read an entire novel. These aren't just

threats to a young person's personal intellectual journey; these same young people are future voters. Jefferson's notion of "An informed citizenry is at the heart of a dynamic democracy" wasn't just a truth, it was a warning.

The EdTech Problem

As my colleague Dr. Jared Cooney Horvath will explain/explained to you, despite the onslaught of technology products into education over the past several years, children today are cognitively less capable than they were a generation ago, and they are *less* digitally literate. The scope of the "screentime" challenge is no longer just about what kids do after school; it's the time they are spending on screens at school, too. Today in America, [nearly 90% of American public schools](#) provide children with internet-connected devices for "learning." [26% of 13- to 17-year-olds use ChatGPT to do their schoolwork](#)– which they access on the laptops the school gives them. I hear regularly from parents whose children are [viewing thousands of YouTube videos](#) at school, on their school-issued devices. Many districts mandate weekly screentime minutes in problematic platforms like [iReady](#), whose [claims of improving outcomes have been misleading at best](#).

Unless you are a parent of a current school-aged child, school today looks very different not just from when we were students, but even five and ten years ago. Today, children spend the school day hunched over individual devices. "Library" time is reading on iPads or listening to a bot read them a book through headphones. One parent touring public schools in a midwest city recently shared with me that what shocked him most was the utter silence of the kindergarten classrooms.

In a weak attempt to monitor the devices they've been given, [secondary surveillance EdTech products like GoGuardian](#) drive teachers' eyes to watch a screen of screens instead of interacting face to face with their students. Whiteboards have been replaced with digitized Smartboards which are front and center in every classroom. It's not just a few apps per school either; it's [hundreds](#), if not [thousands](#), of unique EdTech products, each with their own privacy policy and [96% of these apps sell children's private data to third parties](#).

Curriculum is online. Grades are in a portal. Physical textbooks and workbooks are "optional" and administering lessons online is more efficient when every kid has a 1:1 anyway. Homework is in an online learning management system. Teachers give digital comments, not handwritten feedback, on student's digitally uploaded assignments. Parents have 24/7 access to grades. Many online curricula use the exact same

persuasive design techniques and gamification that emphasizes rewards and engagement used by [addictive social media apps](#).

The assault of [GenAI products into schools has made existing EdTech problems much worse](#). Embedded in nearly every platform, students let AI create their presentations, write and edit their essays, and summarize their reading homework. One parent told me their second grader, after writing a book review in an app called [Beanstack](#), a gamified app to “bring the fun back to reading” by using “insightful data,” was asked if she wanted to “rewrite” the review with the help of AI. Teachers with huge class sizes are turning to AI to assess student writing (or worse, their districts are mandating they use it for such purposes). This is [assuming the metric-oriented EdTech curricula are requiring students to read full-length texts](#) in the first place— [many do not](#). Children are also being given [chatbots as tutors](#). One colleague of mine recently tested Google Gemini’s Guided Learning AI chatbot and [in one single question went from math help to dating advice](#).

What happened?

The onslaught of digitized EdTech products into schools has accelerated while other crises dominate the headlines. That distraction has served EdTech companies well, companies which are as powerful and wealthy as the social media companies whose [troubles dominate the headlines](#).

It is critically important that lawmakers seek to hold these powerful companies accountable by preventing their unfettered access to the most vulnerable members of our society— children.

Because if you remember nothing else I say today, please let it be this: ***at its very core, the business model of EdTech is no different from the business model of Big Tech and both are fundamentally at odds with healthy child development.*** Big Tech has already co-opted the social lives of our children; we cannot let them co-opt their education too. Simply putting “ed” before the word “tech” doesn’t make it effective, safe, or legal or better than a human teacher. At the end of the day, because their business models are the same, EdTech is just Big Tech in a sweater vest.

In this vein, we must also continue to refer to these EdTech apps and platforms not as tools, but as products, because that’s exactly what they are.

PROCEED WITH CAUTION

I must also offer a few words of caution. There are powerful technology companies out there who know that rolling back EdTech will drastically impact their business model

(again, that's exactly why it needs to be rolled back.) You will receive emails and hear public testimony from company executives and lobbyists whose products rely on user engagement. You will be told there is a difference between "educational" screentime and "entertainment" screentime. You may be cited "research" studies that are misleading or cherry-picked or funded by the companies doing the research. You will be told that depriving children access to internet-connected products will increase inequities. You may hear that all children with IEPs and 504s will benefit from more tech, when only a very select few truly need it. You may hear that "this is the world we live in" or that "children need these products to be successful in the future." You may, like I have, even receive hate mail and death threats for putting forth the idea that we should prioritize pencils, paper, and people before technology in a classroom.

These claims are not true, and when you hear them, you must ask: "Who benefits?" I can tell you right now that it is not children, it is not education, it is not democracy. It is tech companies.

Please do not fall for it. Please do not let those powerful companies steer you to make decisions that harm children. Please ask for funding sources and [conflicts of interest](#) when you request public comments. Please dig deeper into the [quality of the "research"](#) being offered.

Because as much as we need and should demand high-quality, peer-reviewed research, we also just need to stop and look at the world around us— the silent Kindergarten classrooms, the hunch-backed teenagers, the tech-addicted adults— to know that *something isn't right*.

I want to establish one very important point: [EdTech is not Tech Ed](#). Children need *technology education* more than ever. But no tech skills will matter if children do not first learn how to communicate, think critically, or problem solve. Children do need technology skills, such as understanding what "the internet" is; what is an "algorithm"; how to discern fact from fake. Children need to learn how technology works and how to do so safely. But learning about technology is very different from learning *on technology*. We teach young people about drug and alcohol risks in school all the time without giving them drugs and alcohol. The same can be true for technology.

Even more concerning, giving EdTech products to children and calling it education poses an [existential threat](#) to our society because of the degradation of skills that ensues. **We must ask why such products are being given to children with vulnerable brains in the name of education in the first place** and do what we can to stop it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The good news is, for the first time in nearly a decade of this work, I feel the wind at our backs. Change is here, but we need strong leadership willing to ignore the persuasive claims of industry, hold companies accountable, and remember that the people you serve include young future voters.

To that end, I have some recommendations for you to consider.

First, when it comes to screen use by children, especially in education, there are four key questions that must be answered with a resounding YES before they are handed over:

1. Is this product effective?
2. Is this product safe?
3. Is this product legal?
4. Is this product superior to a human educator?

Currently, the answer to all four of these questions is a resounding NO and lawmakers must resist pressure to move forward on or further deploy any EdTech product use until we get to 4 YESes.

Additionally, please consider the following when creating policy:

1. Time limits are not enough. While I applaud any efforts to roll back screen use, cutting time alone does not address the data privacy risks, exposure to problematic content, or the fact that what's being done on the screen very well could be displacing an interaction with a human teacher.
2. AI is dangerous for children, especially GenAI. I am frequently asked to advise districts about AI policies. The answer is very, very simple: Do not, under any circumstances, provide children with an unvetted, untested, unproven product. I was the lead author on the national organization Fairplay's recent call for a [5-year-pause](#) on GenAI in Pre-K to 12th grade and I encourage you to look at that for more.
3. Schools must publicly post a list of any and all technology products used by children and schools must ascertain that they have obtained full and informed consent from parents *before* children engage with the products. (See [here](#) and [here](#) for two examples of what that can look like.)
4. Even after providing consent, parents must have the right to opt out of any and all EdTech products, and their child should be provided with an equal educational experience without penalty. Since standardized testing has moved primarily to

digital, states will have to find ways to provide paper-based tests to those families who opt out. While we're on the topic, I would love to see a reduction in high-stakes testing, too. Much of the so-called "need" for EdTech products will decrease if less emphasis is put on test results. Alternatively, consider an "opt in" policy or pilot classrooms or programs that are tech-free, especially for younger children.

5. From an economic perspective, the costs of EdTech will only continue to rise, not just updating [hardware](#) and renewing software licenses, but districts will have to defend themselves in lawsuits that will inevitably occur, because [the harms are already happening](#).
6. I am not anti-tech; I am tech-intentional. Future-proofing schools will teach children Tech Ed, and drastically reduce or eliminate EdTech products. Redirect funds for 1:1 personal devices into hardwired computer labs or laptop carts. Invest in technology teachers.

The benefits of keeping our children off screens at home and at school are vast. There will be time for technology in their adulthoods. But when it comes to preparing children for the future, there is no opportunity to go back and reclaim the growth and foundational learning that occurs in childhood, while brains are still developing.

The skills children need to be successful in the future are not digital; they are human. This is not a kid problem. It is an adult problem that is impacting children. Adults need to do something, NOW.

Remember, children do not need tech; technology companies need children.

Thus, the best preparation we can offer our children for a digital future is an analog childhood **and** an analog classroom. Children thrive when parents, educators, and lawmakers fight for them, together.

Thank you,

Emily Cherkin, M.Ed.

[The Screentime Consultant](#)

[First Fish Chronicles](#) on Substack

Author of [The Screentime Solution: A Judgment-Free Guide to Becoming a Tech-Intentional Family](#)