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From: House Education Committee

From: Emily Cherkin <emily@thescreentimeconsultant.com>
Sent: Wednesday, April 1, 2026 2:12 PM
To: House Education Committee <HouseEducation@rilegislature.onmicrosoft.com>
Cc: Rep. Caldwell, Justine A. <rep-caldwell@rilegislature.gov>
Subject: I Support House Bill **7895**

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Testimony for Rhode Island for House Bill 7895 April 1, 2026

I Support House Bill 7895.

My name is Emily Cherkin. I have a Master's degree in Education and spent twelve years working with middle school students. I am also on faculty at the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Policy in Seattle, WA, as well as author of the book, *The Screentime Solution: A Judgment-Free Guide to Becoming a Tech-Intentional Family*. I write regularly about EdTech at [First Fish Chronicles](#) on Substack. I have testified before members of the UK's Parliament and in January this year, [I testified before the U.S. Senate about the impact of technology on childhood](#).

I do not accept funding from tech companies for my work.

I urge you to pass HB 7895.

Technology is fundamentally changing childhood, and in the process, undermining parents, destroying education, and threatening the very health of our democracy.

Today in America, childhood looks like this:

[Children 8- to 18-years-old average 7.5 hours a day on screens](#)— outside of school hours.

[62% of children under two watch YouTube.](#)

[40% of two-year-olds have a personal tablet.](#)

[Nearly 90% of American public schools](#) provide children with internet-connected devices for “learning.”

Occupational therapists [teach young children how to turn the pages of a book](#).

Preschool teachers report that [toddlers don't like getting their hands dirty](#).

I know one teen so addicted to his phone he sealed it in a ziploc bag and brought it into the shower with him.

[26% of 13- to 17-year-olds use ChatGPT to do their schoolwork](#)– which they access on the laptops the school gives them.

Elementary school children are literally [falling out of their chairs](#) in classrooms because they [lack the core strength](#) to sit for long periods of time.

One child [viewed more than 13,000 YouTube videos in less than three months](#)–at school on his school-issued laptop. Another spent 72 hours in *one weekend* on YouTube.

A teacher told me that while assessing kids for kindergarten readiness, children 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.)

Children are setting their alarms for 2 AM to get up and play on their school-issued laptops while their parents sleep, unaware.

While at school, children are able to chat with complete strangers within educational coding apps, without their parents' knowledge or consent.



(Photo of second graders in an Oregon classroom– they are “reading” books on iPads)

Mounting evidence is showing that smartphones and social media harm children, and after nearly a decade of advocacy work, lawmakers and governments around the world are enacting changes.

I wholeheartedly support these efforts, but I wish to stress that **further protection is needed of children during the school day**, where nearly every child in America is provided with an internet-connected device in the name of education.

To protect children's cognitive, mental, and emotional health we must do more than ban phones from classrooms or remove screens from childhood: *We must fundamentally rebuild EdTech too.*

Passing legislation like Rhode Island's House Bill 7895 is an excellent start to protecting children.

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 ten years ago.

Today, Children spend the school day hunched over individual laptops or iPads

Teachers' eyes are on a screen of screens to monitor students

Chalkboards are digitized whiteboards

Schools use [hundreds](#), if not [thousands](#), of unique EdTech products and apps per school

Curriculum is online learning and grades are stored in digital grading portals

Physical textbooks and workbooks rarely exist, but eBooks and note-taking apps do

Teachers upload lessons and homework to online learning management systems

Digital curricula uses persuasive design techniques that emphasizes rewards and engagement over learning

And finally, human teachers are being replaced by AI "tutors," even as harms of children's use by AI products fill the headlines.

The onslaught of digitized EdTech products into schools happened quickly and relatively quietly while other crises dominate the headlines. That distraction has served EdTech companies well. Yet many of the companies who build these EdTech products— whose

names you've never heard of— are as powerful and wealthy as the companies whose names you do know— Meta, Snap, Google.

In reality, putting “ed” before the word “tech” doesn't make it effective, safe, or legal. EdTech is just Big Tech in a sweater vest.

So it is critically important that lawmakers seek to hold these unheard of, yet still very powerful companies, as accountable as we are doing with the ones whose names we know. 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.

I am pleased to see that House Bill 7895 would give parents the right to opt their children out of the school-issued devices. This is an important pathway towards better protecting children.

If you are wondering whether it makes sense to restrict educational technology in schools, that is not uncommon. After all, you've probably been told that children need these products to be successful, “digital citizens” of the future.

But here is the problem: such claims stem from industry-funded marketing that benefits technology companies, not children or teachers.

This propaganda has unfortunately fueled a wholesale re-structuring of childhood around screens— both at home and in school— and is catastrophic for children, families, and schools.

There are several myths propagated by the EdTech industry and repeated by those who do not know they are being manipulated:

EdTech improves learning.

False. Children today are less digitally literate and less cognitively developed than their parents—

a reversal that coincides with the introduction of EdTech products such as Chromebooks and learning apps into schools. You may be familiar with the work of Dr. Jared Cooney Horvath, whose recent bestselling book *The Digital Delusion* thoroughly debunks the claims of EdTech efficacy. Just a few examples:

Overwhelming evidence exists to show that [reading](#) and [writing](#) on screens [harms cognition](#).

Another [study](#) based on over 300,000 primary students, found that even 30 minutes of digital device use in class had a negative impact on reading comprehension scores.

Finally, one study found that [investing in air conditioning yields a 30% improvement in learning outcomes](#) over giving children a Chromebook.

EdTech companies claim– and market heavily to school districts– that “**EdTech products will help teachers**”

when in fact the very premise of “scaling” teaching through technology-- as EdTech companies intend to do– means displacing the human educators at the heart of the learning experience. “Success,” according to the EdTech industry, would mean fewer teachers serving more students and increasing teacher workload and class sizes, while turning teachers into IT administrators instead of mentors and instructors. It’s no wonder teachers are quitting or retiring early and schools are resorting to AI tutors who are far cheaper, even

as they are more dangerous. All good educators know: learning is rooted in human relationships, and the EdTech business model is fundamentally at odds with this fact. EdTech tools don't help teachers; they help schools hire fewer teachers, while generating greater profits for EdTech companies– some of whom are worth billions of dollars.

Third, you may have been told that **EdTech will democratize education** by giving underrepresented children access to products. But far from improving equity, EdTech products create *new* “digital divides”: a digital safety divide and a digital learning divide. Safer versions of EdTech cost more. Monetizing safety and privacy means under-resourced schools receive less safe versions of the product. Second, EdTech is offered as a “solution” to ballooning class sizes. But [EdTech solutions in under-resourced schools means privileged children will get human teachers, while poor children will get technology and chatbots.](#)

That is deeply inequitable. Just look where technology executives themselves [send their children](#) – to [nature-based, low-tech schools](#)– and you can see that those who build and market these products for *our* children make starkly different choices for their own families.

Concerns about online safety are growing, and in spite of claims to the contrary or efforts to filter or block content, **EdTech is not safe for children** because these very products rely on the internet to deliver their services and the internet is not a safe place for children. Via school-issued devices, children are accessing [pornography](#), [pedophiles](#), [suicide](#) videos, and [extremist](#) content– *even when filters and blocking software is in place*. It is vital that we remove student access to phones during the school day, but doing so without

also removing internet-connected devices from student's backpacks simply *transfers the risks of harm* from an iPhone to a Chromebook.

Just like school administrators and many teachers, you've likely been told that EdTech will **"prepare kids for the future."**

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 fiction; and so much more. Children need to learn how technology works and how to do so safely. But **do not confuse "EdTech" with "TechEd."** Learning about technology is very different from learning *on technology*.

Giving EdTech products to children and calling it education poses an **existential threat** because of the degradation of skills that ensues.

We must ask why such tools 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.

Finally, I often hear the claim that **"it's too late to change things because technology is here to stay."**

It is true that technology is and will continue to be a part of our world— but it is absolutely not a foregone conclusion that EdTech companies should be allowed to run rampant through our classrooms without consequences. Lawmakers do have the power to stop this. It *is* possible to build a safer internet, regulate technology companies, and protect children's data and privacy as the default. Technology companies will always choose shareholders over people, so the only way these companies will meaningfully change is if they are forced to, such as having to register with the state, as Bill H650 proposes. We have regulated other health-harming products before when it comes to use by children. We can and must do the same with EdTech.

Doing nothing is not an option, because as a result of the harms caused by social media and smartphones in the hands of children, plus the ongoing enmeshment of EdTech companies and products into education, **we face four crises** that warrant immediate action:

First, a mental health crisis. **Screen use before two years of age is linked to accelerated anxiety by age 13.** Today, one in three teen girls has seriously contemplated suicide. The youth mental health crisis is so dire it elicited a **warning from the surgeon general.**

Second, we face a learning crisis. **Reading and math scores are plummeting.** We are quite literally wasting education dollars on ineffective technologies.

Third, we face a crisis in creativity. A 15-year-old in Kentucky told me the elementary school students she teaches in a drama class, when she said to them, "Let's pretend we're flying!" they looked at her and asked, *'How?'*

If children can't pretend to fly, they cannot imagine, and if they cannot imagine, they cannot innovate. Creativity means "having an original thought." Technology access in childhood does not enhance creativity; it kills it. Remember, today's tech titans had analog, play-based childhoods.

Finally, the enmeshment of technology in childhood is creating a crisis for our democracy. Jefferson himself said, "An informed citizenry is at the heart of a dynamic democracy." When children spend hours being fed algorithmically-driven rage-bait content designed to increase engagement on internet-connected devices given to them by the adults who are supposed to protect them, they lose the ability to form their own opinions, detect bias, and think critically. That should frighten us all.

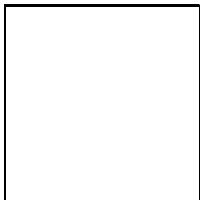
It is important to state that this is not a kid problem. It is an adult problem that is impacting children and adults need to do something, NOW. No one policy change will be sufficient by itself. We need many levers to work in concert to best protect children. In addition to what you consider today with the registry bill, warning labels on social media products and giving families the right to opt their children out of using these harmful products in schools are equally important actions to take.

I support Rhode Island's House Bill 7895 and I urge you to pass it.

Thank you.

-Emily Cherkin

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