RHODE ISLAND

COMMISSION ON DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN EDUCATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

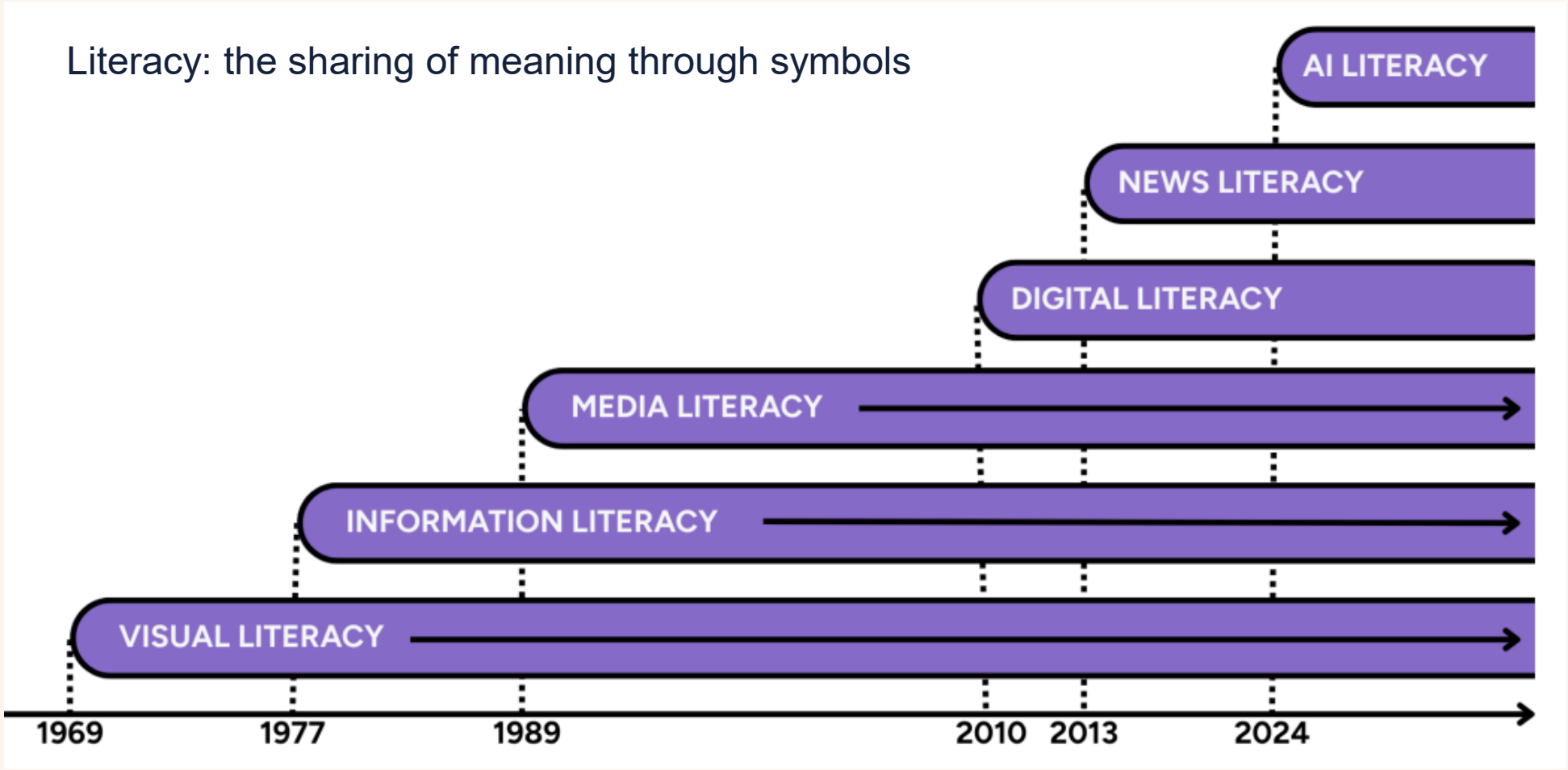
School, Work, Life and Play in a Platform Society

A digital media perspective on the questions before us

Renee Hobbs · Digital media expert member · NOVEMBER 4, 2026

How should parents, teachers, policymakers and the RI community respond to an ever-changing media & technology environment?

Skills & Knowledge for an Ever-Changing World



CONTEXT· THE META SETTLEMENT

Meta Settles with the States

~$18B

maximum, paid over 10 years. Meta denies wrongdoing.



Sources: Georgetown KGI; CNN; EPIC

CONTEXT· AI REGULATION

Federal Shift in Approach to AI Regulation

From a rights-driven, safety-first framework to a deregulatory, market-driven model focused on global dominance and speed

Core values

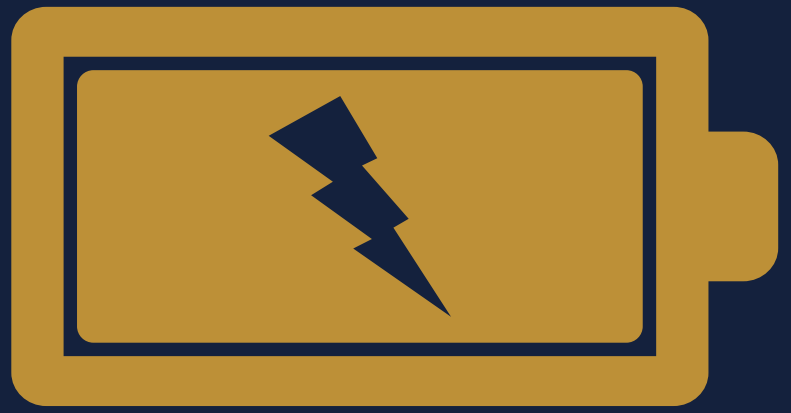
- Fewer rules equal faster technological progress
- Fast-tracking data center construction
- Winning the global AI race against competitors like China.



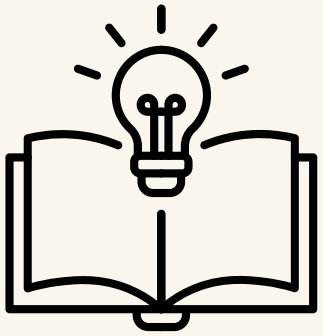
Sources: Georgetown KGI; CNN; EPIC

THE CORE BALANCING ACT

Empowerment & Protection



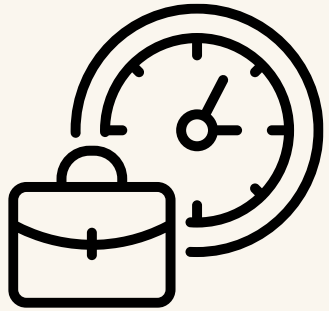




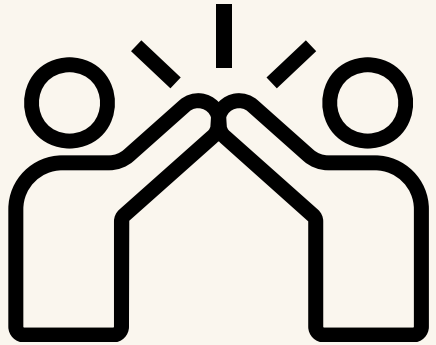
LEARNING



LEISURE



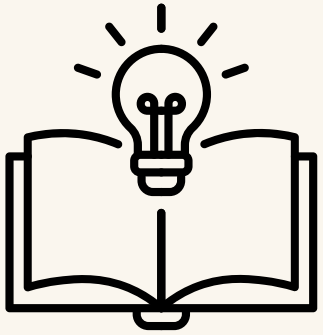
WORK



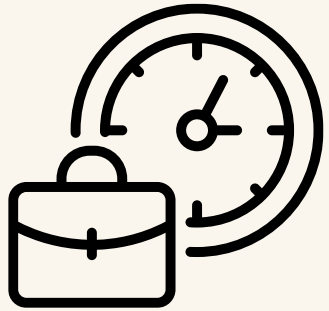
RELATIONSHIPS

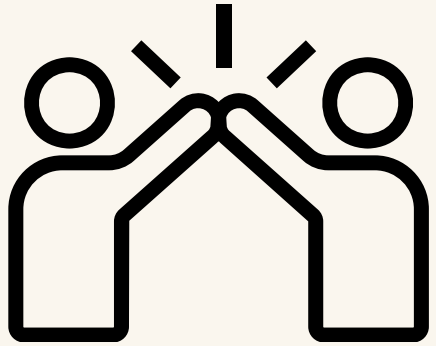


CIVIC PARTICIPATION











LEARNING

Third-party platforms in public schools

LEISURE

Children online, including money in games

WORK

AI in mental health care

RELATIONSHIPS

AI companions and risk of harm

CIVIC PARTICIPATION

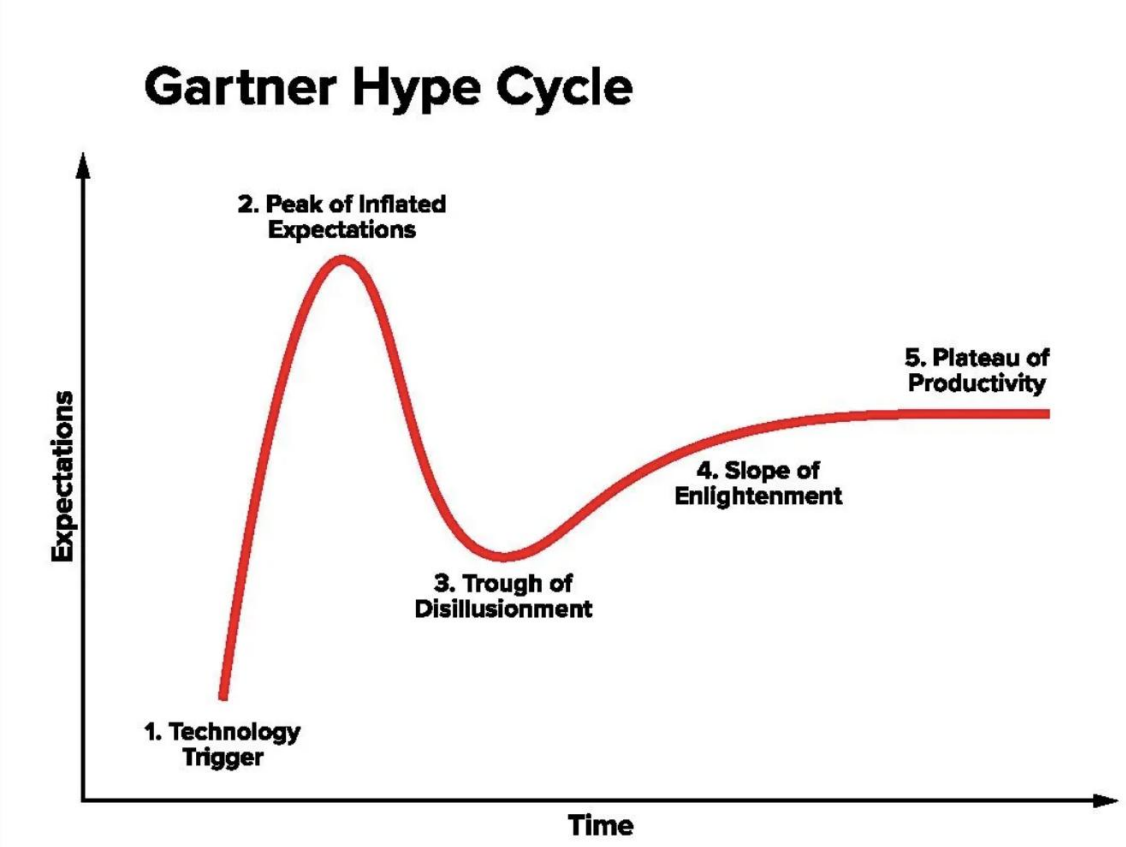
Minors as social media account holders

Age-appropriate content & safe software

Design in children's best interests

TECHNOLOGY HYPE CYCLES

Hype Affects Public Opinion and Public Policy



A MEDIA LITERACY LENS: ASK CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Sources of Information

1 Advocacy Groups

2 Market Research

3 Tech Platforms

4 Journalists

5 Academics

6 Family & Friends

KEEP IN MIND
All media messages and information sources have a point of view

Who collected the data?

How was it gathered and defined?

Why was it published?

CHILDREN 0–8

Digital Childhood Starts at Age Two

40%

have their own tablet by age 2

58% by age 4

1 in 4

has a cellphone by age 8

1 in 5

use devices to calm down, eat meals, or fall asleep

EMPOWERMENT: Content and context matter more than screen-time minutes; 75% of parents see screens as a good way to learn.

PROTECTION: Algorithm-driven short video and in-game purchases are designed to capture attention, not support human development

Source: Common Sense Media, 2025 Census of children 0–8

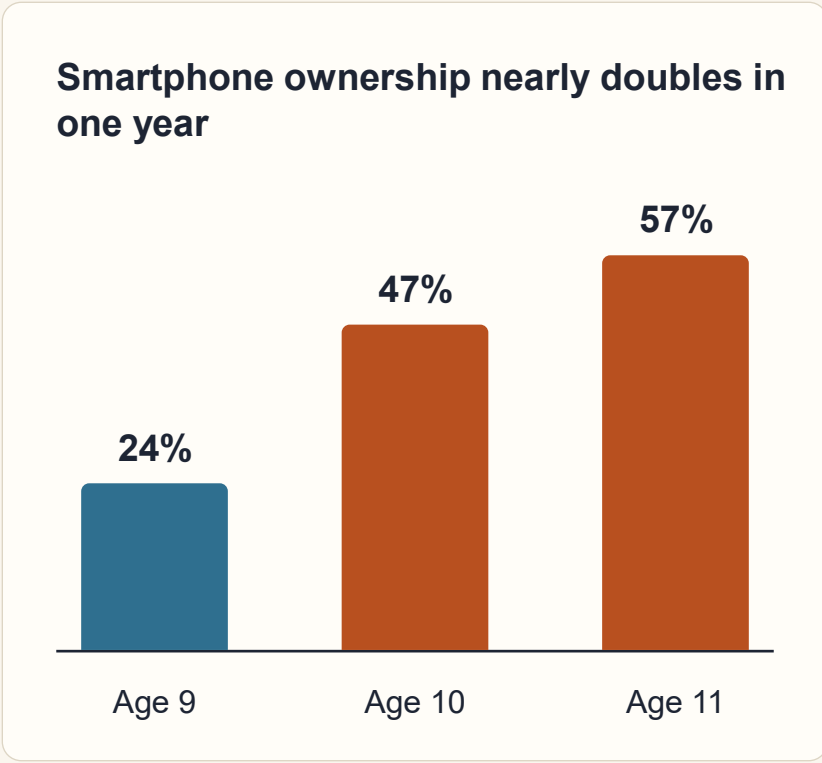
UNDER 13 ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Half of American Tweens Use Platforms Built for 13+

50% of tweens (9–12) used social media on a given day, a median of 1 hr 25 min

49% have used AI chatbots or companions; more than half by age 11

68% of tweens on social media rank YouTube as their top platform



POLICY RESPONSE: New Jersey officials have developed a new publicly funded social media research center dedicated to protecting children from its addictive features and other risks online.

Source: Common Sense Media, 2026 Census of 1,211 youth ages 9–17

TEEN BOYS AND GAMBLING

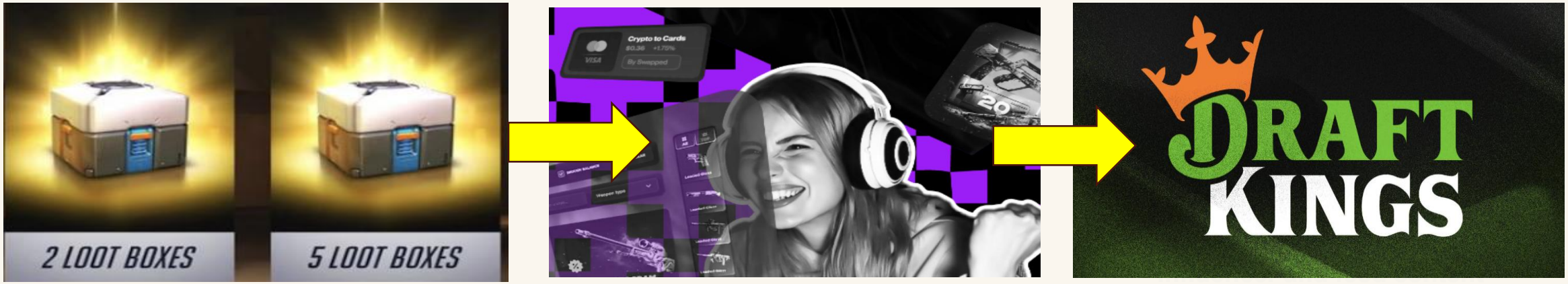
More Than a Third of Boys 11–16 Gambled Last Year

36%
gambled in the past year; **49%** of 17-year-olds

84%
of boys whose friends gamble did so themselves

59%
said gambling content "just started showing up" in their feeds

The addiction pipeline



Source: Common Sense Media, Betting on Boys (1,017 boys, July 2025), via Fordham Institute

TECHLASH

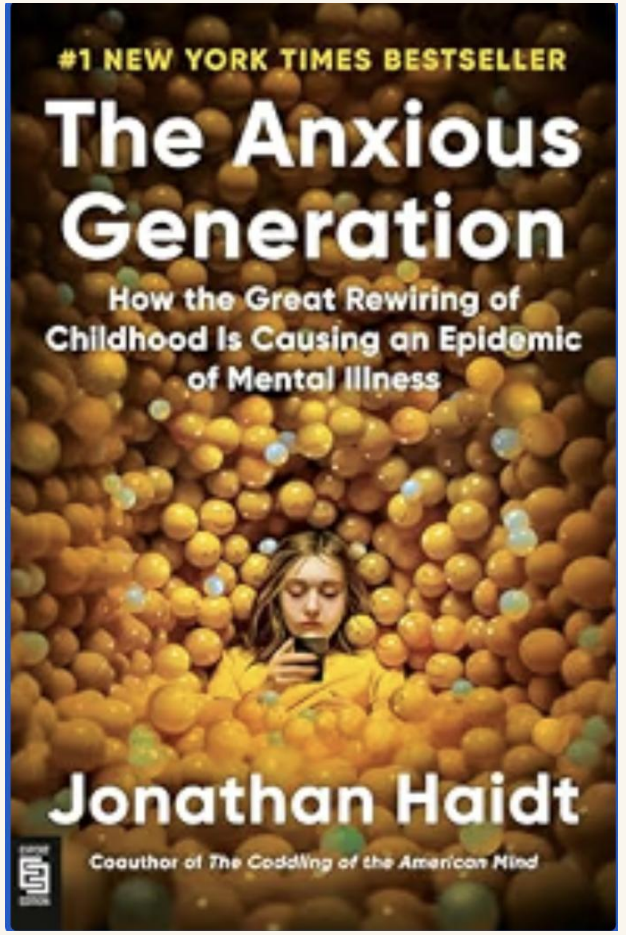
A Bestseller Fuels Screen Skepticism

Momentum

The book was the catalyst for Australia's under-16 social media law and actions by 35 states to restrict student phone use at school

Controversy

Most research evidence cited in the book does not show large, consistent harms of digital technology use. UK evidence shows that restrictive phone policies are not linked with reduced overall phone use or improved mental health



111 consecutive weeks

on the *New York Times* bestseller list

Sources: Book reviews (Nature, NYT, Salon)

TECHLASH POLICY

Social Media Bans Are Spreading, with Mixed Results

AUSTRALIA, UNDER-16 BAN

DEC. 10, 2025

4.7M

accounts revoked by platforms

IMPACT OF THE LAW (SO FAR)

81%

of 10- to 15-year-olds still on restricted platforms, (86% before the law took effect)

Sources: eSafety Commissioner via Al Jazeera, Aug. 2026

TECHLASH POLICY

Social Media Bans Are Spreading, with Mixed Results

AUSTRALIA, UNDER-16 BAN

DEC. 10, 2025

4.7M

accounts revoked by platforms

IMPACT OF THE LAW (SO FAR)

81%

of 10- to 15-year-olds still on restricted platforms, (86% before the law took effect)

PROTECTION: Platforms are designed for adults. Age limits must be enforced, not just written.

EMPOWERMENT: Children have rights to expression, information and connection. Media literacy and better design serve kids better than bans.

Sources: eSafety Commissioner via Al Jazeera, Aug. 2026



Source: New York Times

How Google Took Over the Classroom

The tech giant is transforming public education with low-cost laptops and free apps. But schools may be giving Google more than they are getting.

Updated 6d ago

Google Classroom in Rhode Island public schools

Of **65** districts and charters checked, **13** show public evidence of using Google Classroom. Among the **19** whose platform could be pinned down, that is **68.4%**. Most websites don't say, so the true statewide share is unknown.

Confirmed users
20%

Share of all LEAs checked with public evidence of Google Classroom (Yes or Partial). A floor, not an estimate.

Among determinable LEAs
68.4%

Google Classroom users out of those where any platform was identified.

Couldn't determine
46

LEAs whose public websites name no learning platform.

What the websites show

Number of LEAs by Google Classroom finding. Partial = Classroom in some grades, another LMS in others.



ED TECH IN AMERICA

Hopes & Fears

Factor	Educational Promise	Technoskeptic Critique
Engagement	Boosts student collaboration and builds digital literacy competencies	Contributes to an addictive "attention economy" that undercuts deep learning
Accessibility	Expands classroom walls, offering diverse resources	Exacerbates digital divides and forces reliance on algorithmic data harvesting
Communication	Connects peers, teachers, and parents	Contributes to cyberbullying, digital exclusion, and social anxiety

ED TECH FUNDING ISSUES

Pandemic Relief Funded an Ed Tech Boom

$190B

in federal pandemic relief (ESSER) for public schools

Federal pandemic relief (ESSER) poured $190 billion into public schools, with much of it for digital devices and software subscriptions. Districts are now paying for those tools from regular budgets

THE ISSUE

Districts adopt apps, platforms and AI tools faster than anyone can vet them, and vendors hold large amounts of student data.

THIRD-PARTY PLATFORMS IN SCHOOLS

Wild West Entrepreneurs Fill the Marketplace

3,001

distinct digital tools touched by the average U.S. district in 2025–26

Yet students and teachers used only about four integrated tools each per year.

Why so many?

Free and freemium apps reach classrooms teacher by teacher. Pandemic money funded fast buying. Few districts have staff to vet digital tools.

Sources: Instructure usage reports via eSchool News and GovTech; Internet Safety Labs via GovTech

DOCUMENTED RISKS

Digital Tools Generate Valuable Student Data

96%

of school apps share children's data with third parties

86%

of schools said they had no way to get parental consent

62.4M

student records copied from PowerSchool (2024)

Sources: Internet Safety Labs (2022 data) via GovTech; BleepingComputer; GovTech

THROUGH A MEDIA LITERACY LENS

“Free” digital platforms like Google Classroom fuel the development of AI and cloud computing, with implications for data privacy and user profiling.

CHANGING FEDERAL LAWS: COPPA UPDATED

What’s New with Children’s Online Privacy Protection

FULL COMPLIANCE

April 22, 2026

Finalized January 2025
Effective June 23, 2025

- **Separate consent for targeted ads**
  Parents must opt in again before a child's data is shared with third parties for advertising.
- **No indefinite data retention**
- **Written security program**
- **Broader definition of "personal information"**

The FTC now encourages age-verification technology.

The protected age stays under 13.

Sources: Finnegan; Bass, Berry & Sims summaries of the amended FTC COPPA Rule

PRAGMATIC REALITIES

Schools Struggle with Regulatory Compliance

Schools must ensure that education technology providers are in full compliance with the new data security and retention requirements.

But research reveals a massive breakdown between official district policy and actual classroom practice.

77%

Districts with a process for vetting the privacy and security of technologies before use

55%

Districts where teachers are aware of and use the vetting process

48%

Districts with policies that address how data should be retained for use in student records, encryption of student data, and clear guidelines about which staff can access which data

Source: CoSN 2025 National Student Data Privacy Report

AI COMPANIONSHIP

AI Companions Going Mainstream

27%

of U.S. adult internet users turn to chatbots for social or emotional purposes

72%

of teens have used AI companions; a third discussed serious matters with a bot

EMPOWERMENT: AI provides comfort when lonely and offers a safe place to rehearse hard conversations.

PROTECTION: Always-agreeable bots can foster dependence and displace human relationships.

Sources: Elon University/YouGov (May 2026); Common Sense Media (2025) via KUTV; K-12 Dive; FPF

AI IN MENTAL HEALTH CARE

Chatbots Are a Regulated Mental Health Resource

Rhode Island Regulates the Use of Chatbots in Mental Health Care

- Healthcare providers and facilities must notify patients when AI documents the visit and review that documentation for accuracy.
- AI companion tool operators must implement self-harm protocols, provide recurring human-versus-AI notifications, and file annual reports with the Rhode Island attorney general starting July 1, 2027.
- Licensed healthcare professionals may not use AI for independent therapeutic decisions or treatment plans, and written consent is required when AI is used in recorded therapeutic sessions.

> **EMPOWERMENT:** with about 1,600 patients per U.S. provider, cheap, private AI may reach youth who would otherwise get no help.

> **PROTECTION:** chatbots can validate harmful ideas and mishandle crises

THE BALANCING ACT EXPANDS

Five Tensions Run Through Every Issue

Freedom of Expression	vs	Protecting Consumers
Age Assurance	vs	Privacy
Tech Benefits	vs	Tech Harms
Law on Paper	vs	Enforcement
State Law	vs	Federal Law

CONCLUSION

Some Questions

- Who should bear responsibility for age assurance: platforms, app stores, parents, or schools?
- When the research evidence lags the technology by years, how should schools and families decide now?
- How should we weigh documented benefits (access, connection, learning) against documented harms of the same tool?
- Which of these issues are best addressed by bans, which by design standards, and which by education?
- How could media literacy education address gambling mechanics, AI companions, and data sharing, not just misinformation?

PRIORITIZING TRANSPARENT CHOICE

Good policymaking is not about finding magical, perfect fixes. It is about choosing how to navigate unavoidable trade-offs.

RHODE ISLAND

COMMISSION ON DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN EDUCATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

School, Work, Life and Play in a Platform Society

A digital media perspective on the questions before us

Renee Hobbs · Email: hobbs@uri.edu