Testimony by Emily Cherkin, M.Ed.
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Hello and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you 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 and I recently shared testimony before the National Telecommunications and Information Administration regarding reevaluating eRate funding.

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, 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.)

As of August, 45 states have enacted policies on student phone use at school. This is a good start. However, as schools tell students that phones are distracting and harm learning, they are handing them laptops and iPads and expecting them to learn, while ignoring the risks and harms that come built into school-issued devices.

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 was to give them internet-connected devices built by for-profit technology companies and called it "educational," then acted surprised when test scores plummet, mental health declines, and skill building and cognition erode.

The EdTech Problem

As is increasingly evident– whether in the seven *million* pages of evidence from the trials against Big Tech that shows they relentlessly targeted students, even during school hours; or the over 1,200 school districts filing lawsuits against Big Tech companies for harms to student mental health; or the fact that Meta as a company has warned their shareholders that "legal and regulatory risks in the United States and Europe could significantly impact its business, even amid record revenue and profitability figures"-- **Big Tech companies knowingly perpetuate harms on children but forgo meaningful change because it means it means a loss of revenue for their shareholders.**

Unfortunately, the same risks and harms of Big Tech's business model that puts profits before people are playing out in classrooms too, as Big Tech's sweater-vested cousin, EdTech, infiltrates curriculum, policy, and pedagogy in schools too.

Nationally, in 2024, schools spent *$30 billion on educational technology* and that number is projected to nearly double by 2033.

Yet 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**.

This is a breathtaking reality check: the billions of dollars schools have invested in digital products *has not improved learning outcomes,* and in fact, *the real-world costs that come from the loss of the critical skill-building that is displaced because of the frictionless ease and appeal of digital technologies is and will be devastating.*

It is vitally important to reevaluate state spending on technology because currently the investment does not justify the lack of positive outcomes– nor the risks. If it's helpful to illustrate the absurdity of spending on technology, one study found that investing in air conditioning yields a 30% improvement in learning outcomes over giving children a Chromebook.

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." This means children as young as 4- and 5-years old are given personal iPads. The devices schools give to children are not protective or regulated.

These school-issued devices are full of distractions and temptations: 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. Innocent searches for "Egyptian Queen" render pornographic– and historically inaccurate– AI generated images. Many districts mandate weekly screentime minutes in problematic platforms like iReady, whose claims of improving outcomes have been misleading at best. An internal audit in my own district in Seattle found the district holds contracts with over 2,000 unique EdTech products, a shockingly high number.



The result when a second grader searched "Egyptian Queen" in the app, Book Creator

And as I mentioned, despite having access to all these digital products, today, students are nearly 60% of a school year behind in reading and 40% behind in math compared to a decade ago. Increased screen exposure is especially harmful to our youngest learners and the potential long-term impacts are significant.

Simultaneously, the U.S. Surgeon General has issued dire warnings about youth mental health– youth anxiety has increased 134%, depression by 106%, and nearly 1 in 3 teen girls has contemplated suicide– up 60% from a decade ago.

But it's hard to fully understand how much the classroom has changed in the past ten years 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 now "Media" time– reading on iPads or listening to a bot read them a book through headphones. A 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 as children quietly stared into screens.



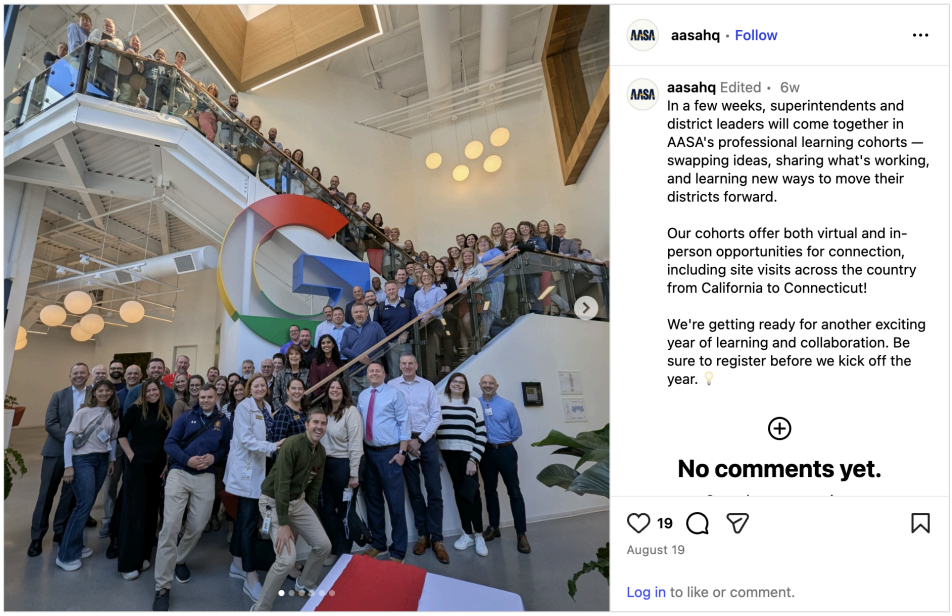
A second grade classroom during "reading" time

It was not the pandemic and remote learning that drove this change; the pandemic and remote learning accelerated a change that was already coming. In the spring of 2020, when most schools went remote, the Chromebooks and digital platforms allowed children to stay connected to their teachers– a lifeboat in an emergency situation. But a lifeboat is not long-term housing. Teachers spent hours shifting their curricula to digital platforms and learning new tools, which was understandable in the moment, but **after students returned to the classroom in person, schools failed to reassess the heavy pivot to all-digital learning**, and EdTech companies were quite happy to continue to pitch products, lock districts into multi-year contracts, and woo school leaders with upgrades and improvements. As a result, schools are locked into an EdTech ecosystem from which extrication will be challenging and difficult.

Recognizing their dive into all things digital technology would require *some* protection or oversight (but which remained very much a reaction to the problem *after* the fact), schools turned to more expensive contracts with secondary surveillance EdTech products like GoGuardian or Securly which drive teachers' eyes to watch a screen of screens instead of interacting face to face with their students. Like Big Tech and other EdTech companies, surveillance is a lucrative business– the EdTech surveillance industry is estimated to be worth over $3 billion. A 2023 ACLU report entitled "Digital Dystopia" found that such surveillance companies prey on school leaders' fears about safety to sell additional digital products and services that are not only ineffective, but

which present other safety risks to children and deter schools from implementing other meaningful interventions.

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. The companies who create these products drive a hard sell, sometimes bypassing traditional curriculum adoption methods. EdTech salespeople come directly to principals to pitch products; teachers can get additional paid work as "influencers" for EdTech products; and superintendents receive multiple marketing emails daily from EdTech companies trying to sell products.



Members of AASA, the School Superintendent's Association, posing by a Google logo

Even before the pandemic, most curricula moved online. Grades lived in a digital portal. Physical textbooks and workbooks are now "optional" and administrating 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. And many online curricula use the exact same persuasive design techniques and gamification that emphasizes rewards and engagement used by addictive social media apps. On top of this, children use their school devices to play computer games, watch YouTube videos, shop, and creatively find ways around any firewalls. Just ask a 6th grader to show you how to bypass GoGuardian. These kids are savvy– they know how to "search things up."

We also have to consider what we have done to *normalize* the presence of technology in our lives, especially around children. Not only are adults constantly with phone-in-hand, but our environments as well have been heavily shaped by digital products- including in the classroom, where chalkboards and whiteboards have been replaced with digitized Smartboards which are front and center in every classroom. What message is conveyed to children when they enter a classroom to see a large screen as the focal point? When classroom bookshelves are empty of books, as one teacher in Utah wrote about, but Chromebooks cover desktops, what does this say about what is important to teaching and learning?



An empty bookshelf in a high school English classroom

More recently, the onslaught of GenAI products into schools has made existing EdTech problems much worse. Embedded in nearly every platform, students are provided with AI "tools" to create their presentations, write and edit their essays, and summarize their reading homework. Some teachers 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 academic tutors, though the lines between homework advice and life advice gets quickly blurred. One teacher tested Google Gemini's Guided Learning AI chatbot and in

one single question went from math help to dating advice. AI Overview is available within Google searches on school-issued laptops, in spite of the fact parents are not informed about this. Turning off AI Overview requires third party support; Google does not offer this easily to school districts.

There are many problems with children's use of GenAI products. But one of the primary concerns is that **GenAI (and similarly, other gamified EdTech apps and products), displaces friction– which is essential for learning**. We don't go to the gym and have someone else lift the weights for us and expect our own muscles to grow; the same is true for learning– children must do the *work* of learning for the learning to stick. GenAI products displace this. GenAI products rely on the labor of people in the global south, run counter to environmental resolutions we hold, violate privacy, and are built on the plagiarized works of writers and artists. AI products as they currently exist are unsafe, unproven, and untested. Schools should not be enabling or encouraging their use.

It's not just K-12 education that lawmakers should pay attention to. Even though the tsunami of skill erosion and cognitive offloading has yet to high secondary schools, higher-ed instructors are already 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, business leaders, politicians, doctors, and teachers.

Jefferson's notion of "An informed citizenry is at the heart of a dynamic democracy" wasn't just a truth, it was a warning.

What Happened?

This isn't a new problem, but it has accelerated significantly in the past decade. Like Big Tech, EdTech companies are as powerful and wealthy as the social media companies whose now well-documented product defects now dominate the headlines.

The EdTech industry today is estimated to be worth around $200 billion. Their **entire business model is dependent on getting (and keeping) schools dependent on their services**. Nationally, schools are spending $30 billion on EdTech. EdTech companies *need* schools and states to continue this spend to please their shareholders, but at what cost?

More than ever, lawmakers need to step in to prevent these powerful companies from having unfettered access to the most vulnerable members of our society– children– by

reevaluating the way the state spends money on education. By all means, invest in your public schools. But do not let that funding become a subsidy for multi-billion dollar EdTech companies whose mission is to drive engagement and whose products won't run on anything but "premium" levels of broadband when a lower level would suffice, such as is occurring with eRate.

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 likely receive emails and phone calls 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.

I am not suggesting states eliminate all spending on technology in education– quite the contrary. But there are subtleties here that matter.

First, school systems that depend on technological tools *should* still exist– registration, transportation, budgeting, payroll. There are obvious benefits to using technology to support in-house operations. That is not the same thing as contracting with private companies for reading chatbots for 5-year-olds' school iPads.

Second, and a very important nuance: **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 and should be true for teaching young people about technology.

Third, lawmakers must be aware of the risks when we allow private companies to steer public education decisions. 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, recognize which entities profit from their use, and do what we can to stop it.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

The good news is, for the first time in nearly a decade of this work, meaningful change is happening, but we need strong lawmakers willing to ignore the persuasive claims of industry, hold companies accountable, and remember that the people you serve include children as 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 technology products or devices 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 four YESes.

Additionally, when creating policy and considering how you spend state money on education, consider the following:

1. **Perform a comprehensive EdTech audit and pause any future adoptions until completed.** *Before increasing any spend on EdTech products, a comprehensive audit of all current EdTech contracts is imperative– not just to evaluate total expenditures, but also to evaluate how frequently products are used or valued by educators. In reality, many apps and products sit unused on a child's device. Internet Safety Labs is an independent non-profit who can help with district audits. They found that school districts average hundreds, if not thousands, of unique EdTech products per school, though few, if any, are vetted for safety. Do not contract with any new or additional products or services until an audit has been conducted.*
2. **Remove 1:1 digital devices for PreK-12th grade students.** *This does not mean eliminating technology. Return to a laptop cart or computer lab model, hire professional technology teachers to teach technology education as a subject, and give students opportunities to build necessary technology skills first. Skills must come before screens.*
3. **Prioritize paper-based curriculum and textbooks over digital products.** *Many schools have moved away from paper and physical texts, in spite of decades of evidence that children learn better on paper and pencil. This includes returning to the use of paper-based planners for students to build executive function skills, rather than rely on a digital portal or learning management system. Many college professors have returned to blue books for testing in part because of student reliance on chatbots.*
4. **Return to paper-based versions of standardized tests and reduce overall reliance on testing.** *Too often we hear that the 1:1 devices are justified*

"because all testing and assessments are now digital." Change that. The testing industry benefits when children test more; children do not benefit. Eliminate contracts with EdTech assessment companies like iReady, which are not improving learning outcomes and which do not provide teachers meaningful insights into student learning. A reduction in high-stakes testing will benefit students too, as significant class time is devoted to test prep. Much of the so-called "need" for EdTech products will decrease if less emphasis is put on testing and test results.

5. **Return to paper-based report cards and progress reports and limit or reduce parental access to online grades.** *Parents absolutely should have insight into student performance and progress, but 24/7 access to grading portals leads anxious parents to overemphasize grades, displaces student responsibility for keeping tabs on their own learning and progress, and requires teachers to spend more time at their computers to both enter grades and email parents.*
6. **Consider ethernet or intranet for school buildings versus the open internet.** *Many of the problems occurring on student devices have to do with access to the internet, but Chromebooks are merely internet browsers and digital curricula must be accessed via WiFi or a cloud. As a result, children are easily tempted and distracted by having open access. Eliminating the internet impacts digital curriculum, but I would argue this is a positive. School systems that require internet connectivity– like for communications and systems like transportation and registration– should rely on a walled garden that protects student and teacher data and privacy, while still serving as a tool for supporting operations.*
7. **Create a public registry of approved EdTech products based on an established statewide framework**. *Just like Big Tech, EdTech vendors cannot and should not be trusted to regulate themselves. An independent registry system would require EdTech vendors to attest to the safety, effectiveness, and privacy compliance of their products, with independent oversight for compliance. See this example in Vermont.*
8. **Do not rely on "time limits" as a solution.** *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. The number of children who should be able to access porn, chatbots, and predators on their school-issued devices should be zero. It is not. If states or districts attempt to set screentime "limits" per grade, it is critical to do the math: if a first grader is "only" going to spend 30 minutes per day on a district-issued device, how do those costs break down per minute? Is that actually the amount of time spent in each first grade classroom? Tech use is often heavily dependent on individual teachers. Given how unproven and potentially harmful these products are,*

questions about whether or not these costs justify the risks must be asked and addressed.

9. **Hit pause on all GenAI products *immediately*.** *AI is dangerous for children, especially GenAI. Note that numerous EdTech products have embedded AI within them, often without parent, or even teacher, knowledge. 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 wrote a sample Model Policy for AI Use in schools here. Teacher use of any AI products should also be evaluated for risk, equity, safety, and privacy. Fairplay's recent call for a 5-year-pause on GenAI in Pre-K to 12th grade is an excellent resource for understanding why a pause is needed. Also see the recent lawsuit against OpenAI, which has implications for how schools rely on GenAI products.*
10. **Require that schools publicly post a list of any and all technology products used** by children and **require schools to ascertain that they have obtained full and informed consent from parents *before* children engage with the products,** including links to each individual contract and privacy policy. *Though some districts currently contract with hundreds or thousands of platforms, that number should decrease significantly following an audit. (See here and here for two examples of what that can look like.)*
11. **Parents should 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. *However, if states reduce overall reliance on EdTech products and support a tech-intentional school model, then opting out may become unnecessary, because any and all tech products used are vetted for efficacy, safety, legality, and whether or not they are superior to a human teacher.*
12. **Obtain informed parental consent on all tech products used.** *As parents raise concerns about the risks their children are exposed to on school-issued devices, states must ensure that proper consent is obtained before children engage with a product. As was made clear by an amicus brief written by the FTC last fall, schools can no longer stand in the shoes of parents for the purpose of consenting to data collection. EdTech companies will not stand behind schools for failing to obtain proper consent; instead, districts may face litigation from their own vendors for failing to get meaningful consent.*
13. **Create an Allow List System for Vetted Tech.** *For the very rare, high quality, already-vetted for efficacy, safety, legality, and superiority to a human educator, districts should have an Allow List for remaining technology tools. Of course, because such tools must meet all four criteria, it will be a short list, but that's the point. High-quality does not need to be high quantity. An Allow List is distinct from a Block List in that an Allow List curates the resources versus a Block List which,*

> *given the millions of apps out there, becomes a futile game of digital whac-a-mole.*

Earlier this year, I spoke to the IT director in a school district in Illinois about the impact of EdTech on school budgets. He casually remarked that he had noticed that each year the contracts the district held with EdTech vendors seemed to go up by a few percentage points and that "things were getting expensive." I was surprised by his surprise– this is *exactly* the way the business model of EdTech companies work. They offer districts free or low-cost versions of their products, get a school or group of teachers dependent on it, then charge more in subsequent years, once the district and teachers and students are deeply enmeshed. Sometimes it is just "cheaper" to pay the annual increase than it is to withdraw and start over.

But that's what needs to happen. The ecosystem is massive, but extremely fragile, and children will be– are– the collateral.

The cost of doing business with EdTech companies is only going to grow, not just because schools will have to update hardware and renew software licenses, but because districts will have to defend themselves in lawsuits that are already occurring, because the harms are already happening. Recently, school districts around the country were put on notice that Google will attempt to shift legal responsibility *to districts* when harm occurs on their platforms. Districts who have to defend themselves against Google will face a well-funded corporate legal army. The recent lawsuit against OpenAI also has serious implications for schools.

When it comes to children, teaching, and learning, the terms used by tech companies to describe growth and profits clash violently with our humanity. Children are not "scalable" or "standardized." Education isn't– or shouldn't be– predicated on a financial "return on investment." Schools should not prioritize "metrics and data" over human relationships and curiosity.

The best investment we can make in our children today is to protect their childhood, their educational experience, and their brains against the toxic tentacles of technology companies who have proven time and time again that they will not put people before profits.

I am not anti-tech; I am tech-intentional. To future-proof our children, schools will have to drastically reduce their reliance on EdTech products, teach actual **technology education**, and redirect spending to things we *know* work– physical books and paper, reducing class sizes, and supporting teachers.

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,

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