Addressing Student Technology and Social Media Use in Schools: Recommendations for School District Leaders

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Adolescents frequently use digital technologies such as the internet and social media (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). According to the Pew Research Center, 95 percent of 13–17-year-olds have access to a smartphone and many describe being on social media "almost constantly" (Anderson et al., 2023). Meanwhile, reports of mental health issues (e.g. attention deficit disorder, anxiety, behavior problems, and depression) among adolescents have increased worldwide and the health experts have declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health (U.S. Center for Disease Control, 2023; World Health Organization, 2021). The U.S. Surgeon General recently called on Congress to pass legislation that would require the inclusion of a warning label on social media platforms, "stating that social media is related to significant mental health harms for adolescents" (Murthy, 2024, para. 3). This reflects a growing narrative that digital technology use is associated with problematic mental health outcomes for adolescents (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Twenge et al., 2018).

This brief presents findings based on an analysis of 45 social media and technology policies from 32 Connecticut school districts. As part of a larger study on social media use and mental health for adolescents, we requested these policies from all districts that operate middle and high schools. We analyzed the content of these policies regarding:

1. technology and social media use,
2. teaching digital citizenship and healthy online behaviors for adolescents, and
3. the influence of technology and social media use on students' mental health

Our intended audience is Connecticut school boards, superintendents, and other constituents who contribute to the design and implementation of school district social media and technology use policies for students. We briefly review research on social media and phone use before presenting our findings and recommendations to aid constituents as they develop and revise policies to promote student mental health.

Mixed Results on the Effects of Social Media and Phone Use on Adolescents' Mental Health

Although the public narrative often positions phone and social media as detrimental to adolescent mental health, studies demonstrate mixed results regarding this relationship (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Mental health is not defined solely as the absence of mental illness or disorders, but the presence of mental well-being (Keyes, 2006). On one hand, research indicates that exposure to negative online interactions such as cyberbullying or social comparison is associated with declines in children's self-esteem, mood, and life satisfaction (Seabrook et al., 2016). Some researchers find that adolescents who spend more time on their screens were more likely to have mental health issues than those who spend more time on non-screen activities (Twenge et al., 2018). One study reports that adolescents who spend more than three hours on social media per day may be at more risk for developing mental health issues (Riehm et al., 2019).

However, researchers have recently called for more nuanced investigations of "screen time," advocating for increased attention to *how* youth use digital media in ways that affect mental health (Nesi et al., 2020). Researchers find that social networking engagement can affect social interaction, connection, and identity exploration that contributes positively to overall well-being (Seabrook et al., 2016), particularly for students with marginalized identities (e.g. LGBTQIA+ students; American Psychological Association [APA], 2023). Students can also use social media to seek mental health resources, support, and guidance (O'Reilly et al., 2019). Additionally, teachers increasingly use technology in the classroom as a tool for learning (Moon, 2018). The ability to use technology and social media has become a necessary skill in the 21st century (Choi et al., 2018).

Thus "[u]sing social media is not inherently beneficial or harmful to young people" (APA, 2023, p. 3). As digital technologies become integral to our daily lives, mitigating their negative effects and promoting their positive impacts is timely and critical (Nesi et al., 2020). The effects of social media usage can vary based on youths' individual developmental capacities, risk factors, and existing mental illness diagnoses (APA, 2023). Therefore, promoting digital citizenship, the "appropriate, responsible, and healthy online behavior" (*U.S. Media Literacy Policy Report 2020*, p. 19), is a potentially critical lever for promoting student well-being (Weinstein & James, 2022). Because adolescence is a period of intense biological, social, and psychological development with lasting implications for adult mental health (Blakemore, 2018; Keyes, 2006; Schwarz, 2009), it is vital that schools—where children spend most of their time outside of the home—consider their role in addressing healthy social media and technology usage (Roeser & Eccles, 2014).

> The way school district policies describe and frame social media and technology use can shape teacher, administrator, and staff decision-making, curriculum implementation, and teaching practices, which influence students' well-being (Lenhoff et al., 2022).

For example, if policies are framed around academics, it is more likely that school rules, priorities, and resources will focus on promoting academic achievement through technology. If digital technology policies are framed around mental health, then school rules, priorities, lessons, and resources may include promoting digital citizenship and well-being. District policy rationale and stated commitments guide how educators make sense of their roles and priorities in carrying out these policies (Spillane et al., 2002).

Unfortunately, technology and social networking sites are evolving faster than district leaders can keep up with in their policies. Recently, the original draft of Senate Bill 14, Section 4, proposed by Connecticut Governor Lamont, included language to address student cellphone use in Connecticut public schools (Connecticut Education Association [CEA], 2024). While this section was not included in the final bill, it reflects a growing interest in cell-phone bans within schools. This is interest is not unfounded, as a recent study points to the efficacy of in-school cellphone bans in reducing bullying and consultations for psychological issues for middle schoolers in Norway (Abrahamsson, 2024). Given rapid evolution of technology and social media and the desire for effective interventions, it is even more pressing that those responsible for developing district policies consider how they frame the policies themselves (Atkins et al., 2010; Keyes, 2006; Lenhoff et al., 2022; Seabrook et al., 2016). We now turn to our findings based on an analysis of 45 district policies.

What Do Connecticut School District Policies Say About Technology and Social Media Use?

Technology and Social Media School Policy Content

We found that an overwhelming majority of policies made limited or no reference to social media. Of the 45 student-oriented technology and social media use policies we reviewed, 24 (53.3%) were technology policies that did not reference social media explicitly, 19 (42.2%) included some reference to social media, and two (4.5%) were standalone social media policies. Across policies, the most common sections included:
- Definitions of school-provided technology or "computer systems",
- Guidelines for acceptable and unacceptable use of personal devices and school-provided technology,
- Consequences for the misuse of personal and school-provided technology, and
- Rights and responsibilities of key constituents including parents, students, teachers, administrators, and the school board related to privacy, liability, safety, security, and monitoring.

Eight (17%) policies included an acceptable technology use contract that parents and students were expected to sign at the beginning of the school year. Many of these policies used similar, if not the same, language. In interviews with superintendents and school leaders participating in our research study, many leaders suggested that district policies originated from templates provided by external parties like the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE) or Shipman and Goodman, LLP.

References to Social Media

Despite the prevailing concerns about social media use related to student mental health (Twenge et al., 2018), only two districts in our study had developed distinct social media use policies. Of the 19 technology policies that addressed social media, most references were limited to vague language reduced to one or two sentences. For example, the following statement was included, verbatim, in four different policies: "Electronic messaging systems include mobile, chat, and instant message; cloud collaboration platforms, including internal chat, peer-to-peer messaging systems, and draft email message transfer; and products that have the ability to create duration-based or subjective removal of content, such as Snapchat, and security focused platforms, such as Signal." These policies did not name social media or social networking explicitly; rather, they included "Snapchat," a popular social media platform example in a long list of electronic messaging systems.

Some policies referenced social media in terms of what was deemed "unacceptable" in educational settings. For example, one policy prohibited "accessing or attempting to access social networking sites [e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTik (sic), etc.] without a legitimate educational purpose." Additionally, these unacceptable use statements were often broad, providing school administrators and teachers latitude as to what constitutes "legitimate educational purpose" and how to enforce such a policy.

Moreover, many of the policies made outdated or limited references to social media use. One policy (adopted in 2011) described social media websites as "not limited to, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr and Twitter." MySpace is nearly defunct, and Twitter was officially renamed X in July 2023. The Pew Research Center found that in addition to YouTube, the most frequently used social media platforms used by students were TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat (Anderson et al., 2023). However, these platforms were named infrequently, if at all, in districts' policies. The policy cited above, unlike many other policies we reviewed, was updated in 2022 and referenced current social media platforms. However, "TikTok" was misspelled. As adolescents' technology and social media use rapidly evolve (Vogels et al., 2022), many districts have not kept up with these changes.

References to Digital Citizenship and Teaching Safe and Healthy Social Media and Technology Use

Over half of the policies included commitments to educating students about safe and healthy technology and social media use. For example, multiple policies affirmed districts' desire to educate students about how to safely and respectfully navigate online spaces, discern factual online information, interact with others online, and to be cognizant of concerning online behaviors (e.g., cyberbullying, exposure to harmful content like pornography). A common statement across many policies was, "The Board will educate minor students about appropriate online behavior, including interacting with other individuals on social networking websites and in chat rooms and cyberbullying awareness and response." Six policies included the exact language: "Through the publication and dissemination of this policy statement and others related to use of the Board's computer systems, as well as other instructional means, the Board educates students about the Board's expectations for technology users." If district leaders hope to change students' technology and social media use behaviors, more districts need to commit to educating students on these topics.

How Are Social Media and Technology School District Policies Framed?

The framing of the policies provides insight into how digital technology can be viewed, interpreted, and implemented in schools (Lenhoff et al., 2022). Technology and social media policies typically framed technology use as (1) beneficial for education; (2) only to be accessed and used for educational purposes; and (3) a privilege and not a right.

Thirty-nine policies (86%) framed computer systems and technology use as essential educational tools that should be used for "education-related purposes." Similarly, 22 policies (49%) named the benefits of technology for learning. For example, some policies included a sentence like the following, "The Board of Education (the "Board") and the Administration believe in the educational value of such computer systems and recognize their potential to support our curriculum by expanding resources available for staff and student use. The Board's goal in providing this service is to promote educational excellence by facilitating resource sharing, innovation and communication."

Yet, 19 policies (42%) conveyed that students' use of technology was a privilege and not a right, and inappropriate use could result in a student's loss of this privilege. These policies outlined consequences for inappropriate use, often threatening to remove technology access altogether. For example, one policy states, "Violations may lead to withdrawal of the access privilege and/or disciplinary measures in accordance with the Board's student discipline policy."

> If technology is an essential part of student learning as noted in many policies, framing technology use as a "privilege" undercuts this value.

Reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic, technology has become integral to student learning (Weinstein & James, 2022). Therefore, focusing on removal of access to technology does not align with how technology and social media are being used and valued in the classroom presently.

How is Mental Health Addressed in Relation to Technology and Social Media Use in School District Policies?

Although mental health is often the rationale that policymakers and the public use to justify the removal of personal phones from schools (CEA, 2024), the policies we reviewed rarely addressed student mental health. No policies used the term "mental health" explicitly; rather they used terms like "safe environments" or protecting students against harmful content and behaviors, such as cyberbullying, pornography, or obscenities (i.e., content that could be deemed as proximal to mental health). Two-thirds of policies (66.7%) identified cyberbullying as an example of unacceptable social media or technology use. Often, "cyberbullying" was included in a bulleted list of unacceptable social media or technology uses.

Only three policies were framed around mental health or mental health issues. Two of the three policies provided rationale for their acceptable and unacceptable use sections based on the ills of social media and technology use rather than their potential benefits. For example, one policy stated, "There is a growing body of evidence that suggests student access to cell phones and other electronic communication devices may be detrimental to a student's emotional well-being and academic growth." Another policy said, "The District also makes a good faith effort to protect its students from exposure to Internet materials that are harmful or explicit." The third policy that mentioned mental health framed social media and technology use and mental health in terms of overall safe environments. It stated, "The Board adopts this policy in order to maintain/promote an educational environment that is safe and secure for district students and employees."

> Given the increasing concern for student social media use and mental health, it is critical that districts and schools amend policies to prioritize these topics.

Recommendations for School District Technology and Social Media Policies

Recommendation 1: Revise and update school district policies to explicitly address current social media and technology platforms and usage.

> Technology is vital to student learning and should be viewed as a student right, not a privilege.

Social media use is prevalent among adolescents (Vogels et al., 2022) and social media and technology change rapidly. It is critical that school district policies accurately reflect the current digital landscape. School districts leaders should:

- Remove language from student technology use policies that frames access to technology as a privilege.

- Adopt standalone social media policies that define social media, operationalize appropriate and inappropriate social media use, and describe the jurisdiction of the Board and school administration to address student social media use. For example, one school district policy included the following language: "electronically posted comments, pictures, or other content will be considered bullying if they have a direct and negative impact on another student's or group of students' feelings of safety in school, on school grounds, or on the bus. This includes electronic content of any kind that leads to a student's or group of students' inability to work or learn in school or at home due to emotional distress." Using detailed, comprehensive language about social media creates a clear policy that schools can implement with fidelity.

- Update technology and social media use policies based on current use, evolving definitions, and trends annually.

Recommendation 2: Include proactive guidance on how school boards and schools will educate students and adults on safe and healthy technology and social media use.

Adolescents need to develop digital literacy so they can safely navigate these spaces and maximize the benefits of their online engagement (APA, 2023; Passey et al., 2018; Weinstein & James, 2022).

> Because adolescents are digital natives (i.e. those exposed to digital technology throughout their lives) and the vast majority communicate using social media both inside and outside of school (Anderson et al., 2023), in-school cell phone prohibitions without educational efforts will likely be ineffective in addressing concerns related to students' mental health.

Technology is integral to the learning environment and reducing screen time through cell phone bans is only one part of the equation (Odgers & Jensen, 2020).

Additionally, adults' education regarding social media plays an important role in adolescent social media use (Nagata et al., 2024). Parent, caregiver and educator attitudes and role-modeling behaviors related to social media likely affect adolescents' social media use and related outcomes (APA, 2023). Nagata and colleagues (2024) found that parent screen use was associated with adolescent screen time and problematic social media use. This finding suggests that children learn their social media behaviors from observing parents and other adults. If we hope to address students' social media use, we likely need to educate adults to model the expected behaviors.

School district leaders should:
- Revise social media and technology policies to include commitments to providing resources and supporting proactive, ongoing, age-appropriate technology and social media use education. Such policies should address the topics of digital agency (i.e., the ability to manage one's own use of technology), digital citizenship, and digital literacy instruction at the school level (Weinstein & James, 2022). For example, in their *Empowered Digital Use Policy*, the Framingham School Committee (2017) in Massachusetts stated that students need "… to be prepared to contribute to and excel in a connected, global community. To that end, the district provides ongoing student instruction that develops digital citizenship skill sets for using technology as a tool" (p. 1).

- Establish expectations requiring educators and school leaders to implement differentiated, developmentally appropriate curriculum on technology and social media use for students of different ages, grade levels, and who possess different risk factors. Some district policies in our sample provided differentiated technology and social media use guidance for their schools based on grade and age level, which could serve as a model for other districts to follow. For example, one district included a flow chart describing how students in grades K-3, 4-5, 6-8, and 9-12 would receive school-based technology, what digital citizenship curriculum would be implemented, and articulated a scaffolded approach to increasing amount of screen time as students got older. The policy stated, "In an environment where learning can take place anytime and anywhere, the [school district] is committed to providing age-appropriate teaching

and learning opportunities for students to use technology tools. To facilitate that five user levels are defined for the purposes of organizing supervision for group instruction and personal use of these information resources. Digital Citizenship is a curriculum framework to teach students to be responsible, legal, ethical, and safe in their use of digital resources. The district provides ongoing Digital Citizenship lessons to students.

- Articulate clear guidance about and commitment to distribution of resources for the education of adults (parents, caregivers, educators) on social media use and teaching healthy social media use behaviors. For example, some policies required parents and students to sign social media and technology use contracts acknowledging their responsibilities toward upholding the rules. These contracts could include digital citizenship resources for parents and students or opportunities for them to engage in further education regarding the effects of social media and technology use on mental health. For example, Common Sense Education provides free, online, student and parent lesson plans regarding digital citizenship for K-12th grade students (Common Sense Education, n.d.). District policies could include these resources as part of student and parent/caregiver contracts.

Recommendation 3: Re-frame school district technology and social media policies to focus on adolescent mental health.

Schools play an important role in adolescent development. Yet, the school district technology and social media policies reviewed in our study were framed primarily around the access of technology for educational use. Additionally, school district policies referenced cyberbullying most frequently as a proxy for student wellness and mental health. While cyberbullying is a concern and potentially contributes to depression, suicidal ideation, and lower self-esteem (Hamm et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2015), it is not the only social media-related factor that can affect adolescent mental health. Other research indicates social media use can also promote perceived social support and closeness, affirmation, and inspiration (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Weinstein, 2018).

> Framing school district social media and technology use policies through the more expansive lens of mental health and well-being facilitates the dedication of appropriate resources to promote student wellness (Atkins et al., 2010).

We recommend that school district leaders revise technology and social media policies to:
- Provide a clear definition of mental health that includes mental illness and positive well-being. For example, one policy stated, "Online Social Networking: The Internet and electronic communications have vast potential to support curriculum and student learning. The Board of Education believes they should be used in school as a learning resource both in developing student literacy and providing on-going professional staff development activities. The Board realizes that existing and emerging smart technologies present new challenges to the educational community." In this policy, include language articulating why and how social networking has the potential to support students' sense of belonging and well-being.

- Provide clear examples for what constitutes "acceptable use" of social media for mental well-being purposes. Currently, most policies focus on the negative aspects of social media use on mental health (e.g. cyberbullying). Include additional language that promotes cultivating students' healthy use of social media for increased well-being (e.g. social connection, community building).

- State that resources and guidance will be provided for mental health education and associated resources related to social media usage based on these definitions and framing, as noted in Recommendation 2.

Conclusion

Digital technology and social media are ubiquitous aspects of students' lives (Carter, 2016), and access to technology is essential to student learning. While concerns about adolescent social media use and mental health persist (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; U.S. Office of Surgeon General, 2023), and school district social media and technology policies likely influence student well-being, many current policies fail to adequately address social media, its associations with student mental health, or efforts to educate students about digital citizenship. Advances in technology have outpaced both research and school policy. This policy brief presents three recommendations to address these concerns: (1) revise and update district policies that address current social media and technology platforms and use on an annual basis; (2) include proactive guidance for school staff and students on safe and healthy use of technology and social media; and (3) create policies that reframe technology and social media policies to focus on student mental health. Implementing these recommendations will help schools address one major component that may be contributing to the adolescent mental health crisis in the United States.

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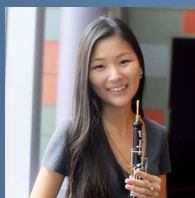
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