



Social Media Victims Law Center

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To: The Vermont Senate Education Committee
From: Laura Marquez-Garrett, Social Media Victims Law Center (SMVLC)
Re: S. 284 – Electronic Devices, Social Media and Online Products in School

Thank you for allowing me to comment on S.284.

I am an attorney with the Social Media Victims Law Center, a Pacific Northwest law firm founded in late 2021 to represent families and children harmed by social media. In the relatively short time since, more than 2,000 families have retained us in connection with social media harms – families from every U.S. state, including Vermont. These harms range from harmful dependencies to anxiety, depression, body dysmorphia, sexual exploitation, sex trafficking, suicidal ideation, and death, to name only a few. I have met with hundreds of children and parents, and we have pulled social media and device data from hundreds if not thousands of devices and accounts.

What we see on a daily basis is nothing short of senseless tragedy after senseless tragedy. Two of the three Fridays this month alone involved fathers weeping as they told me about their dead children. One died when she was 16, and the other was found by his parents and younger sister on the morning of his 18th birthday. I wish I could say that these are the exception in our work, but instead, they are a weekly, sometimes daily, occurrence.

I also have met with parents who try to lock down all access points at home, which is no easy task. They turn off wi-fi, purchase devices that do not allow internet access, expensive software, and more, only to later learn that their child is accessing social media on friends' devices at school or directly through school-issued devices. When they report this to the schools and plead with them to not allow access to the internet, more often than not they are told that it's part of the curriculum. They are told that they have no choice. I have met with children who tell me that they began using a social media platform because one of their coaches at school showed them the funny filters; or their basketball team uses it to communicate; or their teacher set up a homework chat that requires such access. Then there are the kids who tell their parents about the educational YouTube videos they watch at school and, those parents, having no knowledge about or history with YouTube, think it must be okay for kids to watch.

Social media harms are real, and it is imperative that schools take steps to protect our children or, at the least, provide students and families with the ability to protect themselves.

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Big Tech companies have trojan-horsed their way into our educational system, through gifts of free devices and the incredible convenience and connectivity of their technologies. This puts schools in a difficult position because, yes, it is easier to message and reach a large number of people on social media and, yes, it is easier to offer a single technology centered curriculum. At the same time, schools are supposed to be a place where children are safe, where teachers can teach without having to battle addiction and distraction, and where parents do not have to choose between education and the health and safety of their child.

With this background, I have a few additional points relating to S. 284.

First, social media is a source of harms. Depression and suicide rates among minors were on the rise well before 2020 (onset of COVID) and multiple studies and reports, including recent statements from the American Psychological Association, confirm that these platforms are contributing to and facilitating harms for a significant number of American children.

Second, what many people do not understand is that these products operate different for adults than for children. It is easy to brush off claims that social media targets children by design and with harms they never asked for or wanted to see, until you see what social media looks like from a young person's perspective.

Third, convenience is not the same as necessity.

Social media is causing real harm. Now that we know, it is imperative that we not prioritize the convenience to schools of being able to communicate with a lot of people via social media over the safety of our children.

Not providing individuals with a right to opt out of personal data collection and school-issued devices means making some families choose between education and personal safety.

- In some cases, parents pull their children out of school. They are denied a public-school education because they are unwilling to agree to their children's personal data being given to Big Tech, or access to Social Media.
- In other cases, home school or private school is not an option. So those children continue to be harmed, while in the care and custody of the public school system.

Requiring an opt-out is about choice and parental and student rights. It is about making education available to everyone. We *can* teach children about the internet and social media without providing these for-profit companies with constant access to our children and their personal data, just as we teach kids about any number of things without making them a staple in the classroom.

S.284 will implement reasonable safeguards that put kids first.

Thank you for your time and consideration.