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Chair Kiley, Ranking Member Bonamici, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy, and I am the CEO and President of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE). I am also a Distinguished Professor of Education at American University. I have dedicated over 20 years to being a counselor educator and trainer of teachers and school counselors at four universities: Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, the University of Maryland (College Park), Johns Hopkins University, and American University. Prior to becoming a professor, I worked as an elementary teacher, professional school counselor, and family therapist.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the critical issue of screen time and its impact on child development. As President and CEO of AACTE, which represents over 500 educator preparation programs (EPPs) nationwide, I am deeply concerned about the multifaceted effects of screen exposure on our country's students and the vital role of educators in tackling these challenges.

Over the past decade, children's screen time has escalated dramatically, reshaping daily routines and developmental experiences. According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, children ages 8-12 in the United States spend 4-6 hours a day watching or using screens, and teens spend up to 9 hours.[1] For high school students, the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey reveals that 76% of students report using screens for at least three hours per school day, up from 68% in 2013. Even younger children are affected. While the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than one hour of screen time daily for children aged 2 to 5, many exceed this guideline, often averaging 2 to 3 hours per day. Among adolescents, the rise is even more pronounced. Teens now spend an average of 7 hours and 22 minutes per day on screens, accounting for about 43% of their waking hours. Preteens, aged 8 to 12, spend around 5½ hours daily, which is an hour more than a decade ago. Notably, 49% of children aged 0 to 2 years engage with smartphones.[2]

The type of device and content also play roles in screen time habits. Screen time habits among children in the United States vary significantly by age and type of device. According to CDC QuickStats, younger children (ages 2 to 11) primarily engage with televisions and tablets, often using these devices for passive entertainment such as streaming videos. In contrast, adolescents aged 12 to 17 are increasingly turning to smartphones, computers, and gaming consoles, reflecting a shift toward more interactive and social screen use, including texting, gaming, video chatting, and social media engagement. In fact, older children are significantly more likely to exceed four hours of recreational screen time per day. In comparison, younger children tend to remain closer to the two-hour threshold recommended by pediatric guidelines. These patterns suggest that both the type of device and the nature of screen content evolve with age, requiring

educators, parents, and policymakers to consider developmental needs when managing screen time.[3]

This surge in screen time has raised concerns among health professionals. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time for children under 18 months (except for video chatting) and limited, high-quality programming for children aged 2 to 5 years, co-viewed with their parents. However, adherence to these guidelines is low; a meta-analysis revealed that only 24.7% of children under 2 and 35.6% of children aged 2 to 5 met the recommended screen time limits.[4]

Without question, technology can create high-impact learning experiences for all students. Education technology is a crucial tool for teaching and learning and has "the potential to empower students to expand their learning beyond the confines of the traditional classroom, support self-directed learning, help educators tailor learning experiences to individual student needs, and support students with disabilities."[5]

It is crucial to acknowledge the role of technology, including emerging tools like artificial intelligence (AI), in ensuring that students with disabilities have meaningful access to the general curriculum. Assistive technologies such as speech-to-text software, screen readers, and AI-powered learning supports provide critical pathways for these students to attain equitable educational outcomes. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), along with other civil rights laws, guarantees students with disabilities the right to use such tools to access a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. As we evaluate the impact of screen time on children, we must not ignore the civil rights of students with disabilities who rely on technology as a bridge to learning. At the same time, we must recognize that even beneficial screen use, when excessive or unbalanced, can contribute to broader concerns around mental health, attention, and development. Promoting healthy, intentional screen time is essential, particularly for students who may experience both the benefits and risks of digital tools more acutely.

Moreover, modern students must learn how to effectively leverage technology for success in a tech-centric world. Assisting students in utilizing technology, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), is crucial for enhancing our nation's global competitiveness and ensuring national security. As the President noted in his Executive Order "*Advancing Artificial Intelligence Education for American Youth,*" we must "equip our students with the foundational knowledge and skills necessary to adapt to and thrive in an increasingly digital society."[6]

Nevertheless, excessive screen time is linked to various adverse health outcomes. A study published in JAMA Network Open found that reducing leisure screen media use had a positive effect on psychological symptoms in children and adolescents, highlighting the benefits of moderate screen engagement[7]. Additionally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that teenagers with four or more hours of daily screen time were significantly more likely to experience symptoms of anxiety and depression compared to their peers with less screen time.[8]

In conclusion, the significant increase in screen time among children and adolescents over the past decade highlights the need for comprehensive strategies to promote healthy digital habits. This includes investing in educator preparation programs to equip teachers and mental health professionals with the skills to integrate technology effectively and support students' holistic development.

A. Academic Implications of Excessive Screen Use

Research indicates that screen time, particularly when involving passive activities such as video streaming or scrolling through social media, can have a negative impact on literacy development. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has reported declining reading scores among U.S. students, with experts linking part of this trend to increased digital media use. While digital reading can expand access, it often promotes skimming over deep comprehension. A 2019 meta-analysis published in Educational Research Review found that students who read on screens scored significantly lower in reading comprehension compared to those who read print materials, largely due to increased distractions and reduced retention.[9]

Mathematics achievement has also been affected by increased screen time as well. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that students who spent more than six hours per day online performed worse in math than their peers who spent less time. Overreliance on technology for instruction, without proper scaffolding or teacher guidance, can limit conceptual understanding. Additionally, apps and games marketed as "educational" may lack the rigor necessary to reinforce mathematical thinking, leaving students with superficial skills but little depth in problem-solving or reasoning.[10]

The most immediate and widespread impact of screen time on school performance is its effect on students' attention spans. Multiple studies, including one from the University of Southern California, have shown that heavy screen use, particularly with rapid-fire content like TikTok or YouTube, can lead to shorter attention spans and increased impulsivity in young people.[11] Teachers report that students now struggle more with sustained concentration, transitioning between tasks, and engaging in deep, reflective work. This "attention fragmentation" undermines both independent learning and classroom engagement.

Screen-induced behavioral changes are also creating new challenges for classroom management. According to a 2022 report from Common Sense Media, children aged 8 to 12 now average nearly 5½ hours of screen time daily, much of it unmonitored. As a result, some students exhibit greater irritability, reduced frustration tolerance, and dependency on constant stimulation—behaviors that are disruptive in structured learning environments.[12] Educators frequently cite increased difficulty in redirecting students' attention, regulating emotional responses, and reestablishing in-person social norms after extended periods of online interaction.

The rise of screen time has also reshaped how educators teach—but not always for the better. While digital tools have the potential to enrich instruction, many teachers feel pressured to "digitize" learning without adequate training or pedagogical support. According to the Learning Policy Institute, teachers trained in evidence-based educational technology strategies are far more effective than those who are not. Yet, in many districts, especially those with limited

funding, professional development in digital literacy remains limited. Without strong preparation, educators struggle to balance screen use with hands-on, inquiry-based learning, resulting in the overuse of passive technology rather than interactive, human-centered instruction.

Given these widespread academic implications—from lower reading scores and math proficiency to behavioral shifts and instructional fatigue—screen time is no longer a private or parental issue. It has become a systemic educational concern. Schools must be equipped not only with policies on screen use but also with well-prepared teachers who understand how to use technology effectively. This includes incorporating child development, media literacy, and effective digital pedagogy into educator preparation programs. When educators are trained to make intentional, developmentally appropriate choices about technology, they can transform screen time from a liability into a learning asset.

B. Mental Health and Social-Emotional Development Implications

In recent years, educators and mental health professionals have observed a disturbing rise in anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges among school-aged children. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the proportion of high school students reporting persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness rose to 42% in 2021, up from 28% a decade earlier.[13] While multiple factors contribute to this trend, excessive screen time, particularly involving social media, has emerged as a significant risk factor. The American Academy of Pediatrics warns that high levels of digital media use are associated with poor sleep, decreased physical activity, and diminished face-to-face interaction—all of which contribute to emotional well-being.

Teachers are often the first to notice behavioral changes associated with excessive screen use. Symptoms may include increased irritability, social withdrawal, restlessness, difficulty concentrating, and trouble managing emotions, particularly among students who rely heavily on screens outside of school. Many educators report that students have shorter tempers, lower frustration tolerance, and reduced engagement in classroom activities. In younger children, educators are seeing delays in self-regulation and social skills. For adolescents, a 2023 study published in *Computers in Human Behavior* linked high social media use with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety, particularly among girls.

School counselors are sounding the alarm. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has reported sharp increases in mental health referrals, particularly for anxiety, self-harm, and depressive symptoms.[14] Many of these professionals cite social media as a contributing factor; students feel pressure to curate their lives online, experience cyberbullying, or compare themselves unfavorably to others. Body image concerns—especially among girls—have been linked to platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which use algorithm-driven content that reinforces unrealistic beauty standards. These mental health providers are calling for more school-based resources, training, and time to address growing caseloads and complex needs.

Perhaps most distressing is the rise in youth suicide. According to the CDC, suicide is now the second leading cause of death for children aged 10 to 14 and adolescents aged 15 to 24. Between

2007 and 2021, suicide rates among 10- to 24-year-olds increased by more than 60%.[15] While suicide is a complex issue with many contributing factors, screen time—especially exposure to harmful content, social comparison, and disrupted sleep—has been identified as a compounding influence. The U.S. Surgeon General issued advisories on youth mental health, explicitly citing the harms of unregulated social media use.[16] These sobering statistics underscore the urgent need to address the role of screens in youth mental health crises.

Educators are doing their best to meet students' emotional needs, but they are not mental health professionals, and many report feeling overwhelmed and underprepared. Teachers describe feeling like "first responders" to mental health emergencies without adequate training, time, or support. Meanwhile, school counselors, who often serve hundreds of students each, are stretched thin, and shortages of licensed school psychologists persist across the country. Without investment in school-based mental health staff and educator preparation programs that include social-emotional learning, trauma-informed practice, and digital literacy, our education system will remain ill-equipped to meet this moment. Addressing the mental health crisis requires a holistic, well-funded response, and it must begin with recognizing screen time as both a symptom and a driver of deeper systemic issues.

C. The Crucial Role of Educator Preparation and School-Based Mental Health Professionals

Addressing the rising challenges of excessive screen time requires a well-prepared and well-supported education workforce, comprising teachers, school counselors, psychologists, and school leaders. Yet, most educators are not adequately trained to address the social, emotional, and cognitive impacts of screen overuse. This is not due to a lack of interest or effort; it's a scarcity issue. Scarcity of time. Scarcity of training and professional development. Scarcity of research.

Most teacher and counselor preparation programs do not yet offer systematic training on digital wellness, screen time moderation, or how to manage technology-related mental health concerns in the classroom. According to the RAND Corporation, only 30% of teachers feel confident using digital tools in developmentally appropriate ways. Even fewer report feeling prepared to respond to screen-induced behavioral issues like inattention, sleep deprivation, or digital addiction. With screen time now a central force in children's lives, this knowledge gap has serious consequences.[17]

Teachers are increasingly the first to observe signs of screen-related challenges such as disrupted sleep, poor concentration, anxiety, and social withdrawal. Yet many say they lack the tools to intervene effectively. A 2023 Education Week survey found that 74% of teachers believe screen time is hurting student focus, but only 17% have received any training on managing it.[18] Professional development focused on classroom strategies for screen balance, integrating movement and mindfulness, and recognizing mental health red flags is not optional—it's essential.

While school and district leaders establish instructional policies and allocate resources, few are prepared to lead on this issue. A 2022 report by the Consortium for School Networking found

that 60% of school leaders cited "student mental health linked to digital use" as a top concern. Yet, less than 20% had received professional development on managing digital environments or regulating screen exposure during instructional time.[19] Principals need training in change management, policy guidance, and support for teachers struggling with the effects of screen overuse.

Educator preparation programs must evolve to address this moment. High-quality EPPs are beginning to embed coursework and field experiences that help future educators balance the promise of technology with its developmental risks to children. These programs incorporate content on screen time science, digital ethics, and trauma-informed practices, while also teaching candidates to promote digital wellness and model healthy screen habits in the classroom. In some early childhood and elementary programs, for example, teacher candidates learn how to prioritize hands-on, interactive learning over passive screen consumption. Others are integrating digital citizenship and media literacy standards to equip teacher candidates to guide students in evaluating online content, managing screen exposure, and understanding the social-emotional impact of tech use.

Federal teacher training grants, such as the Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP), Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED), Hawkins Centers of Excellence, Teacher and School Leadership Incentives (TSL), and IDEA Personnel Preparation, are vital levers for closing this gap. As discussed further below, unfortunately, the President's budget would eliminate funding for some of these critical programs. These investments fund clinical practice, coaching, and embedded professional development for educators. Importantly, these programs serve as incubators of innovation in educator preparation and development, not only addressing the needs of their communities but also serving as models of best practice that are replicated by educator preparation programs nationwide. Prioritizing screen time literacy, digital citizenship, and youth mental health in these grants would enable institutions to build capacity in the exact areas where the need is most urgent.

Additionally, there is an urgent need to restore a robust federal commitment to education research. Federal support is crucial for conducting large-scale, cross-state research that can identify national trends, evaluate systemic interventions, and generate scalable solutions that individual states cannot fund or coordinate on their own. The current Administration's cuts to the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) have significantly weakened the Department of Education's research capacity at a time when evidence-based solutions are desperately needed. Further, the Administration has gutted the Office of Educational Technology (OET), which provides critical guidance, strategies, and supported research on effective implementation of technology in schools.

We strongly recommend that the Department restore OET and reinstate and strengthen its research arm to support rigorous studies on the effects of screen time and to evaluate interventions and instructional strategies that promote student well-being and academic success. AACTE stands ready to facilitate the dissemination of evidence-based models and provide support to other education preparation programs to implement these models.

Moreover, as you know, President Trump recognizes the importance of "investing in our educators and equipping them with the tools and knowledge to not only train students about AI, but also to utilize AI in their classrooms to improve educational outcomes. Professional development programs focused on AI education will empower educators to confidently guide students through this complex and evolving field. Educators, industry leaders, and employers who rely on an AI-skilled workforce should partner to create educational programs that equip students with essential AI skills and competencies across all learning pathways."[20]

Unfortunately, the Administration has canceled many of these teacher training grants and is proposing to eliminate some entirely, while others will be converted into block grants. These programs are crucial to advancing the President's AI objectives. Without these investments, we risk asking educators to solve 21st-century problems with 20th-century tools.

School counselors and psychologists, too, are overwhelmed by the surge in digital-related mental health concerns. The American School Counselor Association recommends a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1; however, the national average is 408:1. For psychologists, the ratio is even worse, with over 1,200 students per psychologist. Screen time isn't the only factor driving student distress. Still, it's a major one—and these professionals need intensive training, not just reactive triage, to manage the evolving landscape of digital risks and trauma.

The School-Based Mental Health Services grants are designed to meet the mental health needs of students. Additionally, these grants support the hiring and training of school-based mental health workers, such as counselors and social workers, to address the social and emotional needs of students. Sadly, the Administration has terminated the remaining funding for federal grants authorized and appropriated by Congress in the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. School districts across the country have relied on these funds to hire mental health professionals; now, they face the challenge of securing financing for these professionals or operating without their support.

The cuts to teacher training and mental health grants threaten to undo progress as our needs become increasingly urgent, leaving our schools overwhelmed and our most vulnerable children unsupported. We must resist the false dichotomy that says we cannot afford these investments. In reality, we cannot afford not to make them. The digital divide is no longer just about access to devices; it's about ensuring access to high-quality, supportive instruction that empowers students to navigate those devices wisely. Students in under-resourced rural and urban schools frequently experience more passive screen time and fewer interactions with well-prepared educators.[21] Federal investments in teacher training and school-based mental health professionals are crucial for bridging this equity gap.

It is important to note that the budget reconciliation bill under consideration would actually make it harder to ensure schools have qualified and effective educators, counselors, principals, and other essential school personnel. Significantly, the bill would eliminate access to the full Pell Grant for student teachers because they cannot take a 15-credit course load while working in schools. Eliminating GRAD Plus loan programs will make it difficult and more expensive for students to pursue specialty areas like special education, school counseling, and school leadership. And, rather than diverting federal funds into voucher programs, we need Congress to

invest in all our children and make sure they are prepared to "adapt to and thrive in an increasingly digital society."[22]

The implications of excessive screen time extend beyond education; they are now a significant concern for public health. Just as we train teachers to recognize the signs of abuse or neglect, we must also equip them to identify the symptoms of digital overload. Similarly, as we deploy nurses and counselors to support physical and emotional well-being, we must invest in the preparation and professional development of educators who promote cognitive and social wellness in the digital age.

If we are serious about safeguarding the next generation, we must prepare the adults who guide them. Congress has the tools: TQP, SEED, Hawkins, TSL, IDEA Personnel Preparation, and school-based mental health programs. Our educators must be ready, and our policies must support that readiness.

Policy Recommendations

Despite mounting evidence of the profound and long-term effects of excessive screen time on children's development, recent actions by the Administration have failed to prioritize educator preparation as a core solution. While investments have been directed toward devices, broadband expansion, and digital infrastructure, the educators tasked with navigating this new reality often remain undertrained, under-resourced, and unsupported. This imbalance is short-sighted. Screen time is not merely a classroom distraction; it is a public health concern with implications for student attention, emotional regulation, academic success, and long-term workforce readiness.

Without intentional investments in preparation, professional development, and research to help educators identify and utilize evidence-based approaches, we are asking teachers, educators, and counselors to solve a crisis they were never prepared to face. These investments serve as incubators for innovation and can be scaled to support students across the country. However, left unaddressed, the unchecked rise in screen-induced challenges will erode our nation's future productivity, deepen achievement and mental health disparities, and weaken the very fabric of public education. If we fail to act now, we are not only neglecting today's students—we are compromising the future capacity of our workforce, our democracy, and our country.

While regulating screen time is best left to states and local school districts, the federal government has a role to play. **To mitigate the adverse effects of excessive screen time and bolster student development, I urge Congress to do the following:**

- **Invest in Teacher and Educator Preparation**: Allocate resources to improve Educator Preparation Programs that effectively integrate technology into their curricula while addressing students' social, emotional, and learning needs through rigorous research and evaluation. Use competitive priorities in the TQP, SEED, TSL, IDEA Personnel Preparation, and Hawkins programs to prioritize this issue.
    - **Restore Funding for School-Based Mental Health Programs**.
    - **Fund Research on the Impacts of Screen Time Through the Institute of Education Sciences (IES)**: Support longitudinal studies to understand the long-term

effects of screen exposure on various aspects of child development. Additionally, support research that examines the practices of educators and counselors that assist students facing challenges due to excessive screen time. We need to know what works!

- **Support Ongoing Professional Development**: Offer continuous learning opportunities for educators to stay current with best practices in digital literacy and student engagement.
- **Develop Recommendations on Screen Time**: The Office of Educational Technology could develop evidence-based recommendations and provide guidance on healthy screen use for children and adolescents, supporting schools and districts as they develop local policies related to screen time.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter. I welcome any questions and look forward to our continued collaboration in promoting the well-being and success of our nation's students.

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