

Letter of Concern – BLP Tech Statement

June 12, 2024

Dear Superintendent Cook, Deputy Superintendent Nordquist, and Bend-La Pine School Board of Directors:

We are writing to express our concerns with how technology is being used in Bend-La Pine schools, especially the effect of frequent smartphone and iPad use on children's behavior, mood, attention, and mental health. We recognize the harmful effects of overuse of screens on kids, along with the real potential for addiction. Whether sending messages on smartphones during school downtime or swiping iPads in class to get to the next level or gain a virtual reward, these habitual behaviors are detrimental to the children in our community.

Since 2011, youth mental health challenges across the globe, specifically depression and anxiety, have increased markedly, especially since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Mental Health America, Oregon's youth mental health ranked 50 out of 50 states in 2023, which is not a surprise to those of us who see these mental health struggles daily. While screen time alone is certainly not the sole cause for this increase, an abundance of new research shows a clear connection between the rise in addictive technology use and worsened mental health outcomes. Kids are spending too much time on devices at home and at school, and too little time socializing with friends in person, playing outdoors, and having face-to-face experiences that will help them develop into thriving, healthy adults. Children are also accessing troubling content on their devices, seeing images of pornography and self-harm, which significantly impacts their healthy development. Social media, accessed through smartphones at school and at home, preoccupies kids and can damage their mental health and development. During lunch, during free time, and in classes, these devices are ever-present in our children's lives.

We also see the very real consequences of screen time on children's physical health and learning. Dangerously rising rates of obesity and poor sleep have been linked to higher rates of screen use. There are real concerns about the effect of screen use on learning and attention, with higher rates of ADHD and behavioral challenges tied to higher rates of screen time. Several studies show that "brain drain" occurs when devices such as smartphones are present, even when not actively in use, hindering the development of deeper level thinking, creativity and problem solving. In polls, the vast majority of teachers note worsening student behavior after screen use, requiring them to spend more time and energy on behavior management and less on teaching.

While we recognize that these devices are an integral part of modern society and that certain skills are enhanced through the use of technology platforms, we also believe that limits are necessary, especially at schools and on devices that the district provides. Creating healthy boundaries around addictive technology and teaching our children these healthy habits are essential for their development.

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We would love to consult with the district on tech policy improvements to improve the physical & mental well-being of the children in Bend-La Pine Schools. Some ideas for how the district could adjust its use of in-school technology would be:

1. Remove iPads for the youngest elementary grades
2. Set age-appropriate screen time limits for students during the school day
3. Remove YouTube and other addictive, gamified programs from school iPads
4. Prioritize pencil-to-paper learning whenever possible
5. Utilize iPads only when doing so clearly improves the depth of learning or introduces a skill that cannot otherwise be taught effectively (such as coding), storing them away from student desks when not in use

We also ask the district to create and enforce stronger policies around smartphone use in schools, ideally adopting a district-wide “phone-free school” program as many other districts across the country have done.

Thank you for your consideration. We would welcome the opportunity to share additional thoughts and data around these issues.

Signed,

The Letter of Concern has been signed by 135 (and counting) local pediatricians, family medicine doctors, child psychologists, therapists, counselors, and mental & behavioral health providers. Names have been removed for privacy and can be shared upon request.