LOTSIXTEEN

Committee:	Senate Commerce, Science & Transportation Committee
Event:	Plugged Out: Examining the Impact of Technology on America's Youth
Date:	January 15, 2026

Executive Summary: The hearing focused on the harmful effects of technology on youth, with experts linking social media use to rising rates of depression, cognitive decline, and addictive behaviors. Republicans supported limiting youth access to social media and proposed cutting E-Rate funding for schools that lack "bell-to-bell" cell phone bans, arguing that federal funds should not support classroom distractions. Democrats opposed using school funds for enforcement, instead voicing support for comprehensive privacy legislation and regulations for artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots. Despite their different approaches, there was broad bipartisan agreement on the intentional design of algorithms and the need for tech platforms to be held accountable for children's safety.

Member Toplines:

Chair Ted Cruz (R-TX): Cruz argued that the education system has undermined parental authority by requiring internet-connected devices in schools without sufficient guardrails and criticized the Federal Communications Commission for expanding the E-Rate program to "bankroll" unsupervised internet access in students' homes. He praised the *Take It Down Act*, P.L. 119-12, and S. 278, the Kids Off Social Media Act (KOSMA), which would ban social media for children under 13 and prohibit algorithmic feeds for users under 17. Cruz emphasized that social media companies must be held accountable to their terms of service and that federal funding should be leveraged to remove cell phones from classrooms.

Ranking Member Maria Cantwell (D-WA): Cantwell contended that rather than threatening school connectivity funding, Congress must pass meaningful, comprehensive privacy protections regardless of where children access the internet, citing S. 836, the Children and Teens' Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA 2.0). She highlighted the acceleration of harms caused by AI, specifically noting that X's Grok chatbot generated thousands of non-consensual deepfake images. Cantwell stressed that state-level efforts to limit smartphone access in schools are critical but insufficient without federal standards to address addictive algorithms and data exploitation.

Witness Toplines:

Dr. Jean Twenge, Professor of Psychology, San Diego State University: Dr. Twenge presented data showing a sudden, sharp decline in adolescent mental health and academic performance

beginning around 2012, which she correlated with the widespread adoption of smartphones and social media. She recommended raising the minimum age for social media and AI companion apps to 16, with mandatory age verification and implementing "bell-to-bell" phone bans in schools.

[Dr. Jared Cooney Horvath, Director, LME Global](#): Dr. Horvath argued that the integration of digital devices in classrooms has degraded students' cognitive capabilities and reduced reading comprehension to mere skimming. He pointed out that educational technology can often hinder new learners in acquiring foundational skills and suggested removing screens from primary education to emphasize human learning processes.

[Emily Cherkin, Founder, The Screen Time Consultant](#): Ms. Cherkin warned that the "wholesale restructuring of childhood around screens" has precipitated crises in mental health, learning, creativity, and democracy. She advocated for a "tech intentional" approach that prioritizes skill-building over screen time and supported legislative measures like KOSMA to restrict access, arguing that current business models are fundamentally at odds with child development.

[Dr. Jenny Radesky, Associate Professor of Pediatrics, University of Michigan Medical School](#): Dr. Radesky testified that digital platforms are designed to optimize engagement at the expense of child well-being, citing manipulative design features that prolong use and collect data. She called for upstream regulation through federal legislation, such as COPPA 2.0, to enforce child-centered design standards and prevent the monetization of children's attention by both consumer tech and educational technology companies.

Major Takeaways:

- Sen. **Marsha Blackburn** (R-TN) emphasized the need for "safety-by-design" mandates to require platforms to mitigate harms before products reach children and cited [S. 1748](#), the Kids Online Safety Act, as a solution to limit exploitative data practices.
- Sen. **Ben Ray Luján** (D-NM) condemned AI platforms for allowing interactions that encourage suicide or generate non-consensual intimate images, suggesting Congress use subpoena power to force tech executives to address these failures.
- Sen. **Ed Markey** (D-MA) disputed claims that E-Rate funds provide unsupervised access by noting that the *Children's Internet Protection Act*, [P.L. 106-554](#), requires recipients to monitor activity and filter harmful content.
- Sen. **Brian Schatz** (D-HI) voiced support for "bell-to-bell" phone bans in schools and argued that the most powerful aspect of KOSMA is the ban on algorithmic feeds for teenagers, stating that parents are powerless against sophisticated engagement algorithms.

- Sen. **Amy Klobuchar** (D-MN) highlighted that platforms generated over $11 billion in ad revenue from minors in 2022 and argued that social media companies should lose Section 230 protections when they act as publishers rather than open platforms.
- Sen. **Eric Schmitt** (R-MO) likened the current tech industry to the tobacco industry in terms of its awareness of product harms and the anticipated future hearings in which executives will be confronted with this evidence.
- Sen. **Tammy Baldwin** (D-WI) highlighted the risks of a deregulated AI sector and shared a constituent story regarding a family member harmed by a chatbot to argue against granting waivers from federal rules to AI companies.
- Sen. **Bernie Moreno** (R-OH) proposed a strict ban on social media for anyone under 18 and suggested withholding federal funding from schools that allow children to access phones during the day.
- Sen. **John Hickenlooper** (D-CO) cited successful examples of local school districts banning cell phones to improve student focus and suggested that active engagement with technology is preferable to passive consumption.
- Sen. **Dan Sullivan** (R-AK) discussed his legislation regarding mental health ads – S. 414, ADS for Mental Health Services Act – and suggested mandating that online platforms run public service announcements, similar to requirements for broadcasters.