

SB 739 Testimony  
Algorithmic Addiction Fund — Establishment  
February 20, 2024  
Senate Finance Committee

Submitted by Rita M. Montoya  
District 18  
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Dear Chair Beidle, Vice-Chair Klausmeier and Respected Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

I urge you to issue a **favorable report on SB 739 Algorithmic Addiction Fund — Establishment.**

I am a mother of two children, ages 8 and 9, residing in Montgomery County. In the past year, they have become aware of social media. Despite a no social media policy in our own home, my children are increasingly exposed to it by others in various settings. Like many, they are drawn to the fun of it all. Today, I am testifying solely in my capacity as a mother of young children concerned about the manipulative designs built into social media and other online platforms but I would be remiss to mention that I am also a PTA President of a public elementary school; a candidate for a school board of education; and a former Juvenile Public Defender. I say remiss because my concern today is not just for my own children but for all children.

Children need education to promote digital and media literacy and prevent algorithmic addiction. In 2021, ninety-seven percent of children ages 3-18 had home internet access.<sup>1</sup> During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, eighty-two percent of youth ages 14-22 indicated using social media constantly or every day.<sup>2</sup> Still, studies indicate that children and teens do not comprehend the full complexity of how their digital data is collected, analyzed, and used.<sup>3</sup> While public schools may currently promote student evaluation and analyzation of information as well as advocate for ethical student behavior online, when it comes to social media, teaching children to select legitimate information sources and be good digital citizens is not enough.

Parents and guardians are a child's first teachers and we have a responsibility to educate our children. However, like other parents and guardians, I cannot teach my children what I do not know. I am 42 years old. I did not own my first computer until I went to law school in 2005 and did not own a smartphone until I began my legal career as a Public Defender in 2008. Even then, I only bought a smartphone to keep on top of client email and look up caselaw as needed in court. I did not have a social media account until 2010 and consider myself a reluctant user. As my children started to feel the pressure to have smartphones like some their peers, I initially felt somewhat unprepared to have conversations about internet and social media literacy as I

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<sup>1</sup> See National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). Children's Internet Access at Home. *Condition of Education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved February 19, 2024 from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cch>.

<sup>2</sup> See *Coping with COVID-19: How Young People Use Digital Media to Manage Their Mental Health* ISSN: 2767-0163 (Common Sense Media, Hopelab and California Health Care Foundation: March 15, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> See Livingstone, S. Stoilova, M. and Nandagiri, R. (2019) Children's data and privacy online: Growing up in a digital age. An evidence review. London: London School of Economics and Political Science (23-26).

did not fully understand the level of manipulation built into social media platforms. While I am now more educated, I am still trying to figure out how to explain it in words that 8 and 9 year olds can understand without scaring them. As a parent, I often borrow language used by my children's educators to maintain consistency for my children and to educate myself. Like active shooter, fire and earthquake education, teachers are primed for and well-versed in explaining scary situations to children in age-appropriate ways provided they have the resources and funding to do so.

Children must understand the lack of autonomy taking place when they use social media platforms so they can make informed choices while they are using them. Our society places a high value on each individual's ability to make their own decisions. Critical thinking skills specific to social media are essential for children to overcome the manipulative algorithmic designs built into social media platforms. Social media platforms curate content for users based on prior interactions on the platform and even non-platform use of the electronic device. Recently, a simple 30 second conversation with my child about rock band summer camp, where my phone was not open to any social media platform but simply sitting on the arm rest of my chair, resulted in at least three different advertisements for rock band summer camp when I opened a social media application an hour later. Since signing him up, I have been flooded with advertisements for other music options from camp to lessons. In her book, *Unwired*, Gaia Bernstein provides a variety of examples of users' unknowing loss of autonomy including how YouTube, a popular video streaming platform, removes a viewer's stopping signal by playing additional videos automatically after the viewer's selected video ends.<sup>4</sup> As Bernstein points out, manipulative designs do not allow the viewer an opportunity to reflect and decide whether they want to continue.<sup>5</sup> While education about these manipulative techniques is not sufficient to overcome these challenges, it is a necessary first step to preventing algorithmic addiction and maintaining one's autonomy while using social media platforms.

Children deserve the opportunity to learn the tools they need to maintain their power to choose their response. SB 739 provides exactly that.

For the reasons above, I urge you to issue a **favorable report on SB 739 Algorithmic Addiction Fund — Establishment.**

Respectfully Submitted,



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<sup>4</sup> See Cambridge University Press (2023).

<sup>5</sup> See Bernstein, *Unwired*.