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Education, Health, and
Environmental Affairs Committee
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Chair, Joint Committee on
Cybersecurity, Information Technology
and Biotechnology



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THE SENATE OF MARYLAND
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

**Testimony in Support of SB231 - Public Schools - Cyber Safety Guide and Training Course
- Development, Implementation, and Reporting**

January 27th, 2021

Chair Pinsky, Vice Chair Kagan, Members of the Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

Thank you for your consideration of SB231. This simple bill directs the State Department of Education, the Maryland Department of Health, and the Behavioral Health Administration to consult with professionals who specialize in child development and child psychology to develop a cyber safety guide and training course as a resource for students, parents, and teachers grappling with the emergence of ubiquitous social media and technology usage in our daily lives. The guide will be developed in consultation with experts in child development and child psychology, and include information and best practices promoting responsible internet use through the prevention and management of:

- Cyberbullying
- Content depicting or encouraging self-harm
- Hate speech
- Graphic content
- Identity theft and cybersecurity threats
- Dissemination of false information
- Negative impacts of social media and technology usage on behavioral and physical health

The handbook will then be posted to the websites of the Department of Education, Department of Health, and the Behavioral Health Administration, and distributed to each county board of education for their own use.

Over the past year, more of our lives have been spent online than ever. While we've all taken necessary steps to slow the spread of COVID, we have depended on technology for work, school, and to connect with one another. For those of us with children, I'm sure you've noticed just how much our children are online now as compared to just a year ago - and this is not a new trend.

Over the interim in 2019, the Joint Committee on Cybersecurity, IT, and Biotechnology had the pleasure of being joined by Dr. Jacob Swartz - a Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Fellow at Georgetown University Hospital, and Dr. Steven Czinn from the University of Maryland School of Medicine. Their research has been focused specifically on the issue of teen tech and social media use, and during their testimony they noted, among teens, technology had become a constant presence. 95% of teens in 2018 had access to a smartphone, 45% were online at almost all times, and over 90% used a social media platform. While the same data for the past year is not currently available, prior to COVID those figures were on an upward trajectory year over year.

Simultaneous with the growing prominence of this technology over the last 5-8 years, suicide rates across 10 to 14, 14 to 18, and 18 to 21 year old youth have increased at least 50%. Since 2010, the suicide rate has doubled for teen boys and tripled for teen girls.

Obviously the correlation between these trends and statistical points is not enough to warrant an assumption of causation. Suicide rates and mental and behavioral disorders are extremely complex and subject to a multitude of factors. But recent research has shown complex links between mental health and social media usage. In his testimony to our committee, Dr. Swartz made a point of highlighting that, when used in the right ways, our kids can see benefits from social media and technology. It truly can be a non-intrusive way to build social connections and engage in positive community building. However, when used improperly, social media and technology use can be invasive, addictive, isolating, and destructive.

Luckily, emerging research is beginning to point to steps we as a community can take to encourage healthy cyber practices for our kids. Simple steps like minimizing screen time early in life, participating in healthy patterns of co-use on the part of the parent, and modeling healthy screen use can make all the difference - but they do require knowledge of best practices and a concerted effort on all our parts to come together and address this complex public health issue.

Over the past year, many jurisdictions have done excellent work to promote healthy online practices for students. It is my intent that this handbook would draw upon emerging expertise in the fields of child psychology and development, as well as the experiences of our local school systems, to create a resource for parents, children, and teachers to draw on when attempting to address concerns of safe technology use in their daily lives. You will see in the fiscal note of the legislation that while MSDE estimates that general fund expenditures may increase by up to \$1.4 million if contractual services are necessary, the Department of Legislative Services notes that free modules and services are available to meet the requirements of the bill at reduced cost. DLS

also notes that development and distribution of the cyber safety guidebook can be achieved with existing resources. I believe this work is important to our constituents, and will be of great use to parents, teachers, and students attempting to balance the demands of an increasingly digital world with their own mental and behavioral well-being. For that reason **I respectfully request a favorable report on SB231.**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Katie Fry Hester".

Senator Katie Fry Hester
Howard and Carroll Counties