An Open Letter to the Kansas State Board of Education

October 12, 2026

To: Members of the Kansas State Board of Education
Dr. Jake Steel, Commissioner of Education
Dr. Zach Conrad, Deputy Commissioner
Re: Draft Policy Regarding the Effective Use of Instructional Technology in Kansas Schools

> **Our request:** add one sentence to Section A, item 3 of the draft, requiring education for students, educators and families on how technology affects attention, learning, well-being and safety.

A policy can make adults intentional. Only education can make students intentional.

Every parent and teacher in Kansas has watched it happen: a child who cannot put the device down and cannot tell you why. Restrictions and policies can create necessary space for students to learn in non-digital ways. But until someone teaches that child what is happening in their own brain, they remain deprived of the knowledge that can give them agency over their technology choices now and in their future.

Thank you for the care you are putting into this policy. Intentional use is the right goal. Not all screen time is equal. The draft is right that technology in schools should add educational value a non-digital approach cannot. Especially for our youngest students, that kind of structure should come first.

Students

For students, the draft takes an important first step. It asks every district to describe its methods for developing students' digital citizenship skills and supporting their well-being. We argue it falls short because it does not say *what* students should learn regarding technology. Intentional use is not something a policy can require of a child. It has to be taught, in age-appropriate steps, with more ownership as students grow. A time limit tells a child when to stop. It cannot teach them to tell the difference between creating and scrolling, why it was so hard to stop, or what to do when things go wrong.

Teachers

Your goal is quality instruction in every Kansas classroom. Quality instruction means meeting children where they are, and where they are has changed dramatically over the past decade. The draft recognizes that prolonged or inappropriate device use can affect students' engagement, attention and social interaction. Teachers who understand how and why, including what device use does to motivation and memory, are better equipped to teach today's students. Yet the draft asks

nothing about giving teachers this knowledge. We believe this knowledge will improve quality instruction. It is a missing piece that teachers desperately need.

Parents

On parents, the draft says it plainly: "Parents play a fundamental role in their child's education." It asks schools to involve families in developing their plans, to give them clear information, to let them opt out, and to have them acknowledge the plan. Those are real commitments. But a parent deserves to understand what they are deciding.

We have witnessed how educating parents is one of the most powerful things a school can do. In May 2026, parents from Syracuse USD 494, one district where our program is used, stood before you and described what changed once they understood what screens were doing to their children. They chose to implement expectations that devices were turned in at night, play time between siblings increased, and children chose playing outside over device time. Parents felt empowered through a combination of education and community support. Restriction did not produce that. A policy cannot create community. Education did. They believe it changed their community. We envision a time when every Kansas community is able to say the same.

Safety

Then there is safety. The draft commits this board to promoting the "health, safety, and well-being of students." Filters and monitoring are part of that, but not all encompassing. A child is safest when they can recognize a risk, know what to do, and know which adult to tell. That has to be taught, and it matters most with new tools. Before students are asked to use artificial intelligence, for example, they should learn what it is, where it can mislead or cause harm, and how to remain safe.

The technology education we never implemented

This is the technology education we never implemented. We handed devices to students, staff and families without making sure they all understood how these tools affect learning, behavior, safety and well-being. As Syracuse Superintendent Paul Larkin put it, "Failing to address screen health in schools is almost education malpractice."

We have done this before with great success. Youth smoking did not decline only because we restricted cigarettes. It fell when young people were shown how the industry was designed to hook them, and they chose differently. Restriction and education worked together. It changed the health of a generation for the better. Kansas has the power to do the same with this current generation.

Our Request

Section A, item 3 of the draft already requires each district's plan to address digital citizenship and student well-being. Districts must submit those plans by the end of this school year, so what the policy says now will shape what they write. We ask the board to add one sentence to that item:

> **"The plan shall include developmentally appropriate instruction for students, with corresponding education and support for educators and families, on how technology use and design affect attention, learning, emotional well-being and safety, the safe use of any technology the school introduces, and where to seek help if harm occurs."**

In practice, that means four things:

1. Teaching students how device use, especially unintentional or excessive use, affects the brain, learning, emotions, mood, self-confidence and safety.
2. Teaching persuasive design and algorithms, and their effect on focus, learning and relationships.
3. Preparing teachers to understand how technology shapes their students' attention, motivation and memory, and educating parents in ways that go beyond information and acknowledgment.
4. Teaching safety directly: how to recognize risks online, what to do, and which trusted adults to turn to if something goes wrong. For any new tool a school introduces, including AI, that teaching should come before students are asked to use it.

This is not a new subject or a new burden. It fits within the social-emotional and health education standards Kansas has already adopted. We are asking for a standard, not a vendor. Districts can meet it in many ways. What matters is that it happens.

A device policy tells children what they cannot do. Education tells them why, keeps them safe, and prepares them for the world they will actually live in. Kansas can lead on both.

Respectfully,

The Screen Guardians Team

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Attachment

A. Blue Ribbon Task Force on Student Screen Time: Screen Time and Mental Health Recommendations

ATTACHMENT A

Blue Ribbon Task Force on Student Screen Time

Report to the Kansas State Board of Education, November 8, 2024, page 13

Screen Time and Mental Health

1. **The task force recommends districts provide digital citizenship education from nontechnology industry resources, which incorporate unbiased or independently funded research.**
2. **The task force recommends districts share peer reviewed research and discuss mental health concerns associated with excessive use of social media, gaming, platforms, and instant messaging with students, families, and district staff.**
3. **The task force recommends districts develop a robust website and/or other means of communication with parents, students, and the community that is not reliant upon social media.**
4. The task force recommends educators have students take regular breaks from screens throughout the school day.

How this connects to our request

Recommendations 1 through 3 call for education, shared research and clear communication with students, families and staff. Our requested addition to Section A, item 3 of the draft policy would carry those recommendations into each district's plan:

> **"The plan shall include developmentally appropriate instruction for students, with corresponding education and support for educators and families, on how technology use and design affect attention, learning, emotional well-being and safety, the safe use of any technology the school introduces, and where to seek help if harm occurs."**

Source: Kansas State Department of Education, Blue Ribbon Task Force on Student Screen Time Report (Nov. 8, 2024), ksde.gov.