

Testimony in favor of HP530/LD844 “An Act to Regulate Social Media Use by Minors Under 16 Years of Age”

Attn: co-Chairs Senator Carney & Representative Kuhn, and members of the Judiciary Committee

I am writing in support of Representative Fredette’s bill “An Act to Regulate Social Media Use by Minors Under 16 Years of Age”.

For background, I am the proud parent of an awesome teenager, a recent school board member, a PhD Candidate at Muskie School (USM) researching the impact of device-free experiences on adolescents, and a summer camp director with over 25 years of experience working directly with teenagers. I currently serve as Board President of Maine Summer Camps, and last year co-authored a MEPRI Annotated Bibliography for the legislatures education committee on “[Research on Social Media and Child & Adolescent Well-Being](#)”.

My comments on the impact of social media on adolescents blend my knowledge of the scientific literature on the topic, with my decades of experience working with adolescents, my experience of K-12 education as a board member, my wife’s experience as a therapist dealing primarily with High School age clients, and my role as a dad. My comments reflect my own understandings, and are not the official position of any organization I am affiliated with.

I believe that LD530 is an excellent step towards limiting, and perhaps even undoing, some of the greatest harms being inflicted on young people by social media platforms.

The bill does not appear to be an effort to ban social media platforms in the state, merely delay the age of first use of social media by young people. This is a vitally important concept, backed by significant research. In fact, the literature on social media effects is clear – delaying the age of first use beyond the ages of about 13-15 for girls, and beyond about 14-16 for boys has profound impacts on future outcomes.

This concept is one we are all familiar with, in a wide range of domains. We do not allow adolescents under the age of 16 to operate motor vehicles, we do not allow people under the age of 21 to purchase or consume alcohol, or tobacco, or cannabis, or gambling. We prohibit these activities because we recognize two things 1) they are potentially harmful to self and others, and 2) young people frequently lack the executive function/inhibition to exercise self-control/restraint/operate safely. Beyond this, research has established that habits picked up during these developmentally sensitive periods tend to be lifelong, or at a minimum very long lasting. The likelihood of an individual developing alcohol dependency skyrockets when that individual has their first drink before age 18, for instance.

So we have an established precedent of protecting young people from harmful activities, at least until they are old enough to make informed choices and can be reasonably assumed to self-regulate.

Which leaves the question of – is social media harmful? The harms caused to communities and democracies by social media fueled extremism and disinformation is undeniable. This is about individual harms. Again, the literature is clear, far more so than a review conducted in 2015 would have indicated. By 2025 we have a range of studies that not only show correlation, but strongly indicate causal links between social media and an array of individual harms. Increased rates of anxiety and depression, increased suicidality, increased in attentional disorders, increased risks of self-harm associated with

body issues, socio-somatic tic disorders, etc etc etc. Anecdotally the list is even longer – speak to any pediatrician, therapist, or medical professional and they will regale you with stories of young patients “self-diagnosing” sometimes incredibly rare and dangerous conditions based on social media influences. Everything from ASD to cardiological conditions.

Unfortunately, the tech companies responsible for social media apps and platforms will not voluntarily address these harms. The current, harmful, configuration of social media is deliberately designed to maximize attention and time on site, at the expense of all other considerations. Attention can be monetized, and the cost of harms is externalized. The obligation to increase profits directly leads to the harmful effects of social media.

LD844 would force social media companies to care enough to take action, through the dual recommendations

- 1) Real KYC requirements. Financial institutions are required to know their customer (KYC) in order to open and maintain accounts. This mechanism is well established, and broadly accepted as necessary in order to prevent fraud and abuse. That is just to protect our money. It should not be too problematic to impose similar requirements in order to protect our kids.
- 2) Real teeth. Unless regulatory bodies with the power to impose fines on social media companies step up, those companies will continue to exploit children, and the flaws in their psychology, for profit. The equation must be changed, and the incentives aligned with doing the right thing.

I urge you to vote “ought to pass” on this proposed legislation, with the provisions for enforcement and fines intact.

While I can not attend the in-person hearing due to work travel requirements, I am more than ready to help answer any questions or provide any clarification the committee may require. Please don’t hesitate to reach out.

Sincerely,

Matt Pines, M.Ed., PhD (Candidate)

Maine Teen Camp, co-Owner/Director

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