Introduction to Parent Tools

Whenever the question of what to do comes up, there are always three answers:

1. **ORGANIZE**
2. **ORGANIZE**
3. **ORGANIZE**

As edtech has been adopted by the vast majority of school districts in the United States, a movement to reduce its overuse has emerged. This section of the toolkit contains information about ongoing parent organizing activities around the country and resources created by those groups.

In most cases, the first thing for concerned parents to do is to set up a meeting with either school or district administrators. The purpose of an initial meeting will usually be to ask questions about the school or district's educational technology policies and practices.

If you are at that stage you have probably spoken to other parents in your school or district, but now is the time to ask for their active support. You are **much more powerful** as a group of 6 to 10 than you are as an individual. A larger group shows a busy administrator this is not a passing concern that can be ignored without consequence.

Since many parents are particularly concerned about the problems associated with social media and gaming, another approach that can be taken is to gain the school's cooperation in surveying students about the general issues surrounding screen use, both at home and in school. By feeding back the results to students, parents, and staff, all the stakeholders feel some ownership of the problem, and the issue of screen overuse can be addressed in a cooperative problem-solving manner. This may or may not lead to immediate changes in school practices and policies, but it will have opened up that subject for discussion.

Tools for Local Action

In order to build group support, you will need to be both a good listener and a persuader. To help persuade others that the cause is just and worth the fight, you may wish to use documents in "The Problem" section of the Action Kit. These summarize and reference studies that show the effects of excessive screen time on areas such as health, learning, and privacy.

One powerful way of demonstrating support to school administrators is by circulating a petition. There are a number of online tools you can use to do so. This can be done before your initial approach, or as a next step if your first approach is rebuffed. In the Action Kit, we have included several sample petitions that have actually been used across the country. Please feel free to

adapt them for your own use by changing details and language as you see fit. These same petitions can be adapted for use as letters if there are only a few signatories.

If you wish to bring handouts to a meeting, or use handouts to increase your community's understanding of the issue, the Action Kit has a selection of fact sheets, many of which were created by members of the Action Network. Since these are short, read a few and select the one which will be most helpful in your situation. Like the petitions, many of these can be edited and adapted to your own specific needs.

As your organizing intensifies, you should take every opportunity to utilize contacts with local media to state your case before the general public. This may mean talking to journalists about your petition, or requesting that they attend a meeting at the School Board. It could also include writing a letter to the editor, samples of which are included in the Action Kit.

At some point, you and your group will need to be very clear about what, exactly, you wish to see changed. A sample set of policy principles summarizes the types of changes we are advocating at the local district level and the state/legislative level. Again, feel free to adapt this to your own needs.

You may find that after exerting pressure on a school district, you will be invited to serve on a committee to review their edtech and screen time policies. If the district is truly interested in making change, you have won half the battle. The other half is making sure to set a process in place to implement the suggested changes and continually monitor the progress toward the goals you have set. In Arlington, Virginia, for example, a group of parent activists had a seat at the table and created an excellent set of recommendations for their district. They are working now to ensure that the district responds.

Some parent groups, such as Wait Until 8th and Turning Life On are particularly focused on the dangers of children's overuse of smartphones, especially gaming and social media apps. Both groups encourage families to seek peer support in delaying the use of smartphones until at least 8th grade. Allowing smartphones to be used during class exacerbates these problems, but it also has negative consequences for learning. Away for the Day provides resources and support for parents advocating for no smartphone policies in schools.

Legislative and Legal Action

Ultimately, for parents and teachers to slow the rush toward edtech, legal action may be needed. Nobody can foresee when and how this might occur. It might take the form of lawsuits against tech companies or school districts. Legislation will undoubtedly play a role.

To date, there have been several legislative efforts in the US dealing with digital devices and schools. In April 2018, Maryland passed the nation's first classroom screen safety law. The law

required the state department of education to consult with the health department and develop health and safety best practices that would address the potential harm caused by screens to students' vision and musculoskeletal systems. Unfortunately, the tech industry had undue influence in developing the guidelines, so they are not as strong or as clear as advocates had hoped. But, many view this as a good first step and a possible model for other states.

Oregon introduced similar legislation in 2019, calling for a state study to set safety recommendations for students' use of technology in schools, and allows parents to opt out if they so choose. As of this writing, it is still in committee.

Other legislation both in the U.S. and around the world has focused on excluding smartphones from classrooms, primarily as a means of preventing distraction, but also to help address online bullying. France notably took this step in 2018. Similar legislation has been passed in individual states and provinces in Australia and Canada. On the local level, restrictions on cell phone use in schools is common, but California went further and has enacted legislation asking all school districts to come up with smartphone policies to limit or prohibit student use at school.

Before legislative action on a broad scale can be achieved, other legal actions can be taken by parents who face administrators unwilling to share information about their districts' edtech policies and practices, or unwilling to consider making changes to those policies. In Eanes, Texas, for example, a group of parents has issued a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request seeking details of the district's edtech contracts and the analysis that was used to rationalize the purchases. If the district fails to comply with their request, a lawsuit may follow. Their strategy, which they are encouraging others to consider, is outlined in "A Possible Legal Strategy," included in this Action Kit.

The ubiquity and popularity of digital devices – and the financial and political power of the edtech industry – makes the thought of tackling the problems of our schools' excessive use of screens seem overwhelming. Undoubtedly, that is how anti-smoking activists in the 1950's felt, as well. Yet, if parents, with the support of teachers, organize themselves and insist on transparency and the utilization of hard evidence in edtech decisions, progress is more than just possible. We at the Children's Screen Time Action Network believe that eventually, either through lawsuits or by legislation, concerned parents and teachers can and will prevail.