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OPINION

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State should get smartphones out of schools

By Jo Ann Freiberg and Pat A. Ciccone

We're at a critical crossroad ... fast approaching a dangerous cliff. This impending crisis caught us all off guard but is upon us and without swift and immediate action could well become the next public health crisis impacting everyone.

Children are growing up differently. In the past two generations, more than ever before in centuries of human history: children have moved away from play-based childhoods to phone-based childhoods. Children born after 1995 are the subjects of two grave, impactful mistakes: the over-protection of their lives in the real world while simultaneously having unfettered access to the virtual world, including the dark web, pornography and everything else imaginable.

The smartphone was born in 2010. In 2011 23% of teens had smartphones, but by 2016, that number grew to 79%. In 2016, 28% of children aged 8 – 12 had one. Access to the virtual world is now in children's backpacks and pockets; fostering the addictive tendency to check their social media posts liked and retweeted. Youth are spending countless hours of their leisure time staring at their phones instead of pursuing real world relationships and activities.

Since human beings are biologically and psychologically hard-wired to be in synchronous relationships to thrive, in their absence, there is documented, stunning and troubling increases in anxiety, depression, self-harm, feelings of worthlessness, alienation, loneliness and trauma in youth.

These increases are exacerbated during sensitive periods of growth, particularly during puberty. Gen Z is the first gener-

ation to go through puberty in a phone-based world and this reality illustrates the impact of this crisis. In the December 19, 2023, Atlantic, an article titled, "It sure looks like phones are making kids dumber" adds to the worry by theorizing that beyond mental health issues, smart phones may also be contributing to the back sliding in growth of academic achievement.

Over the past six months, in the national and local press, there has been a clear increase in the amount of coverage given to this current screen time threat. Most recently in the June 12, 2024, the Hartford Courant published a feature article, "Navigating adolescence offline: Life as a teen without social media isn't easy, but some families manage." Shortly after this article was printed the Surgeon General demanded that warning labels be placed on social media sites because of the increasing adolescent mental health problems. We know we have a problem, and its impact is irrefutable. What we do about it is complex and we need to follow the researched guideposts.

Our children are suffering and Jonathan Haidt author of the well-researched book, "The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness," acknowledges that our children are suffering and offers four foundational recommendations, that we should all – legislators, educators and parents – take very seriously. He stresses the need to work collectively as a village to achieve these reforms and pull our children back from the



Most people share your suspicion, but they are not sure what to do about it. Speak to your friends, your neighbors, your coworkers, your social media followers, and your political representatives. If you speak up and support the four foundational reforms, you will inspire many others to join you." This is a clear call to action.

Our hope is that in all segments of society we will wake up and take this as seriously as we did the COVID-19 pandemic. Legislators need to act with sound policies and statutory requirements; Educators need to work collaboratively with parents to limit access to smartphones and social media until children are mature enough to handle it.

And, as adults, we need to understand that we are role-models...we might as well be good ones when it comes to how and when we use technology, the internet and social media. Let's heed the warnings of our own children. A class of fifth graders were asked in a recent class exercise, "if you could change one thing in the world, what would that be?" One young man answered without hesitation, "that my mom would get off her phone."

Connecticut leads the nation in so many arenas, let this be the next bold and impressive step to lead and model Connecticut and the national through this child development crisis.

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The authors want Connecticut to lead the nation in getting smartphones out of schools.

FILE

edge of the cliff.

Those foundational reforms are: First, no smartphones before high school. Second, no social media before the age of 16. Third, phone-free schools (not just phone-free during instruction). And, finally, Far more unsupervised play and childhood independence.

Haidt ends his book with, "The most important lesson here is to speak up. If you think the phone-based childhood is bad for children and you want to see a return to play-based childhood, say so.