

Dear Senator / Representative,

I'm writing to express my concerns about a mental health program being piloted in Pennsylvania's schools called Kooth. Kooth is a digital mental health and social media platform from the United Kingdom that has message boards, peer-to-peer interactions, and chat-based practitioner-to-child messaging with a goal of improving mental health in children.

Kooth was introduced to the United States in late 2022 via Pennsylvania's school children. Kooth US was awarded a grant through the PA Department of Human Services. The grant was funded in the fiscal year 2022-23 PA budget. This allowed Kooth access to approximately 150,000 PA students ages 14 years old and up through our school systems without parental knowledge or consent. Currently, we are the only state to participate in this experiment with the intent to improve kids' mental health through the school system using Kooth. Unfortunately, Pennsylvania students were most likely targeted because our minor consent laws make it easy for Kooth to access our children without parental permission.

Here are some of my concerns about Kooth:

- **Excludes The Parent:** Kooth encourages children to go around their parent or a trusted loved one for help. Parents do not get to choose the adult who will be advising their child on critical mental health concerns. If the child displays concerning signals when using the platform, Kooth contacts the school instead of the parent.

- **Children Become Vulnerable**

- Children are not mature enough to understand the potential future consequences of discussing mental health concerns on a public chat site. Nothing online is truly "anonymous". What will Kooth do with the mental health data collected on children? Will this be included in their medical records or school records?

- How will children be protected from content posted by others on the platform since section 230 of the U.S. Communications Decency Act of 1996 shields internet companies from any legal responsibility for content posted by their users? (1)

- No long-term studies have been done on the effectiveness and safety of the Kooth platform for children.

- **No Oversight** With no oversight system in place, this program leaves the door wide open for any agenda to be pushed on our children- political, social, or other.

- **Encourages Social Media/ Online Messaging** Students are encouraged to go online to solve mental health problems rather than building relationships in their community in real life.

- Do students really need more time looking at screens or on social media? *The U.S. Surgeon General just released an official advisory about the negative effects social media has on youth mental health. (2)*

- Can a practitioner messaging a child occasionally online really get to the root cause of a true mental health problem?

- **Potential Tax Burden for Citizens** While currently Kooth is subsidized through a \$3 million block grant, this may soon become a taxpayer liability.

Sincerely,

1. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46751>

2. <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/23/surgeon-general-issues-new-advisory-about-effects-social-media-use-has-youth-mental-health.html>