

Western Ohio Advocacy Network (WOAN) Testimony
House Primary and Secondary Education Committee
June 24, 2024
SB 29

Chairman Manning, Vice-Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee WOAN is submitting this testimony to SB 29 as an extremely concerned interested party. WOAN is a coalition of over 40 school districts, career centers and ESCs located in NW Ohio. Our focus is on advocating on behalf of our students and families protecting our ability to make decisions locally that are in the best interests of our communities. The use of technology and all of the challenges it creates is not lost on us. Neither is the potential harm our students face should technology, or the records created by technology, be used incorrectly or fall into the wrong hands, however we have significant concerns over the impact SB 29 has on our ability to monitor and protect our students.

Schools today have the ability to use programs that look for certain words or phrases which may signify a threat to our students or staff. The bill would limit this to only responding to the immediate threat of life or safety, eliminating our ability to reach out to a student with mental health challenges until the last minute when intervention may be too late. It also will limit our ability to monitor for bullying activity or inappropriate sexual activity by students.

Websites, games and other inappropriate content can, in most cases, be blocked by security software, however new sites and content pop up every day. Our ability to protect students from this kind of inappropriate exposure will be handcuffed. We are not talking about monitoring personal student devices, we are talking about publicly owned and school issued devices which are to only be used for educational purposes.

The General Assembly and Governor recently demonstrated their concern over the use of social media and phones by students when they enacted HB 250 requiring districts adopt a cell phone policy. On the other hand, we believe this bill, as currently written, provides students with a different avenue to access social media and post or send harmful content with no fear of consequences by allowing the activity to occur over school issued devices.

The security of student data, and what can be done by third party vendors, is critically important. We support the protections and requirements in the bill regarding the safety and security of the data providers may acquire in the course of fulfilling the obligations of their contract. Data collected by these providers should be protected in much the same way as protected health information and breeches should be handled in a similar manner. Outlining contracting terms, ownership and requirements for data security are important components that we support and those should be retained and passed by the General Assembly. Parental notification requirements are important as well and something we currently do with our device agreements that parents and students must sign and the beginning of each school year.

Protecting student data is incredibly important and we ask that the committee continue to work on this legislation thus imposing critical security measures on third party vendors. However, we ask that you revisit the language handcuffing districts as we attempt to provide a safe, supportive learning environment for all of our students and staff.