

PAUSE Ontario Advocacy Package

Ending Unrestricted Screen Exposure in Ontario Schools

Executive Summary

Whether or not your child has experienced specific incidents, the research is overwhelming: unrestricted screen exposure in schools harms learning and mental health. This comprehensive package provides two advocacy pathways—one for parents with documented incidents, and one for parents advocating based on research and systemic evidence.

You are not alone. Ontario's own Minister of Education has acknowledged that 50% of Grade 6 students and 42% of Grade 9 students are failing provincial math standards. Ontario school boards have filed a \$4.5 billion lawsuit alleging that social media has caused an attention, learning, and mental health crisis. If the system recognizes the harm, it's time for comprehensive action.

Two Advocacy Pathways

Pathway 1: Research-Based Advocacy

For all parents concerned about unrestricted screen exposure based on peer-reviewed research and systemic evidence. No specific incidents required.

Use this if:

- You're concerned about the broader issue even if your child hasn't shown obvious problems
- You want to advocate proactively based on evidence

- You prefer not to review your child's browsing history

Pathway 2: Evidence-Based Advocacy

For parents who have discovered inappropriate content, witnessed distraction, or documented specific incidents.

Use this if:

- You've found inappropriate content on your child's school device
- You've documented browsing history showing off-task behavior
- Your child has experienced academic or mental health impacts from screen exposure

What the Research Shows

Academic Impact

- **National Bureau of Economic Research (2024):** Florida cellphone bans improved test scores by 1.1-1.4 percentiles, with greatest gains among struggling students
- **University of Miami (2025):** Unrestricted phone access reduces classroom performance by 32%
- **University at Albany meta-analysis:** Phone bans improved attendance by 50% in some schools
- **University of Wales:** Music during studying (whether liked or disliked) significantly impairs learning and memory

Mental Health Crisis

- **UC San Francisco (2025):** 35% increase in adolescent depression linked to social media use
- **CDC:** Teens with 3+ hours daily social media use face 2.7x higher risk of poor mental health outcomes
- **The Lancet Psychiatry:** Cyberbullying victims face 2.62x higher suicide risk

- **Pew Research (2024):** 48% of teens acknowledge social media harms their well-being

Multitasking Myth

- **American Psychological Association:** Task-switching reduces productivity by 40%
- **Cognitive load theory:** Working memory can only handle one complex task at a time

Ontario’s Half-Measures Are Failing

While Ontario schools have banned TikTok, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter, these selective bans are insufficient:

YouTube Loophole: Allowed for “learning purposes,” but has the same addictive features (infinite scroll, algorithmic recommendations, Shorts)

Easy Circumvention: Students bypass network filters using VPNs, mobile hotspots, and browser-based workarounds

False Security: Selective bans create the illusion of protection while the core problem persists

What We’re Asking For

PAUSE Ontario advocates for three evidence-based policies:

1. **Phone-Free Classrooms:** All personal phones stored in lockers or designated areas from 8am-3pm
2. **Eliminate Social Media Access:** Block all social media platforms (including YouTube) on school WiFi
3. **Intentional Technology Use:** Technology used only for specific, teacher-supervised educational tasks

These are not radical proposals—they are evidence-based interventions successfully implemented worldwide.

Letter Templates

This package includes two letter templates for your principal:

1. Research-Based Letter Template

For parents advocating based on research and systemic evidence (no specific incidents required)

[See: Principal Letter - Research-Based Template]

2. Evidence-Based Letter Template

For parents who have discovered inappropriate content or documented specific incidents

[See: Principal Letter - Evidence-Based Template]

Trustee Letter Template

After contacting your principal, escalate to your school board trustee using this template.

[See: Trustee Letter Template]

IPC Complaint Template

If school and board responses are inadequate, file a formal complaint with Ontario's Information and Privacy Commissioner.

[See: IPC Complaint Template]

Coalition Building Guide

Collective action is more powerful than individual advocacy. Here's how to build a parent coalition:

Step 1: Identify Allies

- Talk to parents at school pickup/drop-off
- Post in parent Facebook groups or WhatsApp chats
- Reach out to Parent Council members

Step 2: First Meeting

- Share research and personal concerns
- Agree on common goals
- Assign roles (coordinator, communications, research)

Step 3: Collective Action

- Send joint letters to principal and trustees
- Attend school board meetings together
- Present unified message to media if necessary

Action Timeline

Immediate (Week 1)

- Choose your advocacy pathway (research-based or evidence-based)
- Customize and send letter to principal
- Share PAUSE Ontario website with 3-5 other concerned parents

Short-Term (Weeks 2-4)

- Follow up with principal if no response within 5 business days
- Send letter to school board trustee
- Attend next Parent Council or school board meeting

Medium-Term (Months 2-3)

- File IPC complaint if necessary
- Build parent coalition
- Engage local media if school/board unresponsive

Long-Term (Ongoing)

- Advocate for provincial policy change through MPP
- Support other parents in your community
- Share success stories to build momentum

Critical Talking Points

When engaging with school officials, trustees, or other stakeholders:

On Legal Obligations: “The *Education Act* requires schools to provide a safe learning environment. The *Accepting Schools Act* requires notification when children are harmed. Unrestricted screen exposure constitutes harm.”

On Research Evidence: “This isn’t opinion—it’s peer-reviewed research from UCSF, NBER, University of Miami, and others. The evidence is overwhelming.”

On Ontario’s Own Acknowledgment: “Minister Calandra has acknowledged that half our students are failing math. Ontario school boards are suing social media companies for \$4.5 billion, alleging learning and mental health crises. If the system recognizes the harm, why aren’t we taking comprehensive action?”

On Half-Measures: “Banning TikTok but allowing YouTube is like banning cigarettes but allowing cigars. The addictive mechanisms are identical.”

On Proactive vs. Reactive: “Why should we wait for individual harm when the systemic evidence is clear? Proactive protection is responsible policy.”

Realistic Expectations

Systemic change takes time. Here’s a realistic timeline:

- **Months 1-2:** Initial engagement with school, coalition building
- **Months 3-4:** Escalation to trustee, school board meetings
- **Months 5-6:** IPC complaints, media engagement if necessary
- **Months 7-12:** Provincial advocacy, policy change efforts
- **Year 2+:** Ongoing advocacy, supporting other communities

You may face resistance and setbacks. Persistence, documentation, and community support are key.

Important Reminders

Protect Privacy: Document issues without revealing identifying details about your child

Stay Professional: Maintain respectful tone in all communications to strengthen credibility

Document Everything: Keep records of all communications, meetings, and responses

Build Alliances: Work with other parents, advocacy organizations, and sympathetic officials

Be Persistent: Advocacy is slow but persistence creates change

Next Steps

1. **Choose your pathway:** Research-based or evidence-based

2. **Customize your letter:** Use the appropriate template for your principal
3. **Share this package:** Forward to 3-5 other concerned parents
4. **Join the coalition:** Visit pauseontario.com to connect with other parents
5. **Take action today:** Send your letter this week

You have the power to create change. Let's protect Ontario's students together.

Additional Resources

- **PAUSE Ontario Website:** pauseontario.com
- **Minister Calandra's Letter:** [Link to Dec 3, 2025 letter]
- **Research Summary:** Available at pauseontario.com
- **Parent Coalition Guide:** Included in this package

This package was created by PAUSE Ontario (Parents Against Unrestricted Screen Exposure), a grassroots coalition of concerned Ontario parents advocating for evidence-based policies to protect students from the harms of unrestricted screen exposure in schools.

Letter to Principal: Research-Based Advocacy Template

Use this template if: You are concerned about unrestricted screen exposure based on research and systemic evidence, even if your own child hasn't experienced specific incidents yet.

[Your Name]

[Your Address]

[Your Email]

[Your Phone Number]

[Date]

[Principal's Name]

Principal

[School Name]

[School Address]

Subject: Request for Comprehensive Phone-Free Policy and Restricted Screen Exposure

Dear Principal **[Principal's Last Name]**,

I am writing as a concerned parent of a student at **[School Name]** to advocate for the implementation of a comprehensive phone-free policy and stricter controls on screen exposure during school hours.

The Research is Clear

Recent peer-reviewed studies demonstrate that unrestricted screen access during school hours significantly harms both academic performance and mental health:

Academic Impact:

- A 2024 National Bureau of Economic Research study of Florida schools found that cellphone bans improved test scores by 1.1-1.4 percentiles, with the greatest gains among struggling students.
- University of Miami research (2025) showed that unrestricted phone access reduces classroom performance by 32%.
- Meta-analysis from the University at Albany found that phone bans improved attendance by 50% in some schools.

Mental Health Crisis:

- University of California San Francisco research (2025) linked social media use to a 35% increase in depression among adolescents.

- CDC data shows teens with 3+ hours daily social media use face 2.7x higher risk of poor mental health outcomes.
- The Lancet Psychiatry found cyberbullying victims face 2.62x higher suicide risk.

Multitasking Myth:

- University of Wales research proves that listening to music (whether liked or disliked) significantly impairs learning and memory retention.
- American Psychological Association data shows task-switching reduces productivity by 40%.

Ontario’s Own Acknowledgment

Minister of Education Paul Calandra’s December 3, 2025 letter acknowledged that 50% of Grade 6 students and 42% of Grade 9 students are failing to meet provincial math standards. While phones are not the sole cause, research clearly identifies unrestricted device access as a proven contributing factor.

Additionally, Ontario school boards themselves have filed a \$4.5 billion lawsuit against social media companies, alleging these platforms have caused an attention, learning, and mental health crisis. If school boards recognize the harm, why are we not taking comprehensive action to prevent it?

Current Half-Measures Are Insufficient

While **[School Name/School Board]** has banned platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Snapchat, YouTube remains accessible for “learning purposes.” However:

- YouTube has the same addictive features: infinite scroll, algorithmic recommendations, and YouTube Shorts
- Students can easily circumvent network filters using VPNs, mobile hotspots, or browser-based workarounds
- Selective bans create a false sense of security while the core problem persists

What I'm Requesting

I am asking **[School Name]** to implement the following evidence-based policies:

- 1. Phone-Free Classrooms:** All personal phones stored in lockers or designated areas from 8am-3pm
- 2. Eliminate Social Media Access:** Block all social media platforms (including YouTube) on school WiFi
- 3. Intentional Technology Use:** Technology used only for specific, teacher-supervised educational tasks

These are not radical proposals—they are evidence-based interventions that schools worldwide have successfully implemented.

Proactive, Not Reactive

I am advocating for these changes not because my child has necessarily experienced harm (yet), but because the research shows that unrestricted exposure creates harm. Why should we wait for individual incidents when the systemic evidence is overwhelming?

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further and to collaborate with the school on implementing these protective measures. I am prepared to share the full body of research supporting these recommendations.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

Parent of **[Student Name, Grade]**

[School Name]

Attachments:

- Research summary (available at pauseontario.com)

- Minister Calandra’s letter on declining math scores

Letter to Principal: Evidence-Based Advocacy Template

Use this template if: You have discovered inappropriate content, witnessed distraction, or documented specific incidents involving your child’s school device.

[Your Name]

[Your Address]

[Your Email]

[Your Phone Number]

[Date]

[Principal’s Name]

Principal

[School Name]

[School Address]

Subject: Urgent Concern Regarding Inappropriate Content and Unrestricted Screen Exposure on School Devices

Dear Principal [Principal’s Last Name],

I am writing to you as a deeply concerned parent of a student at [School Name]. I have discovered that my child has been able to access inappropriate and non-educational content on their school-issued device, and I believe this represents a serious failure in the school’s duty to provide a safe learning environment.

Specific Incident(s)

[Describe the specific incident(s) you discovered. Examples:

- **What:** My child accessed [explicit song lyrics / inappropriate YouTube content / gaming websites / social media] on their school-issued laptop
- **When:** This occurred on [date/time period]
- **How discovered:** I discovered this by [reviewing browsing history / observing my child during homework / my child told me]
- **Impact:** This has resulted in [distraction from schoolwork / exposure to inappropriate material / decline in grades / anxiety]]

When I brought this to the attention of [IT department / teacher / administration], I was told that [quote the response you received, e.g., “the school board is unable to individually customize parental controls” or “YouTube is needed for learning”]. This response is unacceptable and demonstrates a concerning lack of action to protect students from harm.

This is Not an Isolated Case

My child’s experience is not unique. Research and evidence from across Ontario and beyond show that unrestricted screen access is creating both academic and mental health crises:

Academic Impact:

- National Bureau of Economic Research (2024): Cellphone bans improved test scores by 1.1-1.4 percentiles
- University of Miami (2025): Unrestricted phone access reduces classroom performance by 32%
- Minister Calandra’s own letter (Dec 3, 2025): 50% of Grade 6 and 42% of Grade 9 students failing provincial math standards

Mental Health Crisis:

- UC San Francisco (2025): 35% increase in adolescent depression linked to social media

- CDC: Teens with 3+ hours daily social media use face 2.7x higher mental health risk
- Ontario school boards' \$4.5B lawsuit: Alleging social media caused attention, learning, and mental health crisis

Legal and Ethical Obligations

The *Education Act* and the Ministry of Education's guidelines place clear responsibility on schools to ensure a safe and positive learning environment. The *Accepting Schools Act, 2012* requires that parents be notified when their child has been harmed. I believe that exposure to inappropriate content and the academic/mental health consequences of unrestricted screen access constitute harm that the school has a duty to prevent.

Current Half-Measures Are Insufficient

While **[School Name/School Board]** has banned some platforms, the current approach is inadequate:

- YouTube remains accessible despite having the same addictive features as banned platforms
- Students easily circumvent network filters using VPNs and mobile hotspots
- Selective bans create false security while the core problem persists

What I'm Requesting

I am formally requesting:

1. **Immediate Meeting:** A confidential meeting to discuss my child's specific incident and review the evidence I have collected
2. **Comprehensive Policy Changes:**
 - Phone-free classrooms (all personal phones stored 8am-3pm)
 - Block all social media platforms (including YouTube) on school WiFi

- Technology used only for specific, teacher-supervised educational tasks

3. Transparency: Clear communication about what steps the school will take to prevent future incidents

I have prepared documentation of the inappropriate content my child accessed and am ready to share this with you in a confidential setting. I am also prepared to escalate this matter to the school board trustees and my MPP if necessary action is not taken.

I look forward to your prompt response within **[5 business days]** and to working collaboratively to ensure the safety and well-being of all students at **[School Name]**.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

Parent of **[Student Name, Grade]**

[School Name]

Attachments:

- Documentation of inappropriate content accessed (if applicable)
- Research summary (available at pauseontario.com)
- Minister Calandra’s letter on declining math scores **[Your Name/Parent Group Name]**

[Your Address]

[Your Email]

[Your Phone Number]

[Date]

[Trustee’s Name]

School Board Trustee

[School Board Name]

[School Board Address]

Subject: Urgent Request for Action on Student Safety and Digital Technology Policies

Dear Trustee [Trustee's Last Name],

We are a group of concerned parents from **[School Name]** who are writing to you today to request your urgent intervention on a matter of student safety. Our children are being exposed to inappropriate and harmful content on school-provided laptops, and the school board's current policies are failing to protect them.

We have documented numerous instances of students accessing explicit materials, and when we raised this with the school administration and the IT department, we were informed that the board is unable and unwilling to implement content filtering software. This inaction is not only deeply concerning but also, we believe, a dereliction of the school board's duty to provide a safe learning environment as mandated by the *Education Act*.

We have already attempted to resolve this issue at the school level, but our concerns have not been adequately addressed. We are now turning to you, as our elected representative, to champion this cause at the school board level. We are requesting that you take the following actions:

- 1. Table a motion at the next school board meeting** to review and revise the board's digital technology and acceptable use policies to mandate the use of content filtering software on all student devices.
- 2. Advocate for the immediate implementation** of a pilot project to test and deploy effective filtering solutions.
- 3. Ensure that the new Student and Family Support Office** is equipped to handle and resolve complaints related to digital safety and technology use effectively.

We have prepared a detailed package of our findings and a comprehensive action plan, which we would be pleased to share with you. We are formally requesting a meeting with you at your earliest convenience to discuss this matter further.

We believe that with your leadership, we can make a significant and lasting change that will protect not only our children but all students across the school board. We look forward to your response and to working with you on this critical issue.

Sincerely,

[Your Name/Parent Group Name]

On behalf of the concerned parents of [School Name] [Your Name/Parent Group Name]

[Your Address]

[Your Email]

[Your Phone Number]

[Date]

Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario

2 Bloor Street East, Suite 1400

Toronto, ON M4W 1A8

Subject: Formal Complaint Regarding Breach of Student Privacy and Safety by [School Board Name]

Dear Information and Privacy Commissioner,

I am writing to file a formal complaint against the [School Board Name] for its failure to protect the privacy and safety of my child, and other students, by not implementing adequate safeguards on school-provided devices. This failure has resulted in students being exposed to inappropriate and harmful content, which we believe constitutes a breach of their privacy rights under the *Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (MFIPPA) and the principles outlined in your office's "Children and Youth in a Digital World" initiative.

My 11-year-old daughter, a student at [School Name], was able to access sexually explicit song lyrics and other inappropriate material on her school-issued laptop. We have documented this and other instances, which we can provide upon request. When we brought this to the attention of the school and the school board, we were informed that they are unable to implement content filtering software, citing a need for "consistency across all schools."

We believe this position is untenable and that the school board has a legal and ethical obligation to protect our children. Your office has stated that "Children should not

have to trade in their privacy for an education.” By failing to take reasonable steps to filter harmful content, the school board is forcing our children to do just that.

We have attempted to resolve this issue through the appropriate channels, including by contacting the school principal and our elected school board trustee. However, we have not received a satisfactory response. We are now turning to your office to investigate this matter and to compel the **[School Board Name]** to take the following actions:

1. **Conduct a formal investigation** into the school board’s digital technology policies and practices.
2. **Issue a public report** on your findings and recommendations.
3. **Order the school board** to implement content filtering technology on all student devices to protect children from accessing harmful and inappropriate content.

We are prepared to provide all necessary documentation to support this complaint. We thank you for your attention to this critical matter and look forward to your intervention.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]