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The Screen Time Reckoning: Educators, Parents, and the Fight For Healthier Classrooms



Taylor Callery for Education Week

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EDITOR'S NOTE

After years of rapid expansion, schools are rethinking how technology fits into teaching and learning. Concerns about screen time's **effects on attention, literacy, and social-emotional development** are prompting educators to seek a better balance. Rather than abandoning ed-tech, many districts are embracing **more intentional, developmentally appropriate use** while renewing their focus on **read-alouds, play, relationships,** and **other human-centered practices**. The challenge is using technology wisely without displacing the experiences students need most.

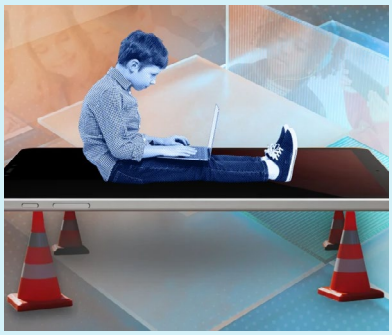


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The Good, Bad, and Ugly of Screen Time: An Explainer

By Arianna Prothero

There's a general consensus that too much screen time is bad for kids.

But what happens when everything in modern society is done on screens? What is a concerned educator or parent to do? And how do we even define screen time when our digital and real lives are becoming increasingly blurred at younger and younger ages?

Education Week consulted multiple studies and experts to answer these questions for the adults in kids' lives who are responsible for teaching today's youth how to navigate a screen-heavy world. Concerns about screen time are also becoming increasingly complicated and problematic due to advances in artificial intelligence.

While limiting screen time and establishing healthy digital habits has long been seen as the responsibility of parents, experts say that the burden should be shared by educators and policymakers, too.

What is screen time?

Nowadays, it can feel like digital screens are everywhere. From students using school-issued laptops for homework to kids talking to their grandparents over video, screens are unavoidable. Like it or not, kids' school experiences, social lives, and hobbies have gone largely digital.

There is no single, universal definition for screen time, but generally watching TV, playing on video game consoles, and using computers, tablets, and smartphones for entertainment count as screen time. Common Sense Media, a nonprofit that researches and advocates for healthy technology use among youth, further breaks screen time into four different categories: passive, interactive, communication, and content creation.

But it's getting more complicated to define screen time as more of the daily functions of life are done on screens, say experts. Doing homework on a computer has not typically been considered screen time, but watching TV has, said Supreet Mann, the director of research at Common Sense Media. "That's really challenging in today's landscape," she said. "The modality of how children are accessing



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[digital content] doesn't seem to matter nearly as much as the content that they're accessing."

That's why experts say we need a more nuanced concept of healthy screen use and guidelines for educators and parents to follow.

Is screen time bad for kids?

It certainly can be, especially if it's getting in the way of socializing, exercising, or learning. Ask almost any educator, and they can regale you with stories about cellphones distracting students in class and social media apps that facilitate bullying.

Studies have found that kids' physical health, mental health, and learning suffers the more time they're on screens.

A 2026 meta-analysis found that adolescents who spent more than two hours a day on screens had higher risks of depression compared with kids who spent one hour or less. But another study that included more than 500,000 adolescents in Europe found detrimental effects of screen time on well-being started occurring with as little as one hour of screen time a day. Other research has found that screen time is linked to weight gain, poor sleep, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity symptoms, among other issues.

While there appears to be less research on how academic-focused screen time affects kids and teens, educators in a recent EdWeek Research Center survey had a mix of positive and negative views on how technology use in the classroom is impacting students' development.

But it's hard to nail down a single point where screen time is too much that's universally true for kids of different developmental stages and maturity levels, experts point out.

Complicating matters is that screen time can be positive—even the same app on the same type of device can be a healthy outlet for one kid but not another. Think of a teenager who spends time on their phone's social media apps advocating for cleaner local parks and keeping in touch with relatives, versus a teen who's on social media late into the night losing sleep as they scroll through content that promotes eating disorders.

How much time do teens spend on their phones?

Data on this varies, but it's fair to say that teens—and increasingly younger children—spend a lot of time on screens, especially on their smartphones.

According to a 2023 U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study, half of adolescents ages 12-17 spend more than four hours a day on screens.

Research published in early 2026 found that teens spent, on average, more than an hour on their smartphones during school hours, and most of it wasn't for educational purposes, said Jason Nagata, an associate professor of pediatrics at the University of California, San Francisco who researches adolescent screen use. Teens were mostly on social media, YouTube, and video games, he said.

"So, probably unlikely to be related to schoolwork," he said. "And calculator and productivity [and] educational apps were actually some of the least used apps, for even like a minute or less a day."

With schools increasingly barring students from having their cellphones in class, those numbers might change, Nagata said. Although he also pointed out that kids can be pretty crafty at getting around the restrictions.

How much screen time is too much?

The American Academy of Pediatrics has steadily moved away from recommending strict daily screen time limits.

The AAP updated its guidance in early 2026 in favor of more flexible recommendations because screen time has become so hard to define, said Cori Cross, a Los Angeles-based pediatrician and one of the authors of the AAP's new policy on screen use and digital ecosystems.

"It would be impossible to have a parent

figure out which part of screens is entertainment and which part of screens is communication or normal daily living," she said. "Parents don't have that type of time."

Another reason for jettisoning strict time limits was that it put the onus on parents to reduce kids' screen time when it's really a society-wide problem, said Cross.

Parents only have so much control over kids' screen use. Schools are increasingly requiring students to do schoolwork on digital devices. And social media companies have created products that are not only the go-to digital hangouts for kids, they're also specifically designed to entice adolescents to spend more and more time on their devices.

What is 'healthy' screen time?

So, if experts don't want to put a firm limit on screen time, but screen time can still be harmful, where does that leave kids and the adults trying to keep them healthy?

The answer is quality and context, experts say.

Passively watching videos without educational value alone in a bedroom is likely not healthy, said Mann, Common Sense Media's research director. But watching an educational TV show with a parent or a class and actively discussing the program together is different.

However, a family with a single parent who works odd hours and lives in an unsafe neighborhood may need to make a different calculation altogether about screen time. There are situations, said Mann, where screens provide a safe, unsupervised activity when there may not be other options.

None of this is to say spending all day on screens is fine as long as it's educational, said Nagata. He still thinks the concept of screen time, even without a strict limit, provides a useful metric for reasonable limitations.

"We only have a certain number of hours in the day, and when kids are on screens for huge proportions of the day, regardless if it's educational content or not harmful content, the screen is displacing other activities that can be beneficial for health," he said. "Like being outdoors and physically active or having face-to-face social interactions with friends and peers. Or sleep."

What do educators think about screen time?

Even as schools have increasingly relied on technology for teaching students, many educators have a negative view of the effect of technology use on teaching and learning.

Majorities of educators indicated on the EdWeek Research Center survey that students' use of technology for school-related purposes has a negative impact on their social-emotional skills, classroom behavior, and physical and mental health.

A little more than a third of educators said that students' tech use for school does more to decrease than increase learning.

"There is no need for 1-to-1 [computing] in the classroom," said a Kansas-based district administrator in the EdWeek survey. "Teachers use devices as a reward, as a time-filler, they try to use it as an intervention or even in place of direct instruction, all of this is insane. Rewards should not be screen time."

Said a high school teacher from Wisconsin: "The screen is a distraction. Kids can find 'more interesting' things to do on the computer than work on the actual curriculum."

What do parents think about screen time?

In terms of parents' views, limiting screen time to reasonable amounts is a daily priority for most parents, according to an October 2025 survey by the Pew Research Center. But it's not the top priority for many parents.

Forty-two percent said that making sure that their kids' screen time is reasonable is one of their biggest priorities. By comparison, 75% of parents said that making sure their kids got enough sleep was one of their biggest priorities. (It's worth noting that some research has tied adolescent sleep problems to a heavy dose of late-night screen time.)

What role should schools play in limiting screen time?

Schools have a role to play in limiting kids' overall screen time, experts emphasize.

Roughly 9 of every 10 teachers, and school and and district leaders say that their school or district provides laptops or tablets for students at all grade levels, according to the EdWeek Research Center.

And a third of educators say elementary students in their school or district are allowed to take school-issued devices home. Three-quarters of educators say middle students can, and 92 percent say high school students are allowed to bring their devices home.

That can create a dilemma for parents, experts say.

Schools should be conscious of the fact that school-issued devices, or expecting students to log in to school email or apps after hours, may disrupt the screen limits families are trying to set, said Cross, the pediatrician who helped develop the new AAP framework.

"Schools need to understand that when they send stuff home, particularly in the elementary school ages, that has to be done on a screen, that a lot of these kids don't have the type of monitoring that they have in school," she said. "Somebody's not standing there while they're doing their homework."

And once on a device, it's easy to get distracted, said Nagata, the UCSF pediatrics professor.

"We have objective data showing that when kids have devices, even if they intend to be doing school-related work, I think it's just very easy to get off course," he said.

Educators should not assume that parents have the know-how and resources to teach their kids about proper media use. Schools should adopt a digital literacy curriculum or program for students and educate parents about healthy digital habits for young people, experts suggest.

Cross said she would like to see more pediatricians and educators explain to parents that they shouldn't give kids their first smartphone or tablet and take a "let's see what happens" approach. Both the AAP and Common Sense Media provide guides to create family media plans to help parents establish healthy media rules that are tailored to their needs.

Finally, teachers and parents alike have a crucial role to play in modeling healthy screen time limits to kids, said Nagata.

"If we're going to have standards and rules for a classroom, I think we should role model them if we want the children to follow the rules," he said. "Even though we're most concerned for kids because [this is] such an important time for their learning and development, adults are equally struggling with many of these issues." ■

Additional Resource
View this article's charts



Taylor Callery for Education Week

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What Educators Really Think About The Overuse of Tech in Schools

By Kevin Bushweller

Most school districts now feature 1-to-1 computing environments for all students. Learning-management systems are used extensively to make classroom assignments, test students, and plan lessons. And teachers and students' use of artificial intelligence in K-12 classrooms is increasing at a rapid pace.

Advocates of these developments make the case that 1-to-1 computing gives students access to the most current information on a topic, rather than material from outdated textbooks; they point to how learning-management systems allow teachers to use data in more sophisticated ways to improve instruction; and they argue that students need to learn how to use AI to prepare for jobs in a tech-driven economy.

But what about the downsides of using technology for teaching and learning?

Critics of the overuse of technology in schools argue that it has led to students losing the ability to concentrate and engage in deep learning, stifled creativity and original thinking, created classroom distractions that have hurt instruction in big ways, and harmed students' mental health. They argue that it is time to dial back the use of it and get back to lower tech, developmentally appropriate learning.

The EdWeek Research Center posed a question in a recent survey asking educators whether they believed ed tech improves or hurts learning. Based on their responses, they were then asked why they felt that way.

Thirty-six percent said technology does more to decrease learning, and their "why" responses are featured in this article. (Twenty-nine percent said tech increases learning. See related article on those responses here.)

Below are 25 responses that we felt best represented a wide range of views from more than 200 answers. They have been edited for length and clarity and are presented in the alphabetic order of the states the respondents are from. ■

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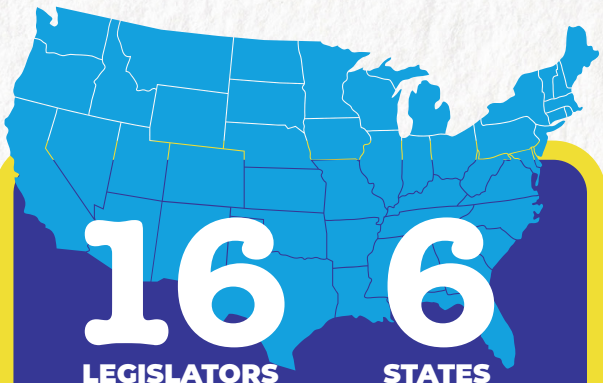
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Published April 20, 2026

'Addicted to Screens': Teachers Sound the Alarm on Their Youngest Students

By Elizabeth Heubeck

Even the most ordinary moments in daily life present a learning opportunity for young children.

Take a trip to the grocery store, for instance, where kids can pick up new vocabulary spanning the alphabet—from avocados to zucchinis. But today's family trip to the store is just as likely to find a parent pushing a cart while a child sits absorbed in a tablet or smartphone.

From family outings to bedtime rituals, electronic devices have taken on a central role in the lives of children as young as toddlers. Forty percent of children have their own personal tablet by age 2, and nearly 25% of 8-year-olds own a cellphone, according to a 2025 national report by Common Sense Media. Educators say the effects are increasingly visible in the classroom.

The impacts are glaring, cut across all foundational skills, and are tough to overcome, teachers reported in response to a January 2026 EdWeek Research Center survey that included a nationally representative group of 1,163 early educators and administrators who work with children in pre-K through 3rd grade. The survey provided a forum for respondents to comment on what they're witnessing among today's youngest students—and they did not hold back.

Dozens of early educators shared concerns about students' school readiness, pointing to gaps in age-appropriate motor skills, social-emotional maturity, attention spans, and overall independence. Many attributed these challenges largely to excessive screen time and permissive parenting.

One respondent wrote: "Young children are given too much screen time and not enough interaction with peers or adults and their environments. They need more conversation, not a screen at a restaurant, in the shopping cart, in the car, in the stroller, etc. Adults need to be talking to them, reading to them, giving them opportunities to explore their community."

Survey respondents shared not only why they think young students are struggling with basic foundational skills, but also how. Keep reading to learn more.

Struggling with independence

Schools operate on a packed schedule, with little room for delays. When students arrive at school needing assistance with basic tasks—like opening their lunch items, putting their coats on, or using the bathroom—they disrupt the schedule and prevent the class from functioning efficiently. While teachers expect occasional disruptions of this sort from their young students. But many say they are seeing a disturbing trend in which a growing number of students come to school unprepared to function independently in the classroom.

Lacking in age-appropriate motor skills

Students start their formal education expected to use their fingers and hands to manipulate objects, from blocks to paint brushes to crayons and pencils. Notably, in spite of our increasing reliance on technology and the simplicity it affords (think swiping and tapping as opposed to writing long-form), a growing number of states are requiring students to learn cursive handwriting, generally between grades 2 and 5.

Advocates of cursive point to its cognitive benefits over typing, including better memory and recall of words and letters. But it also requires fairly advanced fine motor skills—an area where some educators say students are struggling. Survey respondents suggest these challenges extend to a range of tasks requiring hand strength and coordination.

Decline in social-emotional maturity

Following instructions. Taking turns. Responding to disappointment without emotional outbursts. These are baseline expectations in early education. Students who haven't mastered these abilities will have a hard time learning much of anything in a classroom environment.

Teachers say this is a reality for a growing number of students new to school. For instance, 72% of early educators report that their students struggle to follow instructions more so than their same-age peers two years ago, according to the EdWeek Research Center's January early learning survey.

Shorter attention spans

Content on electronic devices moves fast, often accompanied by bright colors, flashing images, and other engaging ways of holding users' attention. By contrast, the pages of a book are static. Today's students, many of whom arrive at school having spent countless hours in front of screens, may not be willing or able to attend long enough to become absorbed in the storyline a print book promises. For some teachers, asking students to pay attention during even less entertaining classroom activities than read-alouds may seem like an insurmountable task. ■

Additional Resource
View this article's charts

Published August 22, 2025

Why One Teacher Told Students to Put Their Chromebooks Away—for Good

By Sarah Schwartz

This school year, Marcie Samayoa decided to ditch Chromebooks.

After a few years of her high school chemistry students sneaking onto Netflix during independent work, or trying to convince her that they could listen to her lesson while watching YouTube videos, she started to think the devices were causing more harm than good.

"It became overwhelming for me as a teacher, because I felt like I was investing so much energy into the Chromebooks," said Samayoa, who teaches in Los Angeles.

Now, the devices—which students used to have out on their desks during class—stay in backpacks most of the time. When they're not doing labs, students complete most of their work with paper and pencil.

Most students in the United States use at least one school-issued digital learning device, according to a 2021 survey from the EdWeek Research Center. While 1-to-1 computing was growing pre-pandemic, the sudden switch to remote learning, coupled with the influx of federal stimulus money to schools, made personal devices in schools nearly ubiquitous.

By March 2021, the survey shows, 90%of district leaders said they provided devices to every middle and high school student, while 84% said the same for elementary school students.

But many teachers now find these classroom laptops and tablets, a necessity during distance learning, to be a source of frustration.

More than half of educators, 56%, said that off-task behavior on laptops, tablets, or desktops is a major source of distraction that cuts into student learning time, according to a separate 2025 EdWeek Research Center survey.

Education Week spoke with Samayoa about why she doesn't assign much work on devices, how her classroom has changed as a result, and where teaching computer skills might fit into the school day.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



Paul Chinn/San Francisco Chronicle via AP

A student in Lynne Martin's 5th grade class studies math using a Chromebook at Markham Elementary School in Oakland, Calif. Some teachers, worried about an over-saturation of digital devices, are now ditching the popular tech tools.

How have you used Chromebooks in the past?

During the pandemic, during distance learning, that's when the whole technology thing came up, which makes sense, because we weren't in the classroom. I started using digital notebooks, just so my students could have all the information in one location on their device instead of looking for several links. I tried to transfer that once we came back in person, but then I realized it's not as effective, and students were getting distracted by their devices.

They would try to go on YouTube or Netflix—and this was before AI—they would try to go to Instagram. The school blocked a few websites from students. And like always, students would try to find a loophole. They started bringing their own devices. That way, we can't monitor it. Then the school this year emphasized, no personal devices; from now on, we're just going to do school-issued Chromebooks. But now we're dealing with AI, and for some reason that's not blocked.

When I'm giving instruction, students need to have their Chromebooks closed. But eventually, you'll see students just opening it a little bit, and you'll see them playing games, even with little access to the screen. It just became a whack-a-mole game: "Why is your Chromebook open?"

Not to mention, students come in and they say, "Oh, Miss, do you have a charger? Oh, Miss, it's not letting me log in. Miss, the internet's out. Miss, my computer's not connecting to the WiFi."

What prompted you to make a change this year?

I was just tired of it. I was sick of it last year. Towards the end of the year, I told myself, "Why do I keep fighting this? It doesn't even make sense." Over the summer, I decided to do a little project where I converted all my online material to paper. I had to reformat everything. ... But man, what a difference did it make in my classroom. I thought it was worth the investment.

What happened the first day that you introduced this change to the students?

Students came into my classroom; they already had their Chromebooks open. As I as-

sumed would happen, they were already on Netflix before class was starting; they were already getting their YouTube ready. I told them, "I'm going to have to ask you to put your Chromebooks away in your backpacks, because we are not going to use them today."

It's funny, because some of them would leave it on their desk because they wanted to take a peek at it. And I told them, "No, no, no, in your backpack. They go in your backpack. We need the desk space, so we're just going to do that."

I gave them the notes on paper, and we used it in class—teaching them the [science] vocabulary, how to use the notes that I gave them for retrieval practice, for spaced practice. Essentially, everything was done on paper and mini whiteboards.

I've been doing that for two weeks, and I saw a huge difference in attention.

Students were more engaged with the material, because they were not distracted by their devices. And me as a teacher, my goodness—so much energy was conserved. I had more energy to invest into the lesson itself, instead of managing screens and devices.

I don't want to go back. I want to keep it that way. But unfortunately, our textbook is online. Every once in a while, we are going to have to use the Chromebook, but I am limiting their use in my classroom.

Is this something that you told your principal you were doing? Was there any resistance from them at all to doing this?

No. In my school, we have a lot of autonomy, so I'm very grateful for that. We don't have to run it by admin. As long as we're teaching, they're okay, and as long as we're using the textbook. Like I said, our textbook is online. Every once in a while, we will be using the Chromebook, but I am definitely limiting it a lot.

How do your students feel about the change?

They're OK for the most part. I haven't heard any complaints.

So far, only one kid has taken out their Chromebook, and I told them, "OK, no." I just had to give them a friendly reminder, like, "We're not using our Chromebooks today, so I need it in your backpack," and they're OK with it. They're fine. I've received some comments from the students: "Miss, I'm learning a lot here." And, "I like paper."

It gives them a chance to practice their organizational skills. Right now, we have a bunch of papers. So one of the concerns [is], aren't they just going to lose the notes? Aren't they just going to just stuff it in their backpacks? I have a folder system, and it is part of our classroom routine. Five minutes before class ends, we dedicate that time towards organizing our folders.

If something happens to my smartboard, that's fine, because they have the notes in front of them.

Is there anything that you might have to get the Chromebook out for, because it's something that can only be done on a computer?

I teach science. It's a very abstract concept. Chemistry is not something that you really can see with the naked eye. The [computer-based] simulations do help a lot. After we build the foundational knowledge that students require to understand the material, I am planning to have them play around with the simulations a bit.

Another is lab procedures. I used to give them the lab procedures, and they had to draw every step [by hand]. That way I can make sure that they know what to do in each step. It forces them to read it and visualize it. However, it was so time consuming. The kids are worried about making it pretty and making it aesthetic, and it was really hard to check for understanding that way.

I transferred that to Google Slides and made them the icons already. They don't have to draw out the microscope; the microscope is already there. All they have to do is copy and paste, that way, they can demonstrate that they read the steps. That has been very useful, and I plan to continue using that.

In math classes, [some teachers] have students doing their homework online. They have to type up the math procedures. It takes a while to type up a fraction; there's formatting that you need to do. I think that causes cognitive overload, because now students are not focused on the problem itself. They're focused on, how do I format this fraction?

I keep seeing that all the time. We used to have advisory, and during advisory, sometimes students would ask help for homework, and I remember they were asking for help on this math problem that they were supposed to do online. They were supposed to draw a tangent line, but the program made it so difficult to draw that tangent line. The student knew what a tangent line was, and they were like, "I'm so frustrated. I just want to draw this tangent line, and this program doesn't let me."

The student understands the concept, but now they're overwhelmed, because the program is not working right now. If they were to just do that on paper, that would have been done in seconds.

Don't students need to know how to troubleshoot those kinds of tech issues? Should teaching that fit into school at all?

Oh, no, we should have a class dedicated to that. Even though these students grew up with technology—they grew up with phones and iPads and Chromebooks—they don't know how to save a file. They don't know how to use spell check. That's because we haven't taken the time to explicitly teach them how to do those things.

When I was in high school, and I graduated back in 2010, we did have a class that taught us how to use Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, Microsoft PowerPoint, how to troubleshoot, what to do if your computer is being glitchy. These kids have never received that type of explicit instruction. A class dedicated towards that would be great. Instead of having them each have a Chromebook and messing with all that, a computer lab dedicated just for that would be awesome. ■

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Kids Are Entering Preschool More Comfortable With Screens Than Books. What Now?

By Elizabeth Heubeck



Jacquelyn Martin/AP

Celenia Romero reads to her Prek-5 students in the library at CentroNia in Washington. Many preschoolers struggle with handling books as screen use rises, raising early literacy concerns.

About one-third of children entering preschool in 2025 didn't know how to handle a book properly, with some trying to swipe at pages as if they were a phone or tablet.

These findings come from a school readiness survey of more than 1,000 early elementary educators in England and Wales. Meanwhile, in the United States, 4 in 10 children have their own tablet by the age of 2, and 75% of parents whose children use screen media do not apply limits, according to a 2025 report titled "Media Use by Kids Zero to Eight," produced by Common Sense Media.

While lawmakers and schools have focused on cellphone use and excessive screen time among teens, very young children's media habits have received less attention. Educators are now noticing the impact firsthand, as early screen exposure can affect school readiness.

"This year, my students are not able to attend to books. When asked, the parents say that their child does not enjoy books, so they do not read to them regularly," commented a respondent to a January 2026 EdWeek Research Center survey of 1,163 early educators, mostly preschool teachers.

Time spent with screens can take away from activities that build early literacy skills, like being read to. And as most schools expect children to be ready to read at ever-younger ages, excessive or non-age-appropriate screen exposure may place young students at a significant disadvantage.

The American Academy of Pediatrics latest policy statement on digital ecosystems and children, published in January 2026, does not offer specific restrictions on screen time for children under 5. It does note that infants under 18 months "struggle to transfer information from a screen to the real world because of immature cognitive processing." It also associates heavier noneducational and solo screen media with delays in language, cognitive, and other forms of development.

Many parents struggling to maintain shared reading habits with children

Historically, before children learned to read, they relied mainly on caregivers to expose them to stories—primarily through print books. That's happening less frequently now.

A survey conducted by the National Institute for Early Education at Rutgers University of roughly 1,000 parents of children ages 3 to 5 between 2020 and 2023 found shared reading habits have not fully recovered from the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, 85% of parents read to their children; this fell to 65% during the pandemic and then rose to 73% by December 2023.

The top factors that prevent parents from reading to their children: "I am too tired" (39%), "my child won't sit still long enough" (36%), and "my child prefers screen time" (33%).

Meanwhile, screen habits of the youngest children are evolving. According to the 2025 Common Sense Media report, nearly half (48%) of children ages 0 to 8 have watched short videos on platforms like TikTok, YouTube Shorts, or Instagram Reels—formats not designed for very young audiences.

Tiffany Munzer, a developmental behavioral pediatrician at the University of Michigan and lead author of the AAP's 2026 policy statement on digital media and children, explains the effects that some media content can have on very young children.

Most 3-year-olds focus on everything in their immediate environment, Munzer explains. Bright flashing lights, sound effects, and other digital entertainment featurescan distract rather than enhance learning.

"Infants and toddlers struggle to transfer information from a 2-D screen into the 3-D world because of cognitive constraints," Munzer said.

Conversely, when caregivers read a story to a young child, they can transfer information in the print book to something that a child has seen in real life, Munzer said. For example, a picture of zoo animals in a book can be tied to a child's own visit to the zoo.

Munzer acknowledged that a well-designed e-book can promote emergent literacy skills such as letter recognition and early phonemic awareness, but that most don't.

Shared experiences of reading together way better than solo screen time

Some experts feel that even well-designed media that promote early literacy or other

learning shouldn't stand in for adults reading to children.

"By introducing screens to young toddlers, even if it's a game or a program that promotes literacy, I worry that it's a substitute for real human interaction between the young child and the adult," said Megan Bone, a pediatric neurologist at the Baltimore-based Kennedy Krieger Institute, a nonprofit that treats children with developmental disabilities and brain disorders.

The back-and-forth exchanges that happen when young children listen and watch a caregiver read a book generally can't be replicated when interacting with an electronic device, Bone argues. "And that's really how we know that young children continue to build their language skills," she said, "through back and forth shared interaction." ■

Additional Resource
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Published January 26, 2026

'Great Lifelong Habits': How This District Is Keeping Young Kids Off Screens

By Alyson Klein

Spokane, Wash.—

It's late on a Friday afternoon, but the 4th and 5th graders chasing each other around the basketball courts at Adams Elementary School here are in no hurry to get home.

They've spent the past hour playing a twist on the classic hoop shooting game H-O-R-S-E, using the name of their school, A-D-A-M-S. They've done dribbling relays. And they've had short practice games, focusing on the sport's signature "triangle offense."

After practice, Olivia Collins, a 4th grade teacher who runs the school's basketball club, congratulated the students—not on their athletic prowess, but on their attitudes.

"I will say excellent job with sportsmanship, because playing a game can be hard," Collins said. "Some people got frustrated, and rather than getting angry, what did they do? They took a break, and that's OK."

There are going to be ups and downs during a basketball game, she said: "It's sports, it's competitive. I would rather you take a break and then get right back into it, then get angry" and ruin the game for others.

It's not the kind of lesson children would likely learn from watching hours of YouTube videos on a cellphone or tablet screen. But it is one that might be increasingly needed as teachers around the country note a rise in elementary schoolers who have difficulty managing their emotions.

More than 8 in 10 public schools say they're seeing stunted behavioral and socioemotional development in their students, according to May 2024 data from the National Center for Education Statistics' School Pulse Panel, which surveys a nationally representative group of more than 1,500 schools from every state and the District of Columbia.

The Spokane school district has worked to make sure that Engage IRL—a roughly two-year-old initiative that couples banning cellphones with a dramatic expansion of extracurriculars to give students opportunities to engage in real life and off screens—starts as early as kindergarten, said Stephanie Splater, the executive director of athletics and after-school programs for the 29,000-student district.



Kaylee Domzalski/Education Week

Students celebrate at the end of basketball club at Adams Elementary School. The Spokane district has significantly invested in extracurriculars to help limit students' screen time, and their elementary schools are no exception.

"Elementary is important to us, it's definitely not an afterthought," Splater said. "We know that we are teaching them such great lifelong habits, and we want them to connect and feel a sense of belonging at their school site" early on.

There are challenges to expanding extracurriculars for younger students

The number of district-sponsored activities jumped nearly eightfold across the district between 2022-23, the school year before Engage IRL began, and this school year, when the program has been in place for more than a year.

The growth has been a bit slower at the elementary level compared to middle and high schools. The number of unique activities—which includes clubs, sports, and one-off events—grew from 188 in the 2022-23 school year to 300 currently, about a 60% increase across the district's 34 elementary schools.

To be sure, elementary schools tend to struggle less with digital distraction problems than middle and high schools. But that doesn't mean the youngest students aren't exposed to devices.

More than half of kids have their own personal tablets before entering kindergarten, and 1 in 4 have their own smartphones by age 8, according to a report released last year from Common Sense Media, a nonprofit that conducts research on youth technology use.

Getting new activities into elementary schools takes deliberative work. There are some hurdles to participation for younger kids that are less of an issue with older students.

For instance, parents may not want an elementary-age child walking home later in the afternoon or taking a city bus after an activity ends. (The district has set up activity buses at select elementary schools to help alleviate that problem).

And "sometimes we have to convince people that it's OK that kindergartners are there after school," Splater said. "They don't need a nap."

Students can learn to use tech for more than 'doomscrolling'

Though the idea behind Engage IRL is to get kids off digital devices, technology isn't taboo in these extracurriculars. It may even take center stage.

For instance, Linwood Elementary in the district hosts both Girls Who Code, a club supported by a national nonprofit that aims to close the gender gap in STEM professions, and Code4All, another club affiliated with a nonprofit that bolsters computer science skills.

Students use iPads and other devices in projects such as leading a robot through a cardboard maze.

"I feel like we're planting seeds for how they could use devices and technology for productivity in the future," said Kelsy Shatto, a 3rd grade teacher who co-runs the school's coding clubs. "It's getting them off the mindless doomscrolling and games and into, 'how can this work in the real world?'"

Younger students participate in many of the same clubs and sports older ones do, including volleyball, cheerleading, knitting, arts and crafts, and coding. But there are some activities that are specific to this age group.

For instance, one elementary school hosts an informal "stay and play" club, where students can compete in board games or just hang out on the playground after school.

Other districts should consider creating such loosely structured clubs in the future, suggested Faith Rogow, an independent media literacy scholar and author of Media Literacy for Young Children: Teaching Beyond the Screen Time Debates.

"I think it's a great idea to offer kids lots of opportunities for lots of activities," Rogow said. "At the same time, especially for littles, we know that often what they're lacking the most is just opportunity for free play, where they get to make the rules, do what they want."

That kind of free-form play teaches students to negotiate with their peers and figure out how to make a game fair to everyone, Rogow said. "After-school activities, for a whole variety of reasons, often are very structured," she added.

Teachers say they enjoy seeing students get off their devices and play

To Collins, the 4th grade teacher at Adams, the extracurricular push feels like a much-needed balm for students dealing with tech overload, which was exacerbated by pandemic-era remote learning.

"I had kids coming back from COVID, and they had never played team sports before because they couldn't" due to social distancing, Collins said. "They didn't know how to work together."

Collins has far more than the basketball club on her plate. At various times, she has worked with cheerleaders, supervised the Multicultural Club and Girls Who Code, and coached Minecraft competitions, and more—a tall order given that she's a full-time teacher and mom to two kids under 10.

Why take on so much? "I do it for the money!" said Collins with a joking smile. (Teachers receive a $28 an hour stipend for leading an extracurricular activity but aren't paid for the time they spend planning activities for clubs or sports teams.)

"Honestly," she added, "it's about the opportunity. If we don't do this, kids aren't going to get" these experiences.

What's more, leading clubs gives her a chance to become "Coach Collins," who her students say has a different energy and feel than Ms. Collins, their 4th grade teacher.

Collins remembers growing up in the 1990s and running around with kids in her neighborhood until it got dark. She's hoping her work in extracurriculars helps her students experience a piece of what she did as a child.

With more activities filling their time, children today can almost get a taste of the era of being told to "play outside, when the lights come on, go home," she said, as opposed to "technology ... all the time." ■

Q&A with Dr. Louisa Moats: The Enduring Power of Print



Dr. Louisa Moats is a leading expert in reading, spelling, and language instruction—bringing deep research and real-world classroom expertise to teacher training. She authored *LANGUAGE! Live*® and helped lead *LETRS*®, and co-authored *Speech to Print* and *Spellography*. Her influential contributions have earned major recognition, including the Orton Award, Eminent Researcher Award, and Benita Blachman Award.

Q: With so much digital content in today's classrooms, why does print still matter?

Dr. Louisa Moats:
While digital tools offer convenience and access, **print provides a fundamentally different reading experience.** A printed book is tangible—you can hold it, see your progress, and easily return to earlier passages. That physical interaction helps readers orient themselves within the text, focus their attention, and engage more deeply with what they're reading. **Print doesn't disappear with a swipe or scroll; it remains present, inviting reflection and rereading.**

Q: How does reading in print affect comprehension and memory?

Dr. Louisa Moats:
Research consistently shows that we remember and understand more when we read in print. When readers can see where they are in a book, underline passages, jot notes, or simply remember where an idea appeared on a page, they're building mental models of the text. Those **physical and spatial cues strengthen comprehension and long-term memory** in ways that digital reading often cannot.

Q: What role does print play in student engagement?

Dr. Louisa Moats:
Print naturally supports sustained attention. Unlike digital environments that encourage constant scrolling and distraction, **printed texts create space for students to slow down, think, and reflect**. That deeper engagement leads to stronger understanding—not just of the words on the page, but of the ideas behind them.



Q: Why is shared reading so important, particularly for older students?

Dr. Louisa Moats:
Reading shouldn't be an isolated experience. Adolescents, especially, are motivated by opportunities to discuss ideas with their peers. Reading the same printed text together **creates meaningful conversations, encourages students to consider perspectives beyond their own**, and transforms reading into a shared intellectual experience rather than simply completing an assignment.

Q: How did those ideas influence the texts selected for *LANGUAGE! Live*®?

Dr. Louisa Moats:
We intentionally chose texts that would spark curiosity and thoughtful discussion. Adolescence is a time for expanding perspectives, so **students should encounter readings that challenge them to think critically, develop empathy, and wrestle with complex issues.** The goal isn't simply answering questions correctly—it's encouraging students to form opinions, ask questions, and engage with the world around them.





Q: Many educators use digital tools every day. Is this an argument against technology?

Dr. Louisa Moats:
Not at all. Digital resources have an important place in education. **The key is balance.** Technology offers tremendous advantages, but it shouldn't replace the experiences that foster deep reading, sustained attention, and thoughtful discussion. Print and digital each serve different purposes, and the strongest instruction recognizes the value of both.

Q: You often speak about the emotional connection readers have with books. Why is that important?

Dr. Louisa Moats:
Many of us remember the books that shaped our childhoods. Those books become part of who we are. **Physical books create a sense of ownership and connection** that extends beyond the words themselves. Students who can hold, revisit, annotate, and share books often develop stronger identities as readers and a deeper appreciation for reading throughout their lives.

Q: What is your advice for educators who want to strengthen literacy instruction today?

Dr. Louisa Moats:
Continue embracing technology where it adds value—but don't underestimate the power of print. **Give students opportunities to hold books, engage in thoughtful discussion, reread meaningful passages, and reflect deeply on what they're reading.** Those experiences remain some of the most powerful ways to build comprehension, critical thinking, and lifelong readers.

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F. Sheehan / Education Week and Getty

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Why Printed Books Are Better Than Screens for Learning to Read: Q&A

By Alyson Klein

Students who want to read about dinosaurs, delve into English literature classics, or just immerse themselves in a good story have plenty of options: Traditional paper books, e-readers, audio books, tablets, computer screens, even their phones or smart watches.

When it comes to learning, however, are all these mediums created equal? Which are best for comprehension, and which are best for younger students? And how will the increasing digitization of books reshape reading instruction?

To unpack those questions, Education Week spoke with Maryanne Wolf, the director of the Center for Dyslexia, Diverse Learners, and Social Justice at the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. Wolf is also the author of *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*, published in 2018 by Harper Collins.

This conversation—which took place on Zoom—has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Is it a good or a bad idea to have students read on a screen versus on a real piece of paper?

The reality is more complex than a nice, neat, tidy binary. If only it were that simple.

The reality is that we have very interesting data that stretches from 3-year-olds all the way through young adulthood, which suggests there are advantages and disadvantages of each medium, depending on the purpose or intention.

Reading development begins well before any teaching. For young children, physical books are best, audio is second best, and tablet is a clear third. And the reason is that there is a certain double-edged sword here. On the one hand, the tabletis more engaging. On the other hand, it's a passivity of engagement. It is overutilizing what we call the novelty reflex that human beings have. This is the last thing we want for child development because we're wanting them to learn to focus. Instead, they are learning to be distracted.

The most common two words after the child goes off the screen: 'I'm bored.' Why? Because they are overstimulated. So between zero and five, the evidence has become quite clear that children's use of the screen is helping to develop the opposite of what we want in focusing of attention.

When are screens helpful?

You heard me say from the start, this is not a binary, right? And I really am very serious about that.

Print has more advantages for children's learning than screens. However, children who are struggling, like those with dyslexia or those who have a really limited background knowledge on a subject, you can use digital complementary programs for giving that child practice.

The brain never had a single gene or a single region that was specific for reading. Reading is an invention. And what the brain has is the capacity to make new connections among its genetically programmed parts, like vision and language and aspects and cognition. So what reading does, and that's why the 0-to-5 period is important, is it takes those regions that had been developing for five years, and it connects them.

We can use digital screeners [diagnostic tests that can be paper or digital] to see what [a student's] development is like. So we want to see: Do they know their letters? Do they know the sounds? Do they have any idea that the sounds are spelled by letters? What is the vocabulary like? We also want to take a look at processing speed.

So even from the start, digital can be used in excellent ways, as a screener [to get an initial handle on a student's skill level] and as a form of practice for children.

There are fewer people reading physical books these days. What are the implications of that trend?

The perception of the students is that they're better readers on the screen. They believe that they're better on the screen because they're faster. They are faster, but they are faster because they [are] basically scrolling, word spotting, skimming, scanning. That means we have a need to really hone these deep reading skills in print, and then teach their use on digital screens.

We know that print has advantages because it encourages the time-consuming deep reading processes. But in the future, we're not going to have people like me. We're going to have most people who are just digital natives. The question is: how do we get the brain to be a deep, empathic, critical, insightful thinker?

Books are really one of the greatest tools for the mind and should never be lost until we are assured that the same processes that were advantaged there are not being diminished by the other mediums. ■



Photo illustration by Gina Tomko/Education Week + Canva

OPINION

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Is the Backlash Against Tech in Schools Going Too Far?

As schools rethink their relationship with tech, one distinction should be at the forefront

By Lina Eroh

Across the country, schools are rethinking their relationship with technology.

At least 38 states and the District of Columbia are restricting cellphones during the school day. Parents are pushing back on screen time and social media use. Educators are questioning whether technology in classrooms has improved learning or simply made it harder for students to focus. And the rapid rise of artificial intelligence has intensified concerns that students are losing opportunities for deep thinking, productive struggle, and meaningful human interaction.

Much of this backlash is understandable.

As a parent of three children—two of whom attend a public school system currently grappling with its use of technology—I understand why so many families are pushing schools to rethink screens, devices, and artificial intelligence. I, too, want my children to spend less time with technology that distracts them, isolates them from their peers, or encourages passive consumption during "free time." I want classrooms centered on discussion, relationships, curiosity, debate, and deep learning. And I want schools to be cautious before introducing any technology into students' lives.

But my professional life adds another layer to this thinking. After nearly a decade in the tech sector, I now work at a foundation that supports organizations working to improve educational outcomes for students. Some use technology and artificial intelligence; others do not. What matters is not whether a tool is digital. It's whether the addition of technology improves outcomes for kids.

That perspective leaves me worried that, in our effort to remove harmful technology from schools, we may inadvertently eliminate tools that help teachers teach and students learn.

There is an important difference between consumer technologies designed to capture attention and evidence-based instructional tools designed to improve teaching and learning. There is a difference between passive screen time and adaptive academic support. And there's a difference between tools that replace human interaction and connection and tools that strengthen it.

Yet, the current conversation too often collapses these distinctions, treating these different categories as if they were one and the same.

Consider Tennessee or Kansas or a district like Los Angeles that, in response to legitimate concerns from parents, aims to reduce screen time by eliminating Chromebooks for elementary-age students. In the process, a virtual tutoring program that provided struggling young readers with individualized support could get eliminated. Teachers could lose access to tools that helped them provide timely feedback on student writing or quickly identify common misconceptions in math, which they could then tackle live in the classroom. And new-language learners and children with learning differences could lose translation and accessibility supports that allowed them to succeed.

None of these consequences was the intention. But they illustrate the risk of simplifying the current debate.

Instead of asking whether technology belongs in classrooms at all, the more important question is how that technology is designed to support learning and whether it delivers on that promise.

The past decade offers plenty of reasons for skepticism. Schools adopted lots of technology rapidly, often without clear evidence that it improved student outcomes. One study of tools built specifically for education purposes found only 1 in 5 showed any evidence of impact. It's no wonder that teachers experienced firsthand how devices and poorly designed products could interrupt learning rather than support it and that parents watched children struggle with attention, social connection, and mental health in an increasingly digital world.

Those lessons matter. But another lesson matters too: Schools, teachers, and students continue to face real challenges, and technology can help address them.

Many of the conditions that fueled the growth of ed tech remain today. Teachers are overwhelmed. Students continue to struggle academically, particularly in math and reading. Districts face persistent staffing shortages, especially in high-need communities, making promising interventions like high-dosage tutoring difficult to staff.

When designed to address specific problems and implemented as intended, technology can help tackle these challenges. Cur-

riculum-aligned instructional tools can at least modestly accelerate student learning. High-dosage tutoring delivered in a hybrid or virtual setting can provide students with individualized support even when human tutors are scarce. Translation and accessibility tools can expand access for multilingual learners or students with disabilities. AI-supported assessment tools can help teachers provide more timely feedback while freeing up time for instruction and relationship-building.

Through this lens of added value for learning, artificial intelligence deserves especially careful scrutiny. Tools that minimize critical thinking, replace student writing, or foster dependence do not belong in classrooms. (Researchers from Stanford University recently reviewed over 800 studies of generative AI tools in education; none was identified to be a high-quality causal study in K-12 settings for students in the United States.) Still, banning AI altogether ignores its potential to reduce administrative burden, help teachers personalize instruction, and expand access to academic support for students who need it most—as well as empower children to understand and leverage the technology of the future.

The question of technology in classrooms shouldn't be a yes or no. At Overdeck Family Foundation, where I work, we've considered the existing research and the experience of our grantees to develop questions to guide decisionmaking about digital tools going forward. The questions won't make the decisions easy, but the decisions will be sounder. As district leaders reconsider what belongs, they should ask:

- Is there credible evidence that this tool is the best way to address the problem you're hoping to solve? If so, what is the expected impact on student outcomes?
- When implemented well, does the tool support, rather than replace, strong teaching?
- Does the tool connect to and enhance current instructional approaches and curricula? Is it developmentally appropriate for the age band?
- Once procured, is there a process in place for tracking and evaluating impact on student outcomes? What is the plan if impact is not detected?
- Can educators clearly explain to families what the technology is, and is not, being used for?

The work ahead is not deciding whether schools should use technology. It's becoming much more sophisticated at distinguishing between technology that undermines learning versus technology that advances it.

We owe it to students, like my daughters, to get that distinction right. ■

Lina Eroh is the senior director of communications at Overdeck Family Foundation, where she works closely with other foundation leaders and grantees. She is the mother of three daughters. (Education Week receives support from Overdeck Family Foundation. Education Week's Opinion editors retain sole editorial control over which pieces run in that section.)

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