

Beyond Bans and Screen Skepticism

by Marc Epstein on behalf of IKON EduTech Group

Abstract

The backlash against educational technology currently spreading nationwide represents a significant reversal in the long-standing support for computer-based learning among key stakeholders of our nation's schools. COVID-19 school closures accelerated universal adoption of 1:1 initiatives to facilitate remote learning, but the resulting isolation and overreliance on devices during that period created learning deficits that have lingered into the post-pandemic era. Parental concerns about excessive screen time and social/emotional well-being related to cell phone texting, game-playing, video streaming, and social media use at home have broadened into a much larger backlash against 1:1 device use for learning in the classroom.

The authors argue that questioning the value of EdTech is appropriate and well-intentioned, but the pendulum is swinging too far too quickly in the wrong direction. The focus on screen time rather than instructional methodology and other critical factors that support learning is misguided, and the value-added benefits of technology to facilitate equitable, anywhere, anytime learning, research, and collaboration are being overlooked. A more balanced dialogue is needed going forward to ensure best practices are applied to the purposeful integration of technology into the curriculum to enhance and support instruction, learning, and productivity. Technology is not incompatible with active, cooperative, hands-on learning, as some critics assert. On the contrary, thoughtfully designed technology-based activities can be the best approach to deepen specific classroom lessons.

Position Paper

Since the 1980's, there has been a growing consensus that modern schooling benefits from computer learning. This sentiment accelerated with the advent of the Internet in the 1990s and reached its zenith with the proliferation of 1:1 iPad and Chromebook initiatives that provided a modern electronic tool to every student and enabled remote learning to take place during the Covid-19 pandemic. Students have benefited from the pervasiveness of anywhere, anytime learning that levels the playing field and provides equitable access to knowledge, resources, and experts. Many of today's software developers, app coders, network engineers, Internet pioneers, and AI designers were yesterday's students who were introduced to previous technological innovations in schools which laid the foundation for their interest in pursuing technology as a career. If we were to plot a graph of overall support for expanding technology use in schools over recent decades, it would show an unmistakable upward trajectory. As recently as 2023, a representative national [cross-section survey of 810 public school parents conducted by Hart Research](#) on behalf of the American Federation of Teachers reported that 76% expressed "a favorable view of the way technology is used to facilitate teaching and learning in their child's school."

Just three years later, decades of momentum, acceptance, innovation, progress, and broad-based support for EdTech is coming to a screeching halt. A reversal fueled by skepticism and overreaction to two books, "The Anxious Generation" by Jonathan Haidt, and "The Digital Delusion: How Classroom Technology Harms Our Kids' Learning – And How To Help Them Thrive Again," authored by Dr. Jared Cooney Horvath, is under way that threatens to turn back the clock and severely limit, or even eliminate, educational technology usage in schools. Raising awareness about the detrimental effects of a "phone-based childhood" on children's mental health since the introduction of the smartphone in 2007 is an important cautionary tale about child development, but let's not throw out the baby with the bathwater. An unrestricted smartphone is quite different from a school-managed learning device.

Some parents, educators, school systems, and even national educational organizations, are not just constructively questioning EdTech practices and tools; they are in full-blown revolt and retreat mode. We are not only at a crossroads; we have reached a pivotal moment in the history of technology in education where

backlash fever is raging. The discipline we devoted our professional lives to build from a frill to a central tool for instruction and learning is under siege; the media is running with the backlash story, and school leaders are on the defensive.

To be clear, the fallout is not all bad. We believe the act of questioning educational practices is well-intentioned and constructive, whether it's EdTech or any other strategy. All educational activities should be able to stand up to scrutiny. Those of us in the EdTech space who are serious and thoughtful about how best to use technology to enhance and support instruction and learning have never advocated for unlimited or haphazard usage. We have always believed in a balanced approach. We have always believed that cell phones are a distraction in the classroom and had policies in place to ban them long before states figured that out. We have always blocked social media sites on school networks and codified that in our Acceptable Use Policies. We have always discouraged excessive video game-playing and urged parents to prioritize device use at home for productive learning, homework completion, and legitimate research. We have always believed that all screen time is not created equally. But the public discourse has swung too far, and the pendulum needs to be recentered. Our aim in writing this position paper is to properly frame the conversation and refocus the discussion into a more accurate, balanced, and constructive context.

The anti-tech movement doesn't seem to be interested in this kind of nuanced approach. They take the extreme position that technology is the problem, and if we simply turn back the clock before technological innovation occurred, instruction will miraculously improve. We object to this black and white, all or nothing, wrecking ball posture to critique a practice that has always been shades of gray. They cite a correlation between declining cognition as measured on standardized assessments and increased 1:1 device uses as if there is causation between the two. Not only has that causation not been established, but it also doesn't consider numerous other factors that have impacted standardized assessment results, not the least of which were learning losses that resulted from remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, it was technology that enabled instruction to take place during that difficult period of time. Without it, students would have been left to their own devices (pun intended) and been much worse off for it.

The backlash against screen time creates an oversimplification of a much larger issue and causes the focus to be placed on the wrong factor. Technology in schools is merely one of many approaches a teacher uses to deliver their instruction on a given topic. The cause of concern is not time; it is about how to use technology thoughtfully, intentionally, and most effectively as compared to other instructional methods. Screen time is only a byproduct of that choice.

As former educational technology leaders with decades of experience in high achieving school districts, we view this issue from a different perspective. Educational technology use and active learning as a human endeavor are not mutually exclusive activities. The highly effective and successful school districts we have worked in over the past four decades embed technology thoughtfully and purposefully into the teaching and learning process while still emphasizing interpersonal skills, curiosity, communication, cooperation, collaboration, critical thinking, hands-on learning and problem-solving. Digital tools and these skills often complement one another.

It is clear to us that students have greatly benefited from thoughtfully and creatively implemented educational technology. There are many examples of how technology adds value in education, such as greater engagement in learning, more immediate feedback, individualized instruction that adapts to personal learning styles and abilities, assistive technology that supports students with diverse learning needs, broader peer collaboration within and beyond the four walls of the classroom, visualization of complex concepts through simulations, the enhancement of the writing process due to easier editing, revision, and proofing tools without the drudgery of re-writing from scratch, and a more level playing field with equitable access to vast online resources, knowledge, and experts for improved understanding, legitimate research, and varied perspectives.

Another stark reality is that [47 states now use computer-based testing \(CBT\) in English Language Arts \(ELA\) and mathematics in grades 4 and 8](#), and the College Board Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) has transitioned to a digital-only format. Lack of proficiency and comfort using a mouse, trackpad, keyboard, touch screen, stylus, and/or digital tools puts students at a distinct disadvantage on CBTs just like they were a few years ago when learning devices became ubiquitous but legacy assessments were still paper based. A best practice for assessments ensures that

there isn't a mismatch between the commonly used learning tool in the classroom and the assessment medium. If digital tools are abandoned in the standardized testing grade levels, the medium becomes a hurdle for accurate assessment.

The rapid rise and uncharted territory of Artificial Intelligence (AI) adds to parental angst and uncertainty about the potential benefits and possible drawbacks of instructional technology overall, even though AI is already a powerful invention that students need to be explicitly taught when and how to use effectively, question appropriately, evaluate thoughtfully, and apply responsibly. That process cannot be delayed until a child enters college. The professor teaching a 200-student freshman lecture hall is certainly not going to take ownership over that responsibility when his or her priority will always be the content of the course. Elementary and secondary educators are beginning to develop best practices and proven effective curricula for implementing AI lessons, but they are not alone. National and state organizations such as the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN), the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), and the New York State Artificial Intelligence Consortium (NYSAIC), are providing support. These professional groups are developing standards and providing resources to schools around the country and advocate against haphazard or superficial use of technology. AI is no different in that regard.

This is not the time to turn away from innovation in an attempt to recover something from the past that never really was lost in the first place. The world continues to evolve, and schools need to prepare students for all that technology, and the latest advancements, can offer. Together, in partnership with the school community and the support of all key stakeholders, teachers can cultivate literacy development, critical thinking, appropriate skepticism, problem-solving, creativity, leadership, communication, empathy, and responsible digital citizenship in a dynamic and ever-changing culture grounded by compassion and driven by technological advancement, individual curiosity, real-world experiences, social and emotional development, and lifelong learning. Educators and parents/guardians need to work together to surmount the challenges that the downside of technology presents, while also implementing a shared vision that maximizes the thoughtful and rigorous application of technology, when beneficial, to enhance instruction, learning, and productivity in the classroom and at home.

A sound, modern-day education balances educational technology with physical tools and real-world experiences. None of those approaches should be completely replaced by the other; each one offers unique contributions to the education of children and teenagers. Before the anti-tech movement creates the very problem it is trying to solve, a worsening educational system, we need to go beyond bans and screen skepticism to refocus, not on screens, but on pedagogy — with and without devices as appropriate, and as determined by educators who are professionals in their field with the support and involvement of the parent community.