

Introduction to Educator Resources

This section of the Screens in Schools Action Kit was created with the goal of helping guide teachers toward taking a more active role in questioning their district leaderships' overreliance on digital devices and computer-based instruction. This is often difficult for teachers to do, as raising questions can brand one as a “malcontent” or “foot-dragger.” (Even with union protections, many teachers fear being singled out for exercising their basic right of free speech.) So, for now, parents are leading the way in trying to slow down the edtech juggernaut. Teachers can support them through joint presentations at PTA meetings and the like. We can also stand behind those parents who are requesting reductions in our school's screen use or are seeking to opt their children out entirely.

There are signs, however, that teachers are beginning to weigh in more forcefully on the issue. For example, in August 2019, *NEA Today* published an excellent [article](#) challenging the personalized learning trend. Some NEA state affiliates, such as the Massachusetts Teachers Association, have taken steps to bring edtech concerns to its membership, and, in some cases, into collective bargaining. Also, AFT president Randi Weingarten has [spoken out strongly](#) about the de-professionalization of teaching, criticizing the incessant, computer-based testing teachers are now required to administer.

Background

Teachers know that the “reform the curriculum” pendulum swings back and forth many times over the course of a teaching career – driven by fads, fears of falling behind the neighbors in standardized tests, and the marketing drive of the education industry, among other factors. Teachers also know that durable gains in students' learning come not through curriculum innovations, but rather through the positive influences of dedicated, caring teachers who are able to make a personal connection to a child and spark their love of learning.

Enabled by sharply lower prices for hardware, and improvements in AI, Wi-Fi, and cloud computing technology, no trend has overtaken schools as rapidly and thoroughly as the push for education technology (edtech) in our K-12 schools, and the associated trend toward computer-based instruction – dubbed, misleadingly, “personalized learning.” More importantly, these trends have also been fueled by the enormous marketing power of the largest corporations in the world including Google, Apple, Facebook, and Amazon, which see K-12 education as a multibillion dollar profit-making opportunity.

Problems Associated with Excessive Screen Time in Schools

The edtech companies' main pitch is that schools need to prepare students for 21st century jobs; and this is a hard pitch for both administrators and parents to question. But schools *need* to be encouraging questions, for the following reasons:

Student Learning:

While the marketers come armed with self-produced studies proclaiming their products' effectiveness, long-term controlled studies have shown that the quantity and quality of student learning is similar, if not lower, in classrooms that rely heavily on computer technology. And students' future success will depend anyway on having gained "soft" skills such as critical thinking, written and oral communication, and group work.

Student Health:

Schools have a duty of care for students while they are at school. They are legally obligated to provide a safe learning environment, and that must include the safe use of digital devices, which have been shown to cause eye and musculoskeletal problems. Yet most schools have done little to provide the equipment and training to students and teachers about safe use.

Student Psychological and Social-Emotional Wellbeing:

The use of digital technology in classrooms cannot be addressed in isolation from students' home use, which, in many cases, is already excessive. By assigning homework online, teachers can – unwittingly – undermine parents or guardians who wish to monitor and control children's home use as a way to protect them from negative health effects, gaming addiction, and screen-related anxiety and depression.

(De-)Personalized Learning:

Computer-based "personalized" learning promises to teach children at their own pace, thus meeting learners exactly where they are. Students are constantly assessed, usually through multiple choice questions, and fed new lessons and assessments once mastery has been demonstrated. This is anything but "personal," as it reduces students' interaction with teachers and peers, leaving some students staring at computer screens for hours per day.

Student and Teacher Privacy and Misuse of Data:

The growing use of technology by schools, accelerated by the recent expansion of Cloud computing, creates serious concerns about children's privacy and the commercialization of the data collected by edtech platforms and apps. Many technology companies collect far more information on children than is necessary and store the data indefinitely.

De-professionalization and Loss of Teaching Jobs:

As schools increasingly rely on computers to instruct students, they can employ fewer teachers, and/or replace them with paraprofessionals, whose main role is to ensure that students remain on (screen-based) task. This is especially worrisome in the fiscal austerity setting in which most districts currently operate.

Distractions Caused by Device Use in Class:

Many teachers must now contend with the distractions created by students' use of digital devices for non-academic purposes. Studies show that the off-task use of digital devices distracts not only that student, but also all those within sight of the device.

Problems with Classroom Management:

Managing the classroom, many teachers contend, is becoming harder and harder. One factor contributing to children's apparent increased impatience and decreased focus is the stimulating effects that excessive screen time has on children's brain chemistry. Both excessive screen use and associated sleep deprivation can mimic and exacerbate conditions such as ADHD.

Commercialization and Privatization:

Robust curriculum, guided by and delivered with teachers' professional judgment, is replaced by predetermined computer algorithms and incessant testing, effectively turning over decisions about pedagogy and content to commercial interests.