Screens, Schools and Equity

EdTech products and 1:1 programs in particular have been hailed as a solution to stubborn equity challenges in education. But evidence is scant. Will more time on screens truly improve equity for learners? Or do traditional methods that prioritize students' relationships, pen and paper, and reading books do a better job of improving underprivileged children's learning outcomes?

! Context

- Children from minority and lower socioeconomic backgrounds **already spend significantly more time on screens**. More screen time in school widens this divide.
- A **top contributor to student engagement** is strong relationships with their teachers.

How prioritizing human interaction over screens supports equity

- **Social learning:** **Classroom discussions** and **collaborative activities** are fertile ground for learning. They help students develop communication skills, listening skills, critical thinking, and a deeper understanding of the material. Purely digital lessons and games can't provide these benefits
- **Relationships:** A key **protective factor** from adverse childhood experiences is a strong relationship with a caring adult. For children who have physically or emotionally absent parents, a teacher can play this role (EdTech products cannot). Time students spend on EdTech products is time students are not spending interacting with teachers or classmates. Students crave positive **relationships**. Working on devices displaces time with teachers and classmates.
- **Distraction:** When students are using devices in school, they often end up off-task or **multitasking**. . Disrupted or fragmented attention makes it hard to retain class material.

The New York Times — 2023
Dependence on Tech Caused 'Staggering' Education Inequality, U.N. Agency Says

NEWS   SCIENCE & SOCIETY — 2019
The learning gap between rich and poor students hasn't changed in decades

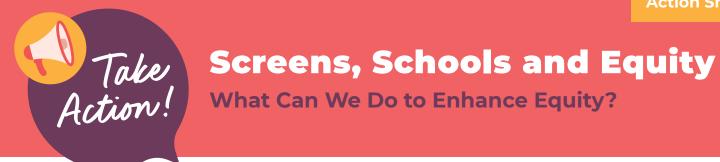Lowest income students' learning level is up to four years behind the highest income students

Bottom Line

If EdTech reduced the education equity gap, we would expect to see it shrinking substantially over the past 15 years as time on EdTech products exploded. We haven't. As of 2019, Science News reported the gap had remained stable for decades. The gap widened during Covid, when EdTech and screen use was supercharged.

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Take Action!

Screens, Schools and Equity
What Can We Do to Enhance Equity?

FOR TEACHERS

- **Create a supportive learning environment:** When students sense a teacher cares about them, they are far more likely to be engaged. Students notice simple acts like greeting them when they enter the classroom, even if they don't always show it. Spending a few extra minutes chatting with students at the beginning of class can help them develop a sense of belonging in your class and connection with you.
- **Give students a voice & lead regular class discussions:** Look for discussion topics your students care about and foster a **classroom culture** where students feel comfortable taking risks and participating. Show them that you value their opinions and are interested in what they think.
- **Use of screens and 1:1 programs sparingly:** only use technology when it adds something students couldn't get any other way.
- **Ensure equal opportunities & promote diversity:** Focus on providing **equal access** to educational resources and opportunities for all students, especially those from underrepresented groups. **Weave diverse materials**, visuals, and perspectives into your curriculum.
- **Engage families: Involve families** in their children's education to improve academic performance and student behavior. Keep families informed about what is happening in the classroom on a regular basis.

FOR PARENTS

- **Encourage Reading:** Read to your younger children, and provide time for independent reading for your older children. **Reading** is a powerful way for your child to get ahead - it supports academic success, critical thinking, comprehension, and builds vocabulary.
- **Opt-Out of 1:1 Internet-Connected Devices (at school and at home):** Resist giving your child a smartphone for as long as possible. Dumbphones enables communication without providing them access to inappropriate content or endless scrolling. Reading is more likely to happen if a child doesn't have a smartphone. See the Opt-Out page.
- **Engage your school:** Talk to your child's principal about why you do not want them to have a 1:1 device. Use this Toolkit.

Visit **bit.ly/screensandlearning** for the full Screens & Learning Action Kit!
References for the Action Kit: **bit.ly/screensandlearningreferences**

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