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Balancing Screens and Learning



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Powering Up & Now Powering Down: A Better Vision for the Classroom

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In 2009, we launched an initiative titled "Powering Students Up," highlighting our commitment to technology integration and creating learning environments tailored to "digital natives." At the advent of the smart screen, we believed that putting technology directly into students' hands was the key to future success. It only made sense to provide students with a similar interactive digital environment that they were becoming accustomed to outside of school. As technology started making its way into classrooms, schools were powering up students with digital technologies and making guidelines to ensure that they were used responsibly (Taranto and Abbondanza, 2009).

For nearly two decades, educational technology's promise of better outcomes and preparing students for the future has dominated our professional publications and conferences. We were fully on board, but we must now ask: Was this mass infusion of technology truly in our students' best interest? What did we actually know about this infusion of technology in our classrooms?

The Research: A Growing Consensus

Fast forward 17 years, and a wealth of research has emerged regarding the true effectiveness of educational technology and the impact of excessive screen time. The U.S. Surgeon General's Office issued a special report (2026) warning that exponential increases in screen usage among children and teens have resulted in decreased cognitive function, poorer educational outcomes, and increased mental health concerns. Leading cognitive scientist Dr. Jared Horvath, author of "The Digital Delusion," has further outlined how cognitive performance often declines in countries that adopt 1-to-1 technology models.

Furthermore, many "ed tech" platforms utilize short-form videos and gamified learning that trigger quick bursts of dopamine but exacerbate attention deficit issues (Winter & O'Neil, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2025). As cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham (2026) notes, the impact on attention spans is a critical concern, as the ability to focus is the fundamental gateway to all learning.

A Shift in Mindset: Prioritizing Human Connection

For the 2026-27 school year, the Canon-McMillan School District is committing to a strategic reduction in screen time. Most notably, Chromebooks have been eliminated from grades K-2. This shift acknowledges that foundational learning is best achieved through active manipulation of materials, face-to-face dialogue and collaboration — essential developmental activities that screens often displace. Moreover, the research is clear that using print materials leads to better attention and higher comprehension rates.

Our focus is on maximizing teacher-to-student and student-to-student interaction. These human connections are vital for developing social skills, language proficiency and critical thinking. We are actively choosing to purchase physical textbooks and hands-on instructional materials rather than digital versions, ensuring technology supports — rather than supplants — proven instructional methods.

> "Our focus is on maximizing teacher-to-student and student-to-student interaction."

The Importance of Limiting Screen Time: Early Childhood

The research is clear regarding the critical importance of minimizing screen time for young children in favor of



physical, social and direct interaction. Although schools cannot control students' technology usage at home, at school, educators can ensure that technology use is intentional. Emily Cherkin (2026), who recently testified in front of Congress on the detriments of excessive screen time, describes that tech should be used intentionally as something that enhances the learning experience. It should not be replacing or supplanting human interaction. Learning environments with true memory consolidation are often best achieved through active manipulation of materials, face-to-face dialogue and collaboration; activities that screens often displace (Horvath, 2025).

Our focus is on maximizing *teacher-to-student and student-to-student interaction*. These interactions are vital for developing essential social skills, language proficiency, critical thinking and the ability to focus in a shared physical space. The K-2 classroom should be a rich environment filled with hands-on resources, engaging activities and teacher-led explicit instruction.

District-Wide Commitment: Reducing Screen Time

This shift for K-2 is part of a larger, ongoing effort across the district to reevaluate and reduce excessive screen time at all grade levels. We have been and will continue to purposely purchase physical textbooks and instructional materials rather than the digital versions. Moreover, we have been actively focusing on integrating technology thoughtfully and intentionally, rather than simply for convenience or default instruction. This instructional shift acknowledges that although technology is an important tool, our focus is centered on human connections.

In addition to reducing screen time, our K-6 program will revisit "ed tech" mathematics and language arts drill programs that are designed to gamify learning, often translating to quick bursts of information and token digital rewards. These programs are associated with quick hits of dopamine and reducing long-term attention spans, neither of which is beneficial to brain health.

Technology Education: It is Still Important

This move is simply an effort to shift the pendulum back to center, not eliminate technology altogether. Our approach is quite the opposite. Instead, our comprehensive technology education pathway begins in the fifth grade and continues through high school, ensuring all students develop sophisticated digital literacy, coding and technical skills. However, these skills are taught in dedicated technology education courses instead of being integrated into the core subject areas.

With this move to reduce screen time, we are following an approach that is necessary to ensure our students receive the full developmental benefits of human-to-human interaction and maximal learning during their most formative years.

Conclusion

Due to the growing concern that technology is doing more harm than good for students' mental health and academic success, now is the time for schools to be responsible and power down classrooms. As Horvath (2025) and Willingham (2026) argue, students' attention is the key to learning. Therefore, schools must examine and adjust their screen time practices as there is clear evidence that digital technologies create distractions for students which negatively impact learning outcomes.

At Canon-McMillan School District, we are excited about the increased opportunities of eliminating screen time for our K-2 students and reducing it in grades 3-12. This change will bring deep interactive learning opportunities for our students at all levels. This strategic

shift will ensure that our learners are receiving quality instruction with research-based practices that protect brain health during critical development stages.

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Author's note: *The book being reviewed is part of a book selection for administrator professional development. I have no affiliation with the author or publishing company.*

If you have any questions regarding the book review, I can be reached at ***steebtk@gmail.com****.*

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