Screen Time Cheat Sheet for Educators

Definitions

Screen Time

A broad (but widely used) term to describe time spent in front of digital media. “Screen time” can refer to the use of televisions, video game consoles, computers, tablets, and any other device that uses a digital screen. The versions of “screen time” that affect K-12 spaces are outlined below.

Educational Technology (EdTech)

Technologies available to teachers and students for instructional purposes. This can refer to software (e.g. phonics programs), hardware (e.g. student laptops), and any other technologies in K-12 settings (e.g. 3D Printers).

Structured Screen Time

Use of digital media that is intentional, carefully curated, and includes expectations for use. Structured screen time is regularly used in K-12 settings as a pedagogical tool.

Unstructured Screen Time

Use of digital media that lacks intention, curation, or expectations (e.g. A child spending multiple hours watching algorithmically suggested YouTube videos).

Digital Literacy

The skills associated with using technology to enable users to find, evaluate, organize, create, and communicate information; and developing digital citizenship and the responsible use of technology. (*Museum and Library Services Act of 2010,* 2010).

Digital Citizenship

The capacity to participate actively, continuously and responsibly in communities online and offline, through competent and positive engagement with digital technologies (Council of Europe, 2025).

Three Kinds of "Screen Time" for K-12 Students

Cell Phones and Social Media

The concern over cell phones and social media in schools have recently resulted in legislation passed by the majority of U.S. states. Thirty-six states (and D.C.) have passed laws regulating cell phone use in schools.

Examples of popular social media platforms for K-12 students include: Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok.

Many social media platforms often operate on an algorithmic content feed model and are incentivized to keep people online frequently and for long periods of time.

Educational Technology (EdTech)

The majority of K-12 schools operate on a "one-to-one" model, meaning that each student is assigned their own technological device for learning.

EdTech, when used as a thoughtful supplement to high-quality teaching, has demonstrated the ability to improve student academic outcomes.

Unlike social media and entertainment, EdTech companies are incentivized to create products that successfully foster student academic growth.

Personal Entertainment

Many students and families use screens beyond cell phones for entertainment and leisure. Examples may include: television, desktop computers, and video game platforms.

Like social media, entertainment companies have an incentive to draw people to their platforms frequently and for long periods of time.

This is so that they can either get people to engage repeatedly with their product OR use the media as a vehicle for advertisements.

Parent FAQs
(and how to answer them!)

Why…?

Why do you use screens in your classroom?

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that the thoughtful implementation of EdTech in K-12 classrooms can have strong and positive effects on student learning outcomes.

Why was my child given their own device for school?

One-to-one devices offer teachers a way for students to work independently on curated, highly personalized learning tasks.

How…?

How often are students using computers in your class?

There is no set amount of time. I use educational technology when it applies meaningfully to the content that I am teaching.

How do I stop my child from overusing their screens at home?

You can mitigate overuse by setting boundaries and modeling positive screen behaviors. I also recommend regular, nonjudgmental conversations about screen habits with your child.

What…?

What is the right amount of screen time for a K-12 student?

There is no “right amount” of screen time for anybody. It depends on the kinds of activities you allow and the habits/needs of your child. Just make sure that your child’s screen use is intentional and balanced.

What can I do to help my child avoid screens outside of school?

It is better to expose your child to screens in a healthy, safe, structured environment rather than avoid them altogether.

Relevant Research

Social Media

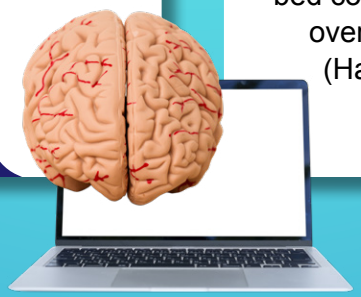
"Several studies link problematic social media use to sexualization, self-objectification, body consciousness" (Casares Jr. & Binkley, 2021).

Social media platforms take advantage of the mesolimbic system (i.e. the brain's reward system) by repeatedly exposing users to stimuli that release dopamine, making it harder for users to click away. Extended use is linked to depression/ anxiety symptoms (Debasmita et. al, 2025)

Modern Workforce Skills

Thoughtful education around digital competencies (like coding) in K-12 classrooms have generated strong improvement in multiple 21st-century skills. (Hu, 2023)

The core skills required for the professional marketplace have evolved significantly in the past decade. Digital skills are becoming increasingly necessary to be competitive in the career marketplace. (McKinsey & Company, 2021).



Impacting Youth Cognition

There is evidence of a correlation between parent screen use and child screen use. This study also found evidence between parent screen use and child socio-emotional irregularities. (Cost et al., 2023)

Excessive screen time can hinder a child's "ability to interpret emotions, fuel aggressive conduct," and can harm overall psychological health. (Muppalla et al., 2023)

There is a consensus in academic research that regular screen use before bed correlates with worse overall sleep health. (Hale et al., 2025)

Screens in the Classroom

Elementary teachers use educational technology (iPads, laptops, etc) to reach goals for differentiation and small group time. One to one devices afford teachers more opportunities for class-wide targeted instruction. (Lauricella and Jacobson, 2022)

Digital educational media have demonstrated a positive impact on early reading skills and creative thinking capacities. (Liu et al., 2022; Neumann & Neumann, 2013; Doron, 2017)