

From Screen Time Mandates to Purposeful Technology Policies and Guidance



A CoSN Guide for District Leaders
Extended Executive Summary

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A CoSN Guide for District Leaders

A quality-over-quantity framework for creating local policies and guidance that protect students, support educators, and preserve meaningful learning.



Extended Executive Summary

The public conversation about screen time in schools has moved faster than most districts' policy infrastructure. What began as a debate about personal cell phones and social media, an area where the majority of states have now acted, has widened considerably. Boards and superintendents are now being asked to set policy on instructional screen time, school-issued devices, one-to-one programs, digital curriculum, online assessment, classroom displays, elementary technology use, take-home devices, parent controls, generative AI, assistive technology, and student data privacy.

State action is accelerating and taking several distinct forms. Some states now require local boards to adopt written technology use or screen time policies. Others direct state agencies to develop model policies, commission research, establish age-appropriate guidance, set grade-level limits, require districts to justify one-to-one programs, mandate parent oversight or opt-down provisions, or place restrictions on specific AI uses. The requirements are not uniform, the deadlines vary, and in several states the obligations land on districts before the implementation questions have been worked out.

This puts district leaders in a genuine bind. They must comply with new legal requirements and respond to legitimate family and community concerns. They must also preserve the technology students depend on for access, accessibility, assessment, intervention, continuity of learning, and future readiness. Those two obligations are frequently framed as a tradeoff. They do not have to be.

The Core Problem With Treating All Screen Time the Same

CoSN is aligned with efforts to reduce low-value screen use in schools, and the concerns about screen time driving the current wave of legislation deserve serious attention.

Not all screen time is the same. Public policies should distinguish between the issues seeking to be addressed and ensure no unintentional consequences. Consider five students: one scrolling social media, one using text-to-speech to reach grade-level text, one collaborating on a multimedia project, one completing a required state assessment, and one receiving targeted intervention through an adaptive platform. All five are using screens — but not all five are using screens purposefully for educational purposes. A policy that counts them identically will not produce the outcome families are asking for.

This is not an argument against measurement. It is an argument about what minutes can and cannot tell a district. Minutes indicate duration. They do not indicate whether use was passive or active, teacher-guided or unsupervised, legally required or optional, instructionally valuable or instructionally empty. A policy built primarily on duration can reduce the visible use of managed school devices while leaving the underlying concern, what kind of use is happening, for what purpose, under what conditions, unaddressed.

CoSN's Position: Purpose Before Minutes

The goal is not simply to reduce or increase screen time. The goal is to ensure that every use of technology has a clear instructional purpose, protects students, reflects local priorities, and meaningfully advances learning.

The guide is organized around three commitments that CoSN recommends anchor any local policy:

- **Centered on Learning.** Learning goals precede tool selection. Technology should be used when it strengthens, extends, personalizes, or makes learning more accessible. Educators retain professional judgment about when a digital approach is the right one and when a book, discussion, lab, manipulative, or hands-on experience serves the goal better.
- **Students Are Protected Online.** School-issued devices operate inside a district-managed ecosystem of layered safeguards: content filtering, cybersecurity protections, account management, mobile device management, approved application processes, and student data privacy review. These protections do not follow students onto personal devices, personal accounts, or consumer platforms.
- **Led Locally.** Communities differ in instructional priorities, grade configurations, student needs, infrastructure, broadband access, staffing, and assessment requirements. There is no universal quota that fits every district. Local decision-making, developed with educator, family, and student input, is both a responsibility and a strength.



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What the Guide Addresses

The guide is a practical policy development resource rather than a position paper. It walks district leaders through the work of translating state requirements into local policy that holds up in practice, including:

- **Definitional groundwork.** Many screen time policies become unimplementable because they never distinguish between categories of technology use. The guide provides recommended local definitions covering instructional screen time, purposeful educational technology, passive and active use, school-issued versus personal devices, assistive and accessibility technology, digital assessment, age-appropriate use, and low-value use.

- **A quality-over-quantity policy framework.** A structured approach districts can adapt locally, built around what a policy should reduce, what it must protect, and what it needs to clarify for educators, families, and board members.
- **Grade-band guidance.** Developmentally differentiated expectations from early childhood through high school, designed to protect analog and relational learning in the early grades while building toward the digital fluency, media literacy, and workforce readiness expected of graduates.
- **Instructional decision-making tools.** Practical protocols educators can use at the point of lesson design to determine whether technology is the right choice, and an evaluation framework that gives teachers, principals, curriculum leaders, technology leaders, and board members a shared vocabulary for distinguishing uses that should be protected from uses that should be reduced.
- **Responding to minutes-based mandates.** Guidance on defining scope, identifying protected and exempt uses, documenting data sources, and communicating honestly about what existing systems can and cannot measure. Most districts do not have systems that cleanly produce per-student instructional screen minutes across every platform, and the guide addresses how to comply without overpromising.
- **Technical feasibility and parent oversight.** A detailed treatment of the operational reality behind parent control and opt-down provisions which includes vendor capability, per-student configuration at scale, in-school versus after-hours settings, conflict resolution when a family restriction blocks a required instructional resource, shared custody and guardianship questions, FERPA and student activity data, and help-desk capacity. This section exists because these provisions are frequently written as policy preferences when they are, in fact, significant procurement and staffing commitments.
- **Protected uses and required exceptions.** Explicit language ensuring that no policy limits technology required by an IEP, Section 504 plan, the ADA, multilingual learner support plans, assessment requirements, assistive technology services, homebound instruction, or other legal obligations.
- **Unintended consequences of blanket restrictions.** A structured analysis of the risks that overly broad restrictions on district-managed instructional technology can create. Things like reduced supervision, increased privacy exposure through shadow technology use, widening access gaps, barriers for students with disabilities, loss of instructional flexibility, lost opportunities to teach digital citizenship, inconsistent implementation and added teacher workload, financial and operational costs, weakened continuity of learning, and workforce readiness gaps. This analysis is specific to district-managed instructional technology and is not intended to discourage districts from adopting or enforcing personal smartphone and social media restrictions, which address a different set of concerns.

- **Policy stack alignment.** A crosswalk showing where screen time expectations belong across board policy, administrative regulation, instructional guidance, professional learning, and family communication and how to avoid silent contradictions with existing acceptable use, one-to-one, data privacy, cybersecurity, cell phone, AI, instructional materials, assessment, and accessibility policies.
- **Ready-to-adapt materials.** Sample board policy language, administrative guidance, roles and responsibilities, a phased implementation sequence, a pre-adoption review checklist, family and staff communication templates, a family FAQ, board presentation talking points, and a state legislative snapshot for context.

Why It Matters

Poorly designed screen time policy does not fail quietly. It fails through a student who can no longer reach an assistive tool, a teacher who cannot tell whether a lesson is compliant, a family that receives inconsistent answers from two classrooms in the same building, a board that was promised reporting the district cannot produce, and a set of workarounds that move student data into environments no one reviewed.

Schools adopted technology to solve real problems of access, personalization, accessibility, communication, assessment, and readiness. Those problems have not disappeared, and several have grown more complex. It is appropriate to challenge excessive, passive, distracting, or poorly designed uses of screens and to ask whether some digital practices have drifted from the purposes that originally justified them. But before deciding what to remove, districts should be clear about what students may lose.

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The full guide, including the complete policy framework, definitions, grade-band guidance, decision-making tools, evaluation matrix, checklists, sample policy language, and communication templates, is available to CoSN members.

The guidance and sample language in the full guide are intended to support local policy development. They are not a substitute for board policy, legal advice, or review by local counsel.