

Are Schools Measuring Learning Impact or Screen Time?

Over the last few years, concerns about screen time in schools have moved from the fringes into the mainstream. Ministries publish guidance. Trusts write policies. Parents ask pointed questions at open evenings. Some schools have banned phones outright; others have quietly pulled devices out of the classroom altogether.

Much of that concern is well founded. Attention is finite, and how children spend their hours matters. But somewhere in the noise the debate has narrowed. We have started to talk about technology in schools almost entirely in terms of duration — how many minutes, how many logins, how many devices per pupil.

Duration is a proxy. It tells you that something happened. It tells you almost nothing about whether it worked.

But amid all the discussion about hours and minutes, are we overlooking the metric that matters most: learning impact?

Measuring What Matters

Two columns sit on every school dashboard. Only one of them describes learning.

EASY TO MEASURE

Screen Time

- Logins
- Device usage
- Time spent

IMPORTANT TO MEASURE

Learning Impact

- Progress
- Understanding
- Outcomes

The metrics trap

There is a reason screen time dominates the conversation: it is trivially easy to count. Every platform reports it. Every dashboard displays it. It needs no baseline, no assessment framework and no professional judgement to produce a number that looks authoritative.

Learning impact is the opposite. It requires evidence, observation, assessment and long-term thinking. It takes terms, not weeks, to see clearly. So the easy number becomes the headline, and the hard number becomes a footnote.

This is not a problem unique to education. Every sector has a metric that is simple to collect and quietly misleading.

BUSINESS

Hours worked

≠

Productivity

MARKETING

Clicks

≠

Engagement

FITNESS

Time exercised

≠

Results

EDUCATION

Screen time

≠

Learning impact

When the easy number becomes the target, behaviour bends towards it. Schools reduce usage to demonstrate restraint, or increase it to demonstrate adoption. Neither movement tells a governor, a parent or a pupil anything at all about progress.

Start With Outcomes and Work Backwards

Most technology decisions run in one direction. The sequence looks sensible. It is backwards.

HOW MOST DECISIONS ARE MADE

Technology



Usage



Measurement



Outcome

FLIP IT

HOW EFFECTIVE DECISIONS ARE MADE

Outcome



Measurement



Learning strategy



Technology

Technology is the last decision, not the first. Once the outcome and the measure are agreed, the question of which tool to buy — and how much it should be used — largely answers itself.

A Simple Test for Any Educational Technology

Four questions. If a platform cannot survive them, no amount of usage data will save it.

01

What outcome are we trying to achieve?

02

How will we know it is working?

03

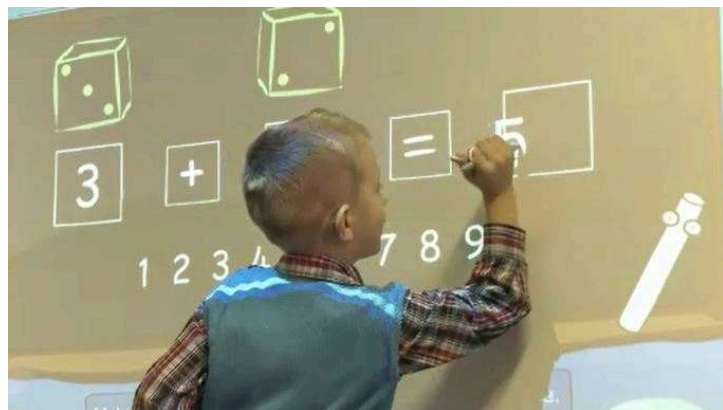
What evidence supports it?

04

If we removed it tomorrow, what would pupils lose?

The goal should never be more screen time.

The goal should be better learning time.



The difference worth knowing

None of this is an argument for more technology, and none of it dismisses the concerns behind the screen time debate. Both things can be true: children can be spending too long on devices, and schools can still be measuring the wrong thing.

In our experience, the schools getting the most from technology are rarely the ones using it the most. They are the ones who decided in advance what progress would look like, chose a small number of tools that could evidence it, and were willing to stop using anything that could not.

That is a harder conversation than counting minutes. It is also the only one that changes outcomes.

The schools that achieve the greatest impact are often the ones that know the difference.

So perhaps the most useful question for the new school year is not:

~~“How long are pupils spending on screens?”~~

But rather:

“What are they learning while they’re there?”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Emma has spent more than 20 years partnering with schools, trusts and education systems to improve pupil outcomes. She specialises in helping education leaders evaluate and implement technology based on evidence, impact and long-term sustainability rather than adoption alone.

Whizz Education partners with schools and Multi Academy Trusts to **prove real learning progress, not just platform usage.** With independent evidence from the EEF trial, we show how Maths-Whizz delivers measurable impact across classrooms.

[Explore the evidence](#)

whizz.com/teachers/eeef-whizz-efficacy-trial