Student Screen Time and Instructional Technology

A Shared Starting Point for Our Conversations

Prepared for: The Santa Monica–Malibu USD Instructional Technology Working Group (TK–12)
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How to read this document

This is a starting point, not a conclusion. It does not argue for a position or tell anyone what to think. It places the strongest evidence for caution and the strongest evidence for purposeful use side by side, with equal weight, so that everyone in this group begins from the same shared understanding.

It is written for everyone at the table: families and parents, students, teachers and staff, union representatives, school and district administrators, the superintendent, the Board of Education, and community partners. Together we are the educational partners, interest holders, and community members whose voices will shape this work.

1. Why we are here, and where we are starting from

Santa Monica–Malibu USD is forming the Instructional Technology Working Group because we believe the decisions we make about technology today will shape the kind of learners (and people) our students become. The goal of these months of conversation is not a quick verdict. It is something more lasting: a shared vision for how technology best serves our students' learning experiences, grounded in evidence, shared understanding, and guiding values. This working group will objectively examine how technology is being used in classrooms today, explore emerging questions around AI in education, and generate practical recommendations to inform district decisions. Throughout this work, the group will remain guided by one question: What is truly best for all students, now and in the future?

One idea sits behind the district's decision to form this group. It is offered here as a starting point to examine together, not a conclusion already reached: **technology is neither the problem nor the answer. The question is how we use it.** Technology is a tool, not a teacher. The question is not whether technology should be used, but whether it is used in a way that helps students learn more deeply, think more critically, and engage more meaningfully. Technology is most valuable when it supports great teaching, rather than attempts to replace it. Strong relationships and meaningful learning experiences remain at the heart of student academic success.

The same questions that guide our thinking about technology also apply to artificial intelligence. This document treats AI as part of digital literacy, not as a separate subject. AI is now infused into the tools students and adults use every day, making it important to understand both its possibilities and its limitations. The community holds a wide range of views, from genuine enthusiasm to understandable concern, and the group will give AI focused attention throughout its work. As with all technology, the central question is not whether AI exists in our schools, but how thoughtfully, purposefully, and responsibly it is used to support learning.

2. Two different questions we often blur together

We are starting from very different places, and that is worth naming plainly. Some families and staff are concerned about screen time and about platforms that pull young people in for hours. Others are eager to see our schools move faster on tools like artificial intelligence. Still, others are asking why we are taking up AI at all. Those views are all here in our community, sometimes within the same family or the same staff room. **None of them is treated as the right answer in this document.** The purpose of this group is to hold all of it, learn together, and find the shared ground underneath.

Before going further, it helps to separate two questions that sound alike but are not the same. They have different evidence behind them and call for different responses.

Personal devices	Instructional devices
Phones, smartwatches, and earbuds students bring from home. Use is mostly social and self-directed, shaped by platforms built to maximize time on screen. This is what the district already addressed when it limited phone use during the school day.	District-provided Chromebooks and iPads used for teaching and learning under a teacher's direction. Their value depends almost entirely on what students are asked to do with them. This is the question this working group is here to take up.

Much of the public worry about "screens" is really about the first column: social media and apps designed to keep people watching. Much of what the research says about benefit and harm depends on the second column. Limiting personal phones and designing strong classroom technology are both worthwhile, but they are different goals. Progress on one of these goals is not the same as resolving the other.

What our district has already done. For the 2025–26 school year, the district adopted a policy limiting personal mobile devices during the school day. This moved ahead of California's Phone-Free Schools Act, which requires every district in the state to adopt such a policy by July 1, 2026 and to develop it with broad participation. That work focused on personal devices. The question of technology used for teaching and learning is still open for us to shape with care.

3. How the guidance has changed: from "how much" to "what kind"

Advice about children and screens has shifted over twenty-five years, from fixed time limits toward an emphasis on content, context, and purpose. Knowing that history keeps our conversation grounded in evidence, rather than headlines.

- Early guidance (roughly 1999–2011) discouraged screens for the youngest children and set strict time caps for older ones. It was built mostly around passive television watching.
- Around 2016, leading pediatric guidance moved from quantity toward quality, emphasizing what is on the screen and who is present with the child (rather than minutes alone) and recognizing that blanket time rules do not fit every child or family.

- Current guidance sets no single time limit for school-age children. It focuses instead on content quality, active versus passive engagement, using technology together, and how platform design (autoplay, endless scroll, rewards, notifications) is built to hold attention. It continues to recommend hands-on, non-digital experiences for the youngest children.

A similar shift appears in national education policy, which now frames the central risk not as whether technology is present, but as how it is used. The gap is between students who use technology to create, investigate, and collaborate versus those who mostly use it to passively consume.

4. A recurring distinction: active use and passive use

Across both the health research and the education research, one distinction comes up repeatedly: the effect of a screen often depends on what the person is doing with it. Passive use (scrolling, autoplay video, undirected watching) is where many of the documented concerns gather. Active use (creating, building, writing, analyzing, collaborating toward a real audience) tends to show a different pattern. Some researchers and educators conclude from this that purpose matters more than time, and that what students are asked to do with a device is the measure to watch. Others hold that the amount of screen time still matters in its own right, particularly for the youngest children, regardless of how the time is spent. Both readings appear in the evidence, and how much weight to give each is one of the things this group will decide.

Most existing research has studied whether devices are present rather than how intentionally they are used. This means the evidence base speaks more confidently to risks of unstructured use than to the effects of well-implemented, active classroom technology. This is a distinction that matters for how we interpret findings in either direction. Put plainly, the research has not yet caught up to the question this group is actually asking. That leaves genuine uncertainty, but uncertainty cuts both ways. It is not a reason to restrict tools whose harms remain undemonstrated in this specific context, nor a reason to expand use without thoughtfulness. It is a reason to do exactly what this group is here to do: examine our own practice, define what intentional use looks like for our students, and build the local evidence base that national research hasn't provided yet. That gap in the research is not a weakness in our conversation; it is the justification for having it.

5. Both sides, side by side

The two panels below carry equal weight on purpose. Neither is presented as correct. Each is the strongest, best-supported version of its case, offered so we can hold the whole picture at once.

The case for caution and limits	The case for purposeful, active use
Early development Evidence is consistent that children five and under build language, thinking, and social skills most effectively through hands-on play, movement, and direct human interaction. Screen activity, even interactive, does not fully replace this. Current guidance prioritizes non-digital experiences for the youngest learners.	**How matters more than whether tech is used** The real risk is not the presence of technology, but passive use of it. Removing tools without a plan for what replaces them can widen the gap between students who create with technology and those who only consume. **Equity and access**

Displacing other things Leading pediatric guidance cautions that heavy, engagement-driven screen use can crowd out the basics of healthy development, including sleep, physical activity, and face-to-face time. This concern is strongest for the youngest children. **Design and attention** Features such as autoplay, endless scroll, rewards, and notifications are engineered to maximize time on device. When those same patterns show up in classroom tools, they can compete with instruction instead of supporting it. **Mental health concern** The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory raised serious concern about social media and adolescent mental health and called for protective action. This is part of what motivated state law and our own device policy. **Concerns commonly raised** When communities take up these questions, families and staff often raise worries about students being less present, weaker face-to-face connection, and phones being misused during the day. The concerns specific to our own community are for this group's listening to surface.	The large majority of U.S. public schools now give each student a device to use. Even in a community with high home access like ours, not every home has it; for students whose access is limited, the school device may be the most reliable one they use all day, and taking it away without a plan can reduce fairness rather than protect it. **What active use makes possible** When technology is tied to real purposes (producing, investigating, collaborating, reaching real audiences) it can deepen engagement and reconnect students who struggle with attendance or belonging. The harms in the research cluster around passive use, not this. **Mental health: evidence is mixed** Whether time on social media harms adolescent mental health is genuinely unsettled. Major research reviews reach different conclusions, and the effects appear to vary by person and by activity rather than following one simple pattern. **Access for every learner** For students with disabilities and learning differences, the right tools can be what lets them take part actively, closing the gap between what they know and what they can show. Rules written for the average student can unintentionally hold back those who depend on these tools.

Read together, neither panel is meant to win. They rest on different priorities: protecting children from real risks on one hand, and protecting access and the benefits of skilled use on the other. It requires thoughtful consideration to weigh those priorities differently. The questions worth reviewing cut across both: how much time, used for what purpose, at what age, and in place of what else. Those are the questions this group is here to work through together.

6. What our own community data adds

National research only takes us so far. The conversation is sharper when it is grounded in our own community. The figures below describe the district's geographic area during the 2023–2024 academic years. They reflect the community we serve, rather than a count of enrolled students. Access and need are not spread evenly across our schools.

Community indicator (2023–2024)	Figure
Households with access to broadband	**92.8%**

Community indicator (2023–2024)	Figure
Households with access to a computer	**96.3%**
People under 18 living in families below federal poverty thresholds	**6.8%**
People living in families with incomes below 125% of the poverty line	**13.9%**
Renters with housing costs greater than 35% of household income	**39.1%**
Mortgage-paying homeowners with housing costs greater than 35% of income	**39.8%**

Source: Community-level data pulled from providers including the California Department of Education, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, United States Census Bureau, and the County of Los Angeles (2023–2024).

Behind those percentages are real homes and families. Applied to the district's geographic area — roughly 51,700 households across Santa Monica and Malibu — It means out of the 52k homes, it could amount to thousands of our families with students within our district:

~3,700	**~1,900**
households with no home broadband	**households with no computer at home**
the 7.2% without access	*the 3.7% without access*

Estimated from EduLens access rates applied to U.S. Census household counts (American Community Survey, 2019–2023) for Santa Monica and Malibu. These are community households, not a count of enrolled students, so the figures show the scale of the gap rather than an exact total.

A high percentage with access can make the gap seem to disappear. The household counts bring it back into view. These homes are also likely spread unevenly across our community — overlapping with the lower-income families, and those spending a large share of their income on housing, shown in the table above. For the students who live in them, the device they receive at school may be the only reliable one they have.

The averages also hide real economic pressure: a meaningful share of children live near or below poverty, and close to four in ten renters and mortgage-paying homeowners spend more than a third of their income on housing.

The takeaway is not that our community is high-need or low-need. It is that we are both, in different homes and different neighborhoods, and that any decision made for the average family will land differently on the families furthest from that average — a difference the group will want to keep in view whichever direction it leans.

7. Where the time actually goes: school and the full day

It also helps to see how much screen time students have, and where it happens. The national figures below come from Lightspeed Systems' 2024 analysis of district-issued devices across 344 districts serving 2.8 million students, alongside national survey data from Common Sense Media and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. The "at school" column reflects district-issued

device use only; it does not include personal phones. The “full day” column is total screen time across all devices, at school and at home.

Grade span	At school (district devices, per school day)	Outside school (home & personal devices)	Full day (all devices)
TK–Grade 2	**~45–75 min** ~0.75–1.25 hrs	**~60–120 min** ~1–2 hrs	**~120–180 min** ~2–3 hrs
Grades 3–5	**~75–100 min** ~1.25–1.7 hrs	**~150–240 min** ~2.5–4 hrs	**~240–330 min** ~4–5.5 hrs
Grades 6–8	**~120–144 min** ~2–2.4 hrs	**~240–300 min** ~4–5 hrs	**~360–420 min** ~6–7 hrs
Grades 9–12	**~90–110 min** ~1.5–1.8 hrs	**~330–420 min** ~5.5–7 hrs	**~420–510 min** ~7–8.5 hrs

National benchmarks, not SMMUSD measurements. The “outside school” column is the approximate remainder of the day once the structured school slice is removed; because the school and full-day figures come from different sources, read it as a sense of proportion rather than an exact number. Lightspeed directly measured sixth-grade and K–12 averages; other spans are estimated from those. The district’s own staff technology-use survey can give the group a local picture to set beside these.

Two things stand out, and they are easy to miss in the daily back-and-forth about screens. First, the structured time students spend on district devices at school is the smaller part of their screen day, and it shrinks as a share as students get older. By high school, supervised school-device use is roughly a fifth of a teen’s total daily screen time; the larger and faster-growing share happens outside school, on personal and family devices, and is mostly recreational. For reference, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry reports that young people ages 8 to 18 average about 7.5 hours of screen time a day nationally.

Second, this points in more than one direction at once, which is exactly why it belongs in front of this group. It complicates the idea that classrooms are the main source of children’s screen time; the supervised time at school is modest and, for some students, the only reliable, guided time with a device they get all day. At the same time, it shows that the home is where most unstructured screen time builds up. What the group makes of this is open: it bears both on the school’s share of the day and on how the district works with families around the much larger share beyond it.

8. Students with disabilities and assistive technology

Any conversation about limiting screens has to hold a second truth at the same time: for many students, technology is not a distraction from learning, it is the bridge to it. Tools that read text aloud, turn speech into writing, provide audiobooks, add captions, or predict words — often called assistive technology — let students with dyslexia, dysgraphia, attention differences, trouble holding information in mind, sensory needs, and other disabilities show what they know. For these students a device can be the difference between taking part and being left behind — and that access can be lost in two very different ways. One is obvious: a rule that takes the tool away. The other is quieter, and easy to miss.

Educators and researchers have long observed that students who could benefit from assistive technology sometimes decline it, or gradually stop using it, because it marks them as different from their classmates. A device that has to be fetched from a separate place, switched on when no one else’s is, or carried by only a few can become something a student would rather “forget” or leave

uncharged than be seen using. The pull to do things the way everyone else does is powerful, and it can quietly cost a student the very access an IEP or 504 plan was written to guarantee. The accommodation exists on paper; the student opts out of it in practice, to fit in.

Taken together, these suggest a consideration worth holding alongside the case for caution: how a tool is offered may matter as much as whether it is offered. When the same supports are available to many students rather than singled out for a few — designed for everyone from the start, not added on as a visible exception — a student who needs them may be less likely to leave them aside just to blend in. The district's personal-device policy already reflects part of this, with exceptions for documented medical needs and for accommodations in a student's individualized education program (IEP) or Section 504 plan. As the group develops guidance, one question to weigh is how to set expectations for most students without unintentionally taking away, or drawing attention to, the tools that some students rely on to learn. The people who know these students best, their special education families and educators, are well placed to help the group think this through.

9. The policy and legal context

This conversation is happening inside a wider movement. California's Phone-Free Schools Act now requires every district to adopt a policy limiting student smartphone use, developed with significant community participation and reviewed every five years. The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on social media and youth mental health helped set that direction, and several states have gone further with laws addressing minors' access to social media and devices. Our district acted early. The work of this group is to make sure the rest of our instructional-technology vision is just as intentional.

Selected Sources

All sources below are publicly available and free to read. For families who want a plain-language place to start, the HealthyChildren.org Family Media Plan and Common Sense Media are the most accessible; the rest are the primary research and policy documents behind this summary. Citations follow APA 7th edition.

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A neutral, both-sides starting point developed to support the Instructional Technology Working Group. It informs our shared conversation and does not represent a recommendation or a settled position.