



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on February 22, 2026

We Spent \$30 Billion Making Education High-tech — and Bought a LESS Cognitively Capable Generation

Here's a point to ponder: Silicon Valley tech executives, including those from Apple and Google, have sometimes opted to send their own children to explicitly low-tech schools. Some also have raised their kids tech-free or with strictly [limited](#) screen time. These are people, too, who know technology as a baker does bread. Given this, a question is raised.

Wouldn't it have been wise ascertaining why these experts [insulated](#) their own children from tech before inundating American schoolkids with it?

Instead, we spent \$30 billion ensuring that every schoolchild could trade a textbook for a laptop. Why, it's a bit like hearing about food manufacturers who will never, ever let their own kids eat their factories' products.

And then turning around and saying, "Hey, my children just love these snacks. All the kids should be enjoying them — to their hearts' content!"

In education's case, though, we have gotten something unprecedented for that \$30 billion.

That is, says an observer, "the first generation less cognitively capable than their parents."

Smart Phones to Dumb People?

As *Fortune's* Sasha Rogelberg [reported](#) Saturday:

In 2002, Maine [became the first state](#) to implement a statewide laptop program to some grade levels. Then-Governor Angus King saw the program as a way to put the internet at the fingertips of more children, who would be able to immerse themselves in information.

By that fall, the Maine Learning Technology Initiative had distributed [17,000 Apple laptops](#) to seventh graders across 243 middle schools. By 2016, those numbers had multiplied to 66,000 laptops and tablets distributed to Maine students.

King's initial efforts have been mirrored across the country. In 2024, the U.S. spent more than \$30 billion putting laptops and tablets in school. But more than a quarter century and numerous evolving models of technology later, psychologists and learning experts see a different outcome than the one King intended. Rather than empowering the generation with access to more knowledge, the technology had the opposite effect.

Earlier this year, in written testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, neuroscientist Jared Cooney Horvath said that Gen Z is less



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cognitively capable than previous generations, despite its unprecedented access to technology. He said Gen Z is the first generation in modern history to score lower on standardized tests than the previous one.

While skills measured by these tests, like literacy and numeracy, aren't always indicative of intelligence, they are a reflection of cognitive capability, which Horvath said has been on the decline over the last decade or so.

The kicker is that, if anything, these standardized tests have been dumbed down over the decades. So when students score worse than those a generation ago, the actual decline may be greater than the testing indicates.

Now, note here that this isn't about being a Luddite. It's about there being a time and a place for everything.

For example, technology certainly facilitates commerce and can make and has made the world richer. It's an unprecedented information resource, too, like having your own personal Library of Congress at your fingertips.

It's also unprecedentedly distracting — and is *designed to be so*.

And virtually all of us are acquainted with this phenomenon. I experience the internet distraction factor when writing my articles.

The Realities

Rogelberg makes some other important points in her piece, too, such as:

- Citing studies, Horvath has highlighted how the data are definitive: More screen exposure tends to correspond with poorer outcomes.
- He attributes this to unrestricted access to digital devices in classrooms. This diminishes rather than enhances students' ability to learn effectively.
- Educational tools must match proven human learning processes; unchecked digital integration appears to undermine classroom effectiveness instead of improving it.
- Signs of this problem emerged years ago. For instance, Maine's long-running tech program registered no test-score gains over 15 years and was declared a failure.
- Generation Z now confronts the consequences of weakened cognitive skills. They extend beyond limited career opportunities or stalled advancement — they threaten society's very capacity to address significant future problems.
- Nonetheless, classroom tech adoption has surged. A 2021 teachers survey revealed that more than half spend 1-4 hours daily on digital tools. A quarter use them five hours or more.
- Despite educators' intentions, students frequently divert their attention elsewhere. A 2014 study of university students showed off-task computer use occurring about two-thirds of the time.
- Frequent tech distractions contribute significantly to impaired learning. For interruptions delay refocusing, and multitasking harms memory and accuracy and deep engagement with challenging material.
- Learning inherently demands effort, discomfort, and persistence, qualities at odds with modern tech's emphasis on convenience and quick switches.
- Many apps (including social media and games) work against education. They're designed for addiction to maximize user engagement and return visits.



Common Sense

This said, there are always those who'll quibble with the data. "Correlation doesn't equate to causation," we may hear. But aren't the above findings just common sense?

After all, the internet is ideal for accessing close to all the information (and misinformation) known to man. But kids can't absorb civilization's entire body of knowledge in school. They only can, and only need to, learn a minuscule sliver of *relevant* information. And that can be done via textbooks. Kids don't, as a rule, need screen access.

Moreover, if a textbook is all a student accesses in class, there's at least a *chance* that the only way he'll be able to experience further stimulation is by turning the page. With the internet, a siren of steroid-engorged, non-relevant stimulation is just a mouse click away.

It's not surprising, though, that we've gone all in on inundating schoolchildren with tech. First, chronological chauvinism is the order of the day with how tradition has been downgraded. One result is a bias toward viewing "new" as synonymous with better.

Second, politicians are often incentivized to promote technology in classrooms by tech-funded special interests.

Remember here, too, that screen time [can have the same effect on the brain as drug use](#). In fact, experts have called it "[digital heroin](#)." Again, though, computers do have legitimate uses.

But so do drugs.

It's when you witness addiction that you know the usage has gone far beyond the legitimate and become destructive.



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