

RESEARCH BRIEF 1 OF 6

Students understand text somewhat better on paper

META-ANALYSIS · STRENGTH: STRONG

WHAT THE RESEARCH FOUND

A meta-analysis combined 54 studies from 2000 to 2017 with 171,055 participants. Readers understood the same text somewhat better on paper than on screens. The paper advantage was larger when reading was timed and for informational text. It did not appear for purely narrative text, and it grew larger in more recent studies.

HOW STRONG IS THIS?

The overall effect is small, but the authors note it equals about two-thirds of a typical year's growth in reading comprehension in elementary school.

WHAT IT DOESN'T TELL US

Most comparisons involved college students reading on computers. It doesn't show that all screen reading harms learning, or that stories read on screens are a problem.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR OUR DISTRICT

Informational reading, like science and social studies texts and timed assignments, is where paper matters most. Paper should be the default there.

SOURCE

Delgado, Vargas, Ackerman, and Salmerón (2018), Educational Research Review. doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2018.09.003

Assistive technology, AAC devices, and accommodations under IEPs and 504 plans are essential tools and are outside the scope of this advocacy.

RESEARCH BRIEF 2 OF 6

Tablets can hold back struggling readers

EXPERIMENT · STRENGTH: PRELIMINARY TO MODERATE

WHAT THE RESEARCH FOUND

In a study of 182 upper elementary students in Spain, ages 10 to 13, students were randomly assigned to read science texts on paper or on a tablet. Among weaker readers working under time pressure, those on tablets understood less than those on paper. Stronger readers did about the same on both. Tablets did not make students more distracted.

HOW STRONG IS THIS?

A single, well-controlled experiment. The effect showed up in one group of students, not the whole class.

WHAT IT DOESN'T TELL US

It's one study, in one country, with two short texts, measured right after reading. Across all students there was no overall difference.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR OUR DISTRICT

The students most likely to fall behind on screens may be the ones who can least afford it. Paper-first reading is an equity issue.

SOURCE

Salmerón, Delgado, Vargas, and Gil (2021), Learning and Individual Differences. doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2021.101975

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RESEARCH BRIEF 3 OF 6

A global review says technology should earn its place

POLICY REPORT · STRENGTH: STRONG

WHAT THE RESEARCH FOUND

UNESCO's 2023 global education report reviewed evidence on technology in schools worldwide. It recommends that technology be introduced only on evidence that it is appropriate, equitable, scalable, and sustainable, and that it complement face-to-face teaching rather than replace it.

HOW STRONG IS THIS?

A major international synthesis, not a single study.

WHAT IT DOESN'T TELL US

It doesn't set screen-time limits, and it doesn't say technology is harmful. It says the burden of proof belongs on the technology.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR OUR DISTRICT

Before buying or renewing a product, the district should ask what evidence shows it improves learning for students like ours.

SOURCE

UNESCO (2023), Global Education Monitoring Report 2023: Technology in education: A tool on whose terms?
doi.org/10.54676/UZQV8501

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RESEARCH BRIEF 4 OF 6

Sweden is bringing back printed books

POLICY REPORT · STRENGTH: OFFICIAL SOURCE

WHAT HAPPENED

Since 2023, Sweden's government has funded a grant for printed textbooks and teachers' guides, working toward one textbook per pupil per subject, and a 2024 change to its Education Act made clear that pupils must have access to textbooks. The government says digital tools should be introduced only at an age when they help rather than hinder learning. The shift came after Swedish fourth graders' scores on the international PIRLS reading test fell from 555 in 2016 to 544 in 2021.

HOW STRONG IS THIS?

A national policy decision, not a controlled study.

WHAT IT DOESN'T TELL US

We can't say screens caused the score drop; many things changed at once, including the pandemic. Sweden's scores remain well above the international average.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR OUR DISTRICT

A country that went further into digital learning than most U.S. districts decided to rebalance. We can learn from that without waiting for a decade of our own data.

SOURCE

Government Offices of Sweden (2024, updated), Government investing in more reading time and less screen time. [government.se](https://www.government.se). Reading scores: IEA, PIRLS 2016 and 2021 results.

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RESEARCH BRIEF 5 OF 6

Pediatricians are focused on design and quality, not just minutes

POLICY REPORT · STRENGTH: STRONG

WHAT THE RESEARCH FOUND

The American Academy of Pediatrics' 2026 policy statement moves beyond simple screen-time limits. It warns that many digital products are built to maximize engagement, which can crowd out healthy habits like sleep and movement, and it urges attention to quality, context, and design.

HOW STRONG IS THIS?

Based on observational, longitudinal, and meta-analytic evidence. The AAP notes that causal conclusions remain limited.

WHAT IT DOESN'T TELL US

It doesn't set limits for classroom use. It doesn't say all digital learning is harmful.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR OUR DISTRICT

Minutes matter, but so does design. Learning apps with points, streaks, and rewards deserve a close look, especially in the early grades.

SOURCE

Munzer et al. (2026), Pediatrics. doi.org/10.1542/peds.2025-075320

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RESEARCH BRIEF 6 OF 6

Federal guidance asks districts to show results

POLICY REPORT · STRENGTH: OFFICIAL SOURCE

WHAT IT SAYS

In August 2026, the U.S. Department of Education issued guidance saying education technology should be judged by whether it improves learning, not by screen time alone. It distinguishes classroom tools from recreational technology, and it calls for evidence, educator judgment, and transparency for parents.

HOW STRONG IS THIS?

Federal guidance, not a law or a research study. It leaves decisions to states and local districts.

WHAT IT DOESN'T TELL US

It doesn't show that any particular product works. It sets the question, not the answer.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR OUR DISTRICT

We agree with the question. For each product used in core instruction, the district should be able to show evidence that it improves learning, and share it with parents.

SOURCE

U.S. Department of Education press release and Dear Colleague letter, August 20, 2026. ed.gov

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