

# Tech in your child's elementary school: what to look for, what to ask

All this "ed tech" sounds modern and cool — but how can you be sure the devices and apps your child's school is using are actually helping your child learn?

by: [Crystal Yednak](#) | Updated: April 24, 2023

Dusty media labs with old desktop computers — or sleek iPads, cloud-merging Chromebooks, immersive VR helmets, and data projectors flashing micro-films? Today, what passes for “ed tech” (educational technology) ranges widely. If a school's technology is shiny and new, parents can



assume their child is getting a modern education. But does all this ed tech really improve learning? Parents who studied with ancient artifacts like pencils, pens, textbooks, and blue-lined notebook paper might be suspicious watching their kids today, because learning is entirely different. Even the ed tech jargon students use sounds like toddler nonsense: Zoom? TikTok? BrainPop? DragonBox?

## What the heck is happening in K-5 classrooms today?

Don't worry. It's all good.

Researchers' opinions on tech's [value in primary schools](#) were mixed for a while, way back, long ago in the pre-Covid era, around 2016. But today, in 2023, the verdict is clear. Ed tech is useful, beloved even, and definitely here to stay. And it's still changing and expanding rapidly. A [recent Gallup survey](#) of thousands of teachers, principals, administrators, and public-school pupils found:

- 96 percent of younger students said digital learning tools are fun and help them learn
- 96 percent of principals and administrators *support* the increased use of digital learning tools at their schools
- Elementary school students want to use digital learning tools outside of school *even more* than middle and high schoolers.
- Black and Hispanic students are *more enthusiastic* about additional ed tech than white or Asian students.
- Students from low-income households crave tech learning even more than kids from higher-income households.

Worldwide, ed tech is used to improve learning in multiple subjects: [English](#) in Malaysia, [mathematics](#) in Finland, [music](#) in Indonesia, [STEM](#) in Spain, [geography](#) in South Africa,

and “content knowledge” in the U.S. Persuasive, right? Still, let’s remember: Ed tech cannot succeed all by itself. It needs smart, well-planned implementation and facilitation by humans to maximize its teaching potential.

## **Evaluating tech in your child’s classroom**

First and foremost: the presence of technology alone is not a panacea. Why? Success hinges on how devices are used. “It’s less about the media and more about the approach,” says [Alison Carr-Chellman](#) Dean of the School of Education and Health Sciences at the University of Dayton.

Whether your child is learning or not still depends, in large part, on the teacher. You don’t want to see teachers taking their usual activities, digitizing them, and that being the end of it, cautions Carr-Chellman. Instead, look for teachers thinking creatively about how to use technology to engage students. If your child’s class is studying oceans, for example, they need to use tech far more than simply filling out an online worksheet. Technology should help kids ask their own questions, find new answers, and show what they’ve learned in challenging and useful ways. A smart way to teach oceans with tech might include a “virtual field trip” to a coral reef, with the [Nature Conservancy](#). Experts caution that technology should never be the center of attention. You don’t want students working for long periods in isolation on their devices. Students should be interacting with the teacher and other kids while using technology. In elementary school, kids should still be working with tangible materials like crayons, glue, scissors, and construction paper.

## **Do students need their own devices?**

Some schools assign laptops or tablets to every student in a class. Others have carts of devices and require teachers to schedule time for their classes to use them. Still, others offer a shared media lab that classes may visit once or twice a week. The question is: Do students need their own device for the school’s tech program to succeed?

The rationale behind every child having their own device — often called “one-to-one technology” — is that it helps kids are more apt to become fluent in using the technology. “If you have a sharing-type scenario, you don’t have that next level of integration,” says [Carl Hooker](#), speaker, blogger, and podcaster on innovative education technology. “All of a sudden your device is taken away and given to someone else, and you don’t have that ownership.”

So far, most studies of one-to-one programs haven’t shown significant increases in student achievement, experts say. Why not? According to [Krista Glazewski](#), an associate professor of Instructional Systems Technology at Indiana University, success hinges on implementation. “When schools call me to consult with them about technology choices, my biggest question is not what devices they are considering for purchase, but what investments they also plan [to make] in teacher development to make in tandem with technology purchases. Because it’s the teaching practices associated with technology use that matter most.”

## Whatever happened to the media lab?

As schools move toward one-to-one programs and in-class tech, the role of the school media lab has shifted. Many media labs have gone mobile, while some have disappeared. “A media lab is better than nothing, but can you really get value out of that when you can only get in there Tuesdays and Thursdays?” says Kyle Peck, co-director of the [Center for Online Innovation in Learning](#) at Penn State’s College of Education. Schools nowadays are all moving quickly toward the cloud, which means software and projects won’t be accessed from one physical device or location in the media center.

## Connectivity matters

A big part of your school’s tech program’s success depends on the basics, starting with the quality of your school’s wireless network. Can everyone stream what they need, when they need it? Can kids interact in real time? No matter how great the lesson plan, learning will be hindered if students are wasting time waiting for pages to load.

The second factor to consider is adequate technical support. Is there a dedicated staff person to deal with the devices when they break down? If not, what’s the plan when things go awry?

## Is that app worthwhile?

Carr-Chellman says parents shouldn’t necessarily fret when they see students playing video games in class. “Games are unbelievably educational,” she notes. A growing body of research has found many video games have the ability to improve cognition, and — online or not — gamification is a proven learning technique.”

Some districts appoint vetting committees to select apps for the classroom, while others look to recommendations from educators. In many cases, teachers may find them on their own. Wondering if the apps your child is using are doing any good? Ask your teacher how the app reinforces learning goals. No matter who vetted the app, your child’s teacher should be able to articulate why they’re having students use it. Here’s a very brief list of highly-rated apps for children’s learning:

- [Khan Academy](#)
- [HiMama](#)
- [PBS KIDS Games](#)
- [Duolingo](#)
- [BrainPOP](#)
- [Minecraft](#)
- [Adobe Spark](#)

## Modern communication between parents and teachers

In some towns, PTO meetings or school newsletters remain the best way to convey messages to parents. Other schools use email, Facebook, Twitter, or robocalls to help parent-school communication. Increasingly, the norm is to have a portal, such

as [Schoology](#), [ParentSquare](#), [Remind](#), or [Infinite Campus](#) where parents log on to access their child's grades, attendance record, lunch money account, and ask the teacher questions.

## Questions to ask about tech at your child's school

- What access will my child have to technology at school? Will they get their own device, share a device, or is there a media lab?
- What technology will my child's teacher be using? Google Classroom? [Nearpod](#)? [Immersive field trips](#)? [Screen Mirroring](#)? How will the chosen technology help my child learn?
- How many hours a day will my child use technology at school? (Pediatricians advise no more than [one hour a day](#) of high-quality programming.)
- Are the teachers professionally trained to help kids use technology correctly? Do they try out the technology on their own, before using it with the class?
- Is my child's teacher enthusiastic, or reluctant, to use technology? ([Columbia University Teachers College research](#) categorized teachers as dexterous, evaders, assessors, or presenters with ed tech.)
- Is tech support provided to the teachers? How reliable is the school's wireless network?
- Will my child's teacher prioritize interactive learning with technology (like online learning games) over passive activities (like watching videos)? Will technology never be used to replace the face-to-face interactions with classmates and teachers that develop valuable social skills?
- Does the school use email, Facebook, Twitter, texts, or systems like [Schoology](#) to enable communication with parents and students?
- Do the teachers post instructional videos on YouTube or TikTok to help their students learn the subject material?
- Is technology used to help different kinds of learners? Are there ed tech options to specifically help kids with learning differences?
- Technology can be intimidating for some parents. But it doesn't have to be. Learning to ask the right questions can reassure you that even if you're not familiar with the latest in ed tech, your child can be, and get a great education along the way.

## About the author

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