

## **Time Quotas vs. Teacher Trust: Rethinking Digital Policy in Primary Schools**

Starting in 2027, Victorian public primary schools will limit digital device use in classrooms to 90 minutes per day for students in Years 3 to 6, with minimal screen time for those in Prep to Year 2. The reform, introduced by the Victorian Government, aims to reduce digital distractions, enhance classroom focus, and relieve families of the financial burden of providing personal devices for their children.

While this may seem like a pragmatic step toward balancing technology and learning, it raises critical questions about the quality of education, equity across school sectors, and the role of teacher professionalism in an increasingly digital world.

### **The Case for Screen Time Limits**

There is clear evidence that excessive screen use (particularly outside of school hours) is associated with poor sleep, reduced physical activity, and socio-emotional challenges in children (OECD, 2025; Sanders et al., 2019; Qi et al., 2023). Limiting screen time in classrooms may support reductions in passive, unstructured digital use, but duration alone is an inadequate measure of educational benefit. The effectiveness of digital technology in schools is contingent not on how much it is used, but on how well it is integrated into pedagogy (Education Endowment Foundation, 2022). When implemented purposefully, technology can enhance collaboration, creativity, and personalised learning. Screen time policies should therefore be designed to optimise, rather than arbitrarily minimise, technology use.

### **The Hidden Costs of ‘Savings’**

The shift away from Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) programs is also pitched as a cost-saving initiative for households. However, the policy shifts the funding responsibility onto schools, many of which are already under financial strain. The AEU has argued that expecting schools, especially those already underfunded in Victoria, to supply adequate technology without additional resources is unrealistic (AEU, 2025). Furthermore, technological obsolescence poses additional risks, with students potentially using outdated devices that compromise learning quality and expose school systems to cyber security vulnerabilities.

Without dedicated funding, public schools may struggle to maintain equitable access to high-quality digital tools, widening the gap between public and private sectors. Research also suggests that device ownership matters. When students are allocated a personal device rather than accessing a pooled one, they develop greater familiarity, can customise it to their own learning needs, and consequently engage more deeply with digital tasks (Males et al., 2015).

### **A Step Backward for Creative Pedagogy?**

While screen time restrictions aim to increase focus, they risk reducing the opportunities for creative, inquiry-based, and collaborative learning that good teaching encourages. In initial teacher education, future teachers learn to design experiences that promote curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking. This reform appears to reflect a broader shift toward teacher-centred models and a growing distrust in teachers’ professional judgment. Instead of investing in teacher capacity to design rich, purposeful digital learning experiences, the government has opted for a compliance-driven solution.

Technology, when used well, enables students to code, build, design, and collaborate, therefore transforming knowledge into understanding. Devices drive 3D printers, robotics and other hardware

that make learning active and hands on. Reducing access to these tools could make classrooms less engaging, not more.

### **From Student Agency to Time Quotas: Reversing a Digital Learning Trajectory**

Restricting device access to a set number of minutes risks undermining the very forms of inquiry-based, collaborative and creative learning that digital tools can enable. In practice, technology allows students to engage in a range of cognitively rich tasks from researching and synthesising information, to coding, designing prototypes, composing music, or creating multimedia presentations. These are not passive tasks; they are active, interdisciplinary, and often iterative.

One-to-one laptop programs, introduced in the 1990s, were designed to promote learner agency and creative autonomy (Loader, 1993). This policy reverses that trajectory, framing devices as distractions rather than enablers of creativity.

The new policy, however, appears to reverse this trajectory. Instead of seeing digital devices as enablers of creativity, they are repositioned as sources of distraction. Yet this raises practical concerns - how will screen time be counted in project-based learning that involves both digital and non-digital tasks? If a student researches on a laptop, sketches a design on paper, builds a prototype, uses the digital camera to collect evidence of learning for assessment, and then returns to the device to write a reflection, how is that timed and tracked (especially between specialist teachers and classroom teachers)? Reducing such complex, iterative learning processes to rigid time quotas risks oversimplifying the realities of classroom practice.

### **Targeting the Wrong Problem?**

The core issue lies not in the presence of digital tools themselves, but in how they are used. Screen time at school, when guided by skilled educators, is often purposeful and cognitively demanding. The problem of excessive or passive screen time stems largely from leisure use at home, where supervision and educational quality are variable. Yet increasingly, passivity is creeping into classrooms through the growing reliance on scripted slide decks and tightly prescribed lesson plans. This approach constrains teacher autonomy and diminishes opportunities for dialogic, inquiry-driven learning. In such contexts, students may spend large portions of class time looking at screens without engaging meaningfully with content. A more forward-thinking response would be to invest in supporting teachers to use digital tools creatively and confidently, enabling them to design learning experiences that support curiosity and critical thinking.

Rather than focusing on reducing screen time, a more productive approach would be to fund digital innovation grants that enable schools to develop inquiry-based and student-driven projects. These initiatives promote purposeful digital creation, where students take ownership of their learning while teachers model ethical and creative technology use. Such investment would strengthen teacher capability, promote equitable access to emerging technologies, and move classrooms beyond surface-level integration toward authentic, inquiry-driven learning.

### **A Contradiction at the Curriculum Level**

The new screen time policy also appears to contradict the revised Victorian Curriculum, which places digital literacy as a foundational skill (VCAA, 2023). If we expect students to be digitally fluent, we must provide them with opportunities to engage with technology as a tool for inquiry, creativity, and problem-solving across all subject areas. Imposing rigid time constraints on device use risks reducing digital learning to a compliance task, rather than embedding it as an integral part of contemporary education.

## Putting Trust Back in Teaching

Reducing digital distraction is a valid and necessary goal, but effective education policy must be grounded in support for high-quality teaching and not about prescriptive controls. Rather than empowering teachers to make informed, context-sensitive decisions about technology use, this reform reflects a deeper trend - a growing distrust in teacher professionalism and a shift toward increasingly centralised, compliance-driven models of schooling.

While managing screen time is a legitimate concern, the emphasis should shift from restricting access to responsible, meaningful use. Limiting device use to 90 minutes per day may appear sufficient on the surface, but it risks over-correcting in ways that stifle creativity, exacerbate inequities, and constrain the very pedagogical flexibility that supports student engagement. While providing each student with access to a pooled device may appear to promote equity, in practice it can create logistical challenges (online NAPLAN assessments) and restrict meaningful integration of technology into everyday learning, particularly when multiple classes or subjects require devices at the same time. And if that access is tightly regulated through rigid time quotas, the educational benefits risk being undermined. This policy aligns with a broader push toward explicit instruction models and scripted lessons that dictate how and what teachers should teach. In doing so, it marginalises the pedagogical expertise of educators and constrains the scope of learning to what is measurable and controllable – factors that may further deter teachers from joining the profession.

If we want students to contribute productively in a world of rapidly changing technology, to develop their critical thinking, creativity, and digital literacy, we must trust the professionals best placed to develop those capacities. That means investing in schools, supporting innovation in practice, and recognising that technology, when meaningfully integrated, is a powerful tool for deep learning. Instead of restricting technology use, governments should channel more focus, energy, and funding into helping teachers build the confidence and capability to use it purposefully in the classroom. Reductive policies sidestep the complexities of pedagogy. If we are serious about preparing students for the future, we must shift from managing screen time to empowering both teachers and students.

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