

The technology trap

Randi Weingarten

President, AFT

When I started teaching in the 1990s, education technology was just being introduced. School computers were glorified typewriters unconnected to the internet, and students had to go to the office if they needed a phone. Many schools began providing laptops to students in the 2010s, and the COVID-19 pandemic solidified the tech takeover. Today, many school systems provide every student with a tablet or laptop—even children as young as 5. More than half of 11-year-olds have a smartphone ever ready at their fingertips, soaring to 95 percent of teens ages 13-17. Four in 10 teens say they are online “almost constantly.” The pace of this tech revolution has been blisteringly fast—and kids are getting burned.

As professor and author of *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt says cellphones and social media are making our kids sedentary, solitary, anxious and depressed. On top of that, there are growing concerns about the adverse effects of all this tech on students’ cognition, attention and achievement.

A leading researcher in this area is neuroscientist Jared Cooney Horvath. He recently analyzed how reading and math trends shifted after state-by-state expansion of education technology. Prior to large-scale digital adoption, National Assessment of Educational Progress scores for fourth- and eighth-graders had been rising steadily for many years. After adoption, the trajectory shifted, often sharply, toward decline. Correlation is not causation, but Horvath cites research indicating that this pattern appears across states, countries, grade levels, subjects and years. In his book *The Digital Delusion*, Horvath notes that investing in air conditioning has a more beneficial impact on learning than providing every student with a laptop.

And then there is artificial intelligence, which is causing seismic changes in virtually every aspect of society. But AI does not change the essential purpose of education: teaching students how to think.

The ubiquity of AI makes critical thinking even more important. Students need to go beyond memorizing facts and learn how to verify them, challenge them and synthesize them into new ideas. Some of the most valuable

skills in the AI age—like problem-solving, communication, adaptability and ethical judgment—depend on the ability to apply knowledge.

Yet best practices in education and the science of learning too often take a backseat to market forces, particularly in the Trump administration, which has given Big Tech carte blanche. The global education technology market was estimated at \$187.01 billion in 2025, and the industry is seeking an even bigger foothold. But research has established that less tech can produce better outcomes. For example, people learn more from hard-copy text than from digital text and by taking notes on paper. And learning is a

Teachers and parents are calling for ‘devices down, eyes up, hands on’ learning.

deeply human endeavor; the student-teacher relationship produces one of the largest effects in educational research.

I’ll just say this about Melania Trump’s proposal to replace human teachers with AI-powered robots: It is devoid of both humanity and evidence of any benefit.

I’m not calling for a ban on AI or a bonfire of the Chromebooks. But the lack of guardrails and federal regulations for AI causes deep apprehension for more and more of us. We need to harness the benefits of technology while mitigating the harms. That’s why the AFT created the National Academy for

AI Instruction last year. It’s a training hub designed by educators, grounded in safety and people-first technology. I am wary of the actual and potential dangers of AI, but it is here to stay. We need enforceable guardrails and regulations—and I have an obligation to my members to help educators become coaches in the game, not spectators on the sidelines.

Indeed, teachers—along with parents—are leading the way on the appropriate use of tech, toward what I call “devices down, eyes up, hands on” learning. The AFT is supporting active learning—from project-based instruction to career and technical education. Last year, our New York state affiliate won a ban on cellphones during the school day. Kids are noticeably more engaged, and hallways and lunchrooms bustle with chatter and laughter again now that students aren’t glued to their phones.

Teachers and parents cannot manage the tech juggernaut on our own. I am increasingly alarmed by the Trump administration’s refusal to address the harms of technology, particularly for young people. I joined Sen. Bernie Sanders and other labor leaders at a press conference this week to urge Congress to regulate AI and ensure this technology benefits the American people, not a handful of billionaires.

We are in a perilous time. Teachers are competing for students’ attention against intentionally addictive algorithms. Families are wary of AI’s safety and social effects on their children. And young people are paying a high price—socially, emotionally and educationally. When we look back on this moment, I hope we will know that we acted in time.



Weingarten speaks at a press conference held by Sen. Bernie Sanders to call for regulation of artificial intelligence, April 16.

Photo: Brett Sherman

FOLLOW RANDI WEINGARTEN: aft.org/verified