

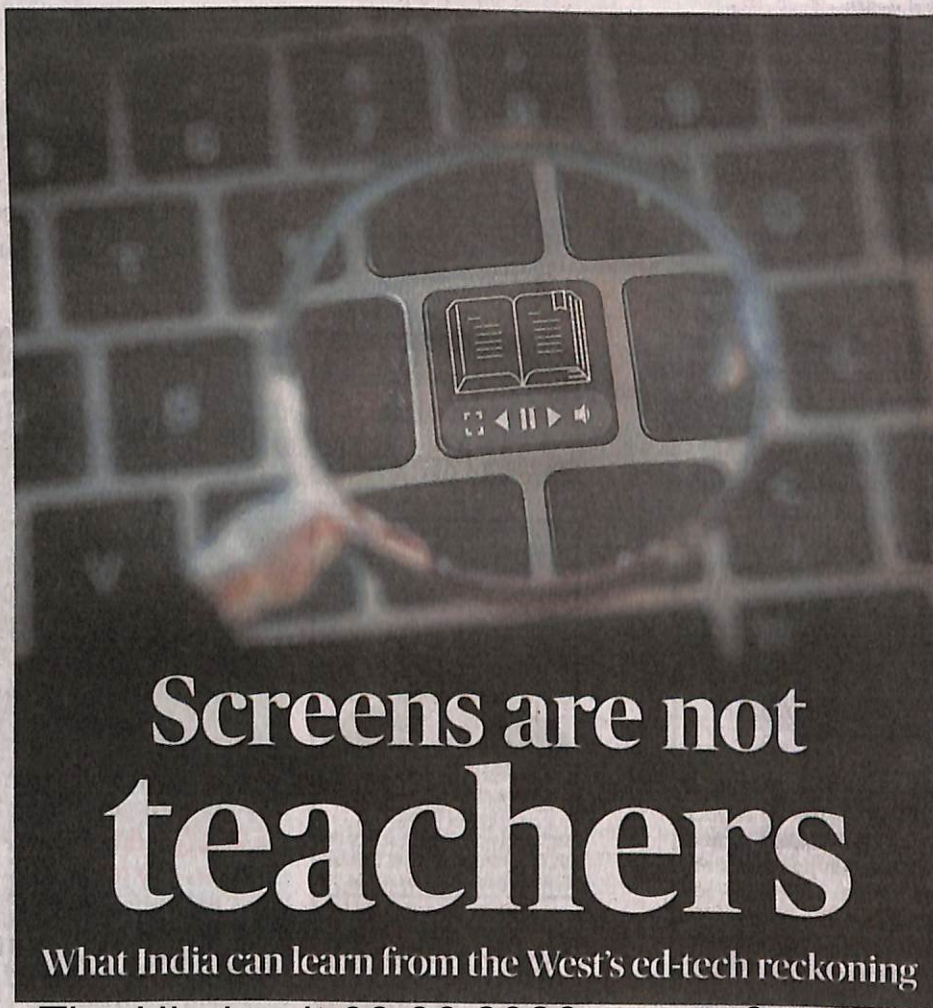
In early 2025, neuroscientist and education consultant Dr. Jared Cooney Horvath testified before the United States Senate with findings that ought to give policymakers pause everywhere: large-scale adoption of digital technology in classrooms is actively harming children, reducing comprehension, eroding attention, and driving a generational cognitive decline unlike anything in the history of standardised measurement.

Gen Z is the first cohort in modern history to underperform its predecessor across attention, memory, literacy, numeracy, and IQ, despite spending more years in formal schooling than any generation before them.

Consistent pattern

Correlating classroom technology adoption across 80 countries with cognitive performance data, Horvath finds a consistent pattern: once digital devices become standard in schools, outcomes deteriorate. The inflection point tracks roughly to 2010 when one-to-one device programmes began spreading through Western schools. Students with heavy daily screen exposure in school score dramatically lower than those with little or none.

Horvath argues that human cognition evolved for sustained, focused engagement and, crucially, for learning from other hu-



Screens are not teachers

What India can learn from the West's ed-tech reckoning

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mans through direct interaction, social cues, and observed behaviour. Digital environments are engineered for precisely the opposite: perpetual novelty, instant switching, continuous distraction. By routing learning through screens, classrooms sever the connection that cognition depends on.

Historian and generational consultant Dr. Eliza Filby adds a dimension that should concentrate minds in India. Across the

Western world, a quiet divergence appears to be under way. Wealthy families – including, conspicuously, those who build and sell these very technologies – are pulling their children away from screen-heavy education.

Elite private schools are increasingly rowing back on digital programmes, reinvesting in teacher-led instruction, and foregrounding skills that screens demonstrably weaken: concentration,

creative thinking, and sustained reading.

Meanwhile, children in poorly resourced schools are growing more reliant on device-led learning, often because little else is available. The digital revolution in education is becoming a mechanism for entrenching the very inequalities it promised to dissolve. The new dividing line, as Filby puts it, runs not between those who can access technology and those who cannot but bet-

ween those whose education is shaped by people and those whose education is governed by platforms.

Indian situation

India is accelerating into this landscape with marked enthusiasm. The National Education Policy 2020 positions digital technology as central to the country's educational future: a National Educational Technology Forum, widespread investment in digital infrastructure, AI-integrated pedagogy, and online and blended learning across levels.

Beyond formal schooling, India has seen explosive growth in ed-tech platforms selling the promise of quality learning to millions of aspirational families. Online courses, coaching apps, and AI tutors are rapidly filling the space that the state has long failed to adequately occupy.

The framing of technology as an equaliser lets governments sidestep the harder work of building human educational capacity – trained teachers, functional schools, real accountability – while the IT and ed-tech industries, with obvious commercial interest in embedding technology into policy, profit from the substitution. Endorsing mass digital adoption as progress risks replacing genuine reform with a corporate growth agenda.

The children most exposed to the consequences are those in underfunded government schools – pre-

cisely the children for whom a tablet can seem like an upgrade. While they get apps, children of the affluent get teachers, tutors, and the deep human instruction that produces durable learning. The equity argument for ed-tech, applied at scale and without rigorous scrutiny, may produce the opposite of what it promises.

China – which has invested in ed-tech at a scale that dwarfs India's and has mandated AI literacy across all grades – has nonetheless restricted unsupervised AI use by primary school students and imposed screen time limits. The thrust is on capturing benefits while containing documented costs. PISA 2022, drawing on data from 81 countries, points in the same direction: modest device use in structured learning showed small gains, while heavy screen use correlated with dramatically lower scores. This endorses selectivity, not blanket acceleration.

India has the advantage of being a late mover. The evidence from countries that moved first is abundant and concerning. The NEP's digital commitments deserve serious, sceptical re-examination driven by research rather than by industry advocacy or the lure of a technological fix. Putting a screen in front of a child is not the same as educating one.

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