



“Not anti-tech, but pro-learning.”

—JONATHAN HAIDT, author of *The Anxious Generation*

THE DIGITAL DELUSION

How Classroom Technology Harms
Our Kids' Learning—
and How to Help Them Thrive Again

JARED COONEY HORVATH, PhD, MEd

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Before we begin, a quick note on terminology and stories:

I.

Throughout this book, I use the terms EdTech, digital tools, and digital technologies interchangeably to refer specifically to student-facing, internet-connected devices. Unless otherwise noted, I am not referring to teacher-facing tools (such as slideware used to deliver explicit instruction) or closed systems that run isolated programs (such as haptic simulators used to train surgeons).

II.

All stories in this book reflect real experiences shared by parents, students, and teachers I have worked with across education. Some names, locations, and details have been changed to protect privacy. In a few cases, individual voices have been blended to capture common themes.

PROLOGUE

A Generation in Reverse

This might be one of the hardest truths our generation has to face, but better to confront it now than keep pretending it isn't so:

Our children are less cognitively capable than we were at their age.

For some parents, that may come as a shock. But for others, it's simply confirmation of what they've long suspected. The daughter who once loved school, but now dreads it. The son who used to devour books, but now scrolls until midnight. Memory is fading. Attention is slipping. Something is wrong, and many of us feel it.

For nearly two centuries, the West experienced steady generational progress. Each new cohort of children grew up, on average, healthier, happier, and better educated than the last.

Until now.

Generation Z (born 1997–2012) is demonstrably less healthy, less happy, and less cognitively developed than their parents were at the same age. For the first time in the history of standardized cognitive measurement, children are consistently scoring lower on many

key measures of cognitive development—from literacy and numeracy to deep creativity and general IQ. And the early data from Generation Alpha (born after 2012) suggests the downturn isn't slowing—it's accelerating.

If this were just a squabble over letter grades or standardized test scores, then perhaps none of this would really matter. But this is about much more.

At the personal level, stronger cognitive skills are linked to better health, longer life, more stable relationships, higher income, and greater life satisfaction. And at the societal level, we're facing challenges far more complex and far-reaching than any in human history. Overpopulation. Water scarcity. Loss of biodiversity. Evolving diseases. Moral drift.

Now more than ever we need a generation capable of deep thought—kids who can grapple with nuance, hold multiple truths in tension, and creatively tackle problems that stump the greatest minds of today. In other words, we need children who are sharper and more adaptable than we are.

But instead of cultivating these capacities, we're undermining them. Somewhere along the way, we've stripped something vital from our children—and perhaps the cruelest part is, they don't even know they've lost anything.

So what went wrong?

Researchers like Jean Twenge and Jonathan Haidt point to smartphones and social media; tools that promote sedentary behavior and encourage isolation. Others, like Abigail Shrier and Greg Lukianoff, argue we've over-medicalized childhood; treating ordinary experiences as "trauma" and shielding kids from discomfort in ways that leave them fragile and unprepared.

While these factors certainly illuminate the existing mental health

crisis, they don't fully explain the *cognitive* collapse. Why are so many kids *learning* less?

To address that, we need to look at the one institution most parents still trust to support learning: *school*. And here, one data point stands out.

For the entirety of the 20th century, IQ scores rose steadily, with each generation gaining about six points over their parents. This growth was largely driven by improved education: the more time children spent in school, the more their cognitive abilities grew.

Starting around the year 2000, however, something changed.

Across the West, IQ scores began to fall—even as time spent in school kept rising. Today's children spend more hours in the classroom than ever before, yet somehow they're developing more slowly.

But here's the kicker: in countries where traditional schooling has remained largely intact, this decline hasn't occurred—in those places, intelligence scores are still rising.

So what changed? What severed the link between schooling and cognitive development?

The answer lies in the meteoric rise of *educational technology*.

SINCE THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, the presence of digital devices in education has exploded. What began as a niche market has ballooned into a \$400 billion mega-industry woven deeply into nearly every aspect of schooling. And all of it was sold under the banner of progress: these tools, we were told, would effectively help our children learn twice as much in half the time.

When parents hear that schools are increasingly embracing digital technologies, many of us picture something familiar from our own childhoods: a few aging desktops in the back of the li-

brary, a weekly typing class, maybe pasting some clipart into MS Paint. Whether you loved it or hated it, one thing was clear: computer time was limited, contained, and rarely central to our education.

But today's EdTech is nothing like what we grew up with—and many parents have no idea just how far things have spiraled.

Over half of our children now use a computer at school for one to four hours each day, and a full quarter spend more than four hours on screens during a typical seven-hour school day. Unfortunately, studies suggest that less than half of this time is spent actually learning, with students off-task for up to 38 minutes of every hour when on classroom devices.

Perhaps worse, driving this digital surge is a wave of invasive tools designed by for-profit tech companies. Many EdTech platforms openly track personal data, build long-term behavioral profiles, and are deliberately engineered for addiction. The strategy is simple: hook kids early, and they'll remain loyal (and profitable) customers for life.

Still, maybe that's a small price to pay for better learning. Yes, these tools may be sapping classroom time, driving distraction, and surveilling our children—but if they truly improve learning, then perhaps the trade-off is worth it.

There's just one small problem: more than 50 years of research show that when screens enter the classroom, learning almost always suffers.

- An OECD international review of EdTech concluded: “Students who use computers very frequently at school do a lot worse in most learning outcomes.”
- After reviewing 126 research studies, the MIT-based Poverty

Research Center found: “Initiatives that expand access to computers . . . do not improve K-12 grades and test scores. Online courses lower student academic achievement compared to in-person courses.”

- A study of nearly 300,000 students across the U.S. reported: “. . . even small daily amounts of use of digital devices in the classroom (here, 30 min) are negatively related to scores on a reading comprehension test.”
- An analysis of over 100 university-level pedagogies concluded: “Expanding the use of [digital] technology at the expense of other forms of instruction is likely to have detrimental effects on achievement.”
- A separate series of analyses shows: “. . . investing in air conditioning has a more beneficial impact on learning than investing in a laptop for every student.”

Far from doubling learning in half the time, digital tools appear to be doing the opposite: halving learning in double the time.

So what can we do about it?

Luckily, we are not the first generation to let tools eclipse the ideals they were meant to serve. This means we can learn from the past.

IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY, textile weavers across England found themselves being rapidly replaced by machines. Power looms and knitting frames could produce cloth faster and more cheaply than any human hand. Seemingly overnight, a once highly-skilled profession was reduced to low-grade piecework.

So the weavers fought back.

Between 1811 and 1812, hundreds of machines were destroyed in a series of coordinated, covert attacks—all carried out in the name of a mythical figure: *Ned Ludd*. These anonymous rebels came to be known as the *Luddites*; a name that struck fear into the hearts of factory owners and stirred pride among working-class communities.

Over the past century, these revolutionaries have been denigrated to little more than petty vandals, often portrayed as backward peasants lashing out at a technology they simply didn't understand. Today, *Luddite* is used as a slur; a lazy way to dismiss and discredit anyone who dares question the supposed wonders of the digital age.

But that gets the story entirely wrong.

The Luddites weren't fighting *against* machines. In fact, they had worked with machines for generations. They were fighting *for* a way of life—one they deeply valued. They understood that new industrial tools weren't neutral; they embodied a new set of ideals that emphasized speed over skill, output over craft, and centralized power over strong community.

Though the Luddites couldn't stop the Industrial Revolution, they left us with something far more enduring: the first principled stand against technological overreach. They had the courage to shout what others only dared whisper: *beware adopting tools designed to reshape the world without first reckoning with their ultimate cost.*

If we hope to push back against the growing incursion of EdTech, we'll need to follow in the footsteps of the Luddites. Only this time, the battleground won't be factories; it'll be classrooms.

I BEGAN MY CAREER AS A TEACHER, and never left the profession in spirit. Two decades ago, I turned to neuroscience—not to aban-

don teaching, but to better understand how learning actually works. Since then, I've worked with schools across six continents, and in that time I've witnessed a subtle but profound shift.

For centuries, the classroom was a protected space: what happened there stayed between teacher and student. But modern schools place a high value on community, and families now have greater input than ever before.

This means we, as parents, are in a unique position to act; to help restore schools as havens for genuine learning, rather than digital shortcuts. But simply having a voice isn't enough. We need to know how to use it effectively.

So how do we wage a constructive fight? What will it take to spark meaningful change in our children's schools?

Pushing back requires three things:

1. Data. We need clear, independent evidence that digital tools harm learning. Unfortunately, EdTech companies are masters of narrative control; they know how to spin even the most damning data as a feature rather than a flaw. To resist this, we also need . . .

2. Mechanisms. It's not enough to show *that* screens harm learning; we also need to show *why*. Once the underlying cognitive mechanisms are understood, the data becomes harder to distort—and much harder to ignore.

3. Strategies. What can we actually do? We need clear, practical strategies—not only for ourselves, but also for the teachers and school leaders we partner with. Change requires action, and action requires a plan.

That's the purpose of this book: to help you see clearly, speak confidently, and act decisively. I want to arm communities with the insights and tools needed to help restore an education that builds strong, motivated thinkers—not passive, isolated consumers.

DESPITE WHAT EdTECH ADVOCATES so often proclaim, human history isn't defined by the evolution of tools. It's defined by the values each generation chooses to protect, and the ones it's willing to abandon.

That means this isn't really a book about technology: it's a book about values—ones I believe are worth defending, not discarding.

This isn't a book about resisting devices; it's a book about reclaiming education as a deeply human endeavor. It isn't about moving away from screens; it's about moving toward deep thought and real understanding. It isn't about scrapping computers from schools; it's about restoring rigor to the classroom.

I am not anti-tech. I am pro-learning.

If you believe education has been marching backward under the banner of progress, then you already know what's worth defending.

So, are you willing to stand up? Are you willing to push back?

This isn't a battle over tools; it's a battle over values. It's a battle over what kind of people we want our children to become.