Education Select Committee Inquiry into Screen Time: Impacts on education and wellbeing

Written evidence submission from the Association of School and College Leaders

A. Introduction

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) is a trade union and professional association representing over 24,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business leaders and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million children and young people across primary, secondary, post-16 and specialist education. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.

2. We welcome the Committee's inquiry into this important issue. We hope that this response will prove useful.

B. Responses to your questions

What is the current understanding of how screen time can support and impact children's development and educational outcomes, including the effect on concentration and behaviour?

3. There are significant, and growing, concerns among educators about the impact of screen time on children. Excessive use of screens can limit children's play, exercise, sleep and overall wellbeing, and there is an increasing body of evidence to suggest that this can lead to negative habits for a lifetime.

4. The access even very young children now have to the internet is leading to uncharted territory. Platforms such as YouTube and TikTok have become the daily diet for many young children. A 2022 article in the *Guardian* highlighted how commonplace it is for three- and four-year-olds to use TikTok, and how this short-form content has fuelled concerns about the negative impact of the dopamine rush.

5. Recent research from Ofcom has found that a fifth of three- to four-year-olds now have a phone of their own. 69% are regularly using phone handsets to go online, including on borrowed devices, while 92% are watching video streaming platforms. Increasingly, children as young as two have easy access to inappropriate content.

6. There is also growing evidence of the effects of children's exposure to unfiltered content, and in particular extreme content. There is growing anecdotal evidence of children and teenagers being reluctant to have their picture taken and published as they think others will take the images and make deep fakes, including pornography. There is also evidence of less extreme behaviour in generations Z and A as they worry that they live in a surveillance culture where their behaviour will be recorded. We would recommend Eliza Filby's work on generational differences to the committee.

7. One major concern of educators about these societal developments is that they are making it more difficult for teachers to identify learning difficulties, which can be masked or replicated by the effects of excessive screen use.

What is the current understanding of how screen time can support or impact children's wellbeing and mental health, including the use of social media?

8. We set out our concerns about the negative impacts of screen time on children's wellbeing and mental health in our answer to the previous question.

9. There are, however, some interesting examples of more positive uses of technology to support wellbeing and mental health, such as the use of 'woebots'. The evidence on these seems to be mixed, with some teenagers preferring the anonymity of AI and others wanting to work face-to-face.

How effective is digital safety education in schools, for example the PHSE curriculum, in educating children about screen time and online harms?

10. The vast majority of schools teach digital safety education, including through the RSHE curriculum. The most successful approaches tend to weave digital literacy and safety through the whole curriculum.

11. It is essential, however, that education in this area is not seen purely as the responsibility of schools. Parents must be encouraged and supported to closely monitor their child's online activity, and to understand what is healthy.

12. ASCL supports calls for an early years healthy screentime campaign targeted at parents, starting with information included in the Bounty packs given out in maternity wards.

13. Ongoing research at University College London, led by Dr Kaitlyn Regher in collaboration with ASCL, has explored how violent rhetoric against women and girls on social media is now being enacted across education settings, and the lack of resources, particularly on critical digital literacy, in schools to address this problem.

14. Initial findings of this research have highlighted the aggressive functionality of algorithms on TikTok, which increasingly push radical, misogynistic and harmful content to young people (mostly men and boys) who initially explore material related to fitness, dating advice and mental health. This suggests that problems of misogyny within schools are interlinked with the wider mental health crises among young people.

15. In particular, this research has indicated a wider lack of awareness of the impact of different typologies of screen time and how the functionality of different applications can impact the health and wellbeing of their users. Emerging from the research are the following key findings:
    - Critical digital literacy is currently not understood or represented well across the curriculum, despite the growing use of social media as way to gain knowledge about health and wellbeing.
    - To improve digital literacy curriculums, peer learning strategies are needed to support students to recognise the pathways to violence and radicalisation online.
    - To promote healthy relationships to the digital space, an effective policy tool may be the introduction of the concept of a 'digital diet', which can explore the different typologies of screen time and manage the potential benefits of online activity alongside mitigating risk.

16. ASCL supports calls for the RSHE curriculum to be strengthened in relation to digital literacy.

17. We would like to see space in the curriculum for exploration of the following issues:
    - how search engines work
    - why extreme content is there (to encourage addictive behaviour) and how to deal with it (rather than pretending it doesn't exist)
    - where we want technology and AI in the curriculum and in our lives as a useful tool to enhance our lives, and where we don't
    - the protocols of using digital media in life, work and communities

How can schools and parents be better supported to manage children's screen usage, for example, through age-related guidance? Could the Department for Education be doing more in this area?

18. ASCL's view is that the DfE should be setting minimum safety and protection guidelines for companies which would like their products to be used in schools (in the same way Google were forced to do by the European Union).

19. It would also be helpful for the government to provide advice and guidance to parents on what is meant by 'screen time', how much screen time is appropriate for children, and the risks associated with excessive screen time.

20. There may be a place for more guidance for schools on this issue, but we would suggest that a government focus on strategies for preventing children being able to access inappropriate content, including thought the Online Safety Bill, would bring greater benefits.

What policies and practices are schools developing to manage children's recreational screen usage, particularly mobile phones?

21. The vast majority of schools implement policies to prevent or limit children's recreational screen usage during school hours. Recent research by TeacherTapp found that:
    - nearly three-quarters of primary schools don't allow phones on site at all, collecting any that are brought in at the start of the school day and only giving them back at the end of the day
    - three in five secondary schools don't permit phone use at any point of the day. Specifically:
      - 5% don't permit them on school grounds
      - 8% collect them at the start of the day
      - 47% don't allow them to be used during the day
      - 20% allow them to be used only with a teacher's permission
      - 12% only allow their usage at breaks and lunchtime, unless a teacher allows their use at another time
      - 7% only allow their usage at breaks and lunchtime
      - 1% allow their usage at any time

22. It is impossible for schools to manage children's recreational screen usage outside of school hours.

23. There are some packages, such as Google Classroom (particularly used with Chromebooks) and Apple devices with Apple Classroom, which mean that schools can control pupils' usage of school-provided devices out of school. Apple and Goggle Classrooms allow devices to be 'locked' for use at home as well as school – this means that a school could decide that, for example, the internet will not be accessible on school-provided devices for Year 2 after 6pm.

24. However, such mechanisms are clearly completely ineffective with children using their own or their parents' devices at home – likely to be the vast majority.

How is screen use as an academic tool being managed in schools, for example, in lessons or for homework?

25. Schools have different policies on the use of screens as an academic tool, depending on their contexts, the extent to which they can afford to purchase devices for all their pupils, and their views on the pedagogical benefits of using different devices.

26. In most cases, pupils will be expected and enabled to use devices to a greater extent the older they get.

To what extent are schools reliant on external sources, such as the use of google for education and classroom activities?

27. Many schools are using Apple or Google Classroom because these services provide carefully controlled access to content, with the teacher being in control of what is seen and the work that children are doing. The DfE should lay down a minimum specification for this.

28. It is ASCL's view that there should be a national programme of specified devices provided for all children. This is partly to help address the concerns covered by this inquiry, but just as importantly to ensure that the digital divide, so sharply exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic, is not allowed to persist.

D. Conclusion

29. ASCL welcomes this inquiry. Technology offers many benefits to children and their education, but also poses an increasingly number of serious risks.

30. We would be delighted to expand on any of the points we have made here, and to assist the inquiry in any way that would be helpful.

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Association of School and College Leaders
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