



Is technology in schools helping kids learn?

By [John Benson](#)

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Now that the cost of iPads and tablets rival that of most textbooks, more and more school districts around the country are dedicating a greater percentage of their budgets to digital learning programs.

Take Santa Fe, New Mexico, for example, where the school board recently approved a \$55 million plan to give each of the district's 14,000 students their own computer. But the real question is does a massive and [costly investment](#) in technology equate to smarter students?

Cato Institute Education Analyst Neal McCluskey said so far the data doesn't support that premise. In New Mexico's case, the [National Education Association](#) reported the state spent \$81 more per student than the national average but fourth grade reading scores were tied for lowest in the country, while math scores were third lowest for fourth and eighth graders.

Speaking of reading scores, a recent government study revealed 9-year-olds who [read for fun once or more per week decreased](#) by 5 percent over the last 30 years. Furthermore, the reading proficiency rates for fourth grade Hispanic students is a mere 20 percent, with eighth graders at 22 percent.

The study's lead author Vicky Rideout said, "It raises an alarm. We're witnessing a really large drop in reading among teenagers and the pace of that drop is getting faster and faster."

So what's the issue? Naturally in today's digital age, the impact of the Internet, smartphones and social media are questioned. [TeachThought](#) Director of Curriculum and former educator Terry Heick tells VOXXI the conversation should be less about the technology itself and more about its use.

"This isn't sexy or compelling," said Heick, who also blogs Edutopia.org. "Teaching and learning are worn words that are kind of stripped of their meaning. They're not exciting. The idea of dropping an iPad in a kid's lap and watching their face glow is powerful. And that's

great, but where is that student? Where have they been? Where are they going? What do they care about? What does their community need from them, and them from their community?"

There's some feeling that eBooks may help promote reading to younger students. Heick agrees, saying that [technology](#) has the ability to promote reading of traditional texts like novels, poems and short stories.

"But of course it's not that simple," Heick said. "People will usually take the path of least resistance, and will tend towards whimsy and distraction if they're not given a sense of purpose and potential."

Naturally, that sense of purpose and potential must tie in with the curriculum at schools embracing the digital age. As for New Mexico, education department officials have noted the low achievement scores are most likely tied to poverty rates for students, not necessarily the implementation of digital learning programs.

Heick said in a nutshell that is the conundrum coloring the entire conversation.

"The question should be less about grades, and more about understanding," Heick said. "The fact that the iconic letter grade continues to lord over discussion of teaching and learning is indicative of a larger problem. Education technology can suffer for the same reasons.

"The larger conversations about how we should redesign learning processes in light of modern technology and circumstance, and how families and communities can become an equal partner in this process, aren't as interesting as iPads, unfortunately. When we do become as interested in learning and citizenship as we do in technology, the technology will become more effective."