NEPC
NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY CENTER

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Newsletter

The Longstanding Research Supporting the New Ed Tech "Backlash"

The ed tech "backlash" is here. Or, at the very least, it has been rediscovered by the national news media.

In February, a neuroscientist's testimony before the U.S. Senate went viral after he explained how educational technology has stymied students' cognitive development.

In March, the state of Utah passed a law that placed restrictions on ed tech that included banning its use in kindergarten through Grade 3.

In April, the nation's second-largest public school district banned the use of screens with students who have not yet reached second grade.

Other states and districts have considered, or are considering, similar measures. Overseas, the backlash has been even stronger.

While this most recent movement might appear to have arisen out of the blue, many aspects are supported by decades of research, including that published by NEPC's Commercialism in Education Research Unit

(CERU).

In recent testimony before the Vermont legislature, CERU co-director Faith Boninger, testifying in her personal capacity, summarized major concerns that this research body has surfaced:

- **Teaching and Learning**: Ed tech products tend to narrow the curriculum to approaches amenable to digital delivery and assessment. Their opaque algorithms make real pedagogical decisions, wresting autonomy from classroom teachers. They may embed cultural biases into the curriculum and expose children to marketing and behavioral tracking. Products using generative AI, which are being introduced into schools quickly and with limited oversight, are especially likely to incorporate misinformation into the curriculum and degrade the relationship between teachers and students.

- **Data Privacy**: Ed tech products collect large amounts of data and can be used to convert students, families, and schools into consumers of additional products sold by their creators and others. (Internal documents exposed during a lawsuit indicated Google's goal of creating a "pipeline of future users" for products like YouTube and Chromebooks.) When data are technically "de-identified," companies can hold and use them forever. Predictive analyses conducted with this information can be used in ways that harm students (e.g., by determining insurance rates or the likelihood of police surveillance down the road). And whether such predictions are accurate matters less than that they're made and used.

  Even if a company that makes an ed tech product acts in good faith, its subcontractors may use the data for unauthorized purposes. When companies are sold, the data they've amassed are passed on to their buyers as assets.

- **Accountability and Oversight**: Ed tech is too often adopted without sufficient oversight. Even districts that pilot new products before purchasing them cannot examine the underlying algorithms. Teachers and administrators downloading products often cannot understand the implications of the complex terms of service and privacy policies they agree to. Once a district buys a product, the

costs associated with giving it up can be so exorbitant that they lock the district into permanent use.

A recent policy brief co-authored by Boninger and NEPC Fellow T. Philip Nichols of Baylor University recommends several steps for addressing these concerns, including:

At the school and district level:

- Limit screen time at school, especially in the lower grades.
- Avoid placing key educational decisions in the hands of commercial algorithms. Instead, clearly articulate pedagogical values, practices and goals, and use those as the standard by which to evaluate any ed tech product considered for adoption or renewal.

At the state level:

- Create an independent, expert entity to vet ed tech products and establish a standardized ed tech contract that fully protects the interests of schools and their students.
- Require that the programming of any product to be used in schools be transparent and amenable to review.
- Prohibit schools from using products whose workings are not transparent to state review unless they provide a well-developed rationale for why the particular technology is the only way to achieve a clearly defined and valid school purpose.

At the state and federal levels:

- Stop uncritically promoting the use of AI in schools.

NEPC Resources on Digital Technologies and Artificial Intelligence in Education

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