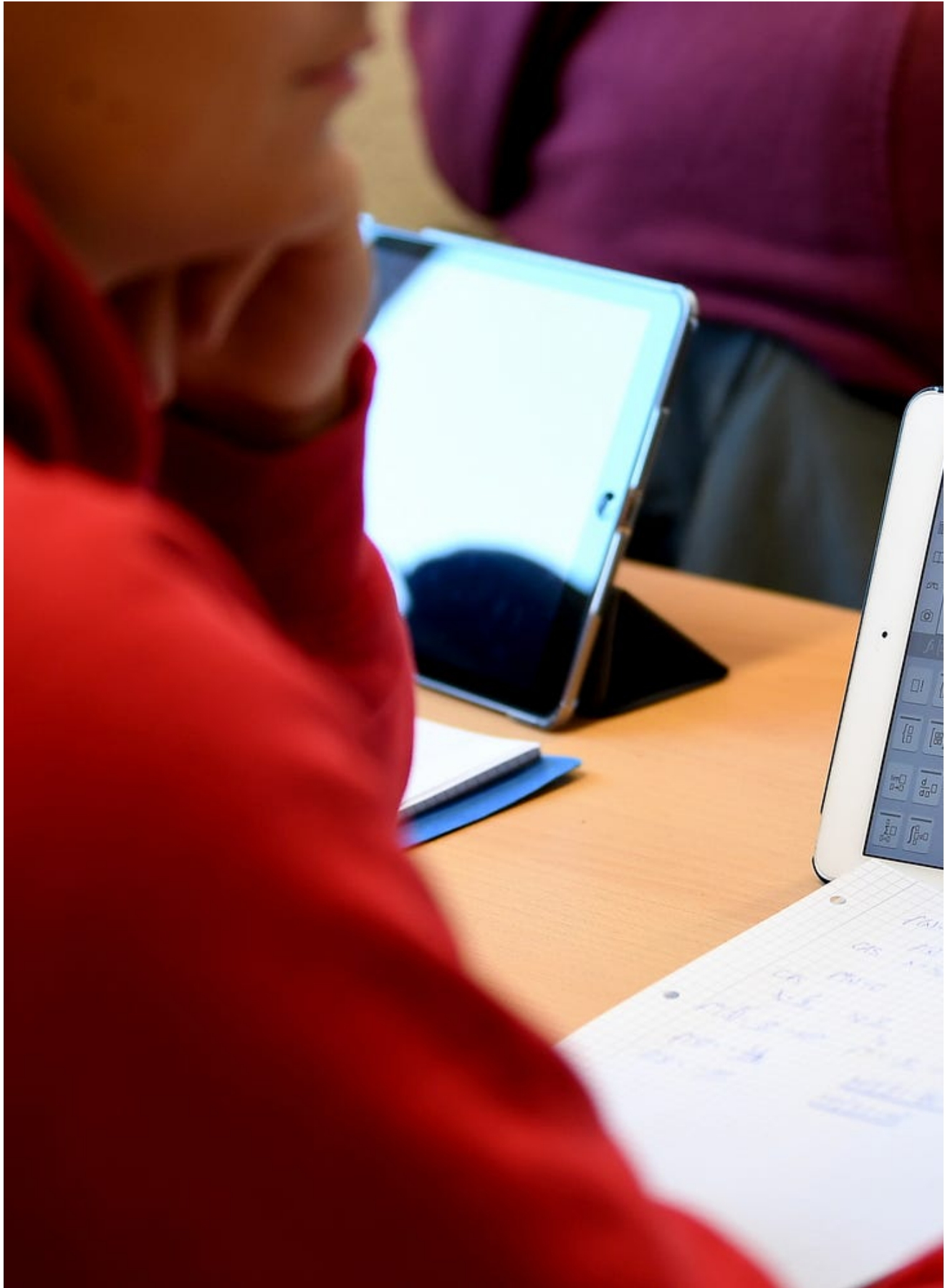


# Inside the Anti-Tech Rebellion In Schools

Nicholas Smyth



(Photo by Britta Pedersen/picture alliance via Getty Images.)

When Mallory received her first “school supplies” email, she was thrilled. As a kid, she loved the trip to the store for pencils, crayons, and notepads. Her daughter was about to enter a public pre-kindergarten class for 4-year-olds. This was a big moment. She felt a surge of love and excitement for her daughter. She enjoyed that feeling of connection to her own childhood that is one of the many rewards of parenting.

Then she clicked the email, and saw that after a water bottle and lunch box the next item on the list was:

1. **WIRED HEADPHONES FOR IPADS—LABELED** with your child’s name (NOT EARBUDS, NOT WIRELESS).

Mallory is not the only tech-skeptical parent who is currently trying to figure out what could possibly have happened to K-12 education in this country. I interviewed 30 parents around the United States. The overall picture is deeply troubling and may even be an existential threat to the public school system as we know it.

The average parent of a young American child is now a Millennial. They remember growing up with technology, with computer class, with laptops in high school. They have cellphones, use the internet, and may even work in tech or communications. They have concerns about technology but are happy to incorporate it into their family life when it makes sense.

However, they are often deeply shocked when they find out that their 4 year-old is about to be given a Chromebook or an iPad upon entry to kindergarten. They think: *isn't that a little young?*

They discover that this is now common practice. According to [2022 data](#), 73% of K-2 classrooms have a 1-to-1 device policy. They ask: *Who made this decision?*

They discover that COVID-era tech policies, which may have been necessary during the pandemic, have not just been continued, but mysteriously ramped up. They start to ask more questions. They quickly learn that their school boards, technology directors, and superintendents have enthusiastically overseen all of this with virtually no opposition.

Maybe they send an email. Maybe they go to a school board meeting. Maybe they get someone on the phone.

It is at this point that things start to go off the rails.

First, parents are often told that a 1-to-1 device policy is necessary to ensure *equal access*. It wouldn't be equitable for kids from wealthier families to have fancy laptops while kids from families without those resources go without. And certain kids sometimes need targeted, computer-based interventions if they are also learning English or have certain disabilities. How could someone be so heartless as to deny these disadvantaged children what they need?

Every parent I spoke to cares deeply about equity. They want society to take care of its most disadvantaged members. But they are often shocked by the brazen and unintelligent ways in which the value of equity is deployed against them.

It is obvious that necessary devices could simply be loaned to poorer students, and that spaces could be devoted to computer-based assistance for the small proportion of students who really need it. None of this requires that literally every student from K-12 be forced to complete schoolwork and homework on their own personal digital distraction device, which they must carry around at all times. None of this requires that school systems must spend fantastic amounts of money purchasing and maintaining these devices.

It's worth asking whether all this really is about caring for the vulnerable. ADHD is now one of the most commonly diagnosed disorders amongst children. 11.4% of American kids have it. Other kids have ADD, are on the autism spectrum, or have other special needs. And as many parents told me, Ed Tech is dangerous for many of these children, particularly when

students can take the laptops out of the classroom to other classes or to their homes. It can make symptoms worse, delay executive functioning, and reduce attention spans amongst the children who need them the most.

Now, in *principle* there are supposed to be protections here. An Individualized Education Program (IEP) can require schools to reduce or eliminate screen time. But many parents told me that Ed Tech is so thoroughly integrated into schools that such protections are useless. They are routinely violated, sometimes out of negligence, other times because teachers simply don't have the ability to monitor every child's usage, and sometimes because the school has abandoned paper-and-pencil instruction in some areas.

Parent testimonials here are eye-opening. Lisa Sunbury is a professor of early childhood education in Santa Cruz, California, and she had a child at Mission Hill Middle School. Her 7<sup>th</sup> grade daughter has a set of serious issues that require an IEP. Lisa did her part at home, enforcing the low-screen policy. One element of this plan was supposed to be minimal access to school devices and a clear requirement that the device be inaccessible outside of certain classes. This was all on doctor's orders.

Yet, Sunbury would regularly find her daughter awake at 3am, playing video games on the school Chromebook that she wasn't supposed to have. She discovered a prohibited TikTok account, made on the school device, with dance videos posted from gym class using that same device. She had further meetings with school officials. Sadly, things seemed to get worse for her daughter, who began to engage in devastating acts of self-harm. Lisa had no choice: she pulled her daughter out of the public school system.

I heard a variation on this story many times. Because of their disabilities, millions of children are highly predisposed to develop addictive, unhealthy relationships with screens. These are disabled children whose lives and relationships are disproportionately damaged in our public schools.

Jonathan, a dad in Connecticut, raised his son to be very literate. He read to him every day and kept screens and TV to a minimum. Sure enough, his son was reading the entire Harry Potter series in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. He was a parent who did *everything* the school system asks parents to do: to be co-educators, to support learning, to prepare children for school.

Jonathan's son is now in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and he no longer reads books.

The deterioration started in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, when his son's homework was suddenly on a set of heavily gamified apps. By middle school, says Jonathan, "my son was rushing through all the app work so that he could play video games and watch YouTube shorts at school." His behavior worsened, and eventually an ADHD test was administered. The results were inconclusive, but Jonathan is convinced that most of the symptoms were the product of screen time. When he enforced a screen-free summer in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, his son had "the best summer of his life," socializing, playing sports, and going out into nature.

Now, this young man is assigned novels and literature by his teacher, but the books are all e-books, and Jonathan's son simply asks ChatGPT for summaries before quickly pasting or typing answers into an app. Then, it's back to watching YouTube and gaming on the school device. Jonathan is powerless to stop this from happening; all requests for more restrictive screen time have been rejected.

This story is playing out all over the nation. Literacy isn't just the ability to read; it's the *desire* to read. School computers aren't just impeding book-based literacy; they are *ending* it. Of course, students have always cheated on their assignments. But now, schools are actively handing out the cheating devices.

Many parents I spoke to chafe under the weaponization of fake expertise. This is a familiar and depressing feature of the modern world. Officials are tasked with managing some system, and are trained in normal techniques and procedures. But when strange new situations arise, they must somehow justify their right to make this novel kind of decision.

They will deploy some shiny new technique, metric, or rubric designed to give the *appearance* of expertise, which is not grounded in any rigorous science or long-term experience. They are typically not experts. But they tell you that they are in order to end conversations.

Michelle is a parent in a massive school district in Fairfax County, Virginia. She is also a researcher with the American Academy of Addiction. She reached out to her school board's multiple "reading specialists" to ask for evidence that supports the deployment of Lexia, a popular gamified reading app. They sent her a few studies, which they described as "independent." When Michelle looked, she discovered that [some](#) of the studies were authored by employees of Lexia. Several weren't even published in journals.

She came to a stark realization: a district that oversees 180,000 students does not know how to run basic tests on research quality.

Other times, this "expertise" amounts to nothing more than some theoretical model, usually one illustrated by a splashy, colorful graphic, to justify the incorporation of even more tech into the classroom.

One such model is the [Triple E framework](#), developed by Liz Kolb in 2011, which asks school systems to score apps on the basis of their ability to "Engage, Enhance, and Extend" student learning. The model has individual teachers and schools rate their own apps, using only their subjective impressions of effectiveness. (Imagine if medicine worked this way. "Doc, why should I take this new drug?" "Well, because I've used it on a few of my patients and it seems to work fine.")

Kylie King, a parent in the district of Plattsburgh, New York, saw what happened when the Triple E model was applied. Like Michelle in Virginia, Kylie has advanced training in statistical analysis, which most of the school "experts" she was talking to completely lacked. Yet after a brief exchange, the school board simply refused to continue any discussion about the Triple E model. In their final response to her on the subject, they wrote:

The information has been shared with both the Technology Committee and the Technology Advisors. They continue to believe they have shared all relevant information regarding how they apply the rubric in the district and are comfortable with the process.

This is the voice of weaponized fake expertise: no details, no extended conversation, no response to particulars. *We have a committee, they rate the apps themselves with no external input, and they have determined that things are fine. End of discussion.*

In response to these difficulties, many parents have started to request an opt-out. That is, they have been asking teachers and principals for alternative, non-digital modes of instruction, usually paper-and-pencil or textbook-based learning.

While many might think this impractical, the state of Vermont is now considering codifying a [right to opt out](#), and Iowa's legislature just passed a [screen time limit](#) for K-5. I spoke to multiple parents who have managed to fight for it, and it seems to be working quite well. One parent reported that the kids in her daughter's class were *jealous* that she didn't have to sit and navigate endless apps, videos, and textboxes to finish her work. Another parent reported that one 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher used the occasion to simply drop the Ed Tech altogether and return to traditional teaching modes.

### [Persuasion events](#)

But these stories are the exception. As a rule, when parents ask for this kind of exemption, they don't get it. School officials often treat the suggestion itself as ridiculous or silly. Sometimes, the responses are even worse.

Beverly Hyde, a parent in Concord, North Carolina, was explicitly told that if her son wasn't

going to use his Chromebook, “he will just sit alone and spend the day doing nothing.” Her son was entering an awkward, pre-adolescent stage, and the thought of this terrified both the young boy and his mother. They were cowed into silence by this open threat, and eventually pulled him out of public schools, moving him to a low-tech Catholic school.

And this was no empty threat. Linda in Texas discovered that while her doctor-ordered opt-out request for her 2<sup>nd</sup> grader was technically being honored, the school wasn’t providing any alternative instruction. They were just “having her sit and draw while the other kids were online.”

These parents are a diverse bunch with different stories. But what unites them all is puzzlement. None of it *makes sense*, but it is happening *everywhere*.

In 2025, [73 percent of Americans](#) reported feeling dissatisfied with public education—the highest number ever recorded. When things don’t make sense, people start to lose trust in their institutions. They start to promote alternative theories that make those institutions look really bad. Sometimes, those theories turn out to have more than a grain of truth to them. I myself was in a meeting with a New York State education regent who told parents, point blank, that reversing course on Ed Tech is going to be extremely difficult because of “the amount of corporate money in the system.”

It is time for education systems to regain public trust by respecting a parent’s right to a human, book-based education for their children. If they don’t, parents will begin to force the issue, and schools aren’t going to like what happens next. After her principal refused to honor a pediatrician’s request to keep the device at school, Kaitlin and Rich in Chicago told their school: “If you send that device home one more time, it’s not coming back.”

The Chromebook is currently gathering dust in their garage, and they bear no legal responsibility for something they neither asked for nor agreed to take. Should such acts become common practice, school administrators will loudly complain about the resulting costs and headaches.

They will have only themselves to blame.

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