

Some KY schools to limit screens in class

Spring pilot showed boost in engagement, reading

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At Boyd County Middle School in Eastern Kentucky, students averaged five to six hours a day on their Chromebooks, according to Principal William Ferguson.

That amount was similar at Simons Middle School in Fleming County, where students typically used their Chromebooks in six of seven class periods, Principal Whitney Shannon Wilson said.

But starting in the 2026-27 school year, both middle schools are limiting Chromebook use and returning to pencil and paper.

The schools are part of a growing trend of limiting screen time in the classroom. In April, the school board of Los Angeles Unified School District voted to limit screen time for all grade levels and eliminate devices until second grade. Other states — including Alabama, Tennessee and Utah — have passed some form of legislation reevaluating classroom tech use. And in Kentucky, one state lawmaker introduced a bill to limit screen time for elementary students to 45 minutes per day — though it failed to move in the General Assembly.

Ferguson and Wilson both said the idea to limit Chromebook use in the classroom came up organically.

At Boyd County Middle School, Ferguson remembers an assistant principal, who used to teach health and physical education, coming into his office in the fall.

“She said, ‘Kids get a lot of screen time. What do you think about maybe getting away from Chromebooks so much?’” he recalled.

The school dabbled with time away from Chromebooks and found students responding positively. In one English class, the teacher said students cheered when she told them they wouldn’t need Chromebooks that day. As they explored the option further, Ferguson said he found data suggesting that excessive screen use can negatively impact kids.

Indeed, there is mounting evidence that too much time spent in front of a screen may harm young children, impairing their executive functioning, social and emotional growth and language development.

The middle school piloted the program in the last quarter of the 2025-26 school year to near universal support, Ferguson said. Already, more students were reading more and checking more books out of the library — a metric other schools have pointed to as a result of phone bans.

It will probably take several years before the full effect of limiting Chromebook use sets in, Ferguson said. But he hopes to see a jump in reading scores and more hands-on science lessons.

At Simons Middle School, Wilson said school staff had noticed how disengaged students were on Chromebooks.

“No matter what the activity is that you provide for them to do while using technology, they are not doing what you’re asking them,” Wilson said. “No amount of teacher monitoring or the technology tools that we have ... are great at catching students because they are so incredibly savvy at doing everything but what you want them to do while they’re using school technology.”

Her goal with limiting screen use is to improve students’ interpersonal skills. Simons Middle School has already banned cell phones for three years — before the statewide ban went into effect in 2025 — and she saw students more engaged with their peers and teachers. But when students handed in their phones, “it’s almost like they would trade out their Chromebook for their cell phone,” Wilson said.

“I feel like taking that a step further and going away from that everyday use of school Chromebooks will be so beneficial to them in creating them as good humans who can work with other humans instead of technology,” she said.

Technology will still be used for standardized testing and the occasional lesson, both principals said. But Wilson’s message is “don’t use it unless you absolutely need it.”

The schools have seen an outpouring of support on social media after announcing the shift.

“Parents love the idea of just going

back to ‘old school’ school,” Ferguson said.

Both principals have purchased new curriculum to prepare for the switch. Wilson ordered fresh math textbooks — physical, not digital — a purchase she “would have laughed” at five years ago.

During Boyd County’s nine-week pilot, teachers realized that student handwriting was a struggle. Ferguson has told parents to give their child opportunities to write things down, such as grocery lists, as much as possible.

Sen. Lindsey Tichenor, the state lawmaker who filed a bill to limit school screen time, said it was “intended to start a conversation” about technology use in the classroom and provide parents with “greater transparency” about instructional screen time.

“As a parent and lawmaker, I strongly believe this is a crucial discussion that needs to be had considering the exponential rise in screen access and use across Kentucky classrooms in recent years,” Tichenor said in a statement to The Courier Journal. “As more schools evaluate their technology practices and as educators, parents and policymakers continue examining the role screens play in elementary education, I think there is a growing interest in finding the right balance between innovation and proven instructional methods.”

Tichenor’s bill, Senate Bill 318, did not move during the 2026 legislative session after being introduced in early March. She also introduced a screen limit provision as an amendment to another bill, but that amendment was withdrawn before passage.

After the session, lawmakers held an interim committee meeting July 6 to discuss the impacts of digital technology on learning, where Wilson and Fleming County Schools Superintendent Brian Creasman presented on the district’s change. In June, the Fleming County Board of Education passed an initial reading of a policy to limit screen time to 45 minutes for elementary students, 60 minutes for middle schoolers and 90 minutes for high schoolers — including in-school technology time and digital homework time. The board later gave the policy final approval.

Lawmakers also heard from Jared Cooney Horvath, author of the book

“The Digital Delusion,” about educational technology and Emily Cherkin, who goes by “The Screentime Consultant,” about the negative impacts of screens on learning.

“It’s not that you can’t learn from things like computers, it’s that learning is always shallower, weaker and less durable than the exact same learning done in analog methods with a teacher, with a class, with a book, by handwriting,” Horvath told lawmakers.

Committee chair Sen. Stephen West said the discussion was just “scratching the surface” but acknowledged “there may be some legislation forthcoming.”

Jefferson County Public Schools, Kentucky’s largest district, did not respond to a question about screen time use in the classroom and any appetite for similar limits.

Without consistent laptop use, Wilson said she’s concerned about students learning to type properly, though she believes handwriting helps with retention.

But Ferguson is confident his students will have enough tech exposure to be prepared for graduation. The school will still have a computer lab and offer computer classes.

“Kids are still going to spend time on their phones and laptops, computers, whatnot outside of school, so they’re still going to have more skills than most of us have just by exploring on their own,” he said.

Teachers at Boyd County Middle School are excited about the shift and having more direct student interaction, rather than teaching with digital platforms.

“They’re professional educators, and they’ve been trained to teach kids,” Ferguson said. “They’re excited about being able to do what they have been trained to do.”

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