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FAMILY & TECH: JULIE JARGON

# The Battle to Ban Screens From School Now Includes Chromebooks and Tablets

After working to ban phones in the classroom, parents are now seeking a return to pencil and paper



By *Julie Jargon* [Follow](#)

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Parents worried about how much time students spend on iPads and laptops during school are

trying to opt their kids out of classroom tech. They're finding it isn't easy.

Cellphone bans are taking effect in big districts across the country, including Los Angeles and Las Vegas. The next logical question, at least for some, is: What about the *other* screens? These concerned parents argue that the Covid-era shift that put Chromebooks and tablets in more students' hands is fueling distraction more than learning.

Teachers and school systems point to the ease of online instruction and say switching for just one student puts a burden on teachers. Tech is woven so deeply into lesson plans and assessments that students using only pencil and paper would be at a disadvantage, they add.

Andrea Boyd of West Des Moines, Iowa, has spent a couple of years pushing for less school technology for her two children. When her son Colin's school issued him an iPad in the sixth grade, he couldn't put it down. Other students nicknamed him the "iPad kid."



Andrea and Aaron Boyd have requested that their eighth-grade son, Colin, and sixth-grade daughter, Madeline, not have school-issued iPads this year. PHOTO: ANDREA BOYD

Boyd checked his activity history to see what he was doing on it all day: He was watching YouTube.

When Boyd asked the school to take back the iPad, school administrators told her they couldn't guarantee Colin would have the same quality education without it, she says. She repeated that request this summer, and asked for a no-screens curriculum for her daughter, Madeline, who just started middle school. The two kids, now just a few weeks into sixth and eighth grades, have been iPad-free.

There have been some hiccups. Colin was given

a teacher's laptop on which to answer AI-generated math questions. Boyd says she reminded the teacher that she had requested a full tech opt-out, no exceptions. She did have to compromise on an online-only English assessment for her daughter.

A spokeswoman for the Waukee Community School District, where Boyd's children attend classes, says the district tries to accommodate all families, including those that ask not to have district-issued devices for their kids. Only a handful have done so, she says.

### **'Who's going to create that worksheet?'**

Not all districts are willing to work with families—nor must they. Unless a state law says districts have to allow parents to opt out of a particular curriculum, schools are under no obligation, says Julie Underwood, a school-law expert and dean emerita of the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Education.

Parents have told me that teachers and principals say lots of classroom instruction consists of interactive games and can't be turned into worksheets. Not all schools purchase physical textbooks anymore; many only offer them as ebooks. Five parents told me they have switched their kids to private or charter schools, which still use pencil and

paper, as a result.

Requesting a screen-free education for a certain child adds to teacher workloads. That's harder now as schools face teacher shortages, says Noelle Ellerson Ng, the School Superintendents Association's associate executive director of advocacy and governance.

"Who's going to create that worksheet? Who's going to identify a textbook? It seems like a small ask, but it's a lot more work," Ellerson Ng says.

Some parents say they offered to do the legwork, identifying books or making paper copies themselves, and were still turned down.

### **No laptop, no internet**

Emily Cherkin requested in June to opt her seventh-grade daughter out of school tech for this fall at a Seattle public school. A former teacher who now coaches parents and schools on balancing kids' screen use, Cherkin says she isn't convinced that screen-based learning is as good as paper-based learning. She says her daughter is easily distracted and often multitasks while using tech.

Emily Cherkin is trying to opt her seventh-grade daughter out of school tech this fall. PHOTO: KATE FORE

She tried to use an internet opt-out form she found on the Seattle Public School district's website, but learned that the district's internet policy hadn't been updated since 2011. She says an IT person informed her that the district couldn't cut out technology altogether, it could only block her daughter from conducting internet searches from school devices.

Cherkin pushed back, saying she didn't want her daughter to have any internet access or a laptop.

This week, a district official emailed Cherkin to say that a full internet opt-out isn't possible because so much of the curriculum is online.

“We do not believe that successful preparation for today’s world can occur without educating students in the use of technology,” the administrator said in the email viewed by the Journal.

Cherkin is still pressing her request with her daughter’s teachers. Many have told her that they will work with her on removing screen-based learning for her daughter, who started school this week. She still isn’t sure what school will look like for her daughter this year.

A spokeswoman for Seattle Public Schools declined to comment.

## **Tech in moderation**

Some parents are seeking a middle ground.

Jodi Carreon was planning to opt her fifth-grader out of classroom tech this fall but decided instead to push for more discerning technology use at school. She’s convened about 70 parents in her San Diego-area district to ask officials about using laptops only when they’re needed, such as for coding or typing class.

She worried that opting her son out entirely would be seen as antagonistic, and says she wants to work with the district.

“The biggest thing I would like to see is a pilot

program of low-tech classrooms,” she says.

“Chromebooks were introduced without strong evidence of their benefit. I think it’s time that we treat ed-tech like the experiment it is, and properly test it.”

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