



Transfor**M**Ative

Less Screen or Smarter Technology?

Global Perspectives on the Future of EdTech.

From screen time to learning time:
a more purposeful, evidence-informed
approach to digital learning.

A TransforMAtive Roundtable Networking Dinner

Event partner – Magma Maths, The Ivy, Birmingham, 14.10.26

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Executive Summary

Education leaders are entering a more discerning phase of digital transformation. The question is no longer simply whether schools should embrace technology. It is whether particular uses of technology make teaching more effective, learning more meaningful, and educational opportunity more equitable — and whether leaders can demonstrate that they do.

At a TransforMATive leadership roundtable in Birmingham, trust executives, education leaders and technology partners explored the tension between growing concern about screen time and the considerable potential of digital learning. Drawing particularly on experience in Sweden and England, and considering the wider international debate, participants challenged the assumption that increased access to devices or platforms is itself evidence of progress.

The discussion identified a consistent direction of travel: **start with the educational problem, establish sound pedagogy, invest in implementation, and evaluate impact before deciding what to sustain or scale.** Screen time alone was judged an inadequate measure. Participants distinguished passive and distracting consumption from purposeful activities that scaffold understanding, deepen practice, extend learning or improve accessibility.

The conversation also exposed a shared responsibility. Schools must define success, develop workforce capability and create the conditions for effective use. Technology partners must be credible about what their products can and cannot achieve, provide meaningful evidence, and remain engaged beyond procurement and rollout. Parents, too, need a clearer understanding of what good digital learning looks like and how that differs from entertainment-led use at home.

A final insight was the importance of **relational architecture**: the formal and informal networks of trust, influence and collaboration through which innovation is understood, adapted and sustained. As AI accelerates change, this human dimension becomes more important, not less.

The central conclusion is straightforward: **move from adoption-led technology strategies to purpose-led, jointly evidenced educational improvement.**



Central Proposition

The future of educational technology is not defined by the amount of technology in schools, but by the quality of the learning, teaching and human relationships it enables.

The Roundtable in Five Messages



1. A recalibration, not a retreat.

International concerns about distraction and excessive screen use invite greater selectivity, not a blanket rejection of digital learning.



2. Learning quality matters more than screen duration.

Leaders need to understand what pupils are doing, why they are doing it and what they learn as a result.



3. Implementation is the missing multiplier.

Clear intentions, teacher expertise, professional development and sustained support determine whether promising tools become effective practice.



4. Evidence and accountability are shared.

Trusts and technology partners need an agreed definition of success, credible measures and an honest account of limitations.



5. Relationships enable lasting change.

Connection between leaders, teachers, partners, families and peers is as important as the technical infrastructure itself.

1. Context: A Global Recalibration of EdTech



One of the opening questions was whether education is experiencing a global correction in the use of technology. The discussion suggested a more useful interpretation: the sector is becoming more discerning about the conditions under which technology adds value.

Sweden offered a particularly revealing lens. Participants reflected on extensive digital infrastructure and the earlier introduction of one-to-one devices, alongside a longstanding appreciation of outdoor learning, physical experiences and human interaction. Representatives of Magma Maths described how access to devices had not always been accompanied by an equally clear pedagogical strategy. Converting textbooks into digital formats, or adding basic interaction, did not necessarily transform learning.

This account aligns with a shift in Swedish policy towards greater emphasis on physical textbooks, reading and age-appropriate use of digital learning aids. Sweden's government has explicitly called for digital tools to be introduced where they help rather than hinder learning (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024/2025). The OECD's analysis of PISA 2022 also identifies digital distraction as a material concern, including among Swedish pupils; its findings are associations, not proof that devices themselves cause lower attainment (OECD, 2023; 2024).

For leaders in England, the parallel question is how to combine trust autonomy and professional judgement with coherent digital expectations, investment and safeguards. The roundtable did not establish a single preferred international policy model. Instead, it reinforced a broader principle: **digital access is an enabling condition, not an educational strategy**. A school can be technologically sophisticated without using technology well; equally, a school can retain books, handwriting, discussion and practical learning while using digital tools in highly effective ways.

The United States was part of the international framing, but the discussion concentrated on first-hand experience from Sweden and UK trusts rather than a systematic comparison of all three systems. That comparative gap is itself a worthwhile area for future research.

2. Key Learning Insights



Insight 1 – Replace the Screen-Time Debate with a Learning-Time Debate

A recurring concern was that the language of ‘screen time’ combines very different experiences under a single measure. A pupil passively watching unrelated content, a learner receiving carefully sequenced mathematical feedback, and a child using accessibility tools may all be counted as spending time on a screen. Yet the educational purposes and likely effects are fundamentally different.

Participants drew on the idea of distinguishing passive consumption from technology that **scaffolds** learning or **stretches** understanding. This was discussed as a useful communication lens, not as a formally validated classification or an argument that all educational screen use is beneficial. Time, age, task design, context and the quality of teaching still matter.

The wider research supports this more nuanced approach. OECD analysis links digital distraction and leisure-oriented device use at school with weaker performance, while showing that relationships between educational device use and attainment vary with purpose and intensity (OECD, 2023; 2024). Such correlations do not establish an optimal universal number of screen hours.



Leadership implication: Move beyond reporting device provision, access and duration. Ask whether a digital activity improves explanation, feedback, practice, participation, assessment or independence compared with an appropriate non-digital alternative.



Insight 2 – Pedagogy Must Lead; Technology Must Follow

There was strong agreement that buying technology in the hope that educational practice will subsequently adapt is a weak starting point. Effective classroom use depends on clear teaching and learning principles, capable teachers and a specific challenge worth solving. Several contributors reflected on the risks of replacing rich teaching with simply opening a laptop and completing an assignment.

The issue is not that digital learning and traditional practice compete for a fixed share of the lesson. The better question is **which approach best serves the learning intention at this moment?** Sometimes that will mean discussion, writing, physical resources or outdoor learning. At other times, digital practice, adaptive feedback, translation or assistive functionality may offer significant advantages.

This is consistent with the Education Endowment Foundation’s guidance that leaders should identify how technology will improve teaching and learning before introducing it, and plan the training and implementation support required (EEF, 2019).



Leadership implication: Every significant EdTech decision should be traceable to a defined educational need and a credible explanation of how teaching practice will change. The tool is not the strategy.

2. Key Learning Insights



Insight 3 – Implementation and Workforce Capability Are Core Educational Investments

Participants repeatedly returned to the gap between purchasing a product and securing its effective use. Even a well-designed tool is unlikely to deliver consistent value if teachers lack time, confidence, professional development or implementation support. The pressure on teacher development was recognised: leaders are already managing competing priorities across curriculum, assessment, inclusion and improvement. Implementation therefore needs to be designed from the outset rather than treated as a final training session. It requires clear leadership ownership, purposeful piloting, protected opportunities for staff learning, feedback loops and adaptation. The EEF's implementation framework offers a useful sequence: **Explore, Prepare, Deliver and Sustain** (EEF, 2024).



Leadership implication: Evaluate the true cost and feasibility of adoption, including training, release time, change management, support and ongoing review — not simply the subscription price.



Insight 4 – Measure Educational Value, Not Activity Alone

The question 'Are we measuring the right things?' proved central to the discussion. Logins, time-on-platform, devices deployed and licences purchased can explain engagement, but they cannot on their own demonstrate stronger learning. Equally, improvements in attainment cannot automatically be attributed to one product when multiple changes are happening together.

Contributors argued for defining the problem, intended impact and success criteria **before** a pilot begins. Leaders should then collect a balanced set of evidence: how faithfully a tool was implemented, what changed in teaching practice, whether pupils learned more or participated better, and whether any benefits justified the investment. Where possible, evaluation should include a baseline and a relevant comparison, and should acknowledge uncertainty rather than claim a 'silver bullet'.

An illustrative evidence framework for trusts

Evaluation dimension	Questions and potential indicators
Implementation and use	Who is using the tool, for which learning tasks, with what training and consistency?
Teaching practice	Is feedback quicker or more precise? Has teacher time been released for higher-value interaction?
Pupil learning	Is there improvement in subject knowledge, practice quality, independence or attainment compared with the starting point?
Equity and experience	Are benefits reaching pupils with SEND, EAL and different access needs? Are attention, confidence and wellbeing protected?
Value and sustainability	Are outcomes proportionate to financial cost, staff time, workload and technical complexity?

These dimensions are a proposed practical framework arising from the discussion, not a claim that the roundtable adopted a shared measurement standard.



Leadership implication: Agree a small number of meaningful success measures at the start, review them with staff and partners, and be willing to stop, adapt or scale in response to what the evidence actually shows.

2. Key Learning Insights



Insight 5 – Shift from Suppliers to Genuine Educational Partnerships

The distinction between a supplier and a partner became one of the evening's defining themes. Participants described frustrations when responsive relationships weakened as providers grew, or when meaningful dialogue gave way to ticket queues and generic feature requests. Others stressed that schools must also play their part: providers cannot understand local context or demonstrate impact without engaged educators, clear goals and access to relevant feedback.

The resulting position was deliberately two-sided. **Technology partners should bring honest evidence, product expertise, ongoing account management, implementation support and clarity about limitations.** Trusts should contribute professional insight, access to appropriate stakeholders, agreed responsibilities and openness about what is or is not working.

The discussion with Magma Maths illustrated the reality that adoption can be organic. Individual schools may see promising results before a trust-wide definition of success has been established. The right response is not to claim that the tool alone caused the improvement. It is to reconnect the parties, examine how the product is used, clarify intended outcomes and share effective practice across settings.

Partnership also matters in procurement. A lower headline price may offer poor value if the organisation lacks the capacity to implement a product effectively. Equally, suppliers should not rely on broad promotional impact claims that cannot be replicated in a particular school.



Leadership implication: Make evidence quality, implementation capability, responsiveness and willingness to learn together explicit criteria when selecting, renewing or reviewing EdTech partnerships.



Insight 6 – Build a Shared Understanding with Parents and Communities

An important challenge emerged around the difference between screen use in school and screen use at home. Participants described how concerns about social media, distraction and late-night device use can shape parental perceptions of classroom technology. School leaders cannot assume that families understand the distinction between passive consumption and deliberately structured learning.

This is not simply a communications problem. Digital citizenship, self-regulation and healthy habits require consistent expectations between schools and families. Yet the conversation also recognised the limits of schools' influence outside the classroom and the need to avoid blaming parents or treating all home experiences as identical.

Practical approaches discussed included parent workshops, demonstrations of classroom platforms and clearer examples of where technology supports feedback, accessibility,

2. Key Learning Insights

EAL learners or independence. Leaders also identified a need to build understanding among their own educational staff and governance colleagues, not only families.



Leadership implication: Explain the purpose, safeguards and educational benefits of digital activity in terms that parents and pupils can recognise. Show learning in action rather than defending screen hours in the abstract.



Insight 7 – Relational Architecture Is the Infrastructure of Sustainable Change

The roundtable closed with a distinctive leadership reflection: formal organisational charts do not fully explain how improvement happens. Two headteachers may hold identical roles, yet have very different networks, levels of influence and access to ideas. Moving a capable professional between teams may appear rational on paper while weakening the relationships that made their work effective.

TransforMATIVE describes this as **relational architecture** — the pattern of formal and informal connections, trust and professional generosity that supports effective collaboration. It includes relationships within trusts, between schools, with technology partners, across professional networks and with parents. It is not a substitute for governance or implementation discipline. It is one of the conditions that makes both work.

Several participants valued the openness of the roundtable itself: leaders with different responsibilities, contexts and commercial interests shared challenges and lessons rather than protecting them. Technology partners likewise identified opportunities to connect schools experiencing similar problems, even where the answer did not involve buying another product.



Leadership implication: Map not only systems, roles and contracts, but also the people and connections through which knowledge travels. Invest in the trust, dialogue and professional networks that allow effective practice to spread.



3. AI, Innovation and the Next Leadership Test



Although the evening focused primarily on EdTech and screen time, the rise of AI sharpened its conclusions. Contributors used the analogy of learning to drive: access to a powerful system is not the same as having the judgement, training or safeguards required to use it responsibly. The point applies to AI-supported planning, assessment, analytics and emerging agentic tools as much as it does to classroom devices.

AI may reduce repetitive work, support accessibility, help interpret information and release time for more valuable human interaction. However, these are possible benefits to be evaluated in context — not automatic outcomes. Education leaders must guard against deskilling, uncritical acceptance of outputs, unclear accountability, unsafe information handling and technology choices that displace professional judgement without demonstrable educational gain.

For English schools and trusts, Department for Education guidance emphasises safe and effective adoption with appropriate safeguards (DfE, 2025). The roundtable's contribution was to connect those governance obligations back to a broader leadership question: **what human capability and human relationship is this technology intended to strengthen?**

The next phase of digital strategy should therefore integrate pedagogy, AI literacy, safeguarding, information governance, implementation and workforce development rather than treating AI as a separate technology project. Success will be judged by improved outcomes and better experiences for pupils and staff, not the number of AI tools switched on.

4. From Discussion to Action: A 12-Month Agenda



The following actions translate the themes of the evening into a practical agenda for education leaders. They are recommendations drawn from the discussion rather than commitments agreed by every participant.

1. Reassess the existing EdTech estate. Identify which products clearly address an educational or operational problem, which duplicate capability, and which have little evidence of value. Involve teachers, pupils, finance and digital colleagues rather than relying only on renewal dates or usage dashboards.

2. Set a common standard for evidence. Require new pilots and significant renewals to document the intended outcome, the baseline, how implementation will be supported, what evidence will be gathered, and the decision point for continuation, adaptation or withdrawal.

4. From Discussion to Action: A 12-Month Agenda



3. Make implementation visible and resourced. Assign an accountable lead, protect teacher development time, test feasibility in contrasting settings and ensure the partner is contributing to adoption and learning rather than only technical deployment.

4. Reframe family and staff conversations. Demonstrate purposeful digital learning, communicate the difference between learning activities and passive use, and discuss how schools and families can support digital citizenship, healthy boundaries and inclusion.

5. Reset expectations of EdTech partnerships. Review whether partners offer responsive support, credible evidence, honest limitations, access to sector learning and practical implementation help. Establish regular, two-way review rather than relying solely on account escalations.

6. Bring AI into mainstream educational governance. Clarify acceptable use, the boundary of human oversight, data and safeguarding controls, workforce capability requirements and measurable educational purposes before accelerating deployment.

Stop, Start, Scale

Stop	Start	Scale
Treating licences, logins and device counts as proof of impact	Defining a learning problem and success criteria before adoption	Practices with credible evidence of better learning and teaching
Assuming one product will deliver a 'silver bullet'	Evaluating implementation fidelity, outcomes and unintended effects	Teacher development and cross-trust sharing of effective practice
Treating providers as either vendors to manage or experts to defer to uncritically	Holding joint, evidence-led reviews with clear mutual responsibilities	Parent engagement, digital citizenship and trusted partner networks

5. Future Research Questions



The discussion exposed areas in which leaders need better evidence, more comparable practice and more honest debate. A future programme of TransforMATive roundtables, school visits and research could explore the following questions.

International Policy and Educational Practice

1. What can England learn from Sweden's policy recalibration, and what should it avoid copying? How can international comparisons account for differences in curriculum, autonomy, culture, teacher development and digital infrastructure?

2. What is the right balance between digital and non-digital learning for different ages, subjects and tasks? Which decisions can be supported by evidence, and which require careful professional judgement in context?

5. Future Research Questions



Learning Impact, Equity and Implementation

- 3. What should a common EdTech impact framework measure?** How can trusts combine attainment, learning behaviours, inclusion, staff workload and cost without reducing complex educational value to a single score?
- 4. How can we establish the contribution of a specific EdTech product?** Which feasible approaches — comparison groups, phased rollouts, mixed-method evaluation and implementation measures — can improve confidence without overclaiming causation?
- 5. When does digital learning reduce educational inequality, and when might it worsen it?** What differences emerge for pupils with SEND, EAL, limited home access or other barriers to participation?
- 6. Which implementation conditions matter most across trusts of different sizes?** What is the minimum viable package of teacher development, leadership capacity and partner support for successful adoption?

Partnership, Trust and Digital Citizenship

- 7. How do parental perceptions of school screen use compare with actual classroom practice?** Which forms of communication and pupil involvement create a better shared understanding of purposeful learning and digital wellbeing?
- 8. How should EdTech partnership quality be evaluated?** Do responsiveness, customer success, transparent evidence and cross-school knowledge sharing improve long-term impact — and how can these expectations survive provider growth?
- 9. Can relational architecture be made visible and strengthened?** How do informal networks, trust and professional generosity influence the spread and sustainability of digital innovation?

AI and the Future of Professional Judgement

- 10. What evidence would show that AI is making education meaningfully better?** Over three to five years, how should trusts assess impact on pupils, teaching expertise, workforce experience, fairness, safety and educational agency?

6. Conclusion: Smarter Technology Requires Better Leadership



The roundtable did not reach for a simple answer to a complex question. There was no convincing case for more screens as an automatic good, or fewer screens as an automatic improvement. What emerged instead was a challenge to replace binary debate with better educational decisions.

A purposeful digital strategy begins with learning, not hardware; with teacher and pupil needs, not product demonstrations; and with outcomes, not activity data. It creates the conditions for successful implementation, demands credible evidence without expecting simplistic attribution, and treats technology providers as partners in a shared educational responsibility.

Just as importantly, the discussion showed that transformation is relational. School improvement travels through professional trust, informed leadership, connections between institutions and honest engagement with families. These relationships are not peripheral to digital strategy; they are part of the architecture that allows it to succeed.

As AI changes the possibilities and responsibilities facing education leaders, this becomes the defining principle: **technology should strengthen human expertise, not bypass it.**

The single most important next step is to make every significant technology decision answer one shared question: what educational problem are we solving, and how will we know that pupils and teachers are better off as a result?

About This Whitepaper



This paper synthesises themes and perspectives shared at the TransforMATive leadership roundtable, Less Screen or Smarter Technology? Global Perspectives on the Future of EdTech, held in Birmingham on 14 October 2026 and supported by event partner Magma Maths. Contributions have been combined into thematic insights rather than presented as attributed or verbatim quotations. The discussion reflects participants' experiences and perspectives; it was not a formal consensus exercise or a systematic research review. Selected external sources are provided to contextualise relevant claims.

Selected Evidence and Further Reading

1. Education Endowment Foundation (2019). Using Digital Technology to Improve Learning. [Read online](#)
2. Education Endowment Foundation (2024). A School's Guide to Implementation. [Read online](#)

3. OECD (2023). PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption. [Read online](#)
4. OECD (2024). Students, Digital Devices and Success. [Read online](#)
5. UNESCO (2023). Global Education Monitoring Report 2023: Technology in Education — A Tool on Whose Terms? [Read online](#)

6. Government Offices of Sweden (2024; updated 2025). Government Investing in More Reading Time and Less Screen Time. [Read online](#)
7. Department for Education (2025). Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Education. [Read online](#)