LEA Shaping the Future

November 2026 ■ 26-11

Lutheran Education Association ■ lea.org

The Changing Landscape of Device Use in Schools

Four Classrooms. Four Philosophies. One Educational Mission.

by Jonathan Orr

For much of the past two decades, the direction of educational technology seemed clear. Computer labs gave way to classroom computers, printed textbooks acquired digital counterparts, and eventually schools placed a device in nearly every student's hands. Each advancement promised new opportunities for learning, and schools invested considerable resources in the belief that greater access to technology would improve education. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation, leaving many schools with technological capabilities that would have been difficult to imagine only a generation earlier.

Each advancement promised new opportunities for learning, and schools invested considerable resources in the belief that greater access to technology would improve education.



©iStock/Drazen Zigic

Just as artificial intelligence began challenging our assumptions about how instruction must be delivered, schools started questioning whether students should have constant access to digital devices at all. Concerns about smartphones, social media, attention, and mental health prompted educators and parents to reconsider practices that had become commonplace. Some schools began removing devices from classrooms, while others embraced technologies sophisticated enough to reorganize the entire school day. How could educators, seemingly united in their desire to serve students, arrive at such different conclusions?



©iStock/Sturti



©iStock/MonkeyBusinessImages

Perhaps because the conversation has changed. What began as a question of how to incorporate technology into classrooms has become a more fundamental examination of how students learn, how teachers spend their time, and what experiences should fill the school day. For Lutheran educators, these questions arise within an enduring mission. Our schools proclaim Christ crucified and risen, teach God's Word, and prepare students for lives of service. We seek to help young people recognize their God-given vocations, joyfully steward His gifts, and cultivate wisdom.

Imagine four seventh-grade students attending four different Lutheran schools, each faithful to that mission. Their classrooms, however, look remarkably different. So do the day-to-day responsibilities of their teachers. What might these four approaches teach us about the changing landscape of education?

What might these four approaches teach us about the changing landscape of education?

What began as a question of how to incorporate technology into classrooms has become a more fundamental examination of how students learn, how teachers spend their time, and what experiences should fill the school day.

Traditional Education: The Device-Free Classroom

Step into our first classroom, and you might wonder how much has changed in the last fifty years. Textbooks lie open on desks, pencils move across notebook pages, and at the front of the room, a teacher is leading seventh graders through a lesson on ecosystems. The subject is familiar enough, but the questions are beginning to get interesting. What happens when a species disappears? How might something as small as an insect affect an entire ecosystem? Soon, students are offering explanations, challenging one another's assumptions, and working together to investigate their predictions. Their teacher moves among them, listening, questioning,

and occasionally redirecting their thinking. Not a laptop or tablet is in sight. In this classroom, at least, the decision to leave technology out is deliberate.

Schools embracing this approach are not necessarily rejecting innovation. They recognize the value of sustained attention, careful reading, and thoughtful conversation in a world filled with digital distractions. The teacher directs instruction, observes students as they wrestle with new ideas, and adjusts the lesson when understanding falters. There is something compelling about a classroom where students and teachers engage directly with one another, without notifications or competing digital activities. Yet we should be careful not to romanticize the familiar. A classroom without devices is not necessarily a classroom filled with attentive students, nor does traditional instruction automatically meet every learner's needs. Teachers have differentiated instruction for generations through flexible grouping, individual conferences, and carefully designed enrichment or intervention. The challenge lies in the time and expertise required, particularly when students arrive with widely varying abilities. Digital tools might make some of this work more manageable, though whether those efficiencies justify their introduction remains a legitimate educational question.

The limitations extend beyond instructional efficiency. Without carefully planned alternatives, students may have fewer opportunities to explore specialized subjects,

Removing technology from the classroom does not remove the school's responsibility to prepare students for the world in which they will live and serve.



©iStock/AdShooter

There is something compelling about a classroom where students and teachers engage directly with one another, without notifications or competing digital activities.

use interactive resources, or develop technological skills increasingly important to their future vocations. Removing technology from the classroom does not remove the school's responsibility to prepare students for the world in which they will live and serve. Yet the personal relationships central to this model offer their own opportunities. A teacher notices a student's aptitude for scientific reasoning. A music director encourages a young musician. A coach recognizes leadership in someone who has yet to see it personally. Through these encounters, students begin discovering how God has equipped them to serve their neighbors. As they study, collaborate, and contribute to their classroom community, they experience the joy of putting those gifts to work. Wisdom grows through discussion, reflection, and the examination of God's creation in light of Scripture. The strength of this model rests not simply in what it removes from the classroom, but in how intentionally teachers cultivate what remains.

Traditional Education: The Technology-Enhanced Classroom

A few miles away, another seventh grader opens a laptop. Today's science lesson covers the same ecosystems, but instead of studying a printed food web, students manipulate a digital simulation. Remove a species, change the rainfall, introduce a predator, and watch what happens. Some results are predictable; others surprise them. Their teacher moves through the room, asking students to explain their observations and defend their conclusions. By the end of class, an online assessment has identified several misconceptions the teacher intends to address tomorrow.

Despite the devices, the basic structure remains familiar. The teacher determines the curriculum, establishes the pace, and guides students through the material. Technology, however, expands what can happen within that familiar structure. Simulations allow students to investigate phenomena that would be difficult to reproduce in a classroom, while digital resources provide access to information, expertise, and experiences far beyond the school walls. Teachers gain new ways to assess understanding, provide feedback, and respond to individual needs. Yet these opportunities come with complications that cannot simply be dismissed as matters of classroom management. The same device that places extraordinary educational resources at a student's fingertips also offers an almost endless supply of distractions, often more immediately appealing than the lesson at hand. Teachers must now compete not only for students' understanding but also for their attention, while managing the technical difficulties and financial demands that accompany a technology-rich



© iStock/Pressmaster

Despite the devices, the basic structure remains familiar. The teacher determines the curriculum, establishes the pace, and guides students through the material. Technology, however, expands what can happen within that familiar structure.

environment. Nor does every digital activity justify the investment. An electronic worksheet may accomplish little more than its paper counterpart, and immediate feedback is not necessarily meaningful feedback. A school can dramatically increase its use of technology without producing a corresponding improvement in learning.

Still, dismissing these tools because of their potential for distraction would overlook an important responsibility of education: preparing students for the world in which they will exercise their vocations. The engineer designing a bridge, the farmer managing a field, and the physician interpreting diagnostic



© iStock/MonkeyBusinessImages

Lutheran schools have an opportunity not merely to expose students to technology but to teach them how to use it thoughtfully and productively.

images all depend upon technologies that would have been unimaginable only a few generations ago. Our students will encounter similar tools, along with the distractions and temptations that accompany them, throughout their lives. Lutheran schools have an opportunity not merely to expose students to technology but to teach them how to use it thoughtfully and productively. A student might discover an interest in engineering through a simulation, collaborate with classmates to address a community need, or develop a digital resource that benefits others. These experiences offer opportunities for joyful stewardship as students put their abilities and the resources available to them to work in service to their neighbors. They also demand wisdom. Access to information is not the same

Access to information is not the same as understanding, and the ability to produce a polished digital product does not guarantee that a student comprehends the ideas it contains.

as understanding, and the ability to produce a polished digital product does not guarantee that a student comprehends the ideas it contains. Learning when to use technology, when to question it, and when to set it aside becomes part of preparing young people to exercise sound judgment in their future vocations.

Blended Learning: The Flex Model

Our third student arrives at school having already encountered today's science lesson. Through an online curriculum, the student has explored ecosystems, worked through simulations, and encountered questions that challenged an initial understanding. Now the class gathers in the laboratory, where the teacher has prepared an investigation that will test some of those ideas. For other students, the sequence might look different. A difficult concept could require direct instruction from the teacher before students continue their online work, while a sophisticated simulation might allow students to conduct investigations

This approach, known as the Flex Model of blended learning, makes online instruction the backbone of academic coursework while providing flexible opportunities for direct teacher involvement.

independently. The learning experiences are not divided neatly between acquiring information on a screen and applying it in a classroom. Instead, each environment contributes to a carefully designed instructional experience.

This approach, known as the Flex Model of blended learning, makes online instruction the backbone of academic coursework while providing flexible opportunities for direct teacher involvement.[1] Imagine students completing 50 to 75 percent of their instruction online, with the remaining time devoted to teacher-guided learning. These proportions illustrate one possible implementation rather than a requirement of the model. Teachers may provide small-group instruction, address misconceptions, or facilitate laboratories, Socratic seminars, writing conferences, and collaborative investigations. The goal is not to move certain kinds of thinking exclusively online and reserve others for the classroom, but to use both environments according to the demands of the curriculum and the needs of students.

For smaller Lutheran schools, the possibilities are intriguing. A student with an interest in advanced mathematics or a specialized science might pursue coursework the school could not otherwise offer while remaining connected to teachers and classmates. Students also assume greater responsibility for their learning, discovering both the freedom and responsibility that accompany the gifts and opportunities available to them. When they gather with teachers and peers, they can move beyond individual accomplishment to share their knowledge, consider other perspectives, and exercise judgment together. Yet independence is not the same as maturity, and personalized learning presents its own tensions. Some students flourish with flexibility while others require considerable structure. Individualized pathways can help students develop particular gifts, but learning together also teaches patience, cooperation, and responsibility for one's neighbors. The teacher's work therefore changes without becoming less important. Explaining every lesson may no longer be necessary, but recognizing when a student needs encouragement, correction, or personal guidance remains essential. The model succeeds when technology strengthens these relationships rather than quietly replacing them.

Students also assume greater responsibility for their learning, discovering both the freedom and responsibility that accompany the gifts and opportunities available to them.



© iStock/MonkeyBusinessImages

Explaining every lesson may no longer be necessary, but recognizing when a student needs encouragement, correction, or personal guidance remains essential.

AI-Driven Learning: The Alpha School Model

Artificial intelligence is already finding its way into traditional classrooms and blended learning environments, but some schools are taking its possibilities considerably further. Alpha School represents one particularly ambitious approach, reorganizing the school day around personalized academic instruction and extensive experiential learning. Our fourth student begins the morning working through lessons delivered by adaptive, AI-supported platforms that respond to demonstrated understanding and adjust subsequent instruction accordingly. Adult guides monitor progress, encourage persistence, and help students develop productive learning habits. Alpha describes an approach in which approximately two hours are devoted to concentrated academic instruction, reporting impressive results that deserve continued independent evaluation.[2]

But the most interesting part of the day may begin when the laptop closes.

Rather than continuing through a conventional schedule of academic classes, Alpha students spend substantial time in workshops devoted to communication, leadership, entrepreneurship, relationships, financial literacy, and practical experiences.[3] A student might develop a business idea, prepare a presentation, collaborate on a challenging project, or practice skills seldom emphasized in traditional academic schedules. These activities are not intended as rewards for finishing schoolwork. They form an essential part of the educational program, built upon the proposition that more efficient academic instruction can create time for experiences that require human interaction and practical application.



© iStock/Anna Stills

Our fourth student begins the morning working through lessons delivered by adaptive, AI-supported platforms that respond to demonstrated understanding and adjust subsequent instruction accordingly.

Imagine what a Lutheran school might accomplish with such an arrangement. Students could spend afternoons learning alongside nurses, carpenters, engineers, pastors, entrepreneurs, and community leaders. They might discover unexpected abilities while serving organizations in their communities or working together to solve problems affecting their neighbors. In such experiences, vocation becomes something more than a future career to consider. Students begin to recognize the needs of those around them and discover the satisfaction of putting their own abilities to work in service to others. Stewardship becomes something lived as they manage resources, contribute their talents, and experience the joy of meaningful service. Wisdom develops as they confront

Wisdom develops as they confront situations involving relationships, competing priorities, and decisions without convenient answers. The classroom, in a sense, extends into the community where their vocations are already taking shape.

situations involving relationships, competing priorities, and decisions without convenient answers. The classroom, in a sense, extends into the community where their vocations are already taking shape.

Of course, the promise of additional time depends upon the quality of what happens during both portions of the day. Rapid academic progress means little without lasting understanding, and an afternoon filled with activities does not necessarily produce meaningful learning. Dependence on adaptive technology also raises questions about students' ability to think independently. Perhaps most importantly, the adult's role changes dramatically. Algorithms can recognize patterns in academic performance, but they cannot know a student as well as a teacher does, offer Christian counsel, or help a young person understand the responsibilities of vocation. These relationships do not become less important when technology assumes more instructional responsibilities. Indeed, the success of the model may depend as much on the wisdom and attentiveness of the adults guiding students through their experiences as on the sophistication of the technology delivering academic instruction.

Algorithms can recognize patterns in academic performance, but they cannot know a student as well as a teacher does, offer Christian counsel, or help a young person understand the responsibilities of vocation.



© iStock/PeopleImages

Whether their instruction comes through textbooks, digital resources, blended learning, or artificial intelligence, we seek to prepare them for those responsibilities with knowledge, gratitude, and wisdom.

Four Educational Models: Questions Worth Asking

Educational Model	Role of Devices	Opportunities to Explore	Challenges to Consider
Traditional: Device-Free	Devices are largely absent from student instruction; teachers and physical resources remain central.	How might an environment free of digital distractions encourage sustained attention, deeper relationships, and thoughtful engagement?	How can schools provide differentiated instruction, timely feedback, and preparation for technology-rich vocations without relying on student devices?
Traditional: Technology-Enhanced	Devices regularly support teacher-directed instruction, research, collaboration, and assessment.	How might digital resources expand learning, reveal students' gifts, prepare them to use technology in service to their neighbors?	When does technology deepen learning, and when might distractions, dependence, or unnecessary digital activities undermine it?
Blended Learning: Flex Model	Online learning forms the instructional backbone, with flexible teacher guidance and face-to-face experiences.	How might flexible learning pathways help students develop their gifts while allowing teachers to devote more time to meaningful interaction and application?	How can schools cultivate independence without sacrificing academic rigor, personal guidance, and the benefits of learning together?
AI-Driven: Alpha School Model	Adaptive technology delivers concentrated academic instruction, creating substantial time for experiential learning.	What might become possible if more of the school day were devoted to vocational exploration, relationships, community engagement, and practical experiences?	How can schools ensure lasting academic understanding, intellectual independence, and meaningful adult guidance in both halves of the school day?

Different Approaches, One Mission

Four classrooms, each organized around different assumptions about learning and the use of time. What distinguishes them is not simply how long students spend looking at screens. A technology-enhanced traditional classroom might involve more daily device use than Alpha's concentrated academic program. The deeper difference concerns the responsibilities assigned to technology, teachers, and students. As technology assumes more of the work of delivering content and providing feedback, teachers may gain opportunities to devote additional attention to guidance, application, and relationships. Their instructional responsibilities may change, but their vocation remains rooted in serving the children entrusted to their care.

Nor must a school embrace one model to the exclusion of every practice associated with the others. Walk down almost any school hallway, and you may find elements of several approaches. One teacher relies on direct instruction while another incorporates online learning; both may serve their students exceptionally well. Still, borrowing an occasional practice differs from embracing a coherent educational philosophy across a whole school. The distinctive advantages of a model can be difficult to realize without consistent implementation. Schools need not demand identical instruction in every classroom, but neither should they mistake a collection of unrelated approaches for an intentional educational program.

As technology assumes more of the work of delivering content and providing feedback, teachers may gain opportunities to devote additional attention to guidance, application, and relationships.

An instructional approach should reflect a clear understanding of the school's mission and the students it serves.

For school leaders, these choices require more than enthusiasm for innovation or affection for familiar practices. Academic outcomes, student readiness, teacher expertise, relationships, and financial sustainability all deserve consideration. Above all, an instructional approach should reflect a clear understanding of the school's mission and the students it serves.

For Lutheran schools, that mission begins with Christ and His Gospel. No educational method creates saving faith; the Holy Spirit works through God's Word. Yet the children entrusted to our care also have lives to live, gifts to develop, and neighbors to serve. Whether their instruction comes through textbooks, digital resources, blended learning, or artificial intelligence, we seek to prepare them for those responsibilities with knowledge, gratitude, and wisdom.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity presented by this changing landscape is not another educational technology, but the invitation to reconsider how we organize learning itself. The tools will change, and our classrooms may look increasingly different. Our mission remains to proclaim Christ faithfully, provide an excellent education, and prepare students to recognize their vocations, joyfully steward God's gifts, and exercise wisdom in service to their neighbors.



Jonathan Orr serves as Chief Academic & Innovation Officer for the Lutheran Education Association of Houston (LEAH). With more than 20 years of experience as a Lutheran educator and administrator, he supports schools in strengthening curriculum, improving instruction, and exploring innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

Endnotes

1. Clayton Christensen Institute, *Is K–12 Blended Learning Disruptive?* (2014). Discussion of the Flex Model and its defining characteristics. Read the report.
2. Alpha School, *The Alpha School Program*. Description of Alpha's academic approach and reported outcomes.
3. Alpha School, *Life Skills Workshops*. Description of the school's afternoon experiential learning program.

Review, Reflect, Resolve

Reflect: **Which of the four instructional models most closely resembles your school today? Does your school's approach reflect a coherent educational philosophy, or has it developed through the gradual adoption of different instructional practices and technologies?**

Respond: **As technology becomes increasingly capable of delivering instruction, which responsibilities might teachers appropriately entrust to digital tools, and which aspects of their vocation remain essential to the relational and spiritual mission of Lutheran education?**

Reimagine: **If you were designing a Lutheran school today, how would you organize instruction, technology, and student experiences to help young people recognize their God-given vocations, joyfully steward His gifts, and cultivate wisdom?**

Shapingthe**Future** is published monthly by Lutheran Education Association and distributed to members of LEA. All material included in **Shaping**the**Future** is the property of Lutheran Education Association and may not be reproduced without permission.

Copyright © 2026 Lutheran Education Association, 7400 Augusta Street, River Forest, IL 60305-1499

Website: www.lea.org **Email:** lea@lea.org

Executive Director: Thomas Wrege, Ed.D.
Executive Director Emeritus: Jonathan C. Laabs, Ed.D.
Editor Emeritus: Ed Grube
Director of Educational Resources: Denise Rice
Director of Member Services: Julie Klopke
Technology Project Director: Paul Piel
Design: Kathryn Brewer

To submit copy, letters to the editor or media for review, contact Paul Piel at pfpiel@gmail.com.

We look forward to hearing from you! Send your thoughts, ideas, and suggestions for future STF topics to lea@lea.org. LEA does not endorse articles cited in **Shaping**the**Future**. We provide links to connect members with information they might find useful.