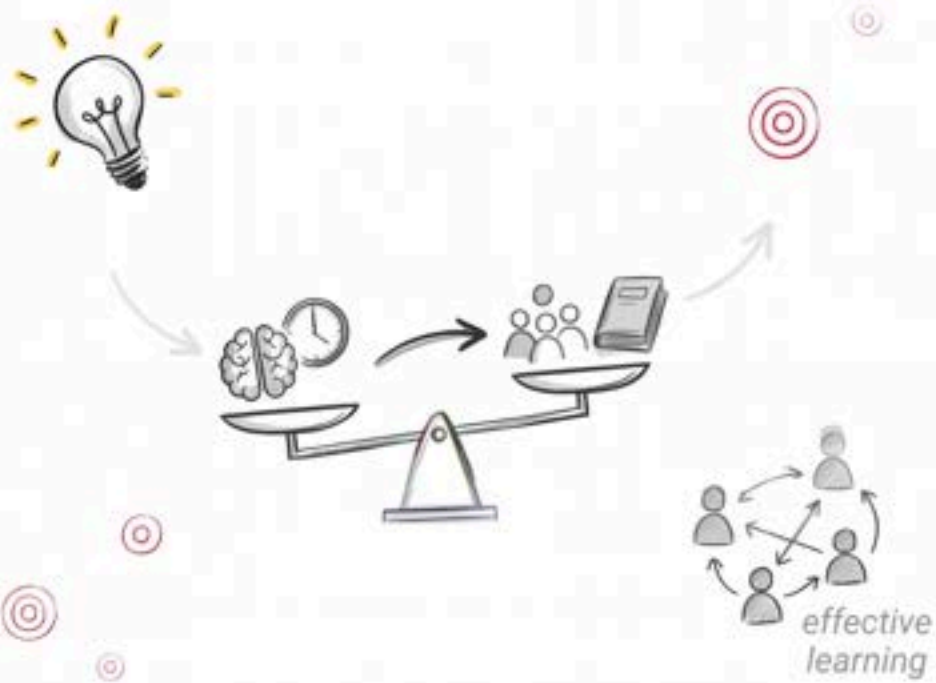
Screen Time and Intentional Technology Use in DSUSD



Desert Sands Unified School District

DESERT SANDS UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Screen Time and Intentional Technology Use in DSUSD

Purpose: Why This Guidance Matters Now

In Desert Sands Unified School District, our vision is to successfully prepare every student for college, career, and life. As we prepare our students for an ever-evolving world, we recognize that technology is no longer just a tool in the classroom; it is the vehicle driving our future.

According to the World Economic Forum's *Future of Jobs Report*, technological literacy, analytical thinking, and creative problem solving are among the most critical skills for the modern workforce. In 2001, Paul Attewell described a "second digital divide." While the first divide was about who *owned a computer,* the second was about *how they were used.* This divide fell largely along income lines: children from higher income homes were more likely to use technology to create and explore, often with an adult beside them, while children from lower income homes spent more of that time simply consuming.

Twenty-five years later, nearly every child now has access to a device, and what separates them is what they do with it. DSUSD's Connect Initiative helped close the first digital divide; our responsibility now is closing the second digital divide. Rather than simply turning off screens, we must ensure our students learn to create, not just consume, so they graduate with the core competencies of our DSUSD Portrait of a Graduate.

This guide functions as a guiding framework for the entire DSUSD community. This framework adopts the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) approach to screen time, focusing on **Quality, Context, and Displacement,** and incorporates the SAMR technology integration model. The SAMR model lays out four tiers of online learning: substitution, augmentation, modification, and redefinition. The SAMR model helps users transform their use of technology from enhancement to transformation by moving from substitution to redefinition. Our goal is to cultivate digital wellness through intentionality, ensuring technology elevates learning without displacing human connection, physical movement, and mental well-being.

Core Definitions: Shaping Our Digital Culture

To ensure our community speaks a common language, we define our relationship with technology through four critical lenses. We shift the conversation from *how long* students spend on screens to *what* they are doing and *why*.

1. Active vs. Passive Engagement

We prioritize technology use to transform learning rather than simply substituting analog tools.

Type of Use	What it Looks Like	Educational Impact
Active Use *(Encouraged)*	Creating digital art, coding, collaborating on global projects, simulating science experiments, analyzing real time data.	**High:** Aligns with SAMR transformation. Students are creators, critics, and innovators.
Passive Use *(Limited to None)*	Mindless scrolling, watching non-instructional videos, using a screen as a digital worksheet with no added value.	**Low:** Pure substitution. Technology is used as a placeholder rather than a learning accelerator.

2. A Shared Language for Students

Students need language they can carry with them. We can teach them to notice whether they are **consuming, practicing, connecting, or creating**. **Consumption** is not inherently negative - reading an article, watching a demonstration, or listening to an expert can be essential. The bigger concern is remaining passive without moving toward understanding or application. **Practice** asks students to apply ideas and use feedback. **Connection** asks them to discuss and communicate with others. When we ask students to **create,** we ask them to design, solve, produce, and present. This helps students recognize how they use their attention and whether the experience moves their learning forward.

3. Instructional vs. Recreational Use

Context determines the value of the digital experiences students are engaging in.

- **Instructional Use:** Purposeful integration of digital tools designed to meet specific learning targets. It is collaborative, driven by curiosity, and designed to make learning equitable and accessible for every DSUSD student.
- **Recreational Use:** Digital media, such as social media, are used for leisure, downtime, or entertainment. While recreation has a place in a balanced life, **our school environments protect instructional spaces to minimize digital distractions and maximize peer to peer engagement.**

4. The Digital Diet: Quality Over Quantity

One way to understand the limits of a minutes only approach is to think about nutrition. Two hundred calories of candy and two hundred calories of dinner may match on paper, but they do not provide the same nourishment. In the same way, an hour spent moving through autoplay videos and an hour spent researching a local issue, collaborating with classmates, designing a solution, and presenting the result appear identical on a usage report. The number is useful, but it cannot tell us what the student experienced, what the student learned, or whether the tool strengthened or weakened the lesson. The same sixty minutes can produce very different outcomes.

While tracking screen time was once the standard approach to digital management, the simple truth is that the number of minutes a student spends looking at a screen does not always indicate meaningful instruction has taken place, and **rigid minute limits do not always support the intentional use of technology.** Technology is a powerful tool in students' lives; our shared goal is to help them learn how to use it responsibly.

In DSUSD, true digital wellness isn't measured by the clock; it is measured by purpose, active student creation, and real world impact. When we shift our focus from counting minutes to elevating pedagogical quality and context, we ensure technology serves as a powerful accelerator for learning without displacing vital human connection.

Measuring digital wellness by time alone operates on the assumption all screen use has the same impact on a child's brain. In reality, the context and quality of the digital activity matter infinitely more than the clock.

- **The Low Value Minute (Passive Substitution):** A student might spend **20 minutes** silently staring at a digitized, non-interactive worksheet or passively scrolling through videos. While the time spent is short, the cognitive lift is low, the engagement is passive, and the technology is serving as a mere placeholder.
- **The High Value Hour (Active Transformation):** Conversely, a student might spend **60 minutes** collaborating in real time on a digital workspace, editing a peer's writing, and coding an interactive science simulation. Although this block of time is longer, it represents high quality, active learning in which students build essential skills as creators and critical thinkers.

Under a rigid, time-limit-only model, the active, high value learning hour is penalized, while the passive, low value worksheet is excused. In DSUSD, we choose to measure what matters. We evaluate technology not by the clock, but by its *impact*, shifting our focus from *"How long has the screen been on?"* to ***"What is the student creating, and how is this tool amplifying their potential?"***

RISE Gives Us a Decision Framework We Already Use

To guide this shift, we replace countdown timers with **The RISE Intentionality Check, utilizing the RISE Framework**. This approach is not a departure from who we are. Our existing RISE framework already gives us a values-based method for making decisions. **Respect** asks whether a technology experience protects attention, privacy, people, and the learning environment. **Integrity** asks whether students are doing the thinking and representing their abilities honestly. **Support** asks whether the tool adds meaningful instructional or accessibility value. **Empathy** asks whether the experience protects well-being, inclusion, relationships, and human connection. Applying RISE to technology use creates consistency across our AI guidance, classroom practice, and district values.

Screen-time guidance extends RISE; it does not compete with it.

Before integrating any digital tool, our educators and leaders should evaluate it through four qualitative filters:

The RISE Intentionality Check

1. **Respect:** Does the tech tool protect focus, attention, and privacy? *(Does it move us up the SAMR framework from mere substitution to active, collaborative creation?)*
2. **Integrity:** Is the student doing the deep thinking, or is the technology doing it for them?

3. **Support:** Does this tool add meaningful learning or accessibility value that paper and pencil cannot? Is the technology being used at the right time, for the right purpose, with the right support, and for the right audience?
4. **Empathy:** Is this screen use pushing out vital, non-digital human experiences like face to face collaboration, physical activity, eye contact, or necessary cognitive rest?

By focusing on **Intentionality Over Minutes**, we empower teachers to design high impact, blended learning environments where screens are opened with clear pedagogical purpose and closed with confidence when the physical, collaborative, or offline portion of the lesson begins.

Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility: Tech as an Essential Bridge

In DSUSD, our core values of **Equity, Inclusion, and Excellence** demand that every student has the tools they need to thrive. When we discuss digital wellness and screen time, we must recognize a fundamental truth: **for many of our learners, technology is not just an instructional option, it is an essential equalizer.**

For students with IEPs, 504 plans, multilingual learners, and many other students, digital accessibility tools are a vital bridge to learning, communication, and self-advocacy.

The Crucial Distinction: Assistive Tech vs. General Screen Time

We do not evaluate assistive and adaptive technology through the lens of standardized time limits. Doing so would be equivalent to limiting how long a student can wear their glasses or use a communication board. Instead, we apply the AAP framework of **Quality, Context, and Displacement** with a specialized lens:

- **Zero Displacement of Connection:** Accessibility tools do not displace human interaction; they *enable* it. By giving a non-verbal student a voice or a visually impaired student access to text, we are actively preventing social and academic isolation.
- **High-Quality Transformation:** Tools like text-to-speech, speech-to-text, and screen readers transform what would otherwise be a passive barrier into an **Active, Empowered** learning experience. This directly aligns with the DSUSD Portrait of a Graduate goal to foster **Effective Communicators** and **Critical Thinkers**.

Embedded Tools: Low-Friction Equity in the Classroom

To support our educators, we focus on leveraging the powerful, built-in accessibility features already available within our streamlined DSUSD Google ecosystem. Teachers should not need to learn entirely new software platforms to make their classrooms accessible; rather, we are optimizing the tools we already have.

A Quick Mindset Shift for Educators

Effective technology integration isn't about adding software; it's about removing obstacles to learning. Applying **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** principles allows us to use embedded digital tools to personalize instruction and differentiate learning in real time.

- **Multiple Means of Representation:** Features like real-time translation and screen reading ensure every student can consume grade-level text and complex ideas.
- **Multiple Means of Action & Expression:** Features like voice typing and audio portfolio recordings give students diverse ways to demonstrate mastery beyond traditional pen-and-paper tasks.

Rather than viewing accommodations as isolated workarounds, UDL embraces the rule **"Necessary for some, good for all."** Providing speech-to-text for an IEP accommodation is necessary; making it available to the entire class for pre-writing brainstorms is proactive differentiation that builds student ownership and agency.

By protecting and prioritizing assistive technology, we ensure our digital wellness guidelines never become barriers to access. Instead, we use technology to remove barriers, honoring our promise to inspire and nurture **all** DSUSD students.

Context Matters: Nurturing Wellness in 100% Online Learning through the DSUSD Virtual Academy

For students enrolled in our DSUSD Virtual Academy, technology is not just an instructional tool—it is how they access daily learning. Naturally, full-time online learning requires a higher volume of screen engagement.

Under the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) framework, this is where **Context** and **Displacement** become our guiding stars:

- **Context:** The virtual classroom is the primary medium for instruction, higher screen minutes are expected and necessary.
- **Active Engagement:** The goal in a virtual space is to maximize **live connection, collaborative problem-solving, and active creation**, while minimizing long stretches of isolated, passive media consumption.
- **Preventing Displacement:** The main objective for virtual learners is protecting

off-screen time so that digital instruction does not displace physical movement, sleep, eye health, and real-world offline relationships.

Key Wellness Recommendations for the Virtual Classroom

To help our Virtual Academy educators, students, and families maintain a healthy, energizing routine, we focus on four core habits:

Virtual Learning Focus	What It Looks Like in Practice
1. The 20-20-20 Eye Reset	Every 20 minutes, students look away from the screen at an object 20 feet away for 20 seconds to reduce visual fatigue.
2. Analog Note-Taking & Brainstorming	Students keep a physical notebook beside their keyboard for sketching ideas, working through math steps by hand, or writing quick reflections.
3. Movement Between Modules	Integrating structured, 5-minute off-screen body stretches or physical movement breaks between instructional blocks.
4. Active Synchronous Connection	Prioritizing live, face-to-face peer discussions, breakout groups, and verbal Q&A over silent, isolated video watching.

Proactive District Actions for Intentional Technology Use

We believe preparing students for the future means creating a digital ecosystem working *for* our educators and families, not against them. To build **Empowered Learners** and **Critical Thinkers** without overloading our classrooms, DSUSD is taking proactive, systemic action. Here is how we are **shifting from high-quantity screen time to high-quality digital learning**:

1. YouTube Management

The biggest structural shift we are making is designed to eliminate unproductive distractions.

- **The Action:** We have configured our district Google Admin settings to block open student access to YouTube on school-managed accounts and devices.
- **What This Means:** Students will *only* be able to view YouTube videos a teacher has explicitly vetted and assigned through Google Classroom.
- **The Impact:** This eliminates passive consumption and video based distractions during the school day. Teachers no longer have to scan the room to see if a student is watching non-instructional content—the system handles the boundaries so our educators can focus on teaching.

2. Streamlining Purchases: Quality Over Quantity

More software does not equal more learning. To prevent "app fatigue" for teachers, students, and families, we are auditing our digital inventory.

- **The Action:** The district will audit our digital inventory and establish a clear ecosystem standard: we will be focusing our district-wide core digital stack on **five hand-picked educational applications** carefully chosen to support each of the core content areas.
- **The Standard:** Moving forward, any digital tool vetted for DSUSD classrooms must prove it offers exceptional **quality, intentionality, and active engagement**. If a platform simply replicates what can be done organically with paper and pencil, or if it promotes passive video scrolling, it will not be part of our core stack.
- **Why This Helps Our Community:**
    - **For Teachers:** Eliminates the pressure to learn dozens of ever-changing platforms, giving you back precious time to master a few powerful, versatile tools that genuinely amplify learning.
    - **For Students:** Reduces cognitive overload and context-switching, allowing them to focus on deep thinking and creation rather than learning new software interfaces.
    - **For Families:** Simplifies the home experience with a consistent, predictable set of tools across grades and content areas.

To ensure every digital tool in our district serves a clear pedagogical purpose, we are committing to a focused suite of five core applications for each core content area, driving learning toward active creation, critical thinking, and collaborative problem-solving.

3. Google Class Tools

We want technology to act as an accelerator for student creation, not just a digital worksheet. To support our teachers in maintaining an active, focused learning environment we are providing targeted support for Google Class Tools.

- **The Action:** Provide ongoing, targeted support for teachers to maximize the instructional capabilities of Google Class Tools, giving teachers real-time, low-friction management layers to guide student attention and personalize instruction.
- **What This Means:** By utilizing features like live captions in 200+ languages, real-time translation, and guided content focus, Google Class Tools ensures digital time remains equitable, high-yield, and directly tied to developing our **DSUSD Portrait of a Graduate** competencies as **Empowered Learners** and **Critical Thinkers** while supporting diverse learners and helping to close the achievement gap through accessibility.

4. Supporting the Balanced Classroom: Enhancing Offline Curricular Tools

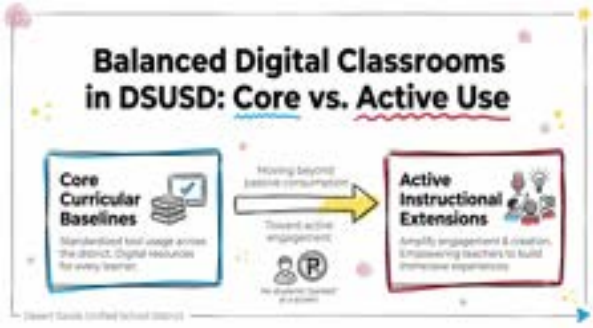
Digital wellness requires a healthy mix of online innovation and offline human interaction.

- **The Action:** We are actively reviewing district curriculum requirements to ensure they support a healthy blended learning model.

- **The Practice:** We are explicitly supporting teachers in utilizing offline curricular tools—including, but not limited to, hands-on science labs, physical math manipulatives, and Socratic seminars. In our Professional Development sessions, we will focus on mastering the core curriculum while leveraging technology to boost engagement and accessibility.
- **The Goal:** By intentionally designing lessons where the screen is closed for deep thinking, peer eye contact, and physical writing, we ensure technology never *displaces* the vital human experiences necessary for child development.

Through these proactive measures, DSUSD is ensuring technology remains a powerful, well-driven vehicle for student success, fully aligned with our Portrait of a Graduate.

Curricular Integration: Baselines, Active Design, and the "Screen Parking" Guardrail



To support a balanced classroom, it helps to understand digital tools used in DSUSD falls into two distinct categories: **Core Curricular Baselines** and **Active Instructional Extensions**.

We want our teachers to feel fully empowered to use technology to amplify student engagement, while also understanding where to draw the line so students are never lef passively "parked" in front of a screen.

1. The Core Baselines: Targeted & Minimal Footprints

Our district-adopted, adaptive curricular programs are highly focused. Designed for personalized skill practice, their required digital footprint is intentionally minimal.

These baselines represent the structured, adaptive components of our adopted curricula, they **do not restrict your ability** to design active, collaborative learning experiences using technology:

- **TK:** *Happy Numbers* (~30 minutes per week / less than 10 minutes per day).
- **K-5:** *i-Ready Reading* (30-40 minutes per week / about 10 minutes per day), *Amplify Science* (30 minutes per week / less than 10 minutes per day), and *Amplify Math (Boost Platform) (*45 minutes per week / approximately 5-10 minutes per day)
- **Middle School (6-8):** *Illustrative Math/Desmos* (45-60 minutes total per week / less than 20 minutes per day) and *Gizmos* (~30 minutes periodically), *English Language Arts* (~ 180 minutes per week).
- **High School (9-12):** *Math I, II, III* (~15-30 minutes per week / less than 10 minutes per day) and *Gizmos* (up to 1 hour per week for complex virtual labs / less than 20 minutes per day), *English Language Arts* (~180 minutes per week)

Completing these targeted sessions fulfills the digital requirement for these programs. This gives you the pedagogical flexibility to transition to whatever medium, whether that is deep offline processing or highly collaborative digital work, making the most sense for your next instructional step.

2. Active Instructional Extensions: Driving Engagement

Does fulfilling your core baselines mean technology is finished for the day? **Not at all.**

We encourage teachers to keep devices open when students are actively collaborating, researching, and creating.

We highly support using technology for high-value, active experiences, including, but not limited to:

- **Collaborative Design:** Students working in real-time on Google Slides to build a shared presentation.
- **Inquiry & Research:** Deep-diving into primary sources for a Social Science DBQ or searching databases for an ELA research project.
- **Active Portfolios:** Students using *Seesaw* to record their voices explaining a physical math problem they solved on a desk with dry-erase markers.
- **Media Creation:** Coding, digital art, or drafting original stories.

Because these activities require students to be **Empowered Learners** and **Critical Thinkers**, this screen time is active, valuable, and dynamically integrated into your lesson design.

3. Avoiding "Passive Screen Parking"

While we champion the use of active technology, we must guard against Passive Screen Parking. This occurs when technology is used as a placeholder to keep students quiet, shifting them from active creators into passive consumers.

> **Avoiding Passive Screen Parking:** A student should never spend hours of the school day passively consuming media on a device. While tools like EdPuzzle, instructional videos, or digitized worksheets have occasional value for direct instruction, they should never become the default classroom activity.

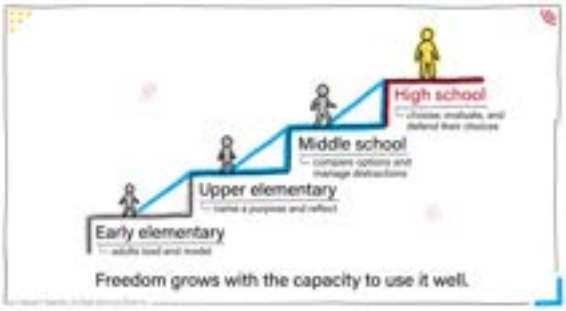
To keep classrooms high-impact, use this quick reference to distinguish between driving the technology and being parked by it:

Active Instructional Design (Do More of This!)	**Passive Screen Parking (Limit This!)**
Students researching a topic to debate with a peer.	Students watching long, unassigned YouTube videos.
Students collaborating in real-time on a shared document, slide deck, etc.	Students working silently on isolated, digital-only worksheets.
Students using voice recording to explain their physical work.	Students parked on back-to-back EdPuzzles with no peer interaction.
Digital tools used to *launch* a hands-on, offline activity.	Digital tools used to *replace* a hands-on, offline activity.

By keeping this distinction in mind, we can confidently design classrooms where screens are opened to expand our students' minds, and closed the moment it’s time to connect, talk, and build community.

4. Developing Student Agency Over Time

Student agency does not mean handing a kindergartner a device and expecting independent self-regulation. Agency develops through age-appropriate support.



- **Early Elementary (TK–2): Adults Lead & Model -** Adults select digital tools, set clear boundaries, model intentional choices, and protect off-screen balance.
- **Upper Elementary (Grades 3–5): Name & Reflect -** Students begin identifying *why* a tool is being used and reflecting on whether it meaningfully helped them learn.
- **Middle School (Grades 6–8): Compare & Self-Regulate -** Students compare digital options, learn to manage distractions, verify online information, and explain their decisions.
- **High School (Grades 9–12): Select & Defend -** Students independently select tools, manage their attention, evaluate learning results, document their creative process, and defend their choices.

5. Grade-Band Guidance: Developmentally Appropriate Digital Use

Technology integration is never a one-size-fits-all model. What is instructionally powerful for a high school senior preparing for college or career can be developmentally inappropriate for a kindergartner building foundational fine-motor skills.

To protect analog learning where it matters most while fostering digital fluency over time, our classrooms operate under four clear, age-appropriate grade-band models:

Early Childhood & Early Elementary (TK - Kindergarten)

- **The Focus:** Prioritize oral language, social play, physical movement, physical books, manipulatives, hands-on exploration, interactive eye level touch boards, fine motor tracing, and projected motion sensing movement based games.
- **Role of Technology:** Digital tools are brief, teacher-guided, and highly selective. They are used primarily for accessibility (e.g., text-to-speech), language support, brief targeted practice, or voice recordings to explain physical work.

- **What We Avoid:** Extended passive video watching, isolated digital worksheet seatwork, or the substitution of digital screens for physical writing and tactile play.

Early Elementary (Grades 1 -2)

- **The Focus:** Prioritize foundational literacy, numeracy, handwriting, oral language, social development, physical books, manipulatives, multimedia portfolios, and robotics block based coding.
- **Role of Technology:** Digital tools are used selectively for accessibility, language support, creation, targeted practice, voice recordings to explain physical work, formative assessment, demonstration of learning, differentiation, and digital citizenship modeling.
- **What We Avoid:** Extended passive video watching and independent screen based seatwork.

Upper Elementary (Grades 3 - 5)

- **The Focus:** Build foundational literacy, inquiry, and critical thinking while beginning to use technology more actively and reflectively. A balance of technology use, discussion, writing, reading, hands on learning, movement, and collaboration. Create multimedia portfolios and utilize robotics and block based coding.
- **Role of Technology:** Students transition from consumers to active reflection. Digital tools support active research, collaborative slide creation, voice recordings to explain physical work, intervention, multimedia projects, simulations, keyboarding, productivity skill building, early media literacy, and adaptive skill practice.
- **What We Avoid:** Screen use that replaces face-to-face peer discussions, Socratic seminars, or physical science labs.

Middle School (Grades 6 - 8)

- **The Focus:** Cultivate digital self-regulation, media literacy, digital citizenship, and collaborative problem-solving.
- **Role of Technology:** Students utilize technology for project-based inquiry, data analysis, coding, multimedia creation, digital design, career exploration, research and source evaluation, digital organization and productivity skills, and peer feedback. Educators help students ask not just *"Can I use technology for this task?"* but *"Is technology the best tool for this learning goal?"*
- **What We Avoid:** Unvetted digital browsing, unassigned video feeds, and isolated digital work with zero peer interaction.

High School (Grades 9 - 12)

- **The Focus:** College, career, civic readiness, and advanced coursework through authentic production and industry-aligned tools.
- **Role of Technology:** Students exercise high agency by selecting appropriate tools, evaluating source credibility, managing their own attention, collaborating across digital platforms, and building digital portfolios that demonstrate mastery. Appropriate uses may include: advanced research, coding, computational thinking, design and engineering, data analysis, digital portfolios, collaboration, responsible use of AI tools, civic engagement and media literacy, and industry aligned tools and platforms.
- **What We Avoid:** Artificial restrictions that prevent students from mastering the professional workflows, research methods, and collaborative tools required in modern higher education and the global workforce.

A policy can guide students while they are at school, but judgment goes with them everywhere. The minutes will be forgotten; what they learn to make will not. We are not preparing students to spend more time on screens - we are preparing them to make better decisions in a world filled with them.