
Sweden education shift: From digital learning to pen and paper

Think Academy

The education system in Sweden is making global headlines by shifting away from heavy digital learning towards more traditional pen-and-paper teaching.

Once praised for embracing tablets and laptops in classrooms, Sweden is now rethinking how much technology belongs in everyday instruction. The change reflects concerns about literacy, concentration and equality, and it offers valuable lessons for educators and parents worldwide.

The digital wave in Swedish education

Like many countries, Sweden leaned heavily into digital learning during the past decade. Schools introduced laptops, tablets and educational apps to boost engagement and modernise classrooms. The goal was to prepare students for a digital future by making resources interactive and widely accessible.

However, by 2023, Sweden's government and educators began to voice concerns. Studies raised red flags about declining reading comprehension and concentration among Swedish students. The Swedish government officially announced it would scale back the use of digital devices in early grades, with more focus on physical books and handwriting. According to an [AP News report](#), Sweden's Education Minister Lotta Edholm said students "need more textbooks" and emphasised that physical books are important for student learning as the country reconsiders screen-heavy instruction.

The drawbacks of digital education

The retreat from digital tools wasn't arbitrary. Sweden's experience highlights several challenges of relying too much on technology in schools:

- *Declining literacy rates:* Higher levels of screen-based learning were associated with weaker reading comprehension and vocabulary development, particularly in early grades. International reading assessments, including the [PIRLS study](#), showed that Swedish students' reading comprehension scores declined between 2016 and 2021, prompting concern among educators and policymakers about reading outcomes compared with earlier student cohorts.
- *Concentration issues:* With digital devices, distractions like notifications and multitasking reduced focus. Teachers reported students struggled to sustain attention.
- *Reduced teacher-student interaction:* Technology sometimes limited in-person communication and classroom discussions.
- *Equity gaps:* Not all families could provide reliable internet or digital tools at home, widening the achievement gap.

These problems forced Swedish educators to reconsider whether 'more technology' always meant 'better learning'.

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The return to traditional pen-and-paper teaching

Sweden's shift does not mean abandoning technology entirely. Instead, it signals a *balanced approach*. Pen-and-paper exercises, printed textbooks, and in-class discussions are regaining importance, especially in early grades.

Benefits of traditional methods include:

- *Improved handwriting and memory:* Research suggests writing by hand strengthens memory and comprehension.
- *Deeper engagement with text:* Printed books encourage focus without digital distractions.
- *Better learning outcomes:* A [UNESCO report](#) warns against uncritical adoption of digital tools in classrooms and highlights the need for balance.

The Swedish government now emphasises that while digital skills are still necessary, they must not replace foundational skills developed through pen and paper.

How Sweden compares globally

Sweden is not alone in rethinking digital education. Other countries are grappling with similar questions:

- Norway and Denmark are also studying how much screen time is appropriate in early schooling.
- South Korea has introduced

guidelines to limit screen exposure for young students.

- UNESCO's 2023 *Global Education Monitoring Report* called for a more cautious, evidence-based approach to EdTech adoption worldwide.

Sweden's decision fits into a larger global debate about finding the right balance between traditional learning methods and digital innovation.

Lessons for parents and educators

Parents and educators outside Sweden can learn from this shift:

- *Moderation is key:* Technology can enhance learning but should not dominate, especially for younger children.
- *Prioritise literacy:* Encourage reading physical books and handwriting exercises alongside digital tools.
- *Stay informed:* Track your child's concentration and performance to decide how much technology helps or hinders their learning.
- *Hybrid approach:* Aim for balance – use digital resources for research and simulations but reinforce fundamentals with pen-and-paper practice.

Conclusion

Sweden's recalibration of digital learning reflects a growing recognition that technology has limits in the classroom when foundational skills are still developing. While digital tools remain important, Sweden's approach stresses that literacy, concentration and equity must come first.

For parents, educators and policymakers worldwide, the lesson is clear: technology in education works best when it complements – not replaces – traditional learning.

This article originally appeared on the [Think Academy blog](#).

Think Academy, part of TAL Education Group, helps K–12 students succeed in school today by building strong maths foundations and critical thinking skills.