

Digital, self-directed learning in primary schools must be stopped!

by Daniel Wahl,* Switzerland



Daniel Wahl.
(Picture nebelspalter.ch)

Countries that have pushed ahead with the digitalisation of schools are backpedalling. But not Switzerland, despite worrying indicators regarding the mental health of our children.

Learning from past mistakes: countries like Sweden and Norway, which relied on tablets and computers, have put a stop to digitalisation and are returning to paper and pens. Greece, Hungary and Italy started the new school year without mobile phones. France is testing the digital timeout in 200 schools with a ban on mobile phones. Australia plans to ban children under 16 from accessing *Instagram & Co.*

Relationships suffer

Those responsible for education, who moved to digitalise their schools long before Switzerland, have realised that learning success and relationships between pupils and teachers and among children have suffered because of the introduction of computers and smartphones. Sociologists and authors such as *Jonathan Haidt* (author of the book "The Anxious Generation") have documented a correlation between reduced academic performance, concentration, depression, isolation and lack of exercise, particularly because of the use of smartphones and social media. Haidt summarises:

"It is mentally unhealthy when our children and teenagers spend too much time in digital worlds with technological tools during important phases of development of the young brain and far too little time experiencing, exploring and living in the real world. This prevents them from

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Sustainable learning success requires the relationship between teacher and student and direct encounters with the subject matter. (Picture keystone)

having enough time to learn real-life skills that are necessary for a healthy, responsible life in the real world later."

The causality has not been proven, but there is plenty of evidence

- that the disembodied, abstract digital world can be frightening,
- that the rapid loss of community in the virtual environment can cause depression,
- that digitalisation can cause sleep deprivation and addiction-like behaviour,
- that time spent on digital devices takes away time spent with friends (social deprivation).

Despite these indicators, sleepy Switzerland currently wants to act the good guy. *Beat A. Schwendimann*, head of the pedagogical office of the *umbrella organisation of teachers* (LCH), expresses an almost uncritical attitude towards digitalisation. "Schools are already in a good position, digitalisation is not just starting tomorrow", he says encouragingly.

There are also digitalisation enthusiasts in the education departments – as Lucerne SVP cantonal councillor *Urs Christian Schumacher*, a paediatrician, has already discovered. The Lucerne cantonal council is opposed to his critical anti-digitalisation initiatives. Schumacher (with whom the "Lehrernetzwerk Schweiz" [teachers' network Switzerland] is in close contact) has observed that pupils are becoming desocialised: "They are left to themselves and their tablets,

and the teacher is only occasionally present as a coach, mainly giving instructions via the internet.

Two levels of digitalisation

Insertion: There are two levels to what is meant by "digitalisation of schools". One, probably less controversial, is the digitalisation of school bureaucracy. The other, more controversial one, concerns the digitalisation of teaching with new, often significantly more expensive teaching materials. This applies to primary school. There is no question that young people at secondary school level need to be prepared for the digitalised world of work and acquire computer user skills.

However, *Andreas Walker*, a futurologist and father of four, takes a critical view of raising children to become digital beings: "It is naive to blindly trust that the global market, the mass of game, cosmetics and textile producers, as well as tech billionaires who send their own children to conservative private schools, are altruistic and socio-politically responsible and only want the best for our children. It is naive to believe that our teenagers can make good decisions on their own, that all this will grow from within them

and that we will adapt neurobiologically and evolutionarily," says *Andreas Walker*.

To gain more attention and launch a broader discussion on the digitalisation of schools, *Urs Christian Schumacher*, a member of the Lucerne cantonal parliament, has announced a petition in the canton of Lucerne. Its title: "No self-directed, digital learning in primary schools."

Schumacher originally planned to launch the petition this February. However, due to his politically overloaded agenda, he has postponed the launch of the petition until autumn. He wants to delve deeper into the topic of digitalisation with experts.

The "Lehrernetzwerk Schweiz" will support Schumacher to the best of its ability and distribute the petition. We will confront politicians with the issue in a targeted manner so that the consequences of digitalisation are also reconsidered in other cantons.

Source: <https://www.lehrernetzwerk-schweiz.ch/2025/02/09/digitales-selbstgesteuertes-lernen-an-primarschulen-muss-gestoppt-werden/>, 9 February 2025

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