

# New learning portal = More screen time?

Parents worry kids may be glued to devices; experts say students can be taught to manage time

Calvin Yang

While parents are excited about the new e-learning platform that gives students access to a range of learning tools, they worry it will mean more screen time for their children.

The Singapore Student Learning Space, which is being piloted at 62 primary and secondary schools, will be rolled out to all schools from next year.

With the online platform, students can learn at their own pace anywhere, any time by having access to videos, games and animations that will reinforce the learning of subjects, including English, mathematics, history and even physical education.

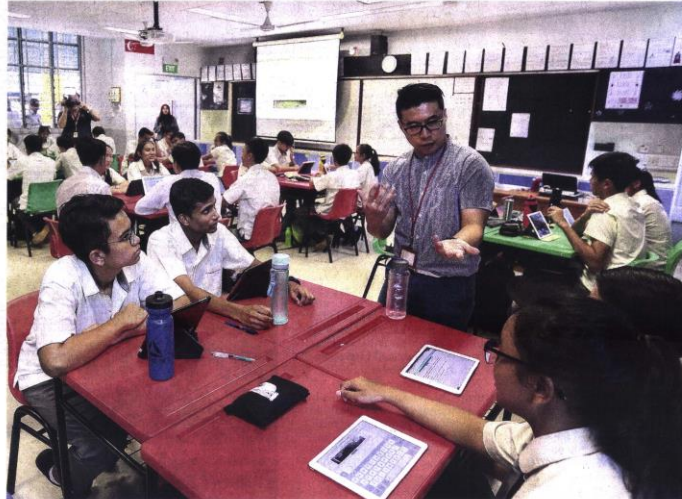
Mr Joseph Chua, 40, who is self-employed and has an 11-year-old son, said: "Students can use these valuable resources and learn at their own pace."

But another parent, Mrs Patricia Tan, 41, worries that her 10-year-old son may end up spending too much time on devices. "They may end up fiddling with their devices even when they are not using the resources," she said.

Studies bear out her concern. A recent one by think-tank DQ Institute and Nanyang Technological University found that 12-year-olds already spend almost 46 hours a week – or over 6½ hours daily – glued to a screen. Even nine-year-olds are spending over 24 hours a week, or about 3½ hours daily, doing the same.

However, National University of Singapore lecturer Kelvin Seah believes that with the portal, students may learn to better use their screen time.

"For instance, students may consciously or unconsciously reduce their time spent on social media, using the time instead for online learning," he said.



"So the increased time spent on the portal could well be compensated by a reduction in time spent on other online activities."

And that is where parents, like Mrs Tan, come in. She said she will be closely monitoring her son, to ensure he balances screen time for learning and playing.

Since last month, the portal's basic functions have been on trial at schools such as North Vista Primary and Anglican High.

The move enhances the Ministry of Education's use of information and communications technology to aid learning.

Students are encouraged to take regular breaks when using their devices, said the ministry, adding that parental guidance is also important

to reinforce such desirable practices. It said: "Many of our students are 'digital natives' who are adept at using smart devices, and schools seek to nurture students to be responsible digital learners."

While the use of technology can be a double-edged sword, it should not be avoided, said Dr Timothy Chan, director of SIM Global Education's academic division. "We cannot blindly reject technology simply because a child has been spending unproductive time on it."

Dr Yuhyun Park, founder of DQ Institute, said parents have to decide what is a healthy amount of time to spend on devices.

"Given the ubiquitous nature of digital media and devices, it is more important for kids to learn how to

use them in a wise way rather than being blocked from potential benefits of online learning," she added.

Experts shared that the problem of screen addiction can be addressed by teaching students about self-control and time management, and leading a balanced lifestyle.

Sociologist Paulin Straughan said parents can "set guidelines that are easy to remember and follow, and set reasonable assignments that can be completed within fair time-limits so that kids can continue to enjoy their childhood".

"We should send clear signals to students that they do not have to over-prepare to secure a good grade," she added.

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Help for needy students to get devices and access

The Singapore Student Learning Space, a new online learning portal, will help level the playing field as it gives all students, regardless of school, the same access to quality learning resources.

But what about those who cannot afford an electronic device to access the online platform?

The Ministry of Education (MOE) told The Straits Times that those who need support can apply for schemes for a computer and subsidised Internet subscription.

The NEUPC Plus Programme, for instance, offers needy students a brand-new computer at an affordable price.

Parents can also tap other grants, such as the Opportunity Fund, to apply for subsidies to purchase personal devices for their children.

Schools also have a range of computing devices that students can use to access the portal during school hours, MOE said.

For home access, students can log in using their own personal devices.

Social studies teacher Tay Peiyong with his students from Admiralty Secondary School on Wednesday. The school is one of 62 where the Singapore Student Learning Space is being piloted. ST PHOTO: JONATHAN CHOO