

Executive summary

Shaping the future of digital education

A global conversation on how to move beyond digital as usual

September 2026



Executive summary

The report is written during a global hype cycle around AI and education. As with any hype cycle, the conversation is future-focused, centred on how education systems should respond to accelerated change to ensure that the technology's strengths can be harnessed and risks managed. Amid the discourse of future perils and potential, it is useful to look back and reflect on what we have learned about digital and AI-powered technology in education systems over the past 25 years.

After over a quarter century of promising claims about technology's transformative potential, the global learning crisis remains acute. Some 273 million children are out of school and a large proportion of those in school are unable to read. Financing for education has shrunk. Meanwhile, global investment in AI is projected to surpass US\$2 trillion in 2026. Total global venture capital investment into EdTech grew to US\$2.6 billion in 2025, concentrated in AI-enabled platforms and tools.¹

These figures point to a fundamental risk: time and money may be wasted if AI in education is used to repeat mistakes made during earlier waves of digital education investment. Seeking quick wins by deploying the latest technologies to the greatest number of students is one such mistake. It overlooks learning outcomes and neglects the sustained, systemic factors that form the backbone of any successful digital education strategy or programme.

Digital and AI-enabled technologies can accelerate progress for children falling behind, sustain education during crises, support multilingual learning, strengthen school inclusion and help teachers tailor instruction to learner levels and needs. But these technologies can also weaken human connection, corrode or impede cognitive development, widen inequities and expose children to harm.

The direction of this impact is not inevitable.

By critically interrogating our past and present, we – governments, educators, development partners and AI industry leaders – can collectively steer towards improving learning and bridging barriers to equitable education. But this is not the default direction of change. **Without strong and proactive governance, business as usual in digital education does not deliver safe, quality learning opportunities for every child.**

Developed in collaboration between UNICEF and EdTech Hub, the report examines the relationships between digital and AI-enabled technologies and learning, teaching, equity, safety and system sustainability. The report is structured using UNICEF's EdTech for Good Framework 2.0, launched in July 2026. Its five pillars organize the chapters of the report: Contextual Readiness, Educational Impact, Inclusive Access, Safety and Well-being First, and Designed for Learning and Teaching.

Each thematic chapter combines a synthesis of global evidence, think pieces offering implementation and policy reflections, and country case studies showing how digital education policies and investments play out in practice. Most content addresses low- and middle-income contexts, where constraints around finance, infrastructure and capacity significantly shape what is viable in digital education.

The report focuses on the equity, sustainability and safety considerations that should inform all decision-making around the use of digital and AI-enabled technologies in education systems. The five chapters explore the best of the current evidence on these issues, examining the points of tension, welcoming expert reflections and ultimately presenting a series of recommendations for a more equitable future that goes 'beyond digital as usual', recalling the title of UNICEF's Digital Education Strategy. The content below summarizes the main insights from each chapter, highlighting the current evidence (what we know) and what productive action can be taken in light of this (what we can do).

¹ Full references and sources for the evidence, facts and figures cited in this Executive Summary are provided in the full report.

Part 1 addresses contextual readiness. It focuses on the central question: What evidence do we have about how digital and AI-powered tools can be implemented and scaled responsibly within real education systems and environments?

What we know	What we can do
Public governance. Without government ownership, digital education interventions will not scale or sustain impact in the long term. In the absence of curriculum alignment, ministries have no structural reason to integrate a platform, teachers have limited confidence in or opportunity to use it, and children have no assurance that their learning will translate into formal schooling.	When partnering with private providers, ensure that each choice increases the government's capacity to own or lead the deployment of the platform independently. Private providers can play an important role, but within systems governed around public education goals rather than commercial incentives, safeguarding pedagogical sovereignty, data governance and long-term fiscal sustainability.
Co-creation and iteration. In the AI era, the most scalable and impactful digital learning tools are those that support educators, are validated by public authorities and continuously improved through feedback loops that connect research, practice and innovation.	Build educator and government participation into the design and continuous improvement of digital education tools and programmes to ensure curriculum alignment, content ownership, and data governance and evidence uptake.
Relevance and representation. Digital and AI-enabled technologies can widen rather than close inequities when local languages, curricula and cultural norms are not reflected in content, design choices or underlying data sets. A significant performance gap between African languages and English persists in AI models used in education.	Co-design and adapt digital education tools to local languages, curricula and cultural contexts, and invest in representative data and evidence to close critical gaps, particularly for underrepresented languages and vulnerable populations.
Interoperability, infrastructure and crisis-readiness. System fragmentation and poor interoperability remain among the most persistent institutional barriers to impactful use of digital and AI-powered tools in education. Reliable electricity, connectivity and affordable devices are absent or constrained across many national education systems. When infrastructure, data systems and teacher capacity are built and maintained consistently over time, they can be crisis-response assets.	Integrate digital education tools into existing workflows and public sector digital ecosystems where relevant. Take the financial, technical and environmental demands of digital and AI seriously by governing and financing across public sector bodies. Explore whether low-tech, offline-first platforms and AI and shared or teacher-led use can simultaneously support crisis readiness, reduce resource demands, extend access and support better models of learning at a low cost, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

What we know

Financing and procurement. Recurring and long-term operating costs need a home in domestic budgets before donor project financing ends. This includes budgeting for long-term teacher support and costing system readiness over the device life cycles. Investments focused narrowly on devices, connectivity or software licensing fees consistently underperform without reliable and maintained support to teachers. Procurement planning and distribution coordination are critical factors for enabling positive and equitable impact.

What we can do

Be realistic about long-term operating costs and human capacity development. Align digital education plans with a government's technical capacity to manage large-scale deployment. Expand and sustain investment in pre-service and in-service teacher professional development to strengthen digital pedagogy and maintain the impact of digital education interventions, financed through core education budgets. Make deliberate design choices related to geographic reach, scheduling, supervision, software calibration and targeting, and consider rolling replacement cycles for 20–25 per cent of devices annually by region or grade level.



Part 2 addresses educational impact. It focuses on the central question: What evidence do we have about how digital and AI-enabled technologies can have a meaningful impact on student learning and broader educational outcomes?

What we know	What we can do
Multidimensional impact. Impact evaluations can focus narrowly on learning outcomes, which overlooks the impact of digital education interventions on teaching, equity, safety, well-being, the learning environment and the broader system.	Expand and nuance the concept of impact beyond learning outcomes alone, including by using frameworks such as EdTech for Good 2.0 that have broader scoring criteria across different domains of educational value. Include metrics in evaluations to explore effects on well-being, relationships, social-emotional learning, engagement, safety and the wider learning environment.
Implementation conditions. A digital tool's educational impact depends not only on its quality, but on how it is adapted, adopted and used in a specific context. Hardware-heavy approaches can carry high costs without corresponding learning gains when implementation capacity, teacher training, technical support, infrastructure or adaptation to local needs are insufficient.	Assess implementation requirements and the readiness of learning environments before investing in a digital or AI-enabled intervention and ensure programming includes consistent pedagogical, technical and operational support for sustained and effective use.
Teacher-led differentiation. Teachers, not automated tools, are the central enablers of learning. Evidence shows that digital tools are most effective when they help someone assess each child and teach to that child's learning level.	Prioritize educational technologies that help teachers identify children's learning levels, align instruction accordingly, monitor progress and provide targeted support.
Measurement and evidence pathways. Programme-level measures such as quiz scores, module completion and progress against tool-specific content can reward what is easiest to measure and limit comparability by showing what happens inside an EdTech tool rather than against established benchmarks or learning that happens outside the platform. Traditional research timelines are often too slow to inform live implementation decisions, and rapid iterative models are not yet routine.	Use psychometrically validated assessments and established benchmarks. Embed evaluation into implementation and explore iterative methods that generate evidence on programme delivery, teacher engagement and outcomes disaggregated by key factors including gender, performance level and disability where appropriate. Where possible, invest in longitudinal research to understand whether early gains hold at scale and how outcomes differ over time.

What we know	What we can do
Cost-effectiveness. Evaluating the links between costs and outcomes is under-researched and not standardized across digital education interventions.	Capture all data relevant to implementation costs, including foundational infrastructure, and hold EdTech suppliers accountable to meeting targets for both provision and outcomes for a given cost. Develop a benchmark of minimum standards for what stakeholders can reasonably expect in terms of learning outcomes, at what cost per child, for different forms of digital and AI-enabled technologies, calculated over time.

Part 3 addresses inclusive access. It focuses on the central question: What evidence do we have about how digital and AI-enabled tools and services can be used to support equitable access to and participation in education for diverse learners?

What we know	What we can do
Equity, exclusion and digital education. Out-of-school children, girls, learners with disabilities and those in crisis-affected contexts face overlapping barriers to safe and meaningful participation in digital learning, including prohibitive connectivity costs, gendered household dynamics, exclusionary design and systemic biases. Technology can help sustain learning under difficult circumstances when the enabling conditions are in place, such as affordable connectivity, accessible digital content and platforms, assistive technology, teacher capacity, inclusive procurement and accountability mechanisms.	Develop a whole-of-system approach that accounts for constrained environments and addresses multiple dimensions of exclusion simultaneously, ensuring that teacher training is at the core. Design interventions for and with learners who face the greatest barriers, including learners with disabilities, girls, least-connected learners and children in low-resource or crisis-affected contexts. Invest in combinations of offline applications, low-bandwidth platforms, content with accessibility features, local-language instruction, gender-responsive design and strong community engagement to reach the most marginalized.



Our starting point cannot be what technology can do. It must be what children need in order to learn, and what education systems need to deliver that learning equitably and at scale.”

Pia Rebello Britto
Global Director, Education
UNICEF

Verna Lalbeharie
Executive Director
EdTech Hub

What we know	What we can do
Inclusive and flexible design. Accessible digital content is most effective when supported by wider enabling conditions, such as accessibility standards and inclusive procurement, access to assistive technology and reasonable accommodation, teacher and school capacity, and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in design and implementation.	Develop accessibility guidelines and require them to be built into the design of digital and AI-enabled technologies and programmes by ensuring assistive compatibility and usability, flexible use to accommodate different learning needs and contextual requirements, and language and cultural adaptation to support diverse needs and abilities. Ensure these features are meaningfully and safely tested with users and improved.
Language and local adaptation. Language support remains one of the most persistent and least recognized barriers to learning, with millions of children speaking a different language at school than at home. AI increasingly enables educational resources to be translated, adapted and generated in historically underserved languages, but major gaps remain in quality and comprehensiveness.	Establish processes to expand language coverage, strengthen localization, improve translation quality and assess cultural appropriateness to strengthen both learning and cultural inclusion, particularly for historically underserved populations.
Limited evidence base. There is limited child-centred, gender-disaggregated evidence on how children use digital and AI-powered technologies; the impacts on their cognitive, social and emotional development; the risks they encounter; and the experiences of children in LMICs. Data systems frequently exclude those who are disconnected or disabled, creating a persistent invisibility that undermines inclusive planning. The evidence base on disability-inclusive education interventions in LMICs remains limited.	Disaggregate data before scaling digital education programmes, assess who benefits and who remains excluded, the conditions under which EdTech interventions have impact or not, and how outcomes differ across groups and contexts, using disaggregated evidence to track whether digital investments reduce or widen gaps. Invest in evidence generation in LMICs that reflects real implementation conditions, including government-run systems, low-resource and crisis-affected settings and diverse learner groups.
The potential of AI. While AI is not a substitute for accessibility, pedagogical, linguistic or technical expertise, it can help reduce production timelines of accessible, translated or adapted education materials at scale and support accessibility workflows when they are combined with strong human oversight, validation processes, accessibility expertise and clear governance.	Explore how AI can accelerate inclusive design processes, keeping educators, accessibility specialists, language experts, ministries of education and human-in-the-loop validation processes at the centre of review of AI-enabled accessible digital education materials.

Part 4 addresses safety and well-being. It focuses on the central question: What evidence do we have about how digital technologies can be designed and governed in ways that uphold children’s rights, protect them from harm and support their well-being?

What we know	What we can do
Data rights and public accountability. The education sector is particularly susceptible to cyberattacks and the tacit neglect of children’s data rights. EdTech can pose multifaceted risks to children’s rights when their data are shared without meaningful consent or legal basis for gathering, processing or sharing personal data. Data security measures and regulatory frameworks are struggling to meet the moment.	Establish and implement laws, policies and normative standards that treat digital and AI-enabled harm as part of violence prevention in, around and through schools. Any digital or AI-powered platform that gathers children’s educational data must be governed, financed and controlled by public authorities with data sovereignty in national hands.
Safety-by-design. The scale and cross-national consistency of online harms confronting children is substantial. Frameworks such as safety-by-design, child rights impact assessments, and privacy-enhancing technologies are well developed in theory, but there are significant barriers to implementing them in real learning environments.	Translate regulatory and standards-setting instruments into prevention and response systems that place responsibility on technology developers to identify and mitigate potential harms at the product design stage, not reactively after launch. Require companies contracted by governments to implement rights-respecting standards across their products and wider business practices.
Digital and AI literacies. Teachers, learners and caregivers need opportunities to expand their digital and AI critical literacies. Without these, even well-designed tools can be used in ways that undermine privacy, well-being and development.	Invest in the capacity of schools and educators to make informed decisions about how technologies are used. Ensure that teachers and learners are well equipped with digital and AI literacies that enable them to make day-to-day decisions about leveraging digital and AI-enabled technologies in ways that prioritize their privacy, well-being and development.



The government should require companies to comply with a set of requirements for digital products used by children.”

10–13-year-old, Spain

Source: Baghdasaryan, B., and S. Vosloo, *Children’s Best Interests in Digital Policy and Practice: From the voices of children, youth and experts around the world*, UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight, 2026, p. 16.

What we know	What we can do
Well-being and screen-free time. Education benefits of digital tools should be weighed against emotional, developmental and other negative impacts, which evidence suggests can be substantial. Harmful social and gender norms extend into digital spaces and can be amplified there.	Teach learners how to live safely, responsibly and wisely with and without digital and AI-powered technologies, including by guaranteeing regular screen-free play and by confronting social and gender norms shaping how technologies are used. Support parents and caregivers to help children understand advertising, online risks and problematic usage patterns.
Evidence on risks and harms. The evidence on online risks, psychosocial harms and data governance failures in LMIC educational settings is disproportionately thin and largely derived from secondary adaptations of research conducted in high-income contexts. Children’s own views on privacy, data governance and AI ethics are conspicuously absent from governance initiatives.	Generate and use evidence about the realities of technology-facilitated and AI-related risks and harms, with a focus on LMICs and crisis-affected contexts. Children’s own voices should be included in this research, especially from vulnerable and underrepresented populations.

Part 5 addresses design for learning and teaching. It focuses on the central question: what evidence do we have about how digital and AI-enabled technologies can be designed and used in ways that support effective teaching and learning processes for greater educational equity?

What we know	What we can do
Pedagogy over product. Commercial EdTech products often prioritize technologically novel features over meaningful learning opportunities, driving adoption based on shallow engagement metrics rather than pedagogically grounded learning progression. Education systems need to actively shape how AI is used, rather than simply absorb what commercial markets produce and promote.	Invest in development and testing conditions, not evaluation alone. Decisions about digital tools are more likely to produce lasting educational benefits when they begin with clearly identified learning challenges and test whether technology can help address them before tools are integrated into education systems.

What we know	What we can do
Collaborative digital learning. In resource-constrained settings, shared-device models that combine digital technology with collaborative, playful and peer-to-peer learning can challenge the assumption that effective EdTech requires one device per learner.	Use technology to strengthen the human relationships and collective capabilities at the heart of education, and where appropriate, use shared-device, collaborative and teacher-led models to avoid a future in which better personalization leads to greater individualization and isolation.
Teacher agency. Learner-facing EdTech can sideline teachers into support roles while platforms deliver core instruction, undermining teachers' relational, creative, empathetic and ethical qualities within the pedagogical process. AI can free up time for routine tasks, but also introduce hidden labour and risks of de-skilling and automation bias.	Reaffirm the irreplaceable, relational role of teachers with their students and protect teacher agency by mandating that AI augments rather than substitutes for teachers, embedding AI competencies in teacher education (pre- and in-service), and funding and supporting teacher-led communities of practice.
Co-design with teachers and learners. Teachers are not passive recipients of digital and AI-powered tools; many are already adopting them on their own and making judgements about where they help. Participatory, iterative approaches to designing EdTech tools with educators and students that consider the interconnection between humans and technology are more effective in the long term.	Keep teachers at the centre and co-design with and for teachers from the problems they actually face. Where appropriate, co-design with learners with disabilities, girls and other underrepresented groups to shape tools, content and implementation strategies that reflect their lived experiences and consider learner variability from the outset.
Human-AI collaboration. Emerging concepts such as 'hybrid intelligence' describe AI and humans working collaboratively to extend each other's cognition, producing outcomes greater than either alone. These approaches can support holistic, pedagogically purposeful and context-responsive learning in the age of AI while safeguarding human connection.	Prioritize models of human-AI collaboration that enhance teacher judgement and learner agency rather than displacing them. Test and refine these approaches through structured sandboxes and testbeds before wider rollout, ensuring that AI supports rather than undermines teachers' professional roles and identities.

Across these five chapters, it is clear that what counts as 'what works' in digital education is always conditional: on governance, infrastructure, pedagogy and local capacity and context. Translating evidence into good decision-making requires deliberate structures

that help different stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, development partners and providers align on expectations and commit to connecting evidence to practice.



Call to Action

As a top priority for the whole education sector, there needs to be a concerted effort to establish the norms and standards that will guide effective practice for how digital and AI technologies inform education.

The public sector must govern technologies in education by setting strong and transparent rules that put the public good ahead of short-term market incentives and prevent long-term vendor dependence. In turn, technology partners must respect public authority by working together within clear accountability frameworks and standards for equity, safety, pedagogy, sustainability and evidence.

The report provides five recommendations:

1

Equity

Make learning equity the defining driver of investment in digital and AI in education. Digital education interventions should be designed for equity from the outset. Investments should be assessed on who is reached, who continues to be excluded and whether outcomes are improving for the groups furthest behind. This means co-creating needs-based interventions with communities through the meaningful participation of children, teachers and caregivers; investing in mother-tongue-based multilingual learning, and culturally relevant and accessible digital content; and offering continuous and integrated teacher development, in particular for those serving children at the greatest disadvantage.

2

Safety

Enforce safeguarding and privacy requirements before digital and AI-powered tools reach schools, and continue monitoring safety and well-being throughout use. This means requiring safety-by-design, child rights

impact assessments, high-privacy defaults, minimized data collection, no targeted advertising, accessible redress mechanisms and clear accountability for learner-facing tools. It also means requiring that the companies which governments contract demonstrate that child rights impact assessments have been conducted and produce regular evidence that tracks how technologies are impacting the safety and well-being of children and school communities over time.

3

Pedagogy

Engage teachers as decision makers and co-designers of digital and AI-enabled tools and programmes to ensure that technology serves pedagogy. AI is not pedagogically beneficial by default: purpose-built, vetted and locally adapted EdTech can integrate AI around specific learning goals, curricula and contexts through deliberate pedagogical design to support teaching and learning. Teachers should be supported as co-designers and decision makers in choosing and using digital and AI tools, rather than being displaced or reduced to technical support roles. This means prioritizing inclusive, culturally appropriate solutions and expanding and sustaining investment in digital and AI technologies for pre-service and in-service teacher professional development, financed through core education budgets, tailored to local contexts and aligned with evidence-informed approaches, such as structured pedagogy and Teaching at the Right Level.

4

Sustainability

Ensure that contextual fit, interoperability and cost-effectiveness are prerequisites for scaling education technologies and are reflected in deliberate design choices for procurement, distribution and implementation models. Sustainable digital education systems should be

grounded in public-interest principles, interoperable standards and reusable public goods, with collective action and collaboration helping to build, align and improve them over time. Programmes must account realistically for long-term operating costs, and one cannot assume one device per child nor reliable connectivity. To scale and sustain effective practice, especially in complex contexts, deliberate and evidence-informed decisions must be made around geographic scope, age-appropriateness, accountability clauses in vendor agreements, device ratios and heterogeneity, rolling and replacement cycles, management, security and accessibility.

5 Evidence

Invest in human and institutional capacity to use robust evidence to guide the effective use of digital and AI technologies in education systems, and to continuously adapt and improve how these technologies are implemented.

The education sector, and those working within it on the role of digital and AI technologies, now has access to clearer evidence regarding ‘what works’ and what does not, and, more significantly, how they can be adapted and applied effectively in different contexts. Evidence that a tool works in selected schools is not evidence that it can be delivered nationally with the same quality, so scaling should be staged by evidence-informed decisions to adapt, expand or stop the implementation. Efforts to build evidence should focus on learning outcomes, align with government priorities, be cognizant of political economy and consider cost across the full life of an intervention. Capacity to build and use evidence is strongest when it is structured into government systems for education delivery.

The bigger picture

Enacting these five recommendations and establishing sector-wide standards, with UNICEF’s EdTech for Good Framework 2.0 as a reference point, will help governments, technology providers, multilaterals, teachers, young people, researchers and civil society align around responsible and purposeful use of digital and AI technologies for learning. UNICEF is committed to helping governments take more ownership over all phases of digital and AI transformation in education: from strategy development and the development of clear evaluation criteria to informed and transparent decision-making on procurement and partnerships.

The evidence base on digital and AI-enabled education has been strengthened considerably in recent years through the work of EdTech Hub, UNICEF and others. But there are still significant challenges ensuring that evidence is contextualized, fully grounded in the realities of many lower-resourced education systems and used to inform decisions. One finding is consistent across all contexts where evidence exists: on their own, technologies cannot resolve the systemic challenges faced in education and, if poorly designed or implemented, they will cause damage and deepen existing inequalities. And yet digital technologies can and do contribute to positive change in education when their usage is determined by what will have a cost-effective impact on learning outcomes at scale.

At a time when many children risk falling further behind, the evidence-based use of digital and AI technologies offers a measure of hope. This comes with a clear responsibility for the education community: to ensure that technologies are used in a way that serves education and the common good, widening the possibilities for every child to learn, participate and thrive.



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