POLICY FOCUS

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Artificial Intelligence and Education

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HIGHLIGHT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is here to stay, and schools will have to find a strategy to make the most of it as a tool, but also ensure students can think on their own, rather than depending on a machine to think for them. Moreover, given the importance of AI in the technological and scientific sectors in particular, the United States must improve its STEM education.

INTRODUCTION

A recent report by Microsoft called Artificial Intelligence (AI) "the fastest-spreading technology in human history," noting that within three years, "more than 1.2 billion people have used AI tools, a rate of adoption faster than the internet, the personal computer, or even the smartphone." And with the internet, the personal computer, and the smartphone, AI will touch all aspects of our lives—education included. As AI progresses and begins to affect more and

more of our lives, it is worth considering in depth how education must adapt to this new technological paradigm.

Putting our heads in the sand and ignoring AI in education is not an option: As teachers around the country have found out, cheating has become easier with generative AI, as students are able to outsource their thinking to the machine faster and easier than ever before—but, on a more positive note, making problem sets and giving students individualized assignments and support has also never been faster and easier. While carelessly allowing AI use will hamper students from learning, failing to incorporate it at all will put us behind both educationally and technologically relative to the rest of the world, especially as rival nations like China create AI models like DeepSeek that **outcompete** American models.

Indeed, American education needs to find a sane middle ground when it comes to AI, neither total Luddite rejection nor unflinching, "anything goes" acceptance. A thoughtful approach to AI—knowing when to use it and when to put it aside—will be crucial in educating students to fulfill their best potential and in maintaining and bolstering America's competitive edge in technology and science.

RETURN TO TECH-FREE CLASSROOMS

One of the most obvious concerns with generative AI is that it allows students to prompt the AI to write an essay, and then receive a fully written essay from the machine—without having to do any thinking, writing, or analysis of their own along the way. Moreover, if students know they can cheat on essays more efficiently than has ever been the case, they will have even less incentive to complete the readings they are assigned or to attempt to grasp the content they are supposed to learn. Complicating matters further is the fact that AI detectors often have false positives, so teachers can't rely on them as consistent, reliable indicators of whether or not a student has cheated. Any assignment in which a computer is used, or could have been used—that is to say, essentially any take-home assignment—is necessarily suspect in the age of AI.

Math classrooms are more or less used to this state of affairs. With freely available calculators and advanced problem-solving software having been available to students for years, if not decades, good math classes still force students to learn math without calculators, especially in earlier grades. In part because of this, math classes generally rely on in-class assessments, often weighing them more heavily than homework. Humanities and science classrooms will have to do the same, and evaluate students based on timed, in-class, blue book essays and open-response questions in which cheating via AI is virtually impossible. In short, American schools must return to technology-free classrooms, except in subjects and cases where technology is explicitly required (e.g., technical instruments

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for labs, courses that require the use of spreadsheets, computer science, etc.).

There are good reasons to do this even beyond concerns around academic integrity. As social psychologist and researcher Jonathan Haidt has argued, even in the absence of AI, children's mental health has declined over the past decade or so because of ubiquitous smartphone and technology use, especially in schools. "We were promised [education technology, or EdTech] would revolutionize teaching. It was going to engage students, bring scores up," he said in a **recent interview**. "And what happened? That's exactly when scores started going down. … People saw a big drop and said it was COVID. And yes, there was a drop with COVID—but the decline actually started in 2012. So if kids knew so much less after COVID, it's not because of the virus. It's because all education was on screens … the distraction effects are enormous. They swamp any possible benefit [of screens]. That's the conclusion."

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Unfettered AI use in the classroom can potentially worsen these pre-existing challenges by further distracting students and making them even more dependent on screens than they already are. It can also prevent them from learning from their teachers and peers, instead learning exclusively from a machine that, no matter how accurate, is not a person and will not help them develop the intangible communication skills that come from having to interact with other human beings in a classroom setting. It's telling that Silicon Valley parents, many of whom work in tech themselves, famously are **against** tech in classrooms—perhaps because they understand better than anyone else that, in order to facilitate technological progress as adults, children first need to develop a sense of discipline and become competent in basic academics.

The truth is that banning screens in classrooms is fairly simple. Twenty states **have banned** smartphones and tablets from classrooms for the 2025-2026 academic year, and 16 more have more relaxed or localized smartphone policies, or are mandating smartphone policies be made by a certain date. But political pressure, arising from adult interests and convenience, is often what has gotten in the way, as Ohio State University political scientist Vladimir Kogan argues in "**No Adult Left Behind: How Politics Hijacks Education Policy and Hurts Kids**." "It is adults who ultimately control public school districts through the ballot box," Kogan writes, "and what they want is often quite different than what public school students need."

EdTech companies, for instance, are incentivized to overstate the merits of their product—independent of whether or not the product actually works—so as to meet their bottom lines. But as former teacher Emily Cherkin **writes**, "The simplest, least expensive, most obvious solution would be to simply not have the laptops in the classroom in the first place. But that would mean countering all the marketing and 'research' that EdTech has been feeding

us for the past decade. It would mean that districts and administrators would be forced to admit that they were wrong about the benefits of EdTech." Now that EdTech companies are incorporating AI into their products, there will be additional pressures and corporate lobbying for schools and states to hop onto this latest fad in education—and all the more reason to resist.

Certainly, pen-and-paper assignments come with their own set of difficulties: they are harder to grade, for instance. But if we want students to learn, we will have to ensure they are made to interact with other people and are able to do basic reading, writing, and arithmetic without AI. Only then can they use AI as a tool to augment their thinking, rather than using it as a magic wand to do away with the process of thinking and even socializing altogether.

GOOD USE CASES FOR AI IN THE CLASSROOM

AI is a tool like any other, one that can be used well or used poorly. There are use cases for it in the classroom, especially as far as teachers are concerned. Teachers, for instance, can use AI to create worksheets based on state standards, tailored to their classrooms and their students' needs.

An **Education Week survey** from February 2025 asked teachers how they use AI. "I don't use it daily," said one middle school English teacher in New York, "but one way I've used it is to create grammar sentence practice with AI-created sentences for students to correct." A high school English teacher from Georgia said he or she uses "textual details to create accurate AI images to depict key settings in *The Great Gatsby*." An elementary school teacher from Utah uses it to create math problems, and a middle school science teacher from New York even said he or she used it to make a fun escape room activity for teaching genetics.

In other words, responsible AI use by teachers to differentiate instruction has the potential to tailor education to each individual classroom. It also may allow teachers to tailor schoolwork to individual students or groups of students. For instance, teachers can hand out bespoke worksheets to students who are ahead in class, allowing them to do work more tailored to their needs without getting bored or having nothing to do. Teachers can also hand out bespoke worksheets to students who are behind, allowing them to develop skills and walk through problems. Teachers can also assign students bespoke homework digitally, grading students complete/incomplete (pass/fail) on digital assignments so as to discourage AI cheating, and use AI with students as an after-school tutor so students understand how to use it responsibly and get personalized education out of it.

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The main thread tying these teachers together is that they are using AI to supplement classroom education rather than to replace it. To be clear, teachers are ultimately human and face potential dangers from AI overuse as much as

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their students do. Some teachers in the Education Week survey said they used AI to grade assignments or send letters to parents, which is a different form of academic dishonesty. Students deserve to be graded by humans, just as teachers deserve to grade human work. Likewise, parents deserve to feel confident that their children's work is being evaluated by a human and that they are communicating with the human to whom they entrust their children, as opposed to a chatbot.

What this all shows is that not all uses of AI and technology are created equal. Electronic devices in classrooms and EdTech are often counterproductive—distracting students from their work and drawing them into the screen rather than engaging them with their surroundings, and potentially even separating teachers from some of the most human parts of their jobs. But AI-generated worksheets and activities that can be done manually or with minimal screen use in the classroom can allow for academic possibilities that did not exist in the absence of AI.

STEM EDUCATION

Critics of screen-free classrooms and proponents of liberal use of technology in the classroom—including AI—often raise a fair question: If the world revolves around AI and other technology, aren't we leaving students ill-prepared if we don't teach them how to use technology in the classroom?

Firstly, keeping classrooms free of smartphones and tablets doesn't mean that technology, including AI, can never be used in them—it just means that technology, including AI, should be used judiciously rather than carelessly. Judicious use might involve teaching students how to do calculations via spreadsheets and advanced graphing calculator programs in higher-level math and science courses, for instance, or reserving monitored computer use for computer science courses.

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What limiting technology in the classroom actually means is ensuring that students are equipped with a real base of knowledge they can draw from in order to use technology effectively. No one opposes, for instance, making students do math

with a pencil and paper before using a calculator, even though people regularly use calculators in the real world for tasks like accounting as well as for innovative work in STEM fields. Once someone has learned how to do a certain calculation on a calculator, she can use AI to augment her mathematical work while still having a fundamental understanding of the calculations she is performing.

To that end, actual technological and scientific innovation, all of which involves AI these days—the type that occurs in American biotech and Silicon Valley and that is the envy of the world—is exceedingly difficult to accomplish without a well-prepared base of mathematically and scientifically trained students and a merit-based college admissions system that ensures that we are expending our resources on training the best and the brightest in these fields.

Unfortunately, America is doing a very poor job of this, as the current state of affairs shows. Per the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results released by the Nation's Report Card in 2025, **61 percent of fourth-grade students** and **72 percent of eighth-grade students** are not proficient in math. And these students are not magically growing out of their mathematical illiteracy, either: A recent faculty report at the University of California, San Diego—one of the nation's top public universities—showed that the share of its first-year students who are not able to meet middle school math standards has grown thirty-fold in the past five years. A full one-eighth of UCSD freshmen are unable to do basic math, many not even meeting elementary school standards.

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This points to two major problems. The first is that schools need to do a better job of teaching math. So-called "inquiry-based learning," which has largely replaced memorization, has been a disaster for students' ability to grasp math. To use an **example** of the failures of inquiry-based learning given by the Fordham Institute's Jeanette Luna, "For example, to multiply 12 by 7 in an inquiry-based classroom, some students might add 12 seven times, while others take the sum of 10×7 and 2×7—whereas a student who has memorized their math facts can quickly and confidently recall '84!' without needing to engage in higher-order thinking."

The second has to do with college admissions. UCSD, in line with the entire University of California system, has circumvented bans on affirmative action by going after students from underserved, usually inner-city high schools with racial demographics that the colleges favor. The problem is not picking talented students from difficult backgrounds, but rather that those students are no longer evaluated against standardized testing scores, which have been made optional.

The result is that the university admits students who look good on paper, solely because they get straight As in an inferior high school with high grade inflation. This process is unfair to the students who arrive at college woefully unprepared and who will struggle to graduate. Worse yet, resources

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that could go to deserving students are instead expended on those who are ill-prepared for college—which, over a long enough timeline, distorts the workforce and research and innovation sectors, too, putting us technologically behind rival nations like China, including in the AI race.

State legislatures can mitigate this by mandating that public universities, at a minimum, return to using standardized test scores for cutoffs for applicants. States can also move to ban inquiry-based learning, as they did with balanced literacy in favor of phonics, when it became clear that balanced literacy was leaving students illiterate. Moreover, universities can perform reviews on their practices, as UCSD did, and acknowledge the problem and fix their processes internally, as UCSD seeks to do.

CONCLUSION

As education expert Robert Pondiscio writes for the American Enterprise Institute, being careful about AI in education is "not an argument for technophobia. It's an argument for intellectual vigilance." In the age of AI, the worst thing we could do is allow students to let machines do their thinking for them. That will make us, as a nation, dependent on machines rather than making us competent enough to use machines to the human and national interest.

WHAT YOU CAN DO!

Get Informed:
Learn more about AI and education. Visit:

- The Illusion of Learning: The Danger of Artificial Intelligence for Education
- The EdTech Revolution Has Failed
- Using Tech to Go Tech-Free: Preparing Students for Screen-Free Classrooms

Talk to Your Friends:
Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Tell them about what's going on and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

Become a Leader in the Community:
Start an Independent Women's Network chapter group so you can get together with friends each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

Remain Engaged Politically:
Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

Connect with Independent Women! Follow us on:

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