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It is important that we no longer think of AI as a future technology and what it might do to education. AI is here, and we need to quickly decide how we are going to teach with, and about, it. Knowing that AI is a classroom reality, the primary challenge for educators is to foster intentional AI literacy, teaching the how, when, and why of intelligent agents, while simultaneously fortifying the boundaries against excessive screen time and technological overreliance.

First, it is important to acknowledge that it can be a slippery slope to define what AI is and how often we interact with it on a daily basis, whether intentionally or not. For the purpose of this statement, AI refers to an agent that users intentionally interact with to answer questions or solve problems. While this includes the common major players in the space, such as ChatGPT, Copilot, Gemini, Claude, etc., it also includes many applications that have been built on these platforms and tailored specifically for schools.

In the three and a half years since ChatGPT was released publicly, the education landscape has changed drastically. Initial fears surrounding this new technology centered on how it could and would be used for cheating. While this remains an issue, it is no longer the primary focus of how these technologies are used in education. AI is now used daily by teachers and students in classrooms. Teachers use AI to better understand state content standards, create assignments, rewrite text passages to appropriate reading levels (Riggs, 2025), and develop lesson plans, among many other tasks. Students use AI as a tutor, a writing aid, a brainstorming partner, and more.

It is also important to acknowledge what has not changed. The teacher remains the most important factor in a student's education. A fully qualified teacher with strong pedagogy and content knowledge is the single most important contributor to student success

(Darling-Hammond, 2000; Monk, 1994). The effect of the teacher is magnified year after year. Stacking three highly qualified teachers in succession versus three underqualified teachers resulted in a 50–percentile-point difference in student achievement scores on state exams in Tennessee (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Teachers who consistently push their students to learn more than expected in a year contribute to long-term increases in student earnings (Chetty et al., 2014). When a district or principal creates an environment in which all teachers believe they can overcome any obstacle in a student's education, the teacher effect multiplies to nearly four times normal student growth (Hattie, 2003).

As we grapple with how best to incorporate AI moving forward, it is important not to forget lessons from both distant and recent history. In the 1920s, radio was touted as the "classroom of the air." In the 1950s, educational television was expected to broadcast lessons at scale. In the 1980s, personal computers were supposed to become teaching machines for all students, and in the 1990s, the internet promised to put all information at our fingertips. Each of these innovations was promoted by some as a replacement for teachers. None replaced teachers, largely because teaching is far more than content delivery. As John C. Maxwell stated, "Students don't care what you know until they know that you care." This assertion is not merely an axiom, it is supported by research (Comer, 2001; Marzano & Marzano, 2003; Noddings, 2012).

We must also learn from more recent experiences with technology and the mistakes made with social media and smartphones. When smartphones became relatively affordable and widely adopted, many believed teachers should leverage these powerful computers in students' pockets as learning devices. Smartphones were brought into schools, and students were often encouraged to use them. If this use had remained strictly educational, we might not be seeing the widespread banning of cell phones in schools today. However, these devices also provided access to social media and endless video content. Currently, at least 20 states have some form of smartphone ban (UNESCO, 2024). Research indicates that increased screen time and social media use are associated with decreased cognitive ability and learning among students (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2026; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2025). Conversely, recent research found children who engage in more adventurous play and less screen time demonstrate better mental health outcomes (Hesketh & Dodd, 2026).

With this recent historical lesson in mind, it is important to examine one of the common ways that AI is being used in classrooms that is screen time intensive. AI is being used as an intelligent tutor capable of identifying and helping correct student misconceptions. AI can facilitate this process by providing immediate, personalized feedback (Booth et al., 2024; Zhu, 2024). The advantage to this scenario is that misconceptions can be corrected

allowing the classroom teacher to continue teaching new content built on correct understandings. The disadvantage is the screentime use by students and the teacher not knowing the struggles of the student to help identify areas where teacher intervention will be needed in the future.

One area in which AI excels is the creation of leveled reading materials. AI can adjust vocabulary, sentence structure, and concept density to match a specific reading level. This allows teachers to provide an entire class with reading material focused on the same content rather than locating different texts for each reading group. Teachers can similarly use AI to plan class discussion questions to ensure they are asking questions exploring different depths of knowledge. In special education, AI can serve as an assistive technology, translating text to speech and speech to text as well as assisting students with image recognition.

AI is also used by teachers for tasks that do not directly involve students. For example, AI can translate messages from teachers or schools to parents in commonly spoken languages. Previously, this task was challenging because many translation programs focused on word-for-word translation. AI-generated translations can include greater cultural nuance and clarity, such as explaining educational terms that lack direct translations. Table 1 provides examples of additional AI tools and tasks that can assist teachers, adapted from Mosher et al. (2024).

TABLE 1: Free and Low-Cost Educator Applications

Application Purpose	**Free & Low-Cost Applications With These Capabilities**			
Content Summarizer/Generator	ChatGPT	Midjournery	Microsoft Copilot	CustomGPT
Image Editor/Generator	Lensa	DALL·E 3	OpenArt	Craiyon
Video Editor/Generator	Fliki	Runway	HourOne	Synthesia
Audio Editor/Generator	Podcast AI	Listnr	Coqui	Wellsaid
Writing Editor/Generator	ParagraphAI	Grammarly	HyperWrite	Claude 3
Analyzing Data	DeepMind	AI Notebook	Stability AI	AnswerRocket
Personalized Instruction	PopAi	Sizzle	Flexi	Khanmigo
Assessment Tools	Twee	Quizalize	Almanack.ai	Magic School
Character/Meme Assistants	Character.ai	Super Meme	Artflow.ai	Free AI Assistant
Productivity Assistant	Brain.fm	Otter	NotionAI	Zapier
Presentations/Designs	Canva	Adobe Firely	Microsoft Designer	Gamma

Using AI for these types of tasks may also help reduce teacher burnout and improve work–life balance (Yu, 2024).

In Georgia, there are examples of AI functioning as more than just a tutor for students or an instructional aid for teachers. In 2022, Seckinger High School in Gwinnett County Public Schools opened as the first AI-themed high school, aiming to incorporate AI across all subject areas within an AI-ready framework. Beginning in 2025, Fulton County Schools launched a formal three-year artificial intelligence pathway within its Innovation Academy. The Georgia Professional Standards Commission, which licenses teachers in the state, is also in the development phase of a state recognition for teachers who receive advanced training in the use of artificial intelligence in education. Nationally, Alpha School has taken teaching with AI to the extreme, using AI as the sole 'teacher' of content areas like reading, mathematics, science, and social studies for just two hours a day. This method has not proven to be successful and is leading to increased stress in students who are consequently leaving the school (Hollister, 2025).

AI is not yet ready to address every teaching challenge. For example, choosing the appropriate assessment method has long been a challenge for educators. While multiple-choice tests are easy to grade, they often fail to measure deeper levels of understanding. Conversely, longer-form responses such as essays provide insight into student thinking but require substantial time and effort to evaluate. Using AI to grade essays is a tempting shortcut. García-Varela et al. (2025) found that AI, when used independently, was highly inconsistent in grading essays. However, when provided with detailed rubrics containing examples and decision tables, AI performance approached human grader reliability. At present, without substantial guidance, AI is not a reliable grader.

Grading reliability is only one concern when submitting student work to AI systems. Many AI models are designed to retain user input to improve future versions. As a result, a student's writing, reflections, or academic struggles could theoretically appear in future outputs. Even when names are removed, AI systems may re-identify individuals by linking writing style or contextual details with other datasets. Sharing student work with free AI tools also raises issues around data privacy and may violate FERPA. Additionally, because most AI systems are proprietary, educators and parents often cannot determine how a particular score or critique was generated, raising concerns about accountability.

Another issue with common AI tools is that they are only as good as the data on which they were trained. Consequently, these systems may demonstrate bias against students based on linguistic background or writing style. This bias also affects AI detection tools, which are notoriously inaccurate and produce higher false-positive rates for non-native English writers (Liang et al., 2023).

Sarkar (2025) describes a phenomenon known as AI shaming, which occurs when teachers or peers accuse students of using AI because they believe the student could not have

produced the work independently. A related form of AI anxiety affects students who use AI legitimately but fear false accusations due to unreliable detection tools (Gorbold, 2026).

One strategy for minimizing risks related to data privacy, bias, and AI shaming is the use of district-approved AI tools. One commonly used example is MagicSchool AI. Although MagicSchool AI contracts with multiple AI providers (e.g., OpenAI, Anthropic, Google), it maintains zero–data-retention agreements that prohibit models from storing or learning from user input. Schools and districts can also implement customizable safeguards. This marketplace is expected to grow rapidly.

One remaining barrier to widespread AI adoption in classrooms is teacher professional development. Many professional development efforts fail due to limited time and funding and because they are often one-time experiences. Teachers attend a workshop, learn about a new technology, and are then expected to implement it independently. This model results in an adoption rate of approximately 15%. When professional development is paired with ongoing instructional or technology coaching that is carried into individual classrooms, adoption rates increase to nearly 85% (Lewis & DeSantis, 2024). Implementing this more effective model requires substantial teacher time and additional staffing resources.

Encouragingly, colleges of teacher education are playing a growing role in developing an AI-literate teaching workforce. Many preparation programs rely on the technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge (TPACK) framework, which emphasizes that effective instruction occurs at the intersection of these three domains (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Chiu (2025) expanded this work through the I-TPACK framework, which integrates AI across each domain and emphasizes the ethical evaluation of autonomous AI decision-making. Teacher educators can also draw on the Teacher Educator Technology Competencies (Foulger et al., 2017) to guide the AI preparation of future teachers. As Mishra et. al. (2025) state:

> *It is sometimes easy, when faced with such rapid technological transitions, to feel that teacher education is always playing catch up. This tendency to characterize educators as perpetually behind the curve, however, obscures the fundamental strengths and enduring values that educators bring to these challenges. While technology may evolve at a rapid pace, educators and the educational community bring essential assets to the table: a deep understanding of the importance of caring for and nurturing relationships; the unique ability to transform disciplinary knowledge into accessible forms that open learners' minds to new ways of thinking; a grounding in research and theory coupled with a dedication to evidence-based practice; a commitment to philosophical and ethical principles refined over generations; and*

> *perhaps most importantly, valuing the practical wisdom gained through localized, contextualized experience.*
>
> *These qualities, (…) serve as our north star in navigating not just the current AI revolution but future technological transitions as well.*

Together, these guiding frameworks and characteristics position colleges of teacher education well to produce new teachers with the ability to integrate AI thoughtfully into their practice and guide their students in its effective and ethical use.

One factor hindering a unified approach to AI implementation in education is the lack of a federal office providing guidance. The resulting void is being filled by professional organizations such as the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) and the Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education (SITE), as well as private technology firms with their own agendas.

AI is here, and education must find a way to thread the needle between teaching students how, when, and why to use AI while avoiding excessive screen time and overreliance on technology. As AI becomes more prevalent, the relational role of the teacher may continue to expand, with increased emphasis on developing students' critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills. While the tech world may take an attitude of "move fast and break things", since educators are working with children, they need to take an attitude of "move intentionally and nurture." Looking forward to an AI-rich future, we need to heed the lessons of the past to educate the next generation of students who will become our innovators and leaders for years to come.

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