Phoenix Policy Institute

Artificial Intelligence in the K-12 Classroom

Examining Trust, Motivation, Socialization, and the Future of AI Policy



Katie Carpenter, Maria Cassereau, and Leila Naganna

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Abstract

Generative AI is already part of daily life in K-12 schools, yet policy has been slow to catch up. This memo looks at how that gap affects the people inside schools, with attention to more than cheating. It finds that AI strains the trust among students, teachers, and parents, which can undermine motivation and contribute to teacher burnout. It also finds that heavy reliance on AI may displace the peer interaction students need for social development, although the evidence suggests the effect depends on how the tools are used. State responses are different: most states offer some kind of guidance, and a small number require districts to act. In response to these findings, the memo recommends three policies. Every district should adopt and regularly review an AI policy. Families should receive notice of AI tools, and opt-out, and a clear explanation of the rules in each syllabus. Teachers should keep control of grading, discipline, and feedback, and AI use should be disclosed. These policies give schools shared expectations to rebuild trust around.

****DISCLAIMER:** AI was used to assist with brainstorming and organizing initial ideas for this Policy Memo. The analysis and final content represent the author's original work.

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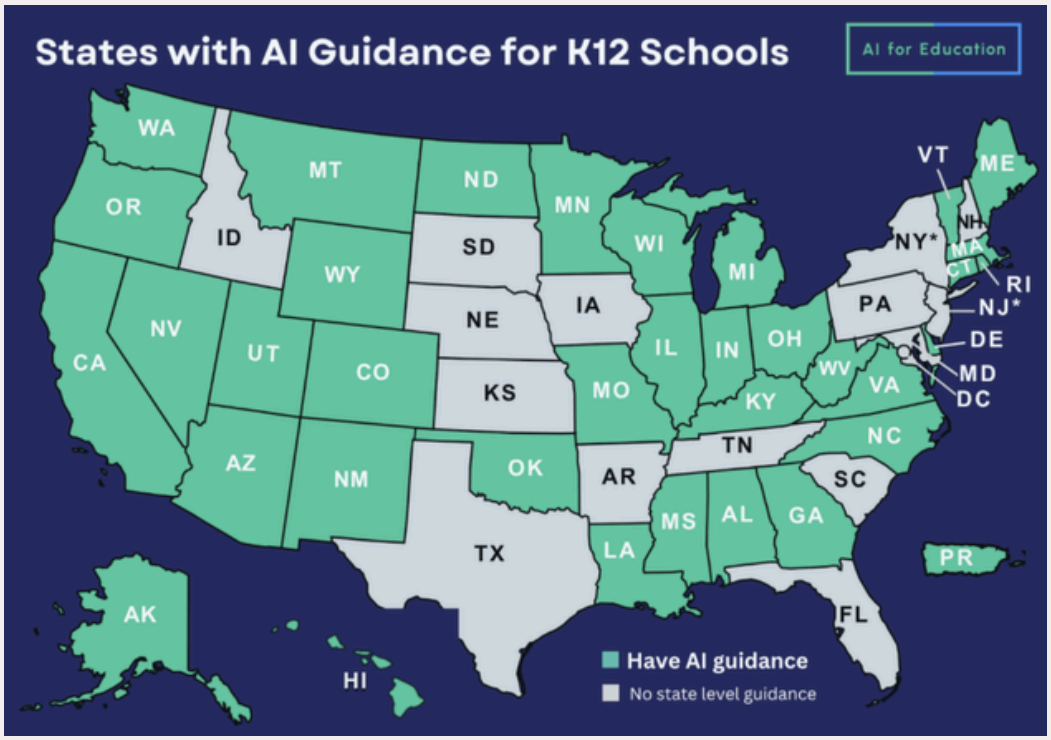
The Changing Classroom

The most important question surrounding Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education is not if students are using it, but how it changes traditional education when they do. More than half of U.S. teens ages 13-17 reported using AI for schoolwork in 2026, according to data collected from the Pew Research Center. As AI grows and becomes increasingly common in the sphere of K-12 education, schools must consider not only how these tools impact academic integrity, but also what they mean for student-teacher trust, motivation, socialization, and the overall educational community.

54%

Of U.S. teens ages 13–17 have used AI chatbots for schoolwork.

Pew Research Center 2026



States with AI Guidance for K12 schools

Have AI regulations
Don't have regulations

Graphic from aiforeducation.io
Last updated August 21st, 2026

The Bigger Picture

When AI is typically discussed with education, to is usually tied with code of conduct violations and cheating. Schools and educators alike must determine when AI-assisted work crosses the line, how students should disclose, and if traditional assignments can still measure student learning. These concerns are important, but they only represent a small part of a much larger conversation. As AI becomes more integrated into the classroom, it can also influence how students engage with learning material, interact with teachers and fellow students, and develop their academic independence. A 2026 review of 22 empirical studies on generative AI in K-12 education identified concerns involving student dependence, social isolation, diminished creativity, and reduced intellectual agency (Tao et al, 2026). The authors argue that responsible AI integration requires attention to the developmental needs of children and adolescents rather than treating AI as just another technological development.



One of the most important issues raised by this shift is what happens to the relationships within the education field. The introduction of AI can alter how students seek assistance, how teachers evaluate student work, and how both groups learn to understand academic integrity. Research examining AI and teacher-student relationships has raised concerns about transparency and trust when students and teachers have different expectations about how AI should be used (Luo, 2024). Instead of simply asking whether students can be trusted to use AI properly, schools also are just as responsible in considering how their own policies can establish an environment in which students and teachers can continue to trust one another.

03

Trust and Relationships

Trust between students and teachers has long been built on a basic assumption: the work a student turns in is theirs. In recent years, the rise of Artificial Intelligence has continuously made this assumption harder to check. When a teacher accepts a student's work, assuming it is 100% authentic, they are ultimately relying on something that cannot be directly verified. Trust is ultimately where the problem of AI in education stems from. Trust is an individual's or group's willingness to be vulnerable to another party, even when that party's behavior is not entirely controlled or predictable (Bormann, 2022). The use of AI creates a negative trickle effect on the education system. When students use AI to complete their work, teachers may question whether they can fully trust a student’s credibility; the problem then extends to parents, who may question whether their child is in a productive learning environment. Without that trust, teachers can no longer assess students in good faith: discussion in the classroom shifts from a place of learning to a place of suspicion.



Student Trust

A 2025 College Board study found that 84% of high school students reported using AI in some capacity for their schoolwork (NMSI, 2026). Banning AI from the school system is unrealistic; it's hard to tell whether students use it benignly, especially when they do schoolwork outside the classroom. For most students, especially in high school, AI has become a convenient resource for brainstorming essay ideas, researching topics, or understanding hard concepts. However, when students take AI a step further by copying and pasting entire articles or problems set into a generative bot, their credibility suffers. This does not mean all students use AI to do their work for them, but the increased availability of these resources has completely changed how students approach their education. As AI becomes a more regular part of students' academic lives, teachers and parents must learn to understand how and why students use it.



Teacher Trust

For teachers, AI has made it increasingly difficult to know whether student work is actually their own. However, it is not just students who continue to use AI; teachers have reported that 61% use AI in some form for their job (Langreo, 2026). By using AI to create lesson plans and assignments and even provide feedback on students' work, teachers can work more efficiently. This raises several questions. Using AI to develop lesson plans is different from using it to give feedback. Do school districts need to have separate guidelines for teachers? The answer is likely yes; a policy should outline which tasks are appropriate for AI. Policy should also require teachers to disclose whether or not they used AI in their work, just like students are expected to disclose on their end. Clear guidelines will maintain trust in teachers, as AI puts that trust at risk.



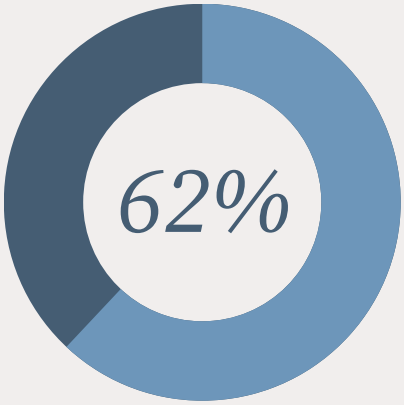
Parent Trust

Parents are mostly in the dark about their child's use of AI; generally speaking, they are not talking to their child about the subject at all. For the most part, parents do not believe their children use AI as much as they do. According to a research study on parents' awareness of AI issues, only about 14% of parents say that they've discussed appropriate AI use with their children (Polikoff, Rapaport, Nathanael, 2025). Furthermore, schools and teachers also communicate poorly about AI use, which creates more confusion and ultimately lowers parents' trust in the public education system. Open communication among schools, teachers, students, and parents is essential to maintaining trust and ensuring AI is used in ways that support educational productivity.



04

Motivation and Optimsim



of students say AI makes thems more confident in thier ability to complete their schoolwork

Pew Research Center 2026

"Education is a deeply social process. Teaching and learning are social, and schools are social" (Stafford-Brizard, 2026). Because learning depends on these relationships, trust is closely tied to motivation. Students are more willing to engage in learning when they believe that their teacher is invested in their futures; teachers are more willing to invest in the future when they believe students are doing honest work. When trust is weakened in education because of the use of AI, ultimately motivation for education also weakens. However, this raises the question: should teachers and students have the same AI policies? Both students and teachers use AI for different purposes. Students are there to learn and ultimately get a good grade, which teachers need because it reflects a student's understanding. Teachers use AI to work more efficiently. Because teachers are losing trust in students due to AI use, it creates a constant power struggle, and that can cause burnout. Student motivation is also at risk. According to a George Mason University study, experts believe that AI can increase motivation by providing instant feedback; however, in the long run, students lose out on a quality education because they don't know how to "learn" (Kelly, 2026). Quick, easy answers may feel rewarding in the moment; however, they skip the struggle that builds critical thinking skills, which can have a negative effect in the long run. As students and teachers become increasingly dependent on AI, their motivation for learning will diminish.

05

Student Integration and Socialization



Students don’t learn solely through individual interaction with a teacher;, peer collaboration, communication, and group problem-solving are also part of the educational experience. Group work is an important part of the educational experience as it allows students to learn not only from completing a task, but also through the process of communication, exchanging perspectives, resolving disagreements, and working together toward a shared outcome. Feng (2025), in his article on group interaction patterns, notes that these interactions contribute to information sharing and team development. The introduction of AI into this environment, creates another source of assistance that can change how students interact during collaborative learning processes.

Student Integration and Socialization



Research examining the risks of AI in K-12 education has raised concerns about its potential effects of AI on students' social and emotional development. In a review of research on generative AI in K-12 education, Tao et al. (2026), identifies concerns including social isolation, emotional disconnection, and dependence on AI. Their review suggests that, as students increasingly rely on AI for assistance, there may be fewer opportunities for some forms of human interaction that contribute to students' psychosocial development. These findings don't necessarily mean that AI inevitably causes social isolation, but rather demonstrate a potential risk that schools should consider as AI becomes more integrated into students' daily experiences.

Feng's research provides an example of how AI can alter group work interactions. In five out of the six studied groups, students interacted more with AI than with their peers when it came to collaborative problem solving. While Feng's study involved university students, Hu et al. (2026) found similar concerns among secondary students (grades 9-12) reporting that AI could reduce the frequency of peer communication during group projects. However, these students also reported that AI could improve communication by generating ideas, clarifying complex information, and helping resolve disagreements. These overall findings suggest that AI is not inherently harmful to collaboration, but that its impact depends on whether it replaces meaningful interactions between students.

06

Possible Policy Solutions

The risks outlined above come from gaps at every level of the education system, so no single policy can close them. This memo recommends three layers of action that work together: the state and district set the rules, schools put them into practice, and teachers and parents support the implementations to maintain a strong learning environment. The steps outlined are listed in highest to lowst priority.

01 **State and district: Require every district to adopt an AI use policy based on a state model.**

State education departments should develop a model AI policy, and every school district should be required to adopt it or a locally written equivalent. Districts should review their policies on a set schedule, such as every year or two, so they keep up with changing technology.

02 **School: Give parents notice and a choice, and make sure students know the rules.**

Schools should notify parents before their child uses any AI tool in class. Families who opt out should be offered a comparable non-AI alternative. The district's AI policy should also be included in every course syllabus, and students should be required to read it.

03 **Teacher and parent: Keep teaching and judgement in human hands and require disclosure of AI use.**

Teachers, not AI, should make decisions about grading, discipline, and other classroom matters, and AI should never replace a teacher. Peer review, editing, and constructive feedback should be done by people. Students and teachers should both disclose when they have used AI.

07

Conclusion

When it comes to AI in education it is important to look into what changes when students and teachers are using it. Banning it is unrealistic, and focusing only on cheating misses most of what is at stake. AI affects the relationships, motivations, and social development that make up the educational community, not just academic integrity.

AI use in education can weaken trust between students, teachers, and parents, potentially reducing student motivation, increasing teacher burnout, and limiting opportunities for independent learning. Research also suggests that AI can both hinder and support students' social interactions. Ultimately, AI's impact depends on whether it complements human relationships and learning or replaces them. That is why it is important to make sure that policies are in place to ensure the effects of AI are positive.

States have begun to respond, but unevenly. As the map in the introduction shows, some states have adopted regulations while other have none. This memo recommends three policies to close that gap. Every district should adopt an AI use policy built from a state model and review It regularly. Schools should notify parents about any AI tool their child will use, offer an opt-out with a non-AI alternative, and build the policy into each syllabus. Humans should stay in charge of grading, discipline, and classroom decisions, with AI used only as a tool and always disclosed. None of these policies will rebuild trust on their won, but they give students, teachers, and parents a shared understanding of what is allowed, which is where trust begins. Schools that act now can help students use AI responsibly while protecting the relationships and independent thinking that education depends on.

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“Technology itself is not transformative. It’s the school, the pedagogy, that is transformative”

-Tanya Brown

