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DESIGNING COHERENT, AI-POWERED SYSTEMS FOR POWERFUL LEARNING

As a longtime educator and leader now working at the intersection of research, practice, and technology, I've seen firsthand how many major reform efforts ultimately succeed or fail based on one thing: coherence. Whether in a classroom, a district, or a broader system, learners thrive when adults share a clear purpose, a common language, and a connected vision of learning.

At Digital Promise Global, our guiding definition of Powerful Learning provides that anchor. Powerful learning fosters agency, purpose, and curiosity through connection to ideas, self, people, and place. Doing this empowers learners with skills that prepare them for the future. As Chief Powerful Learning Officer, my job is to translate that definition into real systems that educators can use and sustain. It must shape how schools design experiences, support educators, choose tools, and define success.

AI makes this moment urgent. Intelligence is becoming more accessible. Information is abundant. Production is easy. But deep, meaningful, transformative learning is not. If AI is everywhere, education must be clear about what it stands for.

The goal is not to make school faster. It is to make it more human. It is to design environments where learners use AI to explore ideas, create new knowledge, and contribute to their communities.



We know some fundamental truths about learning. Understanding matters more than output. Feedback matters more than speed. Relationships matter more than efficiency. [Research](#) has long shown that learners build on prior knowledge, deepen understanding through feedback, and grow in environments that support both cognition and connection.

In an AI-powered world, these truths matter more. When chatbots can generate answers instantly, the work of thinking, questioning, revising, and reflecting becomes even more important.

Motivation also matters. [Learners thrive](#) when they experience autonomy, competence, and connection. These principles align closely with Powerful Learning: agency, growth, and belonging. And development matters. [Learning advances](#) when students are supported just beyond what they can do independently. AI can offer scaffolds in that space, but it cannot replace the relational work of human educators.

So what does a coherent AI-powered learning system look like?

- **Connection:** Learning occurs when learners make connections to ideas, themselves, others, and place. If AI frees time, that time should be reinvested in knowing students more deeply

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- **Curiosity:** Learners explore new ideas and experiences to better understand their world. AI can support exploration, but it should never replace reasoning.
- **Purpose:** Learners have the opportunity to develop an authentic and meaningful contribution. AI can help model solutions and test ideas, but students must still wrestle with complexity and make meaning.
- **Agency:** Learners pursue knowledge through action, choice, and voice. AI acts as a copilot, suggesting possibilities and expanding perspective, but learners remain the decision-makers.

This is where discipline matters. AI [should](#) amplify what we know works: timely feedback, multiple representations of ideas, formative checks for understanding, and strong teacher-student relationships.



It should not become a shortcut around thinking by encouraging writing without reasoning, solving without sense-making, “personalizing” by lowering expectations, or scaling efficiency at the cost of care.

Coherence also extends beyond the classroom. It requires [alignment across systems](#):

- **Instructionally**, educators use AI to deepen inquiry and strengthen responsiveness, not to outsource judgment.
- **Organizationally**, schools design clear norms and guardrails so AI use is transparent, ethical, and centered on learners.
- **At the policy level**, leaders prioritize learning, growth, and innovation over compliance and fear.

At Digital Promise, our work is to connect these levels and to ensure that research, practice, and systems design reinforce one another. We build partnerships, tools, and communities that help leaders turn vision into reality.

To move toward a coherent AI-powered future, systems must make three commitments:

1. **Lead as designers of learning**, not managers of mandates.
2. **Invest in educators** so they can use AI creatively and ethically.
3. **Redefine success** beyond test scores and toward adaptability, contribution, and well-being.

The age of AI gives us a choice. We can chase novelty. Or we can design wisely.

A coherent AI-powered school does not center the technology. It centers Powerful Learning.

When agency, purpose, curiosity, and connection guide our decisions, AI becomes not a disruption, but a catalyst for renewal.

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