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STARTING WITH WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN

Every conversation I have about AI and education brings me back to a question I have been wrestling with for more than a decade: What is school for in a democracy? In my work on assessment and measurement, I have spent years thinking about public trust in institutions, especially schools. I've asked myself: Who decides what counts as learning? Who gets a say in what is measured and why? The answers to these questions involve an element of trust, specifically the belief that leaders at all levels of education genuinely want to help and protect students while improving learning outcomes. Without this trust, our systems lose legitimacy.

That's why when I think about AI in schools, I ask myself another question: What does it mean to be human? For me, it has something to do with love.

I do not mean love as sentiment or a kind of softness. I mean love as an active commitment: a willingness to take responsibility for one another, a decision to design systems that honor human dignity. Love is a verb. It is the steady work of improving conditions so that others can thrive. And this, too, is deeply connected to trust.

If we take that seriously—if we treat love not as a feeling but as a design principle—then we have to ask different questions about technology.

- Not "How can we automate more efficiently?" but "How do we protect the conditions that help humans flourish?"

- Not "What can AI do?" but "What must humans continue to do for one another?"

When love operates as a design principle, coherence follows. Students experience academic rigor alongside genuine belonging. They're supported through transitions by adults who know them, not just systems that track them. They have real choices about their learning, not just the illusion of personalization. Most importantly, they build trusting relationships with adults who see them fully, expect much from them, and believe in them—not just in their test scores or their efficiency, but in their capacity to grow, question, and become.

AI, at its best, can support coherence. It can help educators see patterns across classrooms and schools. It can reduce administrative burdens. It can make certain forms of adaptation easier.

But AI cannot decide what matters. It cannot define our obligations to one another. It cannot hold moral responsibility. And it cannot love.

When we outsource too much interpretive authority to machines, we risk narrowing our understanding of students and flattening their complexity. We risk treating children as problems to be optimized rather than humans to be known. When we design systems that keep humans firmly in the loop—not only as users but as moral stewards—we give technology a chance to serve a shared purpose rather than undermine it.

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This means being clear about what we will not automate. The decision about whether a student is thriving cannot be made by an algorithm, no matter how sophisticated. The moment when a teacher sees a student struggling and reaches out—an automated alert cannot replace that. The conversation where a young person questions what they're learning and why—that cannot be outsourced to a chatbot, no matter how responsive.

Coherent systems begin with a shared purpose—but "shared" is the operative word. Who gets to define what kind of people we're trying to develop? In my work with school districts, I've learned that when communities co-design their vision for students—when educators, families, and students themselves have real voices in setting priorities—the resulting commitments are often more rigorous, not less. They define problems clearly before reaching for tools. They use AI selectively, in service of aims they've set together. They center relationships, not just efficiency. They prioritize excellence over speed. They

are transparent about how student data is used, who has access to it, and why. Most importantly, they treat students not as subjects of technology but as people who deserve to understand how these tools shape their learning—and who deserve real choices about how to use them.

And yet, I still find myself uneasy.

I see the potential in these technologies. I use them myself. But I also know from decades of research what matters most for learning: a trusted adult who believes in a young person and communicates that belief consistently. These relationships are grounded in high expectations and care. If we move too quickly toward automation without protecting that core, we risk eroding the very conditions that make learning possible.

I also worry about the future we are implicitly designing. Not long ago, we told students that coding was a guaranteed path to stability. Today, many of those same students face a shifting labor market shaped in part by the very technologies we encouraged them to master. When I talk with young people, I hear confusion and anxiety about what will endure and how they should think about carving their own paths in the world.

One student I talked to put it plainly: “AI can’t work on a farm, so maybe that is what I should be doing… But what if there was something I wanted to do, and now AI does it? Or what if the things AI is not doing are not things I was looking forward to doing?”

We need to give this student much more than a bunch of new AI tools and platforms. We need to give them a reason to trust. Trust that adults are thinking carefully about the world students are entering. Trust that schools are not chasing trends without reflection. Trust that the humans in their lives—their teachers, their principals, their families—will remain the ones who know them, believe in them, and hold themselves accountable for their growth. They must trust that we are committed to building a society where young people can contribute and find meaning and purpose.

If we begin with love as an active commitment to one another and trust as the foundation of our institutions, then we will have firm ground to stand on in this changing world. From there, technology becomes a tool in the service of human flourishing, not a force that defines it.

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Here are the questions I'm sitting with: Are we designing AI systems that help students become more fully human—more creative, more critical, more connected to one another? Or are we automating the very relationships that make learning possible? And crucially: Who gets to decide?

These are not questions we can answer alone. They require all of us—educators, families, students, policymakers, and technologists—to sit down together and ask what we owe to one another. That's the work ahead. And it starts with love.