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STRATEGIC AI INTEGRATION: KEEPING HUMANS AT THE CENTER

THE WRONG CONVERSATION

As the Age of AI sweeps through education, we’re at risk of repeating a familiar mistake: asking how to fit a powerful new tool into an outdated system. Much of the current discourse imagines students spending hours each day with personal AI tutors, quietly removing human connection from the learning experience. That’s the wrong frame.

AI isn’t ruining education; it’s exposing what’s already broken. We don’t need AI to make lecture-based, siloed, content-heavy schooling more efficient. We need AI to help us finally break free from factory-model education entirely.

WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW

Over the past several years at the [Reinvention Lab](#), I’ve worked alongside educators to build something different: learning environments where students work on real problems that matter to their communities, where educators act as designers and advisors, and where learning extends beyond the four walls.

We know that innovative learning happens when we shift:

- **Why students learn:** From “getting good grades” to “making a difference and finding purpose.”

- **What they learn:** From “lots of content, shallowly” to “less content, deeper” with skills that AI tools like ChatGPT cannot easily replicate.
- **Where they learn:** From “four walls, 8-3” to “everywhere, anytime.”
- **How they learn:** From “teachers as knowledge holders” to “teachers as guides; students as drivers.”
- **With whom they learn:** From “one teacher per class” to “abundant ecosystems of caring adults and peers.”

None of this is new. What’s new is that we finally have tools that can remove some of the structural barriers that kept this vision out of reach.



THE FUTURESOCK SIGNAL

Over the last few years, through an initiative called [FutureShock](#), we tested what happens when AI is used strategically (i.e., not continuously, and not as a substitute for educators) as a catalyst for learner-centered design. FutureShock is a short, intensive learning sprint where young people use AI in a limited window to surface interests, explore possibilities, and design authentic projects. AI is present at the beginning for a few hours to help learners connect ideas and identify pathways, and then intentionally steps back.

What we learned was simple but powerful: AI worked best when it stepped back. Educators became guides. Students took ownership. The technology accelerated early-stage design, but the sustained learning came from human relationships, collaboration, and reflection.

That is the opportunity AI presents: not replacing human connection, but making space for more of it.

THE VISION: STRATEGIC AI, NOT TOTAL AI

If we accept that the goal is learner-centered education, not just more efficient traditional schooling, then our approach to AI must be surgical, not comprehensive.

What AI Should Do:

- Rapidly connect student interests to authentic project possibilities
- Provide targeted support when students hit specific skill gaps
- Enable competency-based assessment that captures holistic development
- Free educators from administrative burden

What AI Should Not Do:

- Replace human relationships as the foundation of learning
- Become the primary mode of instruction
- Operate continuously rather than strategically
- Remove youth voice and agency from the learning experience

Strategic AI integration means knowing when to use the tool and when not to. This isn't about maximizing AI usage. It's about deploying it at strategic points in time to unlock what decades of learner-centered innovators have been trying to build.



THE LEADERS THIS MOMENT REQUIRES

Teach For America’s responsibility at this moment is not to champion technology for its own sake. It is to prepare and support educators who can lead this shift wisely.

In the age of AI, this means **cultivating leaders who:**

- Treat AI as a tool in service of learner-centered design, not as the destination
- Center youth voice, agency, and co-creation
- Protect belonging and human connection
- Are willing to rethink long-standing assumptions about time, space, and staffing roles

It also means **preparing educators who can:**

- Design learning experiences where AI plays a strategic, limited role
- Act as guides and facilitators, not just content deliverers
- Build abundant ecosystems of adults around learners
- Exercise judgment about when technology helps and when it distracts

In this model, educators spend less time delivering content and more time designing experiences, mentoring students, and building partnerships. That requires preparation models that value creativity, facilitation, and relational expertise, not just coverage and compliance.

And it requires systems brave enough to give educators autonomy to experiment, and to measure success not only by test scores, but also by student growth, contribution, and well-being.

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THE “FOR ALL” IMPERATIVE

There is one risk we cannot ignore: that AI-enhanced learner-centered education becomes a boutique experience, available only to students with privilege, access, or proximity to innovation. Without intentional design, AI will widen gaps. But with intentional design, it can help close them. The question is not whether AI can help transform learning. The question is who that transformation is for and who builds it.

If we believe in agency, purpose, curiosity, and connection, then those experiences cannot be reserved for the few. Strategic AI integration must expand opportunity, not stratify it.

THE CHOICE BEFORE US

We can repeat the same tired edtech cycle, layering new tools onto outdated structures. Or we can use this moment to move decisively toward learner-centered education by deploying AI strategically, keeping humans at the center, and ensuring that transformative learning is not the exception, but the norm. AI does not define the future of learning. Our design choices do.