



REIMAGINING LEARNING FOR THE AGE OF AI

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CRPE
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ASU Mary Lou Fulton College for
Teaching and Learning Innovation
Arizona State University

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REIMAGINING LEARNING FOR THE AGE OF AI

MADDY SIMS, CRPE

The Center on Reinventing Public Education's inaugural cohort of [Think Forward Fellows](#) work in classrooms, research organizations, ed tech companies, and school- and system-facing partner organizations. They wrote the vision statements in this compendium to explore a central question: **Will AI reinforce existing models of schooling, or will it help us build learning environments that center purpose, relationships, and real-world contributions?** We invite you to read these statements as provocations that name what matters, surface tradeoffs, and offer a north star for leaders who must decide how to use AI in the service of genuine learning.

Conversations about AI often center on details like tools and workflows rather than major concerns like ends and purpose. That makes it easy to treat AI as a feature set to be adopted, tweaked, and scaled instead of an accelerant for deeper systems change. These vision statements push back. They provoke the field to ask different questions: What should schooling protect when intelligence becomes ubiquitous? What are the skills that only humans can have, and how should schooling develop them? How do we measure success when speed and output are no longer sufficient proxies for learning?

As a collection, these statements...

- 1. Surface tradeoffs.** Fellows name concrete tradeoffs: efficiency versus purposeful learning, automation versus relationship, novelty versus coherence. By making these tradeoffs explicit, our authors help leaders make informed decisions.
- 2. Recenter values.** Across authors, you will see recurring commitments to strong foundational knowledge, teacher judgment, public purpose, equity, and the centrality of human relationships. These are not technical constraints; they are design principles for systems that last.
- 3. Model intent.** At a time of rapid change, a clear north star helps systems decide what to pilot, what to regulate, and what to shelve. These statements show how leaders might translate values into actionable priorities.

PATTERNS WORTH NOTING AND AN INVITATION

These statements shift the conversation from tools and workflows to purpose and design. Rather than treating AI as something to adopt and scale, they ask what kinds of learning experiences we want to create and what role AI should play in supporting them.

Across the collection, several themes emerge. Fellows consistently position AI as a tool to amplify, not replace, human relationships and judgment. They emphasize the importance of coherence across classroom practice, system design, and policy. They underscore equity, purpose, and strong learning experiences as essential and intentional design choices, not afterthoughts. CRPE's white paper, [Think Forward: Building a Coherent Approach to AI in Education](#), further explores each of these ideas through its guiding principles for future-ready schooling.

We invite you to read these statements as provocations, not prescriptions. We hope they help clarify what matters most and inspire you to develop a vision for how AI can support meaningful learning in your particular context. If you do, we encourage you to share your reflections with CRPE. We would welcome the opportunity to learn from your work.

The stakes are high, and the pace of technological change is fast, but the systems that shape children's lives adapt slowly. Vision matters because it frees leaders to act with clarity. These fellows each modeled one way forward. We hope this compendium helps you name yours.



DACIA TOLL

CO-CEO, COURSEMOJO

“...young people will not succeed by out-computing computers. They will succeed by combining strong knowledge, distinctly human skills, and the ability to use AI to amplify their own effectiveness and well-being.”

EXPONENTIAL HUMAN PURPOSE: A MODEL FOR THE FUTURE OF AI IN EDUCATION

For 27 years, I have been a teacher, principal, school system leader, parent, and now EdTech founder. At my own dinner table and in schools across the country, I am being asked an increasingly urgent question: How do we best prepare young people for an AI-powered future?

Being deep in the weeds of teaching and learning—first without AI and now with AI—has shaped several strong, early beliefs.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE NEED, IN PLAIN TERMS

While there is much that is still uncertain about our AI-powered future, we do know young people will not succeed by out-computing computers. They will succeed by combining strong knowledge, distinctly human skills, and the ability to use AI to amplify their own effectiveness and well-being.

First, **knowledge still matters**. The cognitive science is clear: new knowledge can only be retained when the brain has a prior foundation; information that has nothing to anchor to doesn't stick. Students still need foundational knowledge in literacy, mathematics, science, history, and the arts, or they will struggle to connect and extend their learning, evaluate AI-generated content, ask the right questions, and serve as informed citizens. In addition to broad background knowledge, **students should also**



develop deep expertise in at least one genuine interest. Those who combine specialized knowledge with the power of AI will find their niche and use AI to accelerate their learning and opportunities.

Second, **the brain requires productive struggle to learn.** We must focus on the new content, grapple with our confusion, forget and retrieve information to strengthen memory, and practice skills to the point of fluency. One of the greatest risks of AI is the frictionless shortcut it offers. It's incumbent on educators to ensure that learning experiences, even with AI, require the cognitive struggle for deep learning.

Third, **distinctively human skills will matter more than ever.** As machines take on more tasks, human value increasingly lies in judgment, creativity, leadership, collaboration, entrepreneurship, and the ability to act when values and technology collide. Schools must now treat developing these strengths as essential as academic competencies.

Fourth, **young people must learn to leverage both AI and one another to maximize effectiveness and fulfillment.** AI literacy alone is not enough. Students should be using AI to explore ideas, complete tasks, and create new products, designs, and even companies. While some of this work should be independent, much of this learning should be communal, fueled by shared ideas, collective effort, and real-world application. The goal is not only productivity, but also agency, purpose, and connection.

ONE POSSIBLE MODEL, WITH CHOICE BUILT IN

There are many ways to design learning environments that develop knowledge and critical thinking, human connection and skills, and thoughtful AI use. We don't need a single model of schooling, but rather multiple models allowing for student and family choice. What matters is coherence, not uniformity. What follows is one illustration of what a coherent high school model could look like

THE SHARED CORE: BUILDING KNOWLEDGE AND MASTERY

After a morning advisory period with goal setting and reflection, students begin their **Mastery Block**, where they deepen their competence in core subjects: math, literacy, history, science, and the arts. AI curates learning experiences in each student's "learning zone"—challenging but within reach if they put in the productive struggle. Rather than the typical silent, solo learning experience that many AI school designs emphasize, students often work together in small study groups, and teachers circulate, offer targeted feedback, deliver mini-lessons, and provide encouragement. AI makes progress visible to students, teachers, and parents.

Next, all students participate in a **Socratic Seminar** that integrates humanities, science, and ethical reasoning. Students complete reading, AI-supported analysis, and other preparation for homework (yes, reading and homework still matter!). They arrive prepared to debate the ethics of gene editing, analyze leadership choices in a historical case study, or design public policy based on available data. AI supports the analysis of primary sources, but discussion, interpretation, and judgment remain human. Seminar topics are intentionally sequenced to ensure students build broad knowledge over time.



TWO AFTERNOON PATHWAYS: CONNECTING LEARNING TO LIFE

In the afternoon, students spend most of the year in the Project Studio with a three-month “expedition” to practice learning in the real world.

The **Project Studio** requires students to apply knowledge through collaborative, interdisciplinary projects. Topics are intentionally curated to build essential skills and often require the use of a variety of AI tools to produce top-notch products. After the first year, students may propose their own projects with mentor approval. At any given time, more than a dozen projects are underway in the Studio, each supported by a human mentor and an AI coach.

Projects range from designing and undertaking science experiments to launching software products, to researching and producing podcasts, to writing and performing original plays. The projects require creativity, analysis, design, collaboration, and experimentation. Peers collaborate and critique one another’s work. Mentors challenge students to clarify their thinking and defend their choices. AI acts as a design partner, helping simulate outcomes, create prototypes, and accelerate iteration. Projects culminate in public exhibitions with authentic accountability and purpose.

Starting in sophomore year, students spend three months in an **Expedition**, which is either an apprenticeship, internship, or service learning experience aligned to an area of personal interest. The school system develops relationships with local businesses, government entities, hospitals, and nonprofit organizations so that one-third of students can be “in the field” at any given time.

AI coordinates schedules, captures learning and artifacts, supports reflection, and curates a student-specific portfolio. Human mentors onsite and at school provide support, coaching, and accountability. Relevance fuels motivation. Geometry matters when applied to building design. Writing matters when it influences, inspires, or entertains. Engineering comes to life in manufacturing plants, technology firms, and small businesses.

WHY THIS MATTERS

As parents and educators, we are urgently called to prepare students to thrive in and shape their AI-powered future. While imperfect, this school model points toward learning spaces where students master core knowledge, develop advanced human skills, experience real-world relevance, and find meaning in their growth and community.



CAMERON WHITE

SENIOR PARTNER,
NEWSCHOOLS VENTURE
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“There’s plenty of innovation in ed tech, but not enough focus on quality, coherence, and the students who are furthest from opportunity.”

QUALITY OVER QUANTITY: BUILDING COHERENT AI FOR READING AND MATH

When it comes to AI use in the classroom, we don’t need more tools. We need better ones. There’s plenty of innovation in ed tech, but not enough focus on quality, coherence, and the students who are furthest from opportunity.

As an early-stage investor, I see both the promise and the risk of this moment. Despite the immense number of tools flooding the market, few of them align with evidence on what works for learners. Even fewer are designed for the realities of schools serving low-income communities. This is clearly a pivotal moment, and smart investment can help turn the tide.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EVIDENCE

In 2024, K-12 schools spent [roughly \\$30 billion](#) on ed tech. By 2033, that dollar amount is expected to double. Yet [only one in five](#) of the top 150 most-used classroom tools have rigorous evidence aligned with ESSA Tier I-III standards that they positively impact students.

That reality is colliding with an urgency around learning acceleration. A [recent Economist piece](#) points to declining test scores alongside the rise of classroom computer use, suggesting technology may be part of the problem. More nuanced analyses, like [Nik Bear Brown’s response](#) (which is worth reading in full), clarify what the research actually shows and what educators



know from direct experience: the impact of ed tech varies dramatically depending on the skills targeted and the quality of implementation.

For example, a [2024 meta-analysis](#) found positive effects for digital learning tools across every literacy domain, in some cases with especially strong benefits for students from low-income backgrounds. At

the same time, we know that higher-poverty schools are more likely to use technology too frequently and for low-level tasks, contributing to weaker academic outcomes.

Ed tech has not failed, but its designers and implementers may have. As Brown argues, we are deploying the “wrong technology, in the wrong amounts, in the wrong ways.” Meanwhile, approaches with strong evidence remain stuck at 20% market share.

MOVING BEYOND THE HYPE

If we are serious about learning acceleration, particularly in foundational reading and math, the central challenge is aligning the promise of AI-based innovation with the needs of diverse student communities and the school systems that serve them.

Supplemental tools, such as formative assessment platforms, tutoring supports, and instructional planning aids, are often treated as add-ons rather than central levers for improvement. In practice, however, these tools can be powerful entry points for evidence-based innovation in classrooms. When well designed and aligned to high-quality instructional materials, they help educators translate strong curricula into daily practice. For example, they can provide real-time insight into student understanding, generate targeted practice, scaffold differentiation for multilingual learners or students with disabilities, and free up teacher time for feedback and relationship-building. Compared with large-scale curriculum overhauls, supplemental tools are relatively low-cost to implement and pilot, and under the right conditions, they can positively impact student growth.



But there is a [5% problem](#). Implementation makes or breaks a solution’s potential for impact. Too often, promising solutions falter not because the idea is flawed, but because schools lack the time, training, or leadership focus to use them well. That said, there are early bright spots. In some districts, specific tools have been tightly matched to clearly defined needs, such as improving early literacy or strengthening Algebra readiness. In those cases, leaders made expectations explicit, invested in training and coaching, and monitored use over time. Teachers understood what success looked like and had practical support to get there.

“Implementation makes or breaks a solution’s potential for impact.”

Some of these tools require as little as 30 minutes per week of structured use and have been associated with measurable gains in reading and math growth. These results are most likely when expectations are clear from the start, schools receive ongoing support, and vendors share responsibility for outcomes. Approaches such as [outcomes-based contracting](#), where payment is tied in part to agreed-upon results, can help create shared accountability and keep the focus on student growth.

When supplemental solutions are introduced without clear alignment to district goals and classroom practice, they can fragment attention and dilute impact. When they are tightly integrated within a larger instructional strategy, they can become not just “nice to have,” but reliable ways to make a measurable, scalable impact.

THE ROLE OF EARLY-STAGE INVESTMENT

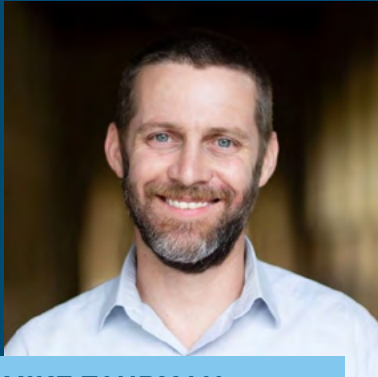
This is where I see our lane as early-stage investors. We sit close to a wide range of emerging ideas — before they are proven and before they reach scale. That vantage point gives us both opportunity and responsibility.

- Shining a light on high-potential, evidence-aligned approaches.
- Supporting context-specific research that improves products and validates potential impact.
- Encouraging co-design from day one — particularly in schools serving low-income communities.

The goal is not to invent entirely new theories of change. In foundational reading and math, we already know a lot about what works. The challenge is realizing this potential. Experience shows that early-stage innovators who are close to communities and school systems are well-positioned to identify and go deep on solving specific instructional challenges. These targeted solutions are more effective than those that are “one-size-fits-all.” Traditional investors also overlook them, so early-stage risk capital is necessary to support these new ideas as innovators build their evidence base and find product-market fit.

If we succeed as investors focused on impact and equity, we should see more high-quality solutions enter the market, out-competing (or in some cases, partnering with) existing products and maintaining results as they scale. Speed and flashy marketing may win in the short term, but quality and results will win in the long term. To meet this moment, school systems must let go of low-quality student distractions in favor of evidence-aligned solutions that truly advance reading and math growth, particularly for students who have been furthest from opportunity.





MIKE TAUBMAN

TEACHER, PROGRAM
DIRECTOR & AI
INNOVATION LEAD

“I think of students’ reactions as lighthouses, showing us how to navigate this foggy AI-in-education moment.”

AN AI DRIVER’S LICENSE FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

Tiana: AI has been helpful in checking my school work after I’ve already done it on my own. It’s become a consistent routine, and it allows me to improve from my work, but only because I tried it on my own the first time.

Mehki: Outside of this class, I use AI to constitute ideas on something I’m not particularly knowledgeable on, then I re-fabricate those through my own thought process, in my own way.

Blessing: AI helps me understand topics better. I use it to explore interests, get advice. It’s changed my day-to-day routine by making me more active and curious. I feel more motivated and willing to learn something new every day.

Those are quotes from high school seniors I teach in the purpose development and career exploration program I run at Uncommon Schools. They’ve been using custom AI tools regularly, engaging with AI using an “AI Driver’s License” framework I designed.

I think of students’ reactions as lighthouses, showing us how to navigate this foggy AI-in-education moment. Their insights both guide us forward and warn us where the risks lie.

To develop successful AI learning models, we must, above all, center student experiences. Students might share those experiences with

us directly, but in some cases, we can make inferences from their work, their outcomes, and the broader research done about them. However, when we encounter students' perspectives, it is critical that we pay attention to them. As Aniya said, "Adults need to value the input of kids more because we were all kids once, and our voice deserves to be heard."

While some of these experiences and perspectives will be positive beacons, some of them will undoubtedly be warnings. In the words of my students:

Miskul: Adults don't understand that people use AI since they are lonely. They don't have anyone to talk to and feel alone, both in the real world and online, so they try to gain some connection through AI.

Alayah: I'm lowkey scared because we are the new adults and we have to make sure we all don't fail as a community

Destinee: I feel nervous because the world is moving fast. It's important to know how to use AI wisely and how to think for ourselves.

To me, these quotes suggest that sometimes educators need to act as the lighthouse themselves and guide students to use AI "wisely," which requires intentionally weaving AI into education. These concerns voiced by my students also suggest that we need to ensure AI is not omnipresent in students' lives. They want to be able to think for themselves, and they want to feel that they aren't always alone with a screen. They're craving community, and they want to believe that the communities they create can succeed.

With students in mind, and after 21 years of teaching, leading, and innovating at Uncommon Schools, I've been building one learning model for this era. My program runs in loops to help students realize life-building is not linear. Each three-week loop includes a series of checkpoints. They need to reflect on their emerging sense of purpose, engage with moral philosophy, research a career, contact professionals in that field on LinkedIn to set up informational calls, explore how to use that career to solve problems that are important to them, and finally, leverage the design thinking process to undertake a long-term project that synthesizes all the previous steps. Throughout, they collaborate with peers and use AI regularly for support. At the end of each loop, students share their projects in a showcase.

After nine loops, in the fourth quarter of the year, we shift to capstone presentations. Each student presents their journey with peers, family, teachers, and mentors: where they've been, where they're going, and how they'll get there. These presentations are often emotional turning points as students publicly claim their purpose and their community pledges support.

I was inspired to create this program in part by Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine's work on [the concept of deeper learning](#), which argues that students learn best at the intersection of mastery, identity, and creativity. I launched my program in the fall of 2020, starting the year entirely online, but even in that setting, students immediately showed me the power of this new approach. Elijah, a student in the inaugural cohort, worked for months with a journalist mentor on a piece about the college admissions process, which was eventually [published in *The New York Times*](#). Elijah later studied English and journalism at Morehouse College and, after graduating this past spring, was accepted into a fully-funded graduate journalism program at NYU.

Elijah and hundreds of other students have pushed my thinking on the program's design as I work to make sure it evolves to meet the needs of the moment. AI is now infused into the program as both a tool and a topic: a tool students use to support their projects and a topic they explore in class discussions.





That tool-topic tension is central to the “AI Driver’s License” framework we use to engage with AI. The framework has four parts:

1. **Choose a Destination:** Reflect on personal, academic, or career goals before using AI.
2. **Learn to Drive:** Master practical AI tools while pursuing authentic goals.
3. **Open the Hood:** Understand how AI systems work and their limitations.
4. **Reflect on Rules of the Road:** Grapple with the big questions AI raises, in your life and our society. Know when to turn AI off and think on your own two feet.

Students cycle through various parts of that framework as they move through each loop of the program. The goal is to help students see AI, as Victoria put it, as “my assistant.”

The following design principles have guided my development of the program and offer an approach others might adapt:

- Purpose comes first and remains the north star throughout.
- Structured, regular reflection catalyzes students’ growth and agency.
- In-person community creates accountability and, more importantly, connection.

“Know when to turn AI off and think on your own two feet.”

- The analog should be the context for the digital, not the other way around.
- Students learn from each other, teachers, AI, and professional experts.
- Real-life experiences matter most; real-world problems should guide those experiences.
- AI should be essential but not the point. AI is the car; students are the drivers.

Many of those principles are already present in schools, but they are often scattered. They are more powerful when woven together into a coherent whole.

Programming that integrates those principles makes students more connected, more confident about college and careers, and more clear-eyed about the AI age ahead.

***“AI is the car;
students are the
drivers.”***

Or, as Tiana put it:

“I’m nervous for the world I’m graduating into, but I do feel prepared.”





ILA DESHMUKH TOWERY

PARTNER,
EDUCATION FIRST

“When I think about AI in schools, I ask myself another question: What does it mean to be human?”

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.

“We risk treating children as problems to be optimized rather than humans to be known.”

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.

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.

“Technology becomes a tool in the service of human flourishing, not a force that defines it.”





D'ANDRE WEAVER, PHD

VICE PRESIDENT &
CHIEF POWERFUL
LEARNING OFFICER,
DIGITAL PROMISE

“AI makes this moment urgent...Information is abundant. Production is easy. But deep, meaningful, transformative learning is not.”

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

“When chatbots can generate answers instantly, the work of thinking, questioning, revising, and reflecting becomes even more important.”

- **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.

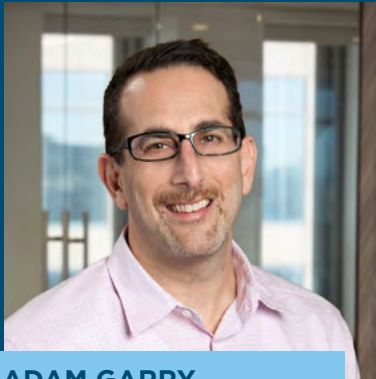
The age of AI gives us a choice. We can chase novelty. Or we can design wisely.

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.

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





ADAM GARRY

PRESIDENT,
STRATEGICEDU
CONSULTING

“[AI] should enhance what humans do best, not attempt to replace it.”

AI IN EDUCATION: A SUPPORT, NOT A SUBSTITUTE

My view of AI in education is straightforward: it should enhance what humans do best, not attempt to replace it. Done well, it can deepen teaching and learning, making them more relational and more adaptive, not more mechanical or detached.

I didn't arrive at that belief through theory. I arrived at it through experience, in my own classroom and leading professional development.

When I was a teacher, I was never the stand-and-deliver type. I didn't lecture from the front of the room. I saw my role as a facilitator. My job was to design experiences, ask better questions, and help students wrestle with ideas. But the system around me didn't always make it easy. Too often, teaching felt like delivering content on a schedule, regardless of whether students were ready for it or connected to it.

That tension is what shapes how I think about AI today.

My vision is rooted in three experiences that changed how I see school.

The first is **backward design**. I spent years helping educators think about starting with the end in mind. If we say we want students to be critical thinkers, collaborators, adaptive communicators, what does that actually look like? What would they produce? What performance would demonstrate mastery? For me, learning has always culminated in performance-based assessment. Not just a



test, but something authentic like a presentation, a design, a solution, or a product.

The challenge has always been practical. Designing meaningful performance tasks is hard. Assessing them consistently is even harder. Teachers are already stretched thin. This is where AI becomes interesting, not as a driver of instruction, but as a support. AI can help generate ideas for authentic assessments. It can assist in analyzing patterns in student work. It can help flag where a student may need more feedback. It doesn't replace professional judgment, but it can lighten the cognitive load that often prevents teachers from doing deeper work

The second experience came from writing a book on **personalized learning**. I'll admit, I wrote it out of frustration. I watched the tech community redefine "personalized learning" as students sitting alone in front of screens, consuming content at their own pace. That was never what I meant by personalization.

For me, personalization is about voice and choice. It's about giving students meaningful input into how they learn and how they demonstrate what they know. It doesn't mean total freedom all the time. It means thoughtful opportunities for agency when it makes sense. It means asking students what matters to them and designing learning that connects.

AI has the potential to either undermine that vision or strengthen it. If we use it to simply serve up more content faster, we've missed the point. But if we use it to free teachers from repetitive administrative tasks, to surface insights about student interests, or to help students reflect more deeply on their work, then it becomes a partner in personalization rather than a replacement for it.

The third influence on my thinking comes from my roots in **comprehensive school reform**. I've seen reform efforts succeed, and I've seen them fail. The difference is rarely the model itself. It's the people. When a district is handed a solution and told, "Implement this," it almost always falls apart. When educators are brought into the process, supported, and held accountable in thoughtful ways, change is possible.

About ten years ago, I had the opportunity to put these ideas into practice. I worked with a district in Georgia that wanted to scale personalized learning. I helped them build a personalized learning platform from scratch as a proof of concept. We integrated backward design tools, performance-based assessments, and e-portfolios into one coherent system. Teachers could design with the end in mind. Students could document their growth over time. It wasn't perfect, but it worked. And it taught me something critical: technology can support transformation, but it cannot create it on its own. Adoption only happened with the user input and the right professional development.

"Technology can support transformation, but it cannot create it on its own."



I often think about that platform and imagine what it could have been with today's AI capabilities built in. AI could have helped teachers generate high-quality performance tasks aligned to standards. It could have provided faster formative feedback. It could have helped analyze student portfolios at scale, identifying strengths and gaps without reducing learning to a single score.

But the core wouldn't change. Teachers would still be facilitators. Students would still do the thinking. The technology would simply make the orchestration more manageable.

If we are serious about transformation, we also have to confront the "grammar of school," including age-based cohorts, rigid schedules, and seat-time

requirements. Those structures were built for efficiency in a different era. If we want students progressing based on mastery, engaging in internships, and designing solutions to real-world problems, we need systems flexible enough to support that.

AI can help coordinate that complexity. It can track competencies across experiences. It can connect students to opportunities aligned with their interests. It can surface patterns leaders might otherwise miss. But again, it is infrastructure, not identity.

The goal is not to digitize the old system. It is to design something better, a system where teachers spend more time mentoring and less time grading spreadsheets, students exercise real agency, assessment reflects meaningful work, and technology amplifies human strengths rather than eroding them.

AI will not transform education on its own. People will. But if we use it wisely as augmentation and not automation, it can help us build schools that are more coherent, more humane, and more aligned with what we say we value most: deep learning and human growth.





SCOTT BESS

PRESIDENT & CEO,
INDIANA CHARTER
INNOVATION CENTER

“Students move forward once they demonstrate mastery, whether that happens in a traditional class, an internship, or an online module.”

DESIGNING HIGH SCHOOLS FOR MASTERY, NOT MINUTES

AI offers a transformative alternative to the familiar structure of high school, one that enables personalized mastery of essential skills, individualized career readiness, and learning that extends far beyond classroom walls.

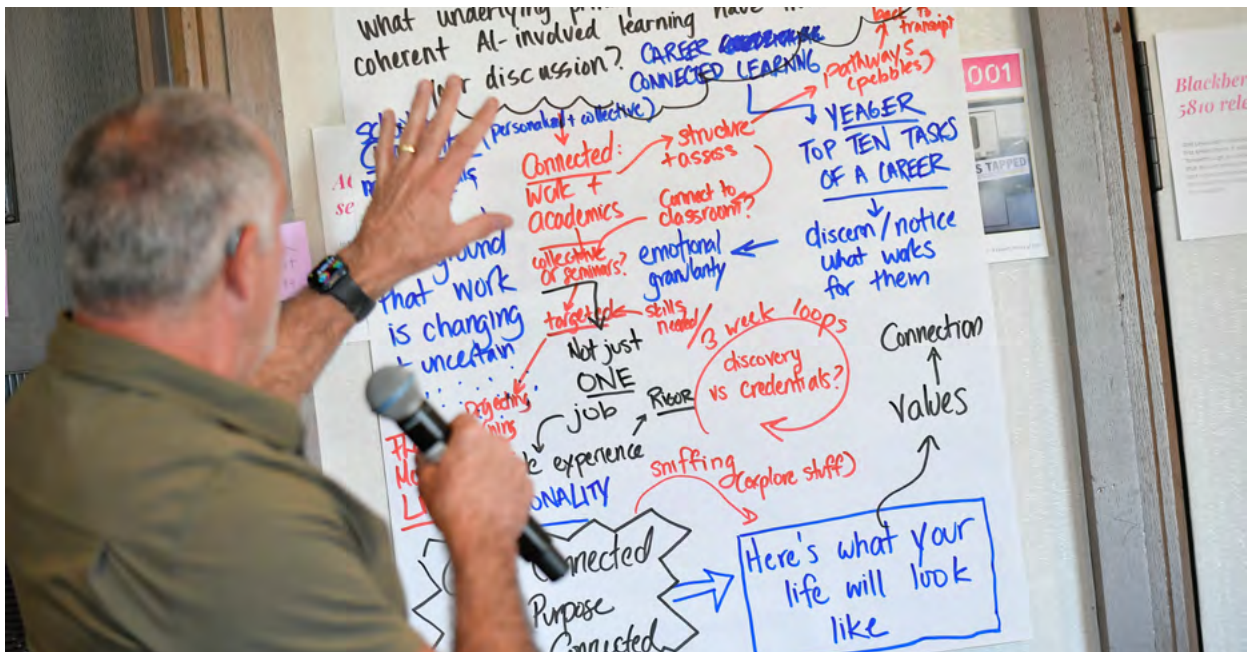
This shift makes it possible to move beyond siloed courses and rigid master schedules. Instead, we can move toward a competency-based system, in which whether a student has mastered the skills required for graduation and for their chosen post-high-school pathway matters more than where or when learning occurs.

In several Indiana schools supported by the [Indiana Charter Innovation Center](#), leaders are already experimenting with competency-based models. Students move forward once they demonstrate mastery, whether that happens in a traditional class, an internship, or an online module. AI can make this easier to manage at scale.

For example, instead of a teacher manually tracking dozens of standards across spreadsheets, an AI system could flag that a student has mastered linear equations but is still struggling to explain their reasoning in writing. When an AI system identifies that a student needs to learn a specific concept or skill, teachers can offer rigorous “just-in-time” seminars focused precisely on that competency. Instruction would become more targeted, efficient, and impactful. Teachers

would support only the students who need that skill at that moment, rather than delivering full-course curricula to an entire group regardless of readiness.

Several Indiana schools are pairing coursework with internships in healthcare, advanced manufacturing, and IT. The challenge has been documenting what students are actually learning on the job. For example, a student interning in a hospital setting may demonstrate communication, data analysis, and problem-solving skills daily. Still, unless those skills are tied to specific state standards or course competencies, schools struggle to determine how they translate into credit. AI tools could help analyze supervisor feedback, student reflections, and project artifacts to determine whether students are meeting academic standards through those experiences. Instead of pausing workplace learning to return to a traditional classroom for a missing requirement, schools can embed academic skill development within authentic experiences. Teaching and learning would become more relevant, integrated, and responsive to student pathways.



One issue that is prevalent today regarding internships and apprenticeships for high school students is the lack of awareness of students about potential career paths. In fact, career counseling and coaching are some of the most powerful applications of AI. In many high schools, counselors manage caseloads of 300 or more students. Personal career guidance is limited by time. AI tools could help counselors quickly see patterns in a student's interests, coursework, attendance, and local workforce needs, giving them a stronger starting point for conversation. Virtual mentoring, resume support, skill-based matching for internships, and access to industry-recognized credentials could be integrated seamlessly into the student experience.



The goal is not to replace counselors, but to give them better information and more time to focus on relationship-building. In this way, AI becomes a partnership tool—elevating support and opening doors that students may not have known existed.

By eliminating the constraints of a master schedule and expanding how and where learning can happen, AI redefines the role of schools. Teachers would spend less time delivering the same lesson to 25 students and more time coaching small groups, reviewing projects, and designing experiences. Schools could coordinate internships, dual credit, and project-based learning without losing track of graduation requirements. AI insights help leaders identify systemic gaps and design new internships, seminars, or collaborative projects to ensure equity and complete access to essential competencies.

In a world where industries evolve rapidly and careers emerge unpredictably, students need agility, agency, and real-world readiness. AI provides a dynamic foundation for schools to prepare graduates who are adaptable, skilled, and connected to meaningful futures. The shift from discrete courses and rigid schedules to a mastery-based, experience-rich system is not just an instructional evolution—it is a fundamental reimagining of what it means to be educated in the 21st century. When used thoughtfully, AI empowers education to become more relevant, equitable, and deeply aligned with each student’s potential and purpose.

“The shift from discrete courses and rigid schedules to a mastery-based, experience-rich system...is a fundamental reimagining of what it means to be educated in the 21st century.”



SUNANNA CHAND

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
THE REINVENTION
LAB AT TEACH FOR
AMERICA

“We don’t need AI to make schooling more efficient. We need AI to help us finally break free from factory-model education entirely.”

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.

“Strategic AI integration means knowing when to use the tool and when not to.”

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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND NOTES

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We note the role of AI in developing these statements. CRPE encouraged fellows to use ChatGPT to support early drafting after they had generated a set of initial ideas. However, the perspectives, judgments, and recommendations in this compendium reflect each author's views entirely. The authors also substantially revised their statements to clarify and strengthen their intents.

ABOUT CRPE

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a nonpartisan K-12 education research center at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation. We rigorously examine and test transformative ideas, using our research to inform action. We are truth tellers who combine forward-thinking ideas with empirical rigor. Since 1993, we have been untethered to any one ideology but unwavering in a core belief: public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we work to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice that will drive the public education system to meet the needs of every student.

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