SEPTEMBER 2026

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

How AI-Powered Education Startups Are Supporting Educators and Students — and How Policymakers Can Encourage Responsible Innovation

SALON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Educators are increasingly turning to AI-powered tools to help address key challenges including teacher shortages, growing administrative demands, limited planning time, and the need to support students' wide-ranging learning needs.

In response, a number of AI startups have begun developing specialized educational tools — guided by established pedagogical methods and guidelines — designed to help educators at all levels meet these challenges responsibly. The companies highlighted in this paper, for instance, help educators create and adapt lessons, support English learners and students with disabilities, simplify the college transfer process, and promote stronger writing and critical thinking skills, among other high-value services.

The benefits of such expert-developed AI-powered education tools are clear. At the same time, however, their rapid advancement, as well as the advent of numerous commercially available tools lacking such expert guidance, also raises legitimate concerns about privacy, accuracy, fairness, accessibility, educational efficacy, and — when used by students — academic integrity.

Public policy will play a vital role in helping schools and educators realize AI's benefits, while also protecting and supporting students and families. Thoughtful, adaptable, consistent public policies can support responsible innovation across the AI ecosystem, enabling companies of all sizes — and especially startups — to operate in accordance with guidelines that help ensure students' safety and privacy; preserve student, family, and educator agency; support rather than supplant learning; and improve our educational system.

This paper recommends a flexible, risk-based policy approach featuring baseline safeguards for educator productivity tools; stronger requirements for student-facing systems; consistent, evidence-based evaluation standards and methods; and the highest level of human oversight for tools used to help make consequential decisions. Effective policy should protect students, preserve human judgment, and promote learning — particularly in underfunded communities —while allowing schools and specialized startups to test, implement, and scale beneficial AI innovations grounded in learning science.

THE OPPORTUNITY

AI-powered tools can reduce repetitive work, generate instructional resources, analyze data, and provide individualized recommendations and materials — providing valuable support to educators[1] and enhancing student learning.

Unsurprisingly, schools are quickly adopting AI-powered tools. From 2023 to 2024, the share of school districts that had trained teachers to use AI-powered tools more than doubled, increasing from 23 percent to 48 percent. An additional 26 percent of districts said they expected to begin such training at some point in the 2024–2025 school year.[2] This growth signals not only strong demand for AI-powered educational tools, but an urgent need for clear, workable policy guidance.

AI-POWERED EDUCATION STARTUPS

A growing number of education startups are developing tools tailored to meet specific needs across K–12 and higher education. The companies discussed in this paper, for instance, offer a range of services throughout the education ecosystem:

- **Educator productivity:** MagicSchool, Brisk Teaching, Diffit, and Merlyn Mind support lesson planning, translation, assessment, feedback, and classroom workflows.
- **Personalized instruction:** SchoolAI, Querium, and Amira Learning provide teacher-supervised learning experiences, step-by-step academic support, and individualized reading lessons.
- **School improvement and professional learning:** Innovare and TeachFX help leaders and educators turn data and feedback into actionable insights.
- **Student navigation and well-being:** EdVisorly and Mainstay support college navigation and student success, while Clayful expands access to human-delivered mental wellness coaching.
- **Writing and academic integrity:** Packback supports classroom discussion, writing feedback, critical thinking, AI literacy, and learning to attribute sources.

This paper highlights such tools' utility and outlines how thoughtful public policy can empower startups to continue creating innovative new tools that help teachers and students, while ensuring student safety and privacy; engaging teachers, families, and students; and enhancing learning opportunities.

LESSON PLANNING AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

AI can help teachers draft lesson plans, align learning activities with state and federal standards, create quizzes and

1. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Teaching and Learning: Insights and Recommendations (2023), https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED631097.pdf.
2. Melissa Kay Diliberti, Robin J. Lake, and Steven R. Weiner, More Districts Are Training Teachers on Artificial Intelligence: Findings from the American School District Panel, RAND Corporation, RR-A956-31 (2025), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-31.html.

discussion questions, adapt readings for specific learning purposes, and prepare family communications. Educators can begin with an AI-generated draft, then refine the draft by applying their knowledge of the curriculum and their students.

A number of education startups are building tools specifically for this work. MagicSchool, for instance, offers educators tools for lesson planning, rubrics, assessments, and communication.[3,4] Similarly, Brisk Teaching works within common classroom tech-applications to help teachers create educational materials, adjust reading levels, translate content, and provide feedback.[5] Another startup, Diffit, helps educators generate and adapt grade-level resources according to reading level, language, standards, and depth of knowledge. And a small company called Merlyn Mind uses voice-enabled AI assistants to help teachers control classroom technology and complete common workflows without having to sit in front of a computer.[6]

SUPPORTING ENGLISH LEARNERS

For English learners, AI can help educators translate family communications, create bilingual glossaries and readings, generate vocabulary practice, and adapt materials across language proficiency levels. These tools can also help students practice reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Amira Learning, for example, uses AI to listen to students read aloud, provide individualized feedback, and support reading development in both English and Spanish.[7] Then, teachers — who know their students and their language needs — can review and improve the translated or adapted materials.

OFFERING TIMELY FEEDBACK

Every classroom includes students with different academic backgrounds, interests, language proficiency, and support needs. AI can help teachers create tailored readings, enrichment activities, visual explanations, multilingual resources, and additional practice materials — saving them significant time.

Startup SchoolAI, for example, allows teachers to build supervised AI-powered learning experiences and view student needs as they emerge.[8] Similarly, Querium's StepWise Virtual Tutor, developed with support from the U.S. Department of Education's Small Business Innovation Research program, evaluates students' problem-solving work in algebra, providing real-time assessments, hints, and personalized tutoring, rather than simply assessing the final answer.[9]

FOSTERING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

AI is also helping education leaders and administrators make more informed operational decisions. Schools collect

3. MagicSchool, "AI Platform for School Districts," https://www.magicschool.ai/.
4. Magic School, "2026 Impact Report," https://www.magicschool.ai/blog-posts/strengthening-teaching-and-learning-with-ai?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
5. Brisk Teaching, "AI Tools for Teachers," https://www.briskteaching.com/ai-tools-for-teachers.
6. Diffit, "Diffit for Teachers," https://www.diffit.me/. Merlyn Mind, "Merlyn for Education," https://www.merlyn.org/.
7. Colorín Colorado, "Supporting ELL Instruction with AI: Ideas for Educators," https://www.colorincolorado.org/article/supporting-ell-instruction-ai-ideas-educators; Teachers College, Columbia University, "How Can AI Support Language Learners?" December 2024, https://www.tc.columbia.edu/articles/2024/december/how-can-ai-support-language-learners/. Amira Learning, "AI Reading Tutor," https://amiralearning.com/amira-tutor.
8. SchoolAI, "AI Built for Education," https://schoolai.com/.
9. Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, "Querium," including StepWise Virtual Tutor projects, https://ies.ed.gov/about/organization/querium.

extensive academic and strategic-planning data, but that data is often stored in separate systems, making it hard for school administrators to fully leverage it. AI-powered analytics can help identify patterns, monitor trends, and surface actionable insights from that data, helping educators and leaders make smart decisions for students.

AI startup Innovare, for instance, provides performance management and continuous improvement software used by school districts across the United States. The company's Strategic Intelligence Platform integrates academic, operational, and strategic-planning data into unified dashboards that help administrators monitor district performance, identify trends, and support evidence-based decision-making. Innovare's EdAI layer can further strengthen these capabilities by surfacing patterns and actionable insights that might otherwise go unnoticed.[10] Another startup, TeachFX, gives teachers private, AI-generated feedback on instructional practices, helping schools extend valuable coaching and professional learning to more educators.[11]

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

In 2022–2023, 7.5 million students, some 15 percent of all public school students, received services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.[12] Notably, a July 2026 Government Accountability Office report found that a growing number of students with disabilities spend at least 40 percent of their day in general education classrooms.[13] That means teachers urgently need tools to help provide individualized support.

Today's AI-powered tools can help educators draft IEP materials, adapt content to different reading and cognitive levels, create visual learning supports, translate family communications, and monitor progress. They can also enhance assistive technologies such as text-to-speech, predictive writing, and alternative communication methods. Tools like Amira Learning, for instance, offer an AI-powered reading tutor that listens to students read aloud, provides real-time feedback, supports English- and Spanish-speakers, and includes dyslexia-risk screening,[14] allowing teachers to cater to a broad range of students.

EXPANDING ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

AI technology can also help schools expand access to early, nonclinical mental health support. Startup Clayful, for example, partners with K–12 schools and districts to provide on-demand, text-based coaching from trained human coaches. It also offers a responsive curriculum and actionable data trends.[15] Importantly, Clayful offers coaching and support, rather than therapy, and serves to complement, not replace, school counselors, licensed clinicians, families, or emergency services. Notably, Clayful's coaching is delivered by people rather than AI agents, illustrating how technology can extend the reach of trusted adults.

10. Innovare, "Strategic Intelligence Platform for School Systems," https://innovaresip.com/.
11. TeachFX, "AI-Powered Instructional Coaching," https://teachfx.com/.
12. National Center for Education Statistics, "Students with Disabilities," Condition of Education (updated May 2024), https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cggand.
13. U.S. Government Accountability Office, Special Education: More Students with Disabilities Were Educated in General Education Settings, but State Trends Varied Widely, GAO-26-107814 (July 2, 2026), https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-26-107814to.
14. U.S. Department of Justice, "Final Rule to Improve Web and Mobile App Access for People with Disabilities," April 2024, https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/justice-department-publish-final-rule-strengthen-web-and-mobile-app-access-people. Amira Learning, "AI Reading Tutor," https://amiralearning.com/amira-tutor; HMH, "Amira Learning," https://www.hmhco.com/programs/amira.
15. Clayful, "Schools & Districts," https://www.clayfulhealth.com/schools; Clayful, "Students," https://www.clayfulhealth.com/students.

IMPROVING COLLEGE ACCESS AND STUDENT NAVIGATION

Students pursuing higher education often face complicated transfer rules, academic credit evaluations, degree requirements, and enrollment processes — but today's AI-powered tools can help.

Startup EdVisorly, for example, uses AI to streamline transcript processing and transfer-credit evaluation, while helping community college students explore universities, plan courses, connect with admissions offices, and apply to four-year institutions. Another AI startup, Mainstay, complements this work by using AI-enhanced student-success coaching to deliver personalized guidance and reminders while connecting students with additional support when needed.[16] By reducing administrative friction and mitigating confusion, specialized tools can help students and institutions navigate a process that is often slow, opaque, and frustrating.

PUBLIC POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Public policy will play a critical role in determining whether educators and students can continue benefiting from AI innovations. In crafting regulations, policymakers should strive to develop consistent policy frameworks that distinguish among uses based on their likely risks and consequences, rather than regulating every AI-enabled tool as if it presents the same risk. Notably, a 2026 report from the Brookings Institution's Center for Universal Education offers a comprehensive analysis of how AI-powered tools can be used to enrich students' learning, emphasizing the importance of using AI to support, rather than supplant, the teacher-student relationship.[17]

A practical, risk-based approach to regulating AI-powered education tools should address three distinct tool categories:

- Educator productivity tools, such as lesson-planning, translation, and administrative assistant tools, should meet baseline requirements for privacy, security, accuracy, responsible procurement, and human oversight.
- Student-facing instructional tools and systems, such as tutors, writing assistants, and personalized learning tools, should be held to more stringent standards for transparency, accessibility, age-appropriate design, educator monitoring, and testing for material errors.
- Tools and systems that play a role in making consequential decisions should be subject to the strongest oversight. For instance, AI systems and tools should not independently determine appropriate discipline, placement, promotion, special education eligibility, admissions, or other decisions that affect a student's rights or opportunities. In these instances, it's critical that educators retain oversight and responsibility.

16. EdVisorly, "AI-Powered Transfer Evaluation System," https://www.edvisorly.com/transfer-evaluation-system; EdVisorly, "For Students," https://www.edvisorly.com/for-students. Mainstay, "Student Success Coaching," https://mainstay.com/.
17. West, D. M., & Greer, S. (2026). A new direction for students in an AI world. The Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/A-New-Direction-for-Students-in-an-AI-World-FULL-REPORT.pdf

ENSURING ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND RESPONSIBLE STUDENT USE

Concerns about students using generative AI to complete assignments are real, but they're not grounds for rejecting AI's constructive uses in education support and enhancement. Rather, they're a call for policymakers to provide teachers, students, and families with clear guidelines to help teachers establish appropriate boundaries for students. As of spring 2025, only 34 percent of teachers reported having school or district policies addressing AI and academic integrity, and more than 80 percent of students said teachers had not explicitly taught them how to use AI for schoolwork.[18]

Even a modest increase in thoughtful guidance can help schools distinguish between AI that complements learning and AI that supplants it. State and federal policymakers can support responsible, beneficial AI use by developing clear guidelines that help teachers:

- Specify when AI use is prohibited, permitted, or encouraged and apply those rules consistently.
- Require students to disclose and cite material AI assistance.
- Teach students to verify outputs, evaluate sources, and recognize bias or fabricated information.
- Design assignments that make work processes visible through drafts, reflection, oral explanation, source evaluation, and revision.
- Engage in fair, rigorous review processes before imposing discipline for suspected AI misuse.

Importantly, AI-powered startups can themselves help schools put these principles into practice. AI company Packback, for example, offers students helpful feedback on structure, clarity, logic, and sourcing before they turn in their work. It also teaches proper citation of AI-assisted work, and gives instructors greater visibility into their students' writing processes. This prevention-oriented model shows how AI can reinforce integrity by supporting original thinking and transparent revision, rather than by policing a finished product.

Finally, educators also need practical training in evaluating AI tools, protecting student information, identifying inaccurate or biased outputs, and designing assignments that preserve critical thinking and original work.

POLICY PRIORITY: PROTECT STUDENT DATA

Schools and vendors should collect only the information necessary to provide a service, clearly explain how student data

18. Christopher Joseph Doss et al., AI Use in Schools Is Quickly Increasing but Guidance Lags Behind: Findings from the RAND Survey Panels, RAND Corporation, RR-A4180-1 (2025), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA4180-1.html.

will be used, and establish strong security, retention, and deletion practices. Policymakers should also address whether student information may be used to train AI models, and ensure that families receive meaningful information about data practices.Critically, any new rules pertaining to student data must be written in accordance with existing state and federal privacy laws, including the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Moreover, students and families must be granted clear avenues of review and recourse, should they wish to challenge data-informed decisions or policies.

POLICY PRIORITY: SUPPORT RESPONSIBLE TESTING AND PROCUREMENT

Policymakers can help schools evaluate AI products by developing a common set of evidence-based third-party assessment standards. In addition, carefully designed pilot programs can also allow educators to test tools, identify unintended consequences, and evaluate results before broader adoption. To reduce unnecessary duplication and help districts with limited resources make informed decisions, jurisdictions should recognize equivalent reviews completed by other states or trusted education organizations.

In addition, procurement questions, model contract terms, privacy and security checklists, and performance assessment standards must be standardized across states and school districts to ensure all students benefit from equally rigorous procedures and standards. Similarly, policymakers should fund implementation capacity, particularly in districts without dedicated legal, procurement, or technology teams.

POLICY PRIORITY: PRESERVE COMPETITION AND INNOVATION THROUGH SMART, CONSISTENT RULES

Policy should protect students without limiting schools to products offered by the largest technology companies. Specialized startups often address important needs that broader platforms overlook, including support for English learners, students with disabilities, college-transfer students, and educators in under-resourced schools.

Overly broad definitions, duplicative audits, inconsistent state requirements, and expensive compliance obligations can prevent smaller companies from entering the education market. Policymakers should therefore strive to establish a clear, consistent framework that can be implemented in school districts across the U.S. Such a framework should require information about how a new tool is used, what information the tool collects, the goals and potential risks of the tool's implementation, and evidence of the tool's efficacy. Regulatory coordination, phased implementation, and technical assistance can preserve strong protections without disproportionately burdening smaller providers.

POLICY PRIORITY: KEEP PEOPLE IN CONTROL

Human judgment should remain central to AI in education. Teachers should review AI-generated instructional materials and student feedback, while school leaders should remain responsible for consequential decisions. In addition, as noted above, students and families must be offered clear avenues for challenging data-informed outcomes. Similarly — to the extent

possible —students, families, educators, and other affected stakeholders should be given opportunities to contribute to and participate in key AI-tool governance discussions and decisions. Finally, and perhaps most critically, students must be taught to question and evaluate AI-generated information rather than accept it automatically.

The strongest policy framework will protect privacy, preserve educators' authority, enable student and family engagement, support competition, and facilitate responsible adoption. With clear safeguards and sufficient flexibility, policymakers can protect students while allowing schools and education startups to test and scale tools that improve teaching and enhance students' learning.

CONCLUSION

AI offers a significant opportunity to improve educational productivity, personalize instruction, expand access, and strengthen the support available to educators and students. Startups such as MagicSchool, Brisk Teaching, Diffit, Merlyn Mind, SchoolAI, Querium, Amira Learning, Innovare, TeachFX, Clayful, EdVisorly, Mainstay, and Packback demonstrate the breadth of solutions already emerging across K–12 and higher education.

The question is not simply whether AI belongs in education, but how schools and policymakers can distinguish beneficial assistance from inappropriate substitution, protect students in proportion to risk, and ensure educators, families, and students remain in control. Thoughtful, adaptable, and human-centered public policies can safeguard students and academic integrity while supporting responsible innovation across the AI ecosystem, enabling companies of all sizes, and especially startups, to develop solutions that improve teaching and, most importantly, students' learning and workplace preparedness.