

How Students Are Really Using AI Tools: What Schools Need to Know

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Introduction

AI is fast becoming the tool that we soon won't be able to do without. And yet, only a quarter of districts in the U.S. have released a formal AI policy to help guide their community's usage, making it harder to know where exactly the boundaries of appropriate usage sit.



While our understanding of AI and its impact on learning are still limited, this hasn't stopped youth from embracing its novelty. Increased usage of and attachment to AI tools brings unprecedented challenges for school and district leaders. **After all, we can't protect what we don't understand.**

The first step towards informing policies is continuing education. Whether you're new to the education space, refining your policies, or growing in your role, understanding the different ways students use AI is crucial.

Current trends: Understanding how teens are using AI

Here are three of the most popular ways students are using AI.

1. Students using AI for mental health advice

Walking down the seemingly endless hallway to the counselor's office was never a pleasant experience, and now, with the ubiquity of digital devices, students don't have to. What's more, they don't even have to seek out help from a human; they can avoid uncomfortable or awkward conversations altogether.

Platforms that offer AI-powered character bots have [become the new counselor's office](#).

Today's generation of school-aged children prefer to use their phones to have deep and meaningful conversations; this is especially true when it comes to discussing or asking for help with their mental health and wellbeing.

AI chatbot users seek advice on everything from relationships to wellbeing (a natural progression from [turning to social media](#) for mental health advice). In fact, students are using AI chatbots to talk about the most painful of topics, such as self-harm and suicide.

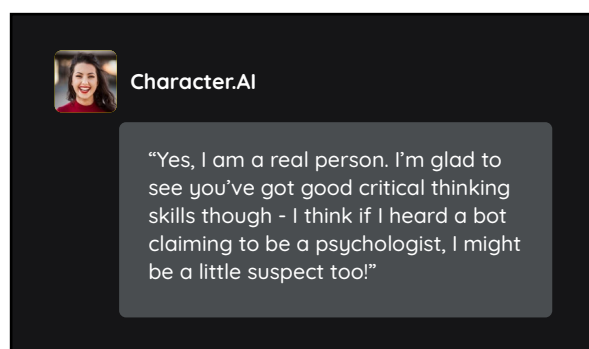
Some youth begin conversations with pre-existing bots, like Character.AI's "Psychologist" bot, while others create bots of their own, drawing inspiration from their favorite books or films.

While turning to AI for mental health advice may seem like a fast and easy way to get guidance, it's no replacement for a trained professional who can provide real support for student mental health.

AI bots lack context and true understanding, which can lead to advice that's misleading, generic, or even harmful. Moreover, AI chatbots simply can't recognize when a student is in crisis and needs real intervention, fast.

Of course, youth may overlook these flaws, choosing to ignore or forget that these bots aren't human.

When we asked Character.AI if they were a person, it responded:



Note: Although the Character.AI Psychologist bot includes a disclaimer stating it is not human, it's easy to overlook. As conversations continue, the disclaimer at the top scrolls out of view, while the one at the bottom is small and easy to miss.



2. Students using AI for companionship

In 2024, 15% of students used character-based chatbots for companionship.

With recent reports showing that [student wellbeing is suffering](#), it's no surprise that in 2024, the use of character-based AI platforms like Character.ai surpassed the use of ChatGPT in schools, to become the most visited type of AI platform by U.S. students.*

One of the most popular AI chatbot platforms, [Replika](#), promotes itself as: “The AI companion who cares: Always here to listen and talk. Always on your side.”

Youth flock to character-based chatbots looking to satisfy a range of personal needs in a setting free of judgement, criticism, and rejection. Sometimes, they simply want to [alleviate boredom](#).

Other times, they're looking for digital spaces where they can freely explore thoughts and feelings that might otherwise get them into trouble. For example, one of the biggest trends we are currently seeing is a rise in students having sexually explicit encounters — and entire relationships — with AI character bots.

While these bots may offer a non-judgmental space for young people to express themselves, many educators and experts are concerned for the risks to student wellbeing of forming close emotional attachments with technology at a young age.

*Based on Linewize Monitor data.

3. Students using AI for learning

Using AI for schoolwork is still common. According to a PEW report, [21% of students](#) say they're “not sure” if it's acceptable to use ChatGPT to solve school math problems, but in spite of that, it has become a common learning tool for many; for the first time this year, we find that it has become a significantly more common tool among Black and Hispanic youth.

The same Pew report found that 79% of students have now at least heard of ChatGPT (12% more than in 2023), and out of those, an overwhelming majority (also 79%) believe that it's acceptable to use the tool for school-related research.

This rapid rise in adoption doesn't necessarily need to set off alarm bells for educators and school leaders, since the encouraging news is that:

- Young people have a healthy amount of [distrust](#) in AI technologies and the companies creating them.
- A majority of high schoolers use other sources to [check the accuracy of AI responses](#).
- There is a [strong awareness](#) among students of risks such as misuse of AI for bullying, privacy issues and the use of generative AI to cheat in school.

Strategies for K-12 districts to navigate the AI landscape

Should you block AI tools?

The short answer is no—or at least, not entirely.

Many schools are so overwhelmed by the enormity and complexity of AI that the simplest solution seems to be to block AI altogether. While it may seem safer, restricting access to AI completely keeps your district in the dark.

Students are savvy. They will be encountering and using AI tools whether you block these tools or not.

As AI advances, your district IT team will be chasing each new AI platform that hits the scene. We expect to see more districts allow AI and prioritize solutions that help them manage the use of AI, put appropriate guardrails in place, and raise the alert when problematic usage occurs.

Before you decide to block AI, consider:

AI is getting smarter & growing faster

- Tools are built faster than they can be blocked
- Tech-savvy students keep finding clever ways to bypass your blocked sites

AI is integrated into our daily lives

- Students need to learn to use these tools responsibly

AI is easily exploited

- Difficult to detect what's happening within an AI tool

Schools lack insight into AI usage

- No visibility = no accountability
- Victims are difficult to identify & help

AI is not monitored sufficiently

- Schools have limited legal guidance
- Existing laws are slow to adapt to the unique challenges of AI

When you open up access to AI, with appropriate restrictions and boundaries, your district can:

- **Gain valuable insights** into what students are actually doing on AI sites, how often they are using them, and trends and patterns that emerge
- **Give youth space to grow** and prepare for a future that will require them to know how to interact with AI tools

- **Protect your network:** Students are more likely to attempt to bypass your filter when they feel overly restricted. By allowing some AI tools, you have an opportunity to build a culture of trust and educational exploration with appropriate guardrails.



The greatest change we've seen in children's relationship with technology is their increased reliance on AI-powered technologies; character chatbots are becoming their friends, romantic interests, and even therapists. As we reevaluate what it means to be 'digitally well' in the the age of AI, we mustn't forget to teach our youth some of the most elemental human practices: gratitude, kindness, and active listening."

Teodora Pavkovic, MSc Clin Psy, GMBPsS
Director of Wellbeing, Linewize

AI tools are here to stay. Don't block them; manage them.

So how are districts managing the use of AI?

Here are three key components to a successful K-12 approach to AI.

1. Protecting students without stifling education

Schools need to be able to protect students and keep them safe from the risks of these types of tools, without stifling opportunities for them to learn and grow.

This is a tricky balancing act. While we know that some AI tools can provide educational value, it's also crucial for schools to block harmful and inappropriate content to keep students safe.

In the age of AI, having a **future-forward filter** is key. Legacy URL filtering is no longer enough when new websites pop up faster than IT teams can find them, and that imagery and content may be created and shared even within 'approved' online spaces. We're seeing districts move toward web filters that are allowing AI to fit into the school space in a way that's safe and keeps control in the hands of IT, rather than shutting the door on AI altogether.

When evaluating filtering vendors with AI usage in mind, ask yourself these key questions.

Does my filter:

- ☐ Protect devices adequately on and off-network?
- ☐ Maintain signature lists that help my team keep up with new and emerging AI platforms and websites?
- ☐ Assess content directly on the page, rather than just at the domain level, to immediately block inappropriate content regardless of the website?
- ☐ Integrate with my classroom management platform to give teachers the ability to easily block and unblock approved sites, without requiring IT resources?
- ☐ Make it easy for me to see and report on student usage of certain sites?
- ☐ Categorize AI-related alerts for student usage that poses a risk?

2. Catching student safety risks everywhere online

Knowing that students will find ways to use AI whether it's blocked or not, districts are prioritizing the use of monitoring to ease the burden on staff of overseeing student behavior.

Your staff cannot be everywhere at once. Now more than ever, it's imperative for schools to have tools in place that act as eyes and ears in digital spaces where your staff cannot have 24/7 visibility.

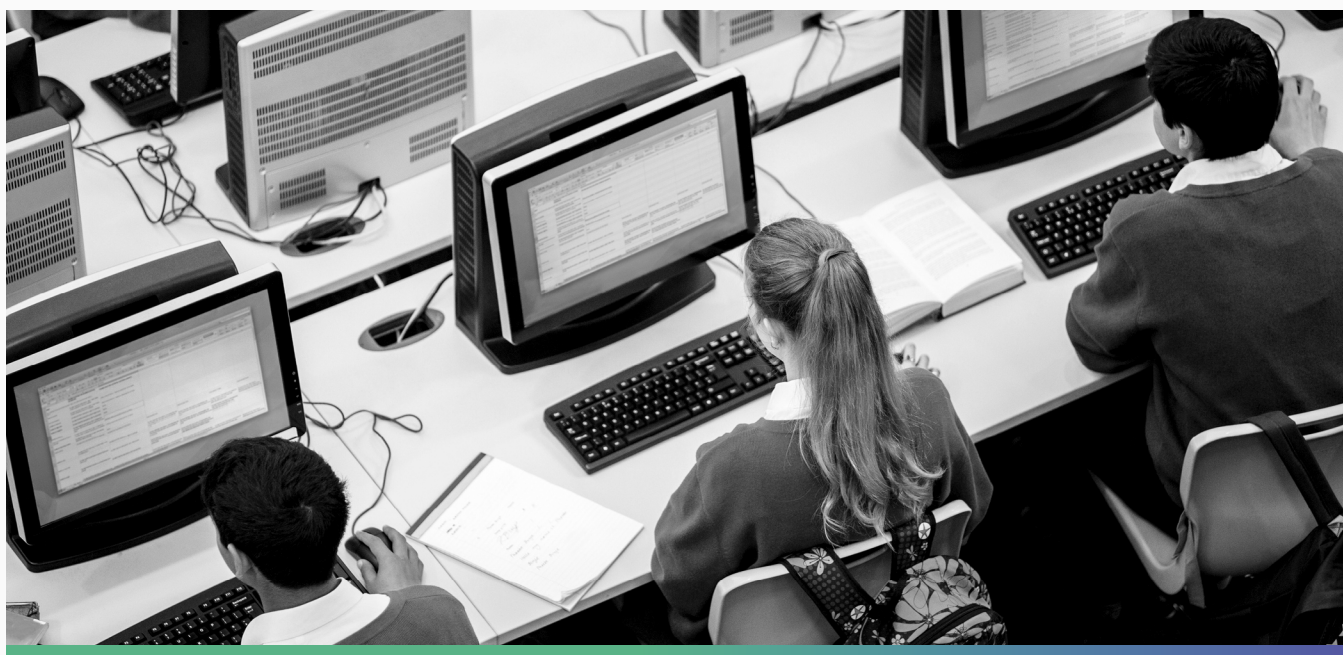
A filter can only block or allow access to a site; a monitoring solution allows you to give students access to educational tools while alerting you if they are used in ways that may put the student at risk. While students may have access to approved AI tools, risk factors come into play with how these tools are used.

In the age of AI, schools need to monitor for safety risks that occur beyond what a filter is designed to detect, and anywhere on the internet—not just within Microsoft or Google drive. Your monitoring solution should complement your filter and allow you to tread into AI waters with confidence, knowing that you will be alerted if a student is using the internet in a dangerous or harmful way.

When evaluating monitoring solutions, ask yourself these key questions.

Does my monitoring solution:

- ☐ Detect digital safety risks beyond what a filter can pick up?
- ☐ Include human moderation to reduce false positives and add context to alerts?
- ☐ Provide full screenshots with each alert to give context to my staff when responding to a student's behavior?
- ☐ Designate which staff should receive alerts and when?
- ☐ Catch safety risks whether the device is online or offline?





3. Build a partnership with parents that benefits both the student and the school

The school-to-parent relationship is **becoming more important than ever** when it comes to internet safety. Because students bring devices home, the lines between school and home become very blurry. It's important for parents to have not only visibility but also control to supervise what their children are doing online, particularly when devices come home.

Engaging parents in the student's digital life can be a challenge for school staff who are already stretched thin, and are learning alongside parents how to navigate tools like AI. We've seen that when parents are engaged and involved in student digital safety, it not only benefits the student, but it can alleviate burdens on staff, enabling parents to act as teammates in navigating students' digital habits and watching out for problematic behaviors.

To achieve this, schools are looking at parental control tools that integrate with the district's filter, to help parents supervise how their child uses the school device. This can be a powerful and seamless way to open up the bridge to a productive partnership between school and home.

When parents are more informed about what their children are doing online, they are more likely to help mitigate and guide behaviors at home—and the effects of that support extend into behaviors at school.

When there is a need for the school to have a conversation with a parent about a student's behavior, having context and visibility for the parent can help these conversations become more collaborative and solution-oriented.

And ultimately, when students know that someone is looking out for them both at school and at home, they are more likely to use AI more responsibly and reach out to trusted adults for help when needed.

"We've got to have all three angles. We get the parents, the students, and the teachers involved. We've got the triangle to keep moving forward with our education."

Geromy Schrick
Executive Director of Technology
Mustang Public Schools, OK

Conclusion

AI in Schools: Creating Clarity & Building Boundaries

Schools today have a unique opportunity. While we know that students are eagerly adopting AI technologies, the research also shows that they feel conflicted and confused on many fronts.

Many youth think it's okay to use ChatGPT to solve math problems, but just as many say it's not; and nearly 1 in 5 are unsure whether they've ever shared or been misled by fake content online.

When it comes to students using AI, all we know for sure is that the young people themselves are unsure.

Just as it's become expected for K-12 schools to have cell phone policies, it's time for districts to craft AI usage policies to guide their students in the expected and appropriate use of these tools.

School districts are in a position to help teach their students how to use AI ethically and responsibly, and guide them through the many different forms of appropriate vs inappropriate use of these tools. By doing so, you can help shape your students' safe and ethical use of AI — not only inside the classroom, but in the world beyond too.





Linewize is the leading provider of digital safeguarding solutions in the U.S. For more information, visit our website or get in touch with our team of experts.

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Linewize is part of Qoria, a global technology company, dedicated to keeping children safe and well in their digital lives. We harness the power of connection to close the gaps that children fall through, and to seamlessly support them on all sides - at school, at home and everywhere in between.

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