

COLUMN: TOPICS, TECH, AND TRENDS**Teaching Kids to Use AI Well, Not Just Catching Them When They Don't****Author:** Joey Lord

This installment marks the second of a three-part series exploring the evolution of artificial intelligence, the ethics surrounding its use, and its potential to enhance student learning. Look for the next and final feature in the *NCMLE Journal*, where we will dive deeper into the potential to enhance learning.

Walk into almost any K-12 classroom right now, and you'll feel it: something has shifted. Generative AI — ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, Copilot, DALL-E — showed up faster than most schools could get ready for it, and it's already changing how students do their work and how teachers think about what "their work" even means.

We have to stop treating every use of AI as an automatic academic integrity violation. That instinct is understandable, but it's not sustainable, and it's not even the right question. The real question isn't whether students are using AI — they are, whether we've given them permission or not. The question is whether we're teaching them to use it well. Banning it doesn't solve that. Teaching them how to think alongside it does.

Richard Culatta, CEO of ISTE and ASCD, recently said something worth sitting with: schools spend too much time defining AI literacy as an abstract concept and not nearly enough time teaching kids how to actually use the technology for learning (Klein, 2025). That distinction matters more than it sounds like it should. Knowing what AI is isn't the same as knowing how to use it responsibly, and right now, most of our policies are built for the first problem, not the second.

Start With Transparency, Not Rules

Every hard question about AI in schools eventually traces back to the same unresolved line: when does help become cheating, and who decides? That's not a question we can answer in the abstract. What we can do is build transparency into the process so students, teachers, and parents aren't guessing.

That starts with telling students plainly when AI is allowed, when it isn't, and what it looks like to disclose using it — and then actually holding that standard consistently across a school, not just in one teacher's classroom.

Teachers have a role here too, and it's a more powerful one than we usually give it credit for. When we show students how we use AI to brainstorm a lesson or work through a discussion topic, we're modeling something important: AI as a thinking partner, not a replacement for thinking. A simple version of this works well — a human starts with a question, AI helps draft or organize ideas, and a human finishes by revising and deciding what's actually good. That loop keeps a person in charge of the judgment calls the whole way through, and it's worth saying out loud to students, not just doing quietly.

It's also worth being honest with kids that these tools get things wrong — confidently, and often. AI can produce answers that sound completely reasonable and are simply false. Teaching students to fact-check what a chatbot tells them isn't optional; it's the whole package.

Meet Students Where They Actually Are

None of this looks the same at every age, and it shouldn't.

With elementary students, it helps to keep things concrete. Compare a smoke detector to a human nose smelling burnt popcorn — it gives kids a real sense of what a machine is doing versus what a person is doing, without getting abstract about it. At this age, the goal is simple: build the habit of asking "is this actually true?" and get comfortable with low-stakes, creative uses — brainstorming a story, generating an image for a project, using dictation tools to turn spoken ideas into text. The one non-negotiable is that they say when they used it.

By middle school, kids are ready for harder questions, and they usually start asking them on their own: whose work is this, really? Where does my thinking stop and the AI's start? This is the age to get serious about spotting bias and unreliable output, and to expect students to explain how AI shaped what they turned in. That habit of self-disclosure is exactly what serves them later.

High school is where it gets real. Students need to know the difference between AI helping them synthesize information and AI doing their thinking for them — especially in research and argumentative writing, where that line matters most. They also need to know that colleges and employers don't agree on AI policy, and that the habit of being upfront about how they used it will carry more

weight than any specific rule. This is also the age to open up the bigger conversations: algorithmic bias, data privacy, the environmental cost of these tools, what AI means for creative and professional work. Kids this age are ready to see AI as more than a tool — it's a force shaping the world they're about to enter, and they should get to productively struggle with that concept.

This Can't Just Live in One Classroom

Even teachers who do all of this well can't carry it on their own — the school around them has to back it up. Districts need real, tiered policies — elementary students shouldn't be held to the same standard as seniors — that spell out what's allowed, what disclosure looks like, and what happens when the line is crossed, while remaining flexible enough to keep up with technology that isn't slowing down.

Assignment-level clarity matters too. Teachers need to be able to tell students, in plain terms, what's fair game on this specific assignment. And it might be time to rethink how we assess altogether — leaning more on drafts, revision history, and in-class work, since a polished final product can hide exactly how much of the thinking was actually the student's.

None of this works if teachers themselves haven't had real time with these tools. Ongoing, hands-on professional development — not a one-off training — is what actually builds the judgment to teach this well, and it needs refreshing as the tools change, which they will keep doing.

And families need to be in the loop. A back-to-school night explanation, a newsletter, a page on the school website — whatever the format, parents deserve to understand how AI shows up in their kids' classrooms and what's expected of them.

The Bottom Line

Ethical use of AI isn't a discipline problem. It's a literacy problem — one of the defining ones of this era, alongside reading and digital citizenship. Schools that treat it that way, that invest in teaching judgment instead of just policing behavior, are going to serve their students far better than the ones still trying to catch kids in the act.

AI is going to keep changing. Our policies will have to keep changing with it.

Dr. Joey Lord is the Instructional Coordinator of Hickory Education Programs for Appalachian State University. She is also a full-time faculty member of the Reich College of Education. This is her 25th year in education with specialties in the areas of Mathematics, Science, Curriculum and Instruction, and edTPA.

But the goal beneath it all stays the same: we're not just trying to get kids to use AI. We're trying to get them to use it well.

References

Klein, A. (2025, July 1). *ISTE CEO: Schools to redefine learning in the age of AI*. GovTech / Education Week.