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As AI spreads in classrooms, North Texas students help shape school policy

Student groups are helping peers use AI responsibly and curb mindless screen time.

By Silas Allen, *Staff Writer*
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School leaders are working to create rules around AI-powered tools and devices such as laptops and tablets — technology that's already in widespread use in classrooms. Students are stepping in to lead conversations among their peers and help their districts set rules.

Lola Gomez/Staff Photographer

Across Texas and nationwide, school leaders are working to create rules around AI-powered tools and devices such as laptops and tablets — technology that's already in widespread use in classrooms.

School boards are hurrying to catch up at a time when there are few rules around AI use at school and concerns about screen time are growing.

Students are stepping in to lead conversations among their peers and help their districts set rules around use of artificial intelligence in schoolwork.

Some work with their peers to help find a balance between technology and offline activities. Others advocate for clearer policies around what's allowed and what isn't. Still others serve on advisory committees guiding those policies. Many of those students say their voice is

critical because they're the ones most directly affected by decisions around technology in schools.

"We are experiencing a new age of technology, a new age of learning, and we can help guide adults on what to implement," said Quynh Nguyen, a senior at Bowie High School in Arlington ISD.

Wylie ISD students look to curb mindless screen time

A growing number of parents and policy makers are concerned about how much screen time students are exposed to at school. In some cases, those concerns have come from students themselves.

One of those student groups is Descreened, which aims to encourage teenagers to spend less time looking at screens and more time experiencing the real world. The group was founded by Wylie High School seniors Ahmed Farooqui and Atharva Naveen.

The group is trying to encourage students to spend time in "third spaces" — locations that are neither home, work nor school — interacting with other people in the real world.

The group organizes events such as workshops, pickleball tournaments and volunteer days as an alternative to spending time online. Over the summer, the group put together 40 goodie bags filled with coloring books, toys and other fun, screen-free items to distribute to patients at Wylie Children's Medical Clinic.

Naveen said the pandemic reshaped his relationship with technology in ways he didn't like. As COVID-19 spread across the country, school districts closed their buildings and shifted instruction to online platforms such as Google Classroom. During that time, many students relied on their devices not only for school, but also for connection to the outside world. Naveen said the need to connect digitally robbed him of a healthy balance between the use of technology and life offline.

After being online for too long, Naveen often feels like he hasn't made productive use of his time. Time he could have spent making healthy memories with friends instead went toward mindless scrolling. But it's easier to recognize the problem than it is to solve it, he said. That's why it's important to offer students alternatives like the ones Descreened organizes, he said. It's easier for teenagers to choose to put down their phones, he said, when there are other fun, engaging options.

Mark Seidenberg, a cognitive scientist and professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, said he's concerned about the educational impact of the widespread use of technology, not only in the classroom but also at home. Parents spend more time buried in their smartphones and less time talking to their kids, he said, and they don't spend as many hours reading to their kids as they once did. That means children are exposed to fewer words than they were in previous eras, which can put them at a disadvantage before they even start school.

New research backs that idea up. A recent study from Rutgers University's National Institute for Early Education Research suggests fewer parents read to their children regularly than in years past. In 2019, about 85% of preschool-aged children in the United States were read to at least three times a week. By 2024, that total had dropped to 75%, Rutgers researchers found. Increased screen time was associated with lower likelihood of reading, according to the study. That suggests screen-based media may be replacing reading time, researchers wrote.

Seidenberg, who wasn't involved in the Rutgers study, said the benefits of parents reading to their kids are clear. They just need to be convinced to put down their phones long enough to do it, he said. But with the large presence screens have in American households coupled with the fast-growing use of AI, Seidenberg said he worries that won't happen.

"More and more," he said, "I think reading is kind of losing the competition with screens."

Related: Texas school districts move to curb screen time in classrooms

Student group advocates for smart AI use

As recently as two years ago, conversations around AI in schools focused primarily on how to keep students from using that technology to cheat. But as AI becomes a larger presence in classrooms and the workplace, districts are working on more detailed rules outlining how those tools may be used. Meanwhile, student groups are holding their own conversations about what responsible use of AI looks like.

One such group is AI SMART, a student organization at Trinity Christian Academy in Addison. The group talks to students about how to use AI responsibly and advocates with school districts for clearer guidelines around AI.

Milena Berezhna, one of the group's founders, said students started AI SMART after they noticed that AI use was becoming more widespread. Berezhna pointed to research suggesting that guidance around responsible AI use hasn't kept up. In a study released last year by the RAND Corporation, 45% of school principals surveyed reported having campus or district policies around AI use. Many districts have instituted policies since then, but Berezhna said many students still feel they need guidance on how to use the tools responsibly.

Sophie Huang, another of the group's members, said the group's main goal is to help students understand how to use AI tools to enhance their thinking instead of replacing it. They also want to help students understand how to use the tools responsibly at a time when the rules about what's allowed and what's out of bounds aren't well defined, she said.

"We didn't want the message to just be, 'Don't use AI,'" she said. "It's an amazing tool when it's used well."

Caleb Kim, another group member, said there are good and bad ways for students to use AI in their schoolwork. For example, if a student is learning derivatives in a Calculus class, they could ask an AI tool to give them the answer, and learn nothing. Or they could ask the same AI

tool to walk them through how to solve the problem, then create a study guide with other practice problems using the same function in different ways. AI SMART, he said, is trying to convince students to pick the latter option.

Beyond the tools' capabilities as study aids, Grayson Tucker, another member of the group, said there could be serious consequences for students' futures if schools treat AI tools as a taboo. Industries are rapidly realigning their operations around AI. If the only message students hear is that AI is off limits, he said, they'll be unprepared to work in that environment.

Even if schools block AI tools outright on their own campuses, Tucker said students can, and do, still use it at home. That's why it's critical students receive guidance on how to use the tools well, he said. All four of the group's current members are seniors, and they're preparing to hand their work off to other students when they graduate. But Tucker said he hopes the gap the group is trying to fill doesn't last more than a few years.

"The entire reason this program exists is because students don't have access to tools to train for AI," he said. "If they did, there would be no reason for this program to exist in the first place."

Policies around school tech are in flux — or nonexistent

Student activism around school technology issues comes at a time when few policies exist. Although many districts are beginning to pass their own rules, most states, including Texas, have no policies outlining how AI can be used in schools. Texas also has no statewide policy limiting school screen time, although Gov. Greg Abbott has called on lawmakers to take up the issue in next year's legislative session.

It's in that context 98 student representatives from all 50 states met over the summer in Boston to debate "legislation" helping districts navigate questions around AI. In a meeting that replicated the U.S. Senate's legislative process, students drafted, amended and passed the STUDENTS FIRST Act by an 82-16 vote. Texas' lone student senator, Heba Badat, a Houston-area student in the Aldine ISD, voted in favor of the proposal.

Among other provisions, the act calls for districts to prioritize student-teacher relationships "by omitting AI usage in situations where human connection is irreplaceable" and provide AI literacy instruction when students first use digital devices in the classroom. Although the act doesn't carry the force of law, AASA, the school superintendents association, plans to send the act to its thousands of member districts across the country.

Other students are influencing school policy around AI closer to home. Nguyen, the Arlington ISD student, took part in a project last year in which she and other members of the district's Student Leadership Advisory Board conducted a listening tour at campuses across the district. During the tour, they talked to students about a number of aspects of school life, including Texas' new statewide school cell phone ban and the use of AI. Nguyen presented the board's findings to the district's Board of Trustees during a workshop in March.

Students largely acknowledged there are advantages and disadvantages to using AI, Nguyen said. AI-powered tools can help with learning and critical thinking, she said, but they can also provide incorrect information and contribute to academic dishonesty.

AI can be a great resource when students are studying for tests or trying to obtain a deeper understanding of the material they covered in class, Nguyen said. She sometimes asks an AI chatbot for an overview of a concept she's studying, then asks for more information on topics she doesn't understand or wants to dive deeper into. She also uses it to generate practice questions before an upcoming test.

That's how many students use AI, Nguyen said. But many others, she said, use it to cheat or to be "lazy with their work." The problem, she said, is that the rules around what's allowed and what isn't aren't always clear.

Nguyen said she'd like to see policies that allow students to take advantage of AI's potential as a study aide while barring students from using it as a shortcut. If students use it to generate answers they can copy and paste into an assignment, she said, they don't learn anything. But students should continue to have access to tools that guide their research and give feedback on answers, she said. She supports the idea of integrating AI into the classroom thoughtfully.

"AI is here to stay," she said, "and we might as well learn how to use it."

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