

NEWSLETTER
David Wallace-Wells

What Schools Are Forgetting in Their Race to Embrace A.I.

May 20, 2026

**By David Wallace-Wells**

Opinion Writer

See more of our coverage in your search results.

[Add The New York Times on Google](#) ↗

You're reading the David Wallace-Wells newsletter. The best-selling science writer and essayist explores climate change, technology, the future of the planet and how we live on it. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Emerge from a bunker into 2026 and, among other disorientations, it might seem a bit strange that just as a wave of phone bans is sweeping the nation's schools, so too is A.I. — with children as young as kindergarten now learning to read on tablets running interactive “learning agents.” You might think that the winds of pedagogical change have begun to blow in a bit of a Waldorf direction, but the first lady, Melania Trump, has made the cause of putting A.I. in every classroom her equivalent of crusading for libraries or healthy eating, and 5- and 6-year-olds across New York City are already learning to read from what The New Yorker's Jessica Winter called a “gamified reading bot” named Amira.

In New York State, phones are now banned in all public schools, from kindergarten to 12th grade. More than two dozen other states have enacted similar policies. The early data on such bans looks pretty ambiguous to me, less like a silver-bullet cure-all for what ails American teens and more as if we've achieved what might be a small uptick in well-being and achievement. But I can't really object to the restrictions, even as a relative skeptic of the smartphone theory of everything. That's because attention in class is pretty precious and there's no way the presence of phones doesn't degrade it, even if only on the margins. Nobody used to tolerate a Walkman or a gaming console in algebra either, and I can't say I'm surprised that, in those places where phone bans have been implemented, teachers seem pretty elated.

But in many places where phones are being withdrawn and sealed in Yondr pouches, A.I. has infiltrated already. Not all technology is the same, of course, and A.I. tutors represent a different kind of educational promise, at least in theory. But over the past few decades, one dream techno

fix has followed the last in the imagination of education reformers, sometimes with great fanfare: laptops in classrooms, tablets, Khan Academy video tutorials or MOOCs. The hope, each time, was that technology could do some of what we'd always relied on scarce humans to deliver, allowing more customization of learning and freeing up overworked teachers to spend their time in more targeted ways. And overall, the returns have been disappointing at best. Some researchers even suggest that it is precisely the arrival of technology in American classrooms, starting about 25 years ago, that best explains recent declines in American academic performance. "This has been the greatest blunder in the past decade of K-12 education," Molly Worthen wrote in *The Times* last month — "the decision to give every child a personal computer and to gamify everything from standardized test preparation to recess."

"My son's math homework is essentially just Pokémon," *The Atlantic's* Will Oremus recently lamented, observing that more than ten minutes of work his 11-year-old had done involved only about thirty seconds of math — and a few bursts of pop-up ads. Thanks to technology in the classroom, unsupervised video intrudes, too: Last month, *The Wall Street Journal* documented the experience of one seventh grader in Kansas who'd gained access to more than 13,000 YouTube videos during school hours between December 2024 and February 2025. In New York, one second grader had watched over 700 videos during school hours in just two months, *The Journal's* Shalini Ramachandran reported. A 10th grader in Oregon watched 200 in less than three hours on a single day.

And now comes A.I. In New York City, Amira listens to children trying to read, offers feedback and correctives and collects data. It's already in place in approximately 150 schools across the city, teaching many thousands of children, *New York* magazine recently reported, under the headline "Help! My Kindergarten Is All In on A.I." In San Francisco, Amira administered reading assessments for first and second graders. In Boston, sixth graders have prepared for year-end standardized tests by working with ChatGPT and Claude, according to *The New Yorker*; in L.A., fourth graders using A.I. in art class produced a "highly sexualized" Pippi Longstocking book cover.

These are not exactly isolated incidents, small hallucinations in an otherwise sane and stable system. In April 2025, one month after he issued an executive order aimed at abolishing the Department of Education, President Trump issued one calling for A.I. to be incorporated into the curriculums of American public schools at all grade levels.

A majority of parents and high schoolers believe that doing so would be harmful to students, RAND found last fall. But only 22 percent of district leaders agreed. When New York City began soliciting public input on guidelines for A.I. use in schools this spring, the Department of Education gestured at the importance of human relationships, but also framed its outreach this way: "The question is not whether A.I. belongs in schools. The question is whether we will collectively build a system that governs A.I. to serve every student and every stakeholder." As Winter put it last month, "It's quite the rhetorical suplex — opening a debate by declaring its central premise off limits."

Parents and advocates haven't entirely abided by such restrictions, as my colleague Natasha Singer reported last month. In late April, the new New York City schools chancellor announced that, in the face of public outrage, an A.I.-focused high school that had been scheduled to open

next fall would now be put on hold. The city needed more time to plan, he suggested; the chairman of the city's Panel for Educational Policy admitted that the panel had had no briefings on A.I. research at all. Soon thereafter, enough parents flooded a P.E.P. hearing that the meeting ran almost seven hours, with more than a hundred speaking out against A.I. even though it was not meant to be the focus of the meeting. "The intense outrage among parents in New York City is as great as I've seen it on any education issue that I've been working on for 25 years," the education advocate Leonie Haimson told *The Times*. She put it more baldly to me: "The opposition is growing like a tidal wave."

You hear similar things, these days, about the broader A.I. backlash that has lately flooded into town halls and community meetings around the country, with data centers offering a focal point around which Americans have clustered various social and political anxieties — about water use and the cost of energy, about oligarchy and the immense power of a small handful of A.I. founders, about the rapid conquest of our imagined future by A.I. and how little democratic control has been exercised over that future. Whoever can channel the backlash into political energy has an enormous advantage in upcoming elections, political analysts have begun to project, as poll after poll shows resentment and hostility growing swiftly.

But the fight over A.I. in schools isn't just a piece of the broader opposition. The logic of how A.I. infrastructure is being built remains somewhat intuitive and recognizably American — big companies with cash to burn buying up plots of land to develop for their own purposes. If a protester stands up at a Utah town hall to demand, about a 62-square-mile, \$100 billion project proposed for Box Elder County, "who asked for this?," the answer isn't difficult to come up with. It's the developer trying to build the data center and the hyperscalers desperate to make use of it.

With schools, it's a lot less obvious how exactly we got here in the first place, with A.I. planted so quickly in classrooms and curriculums that parents and advocates are left to try to weed it out. Or at least institute some common-sense guidelines: more public input, more transparency about what products are being used, more restrictions on data collection and student privacy and above all, perhaps, more rigor regarding whether or to what degree the tools being used are actually helpful to student achievement. This isn't just resistance from the familiar coalition, in other words. It's parents shocked at how quickly some very new technology has so hastily remade school for their kids. These are 5- and 6-year-old brains we're now running our Amira experiment on. Most Americans first heard of L.L.M.s less than four years ago, after all.

And it isn't just the smartphone backlash that makes this rush to embrace A.I. so confounding. It was just four or five years ago that Covid-era school closures had produced widespread anxiety — among parents, among policymakers — about the inadequacy of remote learning and the costs to students of conducting school through a small, personalized screen. Much of that alarm looks to me, in retrospect, excessive, given the way that what was called "pandemic learning loss" did not significantly accelerate long-running declines in test scores that both predated school closures and have outlasted them. But the impression lingers enough that parents object when local officials propose that, in the wake of massive snowstorms, schools might go remote for a single day. Working from a laptop in class is not the same thing as remote-only school, of course, but the lessons we thought we learned five years ago — about the downsides of screen dependence and the importance of embedding learning in a social environment — would

certainly seem to counsel some caution.

Three or four years ago, the arrival of sophisticated A.I. chatbots produced a wave of panic about the catastrophic impacts on learning in high school and especially college: an epidemic of cheating and plagiarism; a workaround for deep reading and critical thinking; and the onset of what has been called “cognitive atrophy,” the result of turning away from education as a kind of intellectual training and toward an approach to schoolwork as a matter of mechanical output. (You generate a term paper the way you buy a Snickers at the vending machine.) Much of the alarm was about how kids were essentially cheating themselves out of an actual education by using A.I. tools; the basic worry was that A.I. would find its way into the classroom, and into schoolwork, almost regardless of the precautions taken by teachers and administrators. But in many cases, now, it is the schools themselves that have incorporated A.I. tools into their curriculums, and while not all such tools are the same, to date there is pretty limited evidence that they might help.

So how did it happen all over again, and so fast, with yet another new technology? One partial explanation comes from genuinely hopeful evangelism, the possibility that new tools might allow us to do better. Another comes from a kind of related desperation about how hard it has been to end the stagnation of American educational achievement. (Would-be reformers have worried that American students were falling behind for many decades, and the past dozen years have traced some striking test-score declines.) To their boosters, the tools promise to unburden teachers and deliver something between a smaller class size and a genuinely personalized tutorlike school experience — a favorite fantasy for tech-minded reformers. And while many parents are likely to feel a reflexive queasiness about turning kindergarten over to A.I. tools, it’s not entirely clear how representative those voices are. There is also a fear of being left behind — among parents, schools and districts — and a sense that, if the world really is changing this fast, maybe kids really would benefit from early exposure.

But I’d add another factor, not specific to schools: the fact that technological history is now narrated by way of what the political scientist Henry Farrell called, memorably, “feral thought experiments.” By this he meant that, almost daily now, Americans are treated to glib forecasts of the technological future, with neat just-so stories about where we are headed — as though the changes had already happened, and the fights over them, too. The natural setting for these thought experiments might be the podcast studio or the conference stage, but they also beam out from opinion pages and congressional hearings. The result: Even amid remarkable resistance, the technology appears from many vantages to possess the shimmer and the solidity of a fait accompli. We tell ourselves that we know artificial intelligence will remake education and then race to make it so, without asking too many questions about what kind of future we’re actually building. “The obvious rebuttal is no: We actually can’t see the future of A.I.,” Farrell writes. And it’s not just in schools that we may be forgetting that.
