

Research Brief

August 5, 2026

Keeping classrooms human-centered: Guardrails for the billion-dollar AI industry disrupting California's education system

In a 2012 speech to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Education Technology, education technology ("edtech") CEO Jose Ferreira described education as "the world's most data-mine-able industry, by far."¹ A decade later, we have seen the expansion of edtech into a quarter-trillion-dollar industry,² alongside the increased integration of artificial intelligence (AI) across education. While emerging technologies can pose new opportunities for students and teachers, they also introduce unique challenges. New issues with AI-driven edtech's effectiveness or data security come to light weekly.

Given the rapid growth of this industry, and its reach into the classroom, educators and frontline school staff have a significant interest in how these products develop and are integrated (or not) in or around the classroom. The promise of our public education system, to provide the basic skills and college or career readiness for every student, is at risk from an industry profiteering off private data of students and educators and the removal of professional educator's agency over the pedagogical choices that provide a genuine learning environment. Ensuring there are effective guardrails for AI and edtech integration in our workplaces—California's schools, colleges, and universities—is a top priority for CFT.

Overview

This report offers an overview of the most pressing concerns about AI in education, as identified by educators and classified professional staff across California. AI's capabilities and uses are growing and changing fast: an up-to-date understanding of its current state in education is essential for lawmakers and stakeholders to proactively respond to new developments, and protect the integrity of our schools and the teaching profession. We draw from a large, representative poll of CFT members conducted in May of this year, alongside testimony from members, and research on the edtech sector to illustrate these concerns, and highlight solutions we hope to advance in the next legislative session. CFT's approach to this issue is not a blanket opposition or support for AI in the abstract; rather, we see a critical need for judicious regulation of technologies that are already integrated into classrooms, whose designs responds to private sector profit incentives rather than the needs of our students, and still continue to evolve at speeds that introduce new challenges every week.

Educators understand the urgency of these issues: the infusion of AI in education is happening at an ever-accelerating pace, and each week more alarming examples emerge of AI products leaking student data, failing to accurately complete the work they were designed for, costing teachers and staff invaluable time, and with dubious educational benefits for students. Furthermore, AI technologies now evolve, specialize, and integrate across sectors at a pace that dwarfs the advent of other technologies of the past, with added pressures to compete

¹ Simon, S. (2014, May 15). The big biz of spying on little kids. *POLITICO*. <https://www.politico.com/story/2014/05/data-mining-your-children-106676>

Note that the recording of the speech was removed from YouTube halfway through the writing of this report.

² Jandric et al. (2026). EdTech and the environment: A research program. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 23. Note: Some estimates of the sector's size vary, but tend to be in a range between \$150 billion and \$1 trillion, with projections for future growth varying further.

with other countries' own AI sectors.³ California needs better regulation now.

Teachers and classified employees cannot endure another school year beginning while new technology spirals unchecked further into uncharted territory, all while storing and collecting even more sensitive student and worker data, vulnerable to leaks and cyberattacks. Our education system needs guardrails like human-in-the-loop policies so real people can override AI decisions as appropriate, and more oversight over procurement so districts do not commit millions to a vendor whose product will require staff to spend valuable instructional time training for and integrating new tools that may not even effectively promote learning or become obsolete.

Executive summary

- Educators and classified professional staff from Pre-K through Higher Education have significant concerns about the rapid expansion of AI-driven edtech into schools, without sufficient time for review and oversight of these products.
- CFT's positions reflect the AFT's national 10-point plan, focusing on three core themes that deeply concern our members:
 - While AI tools may have some promise, they are just tools, and California must first prioritize and fund the humans in the classroom, over risky new ventures;
 - New protections adapted for new technology, including high standards of protection for safety, data privacy, and educators' agency are essential; and
 - California can reverse a disinvestment in education by making Big Tech pay its fair share.
- Most critically, our research shows that, amongst CFT members,
 - 9 in 10 think that AI is harmful to students developing critical thinking skills;
 - 86% think it is important that CFT fights for guardrails for AI use in schools, including protecting student data privacy and mandating human oversight; and
 - 7 in 10 are concerned about supervisors using AI to monitor and evaluate them.
- In short, our members are especially concerned about AI's impacts on student learning and privacy, and its restrictions on their own professional agency.

Next, we briefly define key terms and survey the current state of AI in education. We then develop the three core themes that characterize CFT members' engagement with AI and their most pressing concerns about its use in education, before highlighting solutions that can address these concerns.

AI in California schools today

Just as AI technologies become more widespread across sectors, they have also become more prominent in education. In the current moment, edtech products that are packaged or embedded with AI capabilities are readily available and aggressively pushed to school districts, community colleges, and universities. According to one sector report, more and more K-12 districts are partnering with AI vendors to introduce new edtech tools into schools at temporarily subsidized costs, seeing these partnerships as one tool for attracting more students.⁴

³ Robins-Early, N. (2026, August 1). China's tech advances are causing chaos from Silicon Valley to the White House. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2026/aug/01/china-silicon-valley-white-house>

⁴ Moody's Ratings. (2026, July 23). *AI partnerships subsidize instructional tools, but long-term benefits are uncertain*. Sector in-depth report.

Yet, many edtech vendors are offering products that fail to deliver basic and accurate educational material, or have serious data security issues. One such example includes the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) spending \$3.8 million on an AI chatbot that could not provide correct hours and dates for a financial aid office at one college in the district, nor support several languages, as it claimed to do.⁵

One recent example is particularly striking as it illustrates multiple intersecting concerns. On July 14, 2026, the company Anthropic introduced Claude for Teachers, offering free access to a premium version of its AI chatbot assistant, Claude. Less than two weeks later, a journalist found that some Claude user chats containing personal information, including home addresses, had become visible in Google search results.⁶ In that same week, news reports found that Anthropic was buying rare books, using them to train algorithms, and then shredding those books.⁷ These cases raise questions about the security of adopting a tool like Claude for Teachers, and about Anthropic’s motivations for making such a product free and available to an entire profession. Before the introduction of Claude for Teachers, our research found that 12% of CFT members use Claude.

The speed at which such developments transpire requires an urgent and proactive approach to regulating AI and edtech’s expansion into education that can ensure security and accountability, as well as clear educational benefits.

Key terms

Edtech (short for “education technology”): technology used in education, spanning from early childhood education through K–12 and higher education, as well as career technical education. It involves three major product categories: hardware (interactive whiteboards, laptops, tablets), software (learning management systems, assessment systems, adaptive learning platforms), and content (video, text, audio, and multimedia content). Adapted from the U.S. Department of Commerce’s International Trade Administration.

<https://www.trade.gov/education-technology>

AI (“Artificial Intelligence”): per the UC Berkeley Labor Center, “a catch-all term that refers broadly to a machine-based system’s ability to analyze, apply logic, and improve its capabilities through data analysis to solve tasks.” From IATSE 2024 MOA, via the [UC Berkeley Labor Center](#).

GenAI (“Generative AI”): “a subset of artificial intelligence that learns patterns from data and produces content, including written material, based on those patterns, and may employ algorithmic methods (e.g., ChatGPT, Llama, Dall-E).” From 2023 WGA MOA, via UC Berkeley Labor Center.

Learning management systems (“LMS”): online software platforms designed to support instructional, learning, and assessment activities, and facilitate the delivery of course materials. Examples include Canvas, Moodle, and Blackboard. Adapted from Turnbull et al. (2022). An overview of the common elements of learning management system policies in higher education institutions. *TechTrends*, 66(5).

⁵ Romero, M. (2025, March 6). California colleges spend millions on faulty AI systems: ‘The chatbot is outdated’. *CalMatters*. <https://calmatters.org/education/higher-education/college-beat/2026/03/college-ai-chatbot/>

⁶ Cox, J. (2026, July 27). Tons of peoples’ Claude chats and creations are exposed on Google. *404 Media*. <https://www.404media.co/tons-of-peoples-claude-chats-and-creations-are-exposed-on-google/>

⁷ Landymore, F. (2026, July 25). AI companies are buying antique books, ingesting their contents to train models, and then destroying them at incredible scale. *Futurism*. <https://futurism.com/artificial-intelligence/ai-companies-destroying-rare-books>

AI in education is an increasingly urgent concern for educators

In our May 2026 poll, CFT members identified what they were most concerned about for the education system and our communities. They listed AI as the second-most common concern, only behind quality of education and notably, before pay and staffing. A year ago, AI was not even in the top 5 concerns listed amongst membership. See Table 1, below.

	May 2026 member poll		May 2025 member poll	
	rank	% of members naming topic as top concern	rank	% of members naming topic as top concern
Quality of education	#1	11%	#5	7%
Artificial intelligence	#2	10%	not ranked	0%
Pay/staffing	#3	9%	#3	10%
Trump/DOGE	#4 (tie)	8%	#1 (tie)	14%
Budget cuts/funding	#4 (tie)	8%	#1 (tie)	14%

Table 1. AI has quickly come to the forefront as one of the topics our members are most concerned about. In another question, 68% of members said they think the impact of AI on California’s education system will be negative.⁸

CFT’s priorities for AI

Our priorities for AI draw on AFT’s recently published report, “Devices Down. Eyes Up. Hands-on,” a 10-point plan to protect students and empower educators.⁹ Our approach also builds on work from CFT’s own Educational Technology Committee, and CFT’s AI task force, which have made resolutions and developed recommendations for contract language, professional development, and legislative needs relating to AI use in educational settings.¹⁰ We focus on three core themes from AFT’s plan that unite our priorities.

First, high-quality education is grounded in fundamentals—addressing basic needs, literacy and numeracy, promoting civic engagement, and experiential and active learning—which come before any one tool or technology (points #3–5). AI can be a powerful tool; it is not a substitute for the professional expertise required to deliver the education that students deserve.

Second, we need a new gold standard to protect students’ and educators’ safety and privacy, and uphold their autonomy: strong protections for education all around (points #6 and #7).

Third, we support reinvesting in education by making Big Tech pay its fair share, including funding research to help develop best practices around AI in education (points #8–10).

Our research shows CFT members’ experiences and concerns align with these core themes. First, though their experiences with AI span a wide range, with some seeing promise in new tools, and some more skeptical, they ultimately view it as a tool that requires careful and thoughtful application, but not a replacement for solid pedagogy. We describe these views in a section below about member experiences. Second, members want better protections now, in two main areas of concern: for students’ data privacy, and teachers’ and staff’s agency to make professional decisions in their workplace—to reclaim our expertise and refocus resources on the core fundamentals of good education. Our third theme underscores an opportunity for California to take the lead on backing up critical guardrails on AI with investments in education and research. Due to the urgent need for new

⁸ These rankings come from an open-ended question where members were asked to think about concerns facing “the education system and our communities”. Responses were then sorted into more than 16 categories. In the May 2026 poll, this would mean that 10% of respondents listed AI as their number one concern.
⁹ AFT. (2026). *Devices Down. Eyes Up. Hands-on: Ten points to boost student learning and success in the AI era.* <https://www.aft.org/10pointplan>
¹⁰ CFT. (2025, March 18). *Safeguarding Positions, Human Interaction, and Critical Thinking in the Era of Generative AI.* Resolution.

protections, the solutions in this paper focus on guardrails we believe are critical, and reserve discussion of reinvestment for future reports.

Member experiences: AI as an emergent but limited tool

Our research finds that CFT members are generally familiar with AI, and their views towards the technology in general range widely. Their attitudes towards its usefulness in schools, colleges, and universities tends to be more skeptical, with particular caution towards its application in student-facing contexts. At the same time, members also believe in preparing students for a world where AI is more ubiquitous. Ultimately, members engage directly with new technology while understanding that its rapid developments require careful consideration before introducing it in learning contexts. Teaching requires human connection, supervision, and thoughtful pedagogy. No tool or new technology changes that.

Overall, most CFT members have explored AI tools in general, and feel fairly comfortable with them, but are less inclined to use them in their work, especially in student-facing contexts. Of those surveyed in our May 2026 poll, 96% expressed some familiarity with generative AI tools, and 59% stated that they personally felt comfortable using AI tools. When asked about how frequently they used AI for a series of teaching-related tasks, approximately half stated they never used AI for work like generating grading rubrics, writing emails or communicating with parents or students, with another quarter stating they did so “not very often”. In some divisions, approximately two-thirds never use AI for supporting students directly (64% in K–12, 66% at the UC). By contrast, usage of AI for personal use outside of work, or researching subject matter was more common: with only a quarter of members never using it for those purposes. Members are more averse to using AI in interactions with parents or students, areas requiring human interaction, though they may use it as one resource in background preparation work.

While seeing some promise in AI and cautiously embracing it in select areas of their work, members also see it as a double-edged sword, expressing consistent concern about how it affects students. Most members see AI as detrimental to students' learning of critical thinking skills, as an impediment to their learning more generally, and a risk to their mental health, as discussed in more detail later. Almost all members (92%) agreed that AI made it easier for students to cheat. Still, they did not see AI as a problem to be avoided altogether: three-quarters (75%) of members believe it is important to prepare students to effectively use AI.

In sum, CFT regards AI as a technology that may have applications in education, but is still just a set of tools. The design of these tools matters, as does their use. Indeed, not all members oppose the entire category of AI as a whole, but recognize its limitations. Furthermore, its impacts on students raise particular concerns around safety and effectiveness, especially given how quickly the technology is developing. Our members are open to embracing new technologies, but no degree of novelty or power can make these tools more central to a good education than the professional expertise of educators and professional classified staff, and especially so when these tools' impacts on students are not yet fully understood.

Member concern #1: Data privacy issues (for students, teachers, and staff)

CFT members express serious concerns about data privacy for both students and themselves, and believe it is important to fight for better protections for both. When asked how important it is for them that CFT is involved in a range of issues around AI, a majority of members responded that it was “Extremely important” that CFT fight “for guardrails for use of AI in schools including protecting student data privacy and mandating human oversight.” For 86% of members, this is a priority. Members are concerned about monitoring and surveillance. Nearly all (87%) say it is important for CFT to advocate for “protections for educators from monitoring or surveillance using AI”. This concern was also reflected in another question on actual feelings of concern about the use of AI by a supervisor to monitor or evaluate educators or classified professionals; 69% of members are either somewhat or very concerned about AI being used for supervision, monitoring, or evaluation.

Most are concerned that supervisors will use AI to monitor or evaluate workers

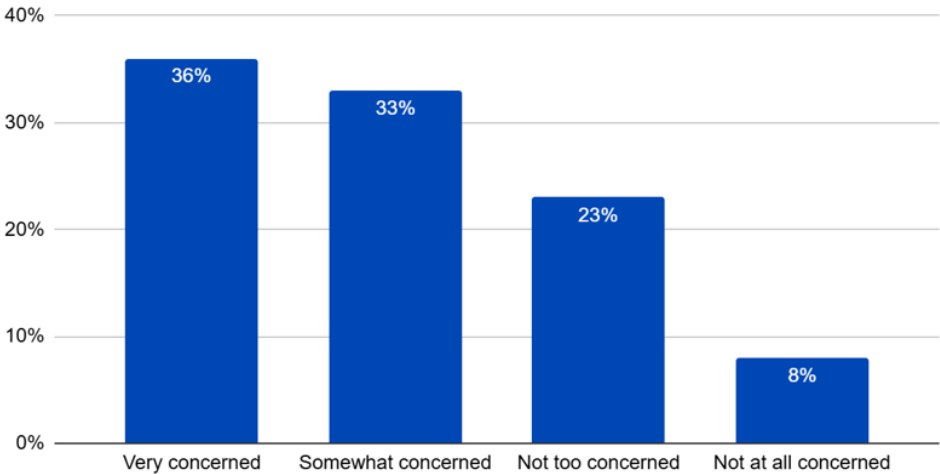


Figure 1. A majority of members are concerned about AI-based surveillance.

These concerns bear extra weight for many, as investigations reveal ICE agents have tapped into school districts’ security cameras for “immigration enforcement” purposes,¹¹ while fears of ICE raids reduce students’ attendance and negatively impacts their mental health.^{12,13}

Privacy concerns also arise from a myriad of problems seen across the education sector, each time reminding us of critical shortcomings in AI-powered edtech. For instance, i-Ready, a gamified assessment tool widely reviled by students, teachers, and parents,¹⁴ faces at least one lawsuit for distributing student data to third parties in real time.¹⁵ Notably, i-Ready’s parent company, Curriculum Associates, Inc., was acquired by private equity firm Berkshire Partners, nearly 10 years ago.¹⁶

¹¹ Keierleber, M. (2026, February, 10). Local police aid ICE by tapping school cameras amid Trump’s immigration crackdown. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/feb/10/ice-school-cameras-police-license-plates>

¹² Sattin-Bajaj, C. (2026). How immigration enforcement is harming U.S. schools and students. *The Brookings Institute: Commentary*. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-immigration-enforcement-is-harming-us-schools-and-students/>

¹³ Dee, T. S. (2025). Recent immigration raids increased student absences. *PNAS*, 45. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2510395122>

¹⁴ Kingkade, T. (2026, May 12). “The revolt against i-Ready: Private equity-backed software faces parent, teacher and student fury.” *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/education/iready-school-software-faces-parent-teacher-student-fury-rcna342850>

¹⁵ Seshadri, M. (2026, June 12). California parents sue i-Ready over data collection sales allegations. *EdSource*. <https://edsources.org/updates/california-parents-sue-i-ready-maker-over-data-collection-sales-allegations>

¹⁶ Curriculum Associates. (2017, September 13). [Press release](#).

In May 2026, the Canvas learning management system, used widely across K-12 and higher education, experienced a large data breach, exposing the personal information of an estimated 275 million users. The data was held for ransom, which Canvas's parent company, Instructure paid.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the outage caused significant disruptions to instruction and to grading across K-12 and higher education.¹⁸ As with i-Ready and Curriculum Associates, Instructure was acquired by and then exchanged between a few private equity firms, which also partnered Instructure with OpenAI.¹⁹ At the time of the leaks, it was owned by private equity firms KKR and Dragoneer, the former of which has had a history of acquiring companies that had then become vulnerable to cybersecurity breaches. These private entities should not be entrusted with our students' data.

Member concern #2: Respect the agency and expertise of teachers and staff

CFT members are also concerned about how AI threatens to undermine their agency as trained educators and their professional autonomy. In one example, at the Salinas Union High School District, where our members are represented by the Salinas Valley Federation of Teachers (AFT 1020), the district spent \$107,350 on a pilot contract to CoGrader, an AI grading tool, with the option to spend \$98,000 to access the tool's complete features. Setting up the tool required a curriculum specialist (Teacher On Special Assignment; TOSA) at the District, alongside staff at CoGrader, to manually input rubrics and learning standards into the CoGrader tool. Though CoGrader was willing to help, teachers ultimately realized within a year that CoGrader's scoring was not as accurate as teachers' handscoring. Some teachers declined to use it and continue grading as they always have, relying on their own expertise rather than the new tool. The District did not renew CoGrader's contract, which would have cost another \$115,138 the following year.

In sum, a tool that did not function as promised cost the district over \$100,000 in just one year, and cost teachers and a TOSA time beyond their usual duties to integrate it into their work. The district already had the professional expertise of experienced teachers, and did not need to expend more on a product that would attempt to replicate that work, but less effectively. Instances like this create workload issues for our members, and also add indefensible cost pressures to districts. Had the contract been renewed, it would have taken those funds meant for students and improving instruction off the table on an ongoing basis, instead enriching an edtech company for producing an ineffective tool.

The same district indeed moved over \$500,000 away from teachers and staff in purchasing Virtual Reality headsets and a spatial learning platform, Prisms of Reality. Prisms markets itself as a platform that makes STEM more accessible to students, with content aligned with a variety of state learning standards, including NGSS (Next Generation Science Standards). Staff found that the activities/lessons in the Prisms platform actually did not align with standards, resulting in a very expensive "toy" in classrooms that required teachers to adjust instructional timelines and sequencing in order to make use of the headsets. Using the platform requires recurring costs of approximately \$250,000 per year for licenses, on top of the initial \$500,000 cost, and other auxiliary costs not factored into the district's planning.²⁰ Despite this spending, the number of headsets is just enough for one classroom per school in the district, and staff report problems in coordinating usage across sites. The contract with Prisms was decided upon by district management, while the logistics, instructional implementation, and upkeep have all fallen on the staff. These tools were purchased without a plan and without input from teachers and staff. All this is in a district that eliminated 14 positions in the same 2025-26 school year, citing budget

¹⁷ Jacka, M. (2026, May 13). Instructure dealing with Canvas cyberhackers a dangerous tactic, say experts. *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-05-14/instructure-dealing-with-canvas-cyberhackers-dangerous-tactic/106674686>

¹⁸ Rix, K. (2026, May 8). CSU students gain access to Canvas, UC still restricted. *EdSource*. <https://edsources.org/updates/university-of-california-csu-systems-restrict-canvas-access-after-hack>

¹⁹ Ravaglia, R. (2025, July 23). Instructure and OpenAI harness the power of AI to transform learning. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ravaglia/2025/07/23/instructure-and-openai-harness-the-power-of-ai-to-transform-learning/>

²⁰ For instance, shared headsets require sanitized supplies to clean them between student use, and controllers require ongoing battery replacement. These recurring out-of-pocket costs fall not on edtech vendors, but on already stretched school and classroom budgets, on top of staff time required to manage, store, and maintain equipment.

constraints.²¹ All significant technology purchases, especially AI platforms, must include a process for teacher/expert input to avoid glittery purchases without alignment with instructional priorities and teachers' professional judgment.

One notable finding is that CFT members generally do not worry as much that AI will replace them. Only a quarter (25%) of members strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement that “AI will replace me at work”, though 64% state it is extremely important for their union to be involved in ensuring that AI is used to support and not replace them. These views are those of professionals who know what they're doing, and who understand that their humanity and expertise are critical to students' learning and cannot be replicated with software. Instead, they are concerned about surveillance, as highlighted above. Plus, given the varying quality and, at best, questionable record of edtech, our members are concerned about its impacts on students, educational quality, and increased workload for little to no educational benefit.

Mixed effectiveness of edtech tools can create more work for teachers and staff

One value proposition and marketing claim of edtech companies is that their products can help save teachers time and accomplish their work more efficiently, while expanding learning opportunities for students. However, more and more examples of these tools presenting students with poor, irrelevant, inaccurate, and inappropriate materials surface every month.

In the case of Alpha School, a network of private schools that are largely driven by AI and have no human teachers (they have human “guides” but bill themselves as “AI-powered”), its AI tools are generating faulty lesson plans, and have been found to introduce hallucinations with illogical choices into more than 10% of multiple-choice questions generated for students' reading comprehension quizzes, rendering these quizzes unusable.^{22,23} Alpha School received praise from Linda McMahon, the U.S. Secretary of Education, who is also a billionaire, just like the school's investor and ambassador, Bill Ackman. At the same time, Alpha Schools' own internal documents remark that its own AI-generated lesson plans do “more harm than good”. Worse still, an investigation into the school found that the company collects massive amounts of data on students, including videos of them—and then stores them in Google Drive folders that anyone could access with a link.²⁴ Even at schools that do not integrate AI as thoroughly into their curricula, AI-generated mistakes like these create even more work for educators, who have to both learn a new software, and clean up after it.

As our own members know, AI seems unlikely to help students learn more effectively. In our member poll, 72% of respondents disagree that “AI helps students learn more effectively,” and 87% agree that “AI is harmful to students developing critical thinking skills,” as depicted in the figures below. Furthermore, 74% believe that AI is harmful to their students' mental health. These views are even more pronounced amongst educators in preK–12: 78% disagree that “AI helps students learn more effectively” and 77% believe that AI is harmful to their students' mental health. This trend reflects more serious concern for our younger and more vulnerable students. Growing evidence from educational and psychological research corroborates these concerns, finding negative impacts of AI on learning, memory, attention, and mental health, especially amongst younger students.²⁵

²¹ DeJarnette, J. (2026, February 25). Salinas Union High School District cuts 14 positions despite community protests. *KSBW*8. <https://www.ksbw.com/article/salinas-union-high-school-district-cuts-positions/70488032>

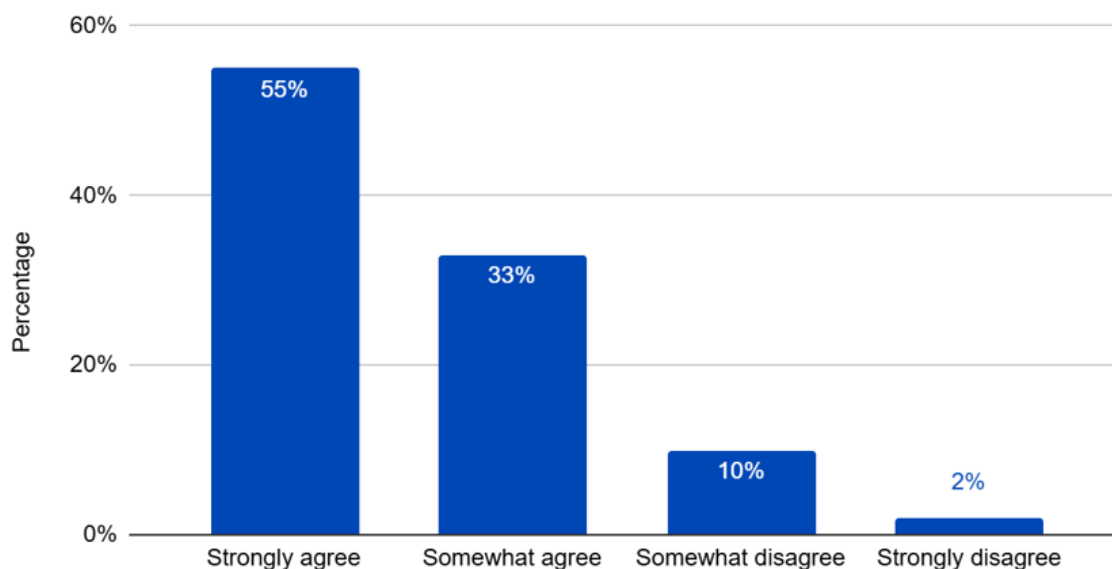
²² Nyce, C. M. (2024, June 14). *A generation of AI guinea pigs*. *The Atlantic*.

²³ Maiberg, E. (2026, February 17). *‘Students are being treated like guinea pigs.’ Inside an AI-powered private school*. *404Media*.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ E.g., Liberatore, et al. (2025). Artificial intelligence impacts in education and pediatric mental health. *Current Opinion in Pediatrics*; Skulmowski. (2023). The cognitive architecture of digital externalization. *Educational Psychology Review*. C.f., Burns et al. (2026). A new direction for students in an AI world. *Brookings*.

Most agree AI is harmful to students developing critical thinking skills



Few agree AI helps students learn more effectively

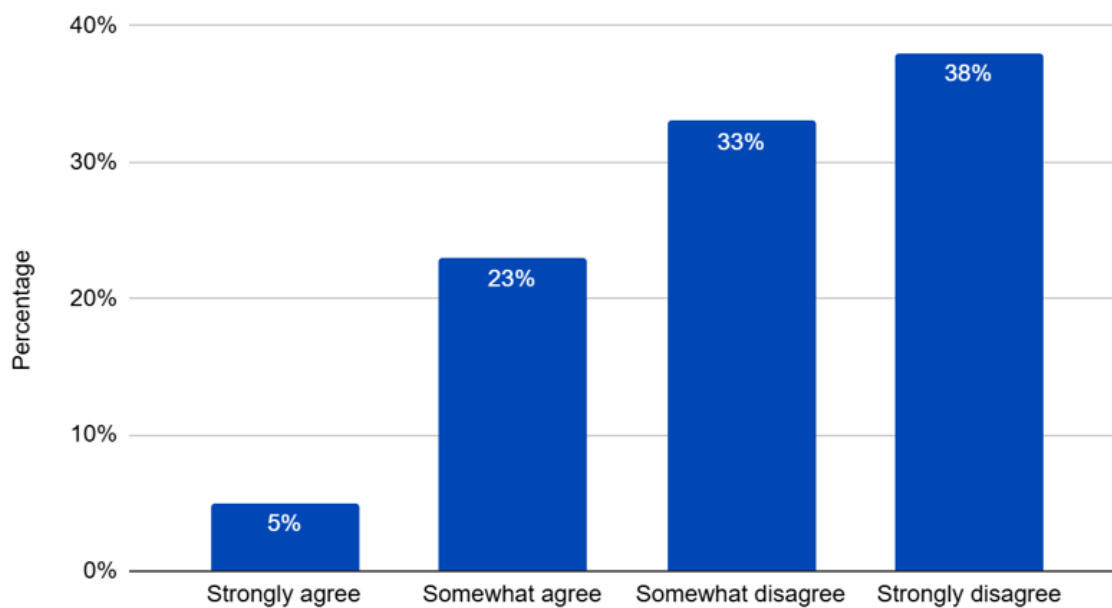


Figure 2a, 2b. *A majority of members disagree that AI helps students learn more effectively. An even larger majority believe that AI harms students developing critical thinking skills.*

AI companies have also expanded their product offerings to include features like generating individualized education plans (IEPs) for students. One report, from the Center for Democracy and Technology (CDT) found that more than half of special education teachers polled nationwide had reported using AI to help develop IEPs in the 2024-25 school year, and 15% used AI “to write an IEP and/or 504 plan in full”.²⁶ The report attributes this high rate of use to the extreme workload of special education teachers. Amidst staffing shortages in special education, some teachers feel that using AI to alleviate some of the work of writing IEPs helps them serve more students. Nonetheless, the report also expressed serious concern about data security, noting that districts need assurance that students’ personally identifying information will be destroyed when no longer needed, and that schools, not vendors, maintain direct control over this information.

Educators also express concern about the poor quality of IEPs generated by AI, and the potentially harmful implications for already vulnerable students. IEPs, are by definition, highly individualized, and AI programs are not capable of achieving individualization by themselves. Indeed, greater personalization would require inputting protected data into such programs, which could violate privacy regulations, and introduce further data security liabilities.²⁷ Furthermore, AI tools have long-documented issues with introducing racial biases into their output (because their models are trained on data collected from a world with widespread racial bias).²⁸ Indeed, as the CDT report asserts, AI should not be used to entirely write IEPs, no matter how helpful they are—and that the process must always have a “human in the loop”.

Good education requires humans, and students deserve to be taught by real people. AI is liable to make mistakes that would be obvious to experienced, expert professionals. In cases where AI technologies have already been integrated in the classrooms, our members believe that to best serve their students, they must be empowered to override AI.

Member concern #3: No AI bosses

Edtech companies develop AI tools with powerful capacities to monitor workers and suggest managerial decisions. School administrators’ use of such features directly threatens teacher agency and autonomy. Across sectors, new AI technology is enabling and expanding electronic monitoring, algorithmic management (which introduces algorithmic bias, and which has included automated firing of workers), and automated management decisions about workers based on protected statuses.²⁹

As discussed above, our research shows educators are not as worried about AI taking their jobs as they are of it policing them in their workplace.³⁰ At LACCD, staff report that AI tools have crept into essential software platforms they use for work, resulting in more extensive monitoring than one would have anticipated when approving a contract for a vendor. These include reminders from Microsoft Teams to return to one’s desk if someone’s laptop detects no camera activity after a few minutes. When 9 out of 10 members say they want CFT to advocate for protections from monitoring and surveillance using AI, they have examples like this in mind.

While vendors introduce more capacity for surveillance through software updates, employers decide what policies to implement. One concern is that employers will use AI-powered monitoring to make workers work harder, rather than adequately staff their schools. This requires companies to insert new AI surveillance features in the software used for core work functions, and supervisors to use these features in automating or expanding their control over workers. Members will need protections against both.

²⁶ Gilban-Cohen, J. (2025, November 11). AI gains ground in special ed, raising legal and ethical concerns. *Government Technology*. <https://www.govtech.com/education/k-12/ai-gains-ground-in-special-ed-raises-legal-and-ethical-concerns>

Aboulafia, A. (2025, October). *From personalized to programmed: The use of Generative AI to develop individualized education programs for students with disabilities*. Center for Democracy & Technology.

²⁷ King, S. (2026, January 30). Short on resources, special educators are using AI—with little knowledge of the effects. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/short-on-resources-special-educators-are-using-ai-with-little-knowledge-of-the-effects-259110>

An opportunity for California to set a bold agenda and gold standards for AI in education

Our students and schools need solutions now. Facing rapid developments in edtech, policymakers are working to develop guardrails that fit the evolving structure and capabilities of the sector. Though the technology is constantly adapting, making its regulation a moving target, there are core principles that can guide this process: first, schools and colleges must protect student and teacher privacy with provisions for greater data security (especially when third-party vendors are involved), and second, AI technologies must not override the agency and professional expertise of teachers and staff. These core principles will not change, though our application of them will adapt to emerging issues in this area.

CFT strongly supports regulations limiting the use of data collected or transmitted by edtech products. These can include age-appropriate guidelines for use, accountability mechanisms (e.g., a review board) to monitor data collection for trends and any abuse or misuse therein. Other protections may include remedies for data breaches, and accountability for vendors whose products are implicated in data breaches.

Furthermore, workers and students should have the right to opt out of use of AI tools, such as recording video meetings, or AI-generated summaries, and furthermore should retain ownership of their own likeness and voice. These highly personal pieces of information should not be used to train models for vendors' benefit or profit or to surveil or punish teachers or students. A bill CFT is currently supporting, AB 1159, will hopefully expand privacy protections for all students (from early education to higher education) and, among several other protections, will prohibit vendors from training or developing AI systems, or engaging in targeted advertising, with student data. We will continue to fight for expanded protections to students' rights to privacy.

Human-in-the-loop laws

Human-in-the-loop policies establish rules for how workers interact with technology, and that a human has "ultimate decision-making authority when digital technologies are used in the workplace."³¹ Critical provisions of such policies include: the right of workers to have sufficient resources and time to review decisions made by algorithms, and the right to deny, modify, or override decisions made by AI without retaliation.

In the last two years, several such human-in-the-loop laws have been passed across many sectors, and many states. One example we take inspiration from is Oklahoma's recently passed Senate Bill 1734, which bans AI tools as the "primary basis for student grading, discipline, placement...or other high-stakes educational decisions," and mandates that "Outputs generated by [AI] shall be reviewed by an educator or authorized school employee prior to use in instruction, feedback, assessment, or decision-making."³² California, however, has yet to provide comprehensive policy in this space, though in 2026, AB 2575 establishes such human-in-the-loop policy in health care services. It defines a scope of practice for health care workers, and empowers them to override AI within that scope, without fear of retaliation from an employer. Similarly, AB 1979 requires health facilities, clinics, and similar offices to ensure that health care professionals retain "the ability to exercise independent professional judgement in their care of a patient whenever that care is informed by the output of a clinical decision support system [e.g., AI]". Meanwhile, SB 947 would require human oversight and

²⁸ E.g., Noble, S. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression*. NYU Press. See also: Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race After Technology*. Polity Press.

²⁹ E.g., Wiessner, D. (2026, July 14). Meta used AI to target workers with medical conditions for layoffs, lawsuit claims. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/meta-used-ai-target-workers-with-medical-conditions-layoffs-former-employees-2026-07-14/>

³⁰ See also: National Employment Law Project. (2025, July 15). *When 'bossware' manages workers: A policy agenda to stop digital surveillance and automated-decision-system abuses*.

³¹ Khan, M. & Bernhardt, A. (2025). *The current landscape of tech and work policy in the U.S.: A guide to key laws, bills, and concepts*. <https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/tech-and-work-policy-guide/>

³² OK SB 1734. (2026). https://www.oklegislature.gov/cf_pdf/2025-26%20ENR/SB/SB1734%20ENR.PDF

corroborating evidence if an algorithm is used in disciplinary or termination decisions at work, requiring a human-in-the-loop on the management side. To date, none of these policies have been signed into law.

With numerous examples of AI-driven edtech producing inaccurate or inappropriate material, whether to teachers (e.g., in grading or IEPs), or to students (in learning materials), it is critical that similar protections are enacted in the education sector. Educators and classified professional staff everywhere should have the right to override any such misstep by edtech. CFT strongly supports policies that uphold educators' autonomy, such as applying human-in-the-loop provisions to any edtech brought into the classroom.

Human-in-the-loop laws are one start, and form part of a growing body of law governing the use of AI. Furthermore, recognizing that the introduction of new technologies costs training time, CFT supports additional measures to provide paid professional development for educational professionals on use of AI generally, and on specific edtech tools. Similarly, CFT calls for greater accountability and oversight of school and community college districts' procurement of edtech tools: teachers, staff, students, and parents all deserve to be at the table in approving AI technologies that will be used to in the classroom.^{33,34} As the body of law governing the use of AI grows, we will return with comprehensive language to retain teacher agency and protect students' learning and health, and equip our schools and communities to define the parameters of AI's use in the classroom.

Conclusion

Developments in AI have taken an ever-accelerating pace, and its broad integration into education brings many new challenges in regulations to protect students, educators, and staff, as well as the integrity of schools, colleges, and universities. These are made all the more urgent by already existing problems with edtech, and the private interests that compel further expansion of AI in these domains. Our research highlights the frontline perspectives of educators and school staff—whether they are skeptical of or embrace AI in general, they have common and prevailing reservations about its impact for students and their education. They affirm that the tools for teaching, no matter their promise, should not come at the cost of the basic fundamentals of a good education: where our members' professional expertise should remain at the forefront, not overridden by the designs of third-party vendors.

More broadly, skepticism is abundant even amongst experts and proponents of further integrating AI into edtech and the infrastructure of our education systems more generally. The global head of Education Learning and Advocacy at Adobe, which has integrated AI thoroughly into its product line, including its offerings for clients in the education sector, told the New York Times, “No one knows what it’s [i.e., AI in education] going to look like [...] and if they say they do, they are highly overconfident.”³⁵ Educators who are on the front line of this warp-speed experiment with AI know this to be true, and they want their union to amplify their voices, and bring their concerns and experiences to policymakers, before the scale of AI's impacts grows any larger.

Students and workers will fight to protect our classrooms from edtech profit motives, and California is at a juncture where it can set strong precedents and establish sensible guardrails on this new technology. Legislators need to act. CFT will continue to do everything in our power to protect data privacy and autonomy for students, teachers, and staff, as AI technology and the issues that arise from it keep developing.

³³ CFT AI Task Force (2024, September). *Call to Action*.

³⁴ See also: EdSource. (2026, July 30). [Chico Unified board mistakenly OKs AI-controlled cameras in schools](#). EdSource.

³⁵ Kintler, L. (2026, June 1). [A university system went all in on A.I. Now it's tearing itself apart](#). *The New York Times*.

