

Devices down, eyes up, hands-on:

10 points to boost student learning and success in the AI era

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Introduction

We are in an era of massive disruption.

Artificial intelligence is triggering seismic shifts in virtually every aspect of society. The affordability crisis is squeezing working- and middle-class families and pushing those living in poverty over the edge. Addictive technology and social media platforms are deepening anxiety and depression—especially among our youth. People with enormous resources and power are stoking division. And the democracy we have built over 250 years is being assaulted from within.

Teachers are no strangers to disruption; we're often the first responders to it. Time and again, teachers provide stability amid chaos, and the human connection which is at the heart of the student-teacher relationship. We help our students navigate a changing world. But this turbulent moment requires a concerted *national* response to prepare our young people for life's opportunities and challenges.

Public education in the United States has always been a state and local responsibility. But the federal government has a unique and vital role to play. When the federal government is doing its job, it helps level the playing field by providing funding and support for low-income students and those with disabilities; it enforces civil rights laws, supports college- and career-readiness programs, and oversees research into the best education practices. But the Trump administration is walking away from those core responsibilities. And by slashing funds children rely on for food, healthcare, housing and mental health services, it is not only undermining students' well-being: It is threatening the survival of untold thousands.

This administration is actively undermining public education—from its massive new federal school tax credit, to its constant attempts to gut education funding and civil rights, to pushing private school voucher programs that hollow out public schools. It is more focused on erasing history, punishing people with student debt and stripping the Department of Education for parts, than on helping every child thrive. It is certainly not articulating a vision for how to prepare students to succeed in this new world.

It's not just the president and his fellow Republicans who are to blame. While Democrats are still among the strongest advocates of strengthening public education, too few Democratic leaders speak clearly about the fundamental importance of public education as a national priority. And too many want to resurrect the failures of high-stakes testing, are pushing privatization or are frankly AWOL from efforts to make public schools, which 90 percent of American children attend, the very best they can be.

A Strong Foundation for Students in a Changing World

So today, I present a vision for America's public schools to provide a strong foundation for our children in this changing world. It's informed by listening to and learning from parents, educators, students, researchers, and business and community leaders, and by countless school visits here and abroad. It's one I hope both Democrats and Republicans will adopt.

Whatever the future holds for students, they need:

- A broad base of foundational knowledge, starting with literacy and numeracy skills.
- Curriculum that is relevant, engaging and fosters curiosity, including subjects like the arts, athletics and civics.
- An emphasis on active learning through meaningful projects and opportunities to apply knowledge in ways that connect learning to real life.
- Safe and welcoming classrooms and campuses where young people feel seen, supported and ready to learn. That includes promoting well-being and protecting students from gun violence, immigration raids and bullying.

These basics equip students for the deeper learning and problem-solving that will be crucial throughout their lives. They help make students more confident and more engaged learners. It's how we promote curiosity and critical thinking and ensure all our students have the agency and persistence they need to confront challenges.

I want to underscore why laying this foundation is urgently needed.

Our students are already feeling the impacts of this disruption. Young people are resilient, but too often, the kids are not all right. A major reason is that they are drowning in tech.

When I started teaching in the '90s, education technology was just being introduced. School computers were glorified typewriters with no internet connection. Students had to go to the office to make a phone call. In the 2010s, many schools began providing laptops to students; in this decade, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the tech takeover. Today, many school systems provide every student—some as young as 5—with a device. More than half of 11-year-olds have a smartphone ever-ready at their fingertips, soaring to 95 percent of 13- to 17-year-olds. Four in 10 teens say they are online "almost constantly." The pace of this tech revolution has been blisteringly fast—and kids are getting burned.

As professor and author of *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt, says, cellphones and social media are making our kids sedentary, solitary, anxious and depressed. On top of that, there are growing concerns about the adverse effects of all this tech on students' cognition, attention and achievement.

Jared Cooney Horvath, a leading neuroscientist, recently analyzed how reading and math trends shifted after state-by-state expansion of education technology. Prior to large-scale digital adoption, fourth and eighth graders' scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress had been rising steadily for years. After adoption, the trajectory shifted, often sharply, toward decline. Correlation is not causation, but Horvath cites research indicating that this pattern appears across states, countries, grade levels, subjects and years. The recently released Education Scorecard, which draws on a huge amount of student data, identifies the same correlation.

And in this era of TikTok and YouTube, which drive rapid shifts of attention, there is growing concern about students' ability to sustain focus and to persist through challenging learning tasks. In one survey of 3,000 teachers, 88 percent reported that their students' attention spans were getting shorter.

Cognitive scientist Dan Willingham notes that it's not that students can't pay attention, but likely that they are less *willing* to pay attention. They are so accustomed to the immediate rewards they get online that they find schoolwork comparatively boring. Fortunately, that's a problem we can deal with.

But before we turn to solutions, we need to talk about artificial intelligence. We are at a crossroads that will define the future of work and society. Without proper oversight and strong guardrails, there will be real dangers to our safety and privacy, to the climate and the very fabric of society.

One thing the AI revolution does not change is the essential purpose of education: teaching students how to think, how to connect, and giving them enough knowledge to do both well.

In fact, the ubiquity of AI makes critical thinking and applying knowledge even more important. Students need to go beyond memorizing facts and learn how to verify them, challenge them and synthesize them into new ideas. Some of the most valuable skills in the AI age—like problem-solving, communication, collaboration, adaptability and ethical judgment—depend on the ability to apply knowledge. But AI is increasing so-called cognitive offloading; rather than working through a challenge, students can turn to an AI chatbot for an effortless answer.

Research has established that less tech can produce better outcomes. For example, people learn more from hard-copy than digital text and by taking notes on paper. And learning is a deeply human endeavor; the student-teacher relationship produces one of the largest effects in educational research. Yet best practices in education, brain research and the science of learning too often take a backseat to market forces and political influence. The global education technology market was estimated at \$187 billion in 2025, and the industry is seeking more. And that's just ed tech, not all tech.

And they have friends at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. The Trump administration has given Big Tech carte blanche. And Melania Trump's White House stroll with the humanoid robot to tout using robots to replace teachers spoke volumes. So did the responses from teachers wondering how a robot was going to build trust with students or know when someone was having a bad day. There's no algorithm for that. Students need their teachers—real human beings, not robots and not chatbots. Remember Michelle Rhee? She couldn't reduce teachers to algorithms, and Melania Trump will not replace teachers with robots.

I'm not calling for an AI ban or a Chromebook bonfire. What I am calling for is getting the balance right to harness the benefits of technology while mitigating the harms. I'm wary of the dangers of AI, but it is here to stay. We need enforceable guardrails and help to cushion the disruption to people's

lives. But that's not enough. It is equally essential to make sure educators understand AI and have a say in its use in education and our profession.

That's why the AFT created the National Academy for AI Instruction last year, to help teachers master AI so that AI doesn't master them. It's a training hub designed and run by educators, grounded in trust, safety and people-first technology. It builds on the work our members did starting after ChatGPT was first announced to develop and continuously update the AFT's "Commonsense Guardrails for Using Advanced Technology in Schools."

Parents must have a real say, as well. They know firsthand the impacts of social media and other technology on their children. Together with parent groups, we released our "Likes vs. Learning" report with clear principles to keep children safe on social media and protect their privacy. And we continue to work with these groups for policy changes to protect children.

A New Vision to Boost Teaching and Learning in the AI Era

Today I am proposing a 10-point plan addressing all of this, to boost student learning and success in the age of AI:

1. No screens (including online assessments) for students in prekindergarten through second grade, unless there is a compelling reason, such as to most effectively support a student with special needs.
2. No student-facing AI in elementary schools—not only to prevent harm, but to build children's skills like relationship-building and persistence. All other student-facing AI, including digital literacy efforts, must be supervised by educators. And until at least age 16, there should be a total ban on so-called "social companion" chatbots, computer programs that simulate human relationships.
3. Redesign schooling so active learning, including project-based, experiential and career-connected learning, is the norm across all grade levels. That means redesigning accountability as well.
4. Ensure students have a solid foundation in literacy, numeracy and civic engagement.
5. Focus on well-being, so that students and their families have their basic needs met and students are prepared to learn, as community schools do so successfully.
6. Protect intellectual property and academic freedom, and support educators to understand, effectively use and make classroom-based decisions about technology integration.
7. Establish a new gold standard for safety and privacy for the use of AI in schools. Providers that cannot meet these requirements should not be eligible to serve K-12 education.
8. Establish an independent research consortium to build a strong knowledge base for effective education practices that can be sustained and scaled. The research should include the effects of AI, screens and technology on students, and should not be paid for by the industries whose products are being researched.

9. Ensure adequate funding of education by states and the federal government. This means reversing the trend of disinvestment since the Great Recession and targeting funding to level the playing field and promote opportunity for all students—and not letting AI and vouchers further defund public education.
10. A “tech tax” on Big Tech’s earnings and on some business operations, to ensure they pay their fair share for the adverse and disruptive consequences of this technology on American families, such as workers being displaced by AI.

Ten points. To ensure our students are prepared for the future, we need a “devices-down, eyes-up, hands-on” strategy.

We are on the threshold of a staggering shake-up of society. Who will pay for this massive AI disruption? The 16,000 workers estimated to lose their jobs each month? Retirees whose spiking energy bills eat up more of their fixed incomes? Who will pay for the harms to the environment—from toxic waste to greenhouse gas emissions to grid strain to water shortages that threaten to make our taps run dry? A tech tax would ensure that Big Tech companies pay their fair share for the adverse consequences of AI. The tax could be on earnings, some business operations, hardware or data processing.

Artificial intelligence is accelerating the steepest upward transfer of wealth in modern history. Tech titans are amassing mind-blowing wealth, while ordinary people are paying enormous costs for living in the AI age. Tech kingpins and corporations can afford to pay a fair tech tax; workers, communities and the earth can’t afford for them not to.

The guardrails and other protections that can help cushion the disruption are vital. The safety and privacy concerns are obvious, as is (or should be) the need to protect intellectual property and academic freedom for faculty and so many others. The federal government must update intellectual property laws to protect human-generated work, and employers must protect workers’ intellectual property in contracts they negotiate with AI companies.

The AFL-CIO has proposed a bold AI agenda to harness the benefits of technological change while preventing the annihilation of countless workers’ jobs. We support our federation’s recommendations.

No less an authority than Pope Leo this week warned that AI must serve humanity, not the powerful few. Leo condemned the use of AI in warfare, and he underscored that teaching and learning are human endeavors. He wrote that schools offer what “the digital sphere by itself cannot provide, namely a shared time for learning and developing trustworthy relationships.”

That vision underscores key aspects of our devices-down, eyes-up, hands-on 10-point plan. Some of what I’ve laid out is already starting to take hold.

Take the bans on phones during the school day, which we support and which 31 states have implemented. What are educators seeing? That kids are noticeably more engaged, and hallways and lunchrooms bustle with chatter and laughter again now that students aren’t heads-down, eyes on their phones.

One year into its bell-to-bell cellphone ban, Dallas schools are seeing a 24 percent increase in library book checkouts. Imagine if kids started reading whole books again.

After years of promoting classroom technology, last month the Los Angeles Unified School District initiated a sharp reversal. Screens are prohibited for students in kindergarten and first grade, and usage is capped for older students.

Several countries that pioneered the shift to ed tech are reversing course after precipitous drops in student achievement. Sweden is shifting back to printed textbooks and limiting screens. In Estonia, research showed that higher screen time for young children was associated with diminished language skills; they're calling for more human-to-human interaction. And Italy has returned to emphasizing handwriting, paper materials and traditional teaching methods.

And now at least some Trump officials, like the acting surgeon general, are issuing warnings that too much screen time for children is a public health concern.

Intentional or not, all this tech has been a huge experiment on kids, and experiments can go wrong. We need to take stock so we can do what we know is right. But teachers, parents and school districts cannot manage the tech juggernaut on our own.

And yet, with this administration, we *are* on our own. I'm not a detective, but I see some clues that there's a connection between the Trump administration's laissez-faire approach to addressing the harms of technology and the tech titans who are funding the president's ballroom, presidential library and political action committees.

Laissez-faire doesn't cut it, given the shockwaves AI is setting off. That is why, in the absence of federal legislation, we are working through our AI Academy to negotiate a gold standard that sets out industry best practices for safety and privacy in the use of AI in schools. We are seeking a binding agreement between America's K-12 schools and any provider that offers AI-driven services to educators or students. Companies that refuse to abide by such a standard must be prohibited from working in our schools.

Microsoft, OpenAI and Anthropic—our partners in the AI Academy—have agreed in principle to our overarching tenets and standards. But as any negotiator knows, it's not done until it's done.

Our 10-point plan also calls for a research consortium. It simply does not make any sense for the 50 states, or the 13,000 school districts in the U.S., to each research the most effective reading strategies, or how much and what type of screen time is appropriate for children at various ages.

It does make sense for the federal government to do this—as our country has done historically in healthcare, science and, at times, education—but the Trump administration refuses. It has decimated the research arm of the Education Department. It has even refused to distribute \$289 million appropriated by Congress for education research.

We need deep research to guide us to scalable and sustainable solutions. So why not launch a research consortium, independent from politics and industry? Maybe it's a brand-new entity with pooled public and philanthropic funding. Or maybe it's the Institute for Education Sciences, as President George W. Bush originally conceived, giving contracts to high-quality researchers and projects. I'd put the impact of screens, tech and AI at the top of that list.

Research already attests to the value of engaged and active learning. It's a pedagogy we know works, especially when students are solving real-world problems and receiving meaningful feedback. And in the AI era, it is more important than ever.

John Dewey was a pioneering advocate of learning by doing. He believed the most effective education was about not just imparting information to students but also actively engaging students with their environments and real-world situations.

Today this learning goes by many names: active, project-based or experiential. Whatever we call it, it works. And it needs to be the way every student can learn, in an age-appropriate way in every grade.

This does not replace the need for a broad foundation of knowledge starting with literacy and numeracy. But today, students need a new set of basics built on the ability to think critically, communicate, collaborate and apply knowledge.

When so much information is only a prompt away, *acquiring* trustworthy knowledge is just the first step. To be useful, that knowledge must be *applied*. Still, successful application of knowledge is just the second step. To really prepare young people for complex challenges, our true goal is to have students who can work together and problem solve. They must be able to pool their collective knowledge, strengths and perspectives, because today's problems are greater than each of us, but they are not greater than the sum of us.

So the crux of this 10-point plan is what this will look like at the school level. What happens when we put devices down? What does "eyes up, hands-on" really mean?

It means prioritizing active learning through meaningful projects—which can range from students creating an eco-friendly garden, to planning and budgeting for a school event, to developing a policy solution to a local issue and presenting it to town officials, to keeping a diary from the perspective of a historical figure. From play for our littlest ones, to debate for older kids, to music and art for all—this is meaningful learning.

When I was a civics teacher at Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn, N.Y., my students and I delved into all sorts of lessons—about the Bill of Rights, efforts to change the Constitution such as the women's suffrage movement, and lessons about street law. They memorized plenty of important information. But where they really shined was in applying their knowledge and in collaborating with each other, like in We the People debate competitions.

This kind of learning is the opposite of drill-and-kill, of students memorizing and regurgitating content. And active learning is the antidote to cognitive offloading—that is, outsourcing thinking to AI.

Where active learning is the norm is career and technical education. CTE is learning by doing. It prepares high school students for both higher education and in-demand career pathways. They do this in places like Thomas A. Edison CTE High School and the Harbor School in New York, RioTECH in New Mexico, the New Lexington School District in Ohio, and the countless other great career-connected learning programs I have visited. Students engage in programs from skilled trades to healthcare to advanced manufacturing. They take part in internships and work-based learning, they receive industry certification in their areas of study, and many earn college credits.

I recently had an incredible full-circle moment. In 2016, Westinghouse Academy in Pittsburgh was threatened with closure. The AFT, through our Innovation Fund, gave the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers a grant to work with the district to start an emergency medical services program at Westinghouse. I recently returned to Westinghouse; today it's thriving and offering students pathways into firefighting, law enforcement and EMS.

CTE students build things. They troubleshoot and fix things. They work in teams. They can explain what they're doing and why they're doing it. No wonder they have great job prospects, whether or not they go to college.

This is why the AFT is such an evangelist for career-connected learning. More than 90 percent of students who concentrate in CTE graduate, and about three-quarters of them continue their education after high school. This pedagogy prepares students as much for college as it does for career. Let's make it the norm for all students.

The rethinking of teaching and learning I have described today must be accompanied by a rethinking of the accountability systems we use to measure our students' progress.

Career-connected education and other types of active learning are suited to assessment by doing—via portfolios, capstone projects or performances, or by living civics the way I taught my students.

But for schools to integrate active learning, accountability systems have to be designed to assess such learning—and to incentivize it. No Child Left Behind's best legacy was to highlight systemic disparities in our extremely diverse country. But the standardized, narrow content assessments it relied on don't help with this challenge. On their own, standardized tests are of little use for school improvement, much less for the teaching and learning of individual students.

For more than 25 years, the New York Performance Standards Consortium has been a shining example of rigorous, relevant assessment at the school level. More recently, the School Superintendents Association has been working to help districts measure what matters. The bipartisan reauthorization of federal education laws led by Sens. Lamar Alexander and Patty Murray was a good first step in giving states the freedom to pursue this. And now, more than 20 states have frameworks for their graduates to measure something meaningful beyond test scores. But there is much more to be done if we are to have assessment and accountability systems that measure and support the active learning I think we all want for our young people.

Addressing Student Well-Being and Investing in Students and Schools

Well-being and readiness to learn go hand in hand with active learning, starting with creating an environment that is safe and welcoming.

Brain science tells us that kids can't learn unless they feel safe, and unless school is a welcoming environment where they feel they belong. Students can't learn if they are hungry, or coping with stress from home, or don't *have* a home. One way to support student and family needs is through community schools, which connect services and activities to the school itself. Like the Oyler Community Learning Center in Cincinnati, a long-established community school that has continuously evolved to meet the needs of its community. The nearby Oyler House community center has tackled the local housing crisis by working with banks, developers and Habitat for Humanity to get families into homes. It has an onsite health center that provides students and the community with mental and physical health services. The school's graduation readiness program has helped it achieve among the best graduation and college acceptance rates in Ohio.

This is why I keep repeating the same proposal I made in my first speech as AFT president, 18 years ago—a vast expansion of community schools. Since then, the AFT has supported more than 1,000 community schools.

The results speak for themselves. Multiple studies show that community schools reduce chronic absenteeism, improve discipline rates and increase academic achievement—including robust outcomes for students of color and English language learners. And community schools produce among the best returns on investment in the research record—an average of \$7 to \$15 for every \$1 spent. And they are places that students, educators and families want to be.

Speaking of investment, over the past 20 years, study after study has shown that money matters in education, and it matters a lot; investment in schools improves student outcomes, while funding cuts hurt those outcomes. Yet 42 states devote a smaller share of their economies to their K-12 public schools than they did in 2006, representing a loss of hundreds of billions of dollars. This disinvestment is particularly acute in states such as Arizona, Florida and Texas, where recent voucher expansions will exacerbate the cycle of underfunding and underachievement. And it's worse in higher education.

We must stop the runaway train that private school vouchers are becoming. Vouchers have produced some of the largest declines in student learning in the research record. They take vital funding away from students in public schools. And they divert taxpayer dollars to wealthy families and families whose children never attended public schools. These facts are well-established by independent research. But voucher proponents are not deterred.

Florida's voucher program, for example, diverts \$5 billion in public tax dollars from kids in public schools each year. The state already ranks among the bottom 10 for per-student spending. Our Florida affiliate recently filed a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the state's voucher program, including the fact that the state has not held nonpublic schools to the same standards and oversight.

At the federal level, Trump's school tax credit could cost taxpayers more than \$50 billion a year. That's double what the federal government spends on helping poor kids and students with disabilities.

I've covered a lot of priorities today. But these aren't the only things we should be doing.

This should go without saying, but we need to follow best educational practices everywhere, such as the science of reading. That includes learning from consistent top performers like Massachusetts and New Jersey, and from the more recent successes in Mississippi and Louisiana.

Another given is that we must increase educators' salaries, which remain woefully low. That includes the assistants and aides who are the backbone of helping students with disabilities. And we must reduce class sizes, which remain incredibly high.

Supporting the public schools that 90 percent of America's students attend should be a bipartisan priority. We have tried to engage President Trump and his secretary of education. Last December, I sent the president a letter suggesting that we work together on an area I believed we both prioritized—CTE. He didn't bother to respond.

The Urgent Need to Revitalize and Reimagine Public Schools to Help All Students Thrive

I wish this administration cared about this crucial moment for our children, but it doesn't, and we can't wait. The vision I've laid out today still can be realized in every district in every state across our country. And the AFT—and America's educators, healthcare workers and public employees—will be willing partners with anyone who will join us in helping our students thrive during this transformational moment.

As we celebrate the 250th anniversary of our nation, public schools remain—as the founders argued—essential to forging a pluralistic, unified nation that is stronger tomorrow than today. Indeed, I just wrote a book about this. By bringing together children of different races, religions, languages and cultures, public school classrooms are laboratories of democracy that forge bonds and bridge our differences—if we support and nourish them.

The 10-point plan I laid out today is grounded in what I've witnessed firsthand over the last three decades. The plan addresses the enormity of the tech earthquake, dealing with screens and student-facing AI; creating an enforceable privacy standard for the use of AI in schools; calling for deep, classroom-relevant research in education; insisting on protections for intellectual property and academic freedom; and demanding a tech tax to compensate the country for the consequences.

We need a relentless, intentional focus on what our young people need: greater literacy, numeracy and civic engagement, and active learning that excites and engages them—all while ensuring their social and mental well-being and ability to form healthy relationships. Devices down, eyes up, hands-on.

Parents want their kids to be engaged and well-prepared. Young people want school to be relevant and interesting. Employers are desperate for talent. And America is crying out for a unifying vision.

America's teachers—as they always have—are doing noble work; they're showing up every day to help young people realize their potential and build our collective future. Today's students will be the ones who heal, help and lead us. They will be the environmental stewards, the innovators, the artists, the first responders and the teachers of tomorrow. The other side is trying to exploit the current crisis to destroy public education and pluralism as we know it. We have a different vision: to revitalize and reimagine public schools so every one of our students can harness their future and build the country they dream of.