Agency in the Algorithm

How K-12 Districts and Advocacy Organizations Can Build Parent Voice on Artificial Intelligence

By Linea Harding, Michelle Croft, Mark Baxter, Amy Chen Kulesa, Mary K. Wells, and Juliet Squire

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Executive Summary

Artificial intelligence (AI) is already shaping how children learn, socialize, and are supported in their learning, but most parents have not been meaningfully brought into decisions about how it is used at school. Drawing on interviews with researchers, parent advocates, and district leaders, this report surfaces patterns in what families are experiencing and offers early principles for districts and advocacy organizations to build parent voice while there is still time to shape, rather than react to, how AI is used in schools. Four patterns stood out, along with what they suggest for how districts and organizations can respond:

- Families are not entering the AI conversation from the same starting point, and ignoring those differences risks deepening existing inequities.
- Parents are motivated to engage with AI in schools but need concrete pathways to move from concern to action.
- Parents need the agency to shape schools' AI decisions and provide real support for navigating AI use at home.
- A handful of districts and organizations are already testing new models and ideas for bringing parents into AI decision-making.

Introduction

Charlotte, the parent of a second grader, asks her daughter what they worked on in school today and learns that her child has been using a chatbot.* As she asks more questions, her concern grows. It is not just that the tool was used without her knowledge, but that her daughter describes it as a friend and may have shared private information with it. Anthony, another parent, notices that his teenager, who has been struggling in math, is suddenly more confident and improving in his statistics class. When he asks about it, his son pulls up an app and gets a little defensive before explaining that he had been using AI at home to break down problems in ways that finally made sense to him. Anthony is not sure whether to feel relieved or unsettled; he is happy the concepts are clicking for his son but had not known about the AI use, and he does not know if the school does either. These two parents are encountering different sides of the same issue: AI is already shaping children's learning and lives, but parents often see only fragments of where it is showing up in K-12, how it is being used, and what questions different uses raise.

AI is not a single tool families can choose to open. Instead, it is a layer built into many of the digital products they already use. It may sit behind a school learning management system, help a teacher draft an email, generate feedback for a student on a math problem, summarize search results, enhance a selfie, or suggest how a teenager might respond to a conflict with a friend. For parents, the challenge is not simply learning the name of one new app. It is understanding how AI is becoming part of the systems, platforms, and routines that shape children's learning, privacy, relationships, and future opportunities — often in ways that are difficult to see.

Teachers and students are not waiting for schools to decide which AI tools are best and what the acceptable use cases are. In a RAND survey, 53% of English language arts, math, and science teachers reported using AI for instructional planning or teaching during the 2024-25 school year (SY); in a separate survey, 58% of principals reported using it for tasks such as writing communications and developing school policies.[1] Even where these uses do not involve students directly, they shape children's educational experiences and raise questions about transparency, data use, and human judgment.

***Note**: *Names and anecdotes are fictional but reflect real parent experiences and challenges Bellwether authors heard from advocates, school leaders, and other stakeholders in interviews.*

On the student side, roughly two-thirds of teens reported using AI chatbots in 2025, with about 30% doing so daily.[2] Teens are increasingly using AI for homework help,[3] but a meaningful share are also turning to AI for emotional support and companionship. Sixteen percent of teens report using AI chatbots for casual conversation, and 10% to 18% use them for emotional support or advice.[4] Younger children are also using generative AI. A 2026 study of U.S. youth found that roughly 1 in 5 preteens ages 10 to 12 (20.5%) and nearly 1 in 10 school-age children ages 8 to 9 (9.4%) reported using generative AI apps on their devices, despite most major platforms prohibiting use by those under age 13.[5]

Parent input has always mattered in a child's education, but the rise of AI tools makes it even more important for schools and districts to proactively engage with families. Federal and state policymakers are already debating rules for AI in education, companion chatbots, deepfakes, privacy, and AI literacy.[6] District leaders who moved fast on AI without community buy-in are now pulling back due to pushback from parents and community members.[7] This is part of a growing "techlash" across the country, as families resist the swift and widespread adoption of technology in schools.[8] The backlash draws on a growing body of research linking heavy screen use to concerns about executive functioning, academic performance, mental health, and child development;[9] a widespread sense that schools adopted ed tech faster than the evidence warranted;[10] and more recent alarm about AI tools and the risks they pose to privacy, academic integrity, and human connection.[11]

National surveys of parents indicate that they want to be involved in this process,[12] but 57% say they have not been asked for input or feedback on AI tools in schools.[13] When schools bring parents into the conversation, families can push for guardrails on high-risk tools, ask how tools tie to teacher-led lesson units, advocate for equitable access to beneficial tools, and help establish shared norms about appropriate AI use at home. Schools that wait for others to frame the AI conversation for parents risk ceding that ground to organizations whose priorities may not align with the district's goals. The current screen time debate is an immediate precedent (Sidebar 1). Parents are already organizing around children's tech use, and AI is only adding to their concern and urgency.

The all-or-nothing approach to AI, although more straightforward, does not adequately set up students for success. **The stronger path is to equip parents with the information and agency they need to weigh in effectively as AI becomes part of children's learning and lives.** For districts and advocacy organizations, that means meeting parents where they are, building shared understanding, and bringing parent voice into decisions about AI policy and use early enough to matter.

About This Report

This report is intended to help districts and advocacy organizations understand how to meaningfully engage parents in the K-12 AI conversation. From April to June 2026, Bellwether spoke with researchers, current and former district staff, parent advocates, and organizational leaders across the country to learn more about what effective parent engagement on AI looks like and what parents most need to understand about AI in their child's life.

Interviewees included representatives from Common Sense Media, DC Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE), National Parents Union (NPU), Parent Shield Fort Worth, Learning Heroes, the Rithm Project, the Stanford Accelerator for Learning, and current and former district leaders from California's Anaheim Union High School District and Georgia's Gwinnett County Public Schools, among others.

The field has not established clear best practices for engaging parents in AI and AI adoption in schools. Bellwether has a limited research base to draw on, given the rapid pace of technological change. Building on conversations with leaders in the field, this report identifies patterns and principles that can help shape parent engagement on AI while parents still have an opportunity to influence how the technology is used in schools.

SIDEBAR 1

The Screen Time Debate

The conversation over AI in K-12 across the country is unfolding amid a broader backlash against children's screen time, social media use, and cellphone use in schools. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers and education policy organizations had already identified unequal access to devices and broadband as a major barrier to students' learning outside of school.[14] When remote learning surged in 2020, those concerns became even more urgent as students without reliable technology access were more likely to be disconnected from school. Since the pandemic, screens have become nearly universal in American classrooms — 99% of teachers report that their schools provide devices, roughly 81% of elementary teachers say students begin using devices by kindergarten, and 27% of teachers report that their students spend five or more hours of their school day using ed tech.[15] At the same time, parents are increasingly seeing research and media coverage linking excessive screen time to concerns about sleep, mental health, child development, and academic performance.[16] Among parents of young children, 75% to 80% express concern about screen media's effects on attention and mental health, even as roughly three-quarters also recognize its potential for learning.[17]

Research validates those concerns. A 2025 longitudinal study of more than 3,000 Canadian elementary school children found that each additional hour of daily screen time was associated with 9% to 10% lower odds of meeting grade-level proficiency in reading and math.[18] Similarly, data from the 2022 Program for International Student Assessment show that, across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, 15-year-olds who spent less time on leisure activities on digital devices outscored their peers in mathematics, even after adjusting for students' and schools' socioeconomic profiles.[19]

Parent concern and growing research about the effects of screen time have been shaping school policy debates in the U.S. over the past few years. Cellphone bans are the most visible response, with at least 38 states and the District of Columbia requiring school districts to ban or restrict students' use of cellphones in schools as of June 2026.[20] The pushback, however, extends further, as parents in multiple states are opting children out of school-issued Chromebooks and iPads, organizing online and in person, and sharing guidance for requesting pen-and-paper alternatives.[21] As of April 2026, at least 17 states were considering legislation to limit classroom technology use beyond cellphones.[22]

AI is, in many ways, a continuation of long-running debates about children and technology. But it is also distinct: AI can generate content, simulate relationships, support learning, produce misinformation, collect data, and shape student work in ways that conventional screen-time debates do not fully capture. As with screens, observers note that the better question is not whether to ban these tools but how they should be used. Yet people on both sides of the debate often default to all-or-nothing positions.

Field Insights

Interviews conducted for this report revealed both the challenges parents face in engaging with AI and the approaches organizations and districts find most effective in addressing those challenges. Three major themes emerged from these conversations.

Theme 1: Families are not entering the AI conversation from the same starting point, and ignoring those differences risks deepening existing inequities.	**Theme 2**: Parents are motivated to engage with AI in schools but need concrete pathways to move from concern to action.	**Theme 3**: Parents need the agency to shape schools' AI decisions and real support for navigating AI use at home.

Theme 1: Families are not entering the AI conversation from the same starting point, and ignoring those differences risks deepening existing inequities.

Parents are not on an equal playing field with AI. Differences in access, awareness, prior technology experience, school trust, and workforce expectations shape whether parents see AI primarily as an opportunity, a threat, or an issue that still feels too abstract to act on.

Earlier ed tech tools — such as math or reading practice programs, personal Chromebooks, and learning management systems like Canvas — expanded students' access to digital resources and content. By contrast, current AI models are far more powerful and have a wider range of uses. They can play a more active role in shaping how students learn, think creatively, solve problems, and generate content. For a growing number of students, AI also offers companionship and emotional support. This makes the equity stakes considerably higher than those of earlier technology debates.

Student and family needs can shape whether AI feels like support or risk.

For some families, AI may make complex school systems easier to navigate. Families of students with disabilities, families facing language barriers, and families with less access to specialized support may find value in tools that can read text aloud, translate information, summarize school communications, or help explain documents such as an individualized education program.[23] These uses do not eliminate the need for human support, but they can make information more accessible to families who often have to work harder to get it.

The same use cases can also raise concerns. Families may worry about whether AI-generated explanations are accurate, whether private information is being shared, or whether schools and service providers will use AI as a substitute for direct communication and support. That is why parent engagement cannot treat AI as simply helpful or harmful. Families need opportunities to discuss specific scenarios, weigh benefits and risks, and identify the conditions that would make a use feel acceptable (Sidebar 2).

SIDEBAR 2

Helping Families Weigh AI Risks and Benefits in California's Anaheim Union High School District

Anaheim Union High School District offers one example of how to engage families and other stakeholders in conversation about trade-offs in AI use. Jecenia Vera, the district's AI lead, described using a "red light, green light" activity with families, educators, and students to discuss different AI scenarios: red for unethical or unsafe uses, yellow for uses that may be acceptable with human input, and green for uses where AI output can be used. The goal was to prompt thoughtful conversations about AI and uncover how different individuals, or stakeholder groups, evaluate different uses.[24]

In one scenario, participants considered whether someone should use AI to explain a medical lab result before their next doctor's appointment. Opinions were split between red and green. Those who chose green argued that AI could help level the playing field for people who lack ready access to medical expertise or adequate translation services. Those who chose red often cited privacy concerns. The activity created space for a more nuanced conversation and helped Anaheim Union's community discuss whether AI should be used, and under what conditions it could be used more safely. In the medical example, the group talked about using AI for medical advice but not uploading personally identifiable information from the lab report into the chatbot.

The Anaheim example reflects a broader takeaway that families are more likely to engage meaningfully with AI when the conversation starts from their own experiences and concerns. The repeated headlines and proclamations about AI's impact on jobs, personal well-being, and the environment are rapidly shaping views. Honoring the complexity of viewpoints, taking the time to understand what families need from existing education systems, and collaborating with them on ways AI might help close those gaps allow schools and organizations to build a foundation of trust and garner greater buy-in for their AI efforts.

AI may widen gaps if under-resourced communities are left out of both access and governance.

What a parent knows about AI, what their child's school is doing with it, how their child is using it at home, and whether their family has the resources to engage at all are shaped by inequities that predate the existence of AI and are being perpetuated by it. Students in under-resourced schools already receive less funding, are more likely to be taught by less experienced teachers, and have less consistent access to high-quality instructional materials than their wealthier peers.[25] They also typically have less access to technology in schools than their higher-income and white peers, and when technology is available, research indicates they are disproportionately directed toward passive, drill-and-practice uses rather than the creative and analytical applications more common in well-resourced settings.[26]

Existing inequities matter because AI adoption depends on more than access to a tool. It also requires the training, infrastructure, guidance, and family engagement that shape how AI is used. Without those conditions, AI could take very different forms across communities: In some places, students may end up with too much of the wrong kind of AI, with low-cost automated tools substituting for teachers and human support, or with too little of the right kind of AI, with fewer opportunities to build the literacy and fluency that increasingly matter for school and work. As Trenace Dorsey-Hollins, founder and executive director of Parent Shield Fort Worth, a grassroots parent organization advocating for educational equity in the Fort Worth Independent School District, put it, "We don't know what we don't know. AI is a tool that is breathing and growing as we use it, and so if we don't use it, it won't be built to represent us."[27]

Current data suggests divides are already emerging. The AI use gap between high-income and low-income teens reached 24 percentage points in 2025, double the prior year's gap.[28] Even more recently, the Rithm Project

conducted a March 2026 national survey of 2,383 young people ages 13 to 24 and found that youth from low-income households are nearly three times more likely to rarely or never use AI, while also reporting worse social outcomes than their higher-income peers.[29] Specifically, "21% feel lonely often or all the time, 57% feel like a burden to others, and only 34% feel a strong sense of belonging at school."[30] The Rithm Project flags this combination of lower AI access or awareness and greater social vulnerability as a compounding risk. Young people need equal support to use AI safely, critically, and productively.

K-12 schools, meanwhile, are unevenly positioned to help close gaps in AI literacy. A 2025 RAND survey of school districts found that, as of fall 2024, 67% of low-poverty districts had trained teachers in generative AI, compared with only 39% in high-poverty districts.[31] By SY25-26, only about 6 in 10 high-poverty districts are projected to have trained their teachers on AI.[32] Beyond teaching, staff training matters because parents' ability to engage depends partly on whether schools themselves can explain the tools being used, why they were chosen, the risks they raise, and how families can provide input.

Families are weighing both the risks of exposure and the risks of exclusion.

The current techlash adds another layer of complexity to parent engagement on AI. Some families are worried about overuse and want fewer screens in school. Other families are still fighting for reliable devices, broadband, and opportunities for their children to use the tools that may matter for school and work. These concerns are not mutually exclusive, but they often reflect different starting points.

For many families, particularly those in under-resourced communities, a pressing equity concern is whether their children will be prepared for a world in which AI fluency increasingly shapes economic opportunity.[33] A late 2025 Common Sense Media national survey found that 57% of parents of children under age 18 believe AI will make it harder for their children to find jobs, and nearly half of kids and teens share concerns about AI's impact on their own economic futures.[34] Some parent-facing organizations, including NPU, are prioritizing this concern by helping families engage in the workforce systems being built around AI. As federal funding begins to flow to state workforce development boards for AI training and upskilling, NPU is helping families understand those investments and ask whether they are reaching their children and communities.[35] NPU is also running a pilot with College Board's BigFuture to build a parent committee focused on college and career planning and resources in an AI-shaped economy.[36]

For other families, concerns about overuse, distraction, and screen exposure are more immediate. Field experts comment that the current ed tech backlash skews toward higher-income, more highly educated parent communities. As one education technology leader observed in The 74 in April 2026, "I think much of the tech backlash from parents is coming from the more-online, higher-educated folks."[37] That backlash is shaping parts of the parent advocacy landscape, with some families pushing schools to reduce screen time, limit devices, or offer lower-tech alternatives. Maya Martin Cadogan, executive director of DC PAVE, surfaced this divide in her own community, noting that the screen-time and device-access debate is socioeconomically divided in ways that often go unacknowledged: Some parents, often those with more resources, are pushing for reduced screen use or no-screen policies, while many Black and lower-income families in the District of Columbia are still focused on securing reliable device and Wi-Fi access.[38] "For many of those [Black and lower-income] families," she noted, "the 'no screens' conversation feels far removed from their day-to-day reality."[39] Some families in her network still rely on schools or organizations to loan devices so students can complete coursework at home.[40]

Field leaders interviewed for this report indicated that families from historically marginalized backgrounds and communities of color in particular are not uniformly on either side of the AI debate (Sidebar 3). As one interviewee noted, within Black communities, some families are wary of biased tools and surveillance, while others worry that if they do not use these tools, their perspectives and experiences will be absent from AI data sets and from efforts to build AI literacy and shape AI development, deepening inequities.

SIDEBAR 3

Parent Attitudes Toward AI Are Not Uniform

Parent perspectives on AI vary by values, lived experience, risk tolerance, and expectations for the future. Views are also shifting quickly, as the share of U.S. adults expressing more concern than excitement about AI jumped from 38% in 2022 to 52% in 2023, where it has roughly held since.[41] A January 2026 Echelon Insights survey found substantial variation among groups nationwide, with women holding considerably more negative views than men (net -26 versus +10), Black respondents among the most favorable groups, and higher-income voters expressing more confidence in AI broadly.[42] These differences suggest that schools and advocacy organizations cannot rely on a single parent-engagement message about AI. Outreach must account for different concerns, including safety, bias, privacy, access, academic support, and future opportunity.

For K-12 districts and advocacy organizations, the implication is that parent engagement on AI cannot begin from a single assumption about what families want. Some parents may want stronger limits; others may want more access; many may want both, depending on the use case. Effective engagement should make room for those differences while helping families understand what their children need to be safe and supported.

Theme 2: Parents are motivated to engage with AI in schools but need concrete pathways to move from concern to action.

Parents are not indifferent to AI. They often have real concerns that deserve to be taken seriously, and a genuine desire to work through those concerns with school and district leaders. They are asking practical, high-stakes questions about safety, learning, privacy, and their children's futures. But many need concrete examples of where AI is showing up before they can move from general concern to informed engagement. Parents do not need to become highly technical experts. However, they can benefit from being able to recognize where AI is being used, understand the trade-offs, ask sharper questions, and have a meaningful voice in decisions that affect their children. That voice matters because school AI decisions are also decisions about instructional quality, student data, teacher judgment, family communication, age-appropriate use, and equity.

Parent engagement on AI is still in the early stages.

Most parent-facing organizations interviewed for this report described AI as an issue gaining attention but not yet a top organizing priority for most families, in many cases generating less urgency than debates over screen time and cellphones. Resources are scattered, programming is uneven, and policy is moving faster than the supports families need. In the absence of a clear playbook, organizations are identifying trusted experts, testing parent-facing formats, and developing materials that can help families move from awareness to more informed participation.

That timing creates a challenge, as AI policies and practices are taking shape while many parents are still trying to understand where AI is showing up and what questions to ask. DC PAVE's Cadogan described this moment as "year zero-ish" — a time for organizations to learn alongside parents, start the conversation, and make sure families are in the room while system leaders are still iterating.[43]

Parents need practical AI literacy that starts with their questions.

Parents' questions about AI are often practical and immediate. According to one parent group, the questions that come up most consistently from parents across different communities are "Is AI going to replace my child's teacher?" and "How does it help my child?"[44] These questions reflect legitimate concerns about displacement, human connection, instructional quality, safety, and whether AI will improve students' experiences. These are the entry points effective engagement programs should address before moving to more nuanced policy questions (Sidebar 4). Parents need enough practical knowledge to recognize where AI is showing up, what kinds of tools their children may encounter, and what questions different use cases raise.

Across interviews, a consistent scope and sequence emerged for how parent AI literacy programs can be structured:

- **Start with recognition.** Many parents significantly underestimate how much they already use AI, which can make it harder to engage on AI-in-education questions. Tafshier Cosby, senior director of the Center for Organizing and Partnerships at NPU, described a pattern she encounters repeatedly: "We had parents calling us and reaching out saying, 'I don't use AI.' And we're like, yes, you do … and this is what it looks like in an education setting."[45] Effective programs begin by helping parents recognize AI they already encounter before introducing AI in school contexts.

- **Build foundational knowledge.** Once parents see AI as familiar rather than foreign, conversations can move into foundational information: what common tools are (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini), how they differ from AI in other contexts, and how AI is typically being used by young people at school and home. From there, families can begin working through the key considerations they are likely to encounter, including opportunities, risks, and questions about appropriate use. In its parent sessions, for example, NPU spent time discussing teacher support, individualized learning, data privacy, and how AI can hallucinate or invent incorrect information.[46] Parents are left with a "toolbox" of questions to bring back to school districts or use to advocate for additional parent AI literacy support.[47]

- **Try tools in low-stakes settings.** Conceptual understanding goes further when parents have direct experience with the tools their children are using. By sharing free tools such as ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini and giving parents time to try them in a guided setting, organizations and districts can help build confidence and give families a concrete frame of reference for conversations at home and with schools.

- **Include environmental and ethical dimensions.** Some experts also recommend addressing the broader societal context of AI, including its environmental footprint and the ethical questions it raises. Situating AI in a broader context can help parents understand the landscape and form their own views. As one leader at Anaheim Union High School District put it: "[Families] also want [to learn about and discuss] the environmental impact because data centers are causing ruckuses in communities. … Everyone has a personal moral and ethical view of AI in general, and we should never force it."[48]

SIDEBAR 4

AI Engagement Approaches[49]

Gwinnett County, Georgia's "Swim, Snorkel, Scuba" AI Framework — Gwinnett County's AI Framework, developed when planning the district's AI-themed Seckinger High School, structures AI readiness across three levels. The framework holds that future readiness is critical for every student, regardless of industry or interest area, because technology is already reshaping what is possible across fields. Seckinger students engage with AI at differentiated levels of depth:

- ***Swim***: All students understand what AI is, can recognize it, and see how it affects their world.
- ***Snorkel***: All students become proficient users who can make informed decisions about when and how to use AI.
- ***Scuba***: Some students develop the skills to build and innovate with AI technologies.

The same layered logic applies to parent engagement. Programs do not need to bring every family to the same depth, but every family should be able to "swim" at a minimum.

Common Sense Media's "Bite, Snack, Meal" AI Framework — Common Sense Media structures parent AI literacy content to meet families at different levels of readiness. Jill Murphy, chief content officer, described the framework as "bite, snack, meal" — social media posts provide the bite for parents who are not yet actively seeking out AI resources; tips and guidance documents serve as the snack for those ready to go a bit deeper; and full AI Risk Assessment Reports are the meal for parents who want comprehensive engagement.[50] This tiered approach avoids assuming a single level of readiness and gives organizations a practical way to reach parents across the full engagement spectrum.

AI literacy and advocacy work best when they happen together.

In a slower-moving policy environment, schools and advocacy organizations might sequence the work by building parent knowledge first, then supporting parent advocacy. That sequencing is not available now. Policy decisions are being made, and the window for parent voice to shape rather than react to those decisions is limited. Waiting for full AI literacy before engaging in advocacy tends to be a losing strategy in this environment.

DC PAVE's Cadogan made this case directly: "I think of literacy and advocacy together, because if we take too much time to do the AI literacy, the train is already moving. So I want to be able to do it together so that parents can have a seat at the table" (Sidebar 5).[51] NPU leaders described a similar dynamic they experienced, with parents already reaching out for guidance on what to ask schools before they had enough AI literacy to fully understand the technology's place in school or the world.[52] In practice, literacy and advocacy were happening in parallel, not in sequence. Several interviewees compared this to social media, where the technology became embedded in young people's lives before parents or schools had frameworks to respond.

That parallel approach should be ongoing. AI literacy is not a stable target, and neither is the advocacy work it requires. The concerns that were central even a year ago, such as AI hallucinating information in response to questions or producing biased results, are now joined by newer ones, including AI that tells users what they want to hear rather than what is accurate, and tools that can take actions independently on a user's behalf with limited human oversight. This rapid change in the AI landscape necessitates more frequent updates to related policies than traditional education policy, which can remain consistent for several years.

SIDEBAR 5

AI Engagement Approaches[53]

DC PAVE's Literacy and Advocacy in the Same Room — DC PAVE has experimented with a model that builds literacy and advocacy simultaneously. In one session, a researcher from the Center on Reinventing Public Education, DC's state superintendent of education, charter leaders, legislative staff, and parents met in a virtual room for a one-hour coffee chat. The superintendent opened by telling parents that her office was actively developing AI rules and that she wanted to hear what they were thinking. As Cadogan described it, "One of the things our state superintendent literally put in the chat as she started was that she was there because they're working on rules and regulations for AI now, and she wanted to hear what parents were thinking."[54] That format collapsed the usual sequence, putting parents in dialogue with decision-makers before either side had all the answers.

Theme 3: Parents need the agency to shape schools' AI decisions and real support for navigating AI use at home.

Parents need visibility into AI decisions at school and support for navigating AI use at home. But visibility alone is not enough. Because AI use spans classroom, homework, social, and family contexts, schools need to help parents and students build shared norms around when AI can support learning, when it may replace the effort or human connection needed, what information should never be shared, and what families can expect from teachers and school systems.

School AI use requires making invisible decisions visible.

When AI is used in school, parent engagement should increase transparency, including what tools are being used, why they were chosen, what data they collect, what guardrails exist, and how families can shape future decisions. That level of transparency is not yet the norm. NPU leaders noted that AI guidelines are often passed without parents being part of the conversation, and that many districts do not include parents in decisions about what tools are used.[55]

How a district frames the conversation also makes a difference in the success of engagement. In Gwinnett County Public Schools, leaders framed early AI readiness conversations around what parents want for their children's futures and how AI might support or undermine those goals. They did not lead with safety and guardrails, believing that safety should be built into the work rather than introduced as the main premise. As one former district leader put it, "The moment you bring that [safety] up, it makes people feel that they need to be protected against something."[56] Starting with shared values can make AI feel less like a technical compliance issue and more like a community conversation about what families want for students.

Parent engagement should happen before decisions are finalized.

Parent engagement is weakest when it reactively happens only after a tool is adopted, a policy is written, or families discover an AI use case by accident. Districts that wait until after decisions are made tend to start the conversation in a defensive posture, leaving less room for families to serve as partners in shaping outcomes. Unfortunately, the data show that early partnerships between schools and parents are currently rare — a February 2026 national survey found 57% of parents had not been asked for input on school AI use, and 47% had never received information about their district's AI policy.[57] The communication gap may be eroding parents' trust in schools around safe and responsible AI use, as evidenced by polls like PDK that show parent support for AI in schools dropped across every use case between 2024 and 2025.[58] Schools need community conversations before implementation, including conversations about what the district hopes to gain, how much data AI tools collect, who has access to that data, and what role families can play in future decisions.[59]

Anaheim Union High School District offers one early example of what it can look like to bring families in before policies and practices are settled. Prompted in part by an Orange County Grand Jury report that found districts were approaching AI unevenly, Anaheim Union High School District retooled its AI work group to include parents, families, and students. As the district's AI framework moved from a single high school pathway to a districtwide approach, leaders presented it to students and parents through feedback cycles, asking what the framework was missing, what families feared, and what concerns needed to be addressed. The district now describes this phase as a "year of building capacity."[60] Its AI working group includes students and families, who are equipped with the skills and knowledge to dive much deeper into conversations about AI tools and uses in and out of school. The district is planning family workshops to continue to build AI literacy, treating those sessions as an essential part of the governance process.

Parents are navigating home AI use without a school policy to point to.

At home, parents are often on their own in guiding children's use of AI, even though children may be using the same tools across schoolwork, social interaction, entertainment, or emotional support. A 2026 Lurie Children's national survey found that while 96% of parents believe they should set rules or limits on AI use, among parents whose children are using AI, 28% reported having no rules in place at home and 55% say their child uses AI unsupervised.[61] DC PAVE noted that parents tend to have little sense of how their children are using AI and need support in navigating how to have substantive conversations with their children about it.[62] Relatedly, NPU raised specific concerns about chatbot use outside of school, including age appropriateness and whether older students may be turning to AI chatbots for mental health support without their parents knowing.[63]

The AI risks also vary by age, making one-size-fits-all guidance insufficient.[64] For younger children, parents may need help understanding where AI is embedded in toys, apps, and consumer products. For older students, the questions may be less about whether they are using AI at all and more about how they are using it, what they are sharing, and whether AI is supporting learning or substituting for effort, judgment, or human connection. Schools cannot govern everything that happens at home, but they can help families start from a shared understanding of AI (Sidebar 6). Parents are already looking to schools for support and guidance in this area — one poll showed that 65% of parents agree schools should teach students how to use AI responsibly.[65] According to Murphy of Common Sense Media, "Starting in a school environment is just a win, because then you all are on the same page at the beginning of the conversation, as opposed to everyone playing catch-up and building their own rules separately from the school."[66] Schools that are already doing family AI engagement should extend their work explicitly to home use, not just classroom policy.

SIDEBAR 6

When AI Becomes Relational, Parents Need a Different Engagement Playbook

Some AI tools do more than help students complete tasks. They simulate conversation, responsiveness, companionship, and emotional support. These uses raise different questions than AI used for homework help, lesson planning, translation, or grading, and they call for a different kind of parent engagement.

A March 2026 Rithm Project survey examined how relationships shape AI use and vice versa, finding that the quality of human connection is a key factor in how young people engage with AI.[67] The research identifies three patterns of high-risk use worth flagging for parents:

- **Human displacement**, where young people turn to AI before or instead of people when upset or confused.
- **AI dependency**, where the technology's use is repeated and concealed from others.
- **AI attachment**, where young people form emotional bonds with the technology itself.

The study also found that when AI use turns personal and intimate, moving from homework help to processing a fight with a friend or seeking emotional comfort, it becomes more likely to begin substituting for human relationships.[68]

Michelle Culver, founder of the Rithm Project, argued that the most important response to potentially dangerous AI use is not more AI literacy but stronger human connection. "The most important thing you can do is not … assume that because [a young person has] humans in their life they're okay. Our research shows that the strongest protective factor against high-risk AI use is having relationships where they don't feel like a burden and experiencing a sense of belonging at school. So, the best investment is actually to double down on relationships where young people feel seen and safe, and that becomes particularly true for kids who are in homes or schools where the adults are already taxed."[69]

Most parents are not yet having these conversations. The Rithm Project found that 61% of young people say parents rarely or never talk to them about AI, and when those conversations do happen, they focus almost exclusively on academic integrity, rarely touching the relational or social-emotional dimensions of how young people are actually using it.[70] When parents do raise AI, many teens conceal their use rather than share it, anticipating a negative response.

Isabelle Hau, executive director of the Stanford Accelerator for Learning, identified the source of that dynamic: "Parents are not equipped yet with the right questions. A lot of adults are coming at those questions with a lot of judgment, as opposed to curiosity about what teenagers are doing with AI, and as a result, those teenagers are hiding, as opposed to sharing with adults."[71]

Entering these conversations well requires curiosity rather than judgment. Culver recommended a frame drawn from researcher Pam Cantor — "If it's important to you, it's important to me" — which opens a conversation without immediately rendering a verdict on the young person's AI use.[72] She also noted that the "parent knows best" dynamic is worth examining here. "Both have wisdom that can be beneficial, and so you want to create a sharing of mutually beneficial knowledge."[73]

These conversations also differ across age groups. For young children, AI is increasingly embedded in toys and consumer products in ways most parents do not recognize.[74] Hau recommended significant caution at this developmental stage and a strong emphasis on human connection, noting that current AI tools are designed to maximize engagement rather than redirect children toward human interaction.[75] For middle and high schoolers, the goal is helping young people develop the judgment to recognize when AI is serving them and when it is substituting for something a human should be providing instead.

Recommendations

EARLY AI PARENT ENGAGEMENT PRINCIPLES FOR DISTRICTS AND ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

The themes above, gathered through Bellwether's research and conversations, point to a central tension: AI is moving quickly, but parent engagement around AI is still developing. Families are navigating uneven access to tools and information, school decisions that are often difficult to see, and home uses that schools cannot fully control. Yet parents are not passive recipients of AI decisions. They are asking questions, making judgments, and in some cases already shaping what happens in their schools and communities. The challenge for districts and advocacy organizations is to meet families where they are and give them concrete ways to engage while decisions are still being shaped.

The field does not yet have a settled playbook for parent engagement on AI. Because this work is still emerging, it is premature to identify a set of best practices. But early examples point to several principles that can help districts and advocacy organizations move beyond one-way communication toward more meaningful parent engagement.

1. Start with shared values, not technology.

Parent engagement on AI should begin with what families want for children, not with the technology itself. Before asking parents to react to a tool or policy, districts and advocacy organizations can start by asking what families value in education, what they want students to be prepared for, and where they see the greatest risks. Those conversations create a stronger foundation for discussing whether AI supports or undermines shared goals.

This approach can also help avoid framing AI as a narrow technical or compliance issue. Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia offers one example: Leaders opened early AI readiness conversations by focusing on what parents wanted for their children's futures rather than the technology itself.

2. Engage families early, before decisions are finalized.

Parent engagement is most meaningful when families have a chance to proactively shape decisions, rather than simply react to them. Districts that wait until a tool has been adopted, a policy has been written, or a controversy has emerged are more likely to begin in a defensive posture. Early engagement creates more room to explain the problem a district is trying to solve, surface parent concerns, and adjust course before implementation is locked in. Anaheim Union High School District in California offers one model: District leaders brought families into feedback cycles as a districtwide AI framework was taking shape, treating family input as part of governance rather than an add-on after decisions were made.

Early engagement does not mean every decision can be slowed indefinitely. Districts may sometimes need to act quickly, especially when safety, privacy, or academic integrity concerns arise. But when school leaders move quickly, they should explain why, clarify whether decisions are temporary or final, and create a clear process for families to weigh in as policies evolve.

3. Match parent engagement to the stakes of the AI use case.

Families do not need to play the same role in every AI decision. Some use cases call for transparency, while others call for consultation, consent, or shared decision-making. Districts and advocacy organizations should help families understand those differences, identify what's most helpful in each situation, and tailor engagement opportunities accordingly.

A stronger parental role likely makes sense when students interact directly with AI tools being considered, when AI affects special education services or mental health support, or when sensitive student information comes into play. In other cases, such as teachers using AI to draft lesson materials or prepare communications, families may not need to be as involved in the policy details but should still know how staff are using AI tools, what information those tools draw on to develop materials, and where human judgment and safeguards remain in place. This distinction can make engagement more realistic. As AI becomes further embedded in learning platforms, communication tools, and administrative systems, families should understand the categories of use, know where the district draws its boundaries, and have meaningful opportunities to shape the highest-stakes decisions.

4. Make AI visible and concrete.

Many parents need something specific to react to before they can engage meaningfully. AI can feel abstract when it is described only as a broad trend or policy issue. It becomes easier to discuss when families can see a tool, consider a classroom scenario, review a proposed policy choice, or talk through a privacy trade-off. Districts and advocacy organizations can make AI more concrete by showing parents how tools work and where AI already appears in school and home contexts. Demonstrations, scenarios, and examples of teacher-facing or student-facing uses can help families move from general impressions to more specific questions. Anaheim Union High School District's "red light, green light" activity shows how a concrete scenario can surface different views, clarify concerns, and help families discuss the conditions under which a use might feel acceptable. Making AI visible also means avoiding generic reassurances. Parents need plain-language explanations of what a tool does, why it is being considered, what information it uses, and how adults will monitor its effects. The more specific the example, the easier it is for families to ask informed questions.

5. Use trusted messengers and build their AI literacy, too.

District leaders may make AI decisions, but they are not always the messengers families trust most. Parent-facing organizations, community leaders, and parent advocates may be better positioned to translate AI decisions into language families understand and to surface concerns that families may not raise directly with school systems. These trusted messengers also need support, as they are being asked to help families navigate AI before the field has developed a stable playbook. Leaders interviewed for this report described having to build their own AI knowledge while simultaneously identifying experts, testing materials, and deciding how to frame the issue for families.

Parent Shield Fort Worth offers one model rooted in community organizing. The organization uses a train-the-trainer approach, building the knowledge of a core group of parent leaders who can then support families in their own school communities. That kind of model recognizes that AI literacy cannot stop with district staff. If families are expected to engage, the organizations and leaders they rely on also need time, resources, and access to expertise.

6. Build with parents and students, not just for them.

Parents can be active co-architects of the conditions under which AI is used with their children. Meaningful engagement requires more than sending a policy home, posting guidance online, or asking for feedback after a draft has already been written. Building with parents means involving them early enough to shape the questions being asked. It means creating opportunities for families to identify concerns, test assumptions, and help define what responsible AI use should look like in their community. NPU's AI engagement sessions offer one example of this approach, combining foundational AI knowledge, practical examples, and concrete questions parents can bring back to schools or districts.

Students should also be part of these conversations. They are often closest to how AI is being used, including which tools peers use for homework, where AI shows up in social or emotional contexts, and what guidance feels helpful or unrealistic. Including students can help adults move beyond assumptions and develop guidance that reflects real use rather than imagined use.

As a general rule, shared norms around AI use should be built with the people most affected by them. Families, students, educators, and community organizations each see different parts of the AI landscape. Stronger engagement brings those perspectives together.

7. Design engagement for action.

The purpose of parent engagement is not simply to raise awareness. Parents need to know what they can do with the information they receive. After a workshop, meeting, or resource, parents should have a clearer sense of what questions to ask, where to find more information, and how to raise concerns or shape decisions in their school or district. That action orientation matters because AI policy and practice are evolving quickly. Families should not have to wait until they are technical experts before they are invited into the conversation. They need enough information to ask better questions, enough trust to participate honestly, and enough access to influence decisions while those decisions are still taking shape.

Conclusion

The field is still in the early stages of figuring out the best ways to engage parents around AI in education, and the right models will continue to evolve as districts and advocacy organizations learn alongside families. But the direction is clear that parent engagement cannot wait for a settled playbook. Families are already navigating AI in their children's schoolwork and at home, often with uneven access to information and little visibility, particularly when it comes to the decisions schools are making. Effective parent engagement should be early, concrete, differentiated, and rooted in shared values. It should help families understand both risks and opportunities, make invisible decisions visible, and build the agency parents need as AI becomes part of children's learning and lives. ✦

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About the Authors

LINEA HARDING

Linea Harding is a senior analyst at Bellwether. She can be reached at **linea.harding@bellwether.org**.

MICHELLE CROFT

Michelle Croft is an associate partner at Bellwether. She can be reached at **michelle.croft@bellwether.org**.

MARK BAXTER

Mark Baxter is a partner at Bellwether and leads the organization's work on state and federal systems. He can be reached at **mark.baxter@bellwether.org**.

AMY CHEN KULESA

Amy Chen Kulesa is a senior adviser at Bellwether. She can be reached at **amy@luminosityadvising.com**.

MARY K. WELLS

Mary K. Wells is a co-founder and senior partner at Bellwether and leads the organization's work on nontraditional and out-of-school learning. She can be reached at **mary@bellwether.org**.

JULIET SQUIRE

Juliet Squire is a senior partner and the head of emerging approaches at Bellwether. She can be reached at **juliet.squire@bellwether.org**.

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