

SMART TOOLS, SMART SCHOOLS: HOW DISTRICTS ARE NAVIGATING AI WITH INTENTION

Elizabeth Forward, South Fayette, and Fox Chapel Area

The prospect that computers could learn to think for themselves has long stoked people’s imaginations in science fiction. But while filmmakers and novelists were busy dreaming up dramatic doomsday scenarios, something smaller — though perhaps more remarkable — came to pass.

Computers became handheld devices that could slip into purses and pockets. They transformed the way people communicate and interact with each other and the world.

Now, the emergence of artificial intelligence represents another leap forward in how we live and learn. And in classrooms and schools, this technological shift is at the center of daily discussion.

How might schools use AI responsibly? How might students wield this tool effectively and creatively? How might districts keep up as technology evolves faster than ever before?

In Western Pennsylvania, three school districts — Elizabeth Forward, Fox Chapel Area, and South Fayette — are taking deliberate and thoughtful approaches to answering these questions. They’re committed to learning how best to use AI to support students and teachers, how to limit its misuse, and how to manage potential problems.

It’s a fitting topic for these districts to tackle. All three are part of Future-Driven Schools, a regional alliance of 47 school districts working to prepare every learner for tomorrow. Together, these districts help teachers, administrators, and board members do what they do

best: innovate and collaborate in ways that benefit students.

Elizabeth Forward: AI is strategically a “part of the process”

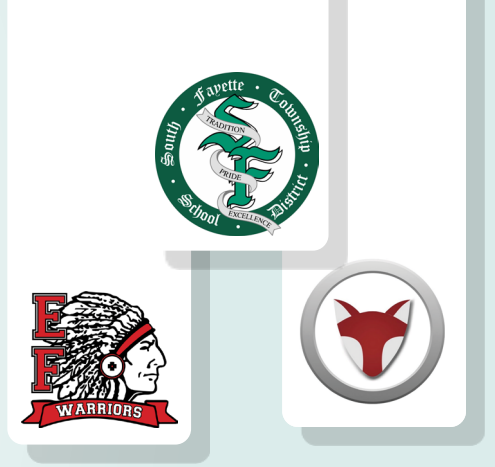
Ignoring AI isn’t an option, says Jennifer Spiegel, an English teacher at Elizabeth Forward High School. At her school, in fact, it’s a central area of focus. It’s a tool that students will need to use adeptly once they graduate. And in the meantime, teachers are helping students leverage its power in positive ways.

Spiegel began a deep dive into the subject by participating in a fellowship with the Allegheny Intermediate Unit. She worked with Kelli Garlow, the district’s high school principal; and Alison DeMarco, its director of technology, to carefully develop Elizabeth Forward’s AI plan.

Their starting point was approaching AI as a way to supplement learning, not supplant it, says Spiegel.

Among their efforts: They created a course to familiarize teachers with AI and how they might use it to improve lesson plans, develop ideas for activities, and teach their students to use AI in their work while maintaining academic integrity.

The district also tasked teachers with developing ways to use AI in all kinds of classes — everything from English and math to art and even gym — rather than relegating it to computer science or other tech classes. That means that in health class, for example, AI can be used to design creative workout plans or to suggest meals that students might eat to maintain a balanced diet.



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The process has been working well because it isn’t something that’s coming down from district leadership or being mandated as a state requirement, says Superintendent Keith Konyk. Rather, it’s a work-in-progress that’s being developed in classrooms with everyone’s input.

But even as teachers are encouraged to stretch their creativity, the district’s perspective is clear: AI is used as a tool that’s part of the learning process, not as a replacement for anything. The district has also set boundaries for how the tool cannot be used, and it communicates those boundaries to students and staff.

“We’ve had lots of conversations with our colleagues about the idea that AI really should be part of the process,” says DeMarco. “But it doesn’t create the final product.”

Keeping up with AI’s evolution is a big challenge, DeMarco adds. So another key to success at the district is continual staff development to communicate the latest developments and professional guidance for AI use.

Despite their long history as a tech-forward district, these very human skills — communication, collaboration, and iterative problem-

solving — are at the heart of Elizabeth Forward’s approach to AI.

South Fayette: Crafting clear guidance for students

Just like Elizabeth Forward, the South Fayette School District is committed to embracing AI’s best possibilities while fully understanding — and mitigating — its challenges and risks. That approach means working directly with students and having honest, enlightening conversations about the ways high schoolers are already using AI in their daily lives.

Among their discoveries: AI helps high school students check their homework, study for tests, and clarify complex information. Some teens create their own study guides, summarize their class notes, and make bespoke flash cards to aid in learning.

Students also use this rapidly evolving tool to workshop ideas for projects and gather input about their writing before they turn in assignments. Older high schoolers are turning to AI to help draft resumes and work on college applications.

All of this information was shared with Superintendent Michelle Miller during a session she convened with South Fayette high schoolers. Miller sought applicants to fill 70 slots as she and her team formed an advisory council to gauge how students use AI. Students who joined knew that the district genuinely wanted their input.

“We want to use AI to learn, not cheat. Teach us how, make expectations clear, and be consistent.” That’s how Miller sums up the message that these students presented. They were eager to talk, open to guidance, and glad to find that South Fayette’s leadership valued their perspectives.

Students want clarity about how they can use AI and consistency from their teachers, says South Fayette senior Pranita Chakkingal. She co-facilitated the advisory council meeting with Miller and produced a video in which students detailed how they and their peers already use AI, as well as what they want from their teachers.

“Support, rather than police, our learning,” Chakkingal says in the

video. “Hopefully, we can all use AI to help us thrive in education.”

Teachers have also been working in small groups for two hours each month to brainstorm about AI and share information. And leveraging the power of the Future-Driven Schools alliance, Miller meets with other superintendents to share South Fayette’s approach and learn how her peers are approaching the subject.

Along with supporting students, the goal is to allow teachers to use AI to be more effective and more efficient. “If I can free up time on some of the busy work that they do,” she says, “they can spend more time with students.”

Fox Chapel Area: “All minds on target”

AI isn’t something that’s looming, says Mary Catherine Reljac, superintendent of the Fox Chapel Area School District. It’s already here — and dealing with it takes teamwork.

That teamwork is well underway at Fox Chapel Area, where teachers and students started swapping AI experiences with each other a few years ago. District leaders encouraged them to continue, and as the technology evolved, Fox Chapel Area developed an initial AI policy.

Today, the district involves staff, students, and outside experts in the ongoing development of that policy. It also launched an AI leadership team that developed an AI readiness survey to gather input. “We’re working with students, we’re working with educators, and we’re working with parents to be able to talk about AI, understand AI, and then chart our pathway forward,” says Reljac. “We’re also hearing on a regular basis from groups of students about AI and incorporating what they are thinking, feeling, and needing into what we’re doing.”

Middle school students learn about AI from computer science teacher Cathie Gillner, who introduces basic “dos and don’ts” with her students. At the high school, faculty gather each month for “What’s Up Wednesdays,” where teachers convene for professional development. One month, teachers might share examples of how they’re using AI with their colleagues; the following month, they might hear from students.

“That’s the kind of conversation that we’re hoping to continue throughout the district,” Reljac says.

The arrival of AI is the largest technological change in modern history. Addressing it wisely and thoroughly is a priority at Fox Chapel Area, where leaders are “committed as a school district to regularly reevaluating our approach to see if it’s still meeting students’ needs,” she says. “Because it may not be in six months. So we may have a whole different approach as the technologies — and what we understand about them — change.”

