

The Global AI Literacy Gap

A Briefing for American School Boards and Superintendents

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Why this briefing exists

American school leaders are being asked to make consequential decisions about artificial intelligence with headlines instead of data. The headlines are about harm, and the harm is real: companion chatbots designed to form relationships with children have been the subject of wrongful death litigation, and roughly a dozen states have now enacted laws restricting them. The Center for AI Equity and Access supports those laws without reservation.

But safety legislation is half of an education policy. The other half is literacy, and on that half the United States now stands apart from much of the world — not in its caution, but in its inaction. This briefing presents the evidence in one place, so that a board deciding its district's AI posture can see the whole board, not one square. No single district created the gap described below. Every district now chooses whether to widen it or close it.

The sentiment divide

Stanford University's AI Index, the largest annual assessment of artificial intelligence worldwide, reports a stark international divide in how people view the technology. Asked whether AI products and services offer more benefits than drawbacks, 83 percent of respondents in China say yes — the highest figure recorded — alongside 80 percent in Indonesia and 77 percent in Thailand. In the United States, the figure is 39 percent. [1, 2]

American wariness is distinctive even among Western nations. Only 33 percent of Americans expect AI to improve how they do their jobs, against a global average of 40 percent, and Americans report the lowest trust of any surveyed country — 31 percent — in their government's ability to regulate AI. [2] Independent 2026 research describes a measurable AI backlash concentrated in the United States and United Kingdom, with net sentiment falling sharply over two years even as sentiment in Germany, France, and the Netherlands improved. [3] The fear shaping American district policy, in short, is not a global consensus. It is a regional mood.

What other nations are teaching

While American policy has focused on restriction, a group of nations has treated AI as a foundational literacy and legislated accordingly.

The United Arab Emirates approved artificial intelligence as a mandatory subject for every government school student, kindergarten through grade 12, beginning in the 2025–26 academic year — the first national K–12 AI mandate in the world —

and has since formalized it as a permanent subject with a dedicated curriculum spanning foundational concepts, data and algorithms, ethics, and real-world application. [4, 5]

China's Ministry of Education has mandated AI instruction across every stage of its education system — primary, secondary, and university — under a national action plan that also incorporates AI into teacher qualification examinations and certification requirements, ensuring the teaching workforce itself is AI-literate. [5, 6]

Singapore is scaling national AI literacy programs and, by 2026, offering AI training to teachers at all levels including those still in preparation. South Korea is writing AI coursework into its national curriculum across all grade levels. [6]

These are not preparations for a hypothetical economy. In China, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria, more than 80 percent of workers already report using AI at work on a regular or semi-regular basis. [1] The classrooms of these nations are aligned with their labor markets. Ours are not.

The American asymmetry

As of this writing, twelve American states have enacted laws regulating companion chatbots, with more than twenty-five considering such legislation. [7] These laws are necessary and this Center endorses them. The asymmetry is what stands beside them: no American state requires that K-12 students be taught what artificial intelligence is, how it works, or how to use it competently and ethically. The nation's entire legislative output on AI and children addresses what the technology must not do to students, and is silent on what students must learn about the technology.

The predictable local result is the blanket ban. A district frightened by companion chatbots — reasonably — prohibits all AI, a policy that does not touch the companion chatbots (which were never classroom tools) but does eliminate both AI literacy instruction and, for students with disabilities, assistive tools to which federal law may already entitle them. The Center's companion position paper, *Companion Chatbots Are Not Assistive Technology*, addresses that second harm in detail. The essential point for this briefing is that a ban is not a neutral act. Every year of it is a year of instruction the district's students do not receive and other nations' students do.

Consider two students graduating in 2035. One, in Abu Dhabi, will have studied artificial intelligence every year since age four. The other, in an American district that banned the subject, will have been taught to regard it as contraband. They will compete in the same global labor market. American school boards do not control that market. They control only which of those two students their district produces.

What a district can do this year

One principle should govern the decision, and it is the same principle boards already apply to everything else they oversee: facts replace feelings. No board would set a reading program, a budget, or a bus route on fear of the unknown; it

sets goals, chooses measures, and reviews the evidence. Artificial intelligence deserves the identical discipline. Fear of the unknown is a feeling, and an understandable one — but a feeling cannot substitute for preparation, and hesitation is not a plan. Preparation looks like the four steps below, each with goals and measures a board can hold itself to.

First, replace any blanket ban with a design-based policy: restrict tools by what they are built to do, using the design distinctions in the Center's position paper and model policy language, so that the policy reaches harmful systems and spares instructional and assistive ones.

Second, adopt an AI literacy scope: age-appropriate instruction in what AI is, how it produces its outputs, where it fails, and how to use it with integrity. Districts need not wait for a state mandate that has not come; the nations described above did not wait for consensus either.

Third, invest in teacher capability. Every national program above trains teachers first, and China ties certification to it. A district's AI posture is only as good as its faculty's understanding, and professional training in recognizing how students think and where they stall is the natural foundation on which AI literacy instruction stands.

Fourth, for students with disabilities, evaluate assistive cognitive tools on their design merits, require written vendor attestations, and honor existing federal assistive technology rights within IEP and Section 504 processes.

The Center for AI Equity and Access offers its position paper, model legislative and policy language, and this briefing to any district without charge, and welcomes inquiries from boards and superintendents at centerforaiequity.org.

Sources

1. Stanford University Human-Centered AI Institute, The 2026 AI Index Report, Public Opinion chapter (hai.stanford.edu/ai-index).
2. Stanford HAI, "Inside the AI Index: 12 Takeaways from the 2026 Report"; survey data collected with Ipsos.
3. Public First, AI Global 2026 (aiglobal.publicfirst.com).
4. United Arab Emirates Cabinet announcement, May 4, 2025; UAE Ministry of Education curriculum formalization for 2026–27 ("Artificial Intelligence and Technology").
5. Reporting on national AI education mandates: Techwire Asia, "Mandatory AI literacy: China joins the UAE and India," April 2026.
6. China Ministry of Education national AI education action plan (effective from September 2025); Nine, "AI in Education: The Space Race for AI Literacy in Schools," May 2025 (Singapore, South Korea programs).
7. MultiState, "State AI Companion Chatbot Laws," June 2026; Stateside Associates, "AI Chatbot Legislation Across the States," March 2026.

Figures current as of August 2026. The Center for AI Equity and Access is an independent nonprofit advocating for every student's right to AI as assistive technology and to genuine AI literacy.