

The No-Answer Standard

A defensible boundary for artificial intelligence use in schools

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Upon publication, this standard will be available at noanswerstandard.org

What this document is

Districts are being asked to decide whether students may use artificial intelligence, and the honest answer is that the question is badly formed. Some of these tools hand a student finished work. Some cannot. Treating both as one category forces a choice between permitting what undermines assessment and banning what does not.

This document draws the line between them. It defines a class of tool that cannot produce student work, and states the conditions a tool must meet to belong to that class. The conditions are written to be checked.

This is the one category of artificial intelligence a district can permit without weakening assessment.

A district that adopts this standard gains something a blanket prohibition cannot provide: a rule that holds under challenge. It has a clear yes, which makes its no credible rather than arbitrary. It has a test it can apply to any product a vendor brings. And it is no longer enforcing a restriction that students can bypass on a phone at home, because the tools inside the boundary carry nothing worth bypassing it for.

The standard

Every student has thinking that has never made it out.

An AI learning tool exists to get it out. Nothing more, and nothing less.

Such a tool may be used by any student, in any classroom, on any assignment, without permission, without monitoring, and without restriction, when all five of the following are true.

- 1. It supplies no answers.** Not at any point. Not under any prompting. Not in any form.
- 2. It works only from the student's own words.** It builds on what the student brings. It introduces nothing the student did not.

- 3. It moves the student forward.** Withholding is not enough. The tool must return the student to the work with more of their own thinking available to them than they had a moment before.
- 4. It cannot be made to do otherwise.** The behavior is built in, not instructed. What can be overridden is a policy. Only what cannot be overridden is a standard.
- 5. It is available to any student.** Not to a documented few. A tool that cannot be misused has no reason to be rationed, and any tool worth giving to a student with a disability is worth giving to the student sitting beside her.

Short forms

One sentence

A tool meets this standard when it cannot supply an answer, works only from the student's own words, moves the student forward, cannot be talked out of any of it, and is available to anyone who wants it.

For a slide, a headline, or spoken delivery

No answers. Only the student's own words. Forward every time. Locked in. Open to anyone.

Why this is not cheating

Education practice already draws the line this standard depends on.

An accommodation changes how a student reaches the material. What is being measured stays the same, so the result remains valid. A modification changes what is being measured, and the result no longer means what the assessment says it means. Districts make this distinction routinely and defend it under scrutiny.

Every argument about artificial intelligence in schools is a disguised argument about which side of that line these tools fall on. The standard settles it by definition rather than by debate. A tool that supplies no content cannot alter what an assessment measures. It can alter only whether the student can reach it.

That places tools meeting this standard inside a category schools already understand, already have procedures for, and already permit. No new category

of exception is required. No separate integrity protocol is required, because the behavior the protocol would guard against is not available.

Why a prohibition has been the only option so far

The restrictions districts have put in place are a reasonable response to the tools that existed. When a tool is capable of producing finished work, and there is no reliable way to detect that it did, the only remaining lever is to control access to the device. Collect the phones. Lock the browser. Prohibit the category. That is not overreach. It is the only instrument available when the problem sits inside the tool and cannot be reached.

The prohibition is not a policy failure. It is a workaround for a tool that was built wrong.

The workaround has a cost, and the cost is not evenly distributed. A control written to stop a small number of students from copying is applied to everyone, and it lands hardest on the students who needed a way in. The student who cannot start a sentence loses the support that would have helped her start it. The student who cannot hold four steps in working memory loses the support that would have held them for him. Nothing about that outcome was intended. It is a side effect of an instrument that was too blunt because no finer one existed.

A conformance standard is the finer instrument. It moves the control from the student to the tool. Once a tool is incapable of supplying answers, there is nothing to monitor, nothing to detect, and nothing to prohibit. The restriction becomes unnecessary rather than merely unpopular, and the access it was costing comes back at no risk to assessment integrity.

This is why every article is written as a property of the tool rather than a rule for the student. A rule can be broken, so a rule requires enforcement, and enforcement is where the cost falls. A property cannot be broken, so nothing has to be enforced.

It is already in the building

Artificial intelligence is already in the building.

It arrived on phones. It is in use during homework, during study hall, and during class. No district permitted this, and no district can currently see it.

A prohibition does not remove it. It removes only the school's ability to say anything about how it is used.

This is the pressure teachers and principals are carrying. They are asked to police something they cannot detect, using a rule everyone knows is not holding.

A standard sets that burden down. Staff no longer have to catch what cannot be caught. They point to a line instead: this class of tool is fine, and everything outside it is not. The line holds because the permitted class carries nothing worth hiding.

The practical consequence is a change in what staff are asked to do. Under a prohibition, every teacher is an enforcement officer for a rule with no reliable means of detection, and every accusation is a judgment call made without evidence. Under a standard, the judgment moves off the teacher and onto the tool, where it can be made once, in advance, by people whose job it is.

It also changes what a school can say to families. A prohibition that is not holding is difficult to defend in either direction. It cannot be enforced consistently, and it cannot be explained to a parent whose child was accused. A stated boundary can be enforced consistently, because what falls outside it is identifiable, and it can be explained, because it rests on a principle rather than on suspicion.

On movement

Article Three is the article that makes this a learning standard rather than an integrity rule. Without it, a tool that does nothing at all would qualify. A locked door supplies no answers.

The claim in Article Three is deliberately modest. It is not that the student masters the material, retains it for a year, or scores higher on a test. It is that the student does not leave where they arrived.

The session must produce forward movement, however small.

The smallness is the point. A student who could not begin a sentence and now has a first line has moved. A student who could not say what a word meant and can now say it in her own words has moved. A student who was holding one idea and is now holding three has moved. None of these are achievements in the sense a gradebook would recognize. All of them are the difference between a student who is stuck and a student who is working.

Set the floor low and the standard becomes something a district can adopt. Set it at mastery and it becomes a claim that has to be defended before anyone is allowed to benefit from it. Standards spread from floors.

What failure looks like

A condition that cannot fail is not a condition. Article Three is testable because these outcomes are real and observable, and any of them means the tool has not met it.

- 1. Looping.** The student is asked the same thing in different words and returns the same answer. Nothing opened.
- 2. Abandonment.** The student leaves before producing anything. The tool held the door shut instead of holding it open.
- 3. Drift.** The language on the page at the end is the tool's language rather than the student's. This is a failure of Article Two showing up as a false pass on Article Three.
- 4. False confidence.** The student leaves holding something confidently wrong. Movement in the wrong direction is not movement.
- 5. No carry.** The student produced work inside the session and cannot do anything with it once the session ends.

Why the standard applies to any student

Article Five is the article most likely to be resisted, and it is the one most often misread. It does not require a district to purchase anything, deploy anything, or provide anything. It requires only that a student who wants to use a conforming tool is not forbidden from doing so.

The obligation is not to provide. It is not to forbid.

Rationing exists to manage risk. A tool that cannot be misused carries no risk to manage, so restricting it to students with documentation serves no purpose except the habit of restricting things. The documentation requirement then becomes its own barrier, and it falls on the students least able to clear it: the ones never evaluated, the ones whose families could not push, the ones whose difficulty was read as attitude.

There is also a plain observation behind it. The student sitting beside the student with the disability usually needs the same thing. She has simply never been assessed, so no one has offered it to her. A ramp cut into a curb was built for a wheelchair and is used by everyone pushing anything with wheels. Nobody proposes checking credentials at the bottom of it.

For a district, this article removes administrative burden rather than adding it. A tool available to any student requires no eligibility determination, no individual authorization, no tracking of who may use what, and no appeals from

families told they do not qualify. Nothing has to be administered, because nothing has to be rationed.

Language for reuse

These passages are written to be lifted whole into board memoranda, task force findings, meeting documentation, and letters to families. They say the same thing at four different altitudes.

To a board, a cabinet, or an AI task force

Our position is not that artificial intelligence is permitted. It is that one narrow class of tool is permitted, and the rest is not. A tool qualifies only if it cannot supply an answer under any prompting, works only from the student's own words, and cannot be reconfigured to do otherwise. Tools meeting that definition cannot alter what our assessments measure, so they require no monitoring and create no integrity exposure. Everything outside that definition remains prohibited, and this is what makes that prohibition defensible. The immediate benefit is to staff. Our teachers are currently asked to enforce a rule against a technology they cannot detect. This replaces that expectation with a line they can actually point to.

To a vendor or developer

Refusal at the surface is not conformance. A model instructed to decline can be persuaded, and a standard that depends on persuasion holds only until someone tries harder. Conformance means the answer is not available to be released. Vendors are asked to state publicly which articles they meet and how that behavior is enforced.

To an individualized education program or Section 504 team

The tool supplies no content, so it cannot alter the construct being assessed. It functions as an access accommodation rather than a modification, and it does not require a separate integrity protocol, because the behavior teams normally guard against is structurally unavailable.

To a parent

This kind of tool will never do your child's work. It cannot. It has nothing to give. What it does is help your child find the words that are already in her head and get them onto the page. Nobody has to watch her use it, because there is nothing she could take from it.

What the standard does not claim

Stated plainly here so it is not misread later.

- 1. It does not add ability.** The standard does not claim that a tool adds ability a student did not have. It claims the opposite. The ability was present and unexpressed.
- 2. It does not eliminate cheating from schools.** The standard does not claim that dishonesty disappears. It claims that this class of tool is not a route to it, and therefore does not justify restricting it.
- 3. It does not certify effectiveness.** A tool can meet all five articles and still be poorly built. Conformance is a floor, not a mark of quality.
- 4. It does not replace a teacher.** A student who has not yet encountered the material needs teaching. The standard governs tools that help a student reach content, not tools that replace instruction.
- 5. It does not address every use of AI in schools.** Tools outside the boundary this standard draws remain a district decision. This document takes no position on them.

Use notes

- This standard is stated at the category level. It names no product, including any product of this organization. That is deliberate and should be preserved in every derivative use. A standard that names a product is marketing, and it will be read as marketing.
- The five articles travel together. Removing any one of them, particularly Article Four, reduces the standard to a promise.
- The opening of the standard is written for delivery aloud. Sentence lengths are set to breath. It should not be rewritten into denser prose for print.
- The canonical address for this standard is noanswerstandard.org. Citations should use that address rather than any page it currently redirects to, so that references remain valid if the standard is later hosted independently.
- Districts, states, and developers are free to adopt, cite, and reproduce this standard in full. Adoption is the purpose. Partial adoption that drops an article should not be described as conformance.