

Capistrano Unified School District AI Strategies to Foster Student Agency

Capistrano Unified School District has approached artificial intelligence not as a technology initiative, but as a teaching and learning initiative grounded in student agency, academic integrity, and thoughtful system design. Our strategy centers on the belief that AI should expand students' capacity to think, create, reflect, and make informed choices about their learning, rather than replace human judgment or reduce learning to automation.

At the foundation of this work is the District's [Generative AI Implementation Guiding Practices](#), developed by a cross-stakeholder AI Task Force that included teachers, students, District leaders, community partners, and Board members. These practices establish a clear, shared framework for responsible AI use that prioritizes safety, transparency, privacy, and ethical decision-making while remaining adaptable as the technology evolves.

A Student-Centered Definition of Agency in an AI World

CUSD defines student agency as students' ability to make intentional choices about how they learn, demonstrate understanding, and use tools responsibly. Within our AI framework, this means students are explicitly taught when, why, and how AI may support learning and when it may not. Students are expected to collaborate with teachers, follow assignment-specific guidelines, protect personal data, properly attribute AI contributions, and critically evaluate AI-generated content for accuracy and bias.

Rather than banning AI or treating it as a shortcut, the District frames AI as a tool that requires discernment. Students are asked to think metacognitively about their use of AI, including what the tool contributed, what the student contributed, and how learning was enhanced as a result. This intentional framing reinforces agency by positioning students as decision-makers, not passive consumers.

System Structures That Support Responsible Use

To support consistent implementation, CUSD aligned its AI practices with existing Board policies related to digital citizenship, academic integrity, and data privacy. Teachers use District-approved, age-appropriate AI tools and set clear expectations for AI use within assignments and syllabi. Employees are guided by FERPA-aligned practices that prohibit the use of open AI tools with sensitive or student data and emphasize professional transparency and accountability.

Importantly, the District treats AI governance as a living system. The Guiding Practices document is intentionally designed to be updated as tools, laws, and instructional use cases evolve. Version history is publicly tracked to maintain transparency and trust with the community.

The AI Institute and the "10% Club" Model

Professional learning is delivered through the Capistrano AI Institute, a phased, cohort-based model designed to build internal capacity rather than rely on one-time training. The Institute began with a voluntary cohort representing approximately 10 percent of District teachers, referred to as the "10% Club." These educators function as innovators, collaborators, and early adopters who explore classroom-level AI use aligned to District principles.

This model reflects a strategic decision to scale responsibly. Rather than attempting districtwide implementation all at once, CUSD focused on depth over speed. Institute participants engage in hands-on experimentation, collaborative problem-solving, and reflective practice, with a consistent emphasis on how AI can increase student voice, ownership, and cognitive engagement.

As demand grew beyond what a small central team could facilitate directly, the Institute added additional self-paced learning options, open collaboration sessions, and vendor-supported training that remains anchored in District values. This shift further reinforced agency, not only for students, but for educators as learners and designers.

Teacher-Curated, Safe AI Environments for Students

In Capistrano Unified, student use of AI is intentionally guided through teacher curated, district supported tools rather than open public platforms. Educators in the Capistrano AI Institute are trained on premium versions of MagicSchool AI and Brisk Teaching so they can design structured, standards aligned learning experiences where prompts, outputs, and expectations are carefully controlled. This approach protects student privacy, reduces exposure to unreliable content, and reinforces responsible AI use while keeping teachers in oversight of the learning process. Within these curated systems, AI supports higher level thinking such as drafting, revising, analyzing, and reflecting, ensuring it enhances instruction rather than replaces it.

Instructional Impact and Student Experience

In classrooms led by AI Institute-trained educators, students engage with AI in ways that are transparent, purposeful, and developmentally appropriate. Teachers use MagicSchool AI and Brisk Teaching to scaffold learning tasks, provide feedback loops, and support differentiation, while still requiring students to demonstrate original thinking and understanding.

Students are explicitly taught that AI is a support tool, not an answer engine. They are expected to evaluate AI-generated suggestions, revise outputs, cite AI contributions when appropriate, and explain how the tool informed their thinking. This reinforces student agency by keeping decision-making and accountability in the hands of the learner.

Because these experiences occur in a secure, teacher-designed environment, students build confidence using AI responsibly before encountering less structured tools outside of school. The result is a learning experience that balances innovation with safety, and autonomy with guidance, preparing students to navigate an AI-rich world with discernment and integrity.

Looking Forward

CUSD's AI implementation strategy is intentionally iterative. By grounding innovation in clear guiding practices, investing in educator capacity through the AI Institute, and centering student agency at every level, the District has created a sustainable model for responsible AI integration. This work reflects a commitment not just to adopting new tools, but to preparing students to navigate a complex, AI-rich world with confidence, ethics, and agency.