

Shaping the Future with Students at the Center: Irvine Unified’s Human-Centered Approach to AI and Student Agency

In an era where technology often moves faster than policy, our district chose a path of proactive leadership over reactive prohibition. We recognized early on that Artificial Intelligence is not merely a technical tool, but a fundamental shift in how our students will learn, work, and connect. In order to evaluate our strategy and ensure we proceed in a proactive, yet responsive way, the AI Steering Committee, comprised of administrators, teachers, and community members, gathered feedback from students and community groups to map our course.

Centering Student Voice

Nearly 50 student focus groups across grades 3–12 have been conducted so far this school year. The goal of these focus groups was to better understand how students experience AI in learning, relationships, and their view of the future. Students were thoughtful, nuanced, and very much aligned through the grade levels.

They told us:

- “Show us how to use it, don’t just ban it.”
- “We want AI to help us think, not think for us.”
- “Make sure humans stay in control.”
- “Be consistent across teachers.”
- “Teach us what’s ethical.”

Elementary students worried about over-reliance and losing common sense. Middle school students questioned inconsistent expectations and chatbot companionship. High school students raised concerns about integrity, authenticity, and whether AI might devalue genuine effort. Across grade levels, one message emerged: Students do not want AI to replace their thinking. They want to be taught how to use it responsibly. That insight became the foundation of our AI Literacy strategy.

Student perspectives directly inform our K–12 AI Literacy Scope & Sequence, ensuring we begin where students are emotionally and developmentally, while building safeguards alongside skills.

Our framework develops agency progressively:

- **Early Grades:** Students explore the difference between humans and machines and learn that AI is a tool, not a feeling being.
- **Upper Elementary & Middle School:** Students debate responsible versus irresponsible use, examine bias, and analyze digital permanence.

- **High School:** Students evaluate ethical complexity, critique AI limitations, and design structured AI workflows that preserve human judgment and ignite innovation.

Each phase includes measurable student outcomes that move learners from awareness to analysis to independent, responsible application. This is not AI compliance training. It is agency development.

We believe student agency requires structured access, not unchecked exposure. Before purchasing instructional AI tools such as MagicSchool and Snorkl, we piloted them and gathered student feedback. Students shared what supported their learning, what created frustration, and where guardrails were needed.

These tools are not positioned as answer-generators. They are feedback engines, supporting revision, reflection, and deeper understanding.

Gathering Community Insight

Community voice has also shaped our direction. We presented our AI implementation plans publicly and received feedback from parent groups, including the Education Advisory Council and the Special Education Advisory Committee. Families consistently emphasized the need for balance: Prepare students for a rapidly evolving future while protecting foundational skills and human development.

Parents called for future-ready and future-proof skills: critical thinking, creativity, ethical reasoning, resilience, and intentional technology use. That feedback is reflected in our phased rollout, privacy-first tool selection, and emphasis on human-centered competencies.

We listened to students, engaged families, aligned governance with instruction, and embedded safeguards alongside access. Most importantly, we positioned students not as passive consumers of AI, but as thoughtful, ethical participants in its use.

Artificial Intelligence will continue to evolve. Our commitment is to shape students who can navigate change with adaptability, intentionality, and integrity.