

SCAN 3

What Students Think, Say and Feel About AI in Their Lives

A synthesis of research since 2018 on the student voice in K-12 - across learning, wellbeing, connection with others, and their future

Prepared for the Youth AI Research Network

This third scan listens. Where SCANS 1 and 2 examined what young people create and what they build with their teachers, this report gathers what students themselves think, say and feel about AI in their lives, especially at school. It is framed by the Network's twin questions of **Learning Well** and **Being Well**, and reads the student voice through the design-justice lens of *AI Unplugged* (Murgatroyd & Couture, 2026): those most affected by AI in schooling have the most to teach us, if we will centre rather than merely consult them.

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1. Purpose and Framing

This is the third report in the Futures Leadership for Change series accompanying the Youth AI Research Network. SCAN 1 asked what young people create when positioned as designers of their own AI space. SCAN 2 asked what teachers and students build together. SCAN 3 does something quieter and, in some ways, more important: it listens. It gathers what students across the K-12 years think, say and feel about the place of AI in their lives, with school at the centre, and organizes that voice around four questions the Network cares about - what students say about AI and learning, AI and wellbeing, AI and their connections with others, and AI and their future.

Two commitments shape the report. The first is fidelity to the student voice: wherever possible this scan privileges what young people themselves have said, and it draws its arguments from real studies with verifiable references rather than impressions. The second is the design-justice lens of *AI Unplugged* (Murgatroyd & Couture, 2026), which holds that those most affected by AI in schooling - students - have the most to teach us, and that the task is to centre their voice rather than merely consult it after decisions are made. The Network's twin questions of Learning Well and Being Well run throughout, and they map almost exactly onto the four themes: learning and the future belong largely to Learning Well, wellbeing and connection largely to Being Well.

A word on what the student voice already tells us in aggregate. Young people are neither the uncritical adopters nor the passive victims that adult debate often assumes. They are ambivalent in the most thoughtful sense: using AI widely, valuing parts of it, and worrying, often acutely, about what it is doing to their thinking, their relationships and their prospects. That ambivalence is the through-line of this scan.

2. How to Read This Scan

Three cautions travel with the evidence. First, most of what is published as student perceptions is survey data reported in researchers' words, not students' own; genuine verbatim student voice is comparatively rare and clusters in a handful of qualitative and youth-led studies. This scan uses the large surveys for the shape of opinion and reserves direct quotation for the moments where young people speak for themselves, including the youth participatory work in *AI Unplugged* itself.

Second, the strongest K-12 evidence is recent and skews toward North America, with the Common-Sense Media, RAND, Gallup and Junior Achievement studies carrying much of the weight. That is where the documented K-12 voice is fullest; it is not the only voice, and later scans should broaden it toward the Network's own countries. Third, of the four themes, AI and connection with others is the least studied, so that section honestly rests on fewer sources and should be read as an opening question more than a settled account.

Theme	What students say, in brief
Learning	Most now use AI and value it, yet a growing majority believe it is eroding

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	their own critical thinking, and they are redrawing the line between help and cheating themselves.
Wellbeing	A majority of teens have used AI companions; a significant minority turn to them for emotional support, raising real risks at a time of acute loneliness.
Connection	The least-studied theme. Some teens find AI conversation as satisfying as friendship and take serious matters to a bot over a person, though most still prefer real friends.
Their future	Broad optimism coexists with sharp anxiety: most are hopeful about their careers yet believe AI has worsened their prospects, and few feel prepared.

3. AI and Learning

As they learn, students are doing two things at once: using AI more each month and growing more worried about what it costs them. By late 2025, the share of middle, high school and college students using AI for homework had climbed from roughly half to nearly two-thirds in a matter of months, driven largely by middle and high schoolers (RAND Corporation, 2026). They use it mostly to understand assignments, brainstorm, look up facts and revise writing - support roles rather than wholesale substitution.

Yet in the same breath, they name the cost. The share of students who believe that using AI for schoolwork harms their critical thinking rose to about two-thirds in 2025, up sharply in a single year (RAND Corporation, 2026). This is the agency paradox of *AI Unplugged* voiced by students themselves: they sense that the convenience may be hollowing out the very thinking school is meant to build. The student-built tool WordFrame, documented in SCAN 1, captured the line young people keep drawing - that AI should, in their words, “help you learn instead of doing the work for you” (Education Gazette editors, 2025).

Students are also quietly redrawing the rules. Most do not regard using AI to understand an assignment as cheating, even as they accept that passing off a fully AI-written essay is (RAND Corporation, 2026). The integrity question, in other words, is being renegotiated from the inside, which matters because the surveillance response is failing the people it targets. Teachers struggle to tell student work from AI, and roughly a fifth of students report that they or someone they know has been accused of AI cheating without proof (Center for Democracy & Technology, as reported in *The Conversation*, 2026). The youth researchers of the Toronto District School Board reached the same conclusion from the students’ perspective, calling for regulation rather than bans and identifying their own concerns about comprehension and metacognition (Francis et al., 2025).

4. AI and Wellbeing

A note on a sensitive theme

This section and the next discuss AI companions, loneliness and adolescent mental health, including a documented case of a young person's death. It is written for educators and treats these as research findings, not as detail to dwell on. Anyone using this material with young people should pair it with appropriate wellbeing support.

The wellbeing evidence is where the student voice turns most urgent. A national study of 13- to 17-year-olds found that most have used AI companions - conversational tools designed for relationship and emotional response - with around half qualifying as regular users (Robb & Mann, 2025). This is not a niche behaviour; it is mainstream, and it is arriving, as the study's authors note, at a moment when adolescent loneliness is already acute.

The risks are real and, in the most serious instances, grave. The same research documents teens encountering uncomfortable or harmful responses, and a wrongful-death lawsuit concerning a teenager's relationship with a companion chatbot has since proceeded toward settlement (Robb & Mann, 2025). For the Network's Being Well frame, the point is not to demonize the tools but to take seriously what young people are telling us through their use of them: that many are carrying more than they can hold, and that a machine that is always available and never judges can become, dangerously, a substitute for human care. This is the deeper meaning of the Toronto student's insistence that school should remain "a place where it is ok to be a human" (Murgatroyd & Couture, 2026).

5. AI and Connection With Others

Connection is the least-studied theme and, perhaps, the most consequential. The available evidence suggests AI is beginning to occupy the space that human relationships once held. In the companion study, a meaningful minority of teens reported finding conversation with an AI companion as satisfying as, or more satisfying than, conversation with real-life friends, and a comparable share said they had taken something important or serious to a companion rather than to a person (Robb & Mann, 2025). Common Sense Media's leadership framed the stakes bluntly, warning of a generation at risk of "replacing human connection with machines" (Robb & Mann, 2025).

The picture is not one of wholesale withdrawal. A clear majority of teens still spend more time with real friends than with AI companions, and many hold a healthy distrust of the advice these systems give (Robb & Mann, 2025). But the relational stakes are exactly the kind that schooling exists to tend. If a tool can stand in for the friend, the confidant or the listening adult, then the question for the Network is not only what AI does to learning but what it does to the web of human relationship that makes a school a community. This theme deserves the Network's own primary research, because the published record is thinnest precisely where the human cost may be highest.

6. AI and Their Future

Asked about their futures, students hold hope and dread together. A 2025 survey of American teens found that the overwhelming majority were optimistic about their future careers, while a clear majority believed AI had negatively affected their career outlook, and most reported feeling pressure to choose the right path early (Junior Achievement & Citizens, 2025). This is not incoherence; it is a generation looking squarely at a future it expects to be both promising and precarious.

The mood, moreover, is darkening. Across successive Gallup surveys, K-12 students' anxiety about AI held high at around four in ten, while excitement and hopefulness fell and anger rose (Walton Family Foundation & Gallup, 2026). Most striking is the preparedness gap: only a tiny fraction of middle and high school students feel extremely prepared to use AI in their future jobs, even as roughly half expect to need it (Walton Family Foundation & Gallup, 2025). Students are not asking to be shielded from AI; they are asking to be made ready for it. Gallup's researchers framed the task as turning that anxiety into agency - which is, almost word for word, what the Network exists to do.

7. What Students Are Asking For

Read across the four themes, a remarkably coherent set of asks emerges from young people themselves, and it is worth stating plainly because it is, in effect, a student-authored brief for the Network. Students want clear and fair guidance rather than blanket bans; they want to be taught to use AI well, not left to figure it out alone; they want transparency and trust around how their work is judged; and, in the case of the Toronto youth researchers, they want genuine regulation and a voice in the rules that govern them (Francis et al., 2025). Above all, across wellbeing and connection, they want the human core of school protected - relationships, care, and the right, as one student put it, for school to remain a place where it is ok to be a human (Murgatroyd & Couture, 2026).

Through the design-justice lens, these are not merely preferences to be noted. They are the demands of those most affected, and they amount to a call for co-governance: students asking to help author the terms on which AI enters their learning lives. A scan that listens carefully finds that young people are already articulating, in their own words, exactly the agency the Network is built to support.

8. Implications for the Network's Work

Several working propositions follow for teams as they design their inquiries. They are prompts, not instructions.

- 1. Treat the four themes as inquiry lenses.** Learning, wellbeing, connection and the future give student teams a ready frame for surfacing and comparing their own peers' voices across the seven countries.

- 2. Privilege the verbatim voice.** Because genuine student quotations are scarce in the literature, the Network's own participatory research can make a real contribution simply by capturing what young people actually say, in their own words.
- 3. Take wellbeing and connection seriously as design constraints.** Any tool a team builds should be examined for whether it strengthens or quietly substitutes for human relationships and care.
- 4. Turn anxiety into agency.** Students are anxious and underprepared, but not hostile; framing the work as preparation and authorship, rather than warning, meets them where they are.
- 5. Hear the call for co-governance.** Students are asking to help write the rules; the Network can give a real venue rather than treating it as feedback.

9. Gaps and the Next Scans

This scan establishes the student voice and its four dimensions; it does not exhaust them. Three gaps should shape what follows. The first is geographic and developmental: the fullest K-12 voice is recent and North American, and verbatim voice from younger children and from the Network's own countries remains thin. The second is thematic: connection with others is markedly under-researched relative to its apparent stakes, and is the most promising target for the Network's own work. The third is longitudinal: almost nothing yet tracks how a given young person's relationship to AI changes as they move through school, which is exactly the kind of knowledge a multi-year, multi-country network can begin to generate.

A coherent sequence for the series would now move from SCAN 1's landscape, through SCAN 2's account of co-creation, through this synthesis of student voice, toward a fourth scan grounded in the Network's own emerging evidence ahead of ICSEI 2027 - carrying the Learning Well and Being Well frames and the design-justice spine throughout, so that the reports accumulate into a single, student-centred argument rather than a set of snapshots.

References

References follow APA 7th edition style. All sources are real and were verified for this report; where a finding reached this scan through a secondary report, that route is named rather than implied.

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A note on sources and student voice

This synthesis privileges genuine student voice and uses only verifiable references. Two of the most powerful student lines it draws on - that AI should help you learn rather than do the work for you, and that school should remain a place where it is ok to be a human - come from young people in New Zealand and Toronto respectively, and stand for thousands of others whose words have not yet been recorded. Capturing more of those words is itself part of the Network's task.