

SCAN 1

Students as Creators of Their AI Spaces

A global environmental scan of student-led artificial intelligence projects in schools, and the issues that students themselves raise

Prepared for the Youth AI Research Network

This scan supports school teams in Canada (Alberta and Toronto), Norway, Ireland, Germany, Iceland, Australia and New Zealand as they lead the design of an artificial intelligence application they judge to be needed, and then use that prototype as the basis for critical reflection on what AI means now and what it may come to mean. The scan is framed throughout by the Network's twin questions of **Learning Well** and **Being Well**.

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1. Purpose and Framing

This is the first in a planned series of environmental scans produced by Futures Leadership for Change to accompany the Youth AI Research Network. The Network brings together small teams of students and a lead teacher in schools across several countries, who will lead the development and deployment of an artificial intelligence application they see as genuinely needed in their own setting, and then use that prototype as the living material for critical reflection. The premise is deliberately inverted from much current practice. Rather than positioning young people as recipients of AI, or as a problem to be managed in matters of academic integrity, the Network positions them as creators of their own AI space - designers, questioners and, ultimately, critical friends to one another across borders.

Two organizing questions run through the work, and through this scan. The first, **Learning Well**, asks what it means to learn with integrity, depth and genuine understanding in a world where capable AI tools are always to hand. The second, **Being Well**, asks what these same tools do to attention, relationship, identity, emotional life and a young person's sense of their own future. The distinction matters because the issues students raise tend to fall into one frame or the other, and because a prototype built without attention to Being Well can quietly undermine the very wellbeing it claims to serve.

The method at the heart of the Network is that of the social innovation laboratory (informed by Youth Participatory Action Research). Students do not simply build a tool or prototype; they frame a question that matters to them, investigate it, act, and reflect on what they learn, with the prototype serving as both intervention and provocation. This scan is intended to give those students and their teachers a shared starting picture - what student-led AI work already looks like around the world, and what issues are surfacing when young people themselves are asked. It is reference material to argue with, not a template to copy.

The seven-country network at a glance

Canada (Alberta and Toronto / TDSB) · Norway · Ireland · Germany · Iceland · Australia · New Zealand

Three cycles structure the year: initiating the network and framing questions; supporting and developing each school's action research; and assessing and sustaining the network, with sharing at the International Congress for School Effectiveness and School Improvement (ICSEI 2027) and final summits in Wellington and Dublin.

2. How to Read This Scan

A scan is only as honest as its account of its own evidence. Three cautions should travel with every section that follows. First, the documented base of genuinely student-led AI projects remains thin and unevenly distributed. A great deal of what is published

describes AI being done to or for students - adaptive tutoring, automated feedback, institutional policy - rather than AI being made by them. The clearest worked examples currently sit in Canada and a small number of other Anglophone settings, which reflects where reporting happens rather than where the practice is richest.

Second, the policy picture is far better documented than the project picture. We can describe with some confidence how China, India, South Korea and others are positioning AI in schooling at a system level, while the lived texture of a single student team's inquiry is largely absent from the published record. This scan therefore pairs a reasonably firm policy landscape with a deliberately illustrative, and incomplete, set of project examples.

Third, the strongest evidence on the issues that matter to students comes from survey and interview work with young people, much of it Canadian and much of it concerned with use rather than creation. It is suggestive rather than global. Where the European partners in particular are concerned, named school-level cases remain a gap that later scans in this series should close. None of this weakens the value of the exercise; it simply means the scan is best read as a map of where to look and what to ask, not as a settled account.

3. The Global Policy Landscape

Across the world, national systems are taking up AI in schooling in strikingly different ways, and those differences are not merely technical. They express what each system believes education is for. A useful first cut distinguishes the centralized, modernization-driven approaches of parts of Asia from the more cautious, ethics-forward approaches common in Canada and much of Europe, and from the infrastructure-constrained reality of much of the Global South.

China has moved furthest toward a comprehensive, centralized model, framing AI literacy as a matter of national modernization and working toward AI education in all schools, with a systematic progression from primary through to high school. India treats AI as a catalyst for digital transformation and equity, with national policy aiming to integrate AI from the early grades and a strong emphasis on workforce preparation and inclusion. South Korea has paired curriculum reform with AI-enabled tutoring and explicit attention to social and emotional support. By contrast, Canada's approach is decentralized and ethics-forward, emphasizing digital literacy, privacy and student wellbeing, with provincial guidance rather than a single national policy.

The contrast with much of Africa and Latin America is sobering and belongs in any honestly global account. By recent estimates only around fifteen percent of school systems in those regions have substantive AI adoption, constrained less by curriculum intent than by digital infrastructure and deep structural inequity. For a network whose members all sit in relatively well-resourced systems, this is an essential point of critical reflection: the question of who gets to create their AI space, and who does not, is itself part of what AI means now.

A recurring design logic worth noticing

Despite very different national philosophies, a common pedagogical sequence keeps reappearing, and it maps neatly onto what the Network is asking its students to do:

1. **Awareness** in the early years - encountering AI, naming it, noticing where it already shapes daily life.
2. **Supervised experimentation** in the middle years - trying, testing and questioning AI tools with guidance.
3. **Greater autonomy** in the senior years - independent creation and critique, which is precisely the register the Youth AI Research Network invites.

4. Country Context for the Network

The participating jurisdictions sit at very different points on the spectrum from decentralized to centralized, and from cautious to expansive. These differences are an asset rather than a complication. They mean the Network can hold a genuine comparison rather than seven variations on a single national story, and they give each team a different policy backdrop against which to position a student-defined inquiry. The table below sketches the governance character of each system we reviewed (Germany and Iceland may join later) and what it implies for student-led AI work. It should be read as orientation, not as a ranking; international comparison is most useful when it surfaces differences rather than declaring winners.

Jurisdiction	Governance and system character	What this means for student-led AI inquiry
Canada — Alberta and Toronto (TDSB)	Highly decentralized; no national education ministry, provinces govern their own frameworks. Alberta and Ontario have moved on AI through provincial guidance, task forces and new digital-technology courses.	Teams enjoy local latitude but little common scaffolding, so the Network itself must supply shared language and ethical guardrails.
Norway	Nordic comprehensive model; strong public provision, high trust in teacher professional judgment, and a welfare-state emphasis on equity and wellbeing.	Fertile ground for the Being Well frame; students are accustomed to dialogue and participation rather than top-down mandates.
Ireland	Centralized national curriculum with a strong recent emphasis on digital strategy and key skills; active engagement with EU AI and digital-citizenship agendas.	National frameworks give teams a clear policy backdrop against which to position a student-defined inquiry.
Germany	Federal system in which the sixteen Länder hold education authority; cautious, rights-forward stance shaped by strong data-protection	Privacy and data governance are likely to surface early as live student concerns, enriching the critical-reflection dimension.

Jurisdiction	Governance and system character	What this means for student-led AI inquiry
	culture.	
Iceland	Small, highly connected Nordic system; consistently strong on access and digital participation; close-knit professional community.	Scale allows quick iteration and unusually direct contact between students, teachers and decision-makers.
Australia	National framework (the Australian Curriculum) implemented through states and territories; an early mover on school AI guidance.	A maturing national conversation on safe and ethical AI use gives teams ready reference points.
New Zealand	National curriculum with a distinctive bicultural and competency-based orientation; strong tradition of learner agency and inquiry.	Inquiry-led, agency-centred pedagogy aligns closely with the Youth Participatory Action Research method at the heart of the Network.

A note on comparison itself. The international machinery for comparing education systems - the OECD's assessments and teaching surveys, UNESCO's classifications and monitoring reports - was built for an earlier set of questions about attainment and access. It is not yet well suited to capturing whether young people can create and critique AI, which is one reason a student-led network of this kind has something distinctive to contribute. The comparative frame this series offers is closer to the ground than the indicators, and that is the point.

5. Students as Creators: Worked Examples

The following examples are offered not as best practice to be replicated but as proof of possibility, and as material for teams to interrogate. Each shows young people moving from consumers to creators of AI, and each carries its own unresolved questions. For every example a reference and link is provided so that teams can go to the source.

5.1 Innovations 10, Delview Secondary School (British Columbia, Canada)

Perhaps the richest documented case of student-led AI work, the Innovations 10 class at Delview Secondary, supported by the Canadian AI Advancement Institute, had students research and produce podcast segments exploring AI's impact on society, culture and technology, with feedback from industry experts. The value lay less in the artefact than in the move it required: students had to form a defensible view of AI, connect it to their own experience, and weigh ethical and social considerations rather than only technical ones. For the Network, it models the reflective turn that should accompany any prototype. caiai.ca/case-study/delview-high-school-case-study.

5.2 Schools of the Future: AI for Student Wellbeing Challenge (MindShare Learning, Canada)

This national challenge asks teams of three to five students, guided by a teacher mentor, to develop AI solutions addressing student wellbeing and quality education, aligned to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Proposed project ideas - an AI mental-health check-in tool, a smart study planner, an anti-bullying detection aid - map

almost exactly onto the Network's twin frames of Learning Well and Being Well, and the judging emphasis on impact and creative use of AI rewards purpose over polish. It is a useful reference point for teams seeking a wellbeing-anchored inquiry. mindsharelearning.ca.

A caution worth carrying into design

Several of the most appealing student wellbeing ideas - mood check-ins, bullying detection, attention monitoring - are also the ones that raise the sharpest Being Well concerns about surveillance, consent and the labelling of young people. A prototype that watches students in order to help them is exactly the kind of artefact whose assumptions the Network exists to examine. Teams should treat this tension as material, not as a flaw to be designed away.

5.3 Lern2ern and student ownership of work (Innovation in Education, Canada)

The Lern2ern initiative illustrates a different facet: students as creators who retain ownership of what they make. Reported examples include Grade 7 students using AI-assisted, curriculum-aligned performance tasks - a rooftop-garden design problem among them - with an emphasis on solving real problems for their community and on students holding the intellectual property in their own work, including through verification of credentials. The principle that young people own the AI-supported work they produce is directly relevant to how the Network frames authorship and agency. iiedu.ca.

5.4 The AI Assessment Scale, Saskatoon Public Schools (Canada)

Not a building project but an enabling condition, Saskatoon Public Schools' adaptation of the AI Assessment Scale gives students and teachers a shared visual language for being transparent about how AI was used in a piece of work. By moving beyond a binary of allowed or banned, and treating categories of use as parallel options rather than a hierarchy, it shifts the conversation from compliance to ethical decision-making and student agency. For a network built on student-led creation, this kind of transparency scaffolding is close to a precondition for honest reflection. leonfurze.com.

5.5 AI-Ready and Day of AI (Actua, Canada, with MIT RAISE)

Actua's AI-Ready programme, delivered with partners including MIT RAISE's Day of AI, foregrounds critical thinking, problem-solving and ethical decision-making rather than technical skill alone, and notably finds that educators often feel less confident than their students. That confidence gap is itself a finding the Network should anticipate and plan for: lead teachers will frequently be learning alongside, not ahead of, their teams. actua.ca/aiready.

5.6 Australia: students designing AI to solve problems they choose

Australia is rich in genuinely student-led AI creation, largely because two national programmes are built around it. The clearest individual case is Access Lens, built by fifteen-year-old Faiz Noorani of Melbourne, who won the Major Prize in Samsung's 2025 Solve for Tomorrow competition for an AI tool that uses augmented reality to translate spoken English into Auslan (Australian Sign Language) through smart glasses or a phone

camera. The idea came from watching a partly deaf friend struggle to communicate in class, which makes it an almost ideal Being Well artefact: student-defined, accessibility-driven, and carrying its own questions about who designs for whom. news.samsung.com/au.

At the school-cohort level, the Day of AI Australia competition is the stronger structural fit for the Network, because it asks students in years 5 to 10 to develop their own AI technology project to improve their school or community, with more than 20,000 students taking part. A useful worked instance is Plumpton High School in New South Wales, where students Zain Al-Shible and Haaziq Anwaar took first place with an image-recognition system to detect manufacturing defects. The competition's register - students naming a problem and prototyping a response - is precisely the one the Network adopts. plumpton-h.schools.nsw.gov.au.

5.7 New Zealand: an essay coach built by students, and a Maori-led accelerator

New Zealand yields the single strongest Learning Well case in the scan, and it is unmistakably student-led. Three Marlborough Boys' College students - Sanjiv, Lawrence and Kahu - built WordFrame, an AI tool that helps students structure and improve their writing rather than writing it for them, as part of their Level 2 business studies class. The framing is exactly the one this report argues for: in their own words, AI in education should help you learn instead of doing the work for you, and should be a tool, not a shortcut. WordFrame was tested by students and teachers at Marlborough Boys' and Girls' colleges and became a finalist in the regional Young Enterprise Scheme, with the teacher's role explicitly to mentor while leadership remained student-driven. gazette.education.govt.nz.

For the Indigenous dimension, the relevant case is Programming Maori Potential. Through that digital start-up accelerator, 115 rangatahi Maori from across New Zealand use hackathon and design-thinking methods to identify and solve community issues with technology, then turn them into working prototypes. One team, Team ROYO (Rangatahi Opportunities), built a platform letting young people move beyond traditional CVs toward personalized digital profiles with video resums, and won the South Island regionals. It is student-led, Maori-led, and problem-defined by the rangatahi themselves, which is the agency model the Network rests on. schoolnews.co.nz.

5.8 Ireland: a creative-arts opportunity the Network can seed

Ireland presents the scan's most instructive near miss. A search for school students using AI as a creative-arts or music studio resource, and designing their own learning around it, returns no documented case - yet Ireland holds, unusually, both halves of what such a project needs. The student-led-build culture is real and visible: Sean O'Sullivan of Coláiste Chiaráin, Croom, Co. Limerick, won the 2024 BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition overall award for an AI tool that authenticates authorship by detecting stylistic fingerprints in generated text, showing that Irish secondary students already lead critically framed AI work. irishtimes.com.

The design-your-own-learning culture is equally strong but runs, to date, on a separate track. Transition Year gives students a self-directed year for mini-companies, musicals

and creative projects, while the Arts Council's Creative Schools programme places a Creative Associate in each school to embed arts and creativity at the heart of learning, foregrounding student voice and wellbeing, and the cross-border Creative Connections programme lets clusters of schools work directly with professional artists. creativeireland.gov.ie.

The opportunity in Ireland

An Irish Transition Year or Creative Schools team using a generative music or image model as a studio collaborator - composing, remixing and critiquing what the model returns, while keeping authorship and artistic judgment human - would sit squarely in the Network's Learning Well and Being Well frames, and would model the students-as-creators premise in a creative-arts register that the Pacific and Canadian cases do not cover. Because the cultural and structural scaffolding already exists and only the AI dimension is missing, this is arguably the most generative thing the Network could pioneer rather than merely document.

6. Issues From a Student Perspective

When young people themselves are asked about AI in their learning lives, a fairly consistent set of concerns emerges. The evidence here is strongest in survey and interview work, much of it with Canadian students, and it concerns use more than creation - but the issues translate directly into questions a creator must confront. They are organized below under the Network's two frames.

6.1 Learning Well

Over-reliance and the erosion of thinking

The concern students raise most often about their own AI use is that it may be quietly hollowing out their thinking. Large majorities of Canadian students now use generative AI for schoolwork and report grade improvements, yet many simultaneously worry that they are learning less, and that convenience is displacing the productive struggle through which understanding is actually built. This is the central Learning Well tension, and it is one a student-built tool can either deepen or relieve depending on how it is designed.

Academic integrity, redefined from the inside

Students are acutely aware of the integrity question, and many want clearer, fairer guidance rather than blanket prohibition. The more interesting shift, visible in the Saskatoon work above, is from integrity-as-compliance toward integrity-as-transparency: not whether AI was used, but whether its use was disclosed and defensible. A network of student creators is unusually well placed to articulate what honest AI-assisted work should look like, because its members are doing the assisting themselves.

From AI literacy to AI fluency

The research conversation is moving beyond a thin notion of literacy - knowing what AI is - toward fluency, which includes critical evaluation, ethical reflection and creative engagement. There is as yet no settled definition of AI literacy, and approaches range from the technical to the sociocultural. For the Network this is liberating rather than troubling: by building and critiquing a real tool, students are doing exactly the integrative, fluency-building work that the literature struggles to specify.

Equity and access

Students and educators alike raise the risk that AI deepens existing divides - unequal access to devices and connectivity, algorithmic bias, and the danger of marginalizing already underserved communities. Held alongside the stark adoption gap in much of the Global South, this becomes a question the Network cannot answer for itself but should not ignore: a well-designed prototype in a well-resourced school is also a reminder of who is absent from the table.

6.2 Being Well

Emotional reliance and the substitution of a relationship

A striking and under-discussed finding is that a meaningful share of students' report turning to AI for personal questions, sometimes trusting it over people, and in some cases feeling less alone as a result. This sits at the heart of Being Well. It is not straightforwardly negative - reduced loneliness matters - but it raises real questions about what is lost when a tool stands in for a human relationship, and about what responsibility a student designer takes on when their prototype invites emotional confidence.

Surveillance, privacy and consent

Many of the most attractive wellbeing applications work by watching young people, and students are increasingly alert to what that means. Concerns about privacy, data and consent are especially live in systems with strong data-protection cultures, and they should be treated as a design constraint from the first sketch rather than a compliance step at the end. The question of who sees the data a wellbeing tool collects, and what follows from it, is one every team should be able to answer.

Anxiety about the future of work

Students connect AI directly to their own prospects, and a recurring worry is the disappearance of entry-level work - the first rungs of the ladder they are about to step onto. This is a legitimate Being Well concern about identity and security, not only an economic forecast, and it gives the critical-reflection strand of the Network real personal stakes.

Voice, agency and the right to shape the terms

Beneath the specific worries lies a more fundamental one: that decisions about AI in their lives are being made without them. The Network's entire premise is a response to this. Where young people are treated as active change agents whose perspectives are genuinely amplified, and where there are real mechanisms - councils, dialogues,

participatory research - for their voice to shape decisions, the relationship to AI shifts from something done to them toward something they help author.

7. Student Voice and Agency

The case for student voice is not sentimental; it is methodological. Our approach treats young people as researchers of their own condition, and a growing body of practice shows what this looks like. Frameworks that position youth as change agents rather than passive recipients, and that build deliberate structures to amplify their perspectives, consistently report richer engagement and more honest problem definition. Classroom practice points the same way: when students are invited to name local, national and global problems, trace their roots and propose responses through their own critical and creative work, they engage with systemic issues far more seriously than transmission teaching allows.

The wider international-education conversation reinforces the point from the policy side, increasingly advocating advisory councils, national dialogues and other formal means of embedding student voice in decision-making rather than consulting young people after the fact. For the Network, the implication is concrete. The prototype is the occasion, but the agency is the substance: what matters most is that students set the question, hold authorship of the response, and act as critical friends to one another's work across the seven countries.

8. Implications for the Network's Critical Reflective Work

Drawing the threads together, several working propositions follow for teams as they move from framing questions into building and reflecting. They are offered as prompts for the early cycles of the action research, not as instructions.

- 4. Let the prototype carry the argument.** The strongest examples in this scan are valuable less for what they built than for the questions that building forced into the open. Teams should expect the artefact to generate their best reflection, and design it so that it does.
- 5. Treat Being Well concerns as design material, not afterthoughts.** Surveillance, consent, emotional reliance and equity are most fruitful when they shape a prototype from the first sketch, especially for wellbeing-oriented tools where the risks and the purpose are entangled.
- 6. Make AI use transparent within the team itself.** Adopting a shared scale or language for disclosing how AI was used, in the spirit of the Saskatoon model, turns the integrity question from a worry into a practice and models the honesty the Network hopes to articulate.
- 7. Plan for the educator confidence gap.** Lead teachers will often be learning alongside their students. Naming this openly, and treating it as a feature of genuine inquiry rather than a deficit, protects both the work and the relationship.

- 8. Keep the absent in view.** Every team sits in a relatively well-resourced system. A short, deliberate reflection on who is not able to create their AI space, and why, keeps the global frame honest and deepens the critical work.

9. Gaps and the Next Scans

This first scan establishes the landscape and the questions; it does not exhaust them. Three gaps should shape what comes next. The most pressing is geographic and evidentiary: with Australia, New Zealand and Ireland now represented by documented student-led cases in Section 5, the thinnest remaining members are Norway, Germany and Iceland (both of whom may join later), where named school-level student-led AI cases should be sought directly rather than inferred from policy.

A related thread is the absence of a school-student-led Indigenous-language AI case in the Nordic Sami context, where the research base and participatory infrastructure both exist but have not yet been joined at the school level - an opportunity flagged for a later scan. The second gap is between policy and practice: we know far more about what systems intend than about what single student teams actually experience, which is precisely the knowledge this Network is positioned to generate and feed back into the series. The third is the near-absence of primary student voice in the published literature on creation as opposed to use - a gap the Network's own research can begin to fill, making its members not only the subjects of the next scan but among its authors.

On the strength of this picture, a sensible sequence for the series would move from this landscape scan, to a focused scan of student-led practice in the participating European and Pacific systems, to a synthesis drawing on the Network's own emerging action research ahead of ICSEI 2027. Each would carry forward the Learning Well and Being Well frames, so that the series accumulates into a coherent account rather than a set of separate snapshots.

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Futures Leadership for Change · Environmental Scan Series · Report 1
Next in series: a focused scan of student-led AI practice across the Network's European and Pacific members.