

BEYOND *the* ALGORITHM

**A Student-Led Look at the Impact of AI
on Kentucky High School Student
Learning & Life**

PART I STUDY RESULTS



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Our Purpose

In early Fall 2025, the research members of the Kentucky Student Voice Team came to consensus on the topic of inquiry for the 2025-2026 school year. Emerging from our team's shared interests, current Kentucky education policy discussions, and what we were hearing from our peers in terms of pressing issues in schools around the Commonwealth, we decided to focus our investigation on **Kentucky students' experiences and perspectives with regard to Artificial Intelligence (AI) in their learning and lives.**

We recognize that the topic of AI is a very popular conversation right now. There is a lot of attention locally and nationally as to whether and how AI should be used in educational settings. Our hope with this research is to contribute to that broader conversation in ways that center the ideas and experiences of young people, as we are those who are most affected by the policy choices that schools, districts, states, and the federal government make related to AI and education, now and in the future.



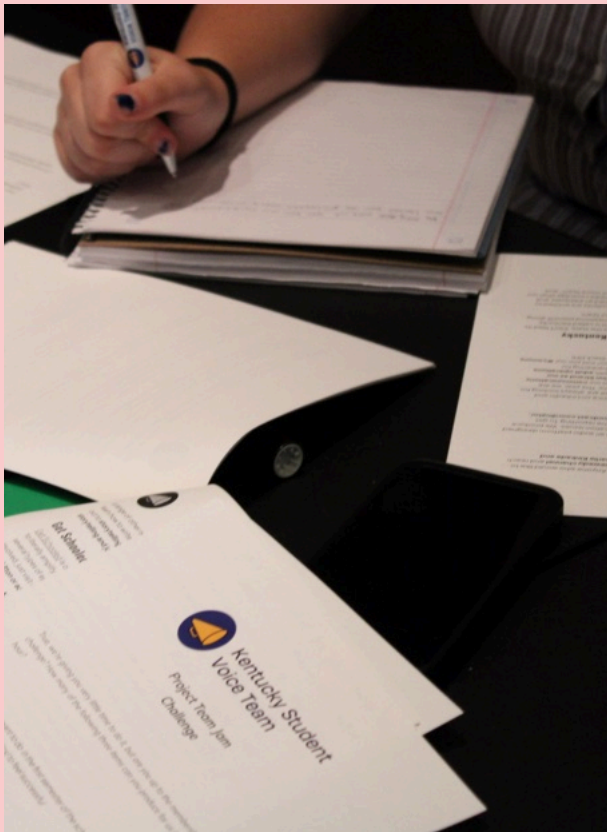
PICTURED: 2026 KSVT RESEARCH TEAM

Methods

To better understand Kentucky students' perspectives on and experiences with AI and learning, we designed a mixed-methods study that includes both quantitative and qualitative data. First, we designed a 33-item survey focused on five central areas. We wanted to investigate:

- 1) **How** and **why** students use AI for their learning;
- 2) Students' ideas about AI **policy** in their schools;
- 3) Students' perspectives on the **relationship** between AI and well-being;
- 4) Students' perspectives about whether and how AI will impact their **futures**; and,
- 5) Students' perspectives on how AI will impact our **broader society**.

Our survey included mostly Likert style items intended to solicit students' behaviors and attitudes as well as a handful of open-ended items. The survey also included several demographic items that asked students to disclose—if they were comfortable—their school's county, their racial identity, their political affiliation, and their perceived socio-economic class.



BEFORE SURVEY ADMINISTRATION, OUR TEAM CARRIED OUT BOTH COGNITIVE INTERVIEWING AND PILOT TESTING TO FURTHER REVIEW AND REFINE THE SURVEY INSTRUMENT.

Survey administration took place throughout the Fall 2025 school semester, and we collected 869 survey responses from high school students across Kentucky. Because our sample was based primarily on schools in which our research team members had contacts and access, we do not claim representation or generalizability. However, we maintain that in our results, readers can glean diverse insights from young people whose experiences and perspectives are relevant for the conversation we need to be having about AI in our schools.

As part of the **qualitative** dimension of our study, we purposefully recruited participants from the survey who had agreed to participate in a more **detailed interview process**, and we also reached out to community and school-based peer networks.

We designed the interview protocol to solicit more nuanced student stories, a process involving pilot testing and refining our questions. We then conducted 19 interviews with students across the state. As with our survey sample, we do not claim full student representation in our interviews, but we did engage in purposeful sampling, attempting to select participants whose identities and responses were diverse and varied. These interviews took place via Zoom videoconferencing and were later transcribed and authenticated. Participants received a token of appreciation in the form of a \$25 gift card for their time.

The process of analysis required steady collaboration among the research team members, and it was scaffolded and supported by Dr. Daniela DiGiacomo, KSVT's adult research partner. We ran descriptive statistical analysis on the close-ended quantitative survey responses, and we engaged in inductive coding in peer-pairs on the open-ended and interview responses. We ultimately came to consensus through iterative conversations among the pairs and then within the larger group. Triangulating these data sets allowed us to understand four primary themes from our findings, which we outline in the results section of this report.

This study is the first of several that the Kentucky Student Voice Team will produce focused on responsible technology use in Kentucky schools. We have made this commitment based on the belief that AI and technology's impact on Kentucky students' learning and well-being will affect Kentucky's young people in profound ways.

Results & Findings

The collective analysis of our survey and interview data surfaced four key findings. Details about the evidence we collected and our research team's analysis, recommendations, and reflections follow.

1

A majority of Kentucky high school **students use AI for educational enhancement**, but students' use and their rationale for use vary widely.

2

AI usage policies vary widely between and within Kentucky high schools.

3

Most Kentucky high school students say AI hasn't hurt their own critical thinking, but **many worry that reliance on AI is eroding problem-solving skills** in general.

4

Very few Kentucky high school students say they personally use AI for mental health support, but **AI's presence still affects their well-being**.

Mathematics

Early math 24 Lessons 12+	Pre-algebra 11 Lessons 18+
Arithmetic 24 Lessons 12+	Algebra basics 11 Lessons 18+
Algebra 1 24 Lessons 12+	Algebra 2 11 Lessons 18+
Geometry 24 Lessons 12+	Trigonometry 11 Lessons 18+



AI - LEARNING

FINDING 1



A majority of Kentucky high school students use AI for educational enhancement, but students' use and their rationale for use vary widely.

Finding 1 Evidence

Most of the Kentucky high school students (88%) we surveyed use or have used generative AI in some form. Our data reveals that when students reach for AI as a study tool rather than as a substitute for their own thinking, they are not only choosing between whether or not to use AI but also exactly when and how. Students in our study told us they are intentional in the ways and in the classes in which they choose to use AI.

For most students, AI is a standard part of how they complete schoolwork. Only about one in eight say they never use it, with close to half saying that knowing classmates use AI makes them more likely to use it themselves.



I think almost all students probably use it--whether it's a lot to the point where it's cheating, or if it's just a little bit to help them get ideas for something they have to do.

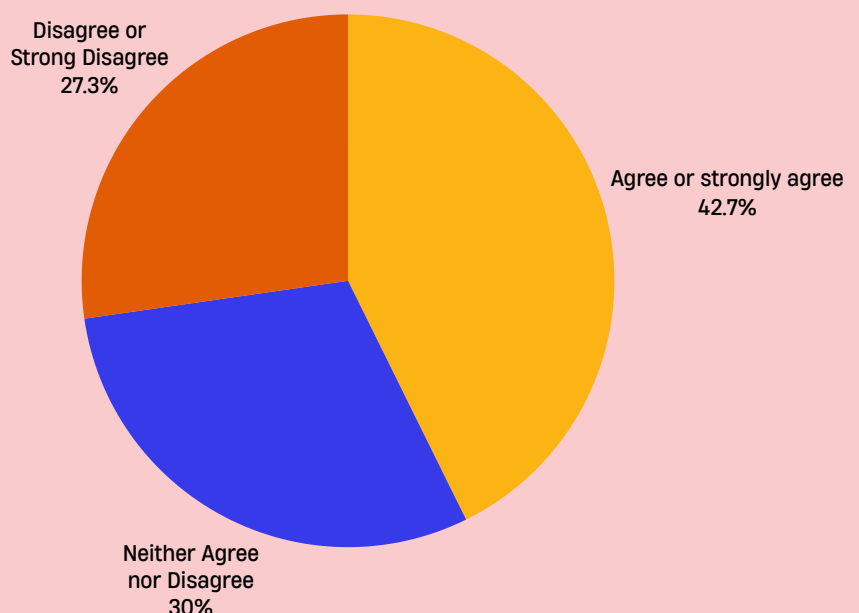
-Fayette County High School student

48%

of students that responded to our open-ended survey item told us that **AI is very beneficial for their learning.**

A similar pattern held in the closed-ended item; see Table 1.

TABLE 1: "AI HELPS ME LEARN BETTER"



While a majority of students report using AI (88%), there are many different ways that these tools are used in the classroom. In interviews, students told us that they reach for AI to brainstorm, look something up, build a study guide, or check grammar (see Table 2). Students we interviewed further reported that using AI to produce finished writing is one of the *least* common ways they use the technology.

“

I usually use it just to give me ideas of how I should structure my essays, how I'll start them, rather than tell it to write my whole essay.

-Fayette County High School student

“

I try not to use generative AI where it types out a whole essay. The one instance I might use it for is for something like a math question, to check an answer or deepen my understanding.

-Jefferson County High School student

The more qualitative data reveals additional subject-specific information. Students we interviewed told us that their primary use of AI was largely in math, science, and for exam studying. Several students described AI as their go-to for math while saying they deliberately try to avoid it for essays. Responses to the survey further underscore this finding. (See Table 2.)

TABLE 2: WHAT STUDENTS ARE USING AI FOR (MULTI-SELECT)

Idea brainstorming	483 (55.6%)
Basic search questions (incl. Google)	405 (46.6%)
Create study guides / practice questions	395 (45.5%)
Grammar, spelling, punctuation	369 (42.5%)
Find resources	329 (37.9%)
Writing (essays, long answers)	110 (12.7%)

If, how, and how often students in our study use AI varies widely. Students' AI use for schoolwork varies from student to student, and so do opinions about the benefits and harms of using these tools for learning. About 43% of the students we surveyed say that AI is at least somewhat likely to help them learn better, while about 27% say it is not. Motivation shows other trends: 53% of student respondents report that AI neither increases nor decreases their drive to do schoolwork, although 21% say it does increase motivation, and 10% say AI use decreases it.

Certain AI tools are used more than others, and students described a sense that AI is increasingly unavoidable. Some of the tools students cited using include: ChatGPT, Gemini, Grammarly, Snapchat's AI, and Google's AI Overview. Several students told us that AI now shows up unprompted in tools they were already using which has begun to muddy the line between using AI to do schoolwork and just trying to do schoolwork.

“

When I Google something, the AI Overview is right there and is so hard to avoid now.

-Jefferson County High School student

“

Grammarly is AI. It's hard for administrations to have any kind of blanket rule on AI usage.

-Boyle County High School student

Additionally in our interviews, multiple students at different schools told us about classmates using Snapchat's AI primarily due to convenience since it's always on their phone and harder for schools to detect. This is as opposed to ChatGPT or Gemini.

FINDING 2

AI usage policies vary widely between and within Kentucky high schools.

Finding 2 Evidence

When it comes to what we learned about AI school policies, survey results revealed a highly varied landscape. Students specifically highlighted discrepancies between policies among teachers at the same school, policies among different schools in the same district, and policies among different districts across the state.

In our survey and interviews, students voiced a desire both for more consistent school policies and more consistent teacher enforcement of them. Students further expressed concern that administrators scrutinize students’ AI use—including running student work through AI detectors--while not making visible how they themselves are use AI in their own instructional practices and teaching work.

“

[Teachers] tell us all the time: ‘Don’t use AI. It’s not good’ But yet people still use it on a daily basis. It’s very normalized, even though teachers are like, ‘don’t do it,’ it’s still being done.

–Pike County High School student

“

My school...[doesn’t have] a school-wide AI policy that I’m aware of. It’s mostly set by each teacher at the beginning of the year or semester; they’ll specify what their opinions are on AI and how much you can use in class.

–Jefferson County High School student

TABLE 3. STUDENTS REPORTED UNDERSTANDING OF SCHOOL AI POLICY
What students know about their school’s AI policy (multiple choice, n=864)

Policy exists, but enforcement varies	465 (53.5%)
Unsure about AI policy	241 (27.7%)
Clear AI policy that is always followed	121 (13.9%)
No AI policy	37 (4.3%)



Students in our study noticed that AI policy also varies by subject within rigorous courses. Interview subjects especially described more leniency in STEM-heavy AP/IB classes, but stricter enforcement in AP/IB English and writing-intensive courses.

“

I would say AI is used especially in the gifted and talented program as a tool of cheating. Whether it's a chemistry quiz or math, students are using AI not as a tool to help them understand these concepts, but rather--just take a screenshot, plug it in, and get a 100%.

-Fayette County High School student

“

I take three English-based classes. Especially in AP Seminar, my teacher is very hard line about AI, and you know, I respect that. But I also know that she uses GPTZero, which is just AI checking for AI.

-Fayette County High School student

Between schools and school districts, AI policies often vary greatly. The increasing use of AI detectors that employ various technologies to detect text that has been submitted into chatbots further complicates AI policy. What is clear, however, is a demonstrated desire among students for consistency in AI policies.

Students suggested many different options for these policies, ranging from full AI bans, to information and AI literacy training and instruction. Students commonly proposed policies that banned AI for cheating, but made a distinction for tasks such as brainstorming and research. In their responses to the open-ended survey questions, students explicitly mentioned wanting stricter enforcement of AI 73 times. In contrast, only 16 students reported being satisfied with their school's AI policy.

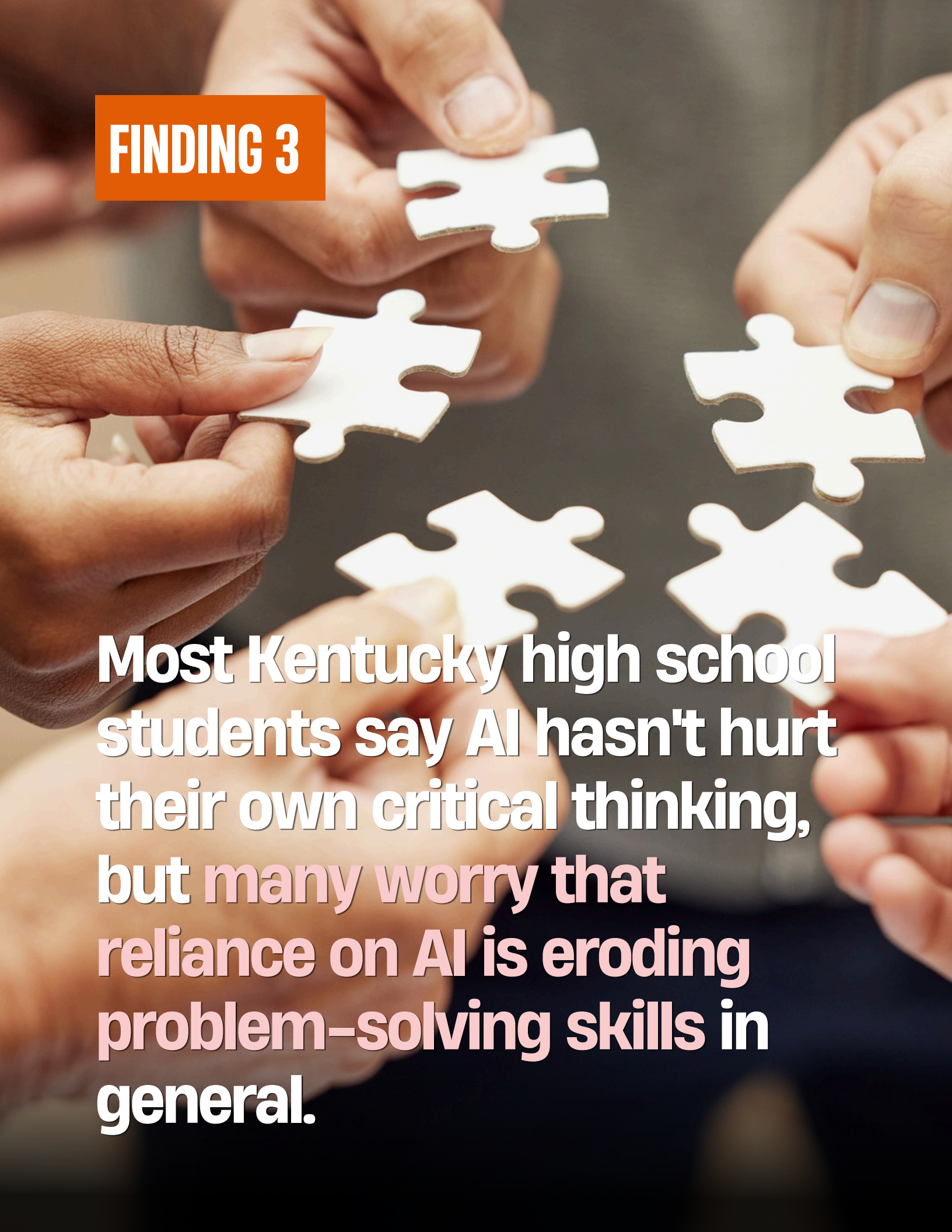


I'm not even really sure what kind of policy I would suggest to enact in a school, just because people use it so often at home and at school, it would be hard to enact some kind of school-wide rule banning AI or restricting it just because there will always be ways to get around it.

If I were to have to suggest some kind of thing that would create change, [it] would be more like informing students on the negative effects of AI as kind of a motivator to maybe stay away from it.

I know that AI has grown significantly in the past few years, so there isn't a ton of data or research, but some kind of statistics on how it affects the environment might make students morally decide not to use it, or more conscious of their future if they continue to use AI at such a degree.

~ High School Student from Jefferson County

A close-up photograph of several hands holding white puzzle pieces against a dark background. The hands are of different skin tones, and the puzzle pieces are being held in a way that suggests they are being assembled or disassembled. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the skin and the edges of the puzzle pieces.

FINDING 3

Most Kentucky high school students say AI hasn't hurt their own critical thinking, but many worry that reliance on AI is eroding problem-solving skills in general.

Finding 3 Evidence

Analysis of close-ended survey items suggests that students, for the most part, do not believe that AI is taking away their ability to work through problems, learn, or think critically; with 52% saying that it does not affect their own ability to problem-solve independently. Yet, in the open-ended responses and interviews, students reported that they have observed their peers become more reliant on AI and its ability to quickly provide information. In the open-ended responses and interviews especially, students expressed concern that AI dependency is indeed having an effect on their problem solving and critical thinking abilities.

“

I think the biggest issue is that people are becoming too reliant on AI. Instead of thinking through problems, they just use ChatGPT. I think this is reducing critical thinking skills over time.

-Pulaski County High School student

“

I fully believe every person has their own unique way of thinking and how they do their work. And I think that with AI, we've lost that, and everyone's work kind of looks the same, and we can tell that it looks and is the same.

-Pike County High School student

As illustrated in Table 2, students said they use AI predominantly to shorten the steps of a task, such as brainstorming ideas or finding sources. Students in our interviews acknowledged these dangers of offloading specific steps to AI, articulating that the process of working through a problem provided more benefit than simply arriving at the answer.

“

People AI generate videos and photos, and they can be so realistic it's easy to fall for them. I know my dad does all the time. It's especially hard for older generations to distinguish AI, but even younger generations believe made-up stuff all the time.

-Jefferson County High School student



“

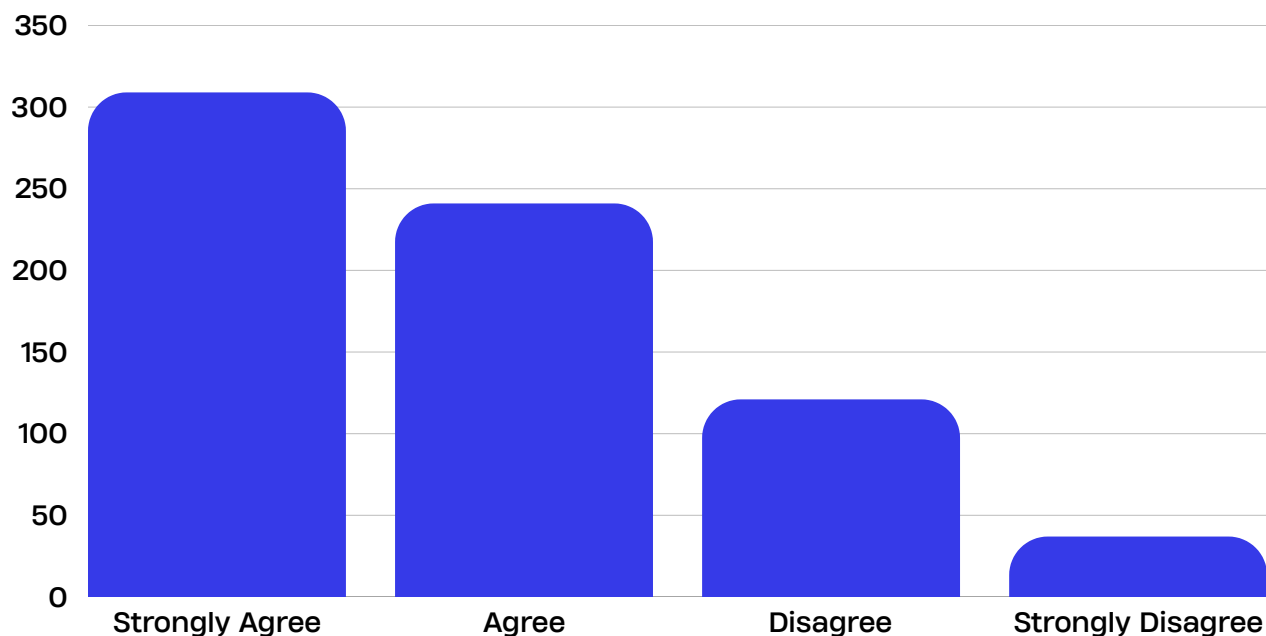
AI really does short-circuit a lot of things that you're stepping over. You're skipping all of the steps in the middle because you're working towards this end goal. But I think a lot of the important things are the steps in the middle that are unseen.

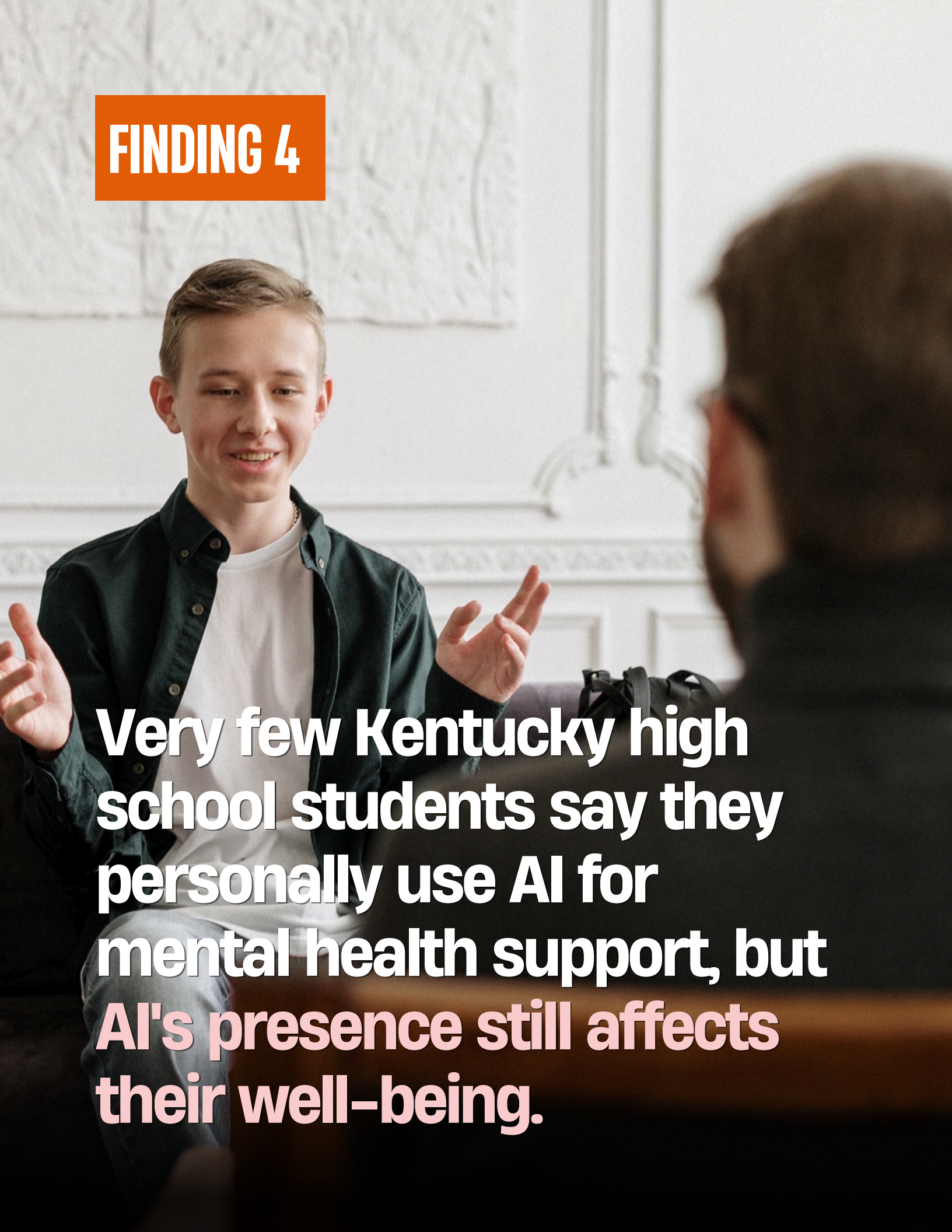
-Boyle County High School student

In reflecting on their AI usage, 77% of students responding to our survey expressed concern about the technology’s power to mislead them. These sentiments were further underscored by our interviews.

TABLE 4. STUDENTS’ THOUGHTS ON MISINFORMATION FROM AI

“I worry that AI is increasing the spread of misinformation online.”





FINDING 4

Very few Kentucky high school students say they personally use AI for mental health support, but AI's presence still affects their well-being.

Finding 4 Evidence

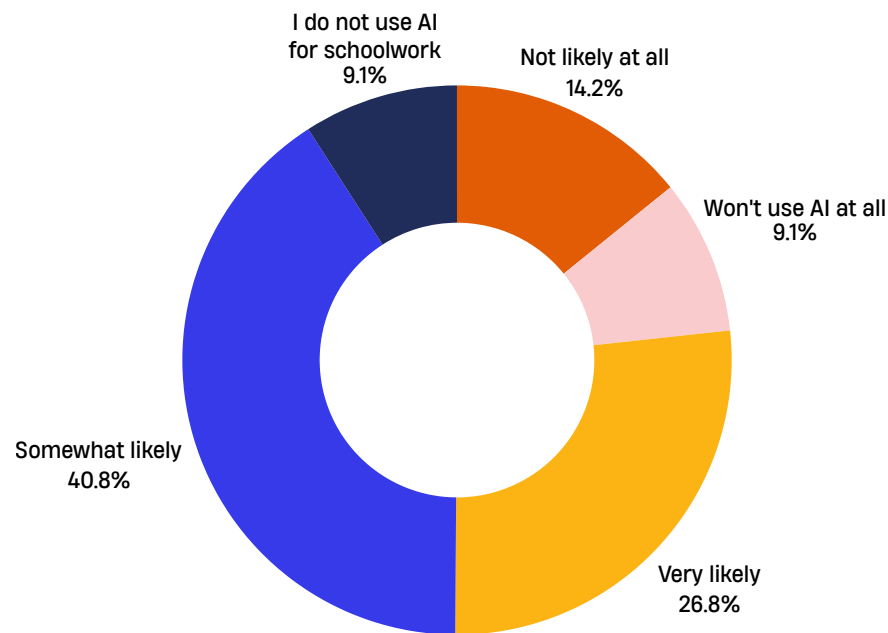
Analysis of both survey and interview data suggests that the majority of students are not using AI for direct mental health support, but rather to alleviate a level of stress from schoolwork. This is an important distinction to make. The survey did find a minority of students who use AI to address issues concerning their own mental health, and their stories are important to dig into, but investigating the topic was beyond the scope of the interview process we designed for this study. What survey analysis did reveal was the following:

- 68% of students reported turning to AI when they are stressed or stuck on a school task.
- Direct use of AI for mental health is rare. 47% of survey respondents said they do not use AI for their mental health at all. Another 36% said AI use has no effect on their mental health. And just 4% said they use chatbots as a friend.
- Students in our survey said the prevalence of AI usage does affect their mental health. A majority of students, 57%, report at least some worry that AI will take the job they want, and even more worry that AI is spreading misinformation.

Kentucky students who responded to our survey said that AI is helping them cope with stress, usually meaning that AI helps them get through a difficult assignment they were stuck on or reduces the workload across all of their classes-- not that they are using it as a therapist to talk about their feelings. Those are different behaviors, and our data shows that a policy response built on the assumption that Kentucky teenagers are confiding in chatbots at scale would suggest something this study does not find.

At the same time, the minority of students who did report using AI for emotional support had nuanced perspectives. These students voiced caution and concern, and several described discontinuing use over time because they believed using AI made things worse for their mental health. Of note, several of these students attributed their use of AI for emotional support to a lack of resources for mental health in general.

FIGURE 5. STUDENTS USING AI WHEN STRESSED/STUCK ON SCHOOL TASKS



The pattern seen in Figure 5 above is fairly one-sided. Combining “somewhat likely” and “very likely” accounts for two-thirds of the sample, while only 14% say that they are not at all likely to turn to AI. The 9% who report not using AI for schoolwork at all form a distinct group, separate from the 24% who do use AI but do not turn to it under stress or when stuck on a school task.



The way AI can affect my mental health positively is when I need additional help on a subject my teacher cannot provide, and AI gives me a different perspective on the topic. This helps manage stress in a way that is not exactly conferring with AI specifically about mental health.

-Grayson County High School student

Similar student responses in the open-ended section of our survey underscore the finding that AI helps students’ mental health related to school, but is not necessarily used for other, direct mental health reasons. A small number of students did note a drawback to this kind of usage, namely that short-term relief can lead to additional stress later on.



I think it can be beneficial in stressful or close deadline assignments; however, I think the constant use of AI has been the cause of pushing off assignments as well. This leads to a cycle of using it."

–Rowan County High School student

FIGURE 6. REPORTED IMPACT OF AI USE ON MENTAL HEALTH

Number of total students: 869

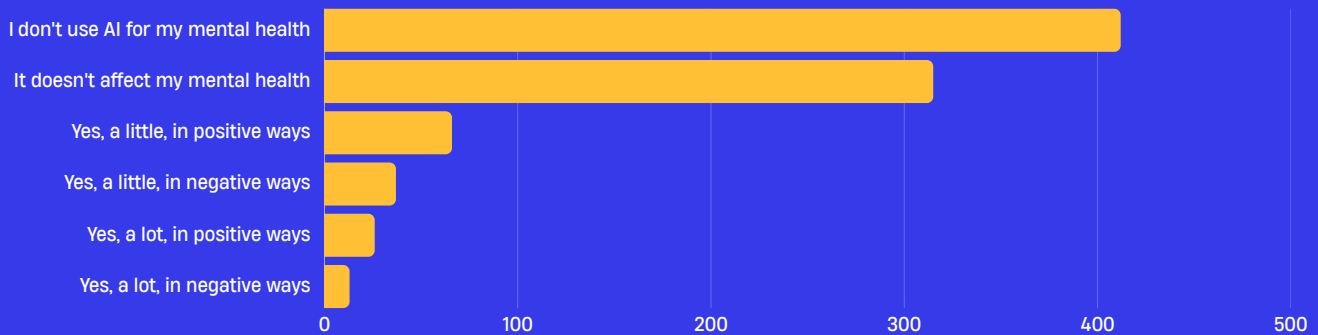


TABLE 7. PERSONAL AND EMOTIONAL AI USE STUDENTS

Never use chatbots for Advice about their life	615 (70.8%)
Never use AI for advice about friendships or relationships	766 (88.1%)
Do not use chatbots like a friend	820 (94.4%)
Report that AI does not affect their ability to make decisions	565 (65.0%)

Students who reported the heaviest personal use of AI for mental health were cautious, and responses weren't necessarily positive.

“

I've used AI Chatbots repeatedly after being introduced to them in freshman year, and I got to the point where I was interacting with these Chatbots for hours on end and it left an incredibly negative impact on me mentally and socially.

-Grayson County High School student

These students acknowledged that while it felt good to be reassured, AI was making their life decisions and seemed to be taking over, which they did not want. A student from Fayette County shared a concern around the lack of systemic access to mental health resources rather than AI itself. They reported that using AI as a therapist felt extremely sad, expressing a desire that human therapy would be accessible enough that people wouldn't have to seek advice from “a literal robot who doesn't have feelings.”

Conversely, we think it is important to report that a handful of students did credit AI with mental health gains. For example, a student from Jefferson County shared that they do mostly use AI as a personal therapist, reasoning that AI can provide deep psychological explanations for better personal and situational understanding.

While our study focused on students and their personal AI use, a recurring theme in the responses centered around the broader impacts of AI.

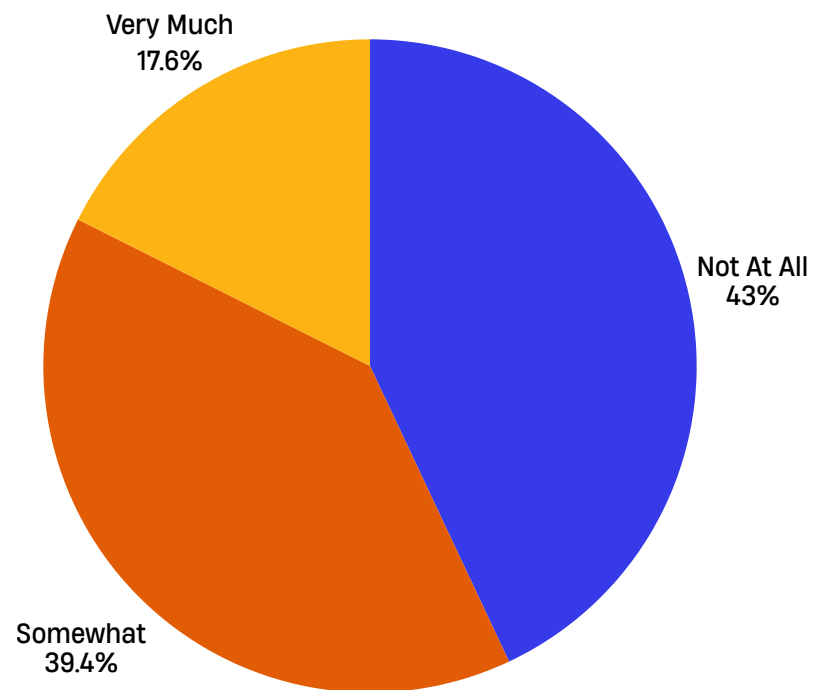
One student from Jefferson County specified that AI negatively impacts their mental health due to its overall societal impact, despite their personal desire not to use the technology. And beyond the personal choice of whether or not to use AI themselves, students tied AI to general anxieties about their future. Among their concerns, students cited everything from fears about environmental issues, water and energy consumption to threats to artists and writers, the future job market, and college admissions.

“

AI makes me feel like our future is doomed. water bankruptcy, polar bears, art careers. It's all fading right in front of my eyes.

-Fayette County High School student

TABLE 8. “I WORRY THAT AI WILL TAKE THE JOB I WANT.”





Recommendations for Policy & Practice

Based on analysis of data and our ongoing researcher reflections, we offer the following recommendations for practice and policy related to AI use in Kentucky high schools.

1

At the school level, **co-design with students AI policies** that address what is allowed in each class along with when and why. Then, revisit, refine, and enforce those policies consistently and fairly within and across the school.

2

At the school level, **provide timely and ongoing professional development for teachers to learn how to use AI responsibly and effectively**, so that they can have a deep understanding of its benefits and constraints and make more informed decisions, even as the technology rapidly evolves.

3

Teach students AI literacy, as well as broader information and media literacy. This could be in a required one-off class, or within and across every class—the latter of which our team recommends as best practice because of the known differences in potential use across disciplines.

4

Set clear expectations at the classroom level about the differences between AI use, plagiarism, and cheating. And in doing so, assume the best of students, as all students want and deserve trust from their teachers.

Study Limitations

As with any study, there are limitations, and ours is no different.

The first limitation of this study concerns the demographic sample. For our sample, and especially for our interviews, KSVT members relied predominantly on our own networks—whether that be friends, classmates, extracurricular organizations, etc. This meant that our responses disproportionately drew from urban and slightly higher-achieving students. A full 43% of survey responses came from students in Jefferson and Fayette Counties, urban districts which together actually represent closer to 22% of the total Kentucky public high school student population.

The second limitation concerns the nature of the questions we asked in relation to the responses we received. Because high school students' AI use can be an especially fraught subject with real-world consequences, we believe that students may have been less honest about admitting to their AI habits for fear they would be seen negatively, as people who cheat or plagiarize.

Additionally, language around AI is still emerging and often differently understood by different people, so our choice of words and descriptions in the survey and interviews may have inadvertently shaped the responses we received.

In future studies, we hope to broaden our sample to include even more geographically and academically diverse students and provide more clear and universal descriptions of AI tools and practices.



PICTURED: KSVT RESEARCH TEAM AT SUMMER 2026 DATA ANALYSIS RETREAT

Researcher Reflections

Because the research team themselves are nearly all Kentucky high school students, their perspectives and experiences with AI and their learning lives are a critical part of the sense-making for this study. As such, we conclude this report by sharing some of their researcher reflections.



**Chase
Colvin**



AI and Learning was a topic that not many of us knew much about when we started, in terms of the landscape, and it is really interesting and fun and exciting that we can make a small step to explore and to add to the conversation. It's still research, and we're still being helpful, even if it's not this ground breaking study, like finding a cure for cancer. We can still add to the conversation. We still get our foot in the door to make the research more accessible.



**Caroline
Segebarth**



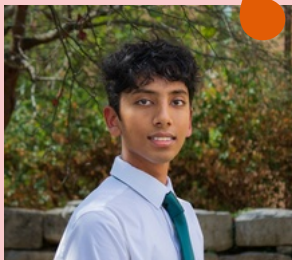
The biggest thing that stood out to me from the data collection, that I wasn't really expecting, was how divided the responses and data were. People were either very, very for it or very, very against it. We didn't see many responses in the middle.



**Caitlyn
Douglas**



I was surprised by the suggestions for what policies could be because I had always considered the potential options to be more in the direction of a full ban or to use AI however you want, whenever you want. And so it was interesting to me to see how students came up with so many different ideas for policies, such as being allowed to use AI for research, but not developing finished writing products.



**Malleshwar
Suresh**



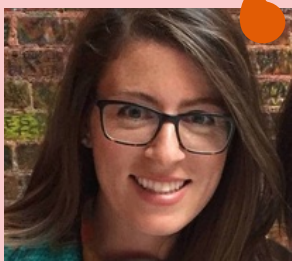
As a result of doing this research, something I've started to think about from the survey and interview responses was how they talked about if you use AI in the short term, we may be slightly ahead, but in the long term we will be behind other people in terms of skill acquisition and knowledge. That's helped me reflect on it a bit and make sure that even if I do use AI to help me solve a math problem because I'm stuck on it, I also actually know how to do the steps and make sure I'm learning from the problems and not just having AI do it for me.



**Ash
Ambhore**



One of the things that I really enjoyed about doing the research was doing the interviews. I got to listen to other people's thoughts and ask follow-up questions that we couldn't really do through the survey. Hearing students explain their experiences in their own words made the research feel much more personal. It also showed me how differently people can think about the same issue, even when they are all experiencing AI in school. Having the interviews alongside the survey helped me understand not just what students think about AI, but why they think that way.



**Dr. Daniela
DiGiacomo**



As someone who teaches and learns with students at the elementary, high school, college and doctorate levels here in Kentucky and around the country, I am so grateful for the opportunity to have conducted this research with the KSVT research team. The data we collected, as well as the conversations we had with and about the data, provided invaluable insight into the complexity of learning with AI in the digital age– and I am looking forward to building on this study with KSVT in the years to come.

Thank You!

The Kentucky Student Voice Team (KSVT) is an independent, statewide, non-profit organization co-founded in 2012 by a group of Kentucky high school students. As a collective of young people, KSVT is on a mission to co-create more just, democratic Kentucky schools and communities as research, policy-advocacy & storytelling partners.



Learn More at
ksvt.org/research

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Special Thanks

Responsible Technology Youth Power Fund