Education | Healthcare | Public Services

NATIONAL ACADEMY FOR AI INSTRUCTION

THE AI ACADEMY BRIEF

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

May 2026 · Issue #3

Insights, educator voices, and practical ideas from the National Academy for AI Instruction.

What's Inside

Opening Message

Artificial intelligence is changing not only the tools students use, but the conditions under which teaching and learning take place. When answers, summaries, and even full assignments are available instantly, schools cannot continue operating exactly as they did before and expect teaching and learning to remain unchanged.

This moment requires more than new rules for technology. It requires renewed attention to the purpose of education itself. In an era where information is always a prompt away, learning cannot be reduced to retrieving answers. Students must be able to apply knowledge, solve problems, communicate ideas, collaborate with others, and think critically about the world around them.

That means the skills and human relationships built in classrooms matter more than ever. Active learning, discussion, hands-on experiences, and productive struggle become even more important in a world increasingly shaped by AI. The challenge before educators is not whether technology exists, but how we ensure teaching and learning continue to center critical thinking, human connection, and meaningful engagement.

Where we Stand

At the Academy, we believe the rise of AI requires schools to think differently about teaching and learning. If AI can instantly generate information, summarize text, or complete routine tasks, then education must place greater emphasis on what students do with knowledge. Students need opportunities to analyze, discuss, create, question, collaborate, and apply their learning in meaningful ways.

This is one reason cognitive offloading has become such an important issue. When students rely on AI to do the thinking for them, they miss the intellectual work that builds understanding, judgment, and independence. But the response cannot simply be prohibition; it must also include rethinking instructional design so classrooms prioritize active learning and authentic engagement.

That shift is already happening in many schools. Educators are creating more discussion-based lessons, project-based learning experiences, collaborative problem-solving activities, and opportunities for students to explain their reasoning and apply knowledge in real-world contexts. These approaches matter even more in the AI era because they make thinking visible and place human interaction at the center of learning.

The Academy remains focused on educator use of AI. Teachers deserve support and training to understand these tools, reduce unnecessary workload, and make informed professional decisions about technology use in their classrooms. But supporting educators also means helping schools adapt instruction for a world where information and answer generation are increasingly automated.

As classrooms evolve, we must ensure the use of AI supports the cognitive engagement that underpins teaching and learning.

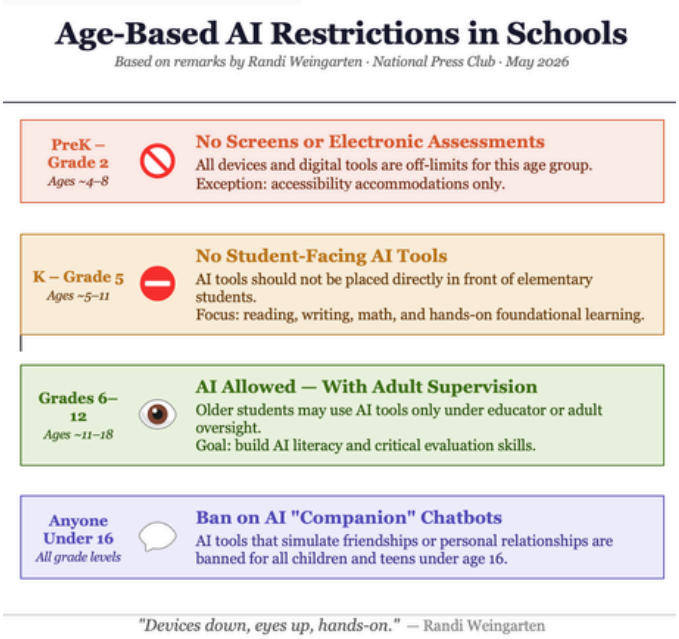
Devices Down, Eyes Up, Hands-On

A speech by Randi Weingarten, President of the AFT

In a recent address, Randi Weingarten outlined a vision for public education that prioritizes critical thinking, active learning, and responsible AI use in an era of rapid change.

"The one thing the AI revolution does not change is the essential purpose of education: teaching students how to think, how to connect, and giving them enough knowledge to do both well."
– Randi Weingarten, Devices Down, Eyes Up, Hands-On

Student AI Guidelines from the 10-Point Plan:



Watch the Full Speech Here:

"Active learning is the antidote to cognitive offloading."
– Randi Weingarten, Devices Down, Eyes Up, Hands-On

Rob's Reflections

Last month, I wrote about cognitive offloading. It is such an important topic, more should be said.

Cognitive offloading just means using the world around us to reduce the amount of thinking or remembering our brains must do. And before we throw our students under the cognitive offloading bus, we should recognize the many ways we offload thinking every day.

One of the simplest examples is the modern smartphone. Most people no longer memorize phone numbers the way earlier generations did. Your phone remembers the numbers for you, and you can tap a name or ask Siri instead of recalling a string of digits from memory. The same thing happens with reminders, alarms, calculators, calendars, GPS navigation, QR codes, and saved passwords. Your device has become your outsourced memory system, or your cognitive off loader.

Of course, students using ChatGPT to write essays instead of demonstrating their own learning and understanding is not the same as storing phone numbers in an iPhone. But it is worth remembering that, not so long ago, rote memorization was considered a fundamental part of education. Students routinely memorized presidents, historical dates, and state capitals. I still remember being graded in on the accuracy of my recitation of Hamlet's soliloquy in English Lit.

It is only because we can readily access information through today's technology that this backbone of education is no longer considered appropriate.

Cognitive offloading is not necessarily laziness or weakness. Humans have always done it. Writing, maps, calendars, libraries, and filing systems were all once new technologies for extending memory and thought beyond the brain itself. Modern digital tools simply make this process faster and more widespread. Everyday life now depends on a constant partnership between human memory and external tools that help organize information and support decision-making.

The real question for teachers is not whether students should use tools to take the load off their brains but knowing what is okay to hand off to technology and what is not. Saving a phone number makes sense because it frees your brain for more important things. But handing off actual critical thinking, problem-solving, forming opinions, and working through hard ideas means missing the part of education where real learning happens. The purpose of school was never to fill your head full of facts or formulas. It has always been about getting better at thinking and applying knowledge.

— Rob Weil, Chief Executive Officer of the National Academy for AI Instruction

Voices from the Academy

Manal Ashmawy is an Instructional Coach for the UFT. She recently attended The Thinking Classroom: Navigating Critical Thinking and Cognitive Offloading in the Age of AI on May 19, 2026. Here's what she shared:

"This session reinforced the importance of critical thinking and the "human touch" when utilizing Artificial Intelligence (AI). I came to a realization that AI functions best as my assistant, not as a replacement for my human intellect. This means I must do the work and engage in my own critical thinking, analyzing, and evaluating tasks and situations before asking AI to refine or review my work. The session confirmed that for students/teachers to gain deep learning they must be engaged in creating complex projects, not just producing basic answers to simple assignments that AI can easily manage. Therefore, I will prioritize giving learners opportunities to actively participate in higher-order thinking skills, specifically analysis and evaluation. Furthermore, I will focus on teaching students/teachers how to evaluate AI-generated responses to ensure they align with their voice and objective, committing to using AI responsibly as an assistant rather than a primary author. I plan to use the CIVIC routine to facilitate this process.

I am addressing cognitive offloading by ensuring that teachers and students actively engage in completing their tasks, such as developing lesson plans or answering higher order questions, instead of defaulting to AI for answers. I will implement teaching strategies that require active human participation and higher-level engagement such as using socratic seminars protocol in order to challenge students, as AI cannot actively participate in this discussion format. Additionally, I will practice teaching and engaging students in different learning strategies such as Error Analysis, Peer Teaching, Live Journaling, and Show Your Thinking with students. Finally, I will share my knowledge of technology with my students to guide them in responsible AI use, positioning myself as a resource for navigating this tool and not depending on AI for thinking, analyzing and evaluating situations. I aim to instill the understanding that while technology will not replace people, those who skillfully and responsibly use technology will be better positioned than those who do not.

Voices from the Academy

What resonated most was the risk of overdependence on AI: the decline of critical thinking skills due to the excessive competition of simple mental tasks. I learned that I do engage in cognitive offloading for my daily tasks like using GPS, Alexa or calendar reminder which helps reduce my mental effort, thereby freeing up my working memory for complex, creative, or strategic challenges. However, the session highlighted that if AI is used excessively, then the brain may lose the ability to perform these mental tasks independently. I learned that I need to be more mindful of my own daily dependency on AI. I need to make a conscious effort to continue employing higher-order thinking skills and not allow AI to become a substitute for my own critical judgment, thus preventing a decline in my critical skills. Critical thinking is the utmost important mental process which requires a person to actively analyze, evaluate, and question information to form an independent judgment, rather than just accepting it at face value. And that is something Artificial Intelligence (AI) can not perform."

—Manal Ashmawy, UFT Instructional Coach for Elementary schools, UFT-Peer Intervention Program

Voices from the Academy

“On May 19, 2026, I attended a professional training session focused on critical thinking in AI: Navigating Critical Thinking & Cognitive Offloading in the Age of AI.

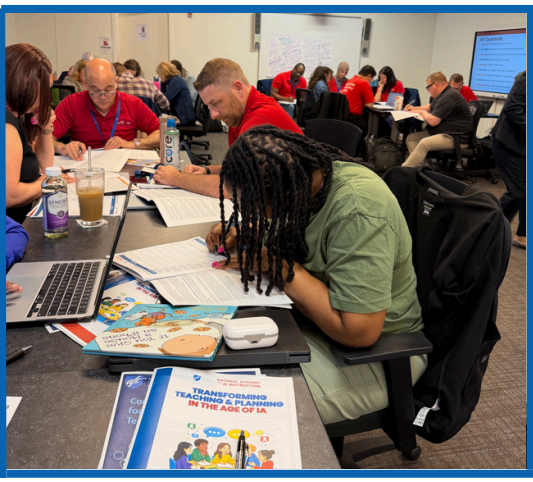
One of the key takeaways from this session is that AI should be viewed as a tool, not a replacement for human thinking. AI can serve as a digital courier or collaborator, but it should never become a shortcut that bypasses a student’s own thinking and creativity. As the saying goes, “AI should be used in service of thinking, not in place of thinking.” AI should NOT be introduced in ways that eliminate the mental effort necessary for deep learning and critical thinking. Teachers play an important role in guiding students to use AI responsibly by facilitating open conversations about the risks of relying on AI to replace active thinking and problem-solving skills. At the same time, AI can be an incredibly valuable resource for educators. When used thoughtfully, it can help teachers design engaging, relevant, and differentiated lessons that increase classroom participation and support student learning. The goal is to use AI to enhance instruction and creativity while still preserving the importance of independent thought and authentic learning experiences.

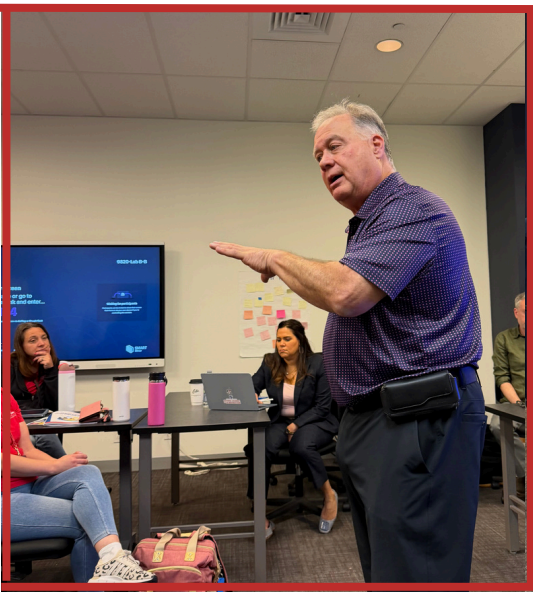
To prevent students from completely offloading their thinking to AI, I plan to implement a more strategic approach to assignment design. This includes shifting the focus toward how students interact with AI rather than simply using it to generate answers. One strategy is to design multi-step, complex prompts that discourage students from relying on simple, one-click responses. By doing so, students will still be required to evaluate information, analyze ideas, and build upon the AI’s output using their own critical thinking skills. This approach encourages deeper learning while ensuring that AI supports the learning process instead of replacing it.
As AI continues to evolve, the goal at JHS 218 remains clear: use technology to enhance engagement and deepen participation, while fiercely protecting the space required for students to develop their own critical thinking skills.”

—Rosalynn Bristol 7th Grade Science Teacher, JHS 218, Brooklyn, N.Y

Beyond NYC

NAAII Backyard Training in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania





This May, the National Academy for AI Instruction traveled to Philadelphia to host a Backyard Training for the Educational Technology Team, made up of members of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers. The session focused on responsible and ethical AI use, strategies for crafting stronger prompts, tools that support differentiated instruction, and conversations around critical thinking and cognitive offloading.

Backyard Training Spotlight

Meet Ron Houston, an Educational Technology Integration Specialist who attended our Backyard Training in Philadelphia. Houston works with 15 schools, helping educators use technology to strengthen instruction and better engage students in the classroom.

Keeping Instruction Intentional

Houston shared that one of his biggest takeaways from the training was the importance of intentional AI integration and understanding its impact on students. He emphasized that educators must carefully consider how students interact with and interpret AI in classroom settings.

“AI is here, but it needs to be used responsibly and purposefully. Lessons need to be intentional, focused, and thoughtfully planned.”

Addressing Fear and Uncertainty

Houston reflected on some of the growing concerns educators have surrounding AI in schools, particularly around trust, authority, and the evolving role of teachers in the classroom.

“Some worry that AI could eventually replace them, while others distrust the technology altogether.”

Critical Thinking in the Age of AI

Houston reflected on the growing conversation around cognitive offloading and the importance of helping students remain actively engaged in authentic thinking and learning as AI tools become more common in classrooms.

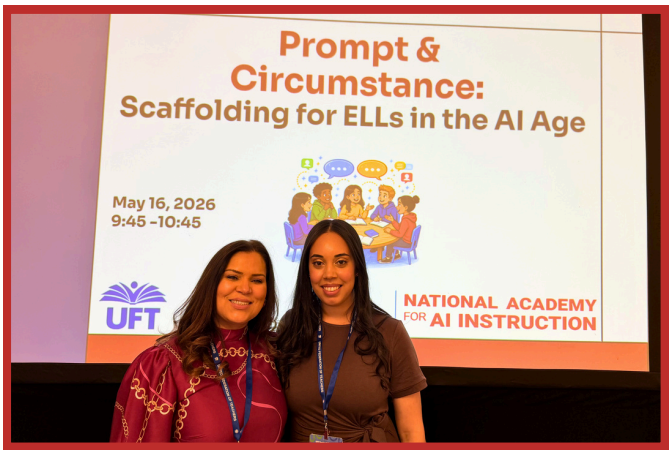
“It’s especially important that teachers are intentional about how AI is integrated into instruction.”

Looking Ahead

Houston emphasized the importance of continuing conversations around AI as the technology continues to evolve in education.

“AI isn’t going anywhere. It’s only going to continue growing and evolving.”

Academy Highlights



Prompt & Circumstance: Scaffolding for ELLs in the AI Age
New York, NY • May 16, 2026

Guide to Responsible AI Without the Drama
New York, NY • May 16, 2026

The Thinking Classroom: Navigating Critical Thinking and Cognitive Offloading in the Age of AI
New York, NY • May 19, 2026

Upcoming Sessions

The Academy offers both in-person and virtual sessions so educators can participate in the way that works best for them. We offer beginner and more advanced courses, so no matter your experience with AI, there is a training designed for you. Each session focuses on practical strategies you can apply right away.

aiinstruction.org

In-Person:

6/11/26- THE THINKING CLASSROOM: NAVIGATING CRITICAL THINKING AND COGNITIVE OFFLOADING IN THE AGE OF AI

Examine how to evaluate AI-generated content and address cognitive offloading — helping educators design learning experiences that keep students thinking critically while using AI responsibly.

MORE IN-PERSON AND VIRTUAL SESSIONS ARE COMING SOON. ON-DEMAND SESSIONS CAN ALSO BE FOUND HERE, ALONG WITH A WEALTH OF OTHER FREE AI RESOURCES: ***WWW.SHAREMYLESSON.COM/NAAII.*** *TO REGISTER OR VISIT THE AI ACADEMY WEBSITE, SCAN THE QR CODE ABOVE. THE NATIONAL ACADEMY FOR AI INSTRUCTION COURSES ARE ELIGIBLE FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION CREDIT AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT POINTS.*

Upcoming Sessions

Virtual:

6/1/26 • 6/12/26 • 6/23/26 - WHO'S DOING THE THINKING? AI, COGNITIVE OFFLOADING, AND WHAT'S AT STAKE

Explore the impact of cognitive offloading on student learning and discover strategies to keep students engaged in authentic thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving.

6/8/26 • 6/16/26 • 6/30/26- CRITICAL THINKING IN THE AGE OF AI

Discover how to strengthen critical thinking in the age of AI by questioning claims, evaluating sources, and refining prompts — helping educators model responsible AI use in the classroom.

6/23/26- AGENTS IN ACTION: BUILDING CLASSROOM PARTNERS WITH AI

Discover how to design custom classroom AI agents that support planning, feedback, and instruction — while prioritizing safety, privacy, and teacher control.

6/30/26- SMART SUPPORTS: USING AI TO SCAFFOLD AND DIFFERENTIATE FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

Learn how to use AI to differentiate instruction and scaffold grade-level content for English Learners — supporting language development and equitable access across proficiency levels.

End of the Year...

This month will focus on fun and engaging end-of-year activities for your students. **This link** includes ideas for:

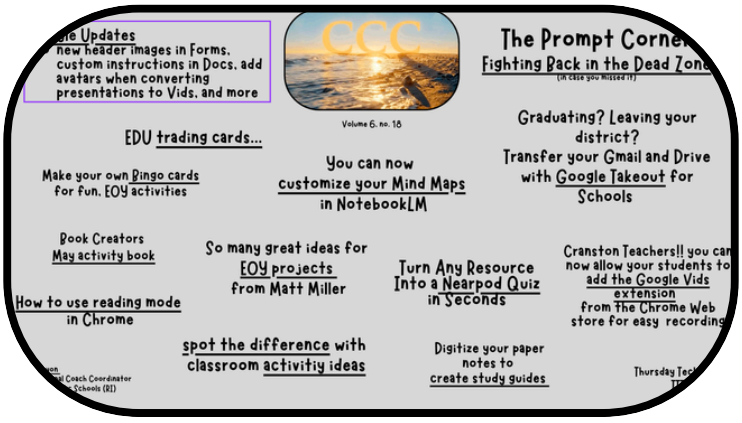
- reflective writing
- media projects
- interactive games
- student presentations
- and more

Please note these are merely suggestions for K-12 classrooms.

Cranston Coaches Corner (CCC)

Ideas You Can Actually Use

Pete Guyon is the Instructional Coach Coordinator for Cranston Public Schools (RI), where he leads district efforts in blended and personalized learning and artificial intelligence. As a national trainer for the AI academy, he supports educators nationally in integrating innovative practices into teaching and learning through his Cranston Coaches Corner (CCC) newsletter. Subscribers receive updates on AI implementation, effective prompting examples, technology tips, and Google updates along with a professional learning certificate. It's completely free to sign up, **click here**.



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