

AI in schools

Considerations for school leaders and teachers

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This explainer draws on emerging evidence to provide considerations for school leaders and teachers on using artificial intelligence (AI) in schools.

Introduction

Over the past few years, the use of AI – particularly generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) – has become increasingly common in Australian schools among students, teachers and school leaders. Like any major shift in education technology, the arrival of AI presents opportunities to support learning and teaching. However, AI also poses new risks and challenges for schools because it can generate content, solve problems and perform tasks on demand, potentially changing the cognitive requirements placed on students when they use technology for learning.

There's currently limited research examining AI and student learning outcomes in school settings, and most available research has been conducted in secondary schools and higher education settings (Fesler et al., 2026). As the evidence on AI in schools continues to develop, the well-established evidence base on [how students learn](#) provides an important foundation for considering the role of AI in education. Decisions about AI use should be informed by the extent to which AI supports the cognitive processes that underpin learning and aligns with the evidence-based practices known to improve educational outcomes.

This explainer draws on the emerging evidence on AI in schools, as well as the established evidence base on effective teaching and learning, to provide provisional guidance and considerations for school leaders and teachers regarding the use of AI in schools. The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) has also developed a complementary explainer with [considerations for policymakers](#). We'll continue to monitor the evidence and provide updated guidance as the evidence base strengthens and matures.

Understanding AI and its use in Australian schools

AI is a broad term that refers to a range of existing and emerging technologies, with attributes that distinguish it from previous technologies and computer systems (Lodge & Loble, 2026). AI has been used in schools for many years through technologies such as speech-to-text, predictive text and accessibility supports.

A more recent development, GenAI is a subset of AI that can produce content that resembles what humans can produce such as text, images, audio and video (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE], 2023). GenAI tools are trained on large amounts of data to recognise patterns and generate outputs, enabling GenAI to produce increasingly sophisticated content and perform complex tasks. AI and GenAI tools can be both general-purpose technologies, such as conversational chatbots, and education-specific technologies designed to support teaching, learning and assessment, including department-approved platforms in some jurisdictions.

In this explainer, AERO uses AI as a broad term that encompasses a range of AI-enabled technologies, including GenAI tools, agents and platforms. Definitions and terminology for AI and GenAI vary across sources and communities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2025), and research doesn't always clearly distinguish between different types of AI technology.

AI use in Australian schools

Across Australia, AI is increasingly being used by students, teachers and school leaders to support teaching, learning, assessment and administrative tasks (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2026; Friedman et al., 2025). AI tools are widely accessible both within and beyond schools and, increasingly, AI is embedded within everyday digital tools, including web browsers, search engines and productivity applications such as word processors. Students and teachers may interact with AI-enabled features without necessarily recognising them (OECD, 2026a), and teachers may not always know if, when, where or how students are using AI (Pearson & Jensen, 2026).

The following are some of the ways AI is reportedly already being used in schools:

- Teachers are using AI for lesson planning, resource generation, data monitoring and analysis, assessment and feedback, communication, community engagement, administrative tasks and tailoring support for students with diverse learning needs (Friedman et al., 2025).
- Students are using AI for help with schoolwork, organisation or problem-solving, including using AI to find information, support learning or translation, and for writing and editing (ACARA, 2026; Office of the eSafety Commissioner, 2026).

Given that AI, and particularly GenAI, is increasingly being used for schoolwork, it's important that teachers and school leaders understand how AI design and use may influence the learning process.

Understanding how students learn

Understanding [how students learn](#) provides an important foundation for making decisions about whether, when and how AI can be used in teaching and learning. Teachers and school leaders can use this knowledge to consider the extent to which AI supports the cognitive processes that underpin learning, in line with system policies and guidance.

AERO's [model of learning and teaching](#) summarises 4 key principles about how students acquire, retain and apply knowledge:

1. Learning is a change in long-term memory.

Working memory is the mental workspace students use to actively engage with information they encounter, while long-term memory stores knowledge for future use. As students learn, they identify relationships and connect new knowledge to existing information in their long-term memory to develop increasingly complex mental models.

2. Students process limited amounts of new information.

Working memory has a very limited capacity, so learning is maximised when the amount of new information students process at any one time doesn't overload it. Receiving information in manageable chunks helps students connect and retain that information in long-term memory.

3. Students develop and demonstrate mastery.

Developing mastery requires students to first store knowledge in long-term memory and then recall and arrange it in meaningful ways. With repeated and varied practice, students' ability to recall and apply their learning fluently, and transfer their knowledge to new situations, increases.

4. Students are actively engaged with learning.

Transferring information from working memory to long-term memory requires students' focused attention and active engagement in a supportive and responsive learning environment.

In the absence of a mature evidence base on AI, the evidence on how students learn provides an important foundation for interpreting emerging evidence about AI and its use in schools to support learning and teaching.

Considerations for teachers and school leaders

Emerging evidence on AI points to both potential opportunities and risks for learning and teaching. The evidence suggests that the educational value of AI likely depends on how it's designed and used, including whether it supports or replaces the cognitive processes that underpin learning (Arthars et al., 2026; Fesler et al., 2026).

AERO has identified 5 broad considerations for teachers and school leaders around the use of AI in schools. These include:

- prioritising evidence-based teaching and learning
- monitoring for risks to learning
- establishing clear expectations for AI use
- considering approaches to assessment
- applying a culturally responsive lens to AI use.

1. Prioritise evidence-based learning and teaching

Teachers and school leaders need a strong understanding of how students learn to inform decisions about AI use and ensure it complements evidence-based teaching and learning. If AI is being used, it should scaffold learning and create opportunities for students to acquire, retrieve, practise and apply knowledge, rather than replace the cognitive work students need to do themselves. Building knowledge in long-term memory is central to this process, providing the foundation for understanding, reasoning and applying learning to new situations (AERO, 2023). This has particular implications for novice learners and students who are still developing foundational knowledge and the metacognitive strategies needed to regulate their learning (Lodge & Loble, 2026).

School leaders and teachers should ensure that AI use in schools aligns with effective teaching and learning practices, as well as relevant education policies and guidance in their jurisdiction. This may include intentional use of AI to:

- monitor student learning and analyse data to inform instructional decisions (Fesler et al., 2026)
- model and explicitly teach students how to critically engage with and regulate their use of AI tools, including deciding when to use AI and when to do the work themselves, as well as how to question, verify and evaluate AI-generated outputs (Arthars et al., 2026)
- provide activities or explanations in response to students' prior knowledge and learning needs – for example, through adaptive tutoring (Aston et al., 2026; Chung et al., 2026) or generating scaffolds such as sentence starters
- generate questions and practice activities that encourage students to retrieve knowledge through varied practice tasks (Lodge & Loble, 2026) – for example, asking a sequence of probing questions that prompt students' thinking rather than providing answers directly
- support students in planning, monitoring and reflecting on their learning – for example, by asking students to explain what they already know, identify where they're uncertain and reflect on how they could check their understanding (Tanti et al., 2026)

- support assessment and feedback by generating statements that teachers critically review, refine and tailor to individual students (where permitted), while retaining responsibility for assessment judgements and complying with privacy and security requirements (Arthars et al., 2026)
- support teachers in creating resources that are checked to ensure alignment with curriculum requirements and evidence-based teaching practices relevant to the subject area (AGDE, 2023; Miao & Holmes, 2023).

2. Monitor for risks to learning

Teachers and school leaders should be aware of, and monitor for, potential risks associated with AI, and particularly GenAI, that could undermine effective teaching and learning.

When students use AI to generate responses, solve problems and produce content on demand, it can reduce the cognitive effort required to complete learning tasks and reduce opportunities for students to consolidate knowledge in long-term memory (Bastani et al., 2025). This may create a ‘performance paradox’, where students perform better on a task when using AI but learn less in the process (Yan et al., 2025).

The key concern isn’t simply whether AI improves students’ immediate performance, but whether its use supports or displaces the cognitive processes required for learning. This is closely related to the concept of **cognitive offloading**, which refers to the outsourcing of cognitive processes to external technologies (Lodge & Loble, 2026; Risko & Gilbert, 2016; Skulmowski, 2023). While cognitive offloading can sometimes be beneficial when it reduces unnecessary demands on working memory and allows students to focus on learning tasks (e.g., using a calculator for complex calculations), it can become detrimental when students outsource cognitive processes and expend less cognitive effort, undermining learning.

Cognitive offloading becomes a concern when AI, and particularly GenAI, reduces the need for students to engage in the thinking required to acquire and retain knowledge. For information to be learned, students need to process and store it in long-term memory. Knowledge stored in long-term memory provides the foundation for subsequent thinking, retrieval, reasoning and application. However, when students use AI to retrieve information, generate ideas or produce written responses, it may reduce opportunities for students to demonstrate, extend and apply their learning (Lodge & Loble, 2026; Tanti et al., 2026).

School leaders and teachers should also be aware of other potential risks, including:

- Students may become over reliant on AI, and particularly GenAI, to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning, which may reduce opportunities to develop the metacognitive strategies and self-regulated learning techniques needed to independently manage their learning (Yan et al., 2025).
- Students may develop illusions of knowledge, where they believe they understand content because they can quickly obtain answers, despite not having developed the foundational knowledge, metacognitive strategies or self-regulated learning techniques needed to apply or transfer their learning independently (Bjork et al., 2013; Skulmowski, 2023; Tanti et al., 2026).
- Students without sufficient prior knowledge and metacognitive strategies may not be able to recognise inaccurate, biased or fabricated AI outputs (Arthars et al., 2026; Oakley et al., 2026; Tanti et al., 2026).

Strong foundational knowledge is important for critically evaluating any source of information; however, AI introduces additional challenges because it can produce plausible responses that may appear authoritative even when they're inaccurate or misleading (Arthars et al., 2026). This can make it more difficult for students to recognise when information needs to be questioned or verified. Teachers should therefore support students in developing the foundational knowledge and metacognitive strategies needed to engage critically with AI. This includes helping students reflect on how they approach learning tasks, identify relevant strategies and make connections between new and existing knowledge. These skills are important for students as they progress through their schooling (Lodge & Loble, 2026).

Teachers should also explicitly teach, model and scaffold self-regulated learning techniques to help students plan, monitor and evaluate their learning and successfully apply these strategies with increasing confidence and independence over time. This is particularly important when AI offers students a convenient alternative to undertaking these processes themselves.

Together, foundational knowledge, metacognitive strategies and self-regulated learning techniques provide an important foundation for effective AI use. Students should have structured opportunities to develop these capabilities alongside an understanding of when and why AI may be appropriate for learning, how to critically evaluate its outputs and how to use it safely and responsibly. Without these foundations, students may become increasingly dependent on AI while becoming less able to question or verify its outputs. Teachers and school leaders should use evidence-based teaching and learning strategies to mitigate these risks and, when AI is considered appropriate, provide structured opportunities and explicitly teach students how to use it to support rather than replace their own learning.

3. Establish clear expectations for AI use

School leaders play an important role in establishing clear and consistent expectations for when and how teachers and students should use AI. Expectations should align with curriculum, assessment and evidence-based teaching, while also supporting culturally responsive and reflexive practice. Where AI is used, expectations should make clear that AI should support – not replace – the acquisition of knowledge and thinking required for learning. For example, AI may support learning if it's used to edit an essay written by a student or generate a worked maths example. However, it would bypass the learning process if a student used AI to write the entire essay or provide the answer to a maths problem.

As the evidence base for AI is drawn predominantly from secondary and higher education settings, with comparatively little research involving younger students, emerging guidance suggests that schools should exercise greater caution if and when introducing AI before secondary school (Arthars et al., 2026; Tanti et al., 2026). Younger students are still developing the background knowledge and metacognitive strategies needed to critically evaluate AI outputs, recognise inaccuracies and use these tools independently in ways that will support learning (Miao & Holmes, 2023). Schools may therefore need to exercise greater caution when introducing AI in primary years, with consideration of age restrictions for AI tools and greater emphasis on teacher guidance and oversight for younger students (Miao & Holmes, 2023).

If AI is being used, teachers and school leaders should explicitly teach students about how AI works, its capabilities and limitations, and how to use it safely, critically and responsibly across curriculum areas without replacing the thinking required for learning (Casal-Otero et al., 2023; Tanti et al., 2026). They should also clarify when students are expected to work independently, when and how AI can be used appropriately, and how teachers will maintain oversight of student learning.

School leaders should consider how to:

- protect student data, in line with system policies, as many students and teachers may be unaware that general AI tools are collecting and drawing on personal data and materials to train AI systems and inform outputs (AGDE, 2023; Miao & Holmes, 2023)
- support staff in building their professional knowledge and understanding of AI to make informed decisions about when, how and why AI should be used and whether its use aligns with evidence-based teaching, curriculum and assessment (OECD, 2026b)
- support staff and students in recognising the capabilities and limitations of AI and critically evaluating outputs (Lodge & Loble, 2026)
- critically evaluate new tools, including their capabilities, limitations, terms and conditions and privacy and data practices, before they're adopted or recommended for use with students (Miao & Holmes, 2023)
- share effective practice and regularly review tool selection and expectations as technologies and the evidence base continue to evolve (Miao & Holmes, 2023)
- regularly review expectations for AI use and provide guidance to ensure alignment with evolving technologies, emerging evidence and broader school priorities, including assessment, digital technologies and culturally responsive practice (Alterator et al., 2025).

A coherent, school-wide approach, along with clear guidance for teachers and students, can help ensure AI supports – and doesn't detract from – high-quality teaching and learning (OECD, 2026b).

4. Consider approaches to assessment and feedback

School leaders and teachers should consider how assessment tasks provide valid evidence of student learning and effectively support learning, in accordance with relevant assessment requirements and guidance from the regulatory authority in their jurisdiction (Pearson & Jensen, 2026). This includes considering:

- when AI is appropriate to use in assessment
- how take-home or unsupervised online assessments tasks can provide valid evidence of what students know and can do independently
- how students should appropriately acknowledge or reference the use of AI when it has contributed to their work, in line with relevant assessment requirements and policies
- how assessment can remain fair and inclusive for students who choose not to use AI for ethical, cultural, privacy, environmental or other personal reasons (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2025)
- whether AI detection tools are used, considering their biases, limitations and potential to disadvantage particular groups of students, including students with English as an additional language or dialect (Liang et al., 2023).

AI may also create new opportunities to support formative assessment. For example, some AI tools allow teachers to access or review students' interactions with the tool, which may provide insights into students' thinking, help identify misconceptions and inform subsequent teaching. Where this functionality is available, AI interactions may provide an additional source of evidence about student learning rather than simply a record of the final product (Tanti et al., 2026).

When permitted by relevant school or system policies and privacy requirements, AI may support teachers with some assessment-related tasks, such as organising information, generating draft feedback statements and assisting with administrative processes. However, teachers should retain responsibility for interpreting student work, making assessment judgements and tailoring feedback to students' learning needs (Arthars et al., 2026). A 'human-in-the-loop' approach supports teachers in critically reviewing and refining AI outputs before using them (OECD, 2026b).

5. Apply a culturally responsive and reflexive lens

Teachers and school leaders should be aware that AI systems aren't designed to understand local cultural contexts or the relationships that underpin culturally responsive and reflexive practice.

AI, and particularly GenAI systems, are predominantly trained on Western datasets and knowledge systems and may misrepresent or decontextualise First Nations knowledges, cultures and languages, reinforce biases and stereotypes, and overlook the cultural protocols and collective rights that govern how Indigenous knowledges are held, accessed and shared (Alterator et al., 2025; Leaver & Srdarov, 2025; McMaster et al., 2026).

Teachers can support students in critically engaging with AI tools by connecting learning with their cultures, identities and existing knowledge (Arthars et al., 2026). For example, when exploring First Nations histories or knowledges, teachers can draw on locally relevant knowledge and perspectives from appropriate sources and knowledge holders, giving students a stronger foundation against which to consider, question and evaluate AI-generated responses. This can help students recognise when AI outputs are inaccurate, incomplete or presented without appropriate cultural context.

Teachers and school leaders should ensure that AI use supports – rather than undermines – culturally responsive and reflexive practice, and prioritises First Nations leadership, Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property, Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Governance. Decisions about AI use should therefore complement, rather than substitute, meaningful engagement with First Nations communities and knowledge holders (Martinez-Maldonado et al., 2026) and be considered with reference to First Nations knowledges and Indigenous Data Sovereignty.

Conclusion

The increasing use of AI in Australian schools brings opportunities and risks for school leaders, teachers and students. While there's very little evidence on AI use in school education and outstanding questions about the long-term impact of AI on learning and teaching, the prevalence of AI use necessitates school leader and teacher responses to safeguard learning and teaching. AERO has identified 5 broad considerations for teachers and school leaders from the emerging evidence on AI.

School leaders and teachers should:

- prioritise evidence-based teaching and learning in decisions around using AI
- monitor for risks to student learning and support students in developing strong foundational knowledge, metacognitive strategies and self-regulated learning techniques
- establish clear expectations for AI use
- consider approaches to assessment and feedback
- apply a culturally responsive and reflexive lens that respects First Nations knowledges.

Ultimately, decisions about AI use should be guided by the evidence about how students learn, with careful consideration of whether, when and how the technology can support teaching and learning. This can help teachers and school leaders make informed decisions about whether AI can meaningfully support the learning process or whether established teaching approaches remain the better choice.

A note on the evidence base

The emerging evidence suggests that AI doesn't have a single, uniform effect on learning. Rather, its impact appears to depend on the design of the technology, including whether it incorporates pedagogical guardrails – that is, features that guide students toward engaging in the learning process rather than simply obtaining the answer. It also depends on how AI is used in teaching and learning and the level of support provided to students (Arthars et al., 2026; Fesler et al., 2026).

Research on AI use in school settings is limited and still evolving (Arthars et al., 2026; Fesler et al., 2026), particularly in relation to its impact on student learning and its implications for First Nations students, educators and communities. Significant questions remain about the long-term impact of AI on learning, teaching, educational equity and student wellbeing.

Teachers and school leaders should be aware of several important limitations to the evidence base on AI in schools:

- Most studies are recent, short term, exploratory and conducted outside Australia (Arthars et al., 2026; Fesler et al., 2026). There's limited research on the durability of student learning when AI is removed.
- Many studies focus on student engagement or perceptions rather than robust measures of learning (Weidlich et al., 2025).
- Much of the current evidence comes from secondary schools and higher education settings (Fesler et al., 2026). Very limited research comes from primary school settings.
- Evidence about the long-term impact of AI on student learning remains limited or mixed (Arthars et al., 2026; Fesler et al., 2026; UNESCO, 2025).
- AI technologies continue to evolve rapidly, meaning research findings may become outdated as new tools and capabilities emerge (Lodge & Loble, 2026).

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