

# Educators on Artificial Intelligence: Here's the One Thing It Can't Do Well

By Eric Jensen



By [kirill\\_makarov/Shutterstock](#)

It isn't just the tech entrepreneurs and Hollywood directors who dream about the role that artificial intelligence can play, or will play, in everyday human life—educators have begun to join them.

However, those dreams aren't always pleasant and may, in fact, sometimes turn into nightmares. If computer systems are able to perform tasks that humans have performed for thousands of years, will it render teachers and administrators a thing of the past? Or is artificial intelligence the secret to freeing up educators' time for other, non-routine tasks, like mentoring and spending more one-on-one time with students?

To find out, I went straight to the source—eight educators, including superintendents, coaches and teachers—to find out whether AI tickles their fancy or scares them straight. The results? A lot more mixed than you might

imagine.

## **Will Artificial Intelligence Make Teachers Lives Easier?**

Though Merriam Webster defines artificial intelligence as the “capability of a machine to imitate intelligent human behavior,” educators define AI differently. Some give generalized, out-of-classroom descriptions; others tailor their definitions more specifically to education.

Kasey Bell, a digital learning consultant and former Texas teacher, choose to go for the former: “AI [is] defined as machines with the ability or intelligence to complete tasks on their own and make intelligent decisions.”

*To me, it means the possibility of bettering the world around us, to advance further than we ever have.*

*Glenn Robbins*

Superintendent Glenn Robbins defines AI less by what it might be and more by what it can do: “To me, it means the possibility of bettering the world around us, to advance further than we ever have.”

Asking educators to pinpoint the term proves an easy way to figure out who’s on the “pro” side of the argument for incorporating AI into the classroom—particularly those individuals are administrators, responsible for supporting educators in integrating technology into their daily practices. Take Kristopher Hupp, a director of technology and instructional innovation from a Pennsylvania district. Hupp sees AI as uncharted, yet highly impactful territory, “using computers to take over many of the tasks that teachers have been traditionally responsible for—such as grading or delivering and individualizing instruction.”

But when educators have different concepts of what makes a piece of technology or tool “intelligent,” it means that a variety of tools get lumped

into the AI category—even if they aren't technically “artificially intelligent.” Amongst these eight educators, edtech software such as [IXL Learning](#) and [i-Ready](#) both get lumped in with Amazon's [Alexa](#) in the same AI bucket, despite the fact that a tool like IXL doesn't theoretically become smarter over time as a user interacts with it.

Nonetheless, a number of educators do seem optimistic about what devices like Alexa can do for teachers. “I think this only helps emphasize the shift to a facilitator role for teachers,” Bell argues. “Not only is information at our fingertips, but now at our command, [with] answers from artificial voices.”

## **Concerns About AI's Implications: “It Deprofessionalizes Teaching”**

In comparison to the optimism coming from educators like Kristopher Hupp, others fall on the opposite end of the spectrum—worried about the effects that artificially-intelligent technologies might have on the role of the teacher in the classroom. James Hilton Harrell, an administrator at Oakland Unified School District in Northern California, offers this: “I am concerned about its role in deprofessionalizing teachers—that AI would replace professional acumen.”

Leon Tynes, a 2017 Grosvenor Teacher Fellow on staff at Engineering and Science University Magnet School in Connecticut, agrees, though he has his reservations about whether AI will become a problem anytime soon. “It won't work... [but] by the time it's a threat, I'll be gone.”

Even some of those educators who see the possibilities—like superintendent Glenn Robbins—pause when asked how AI could affect teaching as a profession. Though Robbins shares that AI has the potential of “bettering the world around us,” as mentioned above, he wonders whether it would render the teaching profession “obsolete”:

*“With more focus on personalized Learning, also known as old-school*

*“Independent Study,” students take ownership of their learning without a teacher. When does AI, like IBM’s Watson, take over a classroom? When does a major reformer make a sweeping push to remove teachers and replace, or lessen them, for AI?”*

Robbins goes even further, offering a piece of advice for young, aspiring teachers: “If I were a young education major, I’d be asking myself how I intend to compete against AI, and what can I do to adapt to the major changes coming forward.”

## **The One Thing AI Can’t Do Well**

Should schools of education and teachers’ unions begin to plan for the inevitable that Robbins alludes to? Not so fast argues Chris Gosselin, a Digital Learning Coach at [Sanborn Elementary School](#). In Gosselin’s opinion, there’s one thing that artificially-intelligent technologies can’t do—and that’s “building and foster[ing] meaningful relationships with students.”

He’s got supporters on a few different sides, including Paul Lindgren of Westside Community Schools in Nebraska. “It would be a crime to have AI lead to classrooms with students isolated from human interaction,” Lindgren writes in an email to EdSurge. “There is no artificial intelligence that can care about a student and effectively communicate that in a meaningful way to them.”

Perhaps that is the key to a world in which AI holds a significant role in education. Artificially-intelligent technologies may be good at doing a lot of things—but holding deep, meaningful relationships with students likely won’t be one of them. And because of that, Vermont superintendent Ned Kirsch is ready for the future.

“[There are those] routine and mundane tasks that unfortunately still take up time, like entering assessment data, attendance, etc. Freeing up time from those aspects of the job by incorporating AI would be welcomed,” he says,

making sure to note what his fellow educators believe with fervency: “It will also allow our teachers to do what they do best—building relationships and making a difference.”

*Mary Jo Madda—[@MJMadda](#)—is the former Director of Audience Development and Senior Editor at EdSurge. She is currently the Creative Strategy Manager for the [Code Next](#) team at Google, and is a former STEM middle school teacher and administrator. In 2016, Mary Jo was named to the Forbes "30 Under 30" list in education. The viewpoints expressed in this article are hers and do not represent that of her employer.*