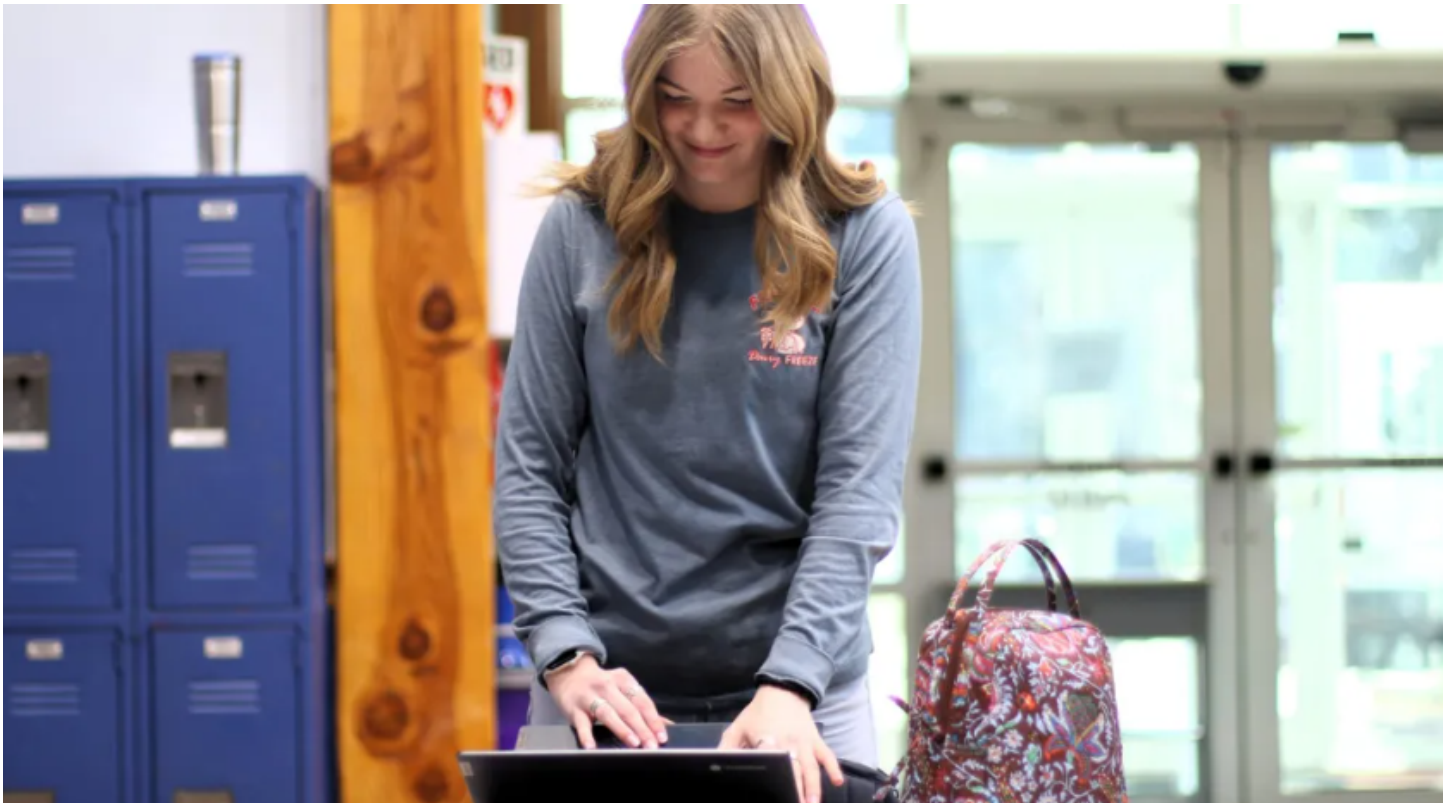


EDUCATION

AI is breaking high school. Students are starting to sound the alarm.

by **Jeremy Margolis**

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Concord Christian Academy student Faith Dudley shared her experience with AI and its uses in schools as it permeates and entrenches throughout daily life in schools. Credit: ALEXANDER RAPP / Monitor

Concord Christian Academy junior Faith Dudley was in class a few weeks ago when her teacher confronted a friend about using AI on an assignment.

The friend denied it, and the teacher didn't press the issue. But Dudley wasn't sure. Curious, she asked her friend after class whether the words had been her own or a machine's.

The teacher's suspicions had been right. Dudley considered her friend a good writer, and the news was "hard for me to hear," she said in an interview.

The Warner resident is no anti-AI absolutist. Dudley sometimes uses ChatGPT as a tool to better understand complicated material, and she doesn't downplay its utility. But she draws a firm line at submitting work directly written by AI.

Increasingly, at high schools across the country, that line has become blurry. Last year, 84% of high schoolers reported using AI for their schoolwork, according to [a study conducted by the College Board](#).

Some of those students may be using the technology in permissible ways, but New Hampshire students said in interviews that unauthorized use has become "very prevalent."

Martin Pennington, a Concord High School senior, estimated that 80% of his classmates have used AI on schoolwork in ways that are not allowed.

"Among students, it's kind of open how much kids use AI for assignments," Pennington said.

AI use has proliferated so rapidly that it is fundamentally transforming the high school experience — even for students like Dudley and Pennington who have elected to self-regulate their own use.

Interviews with eight students from four area high schools, all of whom are unsettled by rising AI use, revealed a burgeoning crisis in New Hampshire's schools. The students described feeling sapped of motivation, noticeable cognitive deterioration among their peers and a sense of hopelessness about whether their school leaders were equipped to address the problems they see.

“I used to be motivated to learn, and now there’s just really not much to be motivated for when you feel that school is more about just receiving a grade than learning, and there’s such an easy way for people to do that and cheat through that,” Pennington said.

Students said that they work less hard now than they did earlier in high school. They reported that the rigor of some of their courses has dropped to meet students at their diminished level.

Concord High senior Andrew Pfitzenmayer said a classmate in his advanced history class “mentioned that he didn’t know the Declaration of Independence was even attached to American history, because he had used AI during that whole class.”

Those interviewed said that students have become more emboldened to use AI this year because of the unreliability of AI detection tools and the lack of consequences. They knew of more classmates who had been wrongly accused of AI use than students who had been caught and penalized. A few said they worried about being wrongly accused themselves if their writing was too strong.

“It makes teachers not trust students as much because they automatically assume the worst,” Concord High senior Caledonia Mahon said. “It can be really damaging to the students who do care about what they’re writing about and do want to give their best work.”

Diminishing motivation

Mahon poured her heart into a recent assignment, an end-of-course personal reflection about how she had grown as a leader during an outdoor education class called R.O.P.E, or Reaching Our Potential in Education.

But when her classmate got up to give his speech, he openly admitted to some members of the class that he had used ChatGPT to write it, she said.

“He didn’t even know what he was saying,” Mahon said. “You could tell it was stuff that did not come from him and his experiences, and it felt a little disheartening.”

Mahon felt second-hand embarrassment. It appeared clear to everyone that a large language model had told the student how he had grown as a leader. The student, however, didn’t seem fazed.

Mahon and Pennington, who was also in the class, didn’t think their teacher cared. Maybe he deducted “a couple points,” Mahon speculated.



Concord High School seniors (from left) Martin Pennington, Andrew Pfitzenmayer, and Caledonia Mahon.
Credit: JEREMY MARGOLIS / Monitor staff

The teacher, Frank Harrison, said in a statement that he had “no evidence” AI-generated work had been submitted in the course.

Terry Wolf, Concord School District’s director of communications and the leader of its AI implementation team, said she was not surprised to hear about the prevalence of AI use among students.

Concord’s AI implementation team, which formed about two years ago, has begun providing teachers with professional development on AI use and is in the process of developing a new district-wide policy, as well as rolling out a pilot program through Microsoft Copilot, she said. Concord High’s [current policy](#) bars all AI use.

Mahon thought the AI-written reflection from her classmate was of poor quality. But as her fellow students have increasingly outsourced their less personal assignments to AI models, she has wondered at times: “Why am I even doing all of this work if they’re going to show up with something that’s going to be better, but not be human-generated?”

Dudley, who used to love writing, said her zeal for the craft has also begun to wane. She used to get substantive comments from her teachers; now, she said, they just say “good work.”

“Even if I get 100s, it’s like: What was the point of writing it if not for an audience to enjoy it?” Dudley wondered. “There’s other things that teachers — which is our audience — are enjoying, even though it’s not my fellow classmates writing it.”

Rob Starner, Concord Christian’s head of school, said he thinks more writing should take place in class, where teachers can meet with students and provide one-on-one feedback. Concord Christian doesn’t currently have a school-wide AI policy, but it plans to develop one over the summer, Starner said.

Students said that AI use has infiltrated every subject, not just writing-heavy humanities courses. Students use tools from Snapchat and Google Lens to photograph or take screenshots of math and science questions, which immediately spit out accurate answers.

In AP art, Pfitzenmayer said he has noticed classmates asking ChatGPT to generate the images students rely on to serve as models for their work, or to brainstorm what types of assignments would earn them the best grade.

“I feel like if you’re in an advanced art program, you should be creative enough to be able to come up with your own ideas,” Pfitzenmayer said.

AI, the students said, has hastened the diminishment of learning for its own sake.

“We’re no longer learning to discover things,” Mahon said. “We’re learning to do what is expected of us based on a numerical scale.”

Academic decline

The students interviewed said they notice their classmates’ heavy reliance on AI is making them less capable thinkers. Some said what they observe has served as a deterrent against increasing their own AI use.

“I worry about almost a mind-deadening future,” said Londonderry High School junior Lauren Damota, who recently came in third place in a statewide writing competition that asked students to opine on AI regulation.

“I’ll have classmates that use AI to write poems or do arts-related homework, and I think that that is so, honestly, lame,” Damota said. “I think it’s so lame.”

The winner of the competition, Bishop Brady High School senior Vaibhav Rastogi, tutors students in math through an [organization](#) he and his siblings founded. He said he has noticed cognitive decline among the children with whom he works.

“The general populace of students — their critical thinking, their ability to really stick with something for an extended period of time — that is something I’ve found lacking,” Rastogi said.

Students said unauthorized AI use is at least as prevalent among high-performing students as middling and low-performing ones.

“When [strong students] copy and paste this really good essay from AI, the teachers don’t question it, because they already know that they are capable of writing it, even though they didn’t,” Concord High junior Jasmine Dorval said.

Teachers, students said, have started to adapt — though not always in a way that would incentivize less AI use.

Students said teachers have increasingly begun grading assessments for completion rather than quality. This, they say, further incentivizes AI use.

Some teachers have, however, begun to take steps to curtail AI use.

In Dudley’s history class, for example, the teacher has recently required that students turn their chairs around so that he can see their computer screens while they work on in-class writing assignments. Other teachers have also increased in-class writing assignments.

How should schools respond?

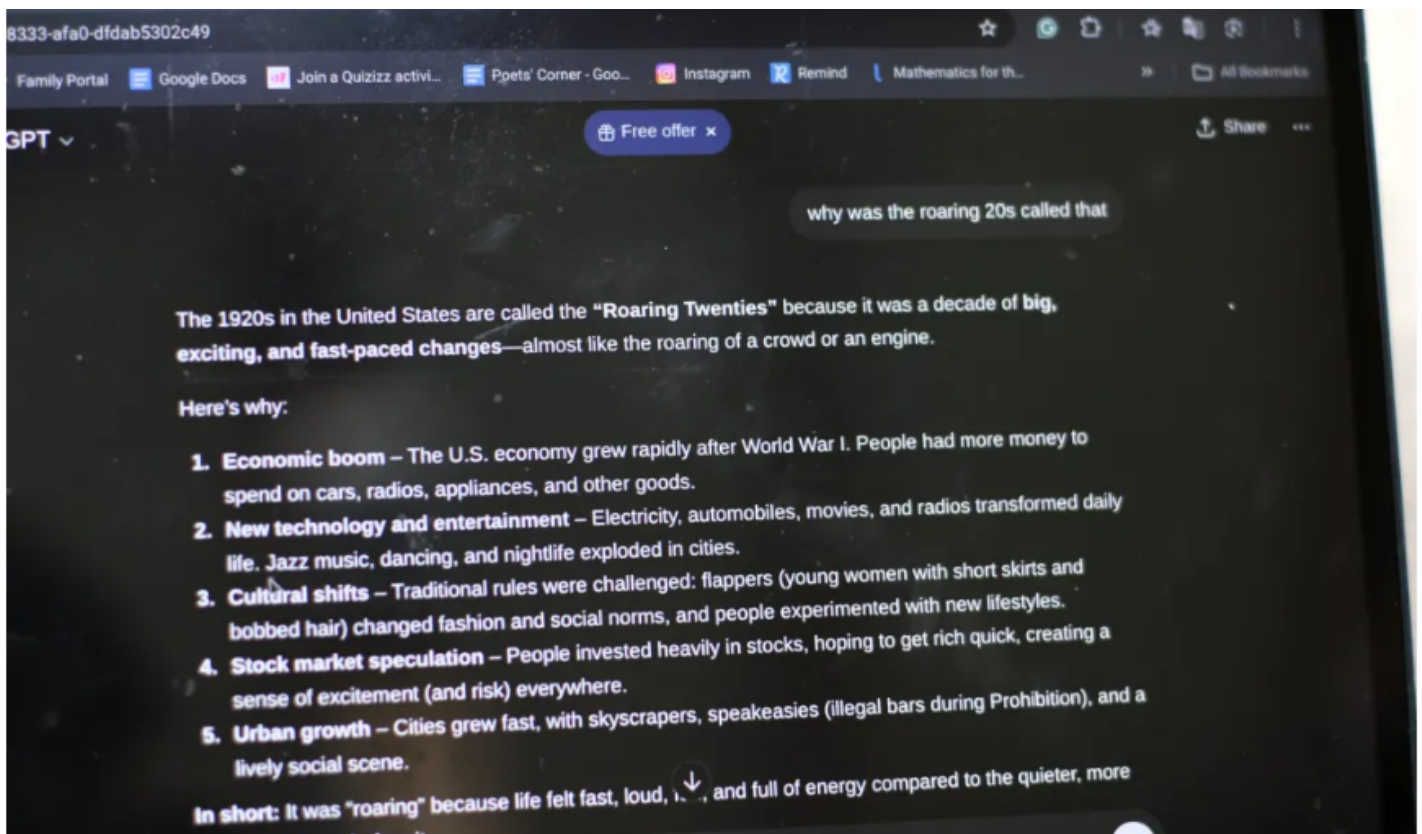
The students sympathize with their teachers. Detection, they realize, is virtually impossible.

Students “have this resource right in front of them that is in a way being shoved in their faces,” Concord High junior Zadi Taylor said. “When there’s a platform like that that is so readily available to use, and there’s really no way to prevent that, that’s where it gets hard to prevent the usage, and teachers are struggling with that.”

Students evade being caught, those interviewed said, by prompting their AI programs to “make this sound like a human wrote it” or “dumb it down a bit.”

Concord does not “officially” use AI detection tools due to their unreliability, Wolf said. At Concord Christian, some teachers use a tool called Brisk, which allows teachers to view students’ edit history on their documents, Starner said.

At Concord High, students said ChatGPT is accessible on their school-issued Chromebooks, though sites like Spotify are blocked. (Wolf said ChatGPT should be blocked, too.) At Concord Christian, students access AI tools through the faculty WiFi, which many know the password for, according to Dudley.



In a recent ChatGPT search, CCA’s Faith Dudley asked the large-language model about the roaring 20s and what they were. Credit: ALEXANDER RAPP / Monitor

Students said the solution is not going to come from blocking access to AI. Rather, they encouraged their school leaders to embrace radical changes in assignments and their generation to adopt a mindset shift about the purpose of school.

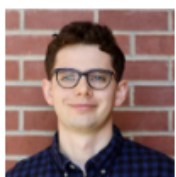
They called for more in-class writing and for more creative work that can’t be easily completed by AI.

“Even having students do what would seem like a younger child thing, like do a comic strip and write a paragraph on each box,” Dudley proposed.

In Concord, the team tasked with thinking about how AI should be used and regulated has met with curriculum facilitators, who are working to change assignments “so that they’re more innovative,” Wolf said.

Students said there also needs to be a broader course correction regarding the purpose of school.

“Embed it in their minds that the point of school is not just to pass and get the highest grade,” Taylor said. “It’s really to understand the core concepts of what they’re learning — how to retain that information and use it later on in life.”



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