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WHITE PAPER

EI Before AI

A Connection-First Framework for Schools in the Age of AI

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Housman Learning

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Children do not
develop in the cloud.
They develop within
human relationships.

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Executive Summary



A brain overwhelmed by dysregulated emotions cannot think, reason, or learn. That single developmental fact should sit underneath every decision a district makes about AI this year. Superintendents are being asked to move quickly on generative AI, personalized learning platforms, and algorithmic media at the very moment that student engagement, teacher burnout, youth mental health, and post-pandemic recovery are already stretching us thin. The temptation is to treat AI as a technical or instructional question. I believe that is the wrong place to start. Before we ask *which* AI tools to adopt, we have to ask a more human question: are we protecting the conditions that let children learn at all, their emotional intelligence, their connection to caring adults, and the daily experience of being helped to manage big feelings? Those conditions determine whether any tool, AI or otherwise, helps a child or does harm.

Housman Learning was founded by Dr. Donna Housman, who has 35+ years of experience as a psychologist in the field of child development and early childhood education.

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Dr. Housman is the author of a children's book series, ECSELEnt Adventures™ with Hemmy and Shemmy, that supports young children's emotional intelligence and mental health by addressing difficult emotions and topics in age-appropriate, safe and engaging storytelling.



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relationships. These relationships are the fundamental building blocks of brain architecture, shaping cognitive, emotional, and social skills from birth. Brain function is the dynamic interaction of biology and environment – experiences and relationships. In the first 1,000 days, when more than 1 million neural connections form each second, daily experiences and human relationships are literally helping to wire the young brain's power grid. When emotional skills are strengthened, the thinking center is strengthened as well; when stress and dysregulation overwhelm the brain, attention, reasoning, and problem-solving are impaired. Emotional intelligence (EI) – the capacity to recognize and understand emotions, regulate feelings and behavior, empathize, collaborate, and solve problems – is not a soft add-on. It is infrastructure for learning and for life.

The evidence that this is already happening is mounting. In national survey research from the Center for Democracy & Technology, about half of students said that using AI in class makes them feel less connected to their teacher, and many teachers worried that AI is weakening the very critical thinking and collaboration that students come to school to build.¹ RAND reports the same broad concern, that heavier AI use may erode critical thinking.² And the American Academy of Pediatrics, in its 2026 policy statement on digital ecosystems, warns that heavier noneducational and solo screen time is tied to delays in language, cognition, and other areas of development.³

This paper offers a different starting point, a connection-first, humanist framework I call EI before AI. The premise is simple: when we help children become emotionally intelligent, we give them resilience against algorithmic pull, and we protect what real learning has always depended on, the human work of thinking and relating. AI can absolutely help. It can increase efficiency and widen access. But it cannot be allowed to become a crutch for thinking, a stand-in for friendship, or a substitute for the human qualities that learning is built on: empathy, compassion, critical thinking, collaboration, negotiation, compromise, kindness, and judgment.

And the most important time to get this right is the very beginning. Pre-K and before is where self-regulation, the language for feelings, empathy, and the habits of getting along are built, through co-regulation, play, and the back-and-forth of everyday interaction. If we want graduates who can use AI wisely, we first need emotionally intelligent adults and emotionally intelligent classrooms to raise them in. A brain flooded by stress and dysregulated emotion cannot do the thinking, reasoning, decision-making, and problem-solving that learning requires. An emotionally dysregulated child cannot learn, and an emotionally dysregulated adult cannot teach. So the urgent question is not how fast we can scale AI into our

schools, but whether we are protecting the conditions that let children think clearly, connect deeply, and truly learn.



EI Before AI Framework: Human Connection Builds the Capacities that Protect Learning



Key Takeaways for District Leaders

- 💡 Treat human connection as a core instructional condition, not a nice-to-have.
- 💡 Prioritize adult emotional competence and co-regulation skills as Tier 1 infrastructure.
- 💡 Adopt a brief Connection Impact Assessment for any AI-enabled product or practice.
- 💡 Use AI to augment planning and differentiation, not to replace dialogue, feedback, and collaborative learning.
- 💡 Teach digital resilience explicitly: emotional awareness, attention training, critical thinking, and ethical tool use.
- 💡 Measure what matters: relationships, belonging, classroom climate, and staff well-being alongside academics.

1. The Central Claim: EI Before AI

We are in the middle of a real-time social experiment, and our children are the subjects. In classrooms across the country, AI is now drafting, summarizing, translating, tutoring, and even 'listening' in ways that were science fiction only a few years ago.² And the pressure on leaders is real: keep up, innovate, compete, move fast.



But education has always been about so much more than handing children information. Children learn because they feel safe enough to take a risk. They learn because they feel seen, heard, and understood by another human being. They learn because they can sit with frustration long enough to stay with a hard problem, and because working shoulder to shoulder with a friend makes thinking feel social and alive. Every one of those is an emotional skill, and all are necessary.

In my work, I remind educators that learning and teaching spring from human interaction and human connection. There is ***no shortcut*** to healthy brain development, and no shortcut to genuine human connection.⁴

The order matters. Put AI first, before children have practiced regulating themselves, reading others, and thinking things through, and we hand them a crutch for thinking and a substitute for real human connection. Put emotional intelligence first, and we give them something far more valuable: the capacity to use AI as a tool while remaining the authors of their own thinking.

The emotional skills children need are not learned from a screen. In my own research, I have found that children build emotional competence in the heat of the moment: in real moments of strong feeling, when a caring adult helps them name what they feel, manage it, and repair things with a friend. That learning does not happen at a safe distance, through a lesson on a device. It happens inside a warm, responsive relationship, again and again, until the skill becomes the child's own.

I think of a child I will call Miller. One afternoon, not yet four years old, he sought out his teacher to tell her something important. 'I am so frustrated,' he said, naming the feeling exactly. A classmate had knocked over his blocks. He had used his words and asked her to stop, and when that did not work, he asked the teacher for help, and Miller then said to the classmate, 'I am feeling frustrated you knocked over my tower and did not listen to my words to stop. Let's go to the Peace Table and work out the problem together.' No app taught

Miller to do that. A caring adult did, in the very moments his feelings were running high, until managing them became something he could do himself.

Moments like Miller's are exactly what our technology choices either make room for or crowd out. EI before AI is, first and foremost, a leadership stance: a decision to treat emotional intelligence and human connection as the ground that any technology strategy stands on. It is also a deeply human one. At a moment when some in the technology world talk about AI mostly in terms of replacement, of jobs, of relationships, of human judgment itself, schools have a chance, and a responsibility, to make a different choice: to put technology in the service of human flourishing, rather than asking humanity to serve the technology.

1.1 What EI Before AI Is (and Is Not)

EI before AI is about what comes first. It is not a rejection of technology. It simply recognizes the human capacities a child needs to use AI well: the ability to pay attention, to manage feelings, to empathize, to think critically, and to repair a relationship after conflict, are built through relationships in the earliest years. They must be growing *before* AI enters the picture, and they have to keep growing *alongside* it. They do not appear on their own the moment a child is handed a device.

EI before AI is:

- 💡 A leadership stance that treats emotionally intelligent practice and human connection as the foundation of any technology strategy.
- 💡 A developmental sequence: build the brain architecture for regulation, language, and connection first; introduce AI tools in ways that strengthen, rather than substitute for, that architecture.
- 💡 A governance discipline: every AI decision is evaluated against a single question — *Will this use increase or decrease the quality of human interaction in our schools?*
- 💡 A commitment to adult emotional competence as Tier 1 infrastructure, because dysregulated adults cannot co-regulate children, and co-regulation is how self-regulation is built.

EI before AI is *not*:

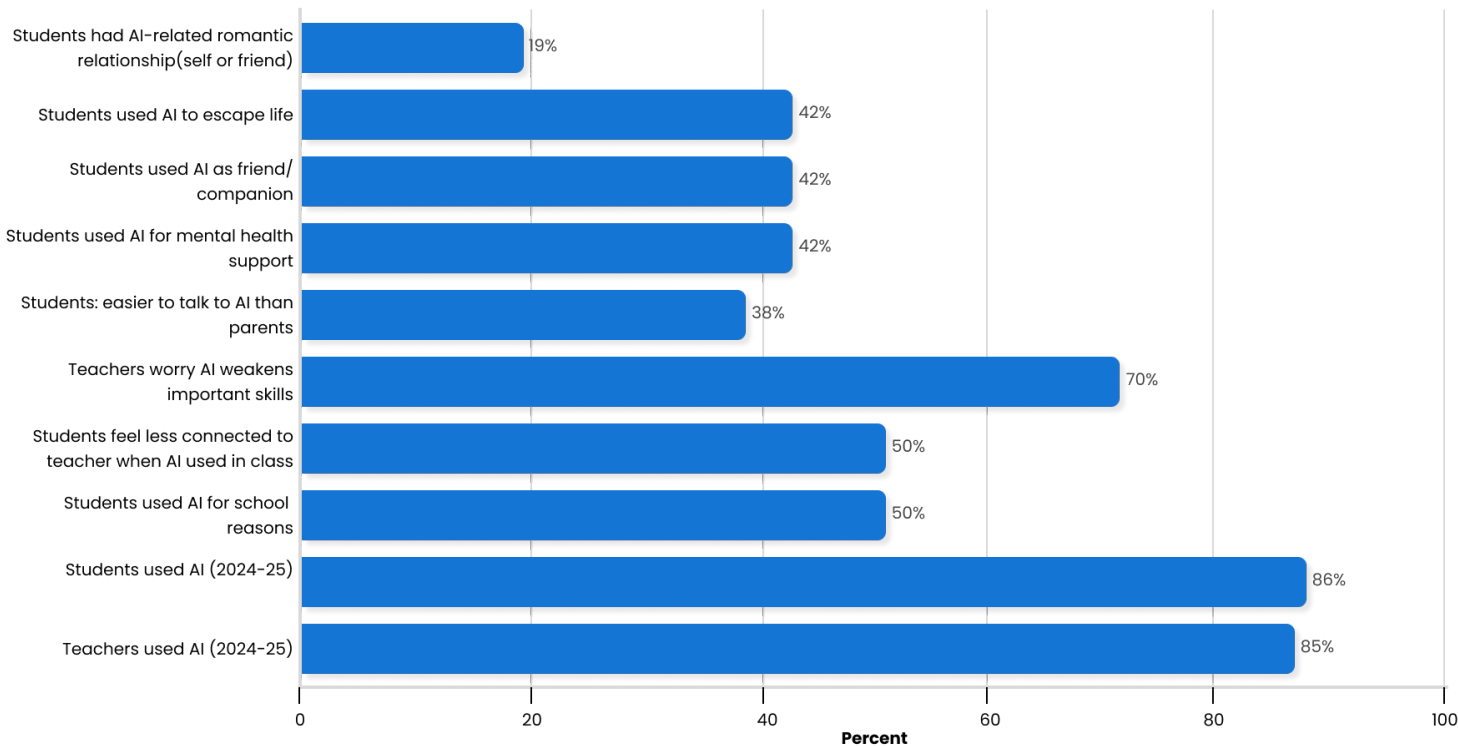
- 💡 A ban on AI in schools. AI can be a powerful tool for educators when used in ways that augment, rather than replace, the relational work of teaching.
- 💡 A repackaging of any specific curriculum. EI before AI is a framework for decision-making, grounded in developmental science, that any district can apply regardless of the programs it currently uses.
- 💡 A delay tactic. Districts can — and should — move quickly on AI governance. The point is to move in the right sequence: human connection first, technology second.
- 💡 An ideological position. The skills at issue — emotional awareness, regulation, empathy, problem-solving — are developmental capacities every child needs.

2. What Is Changing: AI, Algorithms, and the New Learning Environment

To lead well in this moment, we need a shared picture of the challenge. The issue is not that AI exists. It is that AI is being layered on top of a childhood already shaped by algorithms: on-demand entertainment, feeds engineered to hold attention, and digital spaces designed to keep children scrolling.

Renowned social psychologist Jonathan Haidt describes this shift as the rise of a 'phone-based childhood', one in which developmental experiences historically gained through play, peer interaction, and independence are increasingly displaced by screens.⁵ In a March 2026 lecture at MIT, he warned that if current digital trends continue as AI expands, the decline in attention, cognition, and civic life could accelerate further.⁶ Tristan Harris, co-founder and president of the Center for Humane Technology, has long argued that consumer technology is often designed to capture attention, a practice that can weaken focus and strain relationships.⁷ In January 2026, Harris sharpened that argument in Davos, writing that protecting children's development is not a barrier to innovation but a prerequisite for sustainable social and economic progress.⁸

Selected Findings from CDT National Survey Research



Source: Center for Democracy & Technology survey research summarized in 2025 reporting.

Another rapidly emerging trend is that of AI as a companion. In the CDT survey, 42% of students reported back-and-forth conversations with AI for mental health support; 42% used AI as a friend or companion; and 42% used AI as a way to escape from real life.¹ Bestselling author, NYU professor, and cohost of the *Pivot* podcast Scott Galloway has warned about the relational risks of what he calls 'love algorithmically', the migration of intimacy, advice, and affirmation into machine-mediated companionship.⁹

AI is not just another instructional tool. It is reshaping the whole web of relationships within which a child develops, grows and learns. When students feel less connected to their teachers or find it easier to talk to a bot than to a parent, that is not a small technical problem to manage. It is a warning sign we should not ignore. And it arrives just as several technology leaders are speaking openly about AI replacing people: doing work once done by human professionals, thinning out organizations, and standing in for human relationships. When it comes to childhood, education must refuse that trade.

We are living in a moment of extraordinary technological acceleration. AI and digital tools can feel like relief: faster answers, easier planning, more efficiency. But childhood is not a process to be made more efficient. Childhood is meant to be relational, developmental, and human.



The American Academy of Pediatrics' 2026 policy statement underscores the same point from a developmental-health perspective: infants and toddlers struggle to transfer information from 2-D screens to the 3-D world, and heavier noneducational and solo screen media is associated with delays in language acquisition, cognitive growth, and other forms of development.³

Recent peer-reviewed studies in *AI, Brain and Child*, *the Journal of Educational Neuroscience*, make the educational ramifications even clearer. Generative AI in early learning should be judged not only by personalization or efficiency, but also by developmental fit. Does it support adult guidance, dialogue, reflection, and human connection, or does it offload them?^{10 11}

That is why we must protect and foster the one thing that matters most for children's lifelong success and well-being, and what no machine can replace: Emotional Intelligence (EI). The ability to manage emotions and understand the emotions of others is critical to growing empathy, connection, collaboration and critical thinking. With nearly one in four children by age 8 having their own cellphone¹², the risk is not simply screen time, it is lost "face time" and social practice: fewer conversations, less play, fewer opportunities to negotiate, repair, and reconnect.

UNESCO has echoed this warning that generative AI can limit children's discussions and interactions with peers and reduce opportunities for collaborative learning, harming social development.¹³ Recent child-centered

reviews reach a similar conclusion: AI may support learning, but only when human guidance and human connection remain primary.¹⁰

2.1 The Academic Signal: Literacy and Learning Are Sliding

On the national dashboard, the academic signal is flashing. In NAEP 2024, average reading scores declined again from 2022 for both fourth and eighth grades, and are five points lower than 2019.¹⁴ In mathematics, fourth grade showed a modest increase from 2022 but remains below 2019; eighth-grade math is flat in 2024 compared to 2022 after the historic 2022 decline.¹⁵

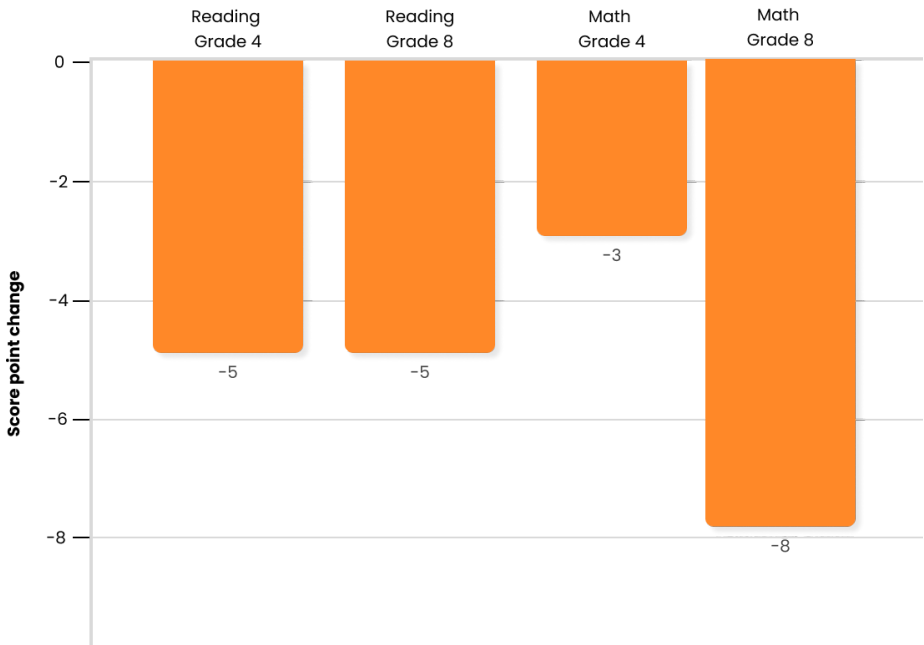
These are not abstract data points. Degradation of national reading and math scores correlate to higher absenteeism, increased disengagement, and behavioral challenges, resulting in more time dedicated to classroom control and management, further eroding opportunities for academic learning to occur.¹⁶ By contrast, the EI before AI framework is an invitation to strengthen the capacities that make learning possible (attention, persistence, frustration tolerance, and relationship safety) starting in the earliest grades.

For early childhood leaders, the question is what sits upstream, prevention or intervention? When early language, self-regulation, and social development are weakened by chronic stress and screen-first habits, later academic repair becomes far more expensive than prevention.

2.2 A Note on Equity

Any large-scale technology adoption will have uneven effects. Students who already have stable relationships and supportive adults are more likely to benefit from AI as an efficiency tool while those who are already isolated or dysregulated will be more vulnerable to relationship substitution and to outsourcing the very skills school is meant to build. In this context, equity is not about access to devices, it is about access to high-quality human relationships and skill-building environments.

NAEP National Score-Point Change from 2019 to 2024



Source: NAEP national results summarized in the paper.

3. Why Connection Works: Developmental Science and the Active Ingredients of Learning

At the heart of EI before AI is a developmental truth: children learn within the context of nurturing and supportive human relationships. Brain function is the interaction between biology and experience, and the young brain is like a power grid under construction with cables being laid where the need and use is highest. Responsive human relationships shape the creation of systems of stress regulation, attention, language, and the development of executive function - the brain's central control system. Human relationships are the playground where children learn who they are, how to handle disappointment, how to solve problems with others, and how to build a secure and positive sense of self.

Human connection is not a "nice to have", it is the foundation of all development and learning.

The neural pathways of the emotional and thinking centers in the brain are interconnected and in the first 1,000 days of life more than 1 million neural connections form each second. The brain's architecture is informed and shaped by daily experiences and relationships. In the early years, the brain expects serve-and-return interactions: those back-and-forth moments when a child reaches out with a look, a gesture, a sound, a word, or a cry, and a caring adult responds. These moments do not simply make children feel good, they help build the circuitry for trust, language, and learning. When emotional skills are strengthened and supported, the cognitive center is strengthened as well. When children learn to identify feelings, tolerate frustration, recover after disappointment, and understand another person's perspective, they are also strengthening the executive function skills necessary for learning and life-long success.

In the corollary, a brain overwhelmed by dysregulated emotion and stress impairs thinking, reasoning, and problem solving. An emotionally overwhelmed brain can't learn. Again, the cables get laid where use is highest. An emotionally dysregulated child cannot learn because emotions take control interfering with executive functions involving processing information, following instructions, reasoning, problem solving - skills all necessary for learning. Likewise, teachers cannot teach effectively when they are unable to manage their own stress. Chronic stress can leave both children and adults stuck in high alert: fatigued, reactive, burned out, and cognitively compromised.

From early childhood forward, predictable, responsive, and supportive learning environments strengthen the brain systems children rely on for attention, self-control, and problem-solving. This is why adult emotional competence is not ancillary to instruction; it is one of instruction's active ingredients.

Peer-reviewed research on emotional intelligence and emotional competence supports this sequence. A 2025 meta-analysis on EI development in early childhood found that emotional intelligence is developmentally shaped rather than fixed.¹⁷ Longitudinal work by Izard, Denham and colleagues has likewise shown that

emotion knowledge and self-regulation in the preschool years predict later social behavior, school adjustment, and academic competence.^{18 19}

The adult side matters just as much. A three-level meta-analysis of early childhood educators' social-emotional competence found positive associations with teacher well-being, close teacher-student relationships, classroom management, and student social skills.²⁰ A 2025 systematic review of EI training programs for educators, together with prior meta-analytic work on EI training and on coaching, suggests that these adult capacities can be strengthened through professional learning, which includes modeling, practice, and feedback.^{21 22 23}

3.1 The Developmental Case for Emotional Intelligence

Earlier social-emotional programs have produced an important evidence base over the past two decades. Meta-analytic work across more than two hundred school-based programs has shown meaningful gains in academic performance, behavior, and attitudes toward self and others, establishing that systematic attention to social-emotional development belongs in education.³⁷ Yet three significant gaps remain, and each of them matters more in the AI era than it did before.

First, these programs have concentrated overwhelmingly on children five and older, in formal school settings beginning at kindergarten or later. The neurodevelopmental case for starting earlier is now well established: ninety percent of brain development occurs before kindergarten, and the foundations of emotional regulation, attachment, and executive function are laid down well before children enter formal schooling. Rigorous evidence for programs delivered from birth, by trained early childhood educators, remains scarce. This matters because the developmental window during which children acquire the capacities they will need to navigate AI is rapidly closing by the time most existing programs reach them.

Second, the dominant programs have been validated primarily in high-risk populations through structured, time-limited curricula delivered as discrete lessons. This leaves open the question of whether emotional and self-regulatory skills can be cultivated as an integrated part of the daily early childhood experience for all children, rather than as a remediation strategy for children already showing risk. In an AI-saturated environment, all children, not only those identified as at-risk, need the EI capacities that protect attention, agency, and judgment.

Third, earlier frameworks treat five competencies as a coordinated set of teachable skills but do not consistently ground them in the developmental science of how emotional capacity actually emerges in young children. Emotional intelligence (the integrated capacity to perceive, understand, use, and regulate emotion in self and others, developed through co-regulation with attuned adults) is a more theoretically precise construct, and one that aligns with how the developing brain actually works.

These three gaps (when emotional development begins, who it serves, and how it is theorized) are precisely what a connection-first approach must address if districts are to prepare children for an AI-shaped world.

3.2 Why Early Years Matter Even More in the AI Era

The gaps above point in one direction: toward the early years. This is when children build a vocabulary for feelings and learn that emotions are information, not emergencies. They learn how to wait, how to ask for help, how to handle disappointment, how to read another person's perspective, and how to translate human connection into the neural pathways of regulation and resilience. They also develop a secure sense of self (preferences, voice, the felt experience of being known), and it is this early-formed identity that later determines whether a child encounters AI as a tool or as a substitute for self. The difference between using AI and being used by it is laid down long before a child touches a device, in the daily experience of being seen, heard, and accurately responded to.

If we want adolescents to engage in ethical, reflective AI use, we cannot begin at age 13, when COPPA regulations allow them freer access to online tools. We must start at the beginning, with adult-child relationships and classroom cultures that teach children how to be with one another: how to communicate, collaborate, problem solve. These foundational skills of EI cannot be taught via AI. In fact, these EI building blocks are essential if children are to learn how to evaluate, discern, and interact with generative AI tools. Discernment is often framed as a cognitive skill, but its foundation is emotional: a child must tolerate uncertainty to question an AI's confident answer, sit with frustration to resist an instant solution, and have experienced authentic human attunement to recognize what is missing in a synthetic one, capacities laid down in the earliest years or laboriously rebuilt later, if at all.

In every prior technological era, the early years mattered because they shaped what a child could learn. In the AI era, they shape who the child will be, and whether they can remain the author of their own thinking in a world that will eagerly do it for them.



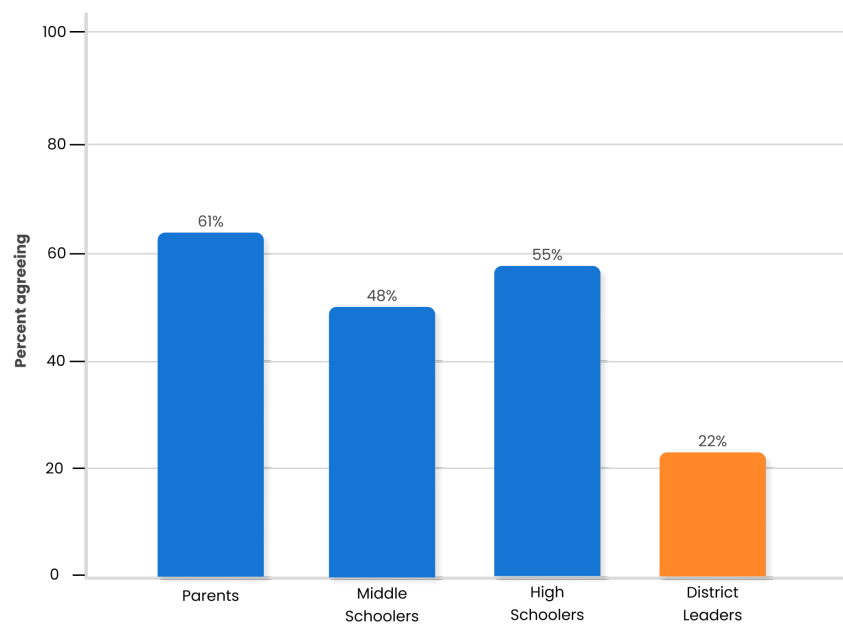
4. EI as Digital Resilience: Protecting Attention, Agency, and Belonging

Digital resilience is often framed as a matter of rules: bans, filters, monitoring. Those tools have a place. However, resilient young people are built by EI skills, by the ability to notice what is happening inside them and to respond with intention, rather than succumbing to algorithmic manipulation.

Algorithms not only target attention; they target emotion. Misinformation research shows emotional reactions shape engagement and belief ²⁴; emotion-regulation difficulties are associated with more problematic social media use,²⁵ which in turn leads to increased depression, anxiety, and stress.²⁶ Emerging work suggests emotion-regulation can reduce disinformation sharing and counter this growing mental health crisis among children.²⁷

EI protects critical thinking. Over-reliance on generative AI without the appropriate bulwarks created early in the brain can reduce critical-thinking ability.²⁸ If students outsource thinking before they have practiced thinking, we should not be surprised when perseverance, reasoning, and metacognition are compromised.

Who Thinks Greater AI Use Will Harm Students’ Critical-Thinking Skills



Source: RAND nationally representative survey reporting (2025)

EI protects belonging. Human beings learn social norms through participation, interaction, and play: reading facial expressions, navigating conflict, collaborating, and repairing ruptures. When UNESCO warns that generative AI may limit peer interaction and reduce collaborative learning,¹³ the risk is not merely about changes in preferred social interactions. It is about a loss of the developmental practice through which children learn how to behave in groups, in institutions, and in society.

With only 22% of district leaders recognizing that increased AI use could harm students' critical thinking skills, there is an urgent need to raise awareness of this foundational concern before AI is adopted at scale. Districts must establish clear, prescriptive frameworks to ensure AI is integrated in developmentally appropriate ways, particularly during the early years, when the cognitive and emotional foundations for lifelong learning are formed.

4.1 EI Skills That Directly Counter Algorithmic Influence

- 💡 Emotion Labeling: naming the feeling increases choicefulness as a response, moving from reactivity to reflection
- 💡 Attention training: noticing distraction and returning to task builds capacity to resist engagement traps.
- 💡 Perspective taking: understanding others' viewpoints reduces polarization and improves collaboration.
- 💡 Delay of gratification: tolerating discomfort reduces impulsive scrolling and outsourcing.
- 💡 Repair and reconciliation: navigating conflict strengthens real relationships, reducing reliance on simulated connection.



5. A District Blueprint: Connection-First AI Adoption

Superintendents do not need another list of apps. They need a framework that can survive the next product cycle. Below is a connection-first blueprint designed to be both timely and evergreen.

At its core is a governance question that should precede procurement: Will this AI use increase or decrease the quality of human interaction and human connection in our schools?

5.1 Ten Connection-First Principles for AI in Schools

1. AI should augment the work of educators, not replace the relational work only humans can do.
2. Protect teacher-student dialogue: conferencing, discussion, and feedback remain non-negotiable.
3. Teach students to use AI as a thinking partner (questioning, checking, reflecting), not as an answer machine.
4. Prioritize transparency: students and families deserve to know when and how AI is used.
5. Minimize automation bias: design routines that require students to justify, cite, and revise.
6. Maintain developmentally appropriate boundaries — especially for children under 13 — around conversational AI and AI companions.
7. Do not delegate emotion to machines: mental health support requires trained humans and safe systems.
8. Adopt privacy-by-design and equity-by-design: evaluate differential impacts and protect student data.
9. Invest first in adult emotional competence, classroom climate, and relationship-based practice.
10. Measure connection and belonging as leading indicators of learning and well-being.

5.2 A Procurement Gate: Connection Impact Assessment (CIA)

Before adopting any AI-enabled product, districts can require a brief Connection Impact Assessment. This is a one-to-two-page addendum to the normal procurement process that asks:



- What adult-child or peer-to-peer interaction will be reduced, if any?
- What new interaction will be enabled (e.g., more teacher time for feedback and small-group instruction)?
- What skills might students be tempted to outsource (writing, reasoning, collaboration)?
- What safeguards prevent relationship substitution (e.g., chatbots as 'counselors')?
- What independent evidence exists (beyond vendor claims) about impacts on learning, well-being, and equity?

5.3 Adult EI as Tier 1 Infrastructure

When the adults in a room are dysregulated, the whole classroom tips toward chaos. When those same adults can co-regulate, the classroom becomes a place where children can settle, learn and thrive. Districts often treat emotional development as a student program, something delivered in a boxed curriculum or a weekly lesson. Research and field experience suggest a more effective sequence: adult emotional competence first. Teacher social-emotional competence is associated with teacher well-being, classroom management, and positive student outcomes.²⁰

In some communities, the label “SEL” has become politically loaded. I am not arguing for ideology. I am arguing for the developmental skills every child needs: emotional awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and the ability to repair relationships and solve problems. The National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (NAEYC) work on self-regulation and executive function emphasizes translating research into responsive practice.²⁹ Not every program marketed under a broad SEL umbrella is anchored in rigorous science or implemented with the adult coaching required to change practice. Leaders should demand clear evidence, fidelity supports, and measurable outcomes, and use the language of EI and human development to keep the focus where it belongs: on children.



6. Measurement, Accountability, and Continuous Improvement

What gets measured gets protected. If we only measure AI adoption (licenses, usage), we will optimize for adoption. If we measure connection, we protect the mission: ensuring every child can learn and thrive.

A practical measurement set includes three tiers: relational conditions, skill growth, and outcomes. Measures should be used for improvement, not punishment.

6.1 Implementation Milestones (Example 18-Month Plan)

Months 1–3	Form an EI-before-AI leadership team; baseline climate/belonging measures; inventory current AI uses; publish a clear 'why' narrative.
Months 4–6	Launch adult EI/co-regulation PD sequence with coaching; pilot Connection Impact Assessment; establish family communication routines.
Months 7–12	Implement EI routines districtwide; redesign assessments to reduce outsourcing; refine policy guardrails.
Months 13–18	Evaluate impact; scale what works; publish a district 'Connection Report' alongside academic reporting; iterate.

7. Implications for Early Childhood and Elementary Systems

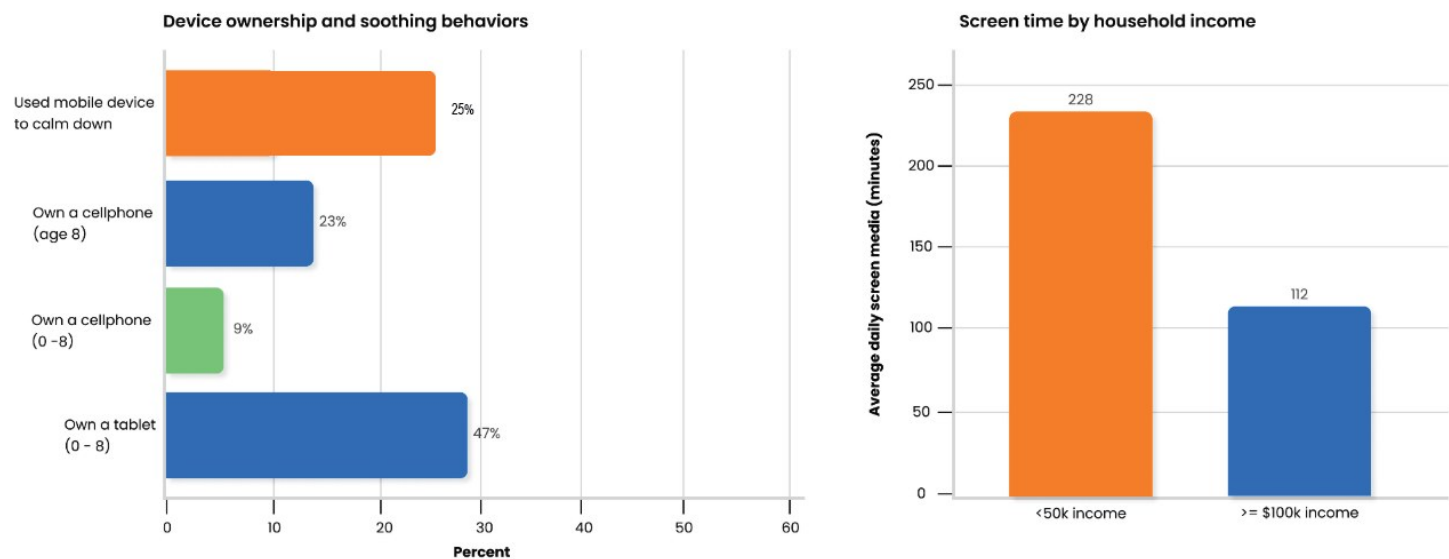
While AI conversations often focus on secondary education, early childhood and elementary systems are where foundational habits are formed. The Common Sense Census reports that by age 8, nearly one in four children has their own cellphone, and 25% of parents report using devices to calm children when they are upset.¹² Those patterns matter because the youngest learners have not yet built the basic human capacities that later make reflection, collaboration, and responsible tool use possible.

In early learning environments, the goal is to ensure that devices do not displace serve-and-return interaction, play-based learning, and peer socialization. When children use screens as a primary method of calming down, we lose the opportunity, and abdicate responsibility, to teach something else: how to move through feelings with language, rhythm, breath, adult support, and human connection.

7.1 The Risk in Early Education Is Relationship Substitution

For district leaders, 'AI readiness' is often framed as device access, curriculum alignment, cybersecurity, and procurement. For children, AI readiness is something far more basic: the capacity to stay connected, think clearly under pressure, and relate well to others. Those capacities are built, or undermined, during their earliest years. These are the years when the brain is wiring the circuits for attention, emotion regulation, language, and social understanding. In other words, pre-K and before is where the protective factors are either practiced daily or quietly displaced.

Selected Indicators from the 2025 Common Sense Census (Ages 0-8)



In early childhood, the core implementation question is not, *'Do we allow AI?'* It is, *'Where might technology substitute for a relationship that is developmentally essential?'* Relationship substitution can be subtle: fewer minutes of teacher-child dialogue, fewer opportunities for peer problem-solving, or more emotional moments handed off to screens instead of adults.

The science is concrete. Algorithmic experiences in early childhood reshape how children learn to relate to others. That shift reaches into how they think and who they become.

The patterns revealed in the charts above, where 47% of early learners under age 8 are using tablets, 23% owning cell phones and 25% of parents turning to them to help calm their young children down, are not a moral failing by schools or families; they are a signal about the environment we have collectively built. Schools cannot control everything, but they can protect the hours of the day when children are in their care, and they can intentionally teach the alternative tools children need.

7.2 EI Capacities AI Cannot Replace – and What Schools Must Protect

To keep decisions concrete, the table below describes key EI capacities that directly protect learning and civic participation in an algorithmic environment, and the corresponding school practices that grow them. This is not a rejection of technology; it is a clarity statement about what *only* humans can develop in other humans.

EI capacity (what children practice)	Why it matters in an algorithmic environment	What schools can protect and teach
Emotional awareness and vocabulary	Supports self-monitoring; reduces impulsive sharing/engagement driven by arousal.	Daily emotion language; check-ins; adult modeling; reflective questioning.
Co-regulation → self-regulation	Builds the ability to pause, tolerate frustration, and choose responses rather than react.	Coaching in the heat of the moment; predictable routines; calm-down tools taught as skills.
Empathy and perspective taking	Counters dehumanization, polarization, and 'comment culture', reducing digital bullying and harmful peer interactions by strengthening social understanding.	Play-based collaboration; guided conflict repair; stories that surface feelings and motives.
Critical thinking with humility	Reduces over-reliance on outputs; supports verification and discernment.	Teach 'How do we know?'; source evaluation; collaborative problem solving without shortcuts.
Belonging and pro-social identity	Buffers against algorithmic identity shaping and harmful social comparison.	Classroom community routines; inclusive practices; family partnership; peer support norms.

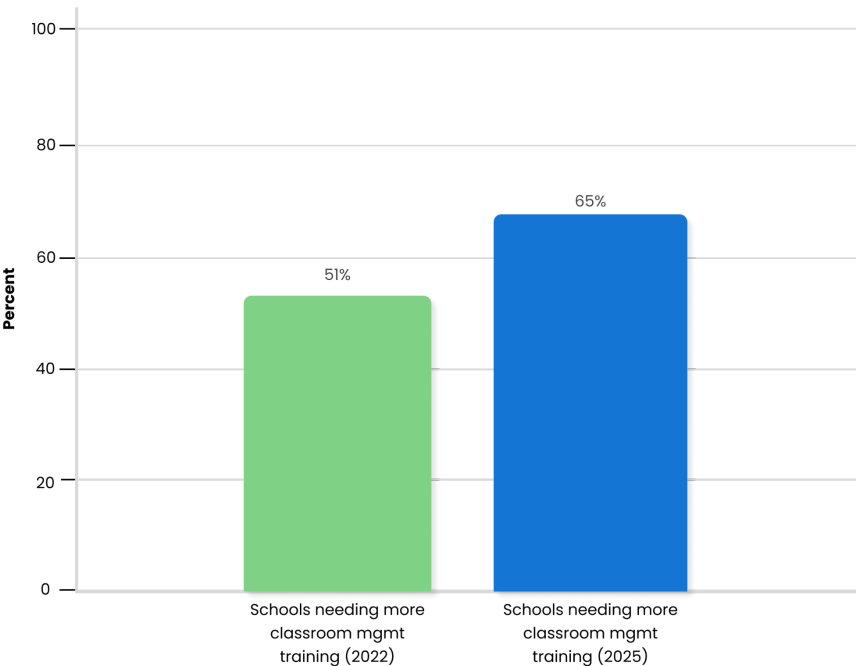
7.3 The Pre-K Professional Development Gap: Scripts Do Not Teach Co-Regulation

Oftentimes, pre-K professional development is built around episodic workshops, compliance training, or scripted lessons that live on a shelf. Scripts do not teach co-regulation. Slide decks do not prepare adults for a classroom full of dysregulated 4-year-olds. Children do not melt down on a PD calendar. Adults need practice, feedback, and coaching in the real emotional moments of the day. The spike in SPED referrals from normal developmental behavior is not a failure of the teacher, it is a failure of training and education of the adult.

Federal data show educators are asking for help: the percentage of elementary schools reporting they need more training on classroom management increased from 51 percent in May 2022 to 65 percent in 2025.³⁰ We argue that simple management is not sufficient – we need to train our educators in how to foster agency and reflection within our children – skills the children get to take with them into higher grades and real-life situations.

The response cannot be a laminated script. When dysregulation is rampant, adults need skill-building and feedback in the moment: coaching that helps educators master self-regulation, managing their own emotions, stress and behaviors first, before they can effectively model, guide and co-regulate with students. The practice of co-regulation builds students' self-regulation, promoting de-escalation, and emotionally attuned instruction.^{35 36} A 2025 meta-analysis of coaching in early childhood settings found moderate-to-large effects for teacher practice, knowledge, and beliefs, with significant effects on child outcomes; importantly, modeling emerged as the coaching process most consistently associated with stronger outcomes.³¹ That is exactly the kind of professional learning this moment requires.

Behavioral Dysregulation Signal and Educator Training Demand



Source: National district leadership reporting and educator training demand surveys.

In those moments of dysregulation, the adult is the intervention. If we want children to develop self-regulation, we must ensure that adults can manage their own stress and emotions first so they can co-regulate: staying calm, naming what is happening, validating feelings, setting boundaries, and guiding problem-solving. Brain

science and classroom science point in the same direction: quality teacher training with support, coaching, and feedback is no longer optional. It is foundational.

7.4 Screens, the Pandemic, and Impacts on Literacy

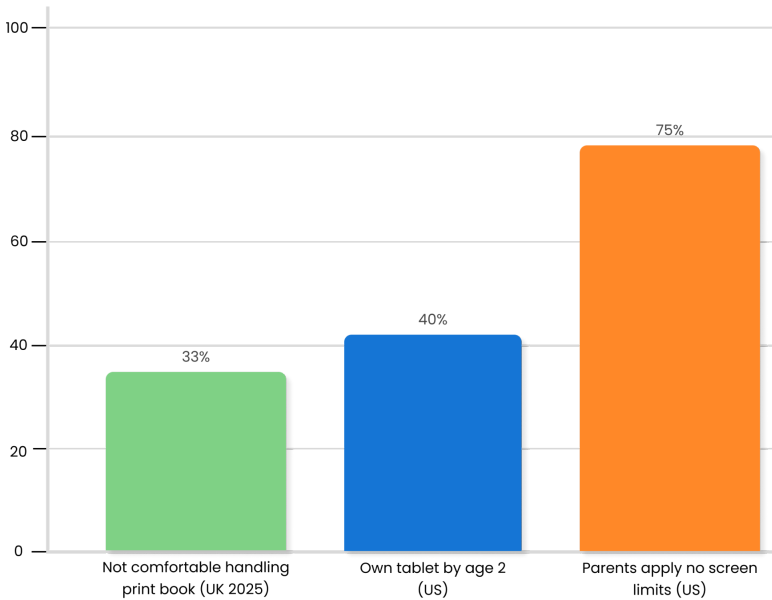
These classroom realities track with broader developmental research. Studies of children born during the pandemic have reported lower verbal, motor, and overall cognitive performance compared with pre-pandemic cohorts, these children are now arriving in early elementary classrooms.³² In a 2025 survey, 76 percent of elementary school leaders said they “agree” or “strongly agree” that the pandemic has continued to negatively affect students’ behavioral development.³⁰

When early experiences include more stress, less social interaction, and more screen exposure, districts should expect not only academic lag but also greater dysregulation, reduced language, and weaker school readiness; and prepare for such eventualities with the tools teachers need to succeed.

At the same time, early literacy and attention habits are shifting in ways that should concern every superintendent. Shared reading has not recovered from the pandemic, which is not only a literacy issue but a relationship issue: reading together is a high-frequency “serve-and-return” routine that builds language, attention, and connection.³³ In the United States, 4 in 10 children reportedly have their own tablet by age two, and 75 percent of parents of children who use screen media report not applying limits,³³ with about one-third of UK children entering preschool in 2025 not knowing how to even handle a book, let alone read one; some tried to swipe pages as if the book were a tablet.³³

This is where we must be disciplined about digital learning in the early years. Technology can support educators, but it can also displace the interaction time children require to learn language, practice turn-taking, and build self-regulation. The American Academy of Pediatrics now explicitly warns that heavier noneducational and solo screen media can delay language acquisition, cognitive growth, and other aspects of development.³ The question for district leaders is not whether a given technology can be adopted, it is whether a given use strengthens or weakens the human developmental process.

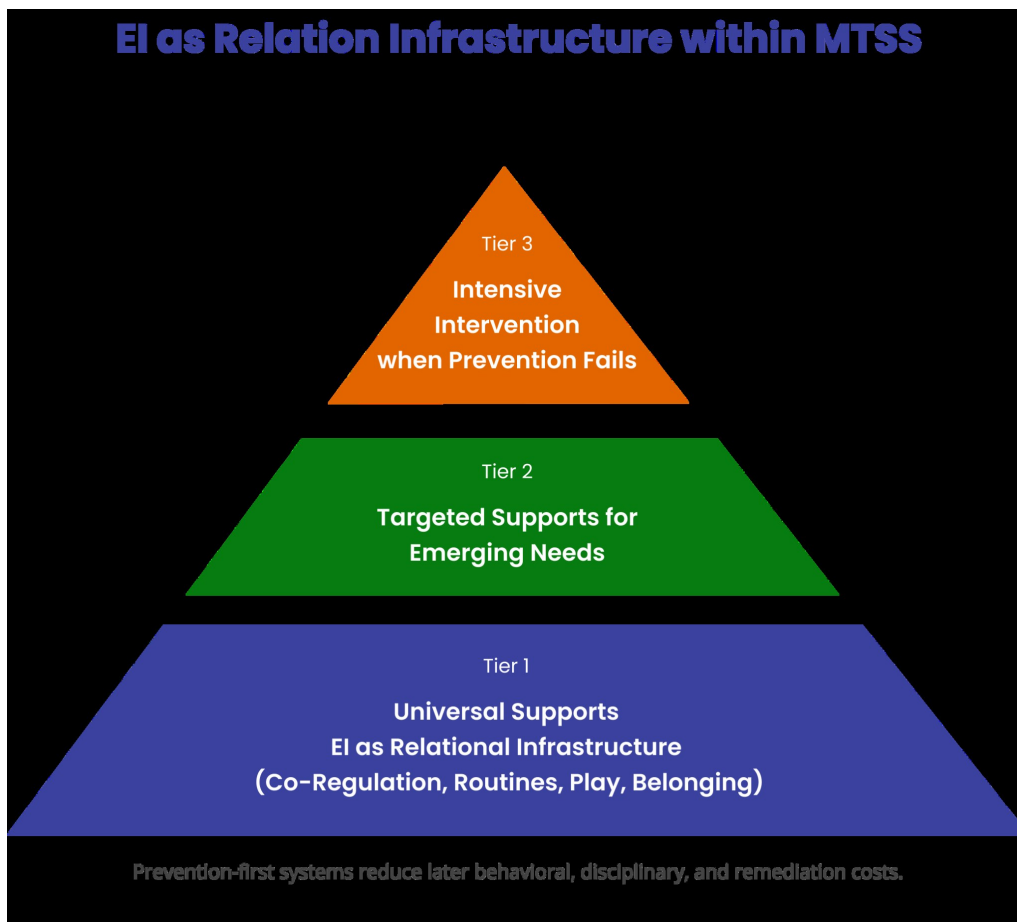
Selected Indicators of Screen-First Early Childhood Experiences



Sources synthesized in the paper: UK early years reporting and U.S. survey research.

8. EI as Tier 1 Infrastructure Within MTSS: Prevention Before Repair

Many districts are already organizing academic and behavioral support through Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). EI before AI strengthens MTSS by clarifying what belongs at Tier 1: emotionally intelligent adults, predictable relational routines, play-based collaboration, developmentally appropriate professional development, and explicit teaching of emotional language and regulation strategies. When Tier 1 is strong, fewer children require Tier 2 and Tier 3 services. The goal is to do more prevention and less intervention.



Housman Learning's begin to ECSEL™ (Emotional, Cognitive, and Social Early Learning) is one example of an EI-focused professional learning approach designed to build adult emotional competence and translate it into daily practice with children. In the EI before AI model, programs like this are not 'add-ons,' they are fundamental Tier 1 infrastructure that make academic learning and success, inclusion and safety, and responsible technology use possible.

9. Superintendent Actions for 2026–27: A Practical Reform Agenda

If 2026-27 is to be a year of meaningful improvement, not another year of initiatives, we need clarity, sequencing, and courage. Below is a superintendent-level agenda that aligns AI governance with early learning and professional development reform.

Recommended first steps (90-180 days):

- Audit for relationship substitution: Where are devices, software, or AI tools reducing teacher-child dialogue, peer play, or collaborative learning time?
- Adopt connection-first AI guardrails for pre-K (or earlier if applicable) to grade 3: AI may support adult planning and translation, but it should not replace instruction, feedback, or emotional support.
- Redesign pre-K PD around real moments: co-regulation, emotion language, conflict resolution, family partnership, and inclusive practice, taught through coaching and reflective supervision, not one-off sessions.
- Align EI outcomes to district strategy: Portrait of a Graduate, school climate goals, kindergarten readiness, grade-level reading, chronic absenteeism reduction, and MTSS prevention targets.
- Measure what matters: teacher-child interaction quality, belonging, classroom climate, staff well-being, and family trust, alongside academics.
- Create a 90-day pilot with a clear implementation study: select sites, define EI routines, train leaders, and collect baseline and follow-up data on climate and interaction quality.

9.1 Diagnostic Questions for District Leaders

1. Do our youngest learners experience sustained, daily serve-and-return interaction, or do devices routinely displace it?
2. Do educators have a shared language for feelings (cozy and prickly) and a shared approach for helping children recover after conflict?
3. Is our pre-K PD primarily workshop-based, or does it include job-embedded coaching and reflective practice that changes adult behavior?
4. Are we measuring the quality of relationships and interaction (not just compliance and academics) as a driver of long-term outcomes?
5. When we adopt AI tools, do we evaluate their impact on human connection, belonging, and collaboration, or only on efficiency and test scores?

If the answer to several of these questions is 'not yet,' that is not an indictment, it is an opportunity. It is far easier to prevent than to repair. When we invest in adult emotional competence and relational practice early, we reduce downstream costs in discipline, remediation, and disengagement.

10. Conclusion and Invitation to Partnership

10.1 A Research Agenda and an Invitation to Collaborate

Across developmental science, technology ethics, and education systems leadership, a shared question is emerging: How do we innovate without eroding the human capacities that make innovation worthwhile? That is the central question beneath EI before AI.

Leading voices across the field have all sounded alarm bells. Haidt has called attention to developmental displacement in the phone-based childhood and recently warned that AI may accelerate the broader decline in attention, cognition, and civic life.⁵ Harris has argued that protecting children's development is not anti-innovation but pro-human flourishing.⁸ Galloway has pointed to the relational risks of AI companionship and the loneliness economy.⁹ Even some frontier AI leaders now warn that powerful systems will further concentrate economic power and displace human work.³⁴ In education, our responsibility is to answer these warnings with a humanist framework: build EI first, use AI second.

I hope this paper contributes to that conversation, and I welcome collaboration with researchers, technologists, and education leaders who share the belief that human connection is the cornerstone of learning.

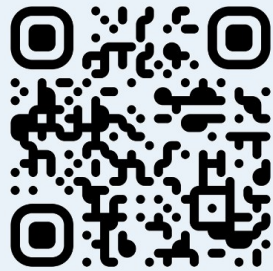


The single action this quarter. Before the next AI procurement decision, convene a cabinet conversation around one question: *Where in our system is technology already substituting for a relationship that is developmentally essential, and what would it take to reverse that?* That conversation, held seriously, will reorder

priorities faster than any policy document.

The invitation. Housman Learning partners with districts, early learning programs, and policy leaders who share the conviction that human connection is the cornerstone of learning. We bring 35+ years of research and practice in early emotional development through our *begin to ECSEL*™ professional learning approach and tools, which are designed to translate developmental science into daily classroom practice. If this paper resonates, we would welcome the opportunity to think alongside you about what EI before AI looks like in your system.

It is far easier to prevent than to repair. The work of building emotionally intelligent schools (emotionally intelligent adults, emotionally intelligent classrooms, emotionally intelligent decisions about technology) is the work that determines whether the next generation can think clearly, connect deeply, and learn well in an AI-shaped world. That work begins now, and it begins with us.



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Appendix A. Connection-First AI Decision Tool

Use this tool in cabinet meetings or procurement reviews. If any item is 'No', pause for redesign.

Prompt	Yes / No	Notes / Mitigation
Does this AI use increase meaningful teacher-student interaction time?	• Yes • No	
Does it protect peer-to-peer collaboration rather than replace it?	• Yes • No	
Are students required to show their thinking (sources, reasoning, revisions)?	• Yes • No	
Is there a clear boundary preventing AI from serving as counselor/companion?	• Yes • No	
Are privacy, data retention, and equity impacts documented and acceptable?	• Yes • No	
Is there training for educators on how to respond when AI use harms well-being?	• Yes • No	

Appendix B. Age-Banded Guardrails for AI and Relationship Substitution

These guardrails are intentionally conservative for younger children. Align with local policy and vendor terms of service.

Age Band	What to Protect	Guardrails (Examples)
Birth-5	Serve-and-return interaction; language, play, co-regulation	Avoid conversational AI with children; prioritize hands-on play; screens used sparingly and with adult mediation; no AI companions
6-8	Emotion vocabulary, conflict repair, persistence, collaboration	If AI is used, keep it teacher-facing or supervised; require students to explain in their own words; protect peer discussion and small-group work.
9-12	Critical thinking, identity development, friendships, civic habits	Explicit instruction in AI literacy; structured 'show your thinking' routines; limit unsupervised chatbot use; no AI tools marketed as therapy/friendship.
13-18	Agency, ethics, long-form reasoning, real-world relationships	Teach evaluation (bias, hallucinations, citation checks); redesign assessments; provide human supports for mental health; establish boundaries for AI companions.

Appendix C. Pre-K Professional Learning Diagnostic and Reform Planner

Use this planner to prepare for 2026-27 pre-K professional learning reform. The goal is not another initiative; it is adult capacity building that changes daily interactions with children.

Diagnostic checklist

- We have a clear, shared definition of EI outcomes for pre-K to grade 3 (emotion language, regulation, empathy, problem solving).
- Our PD includes job-embedded coaching and reflective supervision (not only workshops)
- Leaders are trained to observe and support interaction quality (e.g., teacher-child dialogue, co-regulation, play facilitation).
- We protect daily time for peer play and collaboration as a core instructional practice.
- We have AI guardrails that prevent relationship substitution in early grades.
- We measure climate, belonging, and interaction quality at least twice per year and use results for improvement (not punishment).
- We have a common language across classrooms for naming feelings and guiding repair after conflict.

90-day planning prompts

Complete this table with your cabinet team and early learning leaders.

Question	Current State	Next 90 Days
Where do young children lose connection time (transitions, devices, isolated work)?		
Which adult practices most need strengthening (co-regulation, conflict coaching, family partnership)?		
What coaching capacity do we have (internal coaches, external partners, leader training)?		
Which measures will we use (climate, interaction quality, belonging, staff well-being)?		

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