THE HUMAN QUESTION
with Sharon Higgins
EDITION NO. 1 · SEPTEMBER 6, 2026

Should We Ban AI From the Classroom, or Teach Children How to Meet It?

New York City just paused generative AI in classrooms for a year. The real question a policy like this can't answer alone: have we taught children how to hold a tool this powerful before we hand it to them?

A Consequential Decision

New York City has just made a consequential decision.

Mayor Zohran Mamdani and Schools Chancellor Kamar Samuels have announced a one-year moratorium on student-facing generative AI for children from 2-K through 8th grade, effective for the 2026–27 school year. Nearly 600,000 students are affected.

But the distinction matters: this is not a ban on artificial intelligence itself. Teachers may continue using approved AI tools for instructional and administrative purposes. Exceptions exist for certain assistive technologies. High school students will still receive AI critical-thinking instruction, and limited, supervised pilots will continue.

I support the moratorium, though perhaps for a slightly different reason.

The Question Beneath the Policy

Here is the question underneath the policy: What is a powerful tool for, and who is it for?

A knife in dangerous or untrained hands can cause harm. In the hands of a skilled chef, it can help create an extraordinary meal. A box of matches can burn down a house or light the fire that cooks a family's dinner.

The tool is never the whole story. The hand that holds it is.

AI belongs in that conversation.

Teaching a Child to Hold Fire

The risk isn't simply that a child encounters AI too early. It's that she encounters it before anyone has taught her how to hold it.

I wrote in *Echoes of Consciousness*: "Teaching a child to use fire safely does not mean removing the danger."

That's where this debate gets interesting.

Before children are handed a tool this powerful, they need something no technology should be allowed to quietly take from them: their own agency.

Generative AI is remarkably capable of short-circuiting some of the experiences children need because it can do the noticing, interpreting, and answering for them before they've tried it themselves.

What Children Need Before They Need Answers

They need to know what it feels like to struggle with a question before receiving an answer. To discover their own uniqueness before a machine offers to define it for them. To feel an emotion before asking something else to interpret it. To put their feet in the dirt. To feel rain on their skin and understand that the water falling around them is also fundamental to the living body within them. To look at a tree not as an image or a dataset, but as something alive and growing. To meet their playmates as human beings, not profiles. To discover language the way it has always been discovered: spoken, misheard, corrected, felt, and slowly mastered.

And yes, sometimes they need to be bored.

Sometimes confused.

Sometimes they need to get the answer wrong.

Productive struggle is not a design flaw in learning. It is learning.

The Pause Makes Sense: the Silence Doesn't

AI should not be allowed to quietly take that away from children. But neither should education pretend that AI doesn't exist.

Picture a middle-school student who goes home and uses AI to explore astronomy, write code, chase down a historical question, learn another language, or push herself further in

math. The next morning, she walks into a classroom where the very technology shaping the world outside its doors is intentionally paused while the adults responsible for her figure out how to use it well.

That pause makes sense.

Restraint, used deliberately, is not the same as denial.

But if children are meeting AI outside school while school says nothing about what it is, what it can do, and where it can mislead them, we risk trading one gap for another.

Not an achievement gap.

An understanding gap.

Use This Year Well

That's why I support the pause, not a full stop.

New York City should use this year deliberately, not simply to keep AI away from younger children, but to work out what developmentally appropriate, conscientious AI education actually looks like.

Other systems are already circling this question. Singapore is taking a progressive, age-conscious approach to AI literacy; Estonia has begun introducing AI tools and training at the secondary level; and England is allowing greater school-level discretion within increasingly detailed safety, safeguarding, and developmental standards.

There is no settled global answer yet.

Maybe that's the opportunity.

What We Owe Children First

The United States shouldn't race to put AI into every child's hands simply because it exists. But we also can't let fear of the tool leave our children intellectually unprepared for the world they're inheriting.

Before we let a machine take on more of the cognitive work, we owe it to children to be clear about which capacities they need to build for themselves first:

Critical thinking. Curiosity. Discernment. Emotional intelligence. Language. Numeracy. Imagination. Empathy. Embodied experience. And the willingness to question an answer, even one delivered with total confidence by a machine.

This is why I wrote in *Sensibility: Where EI Meets AI*: "AI is not an oracle. It is a mirror."

Place it in front of an intellectually passive child, and it may only amplify the passivity.

Place it in front of a curious child, one who has learned to question, investigate, verify, disagree, imagine, and create, and something different happens entirely.

AI becomes a collaborator, not a substitute.

The Real Goal

So, the goal was never to raise children who can only function without AI. It's also not to raise children who can't function without it.

The goal is children who can stand on their own intellectual feet first, and who can then use extraordinarily powerful tools without surrendering the judgment, consciousness, empathy, and responsibility that make them human.

Time to Think Before Scaling

Mayor Mamdani and Chancellor Samuels have given New York City something increasingly rare in the age of technology:

Time to think before scaling.

I don't know if a year is long enough. I don't know if "developmentally appropriate AI education" is a phrase we can define, let alone implement, in twelve months.

That uncertainty isn't a weakness in the policy. It's the reason to study this year instead of just waiting it out.

Let's use it well.

Study it rigorously. Listen to teachers. Listen to parents. And especially, listen to the students. Bring developmental psychologists, child-development specialists, neuroscientists, educators, librarians, technologists, ethicists, special-education experts, and families into the room.

Study what strengthens learning and what weakens it: academic performance, independent reasoning, writing development, mathematical reasoning, creativity, attention, digital equity, engagement, academic integrity, and AI dependency.

And measure something harder than whether students produce better answers:

Whether they are becoming better thinkers.

Then teach them not merely how to use AI, but when to use it, when to question it, when to put it down, and when the answer has to come from within themselves.

That isn't resistance to technology.

That is preparation for living intelligently with it.

I write at the place where human development meets artificial intelligence: in classrooms, in families, and in the quiet, unglamorous moments where judgment is still ours to build. That's the question this newsletter will keep returning to: what remains distinctly human once a machine can do so much of the thinking for us.

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Inner Flames Publishing