Let's Build the Fence Before We Build the Gates!

AI is already here. The question is not whether we can put it back, but whether we are preparing the next generation to use it wisely.

According to the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 30% of America's eighth graders performed at or above the Proficient level in reading, while about a third performed below Basic. That matters for AI. A child who struggles to understand what they read will struggle to question a fluent, confident, wrong answer.

Yet as we debate AI restrictions and legislation, are we giving equal attention to the foundational skills children need to navigate this technology?

AI has the potential to help close that gap through individualized instruction and reading support, when its use is guided by sound teaching, appropriate safeguards, and a commitment to independent understanding.

We need fences, not walls. Reasonable safeguards, ethical standards, and protections against harmful uses of AI are essential. Equally important are the internal safeguards we develop in children: comprehension, critical thinking, curiosity, and independent judgment.

And we need gates, because protecting children should not mean denying them opportunities to learn, innovate, and compete in a world increasingly shaped by AI. But the fence comes first, not to keep children out, but to ensure they can enter safely, learn confidently, and grow beyond what they already know.

An old Jamaican proverb reminds us: "*Watch the bung while the pipe leak*." While we guard one opening, the real loss is draining away somewhere else.

The Human Question: Are we building the foundations that will help our children use AI wisely, or merely debating how tightly to control their access to it?

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2024 Grade 8 Reading Assessment.