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New Research Reveals a Widening AI Divide Among U.S. Teens

A Britebound survey of 3,000 U.S. teens finds private school students are four times as likely to have teachers who encourage AI use — while only 36% of teens overall say their school is teaching them enough about AI.

BOSTON, MA, August 26, 2026 — A new study released today by national nonprofit Britebound reveals that while artificial intelligence has become a routine part of how U.S. teens learn and live, the guidance they need to use it effectively has not kept pace. Only 36% of teens say their school is teaching them enough about AI, and the study suggests some growing divides in how prepared young people are for an AI-shaped future.

The report, *Teens and the AI Future: Perspectives, Possibilities, and Preparation*, draws on a national survey of 3,000 U.S. teens in grades 7-12. Fewer than one in four fall into a “High AI-Ready” group - a term Britebound researchers define as students’ self-reported consistent confidence in their AI understanding, skills, and preparation for an AI-shaped workforce.

Teens whose teachers encourage AI use are more than six times as likely to be High AI-Ready as teens in classrooms where AI is banned. Yet that guidance is not reaching students evenly: 57% of private school teens say most of their teachers encourage AI use for schoolwork, more than four times the rate reported by teens in traditional public schools (13%), where roughly 80% of American students are enrolled. The readiness gap follows the same lines. A majority of private school teens (56%) rate as High AI-Ready, compared with 19% of traditional public school teens.

“Teenagers aren't waiting for permission to use AI; they're already using it to learn, make decisions, and imagine their futures. What they're waiting for is guidance on how to use it well,” Julie Lammers, President and CEO of Britebound. “We have to treat AI skills like the career skills they've become. If we do that, AI becomes an on-ramp to opportunity rather than one more advantage reserved for students who already have the most support.”

Additional findings from the report include:

Teen AI use is widespread, but frequency of use varies. 83% percent of teens report using AI tools, and among those who use AI, 30% report using it daily. Private school teens are more than twice as likely as teens in traditional public schools to report daily AI use, 55% compared with 21%.

Schools are sending mixed signals. Only 21% of teens say most of their teachers encourage AI use for schoolwork, while 37% describe a mixed environment where some teachers encourage AI use and others discourage it. Another 17% say AI use is strictly banned in their classes.

Bans don't stop use — they shape it. 43% of teens whose teachers prohibit AI still use it for schoolwork, most commonly to find answers to homework problems. Teens in encouraging environments report broader, more learning-oriented uses, such as creating practice questions and getting explanations of challenging concepts.

Familiarity does not mean readiness. While 63% of teens say they have a strong understanding of AI and how it is used, only 42% say they have the AI skills they will need for a future job.

Readiness gaps follow support gaps. Teens whose parents hold advanced degrees are roughly three times as likely to be High AI-Ready as teens whose parents do not have a four-year degree, mirroring the differences seen by school type.

Teen views are marked by uncertainty. Nearly half of teens, 45%, fall into an “Uncertain” group when asked about AI’s effects on jobs, society, and their own futures. At the same time, many teens see both promise and risk: 66% agree that AI will create new kinds of jobs, while 60% expect many people to lose existing jobs.

"Researchers have long described a 'second-level digital divide' where access to technology spreads quickly, but the skills to use it well don't," said Dr. Caroline Healy, Director of Research and Insights at Britebound. "We're watching that pattern repeat with AI in real time. Teens in more encouraging school environments report broader, more learning-oriented AI use and substantially higher readiness. That is the core equity challenge: ensuring students are not just accessing AI, but learning how to use it thoughtfully, critically, and constructively."

To read more about the insights please visit: [LINK](#)

About Britebound

Britebound is a national nonprofit whose mission is to inspire young people to explore their interests, experiment with careers, and navigate a path to a meaningful and rewarding future. Britebound helps middle and high school students to know themselves, their strengths and their interests, and

understand their education and career options so that they can make informed decisions. Britebound fulfills its mission by providing free, digital experiences directly to millions of students, and through advocacy, impact investing, research, thought leadership, and philanthropic support for educators, and community-based organizations. To learn more about Britebound, visit www.britebound.org