

2025 IMPACT REPORT

A YEAR OF MEETING THE (AI) MOMENT BY
CENTERING YOUTH + EDUCATOR AGENCY

centerfordigitalthriving.org



CHASING MAGIC SINCE 2023

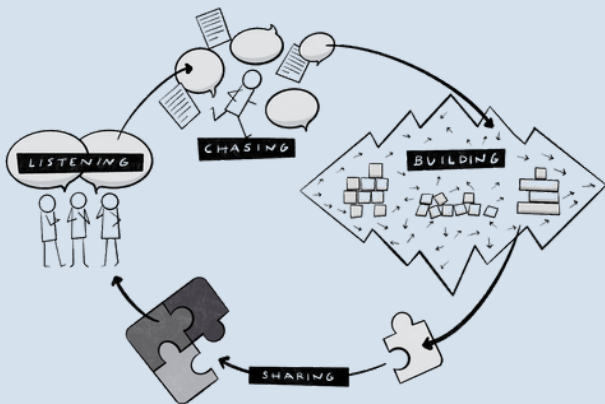
Center for Digital Thriving (CDT) is a research and innovation center based at [Project Zero](#) at Harvard Graduate School of Education. We create knowledge and research-based resources that help youth thrive in a tech-filled world – and we believe educators are essential partners in making that possible.

OUR VISION

A future where every educator coaches students toward digital thriving through joyful, connected learning – guided by research, shaped by youth voices, and tailored to their communities.

OUR APPROACH

Our team has a listening-fueled design cycle that guides our research and resource development through discovery, development, and deployment – always with young people as partners, not research subjects.



THANKFUL FOR OUR FUNDERS

Our work is made possible by generous founding grants from [Susan Crown Exchange](#) and [Pivotal Ventures](#). Our IMAGINE AI project is made possible through the support of grant #63220 from the [John Templeton Foundation](#).

A special thank you to William and Leslie Lee and additional donors who wish to remain unnamed, but whose support never goes unnoticed!

WHO WE ARE

We're a multi-generational, interdisciplinary team grounded in critical optimism about teens and tech. We hold the "both/and" of young people's digital lives with curiosity and care – recognizing the ways technology can be helpful and harmful, exhausting and energizing, connecting and dividing.

OUR FOUNDERS

**DR. CARRIE JAMES**

Managing Director

**DR. EMILY WEINSTEIN**

Co-Director

**DR. BECK TENCH**

Research + Design

MEET THE TEAM

**LAUREN PALAZZO**Strategy +
Engagement**EDUARDO LARA**Senior Research
Manager**DAN BE KIM**Translational Research
Designer**ANA MARIA PAVIĆ**

Communications Lead

**YESENIA AGUILAR**Operations + Project
Coordinator**DAVIDA PADI**

Communications Intern

We're also grateful for collaborations with colleagues at the University of Washington, Indiana University, New York University, University of Birmingham, Brigham Young University, University of Pittsburgh, Hopelab, In Tandem, Common Sense Education, and many others who contributed to our work.

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MEETING THE (AI) MOMENT

WITH AGENCY AS A NORTH STAR

In a year defined by the acceleration of generative AI in schools (and all around us), we focused on one guiding question: **How do we meet the moment by strengthening youth and educator agency when it feels especially challenged?**

In 2025, the Center for Digital Thriving began (as we always do!) by listening. Through youth advisory and co-design, we learned how young people are navigating tech and AI in their schoolwork, friendships, and sense of self – insights that fueled everything that followed. From AI to phone bans in schools, our focus remained consistent: surfacing youth voices in a conversation that too often overlooks them.

We worked alongside educators to translate those insights into action: scaling our 8 Mindshifts, releasing new classroom-ready AI resources, advancing research on AI policy, and growing communities of practice grounded in coaching and shared inquiry.

With fellows and collaborators, we designed tools and frameworks to make AI thinking visible and values-centered – and we carried youth- and educator-informed insights into public discourse, contributing nuance and critical optimism to national conversations.

What follows is a snapshot of that work: a year of listening, building, and sharing all in service of empowering agency in a world constantly being reshaped by technology.


THE CDT
TEAM



IMPACT AT A GLANCE

LEADING WITH LISTENING

90+

Youth engaged in formal listening to center young people's voices on AI and digital life

1000+

Educators surveyed for a national study of AI policies in schools **(coming soon!)**

"... A LOT OF THE PEOPLE IN MY CLASS USE AI TO WRITE THEIR PAPERS. AND I FEEL LIKE I HAVE TO WRITE AT THE SAME LEVEL THAT AI DOES, WHICH I REALLY CAN'T AS, LIKE, A 17-YEAR-OLD..."

– CDT Youth Advisor

"IT WAS A POWERFUL REMINDER THAT WHEN EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS WORK TOGETHER, AI BECOMES NOT JUST A TOOL, BUT A SHARED LEARNING EXPERIENCE."

– Instructional Designer on CDT's *Align on the Line* resource

ACTUALLY HELPFUL RESEARCH + RESOURCES

12

Free, open-access IMAGINE AI educator resources released

400+

Educators engaged in live professional development and workshops



EDUCATOR PD ON A GLOBAL SCALE

350+

Enrollees in CDT's first on demand PD course released in April 2025: *8 Mindshifts for Teaching Digital Well-being*

SHIFTING THE CONVERSATION

45

Media features

20+

Speaking engagements

Translating research into public conversations on teens and screens

HARVARD
MAGAZINE

KQED

NBC NEWS

The
New York
Times

Vox

The
Washington
Post

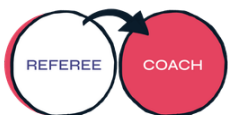
IT'S TIME FOR A MINDSHIFT

Based on extensive listening to young people, we've learned that meeting this moment requires meaningful shifts in how adults think and respond. Over time, we've workshopped and refined **8 Mindshifts for Teaching Digital Well-Being**. Now, we're scaling them more broadly – adapting them for AI and translating them into practical, usable resources for schools.



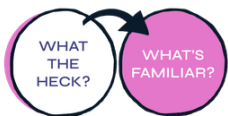
MAINSTREAMING OUR MINDSHIFTS

In April 2025, CDT launched an asynchronous course designed to empower educators by helping them put our 8 Mindshifts into practice: *From “Referee” to “Coach” – and Other Game-Changing Mindshifts for Teaching Digital Well-being, Digital Citizenship, & Media Literacy*. Since launch, we’ve already developed new course materials with a focus on AI. This new content is fresh off the press and available to all **350+ enrollees** as of February 2026!



“The referee approach is you set the rules, you blow the whistle ... We want to coach our kids so they have a sense [that] they can have control over how tech fits into their lives. They can make meaningful, intentional choices.”

– DR. CARRIE JAMES, CDT CO-FOUNDER, AS SEEN IN **THE NEW YORK TIMES**



“The feelings and motivations – wanting to belong, express yourself, feel included, or just have fun – are often very familiar ...”

– DR. EMILY WEINSTEIN, CDT CO-FOUNDER, AS SEEN IN **THE WASHINGTON POST**



“[CDT’s] class and book was one of the most mindshifty experiences I have had as an educator in a long time. I am excited to shift more, dig deep and help my students and staff glean some ways we can live in this digital world with agency, open eyes and seek wellness.”

– EDUCATOR, CDT COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

To close out the year, we welcomed educators from around the world to apply for free enrollment to the course – **expanding access to an additional 225+ educators** interested in supporting youth digital thriving in their contexts.

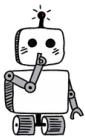
ACTUALLY HELPFUL AI RESOURCES

CDT continued to live its value of creating “actually helpful” resources by translating research into co-designed, classroom-ready resources to help educators navigate AI right now. As part of CDT’s [IMAGINE AI portfolio of work](#) – funded by the John Templeton Foundation – **we released a free set of four co-designed classroom practices to help educators and students explore AI together.** Each practice can be done on it’s own or together depending on where you are in your AI journey.



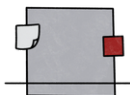
1. **VALUES BRIDGE**

This resource helps students connect personal values to real-world questions of how to practice AI use that reflects what matters most to them.



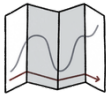
2. **MAKING AI PRESSURES VISIBLE**

This practice prompts open conversations about when, why, and how students might feel pressure to hide their AI use (aka to be “[secret cyborgs](#)”) – and helps destigmatize use bringing it into the open.



3. **ALIGN ON THE LINE**

This resource invites the class to surface the ethically gray areas of generative AI by mapping which uses feel okay, uncertain, or cross a line for a certain assignment.



4. **MAP A MOMENT**

This activity supports reflection on AI use by expressing not just how it was used, but how it felt and what was learned along the way.

NEW IN 2026!

We put our mindshifts into practice for AI dilemmas by extending our pivots to each of our free AI classroom resources.

Beyond the course, we published a **series of 8 bite-sized videos** focused on empowering educators to use AI in their practice.



IN COLLABORATION WITH EDUCATORS

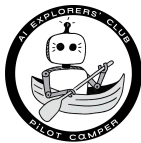
We continue to honor educators as experts and are grateful for moments of learning with and from them. Through advisory councils, workshops, and emerging communities of practice, we partnered with educators to refine resources, test ideas in real classrooms, and bridge youth and educator voices. The following are some highlights of this work from the year:



12 EDUCATOR ADVISORS

We created an IMAGINE AI Educator Advisory Council, bringing together five classroom educators to help co-design and refine our free classroom practices. They piloted early prototypes, tested activities with their students, and offered reflections to root our work in real classrooms.

Behind the scenes, we began convening alumni from our 8 Mindshifts course to form an emerging community of practice. This budding network will help us build a listening loop that strengthens both practice and research over time.



30 AI EXPLORERS' CLUB EDUCATORS

This free one-day, virtual PD adventure brought together AI curious educators to imagine how they might bring AI into their practice with intention, imagination, and a clearer path for shaping the future with their students.



35 GIANT STEP TEEN EDUCATORS

At the Giant Step Teen Conference in Detroit, we led a professional learning workshop for 35 educators to explore our AI resources and research. We also held listening sessions with local teens to hear how tech and AI are showing up in their lives.

MINDSHIFT MINDMELD

SECOND ANNUAL FELLOWS CONVENING



We welcomed a new cohort of Digital Thriving Fellows in September 2025. This year's fellows are exploring and even shaping their own mindshifts through projects spanning research, media, and classroom resources. Later in the Fall, we convened this new cohort alongside our "Forever Fellows" who shared their journeys and next steps for their projects. We left energized by the creativity and commitment of this growing community – and yes, we continued our annual "Wandering Ceremony," a reminder to expect magic, and chase it!

EXPLORE THE WORK OF OUR FELLOWS ALUMNI



**ALIJA
BLACKWELL**

Building Awareness of
School Surveillance



**ADRIENNE
JOE**

Guiding Youth Self-
Reflection with AI



**MOLLY
JOSEPHS**

Defining + Designing
Digital Havens



**CHRYSTAL
KOECH**

Bridging Policy +
Practice: Digital
Futures Code

MEET THIS YEAR'S FELLOWS

Our Fellowship supports bold ideas that put young people at the center of reimagining what it means to thrive in a tech-filled world. For the 2025-2026 cohort, our theme is mindshifts – fresh ways of thinking that create meaningful change in how caring adults and communities support youth toward digital thriving and agency. We reviewed 200+ applications before selecting this year's incredible cohort of Digital Thriving Fellows. Explore their projects below!

.....



TEYRA ANDERSON

Creating a youth-guided mini-series, co-created with young people, that explores how digital life intersects with friendship, family, identity, and selfhood.



MICHAEL DAVIS

Developing a mindfulness and cyberpsychology program that engages young children as codesigners in building strategies for resilience and mindfulness in relation to tech.



GREG DEPOW

Conducting an intervention study focused on using wise empathy as a tool to reshape teens' online experiences – engaging with others' emotions in ways that foster joy, compassion, and authentic sharing rather than comparing.



ECY KING

Creating an interactive comic guide, co-designed with young people, that blends Pan-African concepts with technology to offer youth fresh frameworks for community-centered digital thriving.

.....

APPLICATIONS FOR THE 2026 FELLOWSHIP ARE UNDER REVIEW!

The next 2026-2027 year's Fellowship is all about Educating for Digital Agency. Continuing on our work from 2025, we invited applications from educators whose work with young people embodies and/or explores agency-centered approaches to digital literacy and well-being. We look forward to supporting this next cohort of digital thriving changemakers!

DIGITAL AGENCY MEETS AI

Extending the concept of digital agency to AI, CDT is helping educators and students reclaim intentionality in their relationships with tech by sharing practical frameworks, youth-informed insights, and research grounded in real classroom voices.

AI LITERACY <> AGENCY

Midyear, we released our Agency-Centered Framework for AI Literacy – a resource designed to expand how educators and researchers think about AI literacy. The framework names three literacies – technical, market, and self – and maps them across across Albert Bandura's modes of human agency (individual, collective, and proxy agency).

	INDIVIDUAL AGENCY <i>(you act directly)</i>	COLLECTIVE AGENCY <i>(we act together)</i>	PROXY AGENCY <i>(others act for you/us)</i>
TECHNICAL LITERACY <i>(how AI works in practice)</i>	Understanding how generative AI works; discerning if, when, and how to use it.	Being transparent about AI use; building trust; learning together.	Knowing what AI can and can't do; how design choices and policies shape your access and options.
MARKET LITERACY <i>(the business models behind these tools)</i>	Being alert to the data collected about you, not for you; choosing what to share.	Advocating for AI that's accessible, safe, fair, and built without exploiting people or the planet.	Recognizing hidden incentives in AI tools, platform settings, and policies.
SELF LITERACY <i>(who you are and who you are becoming)</i>	Knowing your values, goals, and moral compass; having humility about your limits.	Co-creating shared values and norms around AI use, with care for others in your community.	Noticing when AI agents, people, or policies uphold or compromise your values.

COMING SOON! NATIONAL AI POLICY LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

We explored the rapidly evolving landscape of school AI policies through a mix of research methods. Stay tuned for our forthcoming study packed with educator insights – plus helpful framing connecting Ted Lasso to educators' experiences coaching for digital thriving!

COLLECTIVE SENSEMAKING

TROUTBECK PARTICIPATORY DESIGN RETREAT



As part of CDT's [IMAGINE AI portfolio of work](#) – funded by the John Templeton Foundation – we gathered researchers, educators, young changemakers, and cross-sector collaborators to grapple with the tensions and opportunities of AI. Together, we began exploring an emerging “AI to Z” practice designed to help “name to tame” experiences with AI. Read one participant's reflection on the power of AI to Z below!

SPARKING NEW WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT AI

“It made me recognize where my language around AI might unintentionally convey judgment or make young people hesitant to share openly. I believe it will also push me to speak with more curiosity, nuance, and humility about AI, focusing less on conclusions and more on naming what we're observing together.”

— CONVENING PARTICIPANT

AI TO Z: GIVING VOICE TO AI EXPERIENCES

Our cross-disciplinary, participatory design retreat **generated more than 50 terms for AI experiences**. It also shaped a new framework for classrooms to do the same by coming up with their own ways of talking about AI. The act of naming these “aha!” and “ahh!” moments is an intervention in itself, making cultural shifts visible and giving us shared language to talk about and respond to them.

PROVISIONAL TERMS FROM THE RETREAT



CHATPLOMACY

Using AI to soften tone, smooth communication, or make messages more diplomatic



EXPECTATION EXPLOSION

When AI-driven efficiency raises the bar for what's possible – and what's expected



HUMAN SIGNALING

Intentional choices to reveal your human-ness to show others you are not a bot



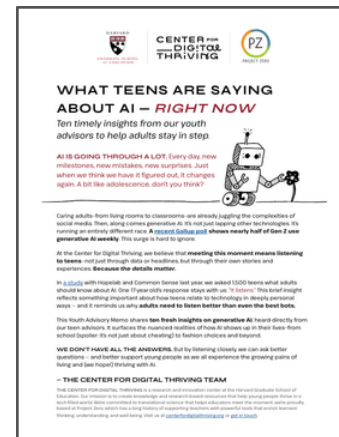
WHY BOTHERISM

The feeling that if AI can do it, there's little point in trying yourself



LISTENING TO YOUTH

For over a decade, our research has shown that young people are aware of the complexities of technology – often more so than adults realize – and truly want to lead healthy digital lives. AI has been no exception. Meeting this moment means listening well – and recognizing young people as experts in their own lived experience. Through 30+ hours of ongoing conversations, co-design, and reflection, youth advisors shape the questions we pursue and the frameworks and resources we build.



10 FRESH YOUTH INSIGHTS ON GEN AI

We invited others into what we were hearing by releasing our Youth Advisory Memo – sharing ten insights on generative AI drawn directly from teen advisors. Here's a peek at some of what we heard from teens:

AI IN SCHOOL

"[Now], I use it to help advantage myself ... just to get on the even playing field with other people. And I think that kind of sucks because I never was going to use AI to cheat or anything like that, but now it feels like ... I have to do it ... to make sure that, you know, I'm not being left behind."

AI EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

"This is kind of a secret ... I used AI for something that I was troubled with in terms of, like, emotions ... because I didn't want to tell my parents."

AI AS A STYLIST

"I've used AI to put together outfits when I have, like, limited outfits because I have to wash stuff. I'd be like, 'Hey, what colors go with this?' so I can have a decent looking outfit ... I thought it did a pretty decent job. I was like, oh, okay, I can definitely wear that."

ELEVATING INSIGHTS

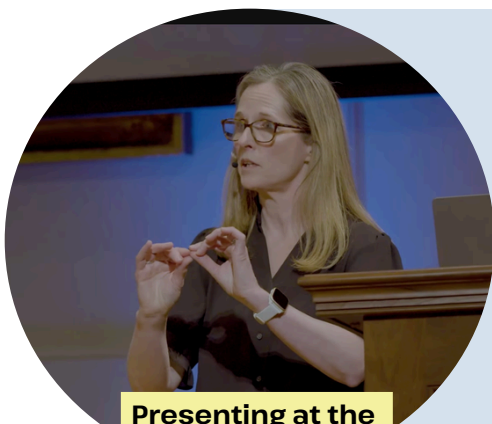
CDT amplified youth- and educator-informed insights through speaking engagements, national media features, educational contexts, and global convenings. We carried what we are learning in classrooms and research spaces into public dialogue – contributing curiosity, care, and critical optimism to conversations about youth and tech.

"The rapid development and deployment of Gen AI in our society requires many new literacies. But this moment requires old literacies, too. Wisdom about how to live well in a world with others in ways that enrich our humanity."

– CDT Co-Founder,
Dr. Emily Weinstein



**Presenting at the
Vatican convening on children + AI**



**Presenting at the
American Philosophical Society**

"We believe youth will be better served and supported in the present – and in their futures – if we direct our energies toward solutions that are both protective of youth and emphasize agency-building for a tech-rich world."

– CDT Co-Founder,
Dr. Carrie James

"I really appreciate all the work you've done around AI. It has been a huge paradigm shift for me to see that students who use it frequently are actually longing for connection ... My heartfelt gratitude for you and your good work. Thank you."

– Course Participant



**Dr. Beck Tench at the
Annual Project Zero Classroom**

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

Engaging influential voices and the public is critical to shifting the conversation.

In addition to **20+ speaking engagements**, the CDT team **shared nuanced insights with 45+ media**, including at *KQED*, *NBC*, *The New York Times*, *Vox*, and the *Washington Post*.

"Removing the devices doesn't remove some of the challenges that are associated with growing up with technologies, but it can remove some of the benefits of those connections ..."

— CDT Co-Founder,
Dr. Carrie James



**"Dry texting," Explained
Are Phones Making Teens More
Conflict-Averse?**

"So often, adults miss or misunderstand aspects of what teens are experiencing behind their screens."

— CDT Co-Founder,
Dr. Emily Weinstein

"A thing that we're hearing, and we have been for a little while, is: 'that robot makes me feel important. I use AI because real people are mean and judging, and AI isn't.'"

— CDT Co-Founder,
Dr. Beck Tench

PLATFORMER

**Grok's New Porn Companion
is Rated for Kids 12+ in the App Store**

ON THE HORIZON

As 2026 continues, we carry forward what last year reaffirmed: **thriving is a collective effort**. With new support underway, we're launching school residencies, releasing our national AI policy landscape study, and growing a vibrant Educator Collective to deepen and sustain this work. As always, youth insights remain our compass – keeping us grounded, hopeful, and focused on building a better future for the next generation.

SCHOOL RESIDENCIES

Thanks to new funding currently underway, we're able to continue our core work – engaging youth and educators in active listening, chasing insights, and building and sharing resources. We're also expanding into embedded school residencies across the U.S. and growing a vibrant Educator Collective to amplify and sustain this work.

EMPOWERING SCHOOLS TO CENTER AI AGENCY

After a year of mixed methods research, we're preparing to release our national landscape analysis on AI policies in schools. This is one of the many initiatives we have planned to continue to help young people (and all of us) navigate AI with agency, including more free classroom resources and interdisciplinary participatory design workshops.

DEEPENING YOUTH ADVISORY

We're developing the next phase of our long-term youth advisory strategy in close collaboration with In Tandem, strengthening how youth voice shapes our research, resources, and public engagement. Alongside this effort, CDT Co-Founder Dr. Emily Weinstein is writing a forthcoming book centered on youth voices and technology, slated for release in 2027. The project extends our commitment to amplifying young people's lived experiences in national conversations about tech and well-being.

BRIDGING + AMPLIFYING YOUTH AND EDUCATOR VOICES

We will continue to honor both youth and educators as experts of their own experiences through ongoing youth advisory, an educator-focused fellowship cohort, and our growing educator community of practice – scaling our mindshifts, evidenced-based resources, and partnerships along the way.

CURIOUS TO LEARN MORE?

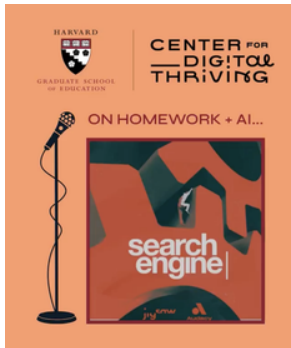
LET'S CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION!



WATCH

CDT + She Persisted Join NBC News to Share How to Talk to Teens About Their Digital Lives

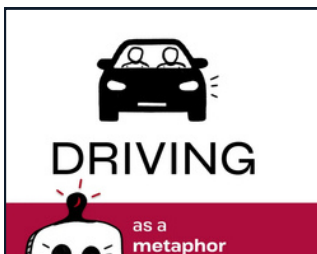
Dr. Emily Weinstein shares how adults often miss hidden signals of teens' digital interactions – and how to meet teens with empathy over eye rolling.



LISTEN

CDT Talks to the Search Engine Podcast About Homework + AI

Could AI reshape homework and school to be more interesting, meaningful, and joyful? Dr. Beck Tench and Dr. Emily Weinstein unpack how CDT is centering youth voices in the AI + homework debate – and how our new framework, Align on the Line (formerly Gradients), can help.



CONSIDER

CDT Explores: What Does it Mean to Drive AI Well?

In this video from CDT's async course, 8 Mindshifts for Teaching Digital Well-Being, AI Fellow Dan Be Kim applies a responsible driving metaphor to AI use in education.

FOLLOW CENTER FOR DIGITAL THRIVING FOR A CRITICALLY OPTIMISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON TEENS + TECH



WE NEED (YOU)TH TO THRIVE

centerfordigitalthriving.org

