



Child rights, parental agency and the governance of AI in education: evidence and recommendations from Parents International

Introduction

Parents International welcomes UNESCO's global consultation on education in the age of artificial intelligence and its recognition of education as a common good whose public purposes must be protected in the face of rapid technological change.

As an international research, advocacy and training organisation representing the interests of parents as the responsible people for the education of their children, and conducting research on education, digital citizenship, children's rights and educational ecosystems, Parents International approaches AI governance from a comprehensive human-rights perspective.

We consider it essential that the debate move beyond the binary question of whether AI is beneficial or harmful to children. The central policy question should be how education systems can ensure that the development, procurement, deployment and everyday use of AI respect and advance children's rights, support their evolving capacities, strengthen the agency of families and all educators (including parents and teachers), and contribute to equitable, inclusive and democratic education.

This requires recognising that children are not merely learners, users of technology or subjects of protection. They are rights-holders whose rights to education, participation, information, privacy, non-discrimination, development and protection must be considered together.

Equally, parents must not be reduced to passive recipients of information about technological decisions made by governments, schools or commercial providers. Their responsibilities, rights and duties in guiding their children, as recognised by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), must be integral to AI governance.

Our recent research in the DRONE, EFfEct, PARTICIPATE and DEMOCRAT projects provides evidence of significant gaps between education policies, institutional practices and the lived experiences of children, parents and education professionals. These findings have direct implications for the introduction and governance of AI in education.

Parents International recommends that UNESCO develop practical guidance for the meaningful participation of children and parents in AI governance at system, institutional and school levels. Such guidance should define minimum standards for consultation, representation, access to information, participation in impact assessments, evaluation and redress, with particular attention to younger children and families traditionally excluded from institutional decision-making.

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We further recommend that UNESCO establish a structured mechanism for engaging international parent organisations alongside child-rights organisations, educators, researchers and education authorities in the development, implementation and periodic review of its AI governance recommendations.

Parents International would welcome the opportunity to contribute its research evidence, international network and practical experience in family–school cooperation, digital citizenship education and child-rights-based educational governance to this process.

We offer the following observations and recommendations in response to UNESCO's consultation questions.

Concepts: Defining human agency and child-rights-based AI governance

We recommend that UNESCO define human agency in education as the effective capacity of children, parents, education professionals and education institutions to understand, critically evaluate, influence and make meaningful decisions about the use of AI. Human agency should not be understood simply as the ability to choose whether to use a particular technological tool. It requires the knowledge, skills, information, institutional conditions and decision-making authority necessary to exercise that choice.

For children, agency must be understood in accordance with their evolving capacities and in conjunction with the rights and responsibilities of their parents. Article 5 of the UNCRC recognises the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents to provide appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise of children's rights, in a manner consistent with their evolving capacities. Article 18 recognises the primary responsibility of parents for the upbringing and development of their children and requires states to provide appropriate assistance – aligned with real and not assumed needs - in fulfilling these responsibilities. These provisions must be read together with Article 3 on the best interests of the child, Article 12 on children's participation, Article 13 on freedom of expression, Article 16 on privacy, Article 17 on access to information, Articles 28 and 29 on education, and Article 31 on rest, leisure and play.

A comprehensive child-rights approach therefore cannot focus exclusively on protection from technological risks. It must also safeguard children's opportunities to learn, explore, create, participate, develop autonomy and benefit from technological innovation.

We recommend that UNESCO explicitly recognise four interconnected dimensions of agency in its policy briefs:

- Children's agency, including meaningful participation in decisions affecting them and the progressive development of independent judgement.
- Parental agency, including parents' ability to guide their children's digital development and participate in decisions concerning the use of AI in education.
- Professional agency, including teachers' and school leaders' capacity to make informed pedagogical decisions rather than becoming dependent on commercial systems or automated recommendations.

- Institutional and public agency, including the ability of education authorities and communities to determine educational priorities, exercise democratic oversight and maintain control over educational data and infrastructure.

These dimensions should reinforce one another rather than be presented as competing interests.

Policy problem: AI is entering education systems that already face significant structural challenges

The introduction of AI into education must be understood within the broader context of existing weaknesses in educational ecosystems.

Our research has repeatedly identified gaps in the digital literacy levels of education professionals and, subsequently, a limited role in the digital literacy development of students, insufficient cooperation between schools and families, limitations in teacher preparation, and discrepancies between institutional assumptions and the experiences of children and parents.

AI risks reproducing or amplifying these challenges if it is introduced without addressing the underlying institutional and professional conditions.

Digital and AI literacy cannot be assumed to be present among education professionals

Our 2025 EFFEct research, involving 1,472 students in Hungary and the Netherlands, found a lack of students' reported school-based development of basic digital citizenship competences, including password management, appropriate online communication and critical evaluation of digital content. The findings indicate that many children are already active digital users without receiving the systematic educational support necessary to navigate digital environments critically and safely in school.

Our DRONE research similarly highlights the need to substantially strengthen teachers' competences in critical thinking, problem-solving, digital resilience and responding to online risks. The implication for AI governance is that education systems cannot assume that teachers and school leaders are sufficiently prepared to evaluate AI-generated content, identify bias and inaccuracies, understand data-related risks or make informed pedagogical decisions about AI use. Professional development must therefore precede or accompany AI deployment rather than being treated as an optional follow-up activity.

Parents are essential digital educators but are insufficiently supported and included

Our research evidence challenges the assumption that digital competence is primarily developed at school and that parents are generally unable to support their children's digital lives.

EFFEct findings indicate that more than nearly 100% of the participating 10- and 15-year-old students had access to smartphones or other devices with internet access – provided by their parents –, and about 80% of 10-year-olds already access social media with parental approval.

These findings underline the importance of recognising the active role parents already play in decisions about children's digital participation.

Our DRONE research also challenges deficit-based assumptions about parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The findings indicate that these parents can be confident digital educators, while children from more advantaged backgrounds may also experience significant gaps in access to trusted adult support. At the same time, parents and students report the lack of support from school. This is reinforced by the account of school leaders who report awareness of teachers' low levels of competence, and subsequently a lack of digital literacy development support provided by them.

AI policies that assume parental incompetence or treat families primarily as sources of risk may therefore overlook existing capacities and fail to address children's actual support needs. Parents need accessible, evidence-based information and meaningful opportunities to participate in decisions concerning AI use at school and at home.

School–family relationships and institutional culture shape the effectiveness of technology policies

Our research on educational ecosystems demonstrates that children's learning and well-being are shaped by the relationships between families, schools and communities. The DEMOCRAT project, involving 42 pilots across six countries, identified challenges in participatory design, parental engagement and the integration of democratic practices into everyday school life.

These findings are relevant to AI governance because consultation cannot be reduced to informing parents and students after decisions have already been made. Meaningful participation requires involving children, parents and education professionals in identifying educational needs, defining acceptable uses, assessing risks and benefits, and evaluating the consequences of implementation. AI governance should strengthen existing educational relationships rather than create new barriers between institutions, families and learners.

Policy recommendations: Establishing a child-rights-based framework for AI in education

Replace blanket age restrictions with contextual, developmental and rights-based assessments

In response to UNESCO's background paper on age-appropriate AI use, Parents International recommends that age appropriateness be assessed in relation to the purpose, functionality, context and conditions of use rather than chronological age alone.

Children of the same age may have significantly different experiences, competences, needs and opportunities for adult guidance. Moreover, AI applications vary considerably in their educational purposes, potential benefits and associated risks.

A blanket prohibition based on age may prevent children from accessing beneficial learning opportunities without necessarily addressing the risks associated with particular AI systems.

We recommend that UNESCO encourage education authorities to:

- Differentiate between AI systems according to their intended purposes, functionalities, data practices and potential impacts on children's rights.
- Assess age appropriateness in relation to children's evolving capacities, the specific educational context and the availability of appropriate adult guidance.
- Distinguish between autonomous AI use, supervised use and AI-supported learning activities facilitated by education professionals or parents.
- Ensure that protective measures are proportionate, evidence-based and regularly reviewed.
- Involve children and parents in developing age-appropriate guidance and evaluating its practical consequences.

For younger children, parental guidance and participation are particularly important. However, parents should not be expected to exercise these responsibilities without accessible information and appropriate institutional support.

The principle of the best interests of the child should guide decisions without being interpreted as automatically overriding children's other rights or the legitimate role of their parents.

Make meaningful participation a mandatory component of AI governance

AI governance should not be limited to consultation among governments, technology providers, researchers and education professionals.

Children and parents must have opportunities to participate in decisions about the introduction and use of AI in educational settings.

We recommend establishing participatory governance mechanisms at national, regional, local and school levels.

These should include:

- Child- and parent-inclusive consultations before the introduction of significant AI applications.
- Accessible explanations of proposed technologies, their intended educational purposes, potential benefits and risks.
- Opportunities to raise concerns, propose alternatives and participate in periodic evaluations.
- Representation of children and families from diverse socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds.
- Accessible complaints and redress mechanisms, including opportunities to challenge consequential AI-supported decisions.

Particular attention should be given to ensuring that consultation does not privilege the most vocal, digitally connected or institutionally experienced parents.

Our research and advocacy experience indicate that traditional participation mechanisms can exclude families whose perspectives are essential to understanding children's actual needs.

For younger children, parents have a particularly important role in ensuring that their children's experiences and interests are represented in decision-making processes, while children's own views should also be sought through developmentally appropriate methods.

Participation must be genuine and consequential. Institutions should explain how the views expressed by children and parents have influenced their decisions.

Recognise parents as equal partners in AI literacy development

UNESCO's recommendations should explicitly recognise parents as primary partners in developing children's AI literacy.

AI literacy should not be reduced to understanding how AI systems function or learning to use generative AI applications effectively. It should include the ability to question AI-generated information, recognise uncertainty and bias, protect personal information, understand the implications of automated decisions, exercise independent judgement and make informed choices about when AI should or should not be used.

These competences develop across educational ecosystems, including homes, schools, peer groups and community environments.

Our DRONE project has developed separate handbooks for parents and carers, teachers, and school leaders, together with learning resources addressing digital literacy, critical thinking, misinformation, cybersecurity, resilience and bullying. This approach provides a useful foundation for AI literacy initiatives that recognise the complementary roles of different educational stakeholders.

We recommend that UNESCO encourage governments and education institutions to provide accessible AI literacy resources for parents and carers, create opportunities for mutual learning between families and schools, and involve parents in the development of AI-related school policies. Training should build on existing parental knowledge and experience rather than assume that parents lack the competences necessary to guide their children.

Establish professional readiness requirements before AI deployment

Education authorities should assess whether teachers and school leaders possess the necessary competences to evaluate, introduce and supervise AI applications before these systems become embedded in educational practice. Our research indicates that digital competence development cannot be taken for granted, even among experienced education professionals.

AI-related professional development should therefore include critical evaluation of AI-generated information, understanding algorithmic bias and limitations, data protection,

pedagogical decision-making, inclusion, child rights and ethical responsibilities. Particular attention should be given to the development of transversal competences, including critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and resilience.

We recommend that AI readiness assessments consider not only technical infrastructure and access to tools but also professional competence, institutional culture, leadership practices and the quality of cooperation with families. Teachers must retain meaningful professional authority over pedagogical decisions. AI should support, rather than replace, professional judgement and human relationships in education.

Protect children's rights through procurement and continuous oversight

Public procurement can provide an important opportunity to translate child-rights principles into enforceable requirements. We recommend that education authorities require child-rights impact assessments before procuring or deploying AI systems that may significantly affect learners. Such assessments should examine impacts on privacy, non-discrimination, participation, access to information, education, development and children's relationships with all their educators and peers.

Procurement requirements should include transparency concerning data collection, retention, sharing and commercial use; accessibility and inclusive design; independent evaluation of educational benefits and risks; and clear allocation of responsibility for harmful outcomes. Children's educational data should not be exploited for unrelated commercial purposes.

Schools and education authorities should also retain the capacity to discontinue AI systems without losing essential educational records, institutional knowledge or access to core services.

AI governance must extend beyond the initial procurement decision. Continuous monitoring, independent evaluation and accessible redress mechanisms are necessary to identify unintended consequences and respond to emerging evidence.

Advancing UNESCO's principles: Human agency, equity, inclusion, safety and ethics

We recommend that UNESCO apply its principles through an integrated child-rights framework rather than treating them as separate policy objectives.

Human agency requires ensuring that children, parents and education professionals have the knowledge, opportunities and decision-making authority necessary to influence AI use. It also requires preserving meaningful human oversight of decisions affecting children's educational experiences and opportunities.

Equity requires examining whether AI applications reduce or reinforce existing educational inequalities. Our research suggests that vulnerability cannot be inferred reliably from socioeconomic status alone. Policies should therefore consider actual competences, support networks, institutional conditions and children's lived experiences rather than relying on assumptions about particular groups.

Inclusion requires accessible design, linguistic and cultural responsiveness, and meaningful participation by children with disabilities, children from marginalised communities and families who may face barriers to conventional consultation processes.

Safety should be understood as enabling children to exercise their rights in environments where risks are identified, mitigated and addressed. Protection should not be equated with exclusion from beneficial learning opportunities.

Ethics requires transparent institutional responsibility, meaningful consent of minors and their parents/guardians and participation where applicable, independent oversight and effective remedies when children's rights are adversely affected.

These principles must be considered together. A technically safe AI application may still undermine children's agency, privacy or access to equitable education. Conversely, an innovative educational application should not be regarded as beneficial solely because it offers new learning opportunities without adequate safeguards.

Evidence and implementation: Recommendations for UNESCO's policy briefs

Parents International recommends that UNESCO's policy briefs place greater emphasis on evidence concerning the actual experiences of children, parents, teachers and school leaders.

Policy development should distinguish between perceived risks, documented harms, demonstrated educational benefits and assumptions about the competences of different stakeholder groups.

We particularly recommend the following approaches.

Use participatory and mixed-methods research

AI policies should be informed by quantitative and qualitative evidence, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, participatory research and longitudinal evaluation where feasible.

Research should examine not only the effectiveness of AI tools but also their consequences for educational relationships, professional autonomy, family engagement and children's exercise of their rights.

Children's experiences should be investigated directly, using ethically appropriate methods, rather than relying exclusively on adult perceptions.

At the same time, the perspectives of parents and other adults responsible for children's education must be included.

Evaluate AI within the wider educational ecosystem

Research should examine how AI use at school interacts with children's experiences at home, in their communities and in informal learning environments. This is particularly important because the educational consequences of AI are unlikely to be determined solely by the characteristics of individual applications.

The quality of teacher–student relationships, the availability of trusted adults, parental engagement, institutional culture and access to alternative learning opportunities may all influence outcomes.

Our educational ecosystem research offers a framework for examining these interconnected factors.

Develop practical, adaptable governance tools

UNESCO should support the development of tools that education systems and individual schools can use to assess readiness and guide implementation. These could include institutional AI readiness assessment frameworks, child-rights impact assessment templates, participatory decision-making guidance, professional development resources and practical evaluation instruments. Our work on digital resilience maturity assessment and conscious digital and AI tool use offers relevant approaches for integrating technological, pedagogical and institutional considerations. Such tools should be adaptable to different national and local contexts and should not assume that all education systems possess the same financial, technological or professional resources.

Ensure that research findings inform policy revision

AI governance should be understood as an iterative process. Education authorities should establish mechanisms for collecting feedback from children, parents and professional educators, and for revising policies in response to emerging evidence. Independent research and evaluation should be supported, particularly where commercial providers have a direct interest in the adoption or continued use of their products. Policies should be reviewed not only when technological capabilities change but also when evidence emerges concerning their educational, social or rights-related consequences.

Comments on the seven UNESCO papers

We offer the following additional recommendations for consideration in the individual policy briefs.

Paper 1

Sustaining education as a common good in the age of AI: the case for deliberative governance

Deliberative governance must include children and parents as recognised educational stakeholders, not merely as end users. Their participation should be built into decision-making structures, with particular attention to families whose perspectives are traditionally underrepresented.

Paper 2

Digital and AI sovereignty

Sovereignty should be considered not only at national and institutional levels but also in relation to the agency of individuals and families. Public control over educational

infrastructure must be accompanied by meaningful rights concerning personal data, transparency, informed choice and redress.

Paper 3

Is there a right age for AI in education?

Age-appropriateness assessments should consider the specific application, educational purpose, child's evolving capacities and context of use. Parental guidance, developmentally appropriate child participation and proportionate safeguards should be integral to these assessments. Blanket age restrictions should not substitute for evidence-based evaluation.

Paper 4

Safe enough to scale? A decision system for learner safety

Safety assessments should address the full range of children's rights and distinguish between technical safety, educational suitability and wider developmental consequences. Evidence of safety in one context should not automatically be generalised to different populations or educational environments. Children and parents should participate in ongoing evaluation.

Paper 5

AI procurement in education: the missing lever in AI governance

Procurement should include mandatory child-rights impact assessments, independent evaluation, meaningful consultation with children and parents, and enforceable safeguards concerning data use and automated decision-making. Educational benefits and potential harms should be assessed before adoption and monitored throughout implementation.

Paper 6

Beyond the price tag: Rethinking total cost of ownership for AI in education systems

Total cost of ownership should include the resources required for professional development, parental engagement, accessibility, independent evaluation, human oversight and institutional capacity building. Costs associated with dependence on commercial providers, system discontinuation and the preservation of non-AI educational alternatives should also be considered.

Paper 7

The right to an explanation: towards explainable AI in education

Explanations should be accessible to children in accordance with their evolving capacities and to their parents as the protectors and guides of their children's rights. They should cover not only how a system operates but also why it is being used, what information it processes, how its outputs influence educational decisions, who remains accountable and how consequential decisions can be challenged.

Concluding recommendations

Parents International welcomes UNESCO's initiative to develop a comprehensive governance framework for AI in education. We encourage UNESCO to ensure that the resulting policy briefs recognise the interdependence of children's rights, parental responsibilities and rights, professional agency and democratic educational governance.

Our research suggests that technological innovation alone cannot address the structural weaknesses of educational ecosystems. AI governance must therefore be accompanied by investment in professional competences, family–school cooperation, inclusive participation and independent research.

The introduction of AI should not become another process through which decisions affecting children and families are made without their meaningful involvement. Instead, it offers an opportunity to reconsider how education systems can better fulfil their public responsibilities, strengthen educational relationships and create environments in which children can develop the knowledge, skills, autonomy and resilience necessary to exercise their rights.

Our overarching recommendation is that UNESCO promote an approach to AI governance that protects children without unnecessarily restricting their opportunities, empowers parents without diminishing children's evolving autonomy, supports educators (be them parents or education professionals) without replacing professional judgement, and strengthens education as a common good through meaningful democratic participation.

References

DRONE – Digital Literacy and Disinformation

Digital competence, resilience and stakeholder capacity

Relevant outputs include the research report, handbooks for parents and carers, teachers and school leaders, and the parent training course. These can inform recommendations on professional readiness, family engagement, digital and AI literacy, and risk mitigation.

EFFEct – 2025 student research

1,472 students in Hungary and the Netherlands

Evidence concerning students' digital practices, parental approval of technology use, reported gaps in school-based digital citizenship education and access to adult support. Relevant to age appropriateness, educational equity and the respective roles of families and schools.

PARTICIPATE

Digital participation, support networks and inequalities

Research concerning children's online experiences, access to trusted adults and differences between socioeconomic groups. Relevant to inclusion, vulnerability assessments and the limitations of deficit-based assumptions about families.

DEMOCRAT – Education for Democracy

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42 pilots across six countries

Evidence concerning participatory educational practices, school culture, professional competences and family engagement. Relevant to deliberative AI governance, institutional agency and meaningful stakeholder participation.

IPA's educational ecosystem research

Family–school relationships and educational outcomes

Research on misalignments between families and schools, including findings presented at the European Consortium for Sociological Research in 2026. Relevant to assessing AI within the wider educational ecosystem rather than as an isolated technological intervention.

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