



A LEADER'S BRIEFING

Who Is Doing the Thinking?

*Keeping human judgement at the centre as AI arrives
in schools*

José Picardo, Azimuth Partners Ltd

The argument *in one page.*

The decision about AI in your school has already been made, by the pupils, who are years into using it while leadership teams debate the principle. The question that still belongs to you is not whether AI arrives, but **who stays responsible for the thinking** once it does.

Two responses fail. Banning it hands your judgement to caution; blessing it hands your judgement to the tool. Both let an outside force set your course. The alternative is a bearing of your own, confident about the gains and clear-eyed about the risks, taken from what your school is already for.

That bearing resolves into three leadership tasks: **protect** the thinking that is the learning, **decide** what you are willing to hand to the machine, and **know** whether any of it is improving learning rather than just being used. None of it needs new money. All of it needs leadership attention.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Sections 1 and 2 Why the decision is already made, and the two exits that lead nowhere.

Sections 3 and 4 Finding your bearing, and the line every leader has to hold.

Sections 5 and 6 The proxies that have quietly broken, and the training paradox beneath them.

Sections 7 and 8 What a school that gets this right does, and where the argument gets harder.

Two tools A six-question self-check, and six moves for next term. **If you read nothing else, read those.**

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This briefing is for heads, trust leaders and senior teams deciding what AI means for their schools. It offers a bearing rather than a tool list, a way of thinking about AI that starts with learning and holds steady whatever the technology does next. It takes about fifteen minutes to read. Read it straight through, or start with the six-question self-check near the end and work backwards.

A word on where this starts. Used with judgement, AI can sharpen thinking, widen access and lift outcomes. I have watched it open doors for pupils who would have struggled enormously without it, and sharpen the thinking of the most able. The caution in these pages is here because that promise is real and worth protecting, never because the technology itself is inherently bad.

THE STARTING POINT

1. The decision has *already been made*

The decision about AI in your school has already been taken. Two-thirds of 13 to 18 year olds were using generative AI by 2025, and nearly half were using it at least weekly, with homework among the commonest uses (National Literacy Trust, 2025). They did not wait for a policy or ask permission. While leadership teams debate the principle, the pupils are three years into the practice.

The staffroom tells the opposite story. Across 55 education systems, only about one teacher in three uses AI in their teaching, and three-quarters of those who do not say the reason is simple: nobody ever showed them how (OECD, 2025). So schools often run on parallel strands. Pupils fluent and unsupervised on one side, teachers cautious and untrained on the other, and a leadership team in the middle with a policy on the shared drive and a working group that has met three times since September.

In the schools I work with, two areas consistently get the least attention. The first is how well the school understands the challenges and opportunities AI brings. The second is whether the school can tell what difference any of its technology is making to learning. Strong wifi, devices in bags, a decent acceptable-use policy, and underneath it a question few can answer with confidence: is any of this making the learning better?

That is the headache this briefing means to ease. The aspirin is not a longer policy or a faster rollout. It is a single question, asked of every classroom, every marking pile and every strategy day: **who is doing the thinking?**

2. Two exits that *lead nowhere*

Faced with these parallel lanes, most schools reach for one of two exits. Both feel responsible, and neither gets you there.

The first is to restrict or to ban it. Block the sites, treat AI as cheating, move on. This instinct has some evidence behind it and deserves a serious hearing. UNESCO has documented distraction from the mere presence of a device, thin independent evidence behind much of the edtech industry, and data practices that should worry any school, with the large majority of pandemic-era products able to harvest information on children (UNESCO, 2023). Jonathan Haidt has argued that we have handed children technologies the adults around them do not understand (Haidt, 2024). A leader who feels the pull of caution is not a luddite. They are paying attention.

The second exit is to bless it and wave it through. Set up the working group, buy the platform, run the launch day, announce that every child will learn to prompt, and call it future-proofing. This has a respectable surface too. The tools are genuinely capable, and pupils will enter workplaces shaped by them. Yet we have been here before. A decade ago schools were encouraged to teach every child to code, on the same future-proofing logic, only to find that particular skill overtaken by the arrival of generative AI. Curricula built on a prediction tend to age badly.

“ *The ban and the blessing are the same solution dressed up as opponents.* ”

Here is what the two exits share: both keep the decision with the technology. One assumes the tool will endanger learning; the other that the tool will enhance it. Either way the school hands its judgement to an outside force and stops thinking for itself. The bearing this briefing offers is a heading of your own: confident about the gains, clear-eyed about the risks, and unwilling to let either camp set your course. That is harder than either exit, which is why so few schools manage it.

3. What is your *technology* for?

If banning and blessing may both ultimately fail, what replaces them? A bearing. A clear sense of what the technology is for, taken from what your school is for.

Start with the part that is easy to skip. **A digital strategy is a teaching and learning strategy made explicit.** Talk of licences, devices and platforms is necessary, and none of it is educational. When a school cannot say in a sentence what its technology is for, what it has is an infrastructure plan aspiring to become a strategy.

A real digital strategy passes two tests. Clarity: can you say what the technology is for, in words a parent or your least confident member of staff would follow? Coherence: do your values, your pedagogy and your tools point in the same direction? Get the sequence right and most decisions make themselves. Values first, then pedagogy, then technology. When that order is clear, your procurement criteria write themselves, and you can approve or decline approaches with confidence.

“ *AI reveals more than it replaces.* ”

With the bearing set, the role of AI comes into focus. It amplifies whatever quality is already present. Give a curious teacher a capable assistant and you get more curiosity. Give an incoherent process a faster engine and you get incoherence at speed.

Used well, this is genuinely good news for schools. A capable assistant can hand a teacher their evenings back, give a struggling reader a patient tutor, and offer a whole department feedback at a depth that was never attainable before. With judgement it can stretch thinking rather than flatten it, prompting better questions, more creative work and more ambitious outcomes.

That points to a clean division of labour. Hand AI the formulaic: the admin, the summarising, the first draft of the routine letter, the mechanics that eat into a teacher's evening. When 259 science teachers used ChatGPT with a short guide, they cut Key Stage 3 planning time by nearly a third, with no detectable loss of lesson quality (Education Endowment Foundation, 2024). The gains arrive when expert design is built in. In one Harvard trial, an AI tutor grounded in good pedagogy roughly doubled the learning of an equivalent class (Kestin et al., 2025), and a teacher-guided programme in Nigeria produced gains its evaluators put at as much as two years of ordinary schooling in six weeks (World Bank, 2025). The evidence is still nascent, but it points to tools that are useful when the expertise is designed into them.

Protect the rest. The tacit, relational, longitudinal core of teaching scales the opposite way to the machine. A teacher needs less effort as they come to know a class better; the machine needs more. Knowing a child across three years is not a task to be automated. It is the job.

THE LINE TO HOLD

4. The thinking *is the learning*

The line every leader has to hold is this: if a pupil is not doing the thinking, that pupil is not learning, however polished the work they submit. Left unchecked, pupils can often be on the wrong side of this line. When nearly a thousand secondary pupils were given unrestricted GPT-4, their practice scores rose by 48 per cent, and then they scored 17 per cent worse than their peers on an exam they sat without it.

+48%

practice scores rose with unrestricted GPT-4

-17%

then exam scores fell, sat without the tool (Bastani et al., 2025)

A version built with guardrails, which made them work before it helped, erased the harm completely (Bastani et al., 2025). The same technology can build the muscle or do the lifting for the pupil, and the difference lives in the design, never in the hype. This is why the capacity worth protecting is metacognition, the planning, monitoring and evaluating that the evidence values at around seven months of additional progress a year (Education Endowment Foundation, 2025).

THE READER'S TEST

Could you stand behind this work without AI?

A pupil who can is learning. A pupil who cannot has handed over the thinking, and the grade is only measuring the machine's performance.

THE JAGGED EDGE

The last part of the bearing is perhaps counterintuitive. **The most mature use of AI is knowing when not to use it.** The tool is capable across a jagged edge: impressive on one task, confidently wrong on the next one that looks almost identical. In a study of business consultants, those working inside the tool's competence improved sharply, while those who strayed outside it without noticing were nineteen percentage points more likely to get the answer wrong (Dell'Acqua et al., 2023). Discernment is the skill that matters, and it cannot be taught in relation to any particular AI tool, because the tools change with every model release. Discernment has to be taught as a habit, subject by subject.

This is the opposite of timidity. Knowing where the tool is a multiplier, and where it gets in the way, is how you get the most out of it.

THE HARD PART

5. The part *most of us put off*

Everything so far is the part that comes easily. Now the harder part, the one that decides whether any of this works.

It comes down to one uncomfortable shift. For years we have read certain proxies as proof that learning is happening: the polished essay, the detailed spreadsheet. Those signals no longer mean what they used to. It shows up in two places.

The first is the pupil's work. For about a century, good written work was acceptable evidence of good thinking. A fluent essay, a tidy lab report, a well-structured answer: we trusted the product because producing it required the thinking we actually cared about. Generative AI has cut that link, because fluent prose and tidy structure are exactly what it produces for free. In a blind test at the University of Reading, AI-written submissions went undetected 94 per cent of the time and outscored real students in 83 per cent of comparisons (Scarfe et al., 2024).

94%

of AI-written submissions went undetected in a blind test at the University of Reading, and they outscored real students in 83 per cent of comparisons (Scarfe et al., 2024).

The machines can now write the essay, and they may soon grade it too: on one assessment organisation's repeated trials, AI assessors agree with expert consensus on the quality of writing more reliably than individual markers do (Christodoulou, 2025). A polished essay with a high mark no longer proves the pupil did the thinking.

It is harder than ever to police your way to compliance. Detection software and sterner policies chase a world that is probably not coming back. The challenge instead is to redesign tasks so the thinking shows while it happens, through oracy, supervised writing, drafts kept and discussed, and the stand-behind-it test applied in the room.

The same trap waits one level up, in the strategy itself. Here the broken proxy is the adoption number. A hundred staff logging in tells you the tool is being used, and it tells you nothing about whether pupils understand any more than they did in September. So the question few schools can answer confidently is the one that matters most: how do you know anyone is learning more? Across the schools I assess, evaluation and impact score lowest by some distance, and AI raises the stakes on a weakness that was already there.

Both are the same problem. The proxies we have traditionally trusted, the polished essay, the data-rich spreadsheet and the adoption numbers, have stopped standing in for the thing you care about. The work that now separates schools doing this well from those who struggle is building evidence you can trust: assessment that shows the thinking, and evaluation that shows the learning.

TRAINING AND EQUITY

6. The digital *paradox*

Building that evidence, and almost everything else in this briefing, comes down to one unglamorous line in the budget: training. Under financial strain it is usually one of the first to go. Schools say teaching and learning come first, then consider trimming the very thing that would make them better. This is the digital paradox, and in my experience it is close to universal, showing up in well-resourced schools and stretched ones alike. Remember that three-quarters of the teachers not using AI said the reason was simply that nobody had shown them how (OECD, 2025). Training is the multiplier that turns spend into good practice; without it, the same tools just produce mediocre work faster.

The cost of the paradox falls unevenly, and this raises the separate question of equity. Where training and strategy are funded, the advantage shows quickly. Private schools are three times more likely than state schools to have a school-wide AI strategy, 27 per cent against 9, and more than twice as likely to have formally trained their staff, 45 per cent against 21, with teacher confidence tracking training closely (Sutton Trust, 2025).

27% / 9%

of private versus state schools have a school-wide AI strategy. Formal staff training runs 45 per cent against 21, and teacher confidence tracks training closely (Sutton Trust, 2025).

This suggests the gap between pupils will not open along the line of who can reach AI, because they can all reach it already; it is in their pockets. It opens along the line of whose school taught them to use it with judgement and whose left them to work it out alone. Guided use narrows gaps; unguided use widens them. That makes the training line, for both staff and pupils, the real equity strategy, however tempting it is to cut.

The encouraging part is that nothing here turns on the budget that produced those numbers. A school-wide sentence about purpose, a clear line on the formulaic, one ring-fenced piece of training: these cost attention, not money, and they are exactly what the well-resourced schools are buying with theirs. The advantage is real, but it is closable.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

7. What a school that *gets this right* does

None of this requires a bigger budget or a bolder platform. It requires a school that holds its bearing across a year.

Picture that school in September. It can say in one sentence what its technology is for, and the sentence is about learning. It has handed the formulaic to the machine deliberately, so teachers get time back, and it has named the things it will not automate, because they are the job. The same discipline runs through the office as well as the classroom: the finance system, the admissions process and the safeguarding record are all held to the same question, who is doing the thinking. Training is funded ahead of the tools, not after them, because the capability is what turns the spend into effective practice.

By the spring the question it asks as a matter of routine has sharpened to the one that counts: are the children learning more than they were, and how would anyone know?

Assessment has started to change shape, with more of the thinking made visible while it happens. The sceptics on the staff have been listened to and treated as the early-warning system rather than dismissed as luddites. The concerns they raised have been built into the new approaches.

By July the school depends less on any single supplier, any single platform, and any single consultant, because the capacity now resides in the building. That is the real test of a digital strategy: the school uses technology discerningly because it was introduced with clarity, it enabled teaching with impact, and it allowed staff and pupils to grow with purpose.

THE HARDER QUESTIONS

8. Where this gets *harder*

No argument is worth much until it has faced the questions that test it. Two are worth meeting head-on, because a thoughtful leader is already asking them.

The first is precaution. Children are a special case, and treating hype and panic as equal is itself a position that has to be justified. UNESCO's evidence on distraction and data exploitation is concrete, while many of the classroom benefits are still young and small-scale. That asymmetry is real. Taking a considered position does not mean splitting the difference; it means the caution has to be specific and justified, applied tool by tool and age by age, rather than waved away as panic.

The second is economics. "Reveals rather than replaces" is a claim about classrooms, and pupils graduate into a labour market. Entry-level employment is already falling in the occupations most exposed to AI, by around 13 per cent for workers aged 22 to 25 in the hardest-hit roles (Brynjolfsson, Chandar and Chen, 2025). Preparing pupils for the present becomes harder if the present includes job displacement. There is no comfortable answer. The honest one is to build the capacities that keep their value when the tasks around them are automated, which are mostly the ones this briefing argues for protecting.

Meeting these questions is what makes the bearing worth trusting. A position that has already faced the best arguments against it is one you can hold when a governor, a parent or a sceptical colleague pushes back.

Where does *your school stand*?

Six questions. Answer them on your own, or take them to your senior team.

1 Can you say in one sentence what technology is for in your school, without naming a product, and do your values, pedagogy and tools all point that way?

2 Do you actually know which AI tools your pupils and staff use day to day, or only what the policy assumes?

3 Of the AI your staff use, how much is absorbing the formulaic, and how much is doing thinking that someone still needs to be able to do?

4 Could your pupils stand behind their best recent work without the tool? How do you actually know?

5 When you last invested in technology, did you fund the training to match, or did the training line not survive the budget cull?

6 How would you know if any of this were improving learning? What would you measure, and are you measuring it now?

Want these scored and benchmarked? The free Azimuth Digital Maturity assessment turns them into a bespoke report in about ten minutes.

Your *next term*

Here is a term's worth of moves that turn this briefing into practice. None of them needs new money. All of them need leadership attention.

- 1 Write the one sentence, rooted in your values.** Start with your school's aims and values, the ones already in your development plan, and complete this line: in this school, technology is for... A good answer reads as an extension of what you already stand for, so the tools serve your aims rather than pulling in a direction of their own. Then hold every current and proposed tool against it. Anything that does not serve it is a candidate for stopping.
- 2 See what is actually happening.** Audit which AI tools pupils and staff are really using this term, rather than what the policy assumes. You cannot lead what you cannot see, and most leaders are surprised by the answer.
- 3 Draw the line on the formulaic.** With a small group of staff, write down what you are content to hand to AI, such as admin, summaries and first drafts, and what you will protect, such as the thinking and the relationships. Publish it as guidance staff can follow rather than a ban they will route around.
- 4 Redesign one task so the thinking shows.** Pick one assessment in one department this term and rebuild it around the stand-behind-it test. For example, set a history essay in two parts: pupils may use AI to gather and challenge ideas and submit that exchange, then write the essay in class with their notes beside them, so the mark rewards the reasoning rather than the polish.
- 5 Fund one piece of training, and ring-fence it.** Choose the single highest-value session and protect its budget before anything else is cut. What changes practice is capability, and capability comes from training.
- 6 Decide now how you will know.** Pick one proxy that tracks learning rather than usage, and commit to looking at it at the end of term. Make it concrete. For example: take a sample of pupils' best recent work in one class and ask them to talk you through it without the tool, then watch the proportion who can, this term and again next. Or compare how a department's pupils do on a task done in class and unaided against the same task done at home.

Six moves, one term. By the end you will have a school that is thinking about the right things, which is the only foundation that lasts.

The question *you are left with.*

The pupils have already decided whether they will use AI. That argument is over, and they settled it long before the working group convened for the first time.

The decision still on the table is yours, and the interesting part is how little it has to do with technology. It turns on who stays responsible for the thinking: where you protect it, what you are willing to hand over, and how you will know any of it is working. Schools that hold those three steady end up with pupils who think harder, teachers who teach better, and powerful tools they use without being used by them.

That is a leadership question. It always was.

How I can *help*

If this briefing has named problems you recognise, that is usually where a conversation with Azimuth starts. There are three ways I work with schools and trusts. They stand on their own, and they work better together.

“*José is a clear-eyed and compelling guide to the intersection between pedagogical theory, educational research and the use of technology.*”

Dominic Norrish, CEO, Unity Schools Partnership

1 Strategic consultancy

You get a digital strategy you can act on, and the evidence to know whether it is working. I work with leadership teams on audits, planning and advisory across school improvement, digital strategy and AI readiness. When you want that senior thinking without a full-time hire, it becomes the Fractional Digital Strategist role, holding the thinking steady across a year.

2 Professional development

Your teachers get their evenings back and teach better, and your support staff use the tools well in their own roles. I design and lead keynotes, workshops and CPD, grounded in evidence-informed practice.

3 Student engagement

Your pupils keep doing the thinking rather than handing it over. I work directly with students and parents on AI literacy, metacognition and evidence-informed study.

The aim is the same in each case: schools that lead with clarity, teach with impact and grow with purpose. The easiest place to start is a short conversation: tell me where your school is and I will tell you honestly whether and how I can help. If you would rather see where you stand first, the free Azimuth Digital Maturity assessment gives you a bespoke picture in about ten minutes.

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About the *author*



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José Picardo is the founder and principal consultant of Azimuth Partners Ltd. He has spent more than 25 years in education, 13 of them in senior leadership, and now helps schools, trusts and national organisations think clearly about AI and digital strategy. He is the author of *Using Technology in the Classroom* (Bloomsbury) and writes *The Compass*, a monthly letter for school leaders.

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About Azimuth

Azimuth works with schools and trusts on strategy, staff development, leadership and students. The thread running through all of it is the one in this briefing: keep human judgement at the centre, and put technology to work for better teaching and learning. If these questions are live in your school, that is the conversation Azimuth exists to have.

azimuth.org.uk ·

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