Hearing Before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Early Childhood Elementary and Secondary Education
"Building An AI-Ready America: Teaching in the AI Age"
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Chairman Kiley, Ranking Member Bonamici and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the topic of artificial intelligence (AI) and educators.

My name is Aneesh Sohoni, and I serve as the Chief Executive Officer of Teach For America, a non-profit, non-partisan, externally validated organization that works to expand access to an excellent education for all children. I'm a former teacher and have worked in schools, school systems, and education organizations for my entire career.

For nearly 35 years, Teach For America has collaborated with more than 300 communities to reimagine what's possible for students. We recruit, develop, and support high-impact leaders to teach and tutor in our partner communities, working alongside families and local champions to deliver high-quality education that puts children on a path to economic mobility and a life full of meaning and opportunity.

This school year alone, we have more than 4,000 teachers and 3,000 high-dose tutors serving more than 275,000 students in urban and rural communities across 37 states and the District of Columbia. Approximately 75% of our teachers serve in urban areas while 15% work in predominantly rural areas. More than one-third of our teachers teach in the communities where they grew up.

The teachers, tutors, and alumni of our program make up a vast network of more than 72,000 individuals who continue to serve as educators, school and system leaders, policymakers, non-profit leaders and beyond. They are fiercely committed to expanding opportunity through education. Many of them are driving discussions around AI and shaping its use for students and other educators.

Nearly 60 percent of alumni continue to work in education, and many more are leading in other fields that impact opportunity for children and families in low-income communities They carry the lessons from the classroom with them in this work, holding close to the belief that students' potential is limitless — and that it is our job to foster it responsibly and capably.

Artificial Intelligence: Strengthening Human Connection Through Talent and Technology

As we think about the future of AI in education, I want to begin by acknowledging that this technology is evolving rapidly. But the reality is that teachers and students are using it right now. According to the Center for Democracy and Technology, 85% of teachers and 86% of students used AI in the 2024-2025 school year. In many cases, AI is being adopted in classrooms without guardrails, guidelines, or support. Ignoring this reality is not an option. I am grateful the Subcommittee is bringing much-needed attention to this issue so that we can shape the best way to leverage the innovations and opportunities available through AI while maintaining a staunch commitment to quality and success in the classroom.

We are quickly learning about where AI is helpful, where it is harmful, and where it may hold the greatest promise, but there is still much more for us to understand. Teach For America does not pretend to have all the answers, but we do believe that, under the right conditions, thoughtful use of AI can offer benefits for educators and students. That's why we are leaning in. We're actively testing, learning, evaluating, and improving, alongside educators, to ensure that teachers are better prepared and supported, rather than leaving them to navigate it through trial and error.

AI must never replace teachers. The neurological imperative of belonging means students learn best when they feel seen, safe, and connected to the adults and communities around them. Human relationships activate the very brain systems that make learning possible. I saw this play out in a mechatronics class in Los Angeles. Students were tasked with working in teams to blend concepts of math, computer science, and engineering to build a product that was of interest to them. I watched as students used AI to support their projects. But what really drove the learning wasn't AI—it was the teamwork, critical thinking, and collaboration happening in the class. The teacher guided the experience. AI supported the work, but the relationships and human skills drove the learning.

While AI must never replace teachers, we do believe it can play an important role in education. When appropriately integrated into a teacher's day-to-day responsibilities, AI can absolutely save teachers time on various administrative tasks. But we should expect and ensure it does more than that. If used well, our experience is that teachers can use it to help students think more deeply, challenge assumptions, and understand new concepts--rather than just give answers. And while some studies highlight the risk of cognitive decline with AI use, other promising research indicates that AI can effectively support the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. For example, when teachers use AI as "tools-to-think-with," rather than shortcuts, it can become a powerful classroom aid. One thing is clear: the potential benefits depend on how intentionally and thoughtfully teachers and students leverage this technology.

That is why educators must have a deep understanding of when to use these tools, when not to, and how to use them to solve classroom challenges. Educators with this level of training can guide students at appropriate ages in how to responsibly use AI, because we know that students will encounter AI throughout their lives. At an elementary school in Washington, D.C., I watched one of our teachers use AI to support her youngest learners with phonics instruction. She ensured that all students were able to sound out the letters they were working on, and when they were struggling, she directed AI to differentiate the instruction, so each student received exactly what they needed. When educators have this level of fluency, AI can become a tool for personalization in learning resulting in stronger instruction.

Teach For America's AI Principles

Three years ago, we recognized AI was coming to classrooms sooner rather than later, and we began to think about how these tools could add value and address challenges facing the teaching profession. We recognized the need for strong guardrails for their use in our preparation of teachers. To that end, we developed the following principles to help us navigate the promise and the perils of AI with clarity and accountability.

- **Align AI With Effective Teaching and Learning:** AI must be used as a tool alongside what we already know drives student learning—not as a replacement for it. That means anchoring its use in strong teaching methods, rigorous content, standards, high-quality curriculum, assessments, and direct insight from students. To understand the learning conditions our students need, we use the Cultivate Survey, developed by the University of Chicago, which captures students' experiences of motivation, belonging, and academic rigor in their classrooms. This data—combined with our knowledge of how to prepare and develop novice

teachers—helps to ensure that AI complements, rather than undermines, the conditions students need to succeed.

- **Empower Educators to Shape AI.** Educators bring deep expertise in teaching, learning, and student needs, and that expertise must be applied to how AI is designed and adopted in schools. Giving educators a voice isn't about turning teachers into engineers. It's about honoring their professional judgment and positioning engagement with AI as a meaningful form of educator development. When educators help shape how these tools are used, they build critical understanding of where AI adds value, where it falls short, and how to use it responsibly in service of students and their own professional growth.

- **Leverage AI to Support Educator Effectiveness and Efficiency.** AI can strengthen teaching by providing timely insights, instructional supports, and tools that reduce administrative burdens, improve instructional decision-making, and reclaim time—allowing teachers to focus on high-impact instruction and personalized connections with students.

- **Harness AI to Drive the Future of Learning.** We recognize that education must evolve with changing technology. But this change can't focus on technology alone. We must elevate academic skills alongside durable, human abilities—like ethical judgment, collaboration, and creative problem-solving. We do not imagine students spending eight hours a day on screens or in virtual reality headsets, with teachers relegated to the background. Rather, we see educators playing an increasingly vital role in fostering relationships and developing skills in young people that technology cannot replace.

Putting Principles Into Action

So, what does all of this look like in practice? As we thought about how to prepare our teachers, we asked the question: "What would it take for teachers to feel capable, confident, and in control of how AI is used in their classroom?" From there, we built a learning series.

We start with AI Introduction. Before entering the classroom—and in addition to their rigorous training and hands-on classroom experience—all incoming Teach For America teachers take a course on the basics of AI, which includes foundational knowledge, best practices, and ethical considerations. They are trained to understand where AI can help, where it has limitations, and where it cannot substitute for human judgment. The goal isn't to fear AI or embrace it blindly, but to develop informed, intentional educators who can use these tools responsibly while keeping students at the center. Since 2024, more than 4,800 teachers have completed this training.

Then we move to opportunities for real-world engagement with AI. We give our teachers opportunities to *experiment* with AI to help them build deeper understanding and confidence, and to hone their judgement about how to use these tools in their classrooms. Through hands-on, collaborative experiences—which we call hackathons—teachers engage with AI by testing ideas, co-designing solutions, and challenging assumptions about what is possible and what is appropriate for students. We've found that opportunities to apply tools to solve classrooms challenges builds far greater expertise on how to use AI than abstract learning.

As part of this process, some educators create AI prototypes. For example, a first-year teacher from Houston built a tool specifically to translate learning for 52 emergent bilingual students and reported a 20% improvement in test scores, plus parent access to the content. In this case, AI did not replace instruction—it removed a language barrier so rigorous content could be accessed, and families could participate. In Michigan, a teacher in our program built a

tool that intentionally inserts a single incorrect step into a math problem, requiring students to identify and explain the error. In this case, AI is being used to deepen critical reasoning and error analysis, not to create shortcuts.

These opportunities are not just about the tools applied but how teachers' perceptions of AI shift when they engage directly with this technology. In each of these cases, the outcome wasn't the tool itself, but the teacher's expanding ability to use AI more critically and engage with AI more responsibly.

These experiences also allow our teachers to contribute to the field of knowledge with technology developers because they bring teaching instruction expertise, classroom realities, and a deep understanding of student needs into conversations about AI design. This helps ensure that the tools entering classrooms are shaped by those who are on the forefront of learning.

And finally, we are collecting data and sharing insights from the field. In 10 Teach For America partner communities, we're piloting more intensive models that act as regional hubs to test, build, and implement AI tools and practices, including guardrails. These regional hubs are providing on-the-ground insights that can be used to share how AI is developed, continuously evaluated, and responsive to the needs of communities.

In addition to insights from the hubs, we're also exploring several promising uses of AI designed to strengthen teaching and learning. For example, researchers are building AI-powered practice tools that let teachers rehearse important real-world situations — like parent-teacher conferences or IEP meetings — in a safe, simulated setting. Teachers can practice, get feedback, and improve without the pressure of a live classroom. If the initial model works, we plan to pilot it with our incoming teachers, and if successful, consider using it more broadly in training and during the school year so teachers can continue practicing and sharpening their skills.

We're also exploring how AI can help instructional leaders synthesize classroom observations, student feedback, and academic data to provide clearer, more actionable coaching for teachers.

AI + High Dose Tutoring

We are also making an investment in technology in our Ignite Tutoring Fellowship—our national tutoring program which accelerates student learning and fosters belonging through virtual, small-group instruction led by trained undergraduate tutors. High-dosage tutoring is one of the most studied, effective ways to accelerate student learning. Through Ignite, we've reached over 40 communities, partnered with hundreds of schools, and trained 5,500 tutors who have delivered more than 200,000 hours of small-group instruction. We're now exploring how to integrate AI coaching tools and practice simulations into our tutor training model. Our hypothesis is that these tools will allow tutors to practice instructional content, receive immediate feedback from their trainers and continuously improve—while helping us deliver tutoring supports to students at scale.

In Los Angeles, Alliance Marine Innovation & Technology partnered with Teach For America Ignite tutors to support 28 eighth graders who were three or more grade levels behind in math, allowing teachers to focus on more grade-level instruction rather than remediation. As a result, students across the entire 8th grade made major gains—80% met or exceeded state math standards on state assessments after a year of Ignite tutoring.

The lesson? Through talent and technology, we can expand capacity in schools, foster important human relationships, and accelerate learning--particularly when both students and teachers are members of generations who grew up surrounded by rapidly changing technology.

Lessons Learned

And we've gained other learnings from the educators who are navigating both AI's risks and its potential that we're taking to heart.

- **AI can deepen thinking and personalize learning.** AI should augment—not replace—what drives student learning. If used alongside strong pedagogy, rigorous content, high-quality curriculum, and student insight, AI can personalize learning and support students in building key durable skills.

- **AI professional learning is more powerful when it is hands on.** Building AI tools deepened teachers' understanding of how AI systems work, their limitations, and biases and where human judgment must remain central. This approach builds responsible AI dexterity, not just surface level awareness.

- **When educators receive training and are involved in shaping AI tools, they use AI more effectively to enhance teaching, reduce some of their administrative workload, and free up time to deeply engage with students.** Additionally, when teachers have this type of hands-on involvement, it also increases the relevance of the AI tool to them and the trust they have in the tool itself, making it more likely to be adopted and sustained.

- **Teacher voice is often a missing ingredient in AI policy and product design.** When educators have an opportunity to shape AI, they bring insights that can strengthen AI tools such as consideration of classroom realities, student variability, and ethical considerations tied to students. Teachers are not just users of AI, they are experts in how students learn. Their voice helps ensure AI reflects real classrooms, supports durable human skills like judgment, creativity, and collaboration, and reinforces—rather than replaces—the central role of educators in learning.

Conclusion

One of the most valuable insights we're getting from Teach For America's work and that of our partners is a greater understanding of what's possible when educators are trained, supported, and invited to shape the tools and skills that will in turn shape the future. We have a real opportunity to improve systems of learning and to ensure that young people, especially those furthest from opportunity, have engaging and relevant educational experiences that resonate in the 21st century.

AI's impact—positive or negative—on education is not yet determined. The choices we make now will ultimately determine whether this technology helps or harms educators and students.

At a moment when the world is changing rapidly—and education is changing with it—it is important that we act intentionally to shape this change, so that the future of education in our country remains bright.

With your partnership, we can support the educators, students, and communities championing this progress—and ensure that innovation becomes a force for progress in education.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to your questions.