Why Springfield's Children?

An AI education experiment has arrived at Kiley Prep. Springfield parents deserve to know what their children are giving up — and who stands to learn from them.

By: *Johnnie R.S. McKnight*

There is an experiment underway in Springfield, and our children are at the center of it.

At Kiley Prep, a sixth-grade classroom is becoming a testing ground for an adaptation of the Alpha School model, an approach built around students moving through academic content using adaptive technology. According to materials obtained by the Springfield Education Association, the Springfield Empowerment Zone Partnership also planned to work with MIT Blueprint Labs to study how the model performs in a "low-income, urban public school" setting.

The Springfield Empowerment Zone says calling Kiley a "teacher-less" classroom is inaccurate. Its September 4 response to the union says a veteran Kiley teacher volunteered for the pilot, remains central to instruction and will continue monitoring progress, supporting students and leading their learning. No teacher has been displaced. SEZP also says Kiley is adapting parts of Alpha's approach rather than importing its private-school model wholesale.

Those distinctions matter. But they do not answer the question I cannot get past:

Why Springfield?

Why not Longmeadow? Why not Agawam? Why not Northampton?

I am not suggesting their children should be experimented on instead of ours. I am asking why a model seeking evidence that it can work in a "low-income, urban public school setting" found its proving ground here.

Look at the children who fill Springfield's classrooms. They are overwhelmingly Black and Latino. Many come from families struggling with housing, food costs, transportation and other pressures that follow children through the schoolhouse door. Some have IEPs. Some are learning English. Some have experienced trauma. Some are already years behind academically.

Those realities should make us invest more humanity in their education, not make them more convenient subjects for testing whether technology can do more of the work.

What Teachers Saw After Covid

When people discuss pandemic learning loss, they usually point to test scores. Teachers saw losses that were harder to measure.

We watched children change.

Students returned struggling differently with attention, frustration, conflict and relationships. Some seemed more anxious. Some struggled to read social cues. Many appeared increasingly attached to screens and less comfortable simply existing with other children. Over time, I have watched some of those social muscles slowly return.

Children develop those skills by being around people. They disagree. They embarrass themselves. They hurt someone's feelings and realize it. They apologize. They lose. They collaborate with someone they do not like. They learn to look another person in the eye.

That messy process is called growing up.

After a pandemic deprived children of so much ordinary human interaction, we should think carefully before putting more screen-based learning at the center of their academic day.

Our students need to understand artificial intelligence. They will inherit a world transformed by it.

They also need to know how to function without it.

A sixth grader should learn to write a paragraph before asking AI to generate one. A child should understand multiplication before depending on software for the answer. Students should be able to read a difficult passage, sit with confusion, organize their thoughts, spell, calculate, research, reason and defend an argument.

There is intellectual development hidden inside struggle.

When a child crosses out a sentence and rewrites it, something is happening. When a student gets a math problem wrong, retraces the work and discovers the mistake, something is happening. When children encounter something they do not understand and wrestle with it until they do, something is happening.

The struggle is not a defect in education. The struggle is part of education.

If we give children the shortcut before they understand the road, we should not be surprised when they cannot find their way without it.

A Computer Sees an Incorrect Answer. A Teacher Sees a Child.

There is something peculiar about the way we talk about teachers. Society praises us while repeatedly searching for ways to do education with less of us.

Think about your own life. Go backward, before the title, degree or career. There was probably a teacher.

Someone saw something in you. Someone challenged you. Someone gave you another chance. Someone recognized that the angry child was actually hurting. Someone told you that you could become something you had never imagined.

Teaching has never been merely the delivery of academic content.

A student puts his head down. A girl who normally participates stops talking. A child who understood fractions yesterday suddenly cannot solve a basic problem.

A teacher asks why.

Maybe he did not sleep. Maybe her family is facing eviction. Maybe the electricity was shut off. Maybe there was violence at home. Maybe someone humiliated him online. Maybe she did not eat breakfast. Perhaps nothing catastrophic happened. Maybe today is simply hard.

A computer sees inactivity. A teacher sees a child.

Great teachers develop an almost invisible skill: we notice.

There is no dashboard for trust. There is no algorithm for the moment a child finally decides an adult is safe enough to tell the truth.

Poverty and trauma do not arrive at school neatly labeled in a database. They walk through the classroom door wearing sneakers and carrying backpacks.

Do Not Mistake Need for Consent

America has an ugly history of disadvantaged communities bearing the risks of experimentation while others collected the knowledge.

I am not comparing what is happening at Kiley to Tuskegee or the horrific medical experiments that helped shape modern research protections. The circumstances and harms are plainly different.

But we were supposed to learn something from that history.

Who gets experimented on matters. Who gives consent matters. Who assumes the risk matters. Who receives the benefit matters.

Those principles should not disappear because today’s experiment happens on a laptop instead of in a laboratory.

That is why the racial and economic makeup of Springfield cannot simply be brushed aside.

If this approach is promising enough for Springfield's children, is Alpha equally eager to test it in affluent suburban public schools? Would parents there receive the same information? Would they be comfortable with the same terms? Would they ask different questions because they have more resources or political influence?

I want those questions answered.

Innovation should not consistently travel in one direction: experimentation for children with the greatest needs and certainty for everyone else.

Do not mistake need for consent.

Our children needing better educational outcomes does not mean we should ask fewer questions about what is being done with them.

It means we should ask more.

Imagine It Were Your Child

Forget Alpha for a moment. Forget SEZP. Forget the union. Forget the lawyers.

Imagine the student is your child.

Your 11-year-old sits down at a school-issued computer. The system learns where she succeeds and where she struggles. Her academic activity produces information.

Now read the agreement.

It permits Alpha to use student and school data collected through its services when that information has been aggregated with other data and deidentified as to students and the school or source. The agreement also says personally identifiable student information cannot be used to train, develop or improve a general-purpose artificial-intelligence large language model except to the extent expressly authorized by the data-sharing agreement and applicable law.

That does not mean Alpha is secretly training an AI model on identifiable Springfield students. I am not making that accusation.

I am asking parents to consider a more fundamental question:

What exactly can Alpha learn from our children?

What information is collected? What becomes deidentified? What can be learned from that information? Can information generated by Springfield students help improve Alpha's educational technology? What information will outside researchers receive? How long will information be retained? What happens if a parent says no?

Those are not questions for lawyers alone.

Those are questions for mothers, fathers and grandparents.

The intellectual-property provisions make those questions even more important.

Alpha understandably retains ownership of the technology it brought into Springfield. But the agreement also says Alpha owns improvements, modifications and derivative works of its platform, curriculum, methodologies and tools, including those created in connection with the pilot.

Springfield educators' expertise has value, too. Yet if SEZP personnel provide suggestions or feedback regarding Alpha's platform or curriculum, the agreement allows Alpha to use that feedback without restriction or obligation, subject to protections against identifying people or disclosing protected information.

Springfield does retain ownership of its student records, assessment results and independently created evaluation materials. That is an important protection and should be acknowledged.

But consider the larger exchange.

Springfield provides the children. SEZP provides the classroom, devices, internet infrastructure, educators and supervision. Our educators provide their professional experience and potentially their feedback.

Alpha provides the technology at no charge during the pilot, retains its intellectual property and improvements, and the agreement leaves future fees to a separate agreement if the program continues or expands.

Maybe that will ultimately prove to be a worthwhile bargain. But Springfield parents deserve to understand the bargain. Because there are really two learners in this classroom. Our children are learning from technology.

The technology may also be learning from our children.

If Springfield's children, teachers and public infrastructure help demonstrate what works, reveal what fails or generate insights that improve a privately owned educational product, we should ask a simple question:

Who owns the value we help create?

Free technology is not necessarily free when the experiment itself has value.

Parents, This Is Your Classroom Too

This is where I want this conversation to leave the conference rooms.

Parents should not have to wait for a union grievance, a lawyer's letter or a newspaper article to understand what is happening in their child's classroom.

If your child attends Kiley, ask questions.

Ask whether your child is participating. Ask what information is being collected. Ask to see the consent and privacy documents. Ask how your child's information can be used. Ask what happens if you do not consent. Ask how students with IEPs and 504 plans will be protected. Ask who is evaluating the experiment. Ask what outside researchers receive. Ask whether parents will see the complete results, including results that do not support expansion.

The agreement itself says SEZP is responsible for obtaining parental or guardian consents required for participation.

Parents should insist that consent be meaningful, understandable and informed.

Do not accept "it's just a pilot" at the end of the conversation.

Your child is not "just a pilot."

That is your son. That is your daughter. That is somebody's grandchild sitting behind that screen.

I am a teacher, but I am also a father. If somebody wanted to place my child inside an educational experiment designed in part to determine whether a privately owned model works in a particular population, I would want to know before the first login — not after the results came back.

Springfield parents deserve that same respect.

I am not asking families to fear artificial intelligence. I want AI in my toolbox as a teacher.

Give me technology that helps differentiate lessons. Give me a system that identifies a mathematical misconception before it becomes a six-month learning gap. Give teachers tools that translate information for families and eliminate administrative work so we can spend more time with students.

There is a profound difference between AI working for a teacher and a teacher working around AI.

One uses technology to strengthen education. The other risks redesigning education around technology.

Before this pilot expands, publish the research design. Explain the data-sharing agreement in language families can understand. Tell parents exactly what information is collected and how deidentified information may be used. Explain who owns improvements developed through the pilot. Establish what success and failure mean before the results arrive. Tell us what role outside

researchers will play. Make the complete findings public, including findings that do not support expansion.

Most importantly, give parents a seat at the table before a pilot becomes a model and a model becomes a system.

A child is not a productivity problem waiting to be solved. A school is not a software platform. A teacher is not an inefficient version of a computer.

Our Black and Latino children should not automatically become the proving ground for the next education market because their schools have greater needs. Their poverty should never make them more available for experimentation. Their struggles should not make their consent less important.

Their need should make us more protective of them, not less.

When somebody experiments with the future of our children, parents should never be the last people to know.

Teach them to read. Teach them to write. Teach them to calculate, reason, communicate, disagree and struggle through difficult ideas. Then teach them to master the technology that will shape their future.

The machine should be the tool. The child should remain the thinker.

Someday these sixth graders will become adults, and someone will ask who changed their lives.

I hope they remember a teacher. I hope they remember a person.