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This week's clearest shift is structural: AI is moving from add-on tool to operating layer in school models, skills platforms, and institutional workflows. The brief also tracks how assessment is being redesigned around evidence of learning, and why the strongest deployments remain tightly scoped and human-accountable.

AI-native learning models are getting real

This week's biggest shift is structural: AI is moving from add-on tool to the operating layer of some school models and learning platforms [1, 2, 3].

At Alpha School, leaders describe TimeBack as a background system rather than a classroom chatbot. It assesses what each student has mastered, keeps them in the zone of proximal development, and uses spaced repetition, rapid quizzing, and immediate feedback to adjust pace and difficulty [1, 4]. Alpha says this lets K-8 students finish core academics in about two hours a day, while guides focus on mentoring, motivation, and afternoon life-skills workshops; the school also reports double expected NWEA MAP growth [1, 4].

Alpha School's Bold Reimagination of Education | MacKenzie Price & Wendy Kopp (12:10)

The model is also moving beyond one flagship campus. Alpha plans Boston-area sites next year, and says a lower-cost Texas Sports Academy variant using the same two-hour academic model is showing similar two-times learning gains even though many students there come from the bottom 40% academically [5, 6]. But even Alpha does not present this as full automation: for kindergarten and first-grade reading, the school says students still get 30 minutes a day with a reading specialist rather than relying only on apps [7, 8].

Duolingo shows the same pattern on the product side. The company says two non-engineers with no chess knowledge used AI tools to prototype a full chess course in about six months, and that course now has 7 million daily active users [2]. More broadly, Duolingo says AI enabled 50 times more content production in the last two years than in its first 12 years, while product managers increasingly bring working prototypes instead of written documents [9, 2].

Duolingo CEO Reveals The Future of Jobs & AI in 2026 (4:57)

Access is widening too. Duolingo says AI conversation practice is moving from its highest-priced tier toward cheaper tiers and likely free access [2]. Google's Gemini is pushing in a similar direction with free SAT practice tests built with Princeton Review resources and instant feedback, on top of its LearnLM tutoring system, with expansion planned to other exams such as India's Joint Entrance Examination [10]. A separate study at two Thai universities found Gemini ahead of ChatGPT for English learners' academic writing on multimodal feedback and source integration [10].

The limitation is just as clear. Duolingo's CEO says motivation remains the hardest part of learning, and teachers still outperform AI on inspiration and context [11, 2]. Tech & Learning also notes that subtle inaccuracies remain a real risk in AI-based test prep [10].

Assessment is being redesigned around evidence, not output

A second major theme is that institutions are treating AI not just as an integrity problem, but as a signal that many assignments no longer show what a learner actually knows.

The EvoLLLution argues that if faculty cannot tell whether an assignment reflects student understanding, the problem is the assignment design, not AI alone

[12]. Its proposed response is to move toward real-time interaction, dialogue, explanations, process evidence, and work valued for interpretation and judgment rather than word count or format [12].

Ethan Mollick's practical playbook points in the same direction. He argues that the "homework apocalypse" is real, but manageable if schools rely more on in-class writing, frequent testing, and flipped classrooms [13]. He also draws a sharper product distinction: AI that simply gives answers can make students think they learned when they did not, while AI that acts as a tutor — quizzing, personalizing, and withholding direct answers — shows strong gains in controlled studies, including work from Taiwan, Kenya, Harvard, and Stanford [13].

That is why interface design now matters. Mollick called the quiet removal of ChatGPT's visible Study Mode a mistake because parents and teachers need an easy way to steer students toward tutor behavior rather than answer behavior; OpenAI later said the feature still exists through `/study` and `/learn`, but Mollick noted that slash commands are not intuitive for most users [14, 15].

> "We really need to embrace AI as a teammate, not in place of any human" [16]

VLACS is translating that idea into assessment design. Leaders are exploring discussion-based assessments where AI can raise additional questions while instructors verify learning, and they argue that if AI can complete a course, the course itself may need to shift toward more authentic, project-based work [16].

In higher ed more broadly, EDUCAUSE says AI is no longer a future trend but an accepted part of teaching and learning that is actively reshaping the student-instructor relationship, especially as students question why instructors may use AI while students face more prohibitive guidance. The report frames the broader challenge as a push-pull between empowerment and surveillance [3].

The strongest deployments are controlled, narrow, and human-accountable

The most convincing operational examples this week were not open-ended chatbots. They were bounded systems with defined knowledge bases, staff workflows, and clear human responsibility.

At Lone Star College, an internal advising chatbot built from about 250 validated questions across advising, admissions, and financial aid has handled more than 70,000 student conversations in a year, saving nearly 10,000 advisor hours by taking repetitive informational questions off advisors' plates [17]. Advisors were told from the start that the bot was an assistant rather than a replacement, and the college says the system is holding at roughly 96% accuracy on its top questions [17].

Examples of the Horizon Trends in Practice: Scaling AI Enabled Advising (4:06)

Instructional design teams are also using AI to create richer course materials. At Belmont, designers are using AI to turn faculty experiences into interactive empathy interviews — scripts from AI, lifelike audio from ElevenLabs, and images from ChatGPT or Claude — so activities that once took days or weeks to stage can be produced and refined quickly [18].

In the Netherlands, the EduGenAI pilot is giving higher education and vocational institutions a local AI environment — mostly open-source models hosted locally, plus some commercial options — to experiment safely while retaining control over data storage, model use, and allowed use cases [19]. The project is also shaped by European rules that classify some educational uses, such as checking student work, as high risk and subject to certification [19]. Just as important, the pilot is framed as institutional learning, not just tool testing: participants get AI-literacy training, policy support, and space to work through tensions between privacy, transparency, and student autonomy [19].

That same need for institutional capacity is showing up in faculty practice. A new OER+AI framework offers six entry points — Curate, Contextualize, Co-create, Cultivate, Amplify, and Sustain — to help faculty use generative AI in open educational resources while staying focused on pedagogy, copyright, and human-centric design [20]. The authors also warn that institutions without real GenAI capacity risk creating a split between a small group of pioneers and a

much larger sidelined faculty majority [20].

What This Means

- **For K-12 leaders:** The boldest AI stories are no longer just about a classroom app. They are about redesigned schedules, staffing, and school models. But even the most AI-forward examples still keep humans central for motivation, mentoring, and early literacy [1, 7, 11, 2].
- **For higher ed:** If AI can produce acceptable assignments, assessment has to move toward explanation, dialogue, process, and authentic application. That is a design challenge more than a detection challenge [12, 16].
- **For student support teams:** Narrowly scoped assistants can create real capacity when the knowledge base is validated and staff remain accountable. Lone Star's advising bot is a strong example of AI taking repetitive work so humans can spend more time on guidance and relationships [17].
- **For self-directed learners:** Access is improving fast — free SAT practice in Gemini, cheaper AI conversation practice in Duolingo — but reliability and learning mode still matter. A tutor that questions you is safer than a chatbot that finishes the task for you [10, 2, 14].
- **For institutional buyers and regulators:** Controlled environments are becoming a competitive advantage. The Dutch EduGenAI pilot shows why institutions want sovereignty over data, clearer permitted use cases, and room to test tools before broad rollout [19].
- **For L&D teams and lifelong learners:** AI is lowering the cost of building custom tools and learning products. Andrew Ng argues this means more people should learn to prompt and use AI to code, not fewer, including people in nontechnical roles [21].

Watch This Space

- **Platform consolidation around continuous learning:** Andrew Ng says Coursera and Udemy have merged to build a broader skills platform as AI changes work and increases demand for continuous, job-relevant learning [22].
- **State-scale deployments:** Dan Hart described Educhat at the New South Wales Department of Education as serving half a million students, a reminder that some of the largest AI rollouts are happening inside public systems, not just consumer apps [23].
- **Non-engineer builders and AI-native subject expansion:** Duolingo's chess launch and Andrew Ng's examples of marketers and recruiters building custom tools both point to a future where smaller teams can create learning products and internal workflows faster [2, 21].
- **New delivery formats:** Alpha says a Fortnite-style game built on top of its learning platform is already in pilot, with broader rollout expected to surface in August [4].
- **Sector-specific AI infrastructure:** The Dutch EduGenAI pilots are

explicitly being used to decide what the final ecosystem should look like, making them a useful model to watch for other system-level deployments [19].

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