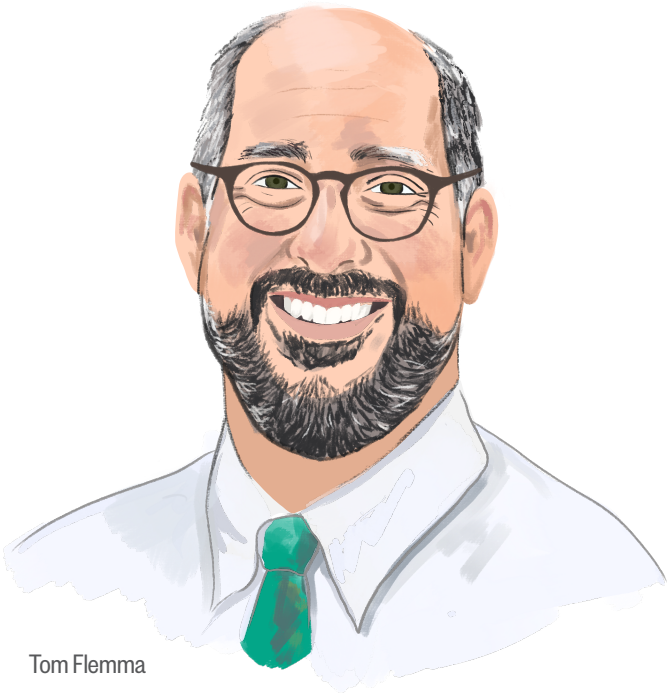


Tom Flemma



Max Flemma

New Frontiers

A head of school and his son discuss AI in the classroom

ILLUSTRATION BY BRITTANY FAN

In the age of artificial intelligence (AI), students are experimenting with new tools—from chatbots that help with writing to tools that generate study guides—as part of their everyday learning. But where's the line between learning smarter and letting technology do the work? Educators are asking tough questions about academic honesty, creativity, and what it really means to learn. While some schools are embracing AI capabilities, others are banning it outright or trying to walk some middle line. In this edited exchange, Tom Flemma, head of school at North Shore Country Day School (IL), and his son, Max—a senior at the school and a savvy AI user—discuss how AI is changing the way students think about schoolwork.

Tom Flemma: Max, tell me a little bit about the way you think of AI in schooling.

Max Flemma: The first thing I think of, which I'm sure is the first thing you think of, is cheating. I mean, it makes the busywork of school easy.

Tom: Can you give me an example of what you think of as busywork? Because a lot of teachers would just call that work.

Max: For my government class, I had to find a bunch of resources on Robert Yates, a delegate representing New York at the Constitutional Convention. Instead of going through the bookmarks on his Wikipedia page, I asked ChatGPT to give me a few resources. Because ChatGPT is able to read a document in a millisecond, it provided me with eight different secondhand and firsthand sources. I ended up reading Robert Yates's personal notes from the Constitutional Convention that he sent to the governor of New York. This was from a national database that I would have never found on my own because I didn't even know it existed. When I want different levels of detail, that's where Google falls short and an AI chatbot can step in.

Tom: Do you think ChatGPT is now a better research resource than Google?

Max: The answer would be different for every single thing you're researching. ChatGPT is not accurate, and unless you specifically ask for it, ChatGPT doesn't tell you where it's getting its information. So you can't fully trust it.

Tom: Why do you think teachers might be afraid of ChatGPT or AI?

Max: Last year in our English class discussion about the book *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, there was a chapter that was really confusing. More than one person used AI to summarize it; students were coming to high-level conclusions, and it didn't make sense for them to be saying the same exact thing. So it kind of kills creativity and critical thinking, which I think is what teachers would be scared about. AI can be used as a supplement for learning, but it can also be used as an excuse not to learn.

Tom: I love the fact that you can make that distinction because, as a school administrator and former teacher, I think that's what is so frightening to us. It's not just being against cheating, which is obviously wrong. Current teachers and administrators feel that there are certain things that are important to learn, and there are certain ways that you need to learn them. And these tools can shortcut that learning. They can make you lazy. If you don't practice your critical thinking skills, if you don't exercise that muscle, it will atrophy. And if you never develop that muscle because you're always using AI or technology, then what is the value of the education? You won't learn those core skills that you are going to need in the world.

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I certainly don't want you to get the sense that I don't believe that AI is a really important tool. I think it's going to be absolutely critical for your generation to understand how it works, how to use it. I know you've found some of these tools really beneficial and not just because they are time-saving. Can you talk about how you've used some of the tools in school?

Max: I've never been a super strong science student. On my first bio test, I studied the way that I had in the past, which was watching videos on the subject and doing practice problems that I found online. And I got an 82, which is not a bad grade, but I wasn't happy with that. For the second test, the teacher gave us a study guide of topics that were going to be on the test. I gave the chapter from the textbook, the study guide the teacher gave us, and an example bio problem I found online to Claude.ai [an AI chatbot]. I asked it to make a 100-question, multiple-choice exam based on the information, and I used that to study. I got a 93 on that test, which is a 10-percentage point increase. I didn't pay more attention during

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class. I didn't take better notes. I just studied differently with different aids.

Tom: So here's the big question: Do you feel that you learned the material the same, less, or more through this method of studying?

Max: I think more. To take a step back, one of the limitations of school in general can be that there are kids who don't learn by sitting in a class listening to a teacher lecture. And once they figure out how they learn best, I think that opens a million doors for them.

Tom: So AI tools like Claude can be a really good way to sift through a whole lot of material to get to the key elements and then allow you to practice those?

Max: Yeah, and that leads me to the next AI tool that I love, which is Google's NotebookLM. Its responses are completely based on the information you give it. It doesn't look for outside info. For example, in my AP government class, we had a simulated Constitutional Convention, and I had to give a statement to the class about Robert Yates's views on federalism. I think I had 14 sources, primary and secondary, and I had notes on all of them. I put every one of the almost 30 documents into NotebookLM. Based on the notes and resources, I had it give me the top 10 ideas and phrases to help me turn 30 multipage documents into a two-page, double-spaced speech. I had NotebookLM give me the structure that would be most effective with the phrases. I suppose you could argue that is an attack on the critical thinking aspect. But what it didn't do, which ChatGPT would have, was write it for me.

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Tom: It's like having a research assistant. It sounds incredibly useful, but I do wonder if the X number of hours you previously would have spent thinking, organizing, and outlining is an essential part of the learning process. I know you did the research. I know you read all the documents, but you did lose out on the hard work of having to find those patterns and sift and organize. For somebody of my generation, that was a really important part of learning.

Max: I agree, and you probably don't want to hear this, but I think the biggest reason that kids use AI is because we have a ton of work to do. If I had had the time, I fully believe that I could have gotten to the same conclusion that AI got to in five minutes. But I'm taking four AP classes. I'm taking Chinese. I play a varsity sport all three seasons. I think that after a certain amount of work is put in, it is still a really good learning experience. And NotebookLM only gives back as much as you can give to it.

Tom: There are some schools that have basically said you may not use AI. What I'm hearing you say is that this is incredibly powerful, and it's going to change learning. We all need to figure out how we're going to coexist and leverage this technology.

Max: Yes, and I have a really good example of how a school can use AI to teach in the classroom setting. Last year I took microeconomics, and we were studying behavioral economics. My teacher gave ChatGPT a prompt and then our job was to figure out where did ChatGPT hit the nail on the head, where did it nick the nail, and where did it miss completely? It showed us the limitations of AI, and it taught us to think critically. The project was more about the uses of AI, I suppose, than it was about behavioral economics.

Tom: Well, the beauty of that example, and maybe that's a great place to end, is you're using a new tool, you're experimenting with it to find its benefits and its limitations, and you had a really wonderful human teacher who carefully designed that exercise to develop critical thinking skills in the best sense of the word while teaching you about this new technology.