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Beaver County educators learning AI skills through CMU partnership

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Beaver County teachers are learning how to use AI in the classroom through a partnership between the Beaver Valley Intermediate Unit and Carnegie Mellon University.

The collaboration works to integrate the technology in a county with small, rural schools.

“The conversation goes to equity and fairness,” Cole Eged, a social studies teacher at Freedom High School, said. “All coming together as a team of educators, across multiple communities, across multiple school districts, we’re able to pull each other up and provide for each other what a more affluent district may be able to provide for their individual staff.”

The partnership started this school year and consists of teachers from 13 of the county's 14 school districts, and several charter schools.

So far, those involved completed two out of four sessions, which have focused on what AI looks like in a district, what policies officials should have regarding the technology and creating a statement and expectations for students and staff using AI programs.

The goal is to create a cohort of educators across the county with a background in AI who can spur conversations about the technology and what it might look like in individual districts, according to Lindsay Forman, a K-12 coordinator at CMU.

“It's not a cookie cutter thing,” she said. “We don't have an expectation that everybody lands in the same place.”

But that’s “also really exciting to see what will come of this as they start those conversations and the training with their teachers,” Ms. Forman said.

AI is a growing trend in districts nationwide. An October report from the nonpartisan, nonprofit Center for Democracy & Technology found that in 2024-25, 85% of teachers who responded to the survey used AI in class. And 86% of students said they used AI for school or personal use.

But a May 2024 report from the the Center on Reinventing Public Education, an Arizona State University research organization, found that more advantaged school districts are ahead of urban, rural and high-poverty districts in terms of AI use.

Because of that urban and rural districts will need access to high-quality professional development, the report found.

In Beaver, the partnership started after a meeting between Ms. Forman and the Beaver Valley Intermediate Unit, which provides educational programming and resources to county districts.

Today, the training is free for teachers. The BVIU uses state funding to cover costs.

For Susan Emmett, the BVIU's program specialist, the partnership allows teachers to know they're learning practices from CMU, a leader in AI research.

"They can see that I'm not just reading an article and playing around with something and being like, 'Here teachers try this,'" Ms. Emmett said. "I'm also getting it from the researchers, I'm building my content knowledge in order to help build their teachers' content knowledge."

Nick Jovonovich, a high school English teacher in Western Beaver, a rural district of 670 students, called the partnership between CMU and the BVIU "massive."

Schools in Beaver County, he said, often lack resources and funding because of their smaller sizes.

By collaborating, smaller schools can pool their resources and create ideas for how to best implement AI in the classroom, Mr. Jovonovich said.

"Having [CMU's] oversight and expertise is going to be massive for us and what we're able to do not just within this workshop but then what we can report back to our own individual districts and implement on a building level, on a district level and seemingly on a county level," Mr. Jovonovich said.

In neighboring Blackhawk, a district with a mix of rural and suburban communities that educates 2,300 students, Dana Cox, a middle school English teacher and technology facilitator, said so far she's learned about different AI tools for the classroom, how the technology functions and how to train other educators on the tools.

Based on that training she's tested different programs such as Magic School, which helps teachers plan lessons, write assessments and generate individualized education plans. Through that, Ms. Cox takes pieces of text students are reading and adapts it to their reading levels, something that would normally take hours to do herself.

Still, before the sessions, Ms. Cox said she was hesitant about AI and the potential for students to cheat, but “once you see all of the virtues it can do for students and how it can give accessibility to them, to things that we have never dreamed of, it really is a tool to consider and use thoughtfully. I went from being a little hesitant about kids cheating to fully embracing it and seeing it as a tool that can be used to help kids prepare for their future.”

Blackhawk, she said, is developing an internal AI committee and creating a policy.

At Freedom, a small, rural district of almost 1,200 students, Mr. Eged is experimenting with the technology in his world history curriculum by using it for research, peer review or having it generate interviews with historical figures and then fact-checking the answers.

While Freedom does not yet have an AI policy, Mr. Eged noted that administrators and the BVIU have encouraged educators to test the technology in the classroom.

“That’s the only real way that we’re going to be able to see where AI fits, where it doesn’t, where it’s successful and then places where it falls short,” Mr. Eged said.

Moving forward, teachers will learn what AI literacy looks like across K-12, Ms. Emmett, from the BVIU, said. That means focusing on kids in kindergarten and how they’re interacting with Amazon’s Alexa or Apple’s Siri.

The group’s final session will take place at Carnegie Mellon.

“It’s a tool that’s here to stay,” Ms. Emmett said, “so we’ve got to learn how to work with it.”