

Heartland Gen Z Adopting AI Quickly, but Schools and Workplaces Lag Behind

Bentonville, AR (May 8, 2025) — As artificial intelligence reshapes the workforce, a new study by Heartland Forward, Gallup and the Walton Family Foundation reveals that Generation Z youth in the American Heartland are embracing AI — but feel largely unprepared for an AI-driven future due to gaps in education and workplace policies.

In a survey of nearly 1,500 young people aged 13 to 28 living across 20 heartland states, 77% report using generative AI tools like ChatGPT, with 43% saying they do so weekly. Despite this widespread adoption, just 10% of K-12 students say their teachers have helped prepare them to use AI in future jobs or education, and only 9% of working Gen Zers feel extremely prepared to use AI at work.

The findings were presented by Angie Cooper, president and chief operating officer of Heartland Forward, and Romy Drucker, director of the education program at the Walton Family Foundation. The presentation took place at the Heartland Summit, Heartland Forward's flagship event in Bentonville, Arkansas. The Heartland Summit brings together approximately 350 policymakers, investors, entrepreneurs, business leaders, philanthropists and thought leaders from across the country.

“Artificial intelligence is reshaping tomorrow's economy and redefining how we compete, learn and innovate today,” said Ross DeVol, chief executive officer and chairman of the board of Heartland Forward. “These findings underscore the pressing need for expanded AI training and education across the Heartland. That's why Heartland Forward is committed to preparing the middle of the country to lead on AI by encouraging innovation, supporting forward-looking public policies and delivering accessible upskilling opportunities.”

Gen Z Is Embracing AI, but Schools Struggle

Nearly half (47%) of middle and high school students in America's Heartland report using AI for homework and learning outside of school. Yet only about one in four (26%) say their school has a clear AI policy permitting its use. This highlights a significant disconnect between students' eagerness to adopt emerging technologies and the readiness of educational institutions to support that adoption. Despite limited formal support, interest in AI education remains strong: About half of Gen Z students say they would enroll in a class on AI if it were offered, even among those attending schools that currently ban its use.

Gaps in Access: Rural, Low-Income and Industry Divides

While enthusiasm for AI is high, access to meaningful AI learning opportunities varies widely. Young people in nonmetro areas of the Heartland are 11 percentage points less likely to use AI weekly compared to peers in metro areas (34% vs. 45%), and less likely to say their schools have clear AI policies permitting its use (19% vs. 28%).

Workplace gaps also exist: Gen Zers employed in STEM fields (61%) and education (59%) are far more likely to report that their employers allow AI use compared to just 10% of healthcare workers and 17% of those in blue-collar or service jobs. These gaps in access and opportunity risk deepening existing inequalities if left unaddressed.

Clear Policies Drive Confidence and Readiness

The report finds that clear school and workplace policies permitting and encouraging AI use strongly correlate with greater AI engagement, confidence and learning among Gen Z youth. In contrast, institutions that ban AI or fail to establish clear guidelines see significantly lower rates of adoption, particularly among students and workers in rural and lower-income areas. Without deliberate action to build AI literacy, many young people in the Heartland risk being left behind in an increasingly AI-driven economy.

Methodology

Results are based on a Gallup Panel™ web survey conducted March 6-13, 2025, with a sample of 3,465 13- to 28-year-olds living in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The Gallup Panel is a probability-based panel of U.S. adults who are randomly selected using address-based sampling methodology. Gallup also recruits using random-digit-dial phone interviews that cover landline and cellphones.

Within the overall sample, 1,517 13- to 18-year-old children were reached through adult members of the Gallup Panel who indicated they had at least one child 18 or younger living in their household. The remaining 1,948 18- to 28-year-old respondents are members of the Gallup Panel.

The majority of this report focuses on the 1,474 Gen Z children and adults living in one of the 20 heartland states. This includes 638 13- to 18-year-old children reached through their Panel member parents, and 836 adult Panel members.

For the total sample of 1,474 heartland Gen Z respondents, the margin of sampling error is ± 3.7 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 610 children still enrolled in K-12 school, the margin of sampling error is ± 5.0 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 864 Gen Z youth who are no longer enrolled in K-12 school, the margin of sampling error is ± 5.0 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups are higher.

About Heartland Forward:

Heartland Forward is a non-profit, policy think-and-do tank that turns ideas into action for states and local communities. Our mission is to accelerate economic growth, change the narrative about the middle of the country and generate \$500 million of economic impact to the heartland by 2030. We do this through applied research, community-driven programs, policy and convenings — focusing on regional competitiveness, talent pipeline and health and wellness.

About the Walton Family Foundation

The Walton Family Foundation is, at its core, a family-led foundation. Three generations of the descendants of our founders, Sam and Helen Walton, and their spouses work together to lead the foundation and create access to opportunity for people and communities. We work in three areas: improving education, protecting rivers and oceans and the communities they support, and investing in our home region of Northwest Arkansas and the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta. To learn more, visit [waltonfamilyfoundation.org](https://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org) and follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

About Gallup

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 80 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of employees, customers, students and citizens than any other organization in the world.

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