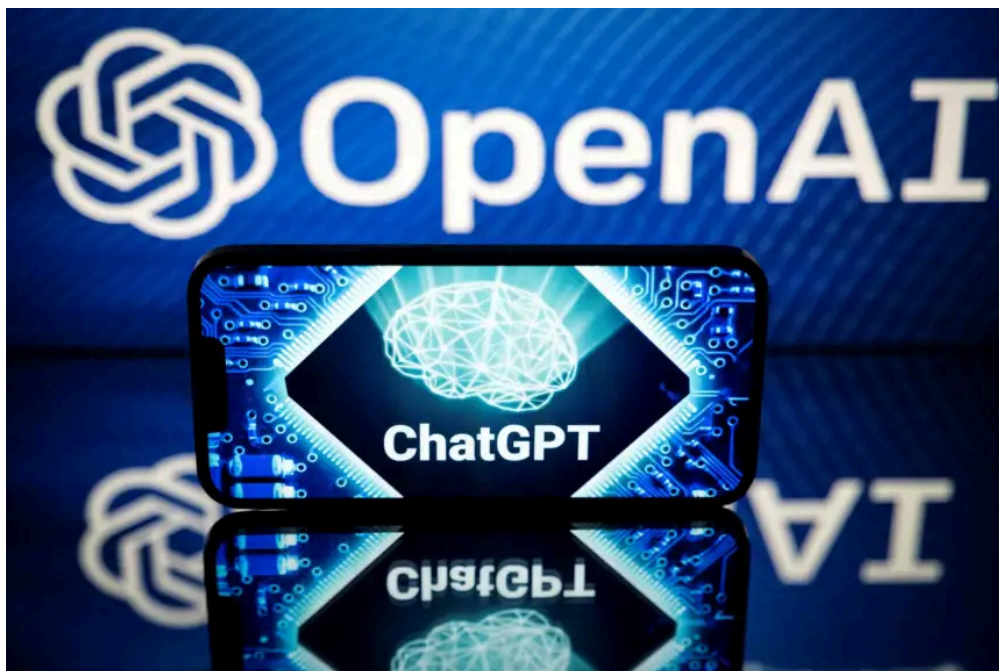


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# Can CT kids benefit from AI? Here's what happened when they got a chance to.



This picture taken on Tuesday, October 22, 2023, in San Francisco, Calif., shows a smartphone screen displaying the logo for OpenAI's ChatGPT. (AP Photo/Chris Wedel)



By **BRAD TUTTLE**

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Kids these days are accustomed to hearing stern warnings against using [ChatGPT](#) or other AI chatbots for schoolwork.

Yet, while ChatGPT is sometimes derisively referred to as “CheatGPT” because of the ease with which students can use it to take shortcuts and plagiarize, tech optimists say AI has incredible potential to boost learning and creativity.

And at a recent two-day workshop at [Hartford Public Library's Albany branch](#), a group of tech-savvy library employees and UConn faculty and graduate students shared a different message, actively encouraging middle school and high school students to play around with artificial intelligence as much as possible.

Dubbed “AI Odyssey,” the event took place after school early this month and featured a half-dozen stations spread throughout the library. At each station, adults equipped with laptops and the latest software supervised as students put AI to work for them. They prompted ChatGPT and other AI tools to answer questions they were curious about, provide explanations of complicated subjects, create 3-D images based on drawings or photographs, and more.

One boy created a series of images depicting a muscled robot with spiky claws and a TV for a head, refining his prompts until the final portrait lined up just right with his artistic sensibility. A girl directed ChatGPT to sketch a pony with a pink tail in a field of pastel flowers, then shifted gears and sought answers on how God created the universe. Another student, a high school sophomore, wanted customized assistance on how to do well on the SAT and find colleges that would be a good fit for him. He riddled the AI with multiple questions before being satisfied with the results, and then took a photo of the step-by-step advice listed on the laptop screen.

AI has virtually endless knowledge at its command and communicates in accessible language, with no coding required. It's available 24/7, it never gets tired or loses patience, and it can serve as a phenomenally handy one-on-one tutor and creative partner — for the people who have access to the technology and know how to use it.

## “An equalizing moment”

The mission behind events like the AI Odyssey is to break down “digital divide” barriers and try to ensure that everyone can take advantage of this powerful technology, which experts say will be a [core component of jobs](#), research and [human beings’ everyday existence in the future](#).



File photo of the Hartford Public Library. (Michael McAndrews / Hartford Courant)

Michael Elder, Hartford Public Library’s assistant director of teen and young adult services, believes AI can function as an “emancipatory tool” that levels the playing field and empowers marginalized groups who often struggle to compete versus people with more wealth and privilege.

“It’s an innovative, emergent tool,” Elder says of ChatGPT and other AI technology. “This is an equalizing moment, and we see it at the library as an opportunity.”

Elder thinks it’s critical for institutions such as the Hartford Public Library to be proactive in helping young patrons learn about AI, with proper oversight and guidance. “It’s great to be first because you can be in a position of leadership,” he says. “Worst-case scenario, we do nothing, and you fall behind while the rest of the country, the world, you know, adopts it.”

Connecticut may be one of the country’s wealthiest states, but 27% of [Hartford’s population lives in poverty](#) compared to roughly 10% statewide. Upper Albany, the neighborhood in Hartford’s North End where the Albany library branch is located, is a low-income district where residents are predominantly Black, including many with Caribbean roots. The library sits within a few blocks of several schools, including Achievement First Hartford, a charter school with middle and high school facilities on the other side of the Albany branch’s parking lot.

## New literacy

Desiree Anderson, the Albany manager, says her library is a popular hub for local students, welcoming 50 to 80 regulars after school on a typical day. Among the reasons the library draws in so many young people is the presence of YOUmedia, a digital learning and maker space for teenagers that features a wide range of the latest tech.

“They’re really into VR or virtual reality. They’re really into Roblox, video games, graphic novels,” Anderson says of the library’s young patrons.

She says parents in the neighborhood tend to run small businesses or have working-class jobs, and she’s doubtful their kids get much exposure to AI and other cutting-edge, often expensive technology. Programs like AI Odyssey and the library’s tech space can certainly help the cause. “YOUmedia tends to get, like, the creme de la creme, top-of-the-line kind of thing,” she says.

The event at the Albany library came about through a partnership with the Hartford Public Library and the University of Connecticut, working jointly with the Connecticut / Baden-Württemberg Human Rights Research Consortium, an interdisciplinary collaboration involving researchers at institutions throughout the Constitution State and a state in southwest Germany. Sessions similar to AI Odyssey are taking place in Germany this fall, and additional AI workshops are planned for the Hartford Public Library in the spring of 2025.

Arash Zaghi, a civil and environmental engineering professor at UConn whose graduate students worked with the young people at AI Odyssey, knows firsthand how powerful AI can be. He uses ChatGPT constantly. As a non-native English speaker diagnosed with ADHD as an adult, he finds the technology enormously helpful in everything from formulating his ideas for work emails to asking advice about family problems. Lately, Zaghi has been reading a lot of Eastern philosophy and routinely pauses to ask ChatGPT to explain complicated concepts, accelerating his understanding greatly.

To Zaghi, AI is not merely another flashy technological tool. He considers it “a new literacy.”

“People compare it with the calculator. People compare it with the computer. I compare it to fire, or literacy, in terms of its equalizing power,” Zaghi says.

“Imagine what happened to those people who were able, I don’t know 50,000 years ago, to harness the power of fire and what happened to those that didn’t.”





Nearly half of recent hires used AI to apply, according to a survey by Resume Builder released in May. (Dreamstime/TNS)

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Zaghi is well aware of the criticism and concerns about AI, but he thinks it's foolish and misguided to tell kids not to use it. The rich and privileged will surely utilize the technology to their benefit, so why should poorer marginalized groups miss out?

AI chatbots have been criticized for their proclivity to “hallucinate” (make information up), but proponents say the frequency of the technology producing false and embarrassing claims has decreased significantly. Zaghi says that AI's large language models — which can be biased because they've been trained primarily on the mainstream writings of white people — can be improved as more people of color from less-privileged backgrounds interact with and train them through prompts and responses.

As for the idea that children's reading and writing skills would be diminished if they resort to AI chatbots often, supporters of the AI Odyssey program believe just the opposite is true. Hartford Public Library's Elder points out that the more young people interact with ChatGPT, the more they're reading and writing and developing these abilities.

Sure, students today can plug a prompt into a chatbot, and, seconds later, have a fully formed essay ready to be cut and pasted in for a homework assignment. The net result would be zero learning (and possibly, an F in the class if their plagiarism is discovered). But, when used properly, AI can help students shape their own ideas and fine-tune thoughts largely in the same way a good teacher or private tutor would. It's a form of learning that's far more interactive and less passive compared to watching a video or sitting through a classroom lecture, proponents say.

Vaiashnavi Sivaprasad, one of Zaghi's graduate students who is pursuing a Ph.D. in education, says that almost none of the young participants she worked with at AI Odyssey had ever tried the technology before. Their main familiarity with it came via input from teachers who discouraged the use of ChatGPT because it amounted to cheating.

However, Sivaprasad thinks AI chatbots have immense potential to tap into students' curiosity and help them learn in ways that are vastly superior to traditional searches on Google or YouTube.

"The useful thing about ChatGPT is it functions less as a search engine and more as like a private tutor," she says. "You can ask follow-up questions. It remembers your follow-up questions. It sort of builds this database. It knows what you're interested in over time, so it's more like you're talking to someone one on one, rather than just dumping these questions."

Sivaprasad's experience supervising one young man at the library illustrates how kids might explore with AI in a quick 15-minute session. The boy began by asking ChatGPT to come up with some "creative burns" — clever insults and putdowns — but the chatbot's results proved unamusing and corny. He then set off prompting the AI with a dizzying assortment of queries that included fuel-efficiency ratings in cars, the Pythagorean theorem, black holes vs. white holes, the heaviest and lightest elements, and whether it's possible to build a star on Earth. Somehow, by the end, the boy was convinced he really wanted to visit Switzerland.

Sivaprasad says that many students during the AI event occasionally backspaced and rewrote messages out of concern that ChatGPT wouldn't understand misspelled words or poor grammar. She explained that their edits were unnecessary: One of the reasons the technology is so accessible is that it is accustomed to interacting with natural, conversational language, so there's no need to polish prose in prompts.

"I was like, you don't have to worry about that," she says. "ChatGPT doesn't care."

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