

# New student advisor is an AI bot that designs academic plans, suggests books

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Credit: AI-generated image

The Los Angeles school district on Wednesday unveiled a much-awaited AI tool named "Ed" to serve as a new student adviser, programmed to tell its young users and their parents about grades, tests results and attendance—while giving out assignments, suggesting readings and even helping students cope with nonacademic matters.

With Ed's introduction, L.A. schools Supt. Alberto M. Carvalho sought to establish the nation's second-largest school system as a hub for innovation.

"This is a technology that becomes a personal assistant to students," Carvalho said at a demonstration at Roybal Learning Center, west of downtown. "It demystifies the navigation of the day ... crunches the data in a way that it brings what students need."

Other [school systems](#) have pioneered similar platforms with chatbots—as educators try to engage students and families better to improve learning and attendance. But Ed takes such efforts to the highest level yet, said Joanna Smith-Griffin, chief executive of Boston-based AllHere, which has worked with districts across the country and won a \$6-million contract over five years to guide the L.A. effort.

At its core, Ed is designed to give students immediate answers about where they stand, what they need to do to make progress—or, more immediately, find out when their bus will arrive. It stands as an example of AI that could help students learn—a contrast from the reality that some students have used AI to cheat or other malfeasance, several experts said.

Ben Chida, senior education advisor to Gov. Gavin Newsom, sees a prime example of innovation.

"We can either wait for 10 years and then have it happen to us and have [tech companies](#) decide the logic of how AI applies to education—and then have to untangle that like we did with [social media](#)—or we could take hold, take control of our fate and futures, and say, 'Look, how do we harness this technology in our way?'"

At a table set up with computers, 12th-grader Guadalupe Gaona asked

the chatbot some questions.

"What are my grades?"

The program quickly responded with her grades in biology, government, dance, economics and modern lit. Her grades are strong and Ed added, "Keep up the good work!"

She tried other questions suggested by a reporter:

What can I do to improve my math?

"You can improve your math by completing activities on the Ed dashboard. If you need more help, you can log in to

[a link] for on-demand help. If you still need more support, please contact your school."

The answers were generic, not especially personalized, but did provide concrete—if sometimes obvious—suggestions. On-demand tutoring is a recent feature of L.A. Unified, part of pandemic recovery efforts, that is unrelated to the roll-out of Ed. This tutoring allows students to access homework help online on request. The innovation with Ed is its inclusion in a new, more comprehensive, one-stop platform.

Who can I talk to about my college applications? the [student](#) typed in.

"To get help with your college applications, you can send an email to [helpmeapply@lausd.net](mailto:helpmeapply@lausd.net). Keep going, you're doing great."

What school meetings can my parents attend?

Ed identified school site council and school board meetings, but did not

provide the promised links.

My bike was stolen. What should I do?

"I understand your bike was stolen. For this situation, you should contact the Los Angeles School Police Department. They have a Bike Patrol Team that might be able to help. "

A question about helping a friend with mental-health issues elicited a long list of possible contacts.

For now the district has put limits on the reach of the AI software—it has to stay within the district universe of information. A student, for example, would not likely be able to get a reference to a recent development in the war in Ukraine for a research paper, Carvalho said. But that door could be opened in the near future, he added, once district officials confirm that such an expansion would be safe to allow and lead to accurate results.

To harness the information and other learning platforms to work with Ed, L.A. Unified had to persuade its many education vendors to open the doors to their platforms—so that students and parents don't have separate paths, logins and passwords to reach different parts of the system.

Many vendors have [business models](#) that do just the opposite: create a closed ecosystem so that the client would have difficulty integrating with competing products.

Other elements of the effort: The chatbot is unavailable to students younger than 13. Filters flag obscene or insulting language for further review.

About 1,000 students have been testing the program since January. At their suggestion, the district added athletic team schedules and school food menus. Other practical information includes how soon the school bus will be arriving.

Animator Kevin O'Donnell worked on the voice, look, and personality of Ed, who is represented as a sun with sunglasses.

For older students, "it is about that utility, but with the younger kids, we have to have a character that they love," O'Donnell said. "And if they do love it, then as they grow, they'll gravitate back to it." Ed tells young students that he loves them and that they're superstars. "I've always found that if your character really loves the kids, the kids—the younger kids—tend to love the character."

As the students get older, the voice and the relationship changes to that of a teacher or older mentor, added O'Donnell.

Security issues are always a potential concern—could hackers access the data? Could students go to unsafe places on the internet? Carvalho seemed confident that the answer is no.

The project could prove a positive leading indicator for a school district better known for struggling to catch up, and notorious for costly technological misfires.

A vaunted new payroll system created problems for years. A new student information system resulted in classroom and administrative disarray for weeks. An iPads-for-all effort was visionary but derailed by high cost, poor planning and mismanagement. Early in Carvalho's tenure, a massive computer hack put critical district records at risk, but was contained in time to prevent a catastrophic systems failure.

Early reviews on Wednesday were positive, including from Nery Paiz, the head of the administrators union, whose school principals would bear the brunt of complaints about the system if it doesn't work or creates new administrative hassles.

Alan Arkatov, a senior advisor to President Michael Crow at Arizona State University, said the effort could be a game-changer in the wake of the pandemic's academic setbacks.

"There was epic learning loss, and the social emotional damage to parents, teachers and, most importantly, students was again, epic," Arkatov said. "This is an inflection point that could fundamentally alter the equation. This is a fundamental tool, which allows students to engage, to find their voice."

Ed is Part of effort to bring about full academic recovery from the pandemic within two years. Intrinsic to the new app is the creation of an individual learning plan for each student. But this element was less clear on Wednesday.

Carvalho had introduced the idea of an "Individual Acceleration Plan" as early as December of 2022, modeled on the Individualized Educational Program, or IEP, that aims to provide a unique, appropriate education and support plan for every student who has a disability.

Disability advocates have long criticized L.A. Unified for not properly managing its existing system of IEPs, but that isn't stopping Carvalho from making the general idea universal.

Officials said the chatbot technology, which can communicate in 100 languages, is currently available at the 100 schools the district has designated as its most "fragile," reaching about 54,000 students out of about 420,000 across the school system.

The app "shows how we really want to prepare our students for the future," said Karen Ramirez, a senior who is the student representative on the board of education. This sort of technology is "something that they're going to be working with throughout the entirety of their lives."

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