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Invited Column

Teaching with AI, Not for AI: Equity, Identity, & Authorship in Literacy

Tayler Pawlak
Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, EES Innovation, Indiana

Jordan Pridemore
Indianapolis Public Schools, Indianapolis, Indiana

ABSTRACT

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into literacy instruction has created new dilemmas for teachers, particularly around the balance of access, plagiarism, and authentic student voice. While AI can generate texts, prompts, and models with ease and speed, it raises critical questions about authorship, ownership, and student voice. Previous research in cognitive science and literacy instruction has demonstrated that cognitive offloading tools can support deep learning; however, little has been established on frameworks for explicitly teaching students and teachers to work with AI rather than for it. To address this gap, a three-stage framework illustrates how students can analyze, redirect, and integrate AI outputs while preserving authentic voice and thinking. The implications highlight how writing tasks can be redesigned to integrate AI in ways that maintain curiosity, perspective, and student identity.

KEYWORDS

artificial intelligence, literacy instruction, cognitive offloading, authorship, student voice, equity, digital literacy, writing pedagogy, cognitive flexibility, authentic learning

Education has always presented teachers with new conundrums. Teachers constantly face choices that require professional judgement and discretion. Extra recess on the first warm day of spring might refresh both the teacher and student, but it comes at the cost of losing precious instructional minutes. Adjusting the pacing of a unit gives struggling students more time to practice and master foundational skills, but it can leave proficient and advanced learners bored or disengaged. Choosing to read a rigorous and complex text aloud can ensure that all students have access to the content, but it reduces opportunities for independent analysis. These small, everyday choices reflect the larger balancing act of teaching. But more recently, the most polarizing dilemma is the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into literacy instruction.

The path to the front of a secondary ELA classroom is often paved with prose, poetry, and perfectly placed commas, and many teachers arrive there because of a deep appreciation for language itself. It is no surprise, then, that the instinctual response to AI in the classroom has been to catch students using it as a shortcut or to ban it altogether. But our energy should be directed toward a more productive challenge: not whether to use AI, but how to leverage it in ways that expand access and provide meaningful scaffolds without displacing authentic student thinking or diminishing their voice.

Not only does this dilemma persist in classrooms, but it also seeps into the practice of designing, building, revising, and creating educational materials. Recently, our team noticed a pervasive gap in the tools available to ELA teachers, more specifically, that teachers needed short, very precise formative assessments aligned to standards that also addressed the barrier created by

CONTACT **Tayler Pawlak**, Literacy Consultant, EES Innovation, IN; tayler@eesinnovation.com. **Jordan Pridemore**, Coordinator of Coaching and Intervention, Indianapolis Public Schools, Indianapolis, IN; pridemorej@myips.com

a student's lack of background knowledge. Our brazen idea was to create common formative assessments for each grade level. Because these assessments were intended to assess reading comprehension, we would need to generate texts that were the appropriate length and Lexile to gauge students' competency in an individual standard and assess their readiness for ILEARN. To ensure the resulting data assessed the Indiana Academic Standard and not a student's familiarity with the topic of the text, we identified a unifying theme for each grade level, a theme that students could predictably have had some experience with or that a teacher could support quickly with video or images. For second grade, all the texts and media examples centered around weather, while in secondary grades, themes became increasingly complex, like the impact of the First Amendment and the relationship between humankind and nature. Our hope was to utilize AI as a tool in creating these texts, allowing us to develop assessments and writing tasks that mirrored what students would experience in ILEARN.

Initially, we were blown away by the efficiency: in seconds, AI could generate a polished passage that might have taken hours to research and craft by hand. That instant productivity echoed the same immediate gratification students often experience when turning to AI. Yet as we studied the drafts more closely, the gaps quickly became apparent, and repetitive patterns emerged. The language was sound, but the texts lacked a richness that only the human touch can provide. What began as a time-saving tool quickly became a challenge–how to elevate AI's potential without allowing it to overshadow the qualities that make literacy powerful.

When writing our common formative assessments, we had to scrutinize every word of a passage to align questions with the standards. The superficiality of the AI-generated texts became increasingly apparent. For example, when drafting questions around 7.RC.5, analyze the development of two or more central ideas over the course of a text, we found the passage barely contained one central, let alone two, and therefore couldn't be used to assess the grade-level standard. The lack of depth meant the texts could not sustain the comprehension questions we wanted to elicit or provide students with meaningful evidence to analyze. This alignment forced us to confront the difference between craft and content when using AI to generate texts.

In the end, we wrote over 200 texts as a team; we say wrote instead of generated because that's ultimately what we did. We had access to AI throughout the process, but to produce the caliber of texts required, we had to deeply reflect on how voice, nuance, and complexity are created within a text, and how those qualities form authentic writing. Our lessons learned were that AI is not a replacement for an idea. It's a language model. Just as a sheet over your head creates the illusion of a ghost by taking shape over your form, a language model needs a strong kernel to form around. Without the shape of the person, the sheet collapses into nothing more than fabric. In the same way, without meaningful ideas, perspective, or identity, the AI-generated text collapses into a generic, repetitive prose. The illusion may appear convincing at first glance, but it cannot stand on its own without a human to give it shape.

Artificial Intelligence as a Cognitive Offload

Artificial intelligence has the potential to serve as what Sal Kahn describes in his new book, *Brave New Words* (2024), as a "personal tutor" or "teaching assistant," providing differentiation and scaffolding for students, allowing them to engage more meaningfully and authentically with the content. Khan's ideas reflect the concept of cognitive offloading, a term used in cognitive science to describe the use of tools to reduce the internal mental demands of a given task or challenge (Morrison & Richmond, 2020). Cognitive offloading is not a new concept in the educational space; calculators, graphic organizers, spell checkers, and manipulatives all serve the function of

cognitive offloading. While these tools were initially met with resistance and panic over diminishing student capacity, they are now widely accepted because they temporarily free up working memory, allowing learners to concentrate on meaning-making, problem-solving, and creativity.

Research on cognition widely supports this shift. Thinking is "slow and effortful," and heavily depends on working memory (Willingham, 2009). When tasks overwhelm working memory with various demands, such as graphological-semantics, students have less capacity for deep comprehension or higher-order thinking. Executive functions, such as cognitive flexibility, are essential for reading and writing, but can be compromised if cognitive resources are consumed by low-level tasks (Cartwright, 2023). Coupled together, research suggests that reducing unnecessary cognitive load is critical for creating space where deep and authentic literacy work can occur.

Within the framework of the Gradual Release of Responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), AI can serve as another tool to alleviate cognitive loads for both teachers and students. For teachers specifically, AI can reduce the load of designing lessons or units, allowing more time for responsive feedback and instruction. Similarly, AI can provide structured support during the guided and collaborative phases, as noted by Khan (2024), allowing students to allocate more cognitive energy to independent work.

When AI is leveraged for cognitive offloading, its efficacy depends on explicit instruction in ethical and purposeful use. Research on digital literacy emphasizes that students require guidance in accessing tools and in evaluating when and how those tools should be applied (Hobbs, 2010). Without structured guidance, modeling, and a reflection component, students risk developing an overreliance. Similar to how the Gradual Release of Responsibility model provides scaffolds as temporary supports (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), AI must be intentionally and strategically introduced so that learners eventually gain ownership of the thinking and writing processes. Explicitly teaching students how to use AI to serve as a cognitive offload ensures that AI remains a tool rather than becoming a replacement for original thought.

To address these challenges and preserve authentic writing, a three-stage process positions students to learn alongside AI rather than for it. The framework is segmented into three stages. In the first stage, students analyze AI-generated text to recognize predictable patterns and limitations. During the second stage, they refine and redirect outputs through purposeful questioning. Finally, in the third stage, students will integrate AI's support with their own ideas and voice to create authentic writing. Together, these stages cultivate authorship, critical thinking, and ethical use of AI within the writing process.

Table 1: Stages to Support Authentic Writing Practices with Artificial Intelligence

Stage 1: Pattern recognition in AI	Identify formulaic AI patterns; analyze for authenticity and voice
Stage 2: Directed Divergence	Refine prompts to deepen AI responses and add context and specific details
Stage 3: Reflective Synthesis	Integrate the AI scaffolds with personal voice, ideas, and ownership

Stage 1: Pattern Recognition in AI-Generated Texts

Pattern recognition refers to a student's ability to notice recurring features, structures, and organizations in a text. Literacy research has continuously emphasized its importance in reading comprehension and the writing process (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Skilled readers automatically recognize patterns in text structure, while novice readers need to be explicitly taught to identify patterns. As text complexity increases, pattern recognition becomes the key to making meaning of complex sentences and ultimately, complex texts. The same principle applies to the use of AI: identifying patterns and recognizing key features are the prerequisites for deeper engagement.

AI platforms, such as OpenAI's ChatGPT and Google's Gemini, are large language models (LLM) designed to predict the most probable sequence of words, which often results in formulaic structures with surface-level coherence rather than nuanced, authentic expression. Students who approach LLM-developed texts as authoritative may overlook these limitations. However, explicitly teaching students to spot these predictive patterns can help students recognize the importance of voice, nuance, and perspective. By working through the first stage: pattern recognition, students will strengthen their digital literacy and reinforce the idea that authentic writing is defined by individuality and meaning-making, not just correctness or fluency.

The first essential step in explicitly teaching students to work ethically and effectively with AI is helping them recognize the recurring patterns in AI-generated texts. Potkalitsky (2025) outlines three skills for students developing authorship with AI. Adapted for secondary students, the first stage centers on equipping students to identify where AI writing feels formulaic, overly generic, or disconnected from authentic voice.

To translate this stage into classroom practice, students need concrete strategies to practice analyzing AI-generated content. One effective method is to teach them to pose targeted questions to AI systems, using the responses as opportunities to identify formulaic patterns and reflect on what authentic writing requires. This strengthens the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing; by strengthening students' critical reading skills, we are informing their writing practice.

When engaging in this learning, students should first input the prompt into the AI to generate a sample draft. This initial output is now positioned as an object of analysis rather than a finished product. By examining the draft, students can identify common structural patterns, notice where phrasing feels generic, and recognize what is missing in terms of voice and nuance. This process lays the groundwork for critical evaluation, helping students see AI outputs as predictable and limited scaffolds rather than authentic models of writing.

After conducting an in-depth analysis of the output, students should assess the writer's responsibility to their reader by posing the question to the LLM platform. This question helps students move beyond pattern recognition and into a deeper level of understanding of the prompt by considering ethics around communication in writing, while also highlighting the importance of voice and individuality in writing. Cognitive flexibility is essential for reading comprehension, which in turn affects the writing process (Cartwright, 2023). Cognitive flexibility allows students to shift perspectives and consider multiple viewpoints in their own understanding. By reflecting on this question, students are able to grapple with the fact that writing is a process that requires intentional choices that communicate identity, perspective, and meaning.

The final question directs students to ask AI what the draft is missing in terms of voice, identity, and perspective by considering how these elements would enhance the overall product or output. Without direct prompting, AI and LLM platforms cannot integrate lived experiences or cultural nuances into their responses. This limitation highlights a central truth in literacy instruction: authentic writing happens when content knowledge meets personal meaning-making. When considering these different elements, students will gain an understanding of how personal

experiences or values impact responses, thus learning the importance of preserving their own authenticity and how this cannot be directly outsourced to AI platforms.

Students complete a series of tasks designed to reveal the limits of AI and emphasize authentic authorship, learning to see AI as a scaffold that requires human judgment rather than a finished product. This stage of the process is about revealing the limitations of AI, prompting students to reflect on what authentic authorship requires. By doing so, this stage builds both digital literacy and authorship, laying the foundation for the subsequent stages, directed divergence and reflective synthesis (Potkalitsky, 2025).

Stage 1: Pattern Recognition in Practice

Recently, we collaborated with a teacher to develop an activity based on the prompt: "Write an argumentative letter to the school board explaining why or why not middle schools should have dedicated recess time." The AI produced a formulaic and predictable draft, full of generic claims such as, "First, recess supports academic performance." The teacher began the lesson by displaying the AI-produced letter on the board. As the teacher read through the AI-produced letter, she modeled how to underline repeated or predictable transitions, like "Furthermore," and "In conclusion," and how to highlight vague or generic language. Additionally, the teacher explained why these phrases felt generic and flat, and how they differed from an authentic voice.

From here, the teacher engaged the students in a guided comparison. The teacher had students evaluate a past student's example. Through guided questions that focused on tone, personal details, and repetition, the students were asked to annotate both texts side by side. At this stage, the students were starting to realize the limitations of AI writing. Students saw how authentic voice came through in personal anecdotes. Once the teacher had finished modeling the process, students would work independently through a series of AI drafts on different age-appropriate argumentative topics, analyzing them for patterns and demonstrating their ability to identify what is overly formulaic and what requires an authentic voice.

Stage 2: Directed Divergence

Directed divergence refers to the concept of intentionally guiding AI to move beyond its predictable outputs by becoming more effective prompt generators. This stage involves steering AI responses in a new direction, whether by reframing the prompt, adding specific contextual details, or incorporating details gathered from the first stage (Potkalitsky, 2025). This process teaches students to recognize where AI outputs fall short and how to intervene with intentional redirection.

Directed divergence demands the use of critical thinking skills. Ennis (2011) expertly defined critical thinking as the ability to reasonably and reflectively focus on what to believe or do. During this stage, students will engage in critical thinking by determining the next steps or questions to pose to AI to elicit better responses. This includes, but is not limited to, asking AI to present counterarguments, shift or add perspectives, or include specific contextual details. By learning to redirect AI outputs in intentional and more purposeful ways, students practice the core dispositions of critical thinkers.

Directed divergence creates structured opportunities for students to exercise cognitive flexibility–balancing and adding to their background knowledge. Within this stage, students are refining AI outputs while simultaneously strengthening their own ability to question, adapt, and

synthesize information. Directed divergence positions students to use AI in ways that foster higher-order thinking.

Explicit instruction in directed divergence means showing students, step by step, how to move beyond the generic AI output. Teachers can model this process in various ways, but students must have foundational knowledge of what makes a good question. This includes, but is not limited to, understanding how specificity, context, and perspective change the quality of the question. For example, the teacher might demonstrate how adding details like audience, purpose, point of view, and criteria shifts the AI response in meaningful ways. Guided practice should provide students with structured opportunities to grapple with various question types, outputs, and guided reflection, ultimately helping them arrive at a more authentic writing composition.

Additionally, research shows that directed divergence aligns with productive struggle in literacy instruction. Thinking is effortful, meaning students often benefit from wrestling with new ideas at their zone of proximal development (Willingham 2009). By explicitly teaching students how to redirect and push AI to produce more profound and more thoughtful responses, students engage in that productive struggle by weighing the adequacy of one draft with their intended purpose and experimenting with revision cycles. This recursive process mirrors traditional writing instruction, where drafting and revising are evolutionary moving parts and pieces to build fluency and voice.

After students develop a stronger prompt that produces the response they want, they should compare the original and revised outputs side by side, noting the strengths and limitations of each output. By reflecting on the revision process and how intentional prompting influences the quality of their responses, students are now active decision-makers, rather than deferring to AI or LLM platforms. This same framework can also be applied to the writing process without AI by asking: How has my draft evolved? What points are missing? What does my perspective add to the prompt? Am I following a predictable pattern that takes away from the meaning of my composition?

While directed divergence equips students with the necessary tools to guide and expand outputs, the final stage creates full ownership of the final composition. Reflective synthesis asks students to integrate what they have learned from earlier stages and transform the work into a piece of writing of their own.

Stage 2: Directed Divergence in Practice

Another teacher we worked with applied this process with his senior class using a personal narrative prompt. Because many of his students were in the middle of their college applications, he wanted to model how AI could be used ethically as a support tool. He directed his students to generate an AI draft to a common application question: “Write a personal statement about a challenge you’ve overcome and what you learned from it.” As expected, the drafts relied on vague struggles with academics and generic lessons about perseverance, resulting in surface-level reflections.

To encourage students’ thinking, the teacher demonstrated how reframing the prompt with specific details from their own lives could lead to stronger results. For example, instead of the broad challenge, he asked the AI to focus on “moving to a new school in the middle of my 10th grade year” or “balancing school during my parents’ divorce.” Students saw how these added details created a more in-depth response.

Following this modeling, students practiced redirecting their own drafts. Some students chose to supply details from their lives, while others experimented with stylistic choices, such as

"add humorous details about a time when I made the problem worse by worrying about it and overcorrecting." The revised outputs demonstrated how specificity and style made the output more engaging.

To close the lesson, the teacher brought the class together for a collaborative discussion. Students added to their running list of AI's strengths and limitations. The conversation highlighted that while AI can provide structure or a starting point, what ultimately makes a piece of writing unique and worth reading is the lived experiences, perspectives, and authentic voice that only a human can contribute.

Stage 3: Reflective Synthesis

The last stage in this process is where students integrate the scaffolds of AI with their new perspective, with their own voice, knowledge, and experience, to produce a composition that is uniquely their own. Potkalitsky (2025) frames this stage as the culmination of working with AI, where the tool has served its purpose. By this stage, students have experienced cognitive offloading in the earlier stages, using AI to handle the surface-level demands, so they are now better equipped to handle analysis. Reflective synthesis bridges that offloading with authorship, asking students to re-engage fully with their own ideas in order to create a final product that clearly communicates their meaning and voice.

What makes this stage distinct is its emphasis on preserving voice and ownership when using AI or LLM platforms. While these tools provide scaffolds and possibilities, they cannot integrate human experience, identity, or values, something unique to each writer. Students must learn that authorship is about communicating and presenting through writing who they are as thinkers; this holds true for all genres of writing, not just narrative. In argumentative writing, voice emerges through the stance the writer takes and the evidence they present. In informative writing, voice emerges through the way ideas and evidence are organized and presented, sentence structure, and how they address the audience. Reflective synthesis allows students to see how their voice should operate within each genre, when and how to elevate it, and how to ensure the final product stays accurate and authentic.

Explicit instruction during reflective analysis should make authorship and ownership visible. Teachers should model how to move from an AI draft to a piece that is their own. There are numerous ways, as with any skill, to explicitly teach it; one approach will be highlighted here as an example. As the teacher models the analysis and synthesis of the work from stages one and two, he/she should annotate three key elements: what is helpful (e.g., organization, sentence starters, new angles), what requires their own voice and perspective, and what needs complete revision (e.g., hallucinations, overused patterns, or repetition). This can be demonstrated through color-coding, underlining, circling, or other annotation strategies that make each element visible.

The goal of reflective synthesis is to move students from relying on and viewing AI as a shortcut or a way to bypass the writing process, but to instead view it as a tool that informs revision and reflection. By combining what is useful from earlier stages within their own voice and experiences, students learn that strong writing is built through choice, perspective, and ownership. Reflective synthesis of the AI outputs should be followed by a metacognition routine that encourages students to reflect on the entire process. This could include noting how their choices shaped the final product, what revisions elevated their voice, and how the outcome differs from what AI produced. This step reinforces that authentic authorship stems from intentional decisions and helps students internalize strategies they can apply in independent writing opportunities.

Stage 3: Reflective Synthesis in Practice

In this final stage, the featured teacher had already spent significant time explicitly teaching students how to engage in meaningful metacognition and reflection on their own reading and writing processes before scaffolding the use of AI. Her students were well-versed in peer review and self-checks, which laid the foundation for deeper work. In her classroom, she consistently pushed students to ask themselves hard questions about their work in order to strengthen their skills and independence.

When students began to incorporate AI, the teacher introduced a color-coding system using highlighters: anything kept from AI was in blue, any AI sentences that had been revised or improved were in green, and any original words were in yellow. For example, if a student kept the AI's organizational sentence starters, they highlighted them in blue. If they reworked vague claims using more specific details, they highlighted them in green. If they added an example from their own experiences, they highlighted it in yellow.

This system gave the teacher multiple data points. By evaluating the blue highlights, she could spot trends, such as students leaning heavily on transitions or sentence starters. This signals which areas need more explicit and direct instruction. When reviewing the green highlights, she could see how students were developing as writers by strengthening AI outputs and could target mini-lessons. Finally, the yellow highlights became the most important marker, representing the students' authentic contributions, which she focused on in her grading. Over time, she expected the proportion of yellow to increase, signaling greater independence and stronger voice.

This process actively engaged students in critical thinking by requiring them to analyze, evaluate, and justify their choices rather than passively accepting AI output. After completing their essays, students answered reflective questions. This served a twofold purpose: first, it made it nearly impossible to "cheat," since the reflections required students to engage deeply with both the content and the process; second, it reinforced the value of their original thinking. Ultimately, these reflective practices position AI as a scaffold and not a barrier, helping students elevate their voice.

Redesign, Not Restrict

The conversation around AI in education often focuses on restrictions, rules, and integration; however, the more pressing challenge is redesigning instruction to work effectively alongside AI. The teacher's role is now focusing on how to facilitate AI authentically and ethically. This requires careful discernment about when AI can support the writing process and when it risks undermining authentic learning.

AI can support both the craft of writing and the development of its content. However, it is essential for teachers to discern when to leverage AI for content and craft, and when students need the productive struggle of working through the writing process independently. For example, AI can suggest organizational patterns, refine syntax, or provide sentence starters. AI can also generate basic background knowledge, brainstorm examples, or provide arguments that help students engage more deeply with ideas. However, the risk lies in allowing AI to do both simultaneously, replacing the work of students rather than supporting it.

Additionally, teachers must discern when AI is providing access versus displacing authentic thinking. This type of discernment is grounded in facilitation. Instruction should be driven by student data, which informs decisions about what is taught, what is measured, and where students demonstrate strengths and weaknesses in their writing. In some cases, AI can remove barriers that prevent equitable access to the task, while in other cases, it can conceal gaps in learning. Skilled facilitation involves recognizing when students need to engage in productive

struggle and when AI can serve as a scaffold to keep them engaged in the process without using it as a shortcut. Recognizing both the strengths and limitations in each circumstance can help teachers integrate AI authentically and intentionally into their classrooms, leveraging it when it builds engagement and access, but also stepping back when it risks undermining ownership or the development of essential writing skills.

Equity must also shape how AI is integrated into literacy instruction and the writing process. For students who struggle to find an entry point into the content, AI can help fill in gaps, including background knowledge, language barriers, sentence starters, and grammatical refinement. However, in this context, equity cannot be coupled with equality. Providing every student with the same AI support risks masking individual needs. Equity requires teacher expertise in knowing when AI provides access that empowers students and when it removes opportunities for growth and development. When used strategically and intentionally, AI can level the playing field without lowering expectations, all while preserving student voice.

Overall, AI requires a strategic balance between numerous things: craft and content, scaffolding and independence, support and struggle, equity and ownership. Redesigning instruction around this balance ensures that AI serves as a catalyst for critical thinking. Teachers who explicitly model this discernment with their students empower them to recognize on their own the opportunities and limitations of AI use in writing.

The integration of AI into literacy instruction intensifies the ongoing challenge of balancing ownership and authenticity. Concerns about plagiarism have long existed in classrooms, but AI amplifies them and adds new layers of pressure for teachers. With this added layer of pressure, teachers must redesign tasks that move beyond product-driven writing and instead place a heavier emphasis on the process (drafting, synthesizing, revising, and reflecting).

In practice, we recently observed a teacher redesign one of her argumentative writing tasks by framing the prompt around this very conundrum: *Can AI claim authorship of writing?* Students began by entering the question into an LLM platform and then pushed the system with follow-up questions intended to expose its limitations on authorship. From here, the students then synthesized the question-and-answer responses into their own argumentative composition. This idea strengthened both the students' argumentative writing skills, questioning, and critical thinking skills, but also highlighted the exact problem she was facing when students turned to AI as a shortcut rather than as a tool for learning.

This three-stage process, as noted earlier, can help teachers refine and sharpen writing skills beyond the use of AI. The habits and strategies formed in each stage are transferable literacy skills that strengthen comprehension, analysis, and voice. When students learn to analyze text for patterns, they build the same close-reading strategies that aid in the comprehension of complex texts. When they practice directed divergence, they are practicing the line of questioning, revision, and perspective-taking that drives effective drafting and revising of writing. Finally, reflective synthesis underscores the significance of voice and ownership. Together, these three stages can serve as a framework for all writing, regardless of genre, task, or content.

Ultimately, the work of redesign is to preserve authenticity and to amplify student voice. Authentic writing must demand and measure more than compliance; it must cultivate curiosity, perspective, and ownership. By redesigning tasks with this in mind, teachers can help students use AI as a catalyst for thinking, not as a replacement, ensuring that what is preserved is curiosity, voice, and ownership.

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Authors

Tayler and Jordan bring extensive experience from secondary English Language Arts classrooms across Indiana, working with diverse student populations and instructional settings. As passionate educators, they have dedicated their careers to helping teachers build confidence in implementing effective, research-based instructional strategies that foster meaningful student learning.

Committed to the belief that every student deserves the power to read, write, and think their way into a life of liberty and the pursuit of happiness, their work focuses on bridging the gap between foundational skills and authentic literacy practices, ensuring that all students can develop their voice with confidence.

Currently, Tayler is a statewide literacy consultant for EES Innovation, and Jordan is the Senior Coordinator of Coaching and Intervention at Indianapolis Public Schools.