Restriction to Readiness: Integrating the AI Assessment Scale (AIAS) into Special Education Educator Preparation Program Course Syllabi

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Abstract

This article describes the integration of the AI Assessment Scale (AIAS) into special education educator preparation course syllabi. The authors examine how structured AI guidance promotes ethical use, transparency, accessibility, and professional readiness while preparing future special educators to navigate AI-integrated PK-12 environments with confidence and responsibility.

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Pennsylvania is currently facing a significant staffing crisis, with special education representing the greatest area of need across all certification areas. A survey conducted by the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) found that 67.2% of reported staffing shortages involved special education, with 73.3% of districts identifying it as their most critical need (2024). Within this demanding landscape, Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers more than technological innovation; it provides scalable and responsive support that can assist with individualized interventions, adaptations for diverse disabilities, and assistive technology recommendations (Hussein et al., 2025). These tools can aid in the reduction of barriers while allowing educators to devote more time to direct student support (Klein, 2024).

Despite the growing relevance of AI in educational practice, educator preparation programs (EPPs) have been slow to incorporate meaningful AI training, often leaving new teachers to "learn on the fly" once they enter the profession (Weiner et al., 2024). As higher education faculty responsible for preparing future special educators, we began questioning whether restrictive syllabus policies were adequately preparing teacher candidates to use AI ethically and effectively. If future educators are expected to develop classroom AI policies, evaluate AI-generated supports, and integrate AI into instructional design, they must first have structured opportunities to engage with these tools during their preparation programs (Black et al., 2024).

In this article, we describe the implementation of the Artificial Intelligence Assessment Scale (AIAS) within EPP course syllabi as a tiered framework for AI integration. We discuss its influence on student engagement and comfort with AI while maintaining clear expectations related to ethics, professional responsibility, and academic rigor.

Why Special Education Courses Require a Different AI Conversation

As teacher educators preparing future special educators, we are navigating an educational landscape increasingly influenced by artificial intelligence (AI). While higher education discussions often focus on academic integrity, plagiarism, and misuse, special education requires a different conversation. Many AI tools resemble the assistive and instructional technologies long used to support students with disabilities. As a result, approaches centered solely on restriction may unintentionally conflict with the practices we expect future special educators to implement in schools.

Accessibility, Universal Design for Learning, and AI

Equitable access to learning is a foundational principle of special education. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) promotes multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, and AI increasingly supports these goals through tools such as translation, text simplification, speech-to-text, text-to-speech, summarization, and personalized feedback. As we worked with preservice special educators in the past, we often observed tension between institutional restrictions on AI and the accessibility-focused practices expected in special education. While K–12 educators routinely use technology to reduce barriers, teacher candidates are sometimes discouraged from using similar supports. DiBattista (2025) noted that AI can reduce barriers, streamline instruction, and expand individualized support, making AI literacy an increasingly important professional competency.

AI as Instructional Support Rather Than Academic Shortcuts

Special educators regularly distinguish between supports that provide access and those that alter learning expectations. Similarly, AI should be viewed as an instructional support rather than solely a content-generation tool. AI can assist with lesson planning, differentiated materials, reading-level adaptations, and behavioral supports. Goldman et al. (2024) argued that EPPs should integrate AI through the TPACK framework so candidates understand not only how to use technology but also when and why to use it. At the same time, preservice teachers must learn to critically evaluate AI outputs, recognize inaccuracies and biases, and make informed instructional decisions. Further, a central concern in AI integration is balancing support with dependency. While AI can improve efficiency and accessibility, overreliance may limit the development of professional competencies. Hur (2024) found that guided exploration and critical evaluation help preservice teachers develop confidence with AI, reinforcing the importance of AI literacy rather than restrictive policies alone.

Preparing Future Special Educators for the Field

AI is increasingly embedded in educational practice through personalized learning systems, progress monitoring tools, communication supports, and instructional planning. National survey findings indicated that while educators recognize the potential of artificial intelligence to enhance teaching and learning, they also reported significant barriers related to professional development, training, confidence, and implementation (Woodruff et al., 2023). These findings further highlight the need for EPPs to intentionally develop AI literacy before candidates enter the profession. Holman et al. (2024) emphasized that EPPs should prepare candidates to navigate these AI-enhanced environments. Integrating AI literacy into coursework provides opportunities to explore ethical decision-making while considering issues such as privacy, bias, accessibility, equity, and student autonomy. Many institutions initially responded to AI through blanket prohibitions. However, concerns regarding academic integrity have been complicated by the limitations of AI-detection tools, prompting a shift toward transparency, disclosure, and intentional assignment design.

For special education EPPs, the question is less about whether AI should be used and more about how its use aligns with learning outcomes and professional growth. Frameworks such as the AI Assessment Scale (AIAS) provide a structured approach for promoting ethical AI integration while maintaining academic rigor. Ultimately, special education requires a more nuanced AI conversation. As teacher educators, our responsibility is not simply to regulate AI use but to prepare future special educators to use these tools with competence, ethics, and professional judgment.

Integrating the AI Assessment Scale (AIAS) Into Special Education Teacher Preparation

When generative AI tools first emerged in education, many educators viewed them as a threat to authentic assessment, academic integrity, plagiarism, and authorship (Klein, 2024, as cited in Goldman et al., 2025). Similar concerns surfaced in higher education, where scholars questioned whether reliance on AI might diminish critical thinking and writing skills (Civil, 2023; Warschauer et al., 2023, as cited in Chan, 2023). Reflecting these concerns, Chan (2023) noted, “Eight out of 24 universities in the prestigious UK Russell Group have declared the use of the AI bot for assessment as academic misconduct included Oxford and Cambridge. Meanwhile, many other universities around the world are rushing to review plagiarism policies citing concerns about academic integrity” (p. 2).

As AI has become increasingly integrated into PK-12 education, EPPs have faced growing pressure to prepare teacher candidates to use these tools responsibly. Will (2024) reported that EPPs are beginning to incorporate AI into coursework while recognizing that graduates will encounter AI in schools from the start of their careers. Historically, EPPs have approached AI cautiously. Even though Weiner et al. (2024) found that approximately 59% of surveyed EPPs provided some form of AI-related instruction, only 25% offered training focused on using AI to support future classroom practice. Likewise, Daher (2025), citing a UNESCO survey of approximately 450 schools and universities, reported 40% of institutions communicated AI guidance only orally, while 20% of respondents were unsure whether their institutions had AI policies at all.

Early in our careers as special education faculty, we adopted similarly restrictive approaches. Course syllabi often prohibited all AI use, creating apprehension among some students while encouraging others to use AI without disclosure. In both cases, opportunities for meaningful conversations about responsible AI use were limited. Conversely, as AI became increasingly relevant to accessibility, instructional planning, and professional practice, we recognized the need to move beyond a simple "ban or use" approach. We sought a framework that would support transparency, ethical use, and academic integrity while helping teacher candidates develop practical AI skills. This exploration led us to the Artificial Intelligence Assessment Scale (AIAS) (Perkins et al., 2025).

AIAS Framework

Introduced by Perkins and colleagues, the AI Assessment Scale (AIAS) provides a structured approach to integrating generative AI into educational assessment through varying levels of AI use and student responsibility (Perkins et al., 2024; Perkins et al., 2025). The framework allows educators to align learning outcomes with appropriate levels of AI integration while main-

taining academic integrity and clearly communicating expectations for how, when, and where AI may be used (Perkins et al., 2024). The five-level AIAS framework (Table 1) is used internationally across schools and universities and illustrates varying degrees of AI implementation within assignments and learning activities. Perkins et al. (2024) provided a summary of the Scale Levels to aid educators in better understanding of how this framework can be tiered across courses:

Level 1: No AI - Students are not permitted to use any form of GenAI, as students are to rely on their own knowledge, skill sets, and comprehension of material. Such tasks could include discussions, oral forms of assessments, class group work, or debates in which all are free from technology; all under supervision of the teacher or instructor.

Table 1

The Artificial Intelligence Assessment Scale (AIAS) Framework

AIAS Level	Description	Primary Educational Purpose
Level 1: No AI	Students complete the assessment independently without AI assistance.	Measures students' own knowledge and skills without AI support.
Level 2: AI Planning	AI may be used for brainstorming, outlining, research, and idea development, but not for generating the final submission.	Supports planning while ensuring the final work reflects the student's own thinking.
Level 3: AI Collaboration	AI may assist with drafting, revising, editing, and refinement. Students must critically evaluate and modify AI-generated content.	Promotes collaboration with AI while maintaining student authorship and critical thinking.
Level 4: Full AI	AI may be used throughout the assessment to help accomplish learning objectives. Students remain responsible for directing AI and evaluating all outputs.	Develops students' ability to use AI strategically while demonstrating professional judgment.
Level 5: AI Exploration	Students and instructors may collaboratively explore innovative AI applications and co-design learning experiences.	Encourages creative, discipline-specific exploration of AI to solve authentic problems and generate new ideas.

Note. Adapted from Perkins et al. (2024). The AIAS framework is freely available for educational use and institutional implementation through https://aiassessmentscale.com/

Level 2: AI Planning - It is permissible for students to integrate GenAI in the brainstorming and feedback process; using the tools to also aid in the organization of ideas. However, final submissions should not contain AI-generated content. Planning approaches consist of using AI to help with generating ideas or solutions to problems, support with the structuring of outlines, or in the form of a research assistance with source or topic suggestion prompting.

Level 3: AI Collaboration - Here, students are permitted to integrate AI in the processes of enhancing content/language, refining, and editing. It can be used to help with grammar, punctuation, spelling, word choice, structural and/or visual edits like image generation tools. It is imperative for students to critically evaluate and modify the suggested outputs produced by AI, which will aid in displaying their understanding of analysis (Perkins et al., 2025).

Level 4: Full AI - Moving to a more complex level, students are responsible for tasking Gen AI to deliver content to achieve particular assessment goals and must critically engage with and assess AI outputs that were created. Students take on the role of directing AI as a thought partner and also demonstrating their own critical thinking capabilities.

Level 5: AI Exploration - At the most advanced level of AIAS, AI can be used at the teacher's or student's discretion. Instructors and students can join together to co-design assessments, develop solutions to solve problems. For example, students can use GenAI for real-time feedback on the strengths/areas of growth of their work, they can be given broad parameters of a task then must prompt Gen AI with more specific guidelines, etc.

AIAS Framework and Syllabus Overhaul

The self-discovery of the AIAS Framework had completely shifted our mindset of how we approached special education coursework and syllabi design within EPP programs. This allowed us to determine a good starting point in which we wanted to expand our regulations of GenAI usage within the courses. One of the first changes we made was replacing restrictive AI language in our syllabi with a concise AIAS policy statement. Such change emphasized ethical decision-making, professional readiness, accessibility, and academic integrity while reassuring students that AI was a tool to support learning rather than something to fear or conceal. The statement also clarified that each assignment specified the appropriate AIAS level and corresponding expectations for AI use and disclosure (Perkins et al., 2025).

Following this syllabus statement, we briefly described the AIAS Levels (as stated previously in this article) and stressed to students that the use of AI was not required if an individual was hesitant or uncomfortable with its integration into assignments. It was vital for us to construct disclosure requirements for GenAI usage (Weiner et al., 2024) so that students would be comfortable regarding transparency in authorship leading to fostering trust between instructors and students (Kim & Koo, 2026; Weiner et al., 2024). A subportion of the syllabus policy specifically identified transparency and disclosure requirements:

When *AI* use is permitted:

- Students must clearly disclose how AI tools were used, following the instructions for that assessment.
- Disclosure must be completed on the AI Acknowledgement Disclosure Form and submitted with each assignment. This is mandatory for Level 2–5 assignments.
- The purpose of disclosure is transparency and learning, not punishment.

Use of AI without disclosure or use that results in misalignment with the stated AIAS level or task conditions, will be addressed under the course offense structure and university policies.

The Disclosure Form (Appendix A) was required for all students to submit alongside their assignments based on the AIAS Level, but if learners were unsure whether a particular use of AI was appropriate, the syllabus also directed them to review the *Generative AI - Student FAQ* (Appendix B) and always encouraged them to collaborate with the instructor for further clarification to ensure they were responsible for accuracy of the final work submitted (Perkins et al., 2024).

Throughout the academic year in which the AIAS Levels were implemented, students within the special educa-

tion courses grew to be more open regarding conversation about GenAI but also were more comfortable in displaying developing usage of such tools, citing in course evaluations the need for more opportunities to use AI to help prepare them for future coursework and professional responsibilities.

Preparing Future Special Educators for AI-Integrated Practice

Professional judgment has always been central to special education. Decisions regarding accommodations, interventions, assessments, and individualized supports require thoughtful analysis of student needs and contextual factors that AI cannot replace. As AI becomes increasingly embedded in PK–12 education through instructional planning, personalized learning, progress monitoring, and communication (Tan et al., 2025; Will, 2024), we believe EPPs have a responsibility to provide opportunities for teacher candidates to engage with these tools before entering the profession.

In our experience, guided exploration helped candidates move beyond simply using AI to thoughtfully evaluate its strengths, limitations, and ethical implications. Rather than viewing AI as a source of answers, students began recognizing it as a tool that supports professional decision-making. This aligns with findings that structured AI experiences build confidence and promote responsible AI use among preservice teachers (Hur, 2024). Likewise, Kim and Koo (2026) argued that generative AI is reshaping teaching and learning, making AI literacy an essential component of educator preparation.

These experiences also reinforced that AI literacy extends beyond technical skills. Future special educators must critically evaluate AI-supported tools for bias, accessibility, privacy, transparency, equity, and their impact on individualized decision-making. Throughout our courses, we emphasized reviewing, verifying, and adapting AI-generated recommendations rather than accepting them at face value, reinforcing that technology should support (not replace) professional expertise. Ultimately, the goal of special education teacher preparation is not AI compliance but AI readiness. By intentionally integrating AI literacy, ethical decision-making, and authentic opportunities to engage with AI, educator preparation programs can prepare future special educators to navigate evolving technologies while remaining grounded in accessibility, equity, and student-centered practice (Daher, 2025).

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence is becoming an increasingly integrated component of educational practice, including instructional planning, assessment, differentiation, accessibility, and communication for students with disabilities (Tan et al., 2025; Waterfield et al., 2024). As AI continues to reshape PK–12 education, educator preparation programs have an opportunity to embrace AI integration as a core component of preparing future special educators to use these tools thoughtfully, ethically, and professionally.

Our experience integrating the AI Assessment Scale (AIAS) shifted our perspective from regulating AI use to developing AI readiness. Rather than focusing primarily on restriction, we found that providing clear expectations, opportunities for guided practice, and transparent disclosure encouraged meaningful conversations about ethical AI use while maintaining academic integrity (Perkins et al., 2024; Perkins et al., 2025). We believe the AIAS offers a practical framework that can help EPPs prepare teacher candidates for the realities of increasingly AI-enabled schools while remaining grounded in accessibility, Universal Design for Learning, evidence-based practice, and professional judgment.

Further, we were able to identify several opportunities for further exploration based on these experiences. Future studies could examine faculty and teacher candidate perspectives on AI integration, changes in AI confidence and ethical decision-making over time, and institutional approaches to implementing the AI Assessment Scale across EPPs. Exploring department-wide and college-wide adoption may also provide valuable recommendations for establishing consistent expectations while supporting responsible, equitable, and transparent AI integration throughout teacher preparation.

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Appendix A

AIAS Use Disclosure Form

Student Name:	
Assignment Title:	
Course Week:	
AIAS Level:	
AI Tool(s) Used (e.g. Chat GPT, Claude, Gemini, Copilot, Grammarly)	
Purpose of AI Use: (e.g. brainstorming, outlining, drafting, revising, problem solving)	
Prompt(s) Used: Below, paste the exact prompt(s) you entered into the AI tool for this assignment. If prompts were refined over time, include the *final version(s)* used to generate or revise content. *(If multiple prompts were used, list them in order below numerically [1., 2., etc.])*	
How AI Contributed to This Work: Briefly explain how the AI tool supported your process and what decisions you made as the author. You may include: ● What you accepted, modified, or rejected that was generated by the AI tool. ● How you verified accuracy or quality ● How the AI output was integrated with your own thinking	
Responsibility Statement: *I confirm that I have reviewed, edited, and take full responsibility for all content submitted, including verifying accuracy, citations, and alignment with the assignment's AIAS level.*	
Name (serves as digital signature):	
Date:	

Appendix B

AIAS Framework Student FAQ

What is this AI policy for?
This course uses the AI Assessment Scale (AIAS) to clearly explain when and how AI tools may be used so that assessments fairly measure your learning and align with university academic integrity policies.

What is the AI Assessment Scale (AIAS)?
Each assignment is assigned an AIAS level (1–5) that defines the role AI may play.
The level will always be stated in the assignment instructions.

Does using AI mean I'm cheating?
No. AI use is not automatically misconduct.
Problems arise when AI use is misaligned with the assignment's AIAS level or instructions, or when required disclosure is missing.

What does "misalignment with assessment conditions" mean?
Misalignment occurs when:

- AI is used in a way that contradicts the assignment's AIAS level
- AI use is not disclosed when disclosure is required
- The submission does not demonstrate the type of learning the assignment is designed to assess

The issue is not AI use itself, but whether your work accurately represents your learning under the stated conditions.

When do I need to disclose AI use?

- Level 1 (No AI): AI use is not permitted
- Levels 2–5: AI use must be disclosed using the AI Acknowledgement Disclosure Form

Always follow the instructions for the specific assignment.

Why do I have to include my prompts?
Including prompts:

- Demonstrates transparency
- Shows intentional and responsible AI use
- Helps explain your process if questions arise

Prompts are used to support learning, not to penalize you.

Am I responsible for errors made by AI?
Yes. You are responsible for:

- Accuracy
- Bias

- Fabricated or incorrect citations
- Tone and appropriateness

Always review and verify AI outputs before submitting work.

Will AI-detection software be used?

AI-detection tools may be used, but they are not used as sole evidence of misconduct. Academic integrity decisions are based on assignment requirements, your disclosure and explanation, academic judgement, and available evidence.

What happens if I misuse AI?

Misuse may include:

- Using AI in a Level 1 (No AI) task
- Using AI beyond what is permitted
- Failing to disclose required AI use
- Submitting work misaligned with assignment conditions

These cases are handled using the offense structure outlined in the syllabus and university policies.

What if I'm unsure whether AI use is allowed?

Ask before submitting.

Requests for clarification are encouraged and will not result in penalty.

What's the key thing to remember?

This course is not trying to catch you using AI.

It asks you to:

- Follow assignment instructions
- Be transparent about AI use
- Ensure your work genuinely represents your learning

If you do that, you are using AI responsibly.