# “To me, a little AI-‘Seahorse’ is not only a waste of time, but actually a disservice to children’s education.

**Interview with Prof. Dr. Klaus Zierer on the recommendations for action proposed by the German expert commission “Protection of Children and Youth in the Digital World”**

The expert commission “Protection of Children and Youth in the Digital World,” commissioned by the German federal government, presented its recommendations for action on June 24, 2026. Prof. Dr. Klaus Zierer was a member of the commission. The commission recommends the use of digital media starting as early as preschool, then proposes an “AI-Seahorse Program“ [ *„Seahorse“ is a popular infantile toy*] for elementary schools, and suggests an age limit of 13 for social media bans. In the view of the „Alliance for Humane Education“, the commission thus failed to fulfill its actual mandate, expressed as ‚Protection of Children and Youth from risks in the Digital World‘.

Prof. Klaus Zierer, in his capacity as professor for school pedagogy, was willing to answer our questions.

**(?) > Alliance for Humane Education:** Mr. Zierer, you are yourself the father of school-age children and you worked as elementary school teacher. And now you are a full professor of school pedagogy at the University of Augsburg — in other words, you train future teachers. You are also one of the few active critics of German educational policy, which is why you were appointed to the expert commission “Protection of Children and Youth in the Digital World”, commissioned by Ms. Prien. How do you assess the current situation in German schools — from very different perspectives — and, in particular, the impact that digitalization is having on it?

**Klaus Zierer:** Well, my position is clear: We are in the midst of an educational crisis. Unfortunately, those responsible for education policy and administration see things differently. Just one example: Right now, every German federal state is once again celebrating the best high school graduation exam scores ever, thereby leading the public to believe that everything in the education system is in order. But that is, quite simply, nonsense. For years, every study on education has pointed in only one direction: downward. Whether it’s academic performance, psychosomatic well-being or physical health, we’re on a downward spiral that’s dramatic. After all, education is the key to prosperity in a nation. Especially at a time when economic performance is also declining a strong education system would be necessary to emerge from the crisis. But the opposite is true. And this raises fears that the downward trend will only intensify. In this context — and given the findings of the studies, one must put it quite bluntly: digitalization is a fire accelerant.

**(?) >** The expert commission “Protection of Children and Youth in the Digital World,” commissioned by the German federal government, presented its recommendations for action on June 24, 2026. You were a member of this expert commission. Yet we do not really recognize your positions in the commission’s recommendations! For example, you have

previously advocated for reversing the digitalization of schools, whereas the commission proposes exactly the opposite**.** Learning with digital media is supposed to begin as early as preschool, and AI as early as elementary school. How is that possible?

**Klaus Zierer:** You shouldn't imagine the work of a commission as a situation where, at the end of the day, everyone agrees. This is especially true when it comes to digitalization. One of the commission's values is certainly its interdisciplinary composition, because it brings together many different perspectives. As a result, there are a number of sensible recommendations for action. However, there are also some recommendations that I consider insufficient. I take a different view on the proposal for age restrictions on social media, the use of smartphones and digital devices, and the use of AI in schools. Here, I had—and still have—a decidedly different opinion.

**(?) >** The Commission doesn't simply call for "more digitalization," but links this to a protection strategy. For example, the recommendations include a chapter on "self-regulation," which suggests that even young children, if they have the right media education, can be made immune to risks and thus prepared for early use. And it calls for a social media restriction until age 13.

**Klaus Zierer:** Self-regulation is an important educational goal that must be introduced step by step. But from a pedagogical perspective, one must first recognize what the child is capable of. To demand from a thirteen-year-old: "Now curb your social media use" is absolute ridiculous. They can't do it because, for one thing, they stand no chance against the addictive design, and for another, their brain development isn't yet advanced enough to allow them to do so. The prefrontal cortex is crucial for self-regulation—especially when it comes to social media—and on the average, it takes until the age of 24 to fully mature! And honestly: I always find it very confusing when adults demand from children something that they themselves cannot do. A glance at the government benches is enough to see this: the amount of scrolling going on there that has nothing to do with the parliamentary debate is alarming.

**(?) >** The need to regulate the so-called "social media" is something being largely discussed worldwide. Our neighboring countries, too, practice a clear age limit, usually set at 16 years. But the commission isn't committing to anything; it mentions 13 years old—which pleases the providers, since that's something already stated in their terms of service. 13 years is exactly the age when children are at their most vulnerable and impressionable development stage, breaking away from their parents' home and seeking out peers. And we are sending them online instead of visiting a sports club or a youth center?

**Klaus Zierer:** From an educational perspective, I am clearly in favor of a higher age limit—ideally 16 years or older, as the scientific international discourse reveals—because we already know that the consequences are particularly dramatic for younger children, and we can hardly mitigate them through educational measures. The vast majority of studies indicate that too-early use of social media causes maximum harm to personality development—and that in nearly all areas we can measure: academic performance declines, loneliness increases despite —or rather, because of many social contacts, depression skyrockets, health issues affecting the musculoskeletal system are triggered, nearsightedness increases, and attention spans shrink. All of this is enough for me to say: 13 is too young to let children onto social media. For years, we've been making an educational mistake by believing that „the earlier, the better". But from an educational perspective, there is such a thing as "too early"—and that's certainly the case when it comes to social media.

**(?) >** Australia has taken the lead with clear rules, requirements, and prohibitions: no social media before age 16. But the press fully reports that these bans are being circumvented. Australia is therefore making adjustments—as announced from the start—based on initial experiences with the ban and its circumvention. And it's holding providers as accountable. From our perspective, that's the only logical and sensible step: providers must take the responsibility, just like with all other media and consumer goods. Right?

**Klaus Zierer:** First of all, it's not surprising that a ban on social media in Australia is being implemented with some bumps along the way. This is due to technical reasons and also stems from the behavior of children and adolescents, who naturally want to stick to their habits—they often have no other choice—and therefore try to circumvent bans by any means possible. Adjustments are needed, and they're being made. Surely, everything will work out even better in the near future. By the way, it's also wrong to argue that a ban is pointless because it can be circumvented. That's the nature of a ban and must always be taken into account.

However, the benefits of a ban remain: Generally speaking, the ban initially has the effect of raising awareness—awareness on all sides: among children, parents, and teachers. When a ban is introduced for educational purposes, discussions take place with the children, parents, and teachers. They are informed about why the ban is being implemented, why it is necessary, and this raises awareness about the issues. It's important to remember that such a ban makes it more difficult to access certain content. A ban never completely prevents misuse, but it does make it more difficult. Today, when children are active on social media they see everything: for example they see violence, they see sexualization, they see scenes of war. Without regulation, social media is an open window to the world—more specifically, a window to the dark side of the world. That's the window that must be closed. For this to succeed, two parties in particular must be held accountable:

First, platform operators must be held accountable for regulating access in compliance with data protection laws and for assuming liability for content.

Second, technology manufacturers must be involved, because they can use default settings to make it easier for parents and schools to provide correct digital devices for children. Only then can education and instruction become effective. Anyone who still believes today that media education alone will solve the problem, fails to understand the mechanisms behind social media, to which children and parents alike are exposed.

**(?) >** You demand bans up to age 16. But Ms. Nadine Schön, the CDU's digital policy expert and co-chair of the commission, counters this by stating that the recommendations do not focus on strict bans, but rather on protection, empowerment, and participation. Protection is understood as a supervised and guided use of digital devices, not as bans, which are rejected as paternalistic.

**Klaus Zierer:** From an educational perspective, it's important first of all to recognize that protection, participation, and empowerment must be weighted differently, depending on the situation. We have situations—especially with young children—where protection clearly takes precedence, while participation does not occur. And I believe this is something we must also understand when discussing age limits and regulations. Any regulations always involve prohibitions in certain areas, but at the same time they also involve a gradual transition toward greater participation and greater empowerment. Anyone who describes prohibitions in education as a "paternalistic" move has, in my view, failed to grasp the essence of education.

The main aspect is the older generation's responsibility toward the younger generation. And of course responsibility—not paternalism—must also include prohibitions.

The reason for this misguided approach—viewing protection, participation, and empowerment as equally valid—lies in a misunderstood pedagogical liberalism that believes that human beings, as free beings, can attain rational freedom only through self-determination. The goal is valid, but the path is flawed. Because the path is not the goal. Education that is effective in fostering learning cannot function without rules—and this needs limitations. In other words: Freedom must be pedagogically restricted. It should not be necessary to quote Immanuel Kant here—since it is common knowledge—but this personality posed the important question: How do I cultivate freedom within the constraints of duty?

It would suffice to reflect on the day-to-day reality of education to recognize that freedom without rules quickly turns into anarchy, or even tyranny, and this is only harmful to education. Contemplating the future, it will be important for us to recognize these interplay of protection, participation, and empowerment—which sometimes are mutually exclusive and sometimes require clear decisions. And I believe that we need to re-engage in this debate in a reasoned manner, in order to find a solution, also for Germany.

**(?) >** The commission has taken a firm stance. In its report, it states: "In principle, (digital) media education is an educational responsibility of childcare centers (SWK, 2022). Childcare centers offer a wide range of opportunities regarding the use of digital media, that is, the promotion of 'digital literacy' and early elementary computer science. But these activities must be child-centered, carried out with care, and conducted by qualified personnel." (p. 72) Therefore, children should learn how to use digital media starting in kindergarten; bans are unnecessary because "the risk of paternalistic approaches" (meaning bans, author's note) is at least nominally reduced, since the focus is always on empowering children to handle even potential risks independently." (p. 84)

**Klaus Zierer:** As a school educator, I see this quite differently and must state clearly: Digital media have no place—absolutely no place—in kindergartens. Jonathan Haidt has clearly demonstrated how important a play-based childhood is, with real experiences and interactions, and how dangerous a screen-based childhood is. In many places we have already sacrificed a play-based childhood in favour of a screen-based one, with problems that are already visible: language deficits, motor difficulties, behavioral issues, and a lot of social problems, as shown by school entrance examinations in several federal states. I sometimes wonder why nobody care about this! During the last ten years such diagnoses have been on the rise, and the factor that has most transformed children's lives is digitalization. The order of the day can therefore only be: the "digital transformation"—as it is so vacuously called—must not be expanded any further. It must be stopped.

**(?) >** As the proposal for an "AI-Seahorse" certification makes clear, the commission is banking on early self-regulation. That is, children are supposed to learn how to use AI for themselves as early as at the elementary school level. What consequences will this have for education and for children learning development?

**Klaus Zierer:** As a school educator, I consider the "AI Seahorse program" an absurd. Children can no longer swim, but in the world of AI they're now being awarded a "seahorse." The terminology itself is already something odd. And if you look at elementary school, the educational crisis certainly doesn't lie in the fact that children should learn to understand AI. First and foremost, children should learn to read, do math, and write; they should understand

themselves and their classmates; they should explore their own bodies; they should play sports and run around, run around and run around. By the way, and just as an aside: How many adults actually understand how AI works? Once again: children are expected to learn something that adults themselves can't follow don't even know about. To me, an "AI Seahorse" is therefore not only a waste of time but even a complete disservice to children's education.

**(?) >** Well, you welcome Pope Leo XIV's stance in his encyclica, you oppose the introduction of AI in schools, and you wroite "Disarm AI through education!. The AI intoxication in education policy, the school oversight, and a large part of the field of educational science currently act as a fire accelerant, after years of playing with fire in the realm of digitalization. And this has already caused great damage. The school system must be rebuilt from the ground up." Yet the commission—and especially Bertelsmann, together with government ministries—firmly advocates the use of AI by children. What consequences do you fear?

**Klaus Zierer:** The consequences are quite simple and already visible today. As an MIT study has shown: People who regularly use AI become accustomed to the technology and sooner or later just stop thinking! This was already certified in neuroscientific studies showing the fact that the brain of people using AI show virtually no activity while composing a text. But since thinking is the essential way for humans to understand the world, it follows that a person who no longer thinks simply no longer exists. If machines determine what we do, if they think for us and limit our judgment, if they even make decisions for us because we have fallen into a self-inflicted state of immaturity, then education is simply finished.

If children are exposed to AI too early—or even captured by its claws—the damage is far greater than it is for adults. After all, children learn to think in school. And the rule is: only through thinking you can learn to think. The way AI is currently used in schools often discharge children of the need to think for themselves. Viewing AI solely as a critical friend or a digital servant could be one approach, but this, in turn, requires an enormous degree of self-regulation – something that even many adults lack. The embarrassing reports about the architecture of speeches and declarations by so many politicians in recent weeks clearly demonstrate this.

**(?) >** One of the commission's recommendations is a ban on cell phones in school during the period up to seventh grade. But anyone who works with adolescents knows that seventh, eighth, and ninth grades—across all school systems—are an extremely challenging and conflict-prone time for parents, educators and teachers. It marks the transition from pre-teen (approx. 10 to 15 years old) to teenager (approx. 13 to 19 years old), characterized by a separation from the parental home, great uncertainty, physical changes (puberty), and the search for validation and new role models (peers). The commission's chair is quoted on DLF as saying: "When young people are 13 years old, they're in the seventh or eighth grade. They're right in the midst of identity development. They're breaking away from their parents, turning to their peers, exploring the world—and that world includes precisely the digital world." (DLF, June 24, 2026) Isn't it negligent, then, to offer these insecure young people digital screens where they can hide themselves, or let them free to navigate in the internet, where they can very quickly find and see every kind of horrors and cruelty?

**Klaus Zierer:** As we know from developmental psychology there's no such thing as "the age of 13" valid for everyone. Some reach it earlier, some later. Alone for that reason, such a fixed age limit, in the middle of puberty, is a dangerous nonsense.

**(?) >** In Germany, there's now an indecisive debate about whether to „introduce a ban or not"; and also whether the age limit should be 13 or 16. But other countries have already made definite decisions.

**Klaus Zierer:** It's worth taking a look at the world's top educational institutions to see that they're doing things differently. Any observer that follows the debates for example at Harvard University will have to pause and think. Then what's being discussed there is nothing less than the introduction of a ban on all digital devices in seminar rooms. While the beacons of the educational world are right now recognizing how harmful digital media can be, how absurd it is that the lower level of education continues to work in the absurd direction of more and more digital media!

**(?) >** Minister Prien called it a decisive step that the commission even intends to legally enforce the so-called "right to digital participation" by incorporating the term "digital neglect" into family law. Does this possibly mean that parents who do not raise their children with smartphones – or schools that insist on a screen-free environment – will face such a new criminal charge: "digital neglect"? How was this discussed in the commission? Please clarify this for us!

**Klaus Zierer:** According to the German constitution, parents have the basic and natural right to educate their children. I can't imagine that this recommendation would undermine that right. And if it did, the courts would quickly overturn it. What I mean by this is rather that parents need to be made aware of their role in the context of digitalization. If parents temselves spend more time playing on their cell phones than accompanying their children; if they mindlessly abandon their children in front of screens, and many other variants, then these are cases of digital neglect. There's nothing wrong with watching a movie together with children, or deliberately allowing them to watch a TV show. It therefore depends on the parents' responsibility for the upbringing of their childrens – and that's what I consider as the basis for such a recommendation. I don't see any obligation to immediately expose children to digital media: and if this was the case, then it would of course be completely unacceptable.

**(?) >** "Guiding children step by step toward media literacy"—that's another thing the commission intends to establish. It proposes a comprehensive prevention and protection system, encompassing self-regulation, education and even therapy, starting in the family and at the kindergarten. Isn't that enough for you?

**Klaus Zierer:** In my view, the important point is not only to make parents aware of their responsibilities, but also to hold tech companies accountable. After all, we see today that parents who want to introduce their children to digital media in a responsible way are confused by the hardware and software – because these are deliberately designed to keep young users engaged with all sorts of nonsensical content, for as long as possible. In this respect, we need more than just initiatives to develop self-regulation. A number of recommendations for action have been formulated to this end.

**(?) >** Let's return to the impact on schools. We can't avoid the suspicion that the commission actually provided reports tailored to please the federal government. The political coalition agreement includes the „Digital Pact 2.0" for an AI-supported, autonomous and adaptive learning based on student data. To this end, a kind of "Student ID" should be created and introduced. With such recommendations for action, the commission is effectively endorsing this very concept. What's your view on this?

**Klaus Zierer:** From an educational perspective, neither AI nor a Student ID can work as a panacea. I'm particularly critical of a a Student ID because it reflects the belief in the omnipotence of an evidence-based control over the education system. But it's not alone since the PISA study that we know that education cannot be fully controlled; that education takes place beyond standards; that education encompasses aspects impossible to measure; and that education requires room for maneuver. All of this is overlooked, and the government educational policy is blind to it. As long as we lack an understanding of education—and by that I truly mean an understanding of education that does justice to the human person, and not to some method of measurement or medium—we will not be able to escape this misconception. Whether the entire report is merely a courtesy report, I can only speak for my own role and decisively reject that notion.

**(?) >** Isn't the focus on the early use of digital media also attributable to the fact that representatives of empirical pedagogy dominated the work of the commission? Such educators argue that educational policy is based on data. That is, instruction must be measurable. From this perspective, it seems logical to collect data via tablets, starting in elementary school. In your new book „Eclectic Pedagogy" you criticize: "The problem is that at present only what is countable seems to be important. Yet not everything that is part of education can be counted, and not everything that is counted is relevant to education". Elsewhere, you also designate this reductionist approach as inhumane. Are the comission's recommendations for action an expression of this obsession with data?

**Klaus Zierer:** A human-centered perspective has long been missing in official education policy, in the commission, and in the pedagogic sphere. Since the first PISA Study shock we've been operating solely on the basis of calculations, but forgetting that human beings are not made up solely of numbers. Martin Heidegger already made it clear that a calculative way of thinking does not correspond to human nature and must be supplemented by contemplative thinking. And most recently, Hartmut Rosa articulated this idea by contrasting "constellations"—that is, a lifeworld that is clearly controlled and allows only for the execution of tasks—with situations in which a person has freedom to act. Education now needs the latter more than ever. Numbers alone won't get us out of the education crisis; instead, they'll drag us even deeper into it.

You criticize the notion "Nothing but computation on the go". But the IPN in Kiel, the real think-tank working to digitizalize schools, considers this as the future. According to the IPN, the "true potential of digital technologies lies in the fact that the generated student data can be used to reconstruct students' learning trajectories, determine the effectiveness of these trajectories in terms of developing targeted competencies, and identify the causes of insufficient effectiveness in order to support students individually in their learning." (IPN Journal 11/24). According to this position AI as a feedback system could even replace teachers, for example when evaluating essays. Now, in parallel with the commission's deliberations, you publicly defined four prohibitions on the Robert Bosch Foundation's school portal that would prevent such a development. Could you outline these again?

• First of all: a ban on personal smartphones in schools is long overdue and it's something very easy to implement. The fact is that no student—and no teacher—needs a personal device in class. Anyone who really wants to teach digitally should use school-issued devices; and these must be provided and set up by the ministries. This would also eliminate the core problem with smartphones, namely: how they distract, capture attention, and hinder learning. The "brain drain effect" of smartphones—which has shown that the mere presence of a

personal device disrupts educational processes—is a classic example in this context and has since been replicated countless times. Moreover, more and more schools everywhere, including in Germany, are reporting what research has already proven: smartphone-free schools work better. And the empirical educational research debunks the belief that "the earlier, the better."

• Second: it is time to put an end to the tablet craze, which actually benefits only one client: Apple and Co. From an educational perspective, there is no question that the basic competencies of reading and writing are being affected and compromised. This is because a screen changes the way people think. The consequence of introducing tablets too early in the learning process is: in-depth reading and writing habilities—which are especially important for learning—no longer develop. Empirical educational research thus debunks the belief "the earlier, the better," because reading and writing—especially during the phase of skills acquisition, and certainly well into the age of 16—are more effective for educational purposes when analog media are used.

• Third: age-restricted use of social media is something necessary in schools. The American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt already exposed a famous and comprehensive view of the influence of social media. He formulated a clear recommendation from an evidence-based perspective: Students must be protected from social media, because their neurological development cannot cope with the associated dangers (and this applies to many adults). Anyone who critically argues that there are no causal chains, must wait a long time to recognize the true educational mandate. After all, education does not involve any "causal chains"; instead, there is a pedagogical responsibility to act—indeed an obligation to immediately act, for the sake of the well-being of children and adolescents! Doing nothing, and merely hoping that the younger generation will figure it out on their own what to do, is a most naive approach, because it ignores both research and theory.

• And fourth: AI requires a clear regulation. There is no doubt that technical developments in the field of AI are quite impressive. But the capabilities of large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, far exceed what children and adolescents (and even adults) are capable of. But the goal of educational institutions is for people to learn how to think and to educate themselves. It's useless for people if a computer , in a matter of seconds, completes the thinking tasks that were assigned to them. This leaves them with nothing but a solution that disappears hours later. As a recent MIT study has impressively demonstrated, a brain atrophy is the result.

**(?) >** One question remains: it has to do with the responsibility of the platforms and their regulation. According to the commission recommendations, among other things platforms are required to introduce protected default settings for minors, and to ban addictive designs. Can protection in the digital world on social media be improved in this way, without a general ban for children and adolescents?

**Klaus Zierer:** Such a responsibility on the part of the platforms would make things much easier, at least from the parents' perspective, because the current situation is often overwhelming. Not all parents have the necessary time, interest or hability to deal with the problems involved in protecting their children in the inner space of the family. So, if the default setting were already an efficient protection, that would perfectly make sense. But that alone isn't enough, because children can also smartly avoid certain restrictions —they can find loopholes and so on and so forth. That's why all stakeholders will have to do their part to

truly protect children—first and foremost the platform operators and tech companies, followed by parents and schools.

**(?) >** Since November 2022, there has been intense discussion about „genAI“ (generative artificial intelligence). In the form of an automation technology, AI has been already part of science and business for more than 70 years. But the neew genAI can do what humans used to personally do: create texts, images, or videos. No less than 33,000 experts from IT and science are now warning of the possible consequences for both individuals and society. Has the commission reflected on the idea of “giving up human thinking”?

**Klaus Zierer:** The public discourse usually revolves around marveling at what technology can do. There are reports about how amazing it is when a seventh-grade schild uses AI to produce a majestic text, and this is then cited as proof of how effective AI is. I find this very naive, because in this situation I cannot grasp what the student is really capable of. I can only admire what technology is capable of achieving. Thinking is humanity’s gateway to itself and to the world. Anyone who hands this over to AI is not only no longer thinking—he also ceases to exist. But I’m not surprised that such connections aren’t understood. Anyone who spends a whole day simply shuffling numbers from one place to another has already forgotten how to freely think for himself.

**(?) >** In the German federal state of Bavaria new forms of testing are being discussed, involving AI, bots, and technical devices. Do we no longer need exams that can only be solved using one’s own mind?

**Klaus Zierer:** In an era of increasing digitalization of everyday life, the Bavarian Ministry of Education believes that the culture of testing must also change and adapt to the culture of digitality. It’s not clear exactly what is meant by “culture of digitality.” However, in the future, fewer written assessments will be required, and they may be replaced by new exam formats. Among other things, the creation of podcasts and explanatory videos is mentioned. At first glance, such a reform may seem modern and in step with the spirit of the times. But as so often happens, especially in education, it is crucial not to go with the flow. For in education, the individual is the measure, not the spirit of the times. Thus, upon closer inspection, the problems with the new examination culture quickly become apparent and reveal that the Bavarian Ministry of Education is on the wrong track. First, according to a Postbank digital study, children spend nearly 70 hours a week gazing at screens. With school digitalization, this number will grow. The reason for this situation is a digitalization craze that lacks any empirical basis. This was true for the project „one tablet for each student“ and it holds true for the new exam formats. No podcasts nor instructional videos will catapult Bavaria out of its educational crisis, so that students can find themselves. For years, academic performance has been trending in only one direction: downward. So while Bavaria’s students are performing worse and worse, education policy continues to digitalize the education system more and more.

**(?) >** But education policymakers claim that digitalization will help schools to adapt to modern demands and offer new skills, and so prepare students for the future real world.

**Klaus Zierer:** Let me remind one previous point: even in an increasingly digitalized world, podcasts and explanatory videos are proving to be skills needed primarily by influencers. Is this then the new educational ideal? Considering the embarrassing appearances of politicians in social media, one can certainly imagine that the „dream“ of the political influencer is quite alive—but for the mission of education, all of this is totally irrelevant and a waste of time.

Reality shows that these formats go hand in hand with a continuous decline in academic performance. Although the Bavarian Ministry of Education states that Bavaria remains committed to high academic standards, the new proposed examination culture cannot serve this promise. By the way there is now sufficient proof that oral and practical performances are consistently rated higher than written work.

So, anyone who reduces written assessments to oral and practical formats, is really lowering the standard of achievements. When we talk about the present and the future, and seek to understand education in this context, it is first and foremost clear that nobody knows what the future will bring. Who could have predicted in 2005 that a gadget like a smartphone would have such a profound impact on children's lives? And who could anticipate just a few years ago that generative AI would begin to dominate human thinking? The only thing we know is that we are human beings, and our existence requires not only knowledge and skills, but also the development of human character and compassion. Anyone who wants to prepare students for life's reality must focus on them as human beings, regardless of what the technological „spirit of the time" would like to imprint on us. Following such guidelines, students will be able to master any challenge the future may bring.

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**(?) >** One consequence of using AI is that we can no longer trust the validity of a text written by a student work. Instead of banning AI, do you think the focus is now shifting to oral formats?

**Klaus Zierer:** Exactly. But in this regard Bavaria is still considering exactly old testing formats that are completely useless. It's the case of so-called „debates". It's good to remember that debates, although important for democracy, at the end of the day they should not be evaluated. Students are already reporting that freedom of expression in schools is now not so straightforward, and that ideological positions often dominate. If, against this backdrop, a debate is now graded, this can only lead to further passivity on the part of the students. Hardly any student will dare to say what they think; on the contrary, they'll say even more what the teacher wants to hear. All in all, the new examination culture in Bavaria joins a long list of measures that have only one consequence: lower academic standards in the education system.

There is another bizarre situation in Bavaria: over the years, more and more young people finish high school with increasingly higher average examination scores. But at the same time, empirical studies—most notably PISA—show that academic performance is declining and getting worse. Never before has the school examination culture been as far removed from students' actual academic performance as it is today. The new examination culture continues this trend. At its core the culture of digitalization dominates with superficiality and selfishness. Continuing to treat it as a guiding principle will not lead to getting the Bavarian education system back on track.

**(?) >** In your press release regarding the Pope's encyclical letter you wrote: "An empiricist and technological hypertrophy has plunged schools into a severe crisis. The PISA studies clearly show this: worldwide learning results are declining, pointing to a global education crisis. The AI frenzy sweeping through education policy, school supervision, and a large part of the field of educational science is currently acting as a fire accelerant after years of playing with fire in the realm of digitalization, which has already caused great damage. The house of education must be rebuilt." What steps are necessary to rebuild this house?

**Klaus Zierer:** In my view, we need to focus on three aspects: First of all, society as a whole must once again become aware of what education truly means. In recent years, the education system has been manipulated to a degree that nothing remains of its core. Digitalization is one example of this: smartboards, tablets, BYOD, and the likes—all these experiments have changed the face of schools, but without improving them. Another example is the „ideology of equality", which ultimately seeks to erase all the differences that people naturally bring with them. Party manifestos always insist that educational success must be decoupled from family and home life. Anyone who believes that this is possible doesn't understands a thing about education. The only way to come anywhere close to achieving that would be by lowering educational standards—in other words, „more equality through stupidity for everybody". That is, take-it-easy, no more repeating a grade, no unannounced assessments, and much more. Hopefully, no one can seriously want that!

Education always implicates inequalities. Those who outright want to ban the concept of achievement from the educational system are pratically assuring that the lottery of life strikes without mercy and that inequalities continue to grow. It is not the strong children with strong parents who need the state the most. They can always help themselves. If the education system abandons the concept of achievement, the result ist hat those most vulnerable will suffer the most. That is why achievement and effort are needed now more than ever. Demanding achievement is not only a matter of social reason but also one of respect for every single young person. It is an expression of the conviction that everyone can accomplish something important and, at the same time, rise above themselves—even though we are all different. Successful education does not aim to produce people who are absolute equals. Instead, it seeks to recognise the differences in the world and, through education, the dignity of each individual. The moral recognition of exceptional achievement despite adverse personal circumstances is one of the core characteristics of good pedagogy. To achieve this we do not need leveling algorithms, but instead motivating personalities as educators.

**(End)** Professor Zierer, thank you for your willingness to address our critical questions and to take a clear and provocative stand— as evidenced by the courageous arguments in your closing sentences. Your new book, *The Tyranny of Equality: Toward Greater Justice in Schools and Society*, which proposes a way to overcome the education crisis, is on our reading list.

The interview in German as PDF file (13 pages) is available through the link: www.die-pädagogische-wende.de/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/interview_klaus_zierer.pdf

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