

Paul Vallas: Chicago and CPS cannot afford to bench themselves in the AI revolution

By [Paul Vallas](#) | Special to the Tribune

PUBLISHED: September 3, 2026 at 5:00 AM CDT

Artificial intelligence is transforming at a rapid pace how we work, learn and live each day. It is already deeply embedded in everyday enterprise software, supply-chain operations and scientific research. Massive global capital investments, clear productivity gains and technical momentum mean AI will remain a permanent pillar of modern society and an expanding engine of the world economy. For Chicago, AI offers an unprecedented, generational economic and educational opportunity — one that could rival the transformative impact of the Industrial Age.

Unfortunately, recent events suggest that Chicago's leadership may elect to bypass these opportunities altogether. Growing opposition to the Illinois Quantum & Microelectronics Park at the former U.S. Steel South Works site threatens the transformative project. Meanwhile, Chicago Public Schools has demonstrated a troubling willingness to yield to activist parent groups that are lobbying for delaying the use of generative AI in the district. The hesitation to deploy enterprise tools such as Google Gemini signals an alarming retreat from innovation.

A recent Community Over Quantum rally, during which Mayor Brandon Johnson spoke, devolved into political theater, with protesters shouting down economic development proposals and demanding the project be halted. The proposed park is not even a high-density AI data center, which has become the primary target of activists.

The park is designed as a research, development and advanced manufacturing campus on Chicago's South Side. It is dedicated to quantum computing and microelectronics innovation, hosting anchor tenants such as PsiQuantum, research labs, testing equipment and cryogenic cooling infrastructure. It will also house premier federal and corporate initiatives, including the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency-Illinois Quantum Proving Ground and an IBM innovation hub.

Mamdani announces AI ban for young students in NYC schools

The park's leadership has made it clear that the facility will not host standard server-farm data centers. Yet political opposition persists, driven largely by activists who do not live in the South Side neighborhoods devastated by decades of manufacturing decline.

Beyond quantum research, Chicago possesses a distinct advantage for broader digital infrastructure: vast stretches of abandoned industrial property and freshwater access via Lake Michigan. For more than half a century, the city has struggled to repurpose industrial land. The AI and cloud infrastructure sector requires large parcels, heavy industrial zoning and high-voltage electrical infrastructure. Crucially, these facilities do not need to sit in trendy neighborhoods.

Transforming Chicago into a hub for data centers and technology infrastructure should not require massive city or state subsidies. Growing national scrutiny over power demands and taxpayer handouts has rightly shifted that policy landscape. Furthermore, much of the city's South and West sides lie within federal Opportunity Zones, offering significant private capital-gains tax incentives, while federal brownfield programs assist with environmental

remediation. As policy analyst Jordan Powell noted in the Chicago Contrarian, selling speed, streamlined site approvals and zoning clarity is incentive enough to attract private investment without spending a dime of taxpayer money.

As I argued [previously](#), properly deployed AI can bring significant cost savings to school district operations by making real zero-based budgeting a reality and improving all aspects of school management. Most importantly, AI can significantly expand teacher instructional support, increase active learning time and provide one-on-one assistance at an affordable cost for each CPS student.

AI allows economically disadvantaged students to leapfrog historic infrastructural deficits while human-centered safeguards, data privacy protections and equitable access are maintained. Teacher union leadership and activists will resist these shifts to preserve legacy staffing models. But delaying AI in public schools will not stop children from using it.

It will simply guarantee that wealthy suburban kids with private tutors and paid AI subscriptions learn how to build with it.

When a school district chooses to wait and see, it isn't playing it safe — it is actively widening the equity gap. Chicago's students are not just competing against kids in Winnetka or Naperville; they are competing against students in Shanghai, Beijing, Tokyo and Singapore who leverage AI in their classrooms. How can CPS expect its graduates to compete globally if it refuses to give them the tools of the modern economy?

Chicago has a world-class institution ready to help CPS take full advantage of the AI revolution. At the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, the Gies Disruption Lab's Contextual AI Avatar project has created a state-of-the-art tool kit for enhancing educational support, as high school researcher and Chicago Rising founder [Leo Fiascone, 17](#), recently highlighted in the Chicago Contrarian. It offers the equivalent of a 24/7 AI assistant for every teacher and a personalized tutor for every child.

The Disruption Lab is not about replacing dedicated teachers. It is about equipping them with powerful tools so they can focus on mentorship, deep relationship building and targeted academic support.

[Fiascone](#) urges in his piece that CPS should formally adopt the Gies Disruption Lab as its primary innovation laboratory. A structural partnership between CPS and U. of I. would honor the historic land-grant mandate by deploying university research to solve the state's most pressing urban challenge.

Skeptics once claimed the internet would never replace printed newspapers, that personal computers were unnecessary for the average home and that the automobile was a passing fad. In Chicago, traditionalists insisted that electronic trading platforms would never replace the floor pits of the financial exchanges.

For over five decades, Chicago has sought solutions for contaminated industrial land abandoned by manufacturing. Today, the technology sector offers a self-funding mechanism to remediate and redevelop those sites. Concurrently, AI presents the city with an actionable path to reform a struggling K-12 system that consumes an ever-increasing share of public resources while contributing to the exodus of middle-class families.

This is a once-in-a-generation economic and social opportunity Chicago must seize.

Paul Vallas is an adviser for the Illinois Policy Institute. He ran for Chicago mayor in 2023 and was previously budget director for the city and CEO of Chicago Public Schools.

Submit a letter, of no more than 400 words, to the editor [here](#) or email letters@chicagotribune.com.