UK schools 'bewildered' by AI and do not trust tech firms, headteachers say

Schools are "bewildered" by the fast pace of development in artificial intelligence and do not trust tech firms to protect the interests of students and educational establishments, headteachers have written. A group of UK school leaders have announced the launch of a body to advise and protect schools from the risks of AI, with their fears not limited to the capacity of chatbots such as ChatGPT to aid cheating. There are also concerns about the impact on children's mental and physical health as well as the teaching profession itself, according to the Times. The headteachers' fears were outlined in a letter to the Times in which they warned of the "very real and present hazards and dangers" being presented by AI, which has gripped the public imagination in recent months through the emergence of breakthroughs in generative AI – where tools can produce plausible text, images and even voice impersonations on command. The group of school leaders is led by Sir Anthony Seldon, the head of Epsom College, a fee-paying school, while the AI body is supported by the heads of dozens of private and state schools. The letter to the Times says: "Schools are bewildered by the very fast rate of change in AI and seek secure guidance on the best way forward, but whose advice can we trust? We have no confidence that the large digital companies will be capable of regulating themselves in the interests of students, staff and schools and in the past the government has not shown itself capable or willing to do so." Signatories to the letter include Seldon, Chris Goodall, the deputy head of Epsom & Ewell High School, and Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders. It adds that the group is pleased the government is now "grasping the nettle" on the issue. This week Rishi Sunak said "guardrails" would have to be put around AI as Downing Street indicated support for a global framework for regulating the technology. However, the letter adds that educational leaders are forming their own advisory body because AI is moving too quickly for politicians to cope. "AI is moving far too quickly for the government or parliament alone to provide the real-time advice schools need. We are thus announcing today our own cross-sector body composed of leading teachers in our schools, guided by a panel of independent digital and AI experts." Supporters include James Dahl, the head of Wellington College in Berkshire, and Alex Russell, chief executive of the Bourne Education Trust, which runs about two dozen state schools. The Times reported that the group would create a website led by the heads of science or digital at 15 state and private schools, offering guidance on developments in AI and what technology to avoid or embrace. Seldon told the Times: "Learning is at its best, human beings are at their best, when they are challenged and overcome those challenges. AI will make life easy and strip away learning and teaching – unless we get ahead of it." The Department for Education said: "The education secretary has been clear about the government's appetite to pursue the opportunities – and manage the risks – that exist in this

space, and we have already published information to help schools do this. We continue to work with experts, including in education, to share and identify best practice."