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EDITOR'S PICK

NH students tackle how to regulate AI in civics essay competition

By Paul Feely Union Leader Staff
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Vaibhav Rastogi, right, a senior at Bishop Brady High School, shakes hands with state Supreme Court Chief Justice Gordon MacDonald on Monday at the High School Civics Essay Contest Award Ceremony at Merrimack Superior Court in Concord. Rastogi placed first in the contest.

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How should freedoms and rights-enshrined documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution dictate the way artificial intelligence (AI) tools are regulated?

And should AI companies be required by law to pay authors whose work they use?

Vaibhav Rastogi, a senior receiving his education in person through Bishop Brady High School and virtually through Virtual Learning Academy Charter School, won first place for his essay tackling that topic in the New Hampshire Bar Foundation's second annual High School Civics Essay Contest.

Rastogi earned a \$5,000 award. Runners-up, who each received a \$2,500 award, were Leah McFarland, a senior at Newfound Regional High School, who placed second, and Lauren Damota, a junior at Londonderry High School, who placed third. All three were honored Monday during a ceremony at Merrimack Superior Court in Concord.

New Hampshire students enrolled in grades 11 and 12 during the 2025-26 academic year were invited to write 750 to 1,000 words presenting a clear position on the topic, "How should the freedoms and rights identified in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution shape the way AI tools like ChatGPT are regulated? Should AI companies be required by law to pay the authors whose work they use?"

Forty-nine students submitted essays. A panel of attorneys and judges then evaluated each submission on criteria including the understanding of constitutional principles; originality, clarity and depth of analysis; and grammar, spelling, composition and citations.

State Supreme Court Chief Justice Gordon MacDonald said the students honored Monday, as well as all who entered the contest, fill us with "renewed confidence for our future."



State Supreme Court Justice Melissa Countway, left, and Chief Justice Gordon MacDonald, right, pose with essay contest award winners Vaibhav Rastogi, second from left, a senior at Bishop Brady High School, Leah McFarland, center, a senior at Newfound Regional High School, and Lauren Damota, a junior at Londonderry High School, at the High School Civics Essay Contest Award Ceremony on Monday afternoon in Concord.

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“The winning essay is so very well constructed – crisp, disciplined writing, and excellent uses of topic sentences,” MacDonald said. “And in terms of inspiration, I found particular inspiration in this line toward the end of the essay – ‘As America approaches its 250th birthday, the question is not whether the Constitution can accommodate artificial intelligence, but whether we will honor the values it enshrines.’”



Essay contest award winner Leah McFarland, a senior at Newfound Regional High School, speaks with Supreme Court Justice Melissa Countway, as her father, Ryan McFarland, looks on Monday.

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Rastogi, who is considering exploring a pre-law track in college, said he spent about three days looking through cases and identifying what he would want to reference in his essay.

“I initially started off by looking at music rights, since I thought those would be applicable to AI,” Rastogi said. “So, I think in my first two days I was writing about music rights but then I switched my essay a little bit more to just constitutional principles and looking at those through the lens of the three cases I did end up choosing.”

In his essay, Rastogi wrote AI companies such as OpenAI, Google, Anthropic and Microsoft promise “unprecedented innovation, efficiency and access to knowledge.”

“Yet they also challenge foundational constitutional commitments to free speech, property rights and personal liberty,” Rastogi wrote. “AI regulation must reflect these commitments by ensuring that innovation does not come at the expense of the very freedoms the Constitution exists to protect.”



Essay contest award winner Lauren Damota, a junior at Londonderry High School, speaks with state Supreme Court Justice Melissa Countway, at the High School Civics Essay Contest Award Ceremony at Merrimack Superior Court in Concord on Monday.

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In her third-place essay, Damota wrote the rise of artificial intelligence — specifically generative AI systems developed by companies like OpenAI — has raised concerns over the use of millions of authors' work without credit or compensation.

"While AI is a promising and transformative technology, the rapid growth of AI companies rests upon the backs of countless human creators who deserve recognition for all their labor," Damota wrote. "For this reason, AI companies should be legally required to compensate authors whose copyrighted works are used in artificial intelligence training and development."

Damota said she's had a number of conversations about AI — including the ethics and legalities of it moving forward — with her civics teachers.

“It does interest me and I feel pretty clear on my stance on it, and my essay reflects that,” Damota said. “It’s a complex issue, and I think the hardest part of it was figuring out in what aspects it connected to civics – where exactly did it click, which cases reflect what we can and can’t do. ... That was the hardest part for me.”

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