

Center for Public Education



Artificial Intelligence: How Urban School Leaders Can Flip the Script

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Council of Urban Boards of Education

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) presents education leaders with an unprecedented set of challenges. These challenges span both hardware and software — from students spending increasing amounts of time on AI-enabled devices and screens to increasingly sophisticated AI-powered social media platforms designed to capture and hold young people's attention.

At the same time, public policy has struggled to keep pace. Federal and state governments have been slow to establish clear AI guardrails, leaving many local school boards to navigate these issues with limited guidance. School boards must navigate a landscape that juxtaposes the growing use of AI by students and educators — and the rapid pace of innovation driven by AI developers — with parents' concerns about children's learning, well-being, and online safety. As a result, school boards are increasingly on the front lines, making critical decisions about how AI should be used in schools.

AI is here to stay. The question is no longer whether schools should use AI, but how they can use it responsibly to improve teaching and learning while minimizing its risks. Education leaders must balance concerns about excessive screen time with AI's potential to personalize learning, increase educator productivity, and prepare students for an AI-driven workforce. They must also ensure that students become thoughtful creators and critical users of AI — not simply passive consumers — while strengthening media literacy, digital citizenship, and mental health supports.

These challenges require school boards and district leaders to look beyond simply adapting existing practices. They should ask more fundamental questions about how AI can help transform an education system designed for a different era and better prepare students for the future. Ultimately, AI should not drive educational change; educational goals should drive how AI is governed and used.



Why This Report

AI is rapidly becoming part of teaching and learning in school districts, but policies and guidance governing its use have not kept pace. A 2024 [study](#) by [Digital Promise](#) — also known as the National Center for Research in Advanced Information and Digital Technologies, a nonprofit organization established by Congress through the 2008 reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act — surveyed 31 school districts serving more than 260,000 students across the United States. Among these districts, 93% reported that at least some schools were using AI technologies in the classroom, and 41% had purchased AI-powered tools within the previous 12 months. Yet only about one-quarter had established specific policies or guidance for the effective or authorized use of AI.

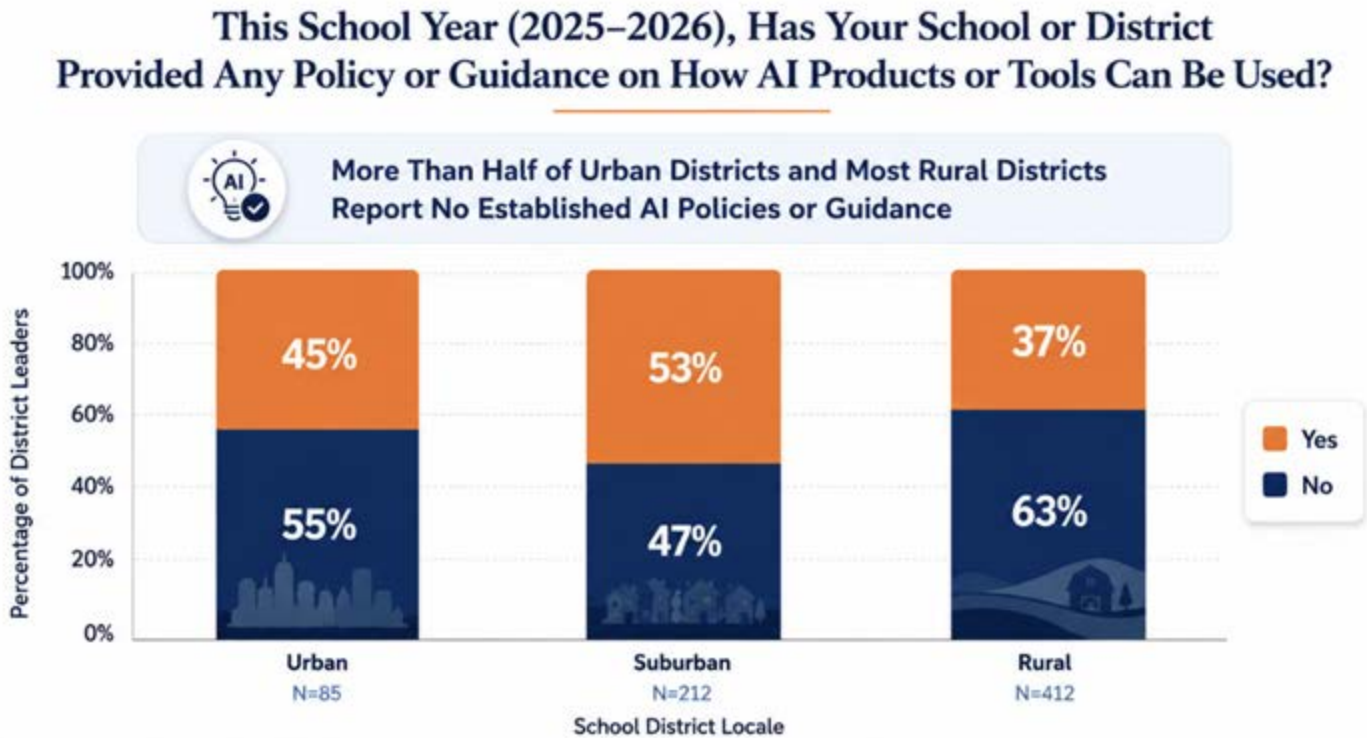
The pace of adoption has continued to accelerate. Since 2023, the Center on Reinventing Public Education ([CRPE](#)) has tracked how school districts are approaching generative AI. Its database identifies “[early adopter](#)” districts as those pursuing systemic AI adoption — for example, piloting or exploring an AI tool or strategy in one or more schools with central office coordination or endorsement. According to CRPE’s latest [tracking](#), the number of early adopter districts increased from 40 in 2024 to 79 in the 2025–26 school year, nearly doubling in one year. The strongest growth occurred among nonrural districts ([Dusseault and Hurwitz, 2025](#)). Districts in cities and suburbs represent the fastest-growing segment of school systems pursuing systemwide AI strategies.

Internal data collected by the National School Boards Association (NSBA) points to a similar gap between AI adoption and district governance. In April 2026, NSBA surveyed more than 1,000 school board members across 48 states. Only 30% reported that their districts had established policies or guidance on what educators should teach students about AI tools and/or how students may use AI products and tools. Approximately 70% reported that their districts were either still developing AI policies or that they did not know the status of their district’s AI policies.

NSBA data further show that 55% of urban district leaders and 47% of suburban district leaders reported having no established AI policies or guidance (see Chart 1). These findings point to a broader trend: AI use is becoming increasingly common in school districts, while districtwide policies and coherent strategies for its use are still developing. For urban school districts, this gap raises particularly urgent questions about educational equity — who has access to AI, how it is used, and whether all students can benefit from these rapidly evolving technologies.



Chart 1.



Note: Of the 1,028 respondents, 319 did not identify the locale of their school district. Source: 2026 NSBA internal survey

NSBA’s Council of Urban Boards of Education ([CUBE](#)) is committed to creating educational opportunities that equip urban school board leaders with the knowledge and skills to serve as effective local education policymakers and advocates for equity in public education. In support of this mission, NSBA’s Center for Public Education (CPE) developed this report to examine AI as a timely and rapidly evolving challenge for urban school districts and their leaders.

For the purposes of this report, **“urban districts” is used broadly to reflect the communities represented by CUBE and includes school districts located in cities, suburbs, and towns.** In other words, the term encompasses urban and other nonrural districts rather than referring exclusively to districts located in large cities.

CPE plans to dedicate a separate report to rural school districts, where AI adoption may present distinct challenges, including limited internet connectivity, geographic isolation, and other factors associated with rurality that can affect the adoption and use of AI in K–12 education.

In this report, we examine three fundamental questions facing school boards and district leaders, using research, data, and actionable strategies to move from broad challenges to practical governance decisions:

1. **From AI Consumers to AI Creators:** How can school boards and district leaders cultivate a culture that empowers students to move beyond simply consuming AI-generated content to using AI responsibly and creatively as a tool for learning, problem-solving, and innovation?
2. **From AI Risks to Media Literacy:** As AI-powered social media raises growing concerns about student well-being, how can school boards and district leaders equip every student with the media literacy skills needed to navigate, evaluate, and engage responsibly with an increasingly AI-driven digital world?
3. **From Piecemeal Policies to Transformational Systems Change:** How can school boards and district leaders move beyond individual policy responses — such as banning cell phones or limiting screen time — to developing a coherent, systemwide approach to AI that supports student learning, well-being, safety, and future readiness?

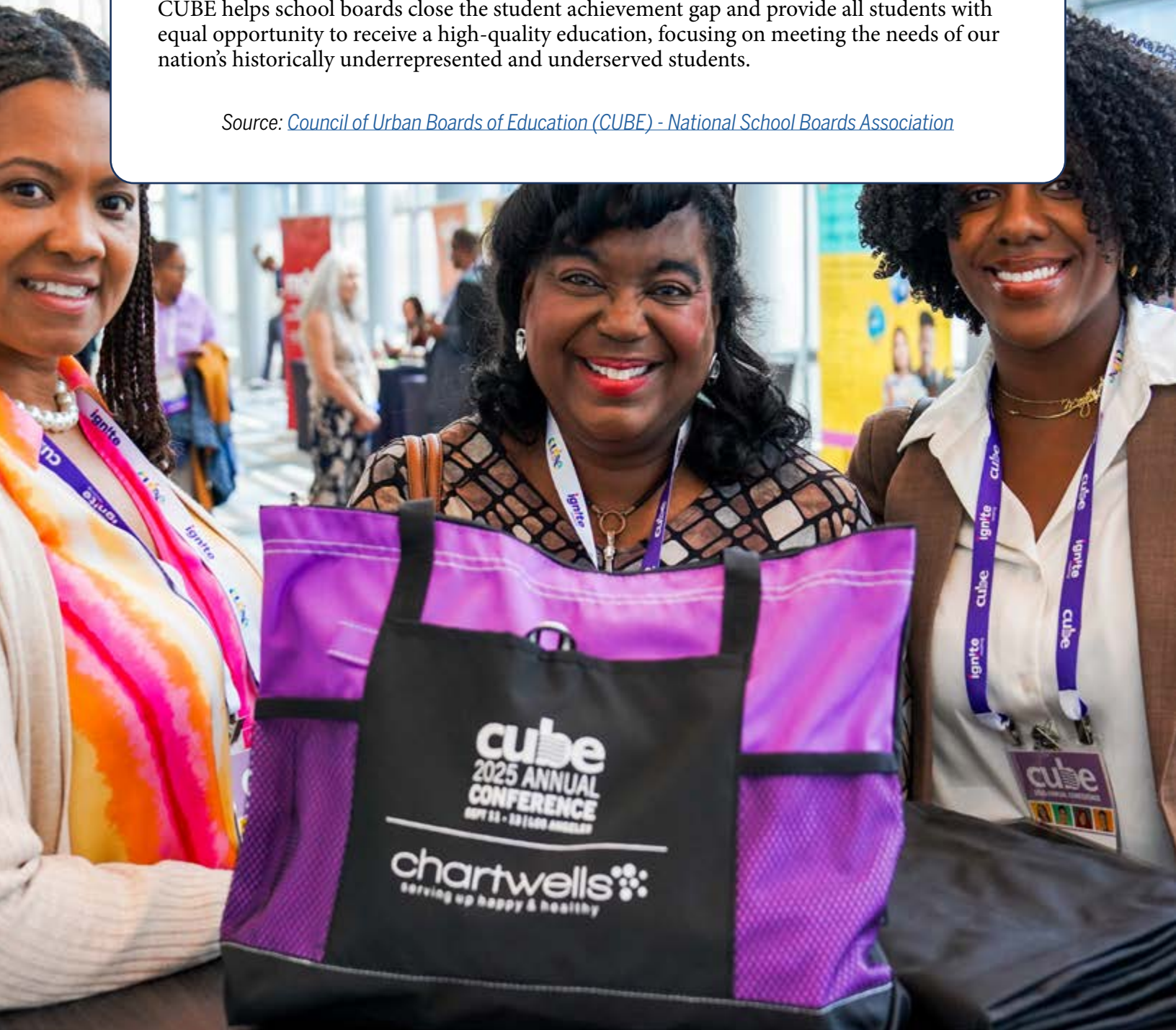


Resource Box 1: The Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE)

The Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE) supports excellence in urban school board leadership. As part of its mission, CUBE creates educational opportunities for urban school board leaders to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to serve as effective local education policymakers and as advocates for equity in public education.

Committed to addressing the educational challenges that exist in our nation's urban centers, CUBE helps school boards close the student achievement gap and provide all students with equal opportunity to receive a high-quality education, focusing on meeting the needs of our nation's historically underrepresented and underserved students.

Source: [Council of Urban Boards of Education \(CUBE\) - National School Boards Association](#)



From AI Consumers to AI Creators

In the United States, nearly 9 in 10 children ages 9 to 17 (86%) use or interact with AI, including about 1 in 4 (24%) who do so daily, according to a 2026 study by [Common Sense Media](#). Among children who use AI, 89% say they use it for fun or entertainment, while 85% use it for schoolwork or homework. One encouraging sign is that 3 in 4 children (75%) also report using AI to create things, suggesting that many young people are engaging with AI not only as consumers but also as creators.

Curiosity can inspire students to apply their knowledge in science and technology to solve real-world problems. With AI as a tool, students can turn what they learn in school into innovative products and practical solutions. The [2026 National STEM Festival](#) offers compelling examples across a range of fields:

- **Health Care and Medical Technology.**

[Tushar Mehta](#), a high school student from Pennsylvania, developed an AI-based system designed to detect lung cancer earlier while making the results easier to understand.

[Vedhsai Thiriveedi](#), a high school junior from New Hampshire, developed PillPatrol, an AI-powered mobile app that identifies counterfeit pills and helps teenagers recognize potentially dangerous fake prescription drugs. The app uses AI image recognition to analyze pills and provides a chatbot, drug-safety information, and a community forum.

[Aadya Syal](#), a high school student from Washington, developed an AI-powered platform that uses journal analysis and personalized insights to expand access to mental health support.

- **Biotechnology and Gene Editing.**

[Amal Eltayib](#), a student from Iowa City, Iowa, developed OMEGA, an AI tool that improves the precision of CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing by optimizing guide RNA selection for targeting multiple genes simultaneously.

- **Environmental Science and Climate Solutions.**

[Satya Kokonda](#), a high school student from Delaware, used AI to design advanced carbon-capture materials aimed at reducing industrial greenhouse gas emissions.

[Sylvia Xu](#), a 17-year-old student from New Mexico, applied AI to another environmental challenge with her project, Using AI to Predict When the Rio Grande Will Run Dry.

- **Accessibility and Assistive Technology.**

[Aasrith Ravulapati](#), a high school student from Georgia, created a real-time AI navigation system to help people with visual impairments navigate their surroundings.

- **Special Education and Learning.**

[Michelle Xie](#), a high school student from Mississippi, developed an AI system that helps children with autism learn to recognize emotions in speech.

- **Data Science and Media Analysis.**

[Arjun Jain](#), a junior high school student from South Carolina, used data science and machine learning to examine how technology news media portrayed artificial intelligence over nearly two decades. He analyzed more than 22,000 technology news articles published between 2006 and 2024, using sentiment analysis and topic modeling to identify changes in how the media discussed AI, including shifts following the emergence of ChatGPT. His project demonstrates how students can use AI and computational methods not only to build products, but also to study changes in society and public discourse.

For urban school districts, these examples also raise an important equity question: Do all students have access to the courses, technology, mentors, data, and hands-on learning opportunities that enable them to become AI creators? As AI becomes increasingly important to college and career readiness, urban school leaders have an opportunity to ensure that students historically underserved by education and technology are not left on the consuming side of the AI divide.

How Can District Leaders Foster a Culture That Turns AI Consumers into AI Creators?

Researchers ([Tomlinson et al., 2025](#)) find that the most common and successful AI-assisted work activities center on information work — the creation, processing, and communication of information. The student examples above illustrate this potential: rather than simply using AI to consume information or complete assignments, students are using it to investigate problems, analyze data, develop ideas, and create projects and products with real-world applications.

To help more students make this shift from AI consumers to AI creators, school boards and district leaders can cultivate students' talents and capabilities across three key dimensions:

1) Cultivate curiosity and creativity from early childhood through high school.

A 2026 Common Sense Media [survey](#) highlights both the promise and the tension surrounding AI and creativity. While 70% of parents and 62% of children ages 12–17 worry that AI tools could undermine creativity, children are more likely than parents to view AI as a learning asset (58% vs. 41%). These findings highlight the importance of helping students use AI not as a substitute for thinking and creativity, but as a tool to support them.

Students are naturally curious about the world around them. They care about having clean water and clean air and about the health and well-being of their families, friends, and communities. When they see people struggling or problems affecting their communities, they often want to understand why, help others, and make a difference. District leaders can nurture this curiosity by creating opportunities for students to ask questions, investigate real-world challenges, and explore how what they learn in school — including AI and other emerging technologies — can be used to develop solutions. Curiosity can be the starting point for moving students from simply consuming AI to using it purposefully to create, innovate, and solve problems.

2) Incorporate more hands-on, creativity-driven, project-based, career-related learning into both in-school and after-school programs.

Give students opportunities to move beyond simply using AI to complete schoolwork. Through hands-on projects, students can combine AI with knowledge from fields such as medicine, biotechnology, environmental science, engineering, and education to investigate real-world problems, design solutions, and create useful tools. Project-based learning can help transform AI from a tool students consume into a tool they use to create, experiment, and innovate.

3) Strengthen students' research skills and integrate data science across grade levels.

Curiosity leads students to ask questions, gather evidence, collect and analyze data, and draw conclusions. These research skills provide an important foundation for using AI effectively. Because data analysis and AI are increasingly intertwined, students need opportunities to develop **data literacy alongside AI literacy** — learning not only how to use AI tools, but also how to evaluate data, recognize patterns, test ideas, and use evidence to solve problems.

The goal is not simply to teach students **how to use AI, but to teach them how to think, create, and solve problems with it.**

Board role: School boards can establish graduation competencies that emphasize creativity, research, data literacy, and responsible AI use; align strategic plans and budgets with project-based and career-connected learning; and ensure that these opportunities reach all students.

By cultivating curiosity, expanding hands-on learning, and strengthening research and data skills, district leaders can help ensure that AI amplifies students' creativity rather than replaces it. The future belongs not to students who merely consume what AI produces, but to those who can use AI to create what does not yet exist.



Resource Box 2: Start With Learning — Five Questions Before Investing in AI and EdTech

As AI and educational technology become increasingly embedded in schools, boards should begin not with **what a technology can do**, but with what students need to learn. Before approving or expanding an AI or EdTech investment, school boards can ask:

1. **What educational problem are we trying to solve?** What student learning or instructional outcome should improve?
2. **What evidence shows that this technology can help?** Look beyond vendor claims to evidence of effectiveness and input from educators and students.
3. **Is it appropriate for the students who will use it?** Consider age, development, accessibility, equity, student well-being, and whether the specific technology promotes active learning rather than passive consumption.
4. **What are the costs and risks?** Consider instructional time, student attention, privacy, security, accessibility, implementation, and professional learning — not simply the purchase price.
5. **How will we know whether it is working?** Establish clear outcomes and evidence for determining whether the technology should be continued, expanded, changed, or discontinued.

The governing principle is simple: Start with learning, not technology. The question is not “What does this product offer?” but “What educational problem are we trying to solve, and what evidence shows that this technology will help us solve it?”

(Sources: [InnovateEDU](#), [Responsible K–5 EdTech Use Pillars](#); [2026 EdTech Evidence Report](#); [Fearing, 2026](#))

From AI Risks to Media Literacy

[“AI isn’t just doing students’ homework. It’s doing their thinking.”](#)

Common Sense Media, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving children’s digital well-being, has established the [Youth AI Safety Institute](#) to independently research AI’s impact, develop safety standards, evaluate AI products, and share findings with families and the public. Its research shows how deeply AI is becoming embedded in young people’s lives. According to Common Sense Media ([2025](#) and [2026](#)), more than half of American teens regularly interact with AI companions, and 59% of children and teens use AI to search for information or facts, while 55% use it for help with homework. At the same time, 42% of students report using AI for mental health support, companionship, or an escape from real life ([Center for Democracy & Technology, 2025](#)).

These uses raise concerns that extend well beyond cheating or academic integrity. AI can increasingly influence what young people see and believe, how they make decisions, and where they turn to for information, advice, and friendship. In this sense, emerging AI risks build on lessons schools and families have already learned from social media.

Those lessons are consequential. Families have sued Meta over serious harms to teenagers, including cyberbullying, financial sextortion, and eating disorders ([Ingram, 2025](#)). Roughly 2,000 lawsuits filed by parents and school districts have been consolidated in federal court, with many alleging that platform algorithms and features were designed to maximize engagement in ways that contributed to addiction and other harms ([NPR, 2026](#); [The New York Times, 2026](#)).

The lesson for schools is not simply that emerging technologies carry risks. It is that protecting students requires more than reacting after harm occurs. As AI becomes increasingly woven into young people’s learning and daily lives, students need the knowledge and judgment to understand how these technologies influence them — and how to use them critically, safely, and responsibly.



How Can District Leaders Turn AI Risks Into Opportunities for Media Literacy?

Rapid advances in AI underscore a broader challenge for schools: digital safety can no longer be separated from media and AI literacy. Students need more than rules about screen time or prohibited platforms. They need the skills to question AI-generated information, recognize manipulation and harmful design features, protect their privacy, evaluate online relationships, and understand when technology is influencing not only what they consume, but also how they think and make decisions.

1) Build regular, constructive communication with parents about AI use.

A 2026 Common Sense Media [survey](#) reveals a significant gap between how parents perceive AI use among children ages 12 to 17 and how children actually use it. For example, 46% of parents believe children mainly use AI to create images or videos, compared with 39% of children who report doing so. Similarly, 23% of parents believe children use AI mainly for companionship, while only 8% of children report doing so.

This gap creates an opportunity for district leaders to strengthen communication with families. Schools can regularly share what students are learning about AI, how AI is being used in teaching and learning, and what potential risks families should understand. **Transparency builds trust.** Rather than communicating only when problems arise, district leaders can create ongoing, constructive conversations with parents, listen to their concerns, answer questions, and work together toward practical solutions.

2) Build students' judgment and responsibility through AI and media literacy.

Two findings highlight the need for AI and media literacy to help students develop the judgment, responsibility, and self-discipline to make informed choices about AI use.

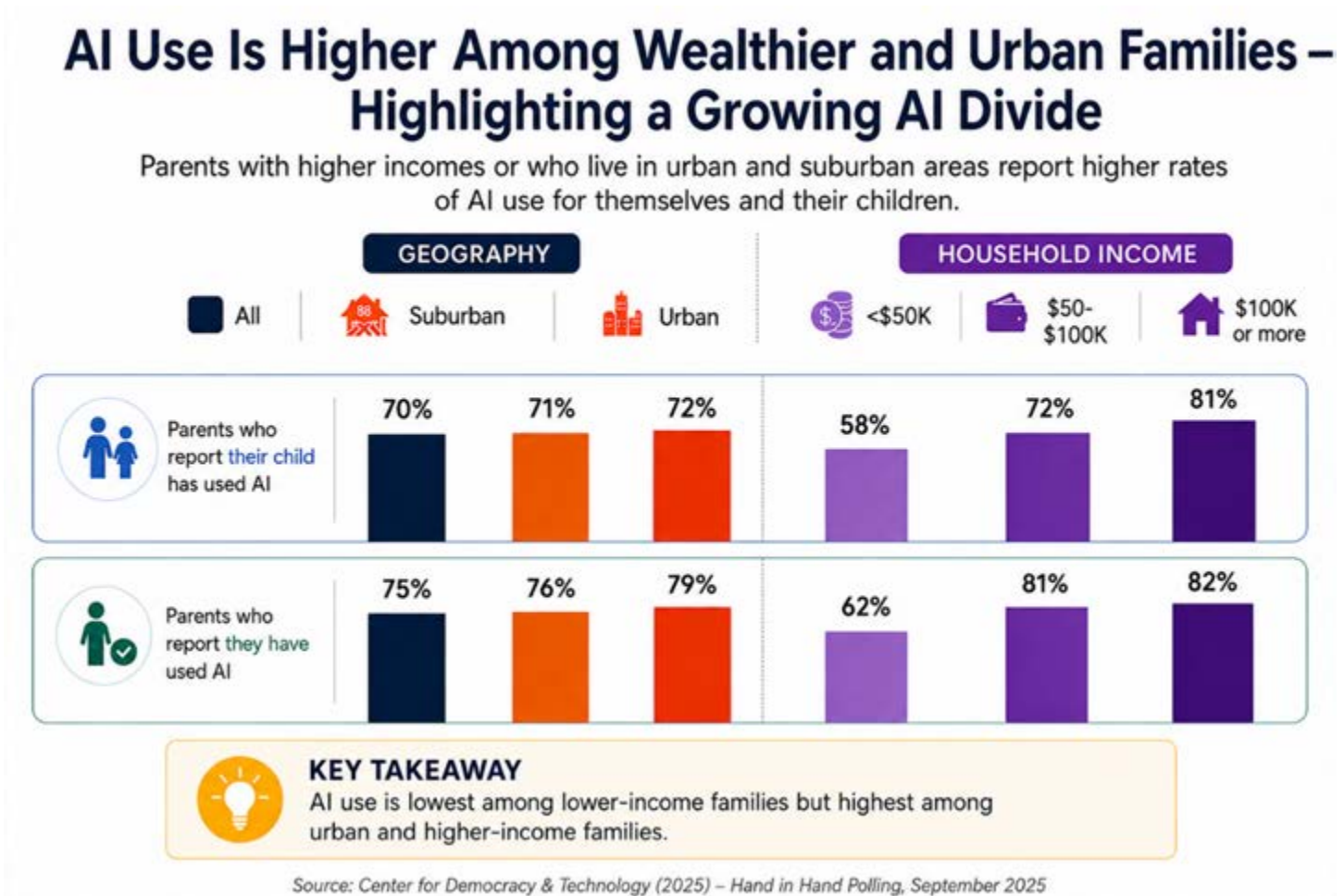
- A 2026 Common Sense Media [study](#) reveals a significant divide between parents and children over AI use for schoolwork: 52% of parents say it is unethical, while 52% of children say it should be encouraged. Despite this difference, both groups agree on an important point: schools should teach students how to use AI responsibly.
- A 2025 [study](#) by the Center for Democracy & Technology (CDT) reinforces this need. It finds that AI literacy training and guidance have not kept pace with the rapid adoption of AI or its known risks. Few students and teachers receive adequate guidance on how to respond when they encounter problems with AI systems or when AI use begins to negatively affect a student's well-being.

These findings suggest that AI literacy should go beyond teaching students how to use AI tools ([BHEF, 2025](#)). Students also need the judgment and responsibility to decide when, why, and how to use AI — and when not to use it.

3) Expand access to AI and media literacy education for disadvantaged students.

Equal access to media literacy education is more important than ever as AI rapidly becomes part of nearly every aspect of daily life. According to CDT data (see Chart 2), parents with higher incomes and those living in urban and suburban communities report higher rates of AI use for both them and their children.

Chart 2.



These findings point to a potential AI literacy divide. Parents who have more experience with AI may be better positioned to guide their children toward responsible and productive use. In contrast, students from lower-income families may have less access to such guidance, making it even more important for schools to help them develop the knowledge, judgment, and self-discipline to use AI as a tool for learning and creativity rather than allowing it to replace the thinking, effort, and engagement that meaningful learning requires.

For urban districts, these disparities can exist within the same school system, where students from different neighborhoods and family income levels may have very different access to AI tools, adult guidance, and opportunities to develop AI literacy. Ensuring equitable access therefore means more than providing devices; it means ensuring that every student develops the knowledge and judgment to use AI safely and productively.

In summary, the goal is not simply to protect students from AI, but to prepare them to navigate a world shaped by AI. By partnering with families, building students' judgment and self-discipline, and ensuring equitable access to AI and media literacy, district leaders can turn emerging risks into opportunities for learning and empowerment. **In an AI-driven world, media literacy is no longer optional — it is an essential skill for every student.**

Resource Box 3: Examples of How Schools Are Advancing AI and Media Literacy Through Innovation

From AI Consumers to AI Creators: A Student Hackathon in Action

On a Friday morning in early March, about 100 students at Washington Leadership Academy (WLA), a public charter high school in Washington, D.C., gathered in the assembly hall for a “Hackathon.” Their challenge was simple but ambitious: **build an AI-powered chatbot to solve a real-world problem.**

For most students, this was their first Hackathon — but hardly their first encounter with AI. They described the technology with a mix of enthusiasm and skepticism: useful but controversial, powerful but prone to mistakes. One junior offered a particularly sharp critique: “The term ‘artificial intelligence’ isn’t real because to be intelligent you have to be able to teach yourself. It should be called artificial prediction — all it does is predict answers.”

By the end of the day, ideas had turned into working tools. Student government members developed a chatbot to help classmates communicate concerns to school leaders. One senior showcased a personal AI receptionist he had built outside school — one capable of answering emails, handling phone calls, and organizing calendars — with hopes of eventually selling it to local businesses.

The projects were modest in scale, but their significance went beyond the technology itself. **Students were moving from simply using AI to creating with it — applying the technology to solve problems, serve others, and turn their own ideas into practical tools.**

This freedom to create is paired with clear expectations for responsible AI use. WLA’s AI rubric defines when and how students may use AI independently. When students violate those expectations, the school combines educational interventions with disciplinary measures. Students meet with a teacher, administrator, and parents to discuss what happened, why it happened, and how to make better choices in the future. Consequences are tailored to the circumstances and may range from redoing an assignment to in-school suspension or, in rare cases, more serious disciplinary action.

The Hackathon and the school’s AI expectations illustrate two sides of AI literacy: **giving students room to experiment and create while teaching them to use AI responsibly and understanding the boundaries of appropriate use.**

Teaching AI Literacy Through Existing Technology Classes

New Jersey's [Passaic City School District](#), which serves about 12,000 students, has integrated AI literacy into its existing K–8 computer applications curriculum rather than creating a separate course. Because students already take the class each year, the district can build AI knowledge progressively alongside coding, digital citizenship, and other technology skills.

Beginning in the 2023–24 school year, teachers introduced age-appropriate lessons on **how AI works, how it is trained, why it can produce inaccurate information, and how to use it ethically and responsibly**. More structured instruction begins in fourth grade and deepens in later grades, while younger students are introduced to basic AI concepts as opportunities arise.

Students also learn through hands-on activities. Using resources from Learning.com and Code.org, teachers demonstrate how chatbots generate responses, explore how prompts affect results, and engage students in questions about AI-generated content, accuracy, authorship, and ethics.

At the high school level, students at Passaic Academy for Science and Engineering can take an AI course covering basic algorithms, applied projects, and the social and ethical implications of AI. Districtwide, an **AI acceptable-use rubric** provides another opportunity for teachers and students to discuss prompting, ethics, responsible use, and expectations for AI-assisted schoolwork.

Passaic's approach demonstrates that **AI literacy does not necessarily require a new stand-alone curriculum. Districts can build it into existing technology courses and deepen students' knowledge as they progress through school.**

Using School Librarians to Deliver AI Literacy

Maryland's [Washington County Public Schools](#), a small city district, is using school librarians to bring AI literacy to students in grades 6–12. Launched in the 2024–25 school year, the initiative teaches students **how AI works and how to use it responsibly for critical thinking, brainstorming, and research while maintaining academic integrity**.

Secondary library media specialists developed eight foundational lessons adapted from Common Sense Media's AI literacy curriculum. Topics include **how AI is trained, how chatbots and algorithms work, AI bias, and facial recognition**. Librarians deliver the lessons through partnerships with English and social studies teachers or through instruction in school libraries.

The district is building on this foundation with extension lessons for grades 7–12 that explore more complex issues, including **deepfakes and AI ethics**. The approach allows students to begin with a common foundation and develop more sophisticated AI literacy as they advance through school.

AI literacy is also beginning to reach elementary classrooms. For example, fourth graders discuss AI after reading *Alice and Sparkle*, a children's book created with generative AI tools.

Washington County's long-term goal is to **embed AI literacy across subjects rather than treat it as a stand-alone topic**. School libraries provide the starting point — a ready-made instructional hub from which AI literacy can gradually spread across the curriculum.

Using After-School Programs to Turn Students into Digital Media Creators

In June 2026, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine hosted a [workshop](#) on media literacy education for children and youth. Researchers examined the rapidly changing media and information environment, while practitioners shared strategies for strengthening media literacy both in and outside of school.

One example came from Guerrilla Arts Ink, an arts and digital media education organization founded in Washington, D.C., in 2006. Created in response to limited arts funding in schools, the organization provides students from underserved communities with opportunities to **create digital media, develop their own voices, and build skills through hands-on learning**.

Students have access to resources that may not otherwise be available to them, including an audio recording booth, photography studio, art supplies, digital media programs, and AI tools. Rather than simply consuming digital content, students learn to produce it — using technology and the arts to tell stories, communicate ideas, and express their perspectives.

Guerrilla Arts Ink demonstrates how **after-school programs can expand access to media literacy by giving students the tools, space, and guidance to become digital creators — not just digital consumers**.

(Source: [The Trailblazing School on the Frontier of Artificial Intelligence - Education Next](#); [‘It’s Not Magic’: How These Schools Are Teaching AI Literacy](#); [Media Literacy Education for Children and Youth: A Workshop](#); [Guerrilla Arts Ink | Hip Hop Arts Education & Cultural Programming | Washington DC](#))

From Piecemeal Policies to Transformational Systems Change

AI presents K–12 education leaders with a conundrum. Schools need to protect students from distraction, excessive screen time, overreliance on technology, and inappropriate AI use. At the same time, students need opportunities to learn how to use emerging technologies responsibly, critically, and creatively. The challenge for school boards is therefore larger than deciding which technologies to restrict. It is determining how technology should support — or interfere with — the learning schools want students to experience.

From Cellphone Bans to Screen-Time Limits

Cellphone restrictions have become one of the most common policy responses to concerns about student technology use. As of August 19, 2026, 45 states had enacted laws or adopted policies addressing cellphone use in K–12 schools ([Ballotpedia, 2026](#)). Some districts are going further. [Los Angeles Unified School District](#) has adopted grade-specific limits on instructional screen time, while [Fairfax County Public Schools](#) requires cellphones and other smart devices to be turned off and stored throughout the school day.

Policymakers are also beginning to address screen time more broadly. In 2026, [Iowa](#), [Utah](#), [Tennessee](#), and [Alabama](#) adopted measures limiting or regulating technology use among younger students, reflecting growing concerns about excessive exposure to digital devices.

Yet restrictions alone have limitations. Emerging research on school cellphone bans finds mixed results. A national study found modest academic effects, little evidence of improvements in attendance or classroom attention, and some short-term disruptions to student well-being and discipline ([Allcott et al., 2026](#)).

The Larger Challenge: Protecting Thinking, Not Just Limiting Screens

More fundamentally, cellphone bans and screen-time limits address how much and when students use technology, but not necessarily **how technology shapes learning and thinking**. A student can put away a cellphone and still use AI on a school-issued laptop. A district can limit screen time without addressing whether students are thinking critically while using those screens. And schools can restrict specific AI applications without confronting a larger question: **How is technology reshaping the way students learn and think?**

Concerns about technology use are increasingly extending to AI itself, particularly for younger students. Rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, some school districts are developing policies that reflect the ages of their students, local priorities, instructional goals, and community concerns.

- [New York City Public Schools](#): For the 2026–27 school year, NYCPS is implementing a moratorium on student-facing generative AI in grades 2K–8, while allowing limited use in high schools. The district is also applying screen-time restrictions that vary by grade level.
- [Los Angeles Unified School District](#) : LAUSD placed a one-year moratorium on student use of generative AI on district-issued devices across all grade levels.
- [Chicago Public Schools](#): The district is facing growing debate over student AI use, with candidates for the Chicago Board of Education calling for a multiyear moratorium on generative AI in classrooms.

In May 2026, American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten proposed a [10-point plan](#) for student learning in the AI era. The plan emphasizes stronger guardrails and a renewed focus on students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Among its recommendations are no screens for students from pre-K through second grade except when there is a compelling educational need, no student-facing AI in elementary schools, and no AI "social companion" chatbots for students younger than 16.

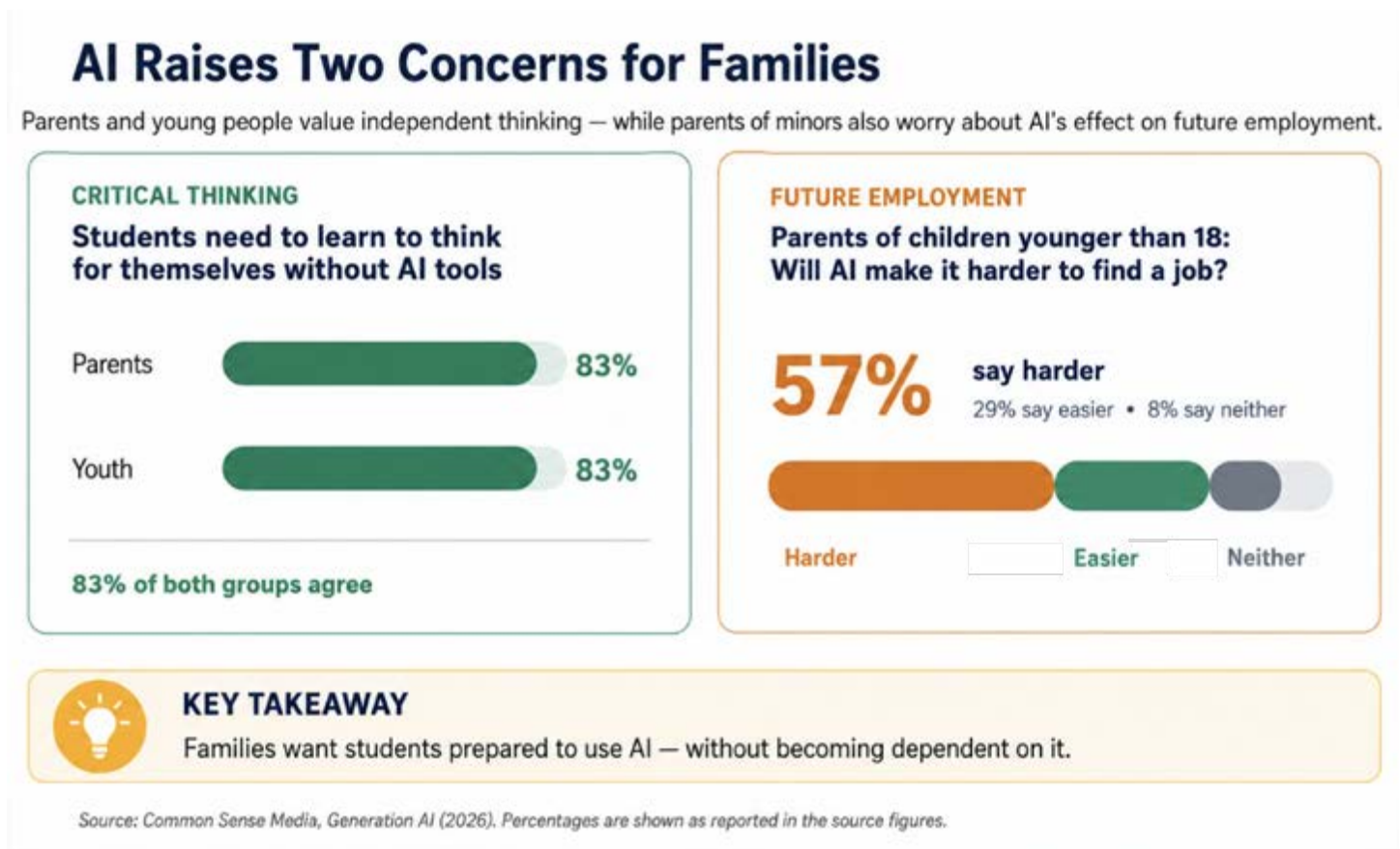
At the same time, Weingarten emphasized that stronger guardrails should not mean rejecting technology altogether. "I'm not calling for an AI ban or a Chromebook bonfire," she said. Instead, she called for balancing the benefits of technology against its potential harm. Her position reflects a broader challenge facing school leaders: **AI is here to stay, but that does not mean every technology is appropriate for every student, at every age, or for every learning experience.**



The deeper risk is not simply that students spend too much time with technology. It is that they may become **overdependent on technology to do the intellectual work of learning** — generating ideas, finding answers, interpreting information, solving problems, and producing original work. When students routinely outsource these processes to AI, they may have fewer opportunities to develop the critical thinking, creativity, persistence, and judgment they will need in college, careers, and civic life.

Families appear to recognize this tension. [Common Sense Media data](#) show that parents and young people strongly value independent thinking, even as parents worry about AI's impact on their children's future employment (see Chart 3). **The message is clear: Students need to be prepared to use AI, but they also need to learn how to think, create, and solve problems without depending on it.**

Chart 3.



How Can District Leaders Move From Piecemeal Policies to Transformational Systems Change?

Despite the rapid spread of AI, comprehensive schoolwide policies remain uncommon. As of December 2025, only about one-third of students nationwide reported that their school had a schoolwide policy governing AI use. Among students who reported having such a policy, they were two to three times more likely to say that AI assistance on homework was prohibited rather than permitted ([RAND, 2025](#)).

The deeper problem, however, is not simply a policy gap. It is a transformation gap.

Cellphone bans address distraction. Screen-time limits address excessive technology exposure. Academic-integrity policies address cheating. AI policies establish boundaries for acceptable use. Each can serve an important purpose. However, when developed separately, these policies risk becoming a patchwork of responses to individual symptoms rather than a coherent strategy for teaching and learning in an AI-enabled world.

Recent research suggests that meaningful improvement in public education requires transformational systems change ([CRPE, 2026](#)). Rather than simply improving existing practices, districts pursuing transformational change rethink how the system itself works: what and how students learn, how they demonstrate progress, how educators work together, how resources are allocated, and how decisions are made. The goal is to create a system in which every student can learn at a high level and pursue a promising pathway of their choosing.

For school boards and district leaders, this transformation requires three shifts. For urban districts, these shifts can also address longstanding inequities in access to rigorous learning, advanced coursework, career pathways, and emerging technologies. The goal is not simply to integrate AI across a district, but to use AI-enabled transformation to expand opportunities for students who have historically had the least access to them.



1) Shift the conversation from regulating devices to designing learning.

School boards and district leaders can begin with a more fundamental question: **What should students know and be able to do in an AI-enabled society, and how should technology help them get there?**

Starting with this question changes the focus from controlling individual devices and applications to designing the learning experiences students need. It also connects decisions about AI to curriculum, instruction, assessment, media literacy, student well-being, teacher professional learning, data privacy, cybersecurity, procurement, and workforce preparation. Instead of asking whether a particular technology should be allowed or prohibited, leaders can ask how — and under what conditions — it advances educational goals.

2) Shift from policing cheating to rethinking student assessment.

The [Pew Research Center](#) found in 2026 that nearly 60% of teenagers said their classmates used AI chatbots to cheat either “very often” or “somewhat often.” Certainly, generative AI complicates what schools consider cheating — and raises questions about how schools assess learning.

If a student can paste an entire assignment into an AI chatbot and receive a passing response, educators should certainly address the student’s behavior. They should also examine the assignment itself. Tasks centered on summarizing information, recalling facts, or producing formulaic responses are often precisely the tasks generative AI can perform most easily. In this sense, AI may be exposing a longstanding weakness in some traditional assignments: they can reward completion without requiring students to demonstrate deeper thinking.

One way to rethink student assessment is to start with a different set of questions: **Was the assignment rigorous enough in the first place? Did it genuinely challenge students? And does the rise of AI require educators to reconsider what constitutes cheating?**

Some schools are already moving beyond a simple permitted-versus-prohibited approach to AI ([Moon, 2026](#)). At one school in Washington, D.C., for example, an AP Psychology teacher gave students 30 minutes to develop a complete advertising campaign and allowed them to use as much AI as they wanted. Rather than treating AI use as cheating, the assignment assessed students’ ability to direct and apply AI effectively.

Other assessments deliberately remove technology. An AP Government teacher, for example, uses paper-and-pen tests and requires students to give presentations without digital assistance. This approach gives educators opportunities to assess what students can independently know, reason through, and communicate.

Districts can also develop AI rubrics that clearly define different levels of acceptable AI assistance. When students violate those expectations, schools can combine accountability with education by engaging students, educators, administrators, and parents in examining what happened, why it happened, and how to prevent it from happening again.

The broader lesson is that schools need both **AI-enabled learning and AI-free learning**. Students need opportunities to learn how to use powerful AI tools effectively, but they also need opportunities to demonstrate what they can **think, create, solve, and communicate independently**.

3) Shift from purchasing technology to governing for outcomes.

Systems change also requires districts to rethink their relationships with technology vendors. Traditional procurement often focuses on products, features, licenses, and costs. An outcome-based approach starts with a different question: **What educational problem are we trying to solve, and what evidence will show that the specific technology is helping us solve it?**

Districts can use [outcome-based contracting](#) to establish clear expectations for what a technology should accomplish, how success will be measured, how student data and privacy will be protected, and how vendors will be held accountable when agreed-upon outcomes are not achieved. This approach can align technology investments with district priorities rather than let available technologies drive educational decisions.

Ultimately, the choice is not between banning technology and embracing it. The challenge is to build a coherent educational system in which **technology serves learning rather than defining it**. For school boards and district leaders, that means moving beyond piecemeal policies toward a districtwide strategy that connects governance, teaching, assessment, student well-being, professional learning, and technology investments. Because AI is evolving faster than traditional policy cycles, districts also need flexible governance frameworks grounded in durable principles, with practices and guidance that can adapt as technologies, evidence, and educational needs change. The goal is to prepare students to **think independently, create purposefully, and succeed in a world increasingly shaped by AI**.



Resource Box 4: What AI-Enabled Transformation Looks Like

Anaheim Union High School District: Let Learning Goals Drive Technology

[Anaheim Union High School District](#), a large city district in Orange County, California, serves more than 25,000 students in grades 7–12. For more than a decade, the district has worked to transform how students learn and how that learning is measured.

Rather than starting with technology, Anaheim started by asking **what students should know and be able to do**. After engaging parents and business leaders, the district decided to move beyond traditional measures of student achievement and organize instruction and assessment around a broader set of skills and competencies. It then partnered with faculty at the University of California, Irvine, to develop and refine that vision.

Technology came later. When district leaders discovered that existing learning management systems (LMS) could not support their instructional model, they partnered with an education technology organization to develop a customized solution. Over time, Anaheim also built its own internal capacity to develop AI-powered tools within the LMS.

The transformation took years, requiring district leaders to deepen their understanding of both instruction and the technology needed to support it. That sustained involvement has allowed Anaheim to maintain control over the direction of change. As one district leader explained, “We want to set the conditions. We don’t want those conditions set for us.”

Lesson for school boards: Start with the educational vision, not the technology. Boards can establish clear goals for what students should learn and how learning should be measured, then ensure that technology investments — including AI — serve those goals. Strong partnerships with outside organizations can provide expertise, but districts also need internal capacity to maintain ownership of their strategy.

Agua Fria Union High School District: Use AI to Solve an Instructional Problem

[Agua Fria Union High School District](#), a large suburban district in Avondale, Arizona, serves about 10,000 students across six high schools. In 2021, the district launched an ambitious goal: create 21 career-connected pathways by 2031 that prepare students for high-wage, in-demand jobs and internships.

To advance that goal, Agua Fria transformed its comprehensive high schools into industry-focused, wall-to-wall academies in 2024. In this model, career preparation is not limited to career and technical education (CTE) courses. English, math, science, and other academic subjects also are connected to students' chosen career pathways.

Implementation, however, presented a practical challenge: **How could teachers connect core academic standards to dozens of different career pathways?**

Rather than purchasing a generic AI product, the district used AI to develop tools around this specific instructional need. One tool helps teachers map academic standards to career pathways. Another draws from a repository of 300 career-specific “teaching through the lens” examples that educators can use to connect academic content with real-world careers.

For Agua Fria, AI became a tool for implementing the district's existing educational strategy — not the strategy itself. As one district leader acknowledged, innovation can be “messy,” but AI has helped the district streamline the work and strengthen strategic planning.

Lesson for school boards: Start with the problem AI is supposed to solve. Before approving an AI investment, boards can ask: What student or instructional need are we addressing? How does this technology advance an existing district priority? And how will we know whether it is working? Agua Fria demonstrates how AI can support systems change when it is tied to a clearly defined educational goal rather than adopted simply because the technology is available.

In summary, the two districts illustrate an important governance principle: **Transformational change does not begin with AI. It begins with a clear vision for student learning.** Anaheim used technology to support a new approach to learning and assessment; Agua Fria used AI to help implement a career-connected instructional model. In both cases, **educational goals drove technology decisions — not the other way around.**

(Source: [Early-Adopter-Brief-Phase-2-August-2026-1.pdf](#))

Conclusion: Put Learning First

For CUBE and urban school board leaders, the rise of AI presents both an urgent challenge and an opportunity to advance educational equity. Urban districts serve diverse student populations and often confront persistent disparities in access, opportunity, resources, and support. As AI becomes increasingly embedded in education and everyday life, school boards have an important responsibility to ensure that it does not deepen existing inequities, but instead expands opportunities for every student to learn, create, and thrive. **Equity in an AI-enabled world means ensuring that every student — not only those with the greatest resources — has the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills, judgment, and creativity needed to shape their own future.**

AI is not simply another technology for school districts to adopt, regulate, or prohibit. It is changing how students learn, create, and communicate — and what they will need to succeed in college, careers, and civic life. For school boards, the challenge is larger than writing an AI policy. It is deciding what learning should look like in an AI-enabled world and ensuring that technology serves that vision.

This report points to three shifts:

- **From AI consumers to AI creators.** Give students the curiosity, creativity, research skills, and opportunities to use AI to solve real-world problems — not simply consume what AI produces.
- **From AI risks to AI and media literacy.** Equip every student with the knowledge and judgment to evaluate information, recognize manipulation, protect their privacy, think independently, and decide when and how AI should — or should not — be used.
- **From piecemeal policies to transformational systems change.** Move beyond isolated rules about cellphones, screen time, cheating, and AI toward a coherent strategy connecting learning, assessment, student well-being, equity, professional learning, and technology investments.

For school boards, the guiding principle is simple: **Start with learning, not technology.** Ask what students should know and be able to do, what problems technology can help solve, how students will be protected, and what evidence will show that it is working.

The goal is not to prepare students for AI. It is to prepare students for their future — with the curiosity to ask questions, the judgment to use technology responsibly, the ability to think independently, and the creativity to build what comes next.



NSBA's AI Smart Certification: Lead with Confidence in the Age of AI

AI is already changing how students learn, how educators work, and how school districts operate. For school board members, that means decisions about AI are no longer somewhere on the horizon — they are becoming part of the work of governing public schools.

You do not need to be an AI expert to lead effectively. But you do need to know the right questions to ask — and you do not have to navigate these challenges alone.

NSBA, in partnership with the National AI Academy (NAIA), offers the AI Smart Certification to help K–12 education leaders understand what AI means for their schools and communities. Designed with education leadership in mind, the certification translates a rapidly evolving technology into practical knowledge board members can use to make informed decisions about policy, governance, teaching and learning, technology investments, privacy, and responsible AI use.

Through the certification, participants will:

- Understand what matters. Learn how AI is affecting teaching, learning, district operations, and the future of education — without needing a technical background.
- Ask better questions. Strengthen your ability to evaluate AI policies, tools, opportunities, and risks before important decisions reach the board table.
- Learn with and from fellow board members. Become part of a learning community where school board members can exchange experiences, share promising practices, discuss emerging challenges, and learn how peers across the country are approaching AI governance.
- Build a network for continued support. Connect with peers who are confronting many of the same questions, creating opportunities to share resources, learn from one another, and navigate new AI developments together.
- Lead responsible AI use. Explore practical approaches to ethics, privacy, student safety, equity, and effective implementation.
- Prepare your district for what comes next. Build the knowledge and confidence to help your district respond strategically as AI continues to evolve.

AI is moving fast. School boards can learn and lead together.

The **AI Smart Certification** is more than an opportunity to learn about AI. It is an opportunity to join a community of school board leaders preparing together for what comes next — sharing knowledge, learning from one another, and strengthening their capacity to provide informed, responsible leadership in an AI-enabled world.

(Source: [NSBA AI Smart Certification - National School Boards Association](#))

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About CPE

The National School Boards Association (NSBA) believes that accurate, objective information is essential to building support for public schools and creating effective programs to prepare all students for success. As NSBA's research branch, the Center for Public Education (CPE) provides objective and timely information about public education and its importance to the well-being of our nation. Launched in 2006, CPE emerged from discussions between NSBA and its member state school boards associations about how to inform the public about the successes and challenges of public education. To serve a wide range of audiences, including parents, teachers, and school leaders, CPE offers research, data, and analysis on current education issues and explores ways to improve student achievement and engage support for public schools.

About NSBA

Founded in 1940, the National School Boards Association's (NSBA) purpose is to ensure each student everywhere has access to excellent and equitable public education governed by high-performing school board leaders and supported by the community.

With members spread across the United States, the Virgin Islands, and Canada, NSBA is the only national organization representing school boards. Along with its member state associations and member public school districts representing locally elected school board officials serving millions of public school students, NSBA believes that public education is a civil right necessary to the dignity and freedom of the American people and that each child, regardless of their ability, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, identity, or citizenship, deserves equitable access to an education that maximizes their individual potential.

For more information, visit nsba.org.



NSBA's Position

NSBA supports strengthening local school board governance and community engagement in public schools and recognizes the many options and choices offered to students in our public schools. NSBA opposes vouchers, tuition tax credits and similar programs, and charter schools not subject to oversight of the local school boards, effectively creating a separate, unaccountable system of publicly funded education that:

- a) diverts public funding to private schools, private home schools, including virtual schools, regardless of whether they are owned or operated by individuals, religious institutions, not-for-profit entities, or corporations;
- b) diverts public funds outside of locally elected, locally accountable, representative oversight; and
- c) often has the effect of re-segregating schools.

Public funds should only be used within public schools to advance curricular opportunities, including specialized public school programs authorized by local school boards, such as magnet schools, alternative schools, career and technical education partnerships, advanced placement programs and classes, dual credit programs, postsecondary–high school partnerships, and high school–local business partnerships. NSBA urges full accountability of the use of public funds for educational purposes.

NSBA believes public tax dollars should only support public schools. NSBA opposes any efforts to subsidize tuition or expenses at elementary or secondary private schools, religious schools, or private home/ correspondence schools with public tax dollars. Specifically, NSBA opposes vouchers, tax credits, and tax subsidies for use at nonpublic K-12 schools.

