

AI Early Adopters: Emerging Trends, Gaps, and Implications

Center on Reinventing Public Education

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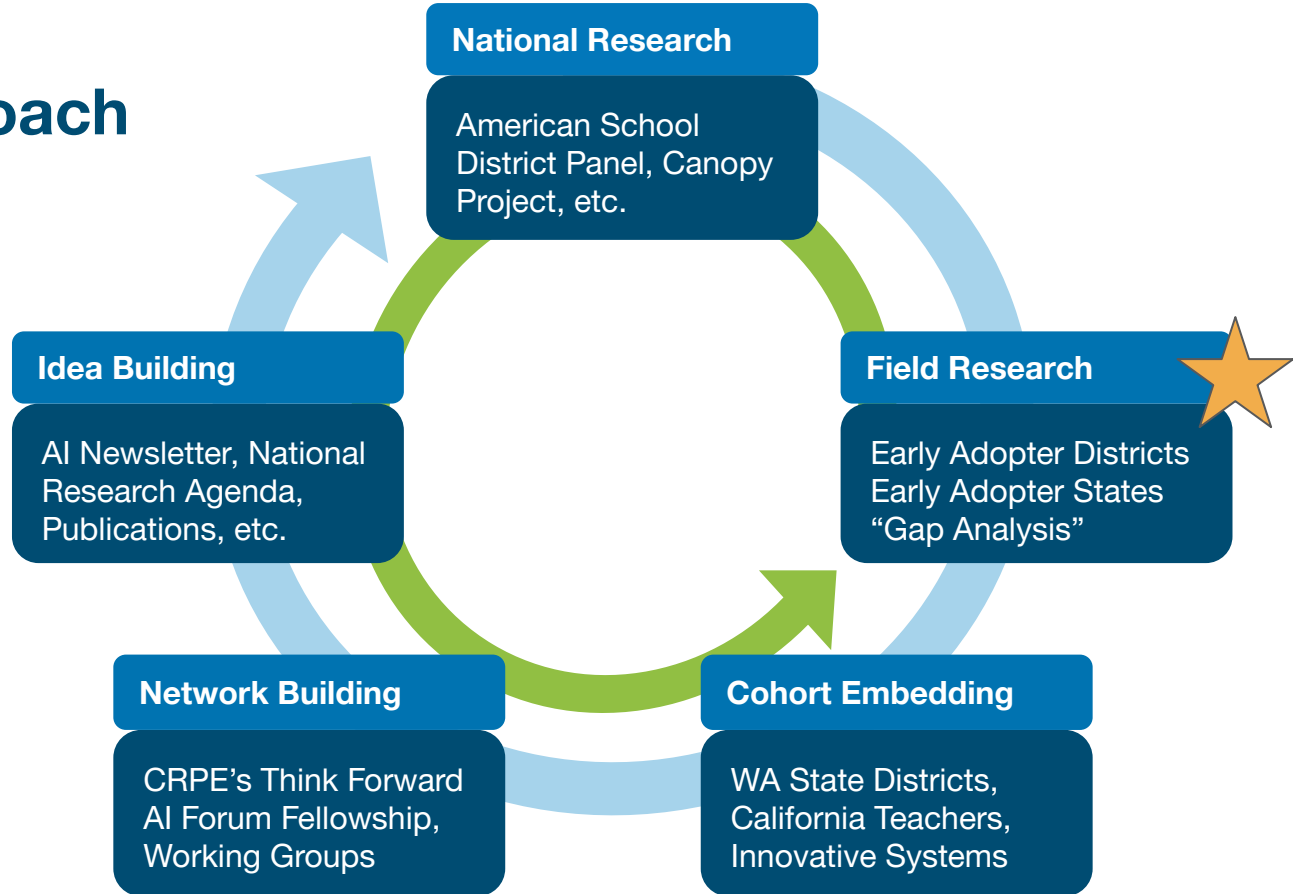
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Agenda

1. **Context**
2. **Study 1: Gap Analysis**
3. **Study 2: District Early Adopters**
4. **Study 3: State Early Adopters**
5. **Q&A**

CRPE's AI Research Approach



Methods

Expert Interviews

Understand field background knowledge to shape research priorities

Desk Research

Conduct desk research to broaden understanding of landscape

Databases

Build public profiles to signal emerging typologies of AI approaches

Surveys

Gather initial perceptions from district and state actors

**Focus Groups
and Interviews**

Expand on learning with wider range of leaders and stakeholders

Deep Dives

Go deeper into targeted sites to generate profiles and expand context

Feedback

Test emerging learnings throughout and formally at study end

Methods

Data Collection

Districts

States

Gap Analysis

Landscape Scans

–Desk research
–100+ districts vetted

–15 expert interviews
–Desk research

–N/A

Surveys

–45 districts
across 20 states

–29 SEAs & 9 partners in
24 states & 4 territories

–N/A

Focus Groups & Interviews

–30 participants in
14 districts
–16 participants in 4
“deep dive” sites

–14 SEAs & 9 partners

–50+ interviews with highly
informed experts on AI in
education + parents, parent
advocates, and students

Databases

–79 profiles

–20 profiles

–N/A

The AI Landscape

Nationally representative surveys from
RAND and CRPE's American School
District Panel and RAND's American
Youth Panel (2025-2026)



AI + Education in 2025-26: By the Numbers

55% of teachers report receiving school- or district-provided AI training; **only 2%** report receiving **substantial training**.

25% the percentage gap between high-income and low-income districts providing AI training to teachers (**87% vs 62%**).

19% of students report receiving training on how to use AI for schoolwork from their teachers.

62% of students report using AI for homework—up from 48% in ten months.

67% of students agree that more AI use will harm critical thinking skills; up more than 10 points in ten months.



AI Gap Analysis

Our goal: Understand how the AI in education market is misaligned—where demand and supply are missing opportunities to achieve transformative potential.

Supply vs. Demand

There is a **massive gap** between what edtech is building and what students and teachers need.



Supply Side

Weak understanding of education problems, poor link to evidence, “in the box” orientation.

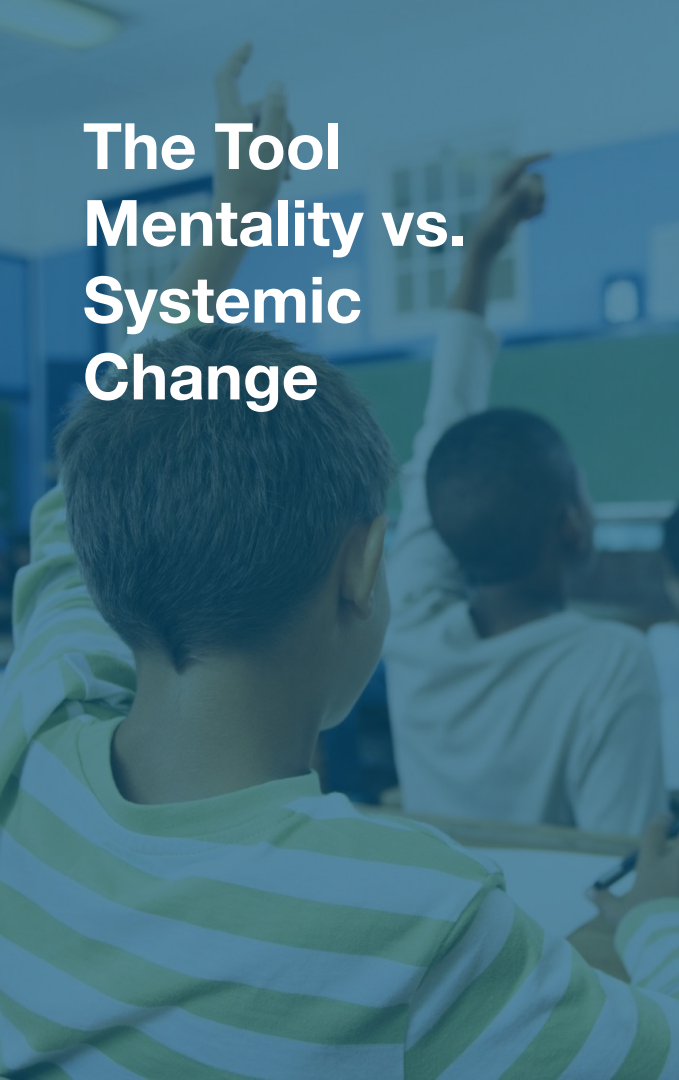


Demand Side

Lack of vision, problems with current tech not clearly expressed, misaligned policy and politics, inequitable uptake.

Six Key Gaps

- 1 Tool obsession without a plan for large-scale implementation, training, and systemic redesign.
- 2 Lack of integration and coherence in classrooms and schools.
- 3 Disconnect from instructional science and evidence.
- 4 Misalignment with education's underlying challenges and future realities.
- 5 Tools layered onto outdated delivery models and policy infrastructure.
- 6 Lack of input from teachers, parents, and students.



The Tool Mentality vs. Systemic Change

The market is currently flooded with point solutions, but education's real challenges are structural.

“Funders are WAY too focused on tools... We need more investment in capacity and change management.”

“Companies are remaking how they structure their systems—over here in education, we’re talking about chatbots.”



Poor Integration into Classrooms and Schools

AI tools are not yet meaningfully embedded into a coherent strategy for teaching and learning.

“Teachers often have a core curriculum plus a handful of supplementals plus products or programs they like plus tutoring programs down the hall—all might be good, but they don't talk to each other, and the teacher is saddled with the job of understanding how to use all of them together.”



Disconnected from Instructional Science and Evidence

Evidence is too often an afterthought.

“What’s coming out is not necessarily very useful or meaningful to improving learning or may not be grounded in learning science.”

“Show me the research... that interacting with this chatbot is going to be better than research-based best practice.”



Misaligned with Education's Core Problems and Future Realities

AI tools largely ignore student motivation, creativity, and social connection, and are not building future-ready skills and knowledge.

“It’s abundantly clear that young people need more social connectedness, social support, PERIOD.”

“If we want creative and collaborative people, we can’t keep putting them through a factory.”

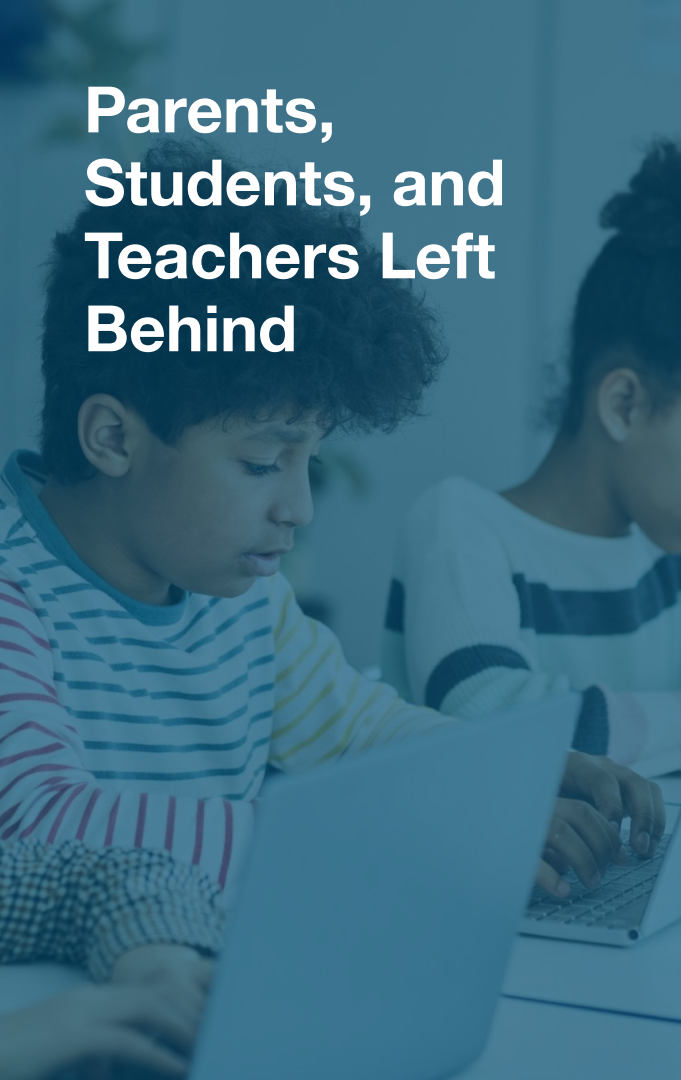


Tools Layered onto an Outdated Delivery Model

AI tools are layered onto stagnant education delivery models, including teacher prep, grade-level testing, siloed staffing structures, and lack of vision.

“We have a lack of imagination. Most folks don't know what's possible because they haven't had exposure to it. They don't know what's available because they haven't seen it.”

“We are still stuck in the two sigma model—that's great—do I want to see my kid getting personalized help, of course. But we are relying on AI-powered help rather than keeping a human at the center.”



Parents, Students, and Teachers Left Behind

*“AI is exciting and growing fast, but education has been around for thousands of years... **Before we rush new regulations, we should be clear about how we actually want AI used.**” - Student*

*“We’re not against it, but if something happens... **who is responsible? Don’t just tell me the algorithm.**” -Parent*

*“**I wish they were asking more more teachers** what they want from these platforms.” -Teacher*



District AI Early Adopters

Our goal: Understand how Early Adopter districts are integrating AI, and whether AI is catalyzing system transformation or more innovative approaches to schooling.

Early Adopters in 2025-26: The Bottom Line

1

Early Adopter districts are increasingly sophisticated in their AI use and aligning AI to system goals. But most are adopting AI to improve the **traditional model of schooling**, while only a subset are **amplifying existing transformation effort** or **piloting completely new models**.

2

Regardless of strategic intent, **AI adoption is exposing the limits of traditional change management approaches**, particularly around the pace of technological advancement and student use.

3

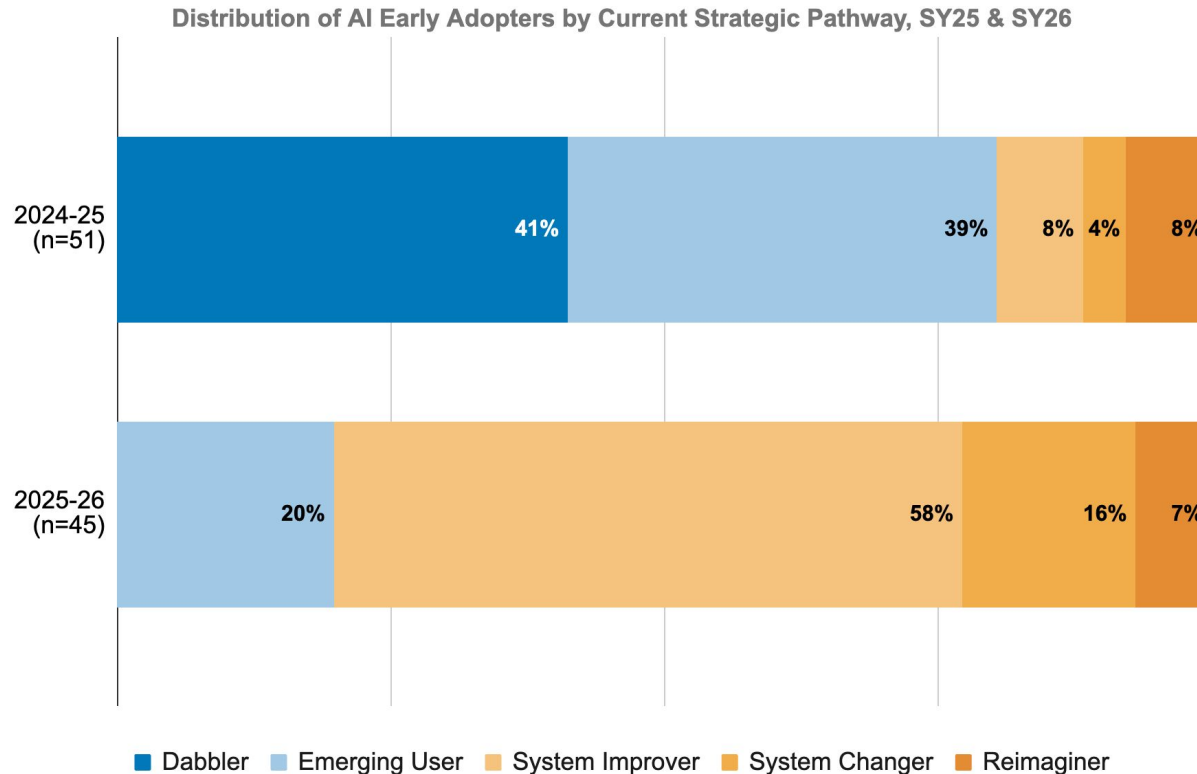
External supports help Early Adopters implement AI responsibly, but do not yet support transformation. Districts pursuing transformational change must navigate that work largely on their own.

Early Adopters fall into one of five categories ...

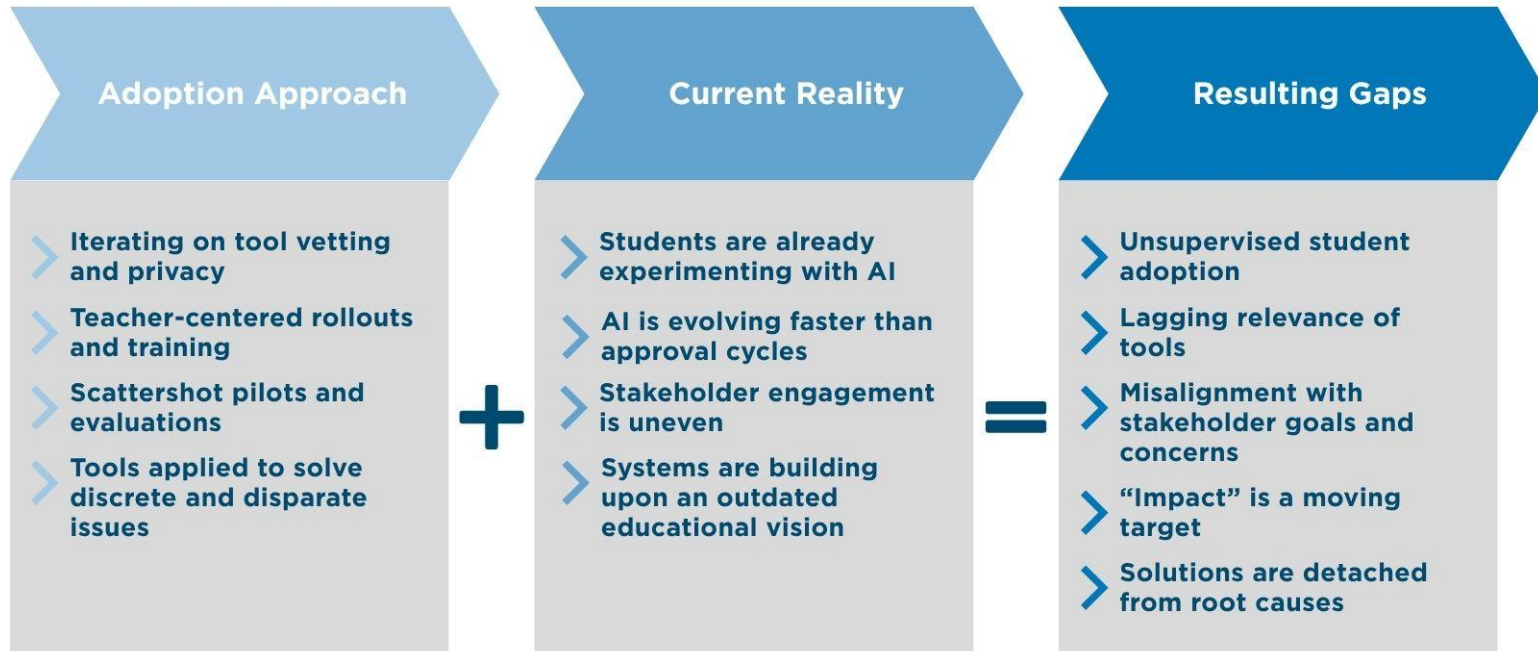
Typology of AI Adoption for Early Adopters

Level of Systemic Adoption	Category	Description
Not Yet Systemic Adoption	Dabbler	AI use is aspirational or symbolic, with no clear purpose or plan for scaling.
	Emerging User	AI use is active, without clear alignment to district strategy.
Systemic Adoption	System Improver	AI use strengthens the existing instructional and learning model and improves traditional outcomes.
	System Changer	AI use amplifies a preexisting reform effort aimed at changing the learning model and outcomes.
	Reimaginer	AI use explores fundamentally new models of learning, teaching, and system design.

... and are increasingly aligning AI to distinct strategic goals.



AI adoption is testing the limits of traditional change management.



Promising practices: Early Adopters are navigating with more agile leadership.



One early adopter is promoting student and teacher use of AI districtwide, **but intentionally waiting to create district AI policy until teachers and students thoroughly experiment with AI.** They prioritize innovation and engagement over restrictions and safety.



Another has created an **explicit culture of expectation for teacher experimentation**, coupled with feedback structures that allow for positive teacher experiences to filter up to building and central office leaders.



Instead of adopting and evaluating just one tool, **one district built a secure, district-hosted platform that allows staff and students to safely access and build on multiple frontier LLMs.** This allows for safe experimentation and evaluating tool usage from multiple perspectives.

The external support landscape helps districts adopt AI, but not use it to pursue deeper instructional change

Networks, intermediaries, and technical assistance providers help make sense of emerging tools, manage risk, and build implementation capacity. But external partners are not yet equipped to support AI-enabled instructional redesign.



For example, a Colorado district partnered with funders and intermediaries to reduce budget trade-offs, build an AI executive committee, learn alongside peers, and level up their AI work across the system.

Early Adopters look to states for guardrails, not innovation leadership

Early Adopters want states to:

- Create student AI literacy standards
- Vet tools and provide guardrails
- Negotiate tool pricing
- Fund pilots and create “sandboxes” for experimentation



For example, a New Mexico district cited the statewide funding of Amira licenses as a critical driver in their adoption of the tool; they now use it as a K-2 screener.



State AI Early Adopters

Our goals were to:

- Understand how state actors and partner organizations integrate AI into policies, guidance, and operations
- Learn how they are supporting districts and schools
- Discover what enablers and barriers they experience

The Bottom Line

1

Most state agencies are pursuing ad-hoc, reactive, and fragmented approaches. They are reluctant to mandate.

2

Despite this, promising leadership examples and strategies are emerging.

3

SEA capacity, political resistance, and costly human capital investments are key challenges ahead. AI presents a unique policy and community engagement problem.

4

Left unaddressed, state inaction is likely to leave districts adrift—especially those serving high-need students.

5

We must equip SEAs to be more agile, invest in people, and demand evidence of AI effectiveness. Absent this, statewide AI integration will remain uneven and unproven.

Most states are still forming the conditions for future AI strategy.

Integrators

Embedding AI into some core education systems through pilots, evaluation, procurement supports, standards revisions, or implementation strategies.

Condition Builders

Investing in enabling conditions for AI integration through PD, infrastructure, governance, and early implementation efforts.

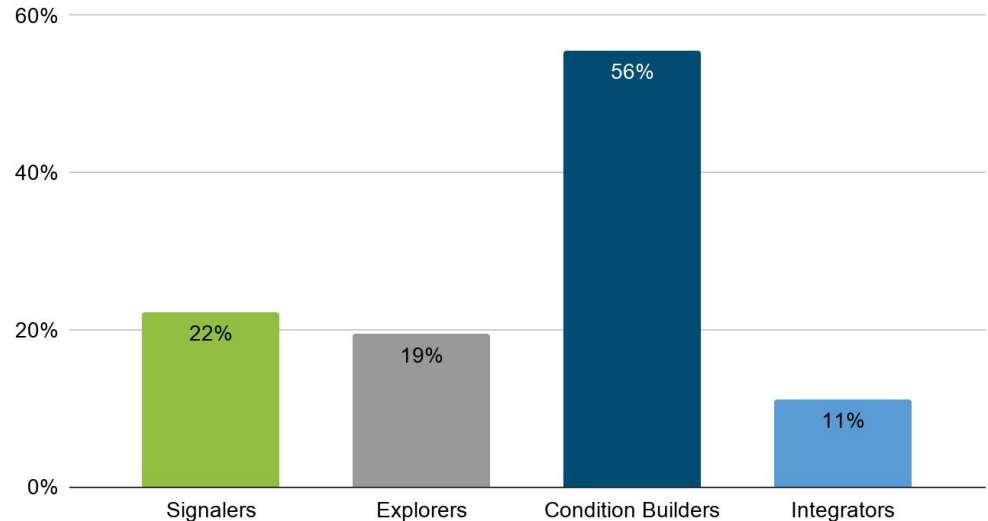
Explorers

Articulating AI visions and guidance while exploring implementation approaches, pilots, legislation, or educator supports underway.

Signalers

Acknowledging AI's influence and beginning to address its use through guidance development, partnerships, and limited professional learning.

2025-26 State AI Approaches (n=39)




A few are exploring AI tool pilots, learning standards, impact, and procurement. More plan to do so.

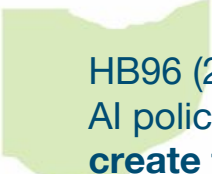
State AI Approaches

	Vision and Guidance	Partnerships	Professional Development	Infrastructure	Tool Pilots	Learning Standards	Impact	Procurement
Integrators (11%)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Condition-Builders (56%)	X	X	X	X	Planning	Planning	Planning	
Explorers (19%)	X	X	Planning	Partial				
Signalers (22%)	Planning	Partial						


Promising leadership examples and strategies are emerging.



The Louisiana State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education funded AI tool pilots across Louisiana to support reading and math instruction. **It made incorporating independent research an implementation requirement.** Early results have shown positive effects and the state has expanded use of promising tools.



HB96 (2025) required the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce to develop a model AI policy. **It requires all districts and charter schools to adopt the model policy or create their own aligned version.** State service centers are rolling out **aligned support and exploring tool quality indexes.**



Through Virtual Virginia, the state is developing **AI-focused professional learning modules and micro-credentials** for educators. They're using a **train-the-trainer model** so school divisions can adapt and deliver content locally, allowing the state to set a common baseline and support broad access.

Integrator Profile: Utah

Utah has one of the most coherent statewide AI strategies, leveraging first-in-the-nation roles and cross-sector partnerships.

Clear Vision Anchored in State Priorities

- Office of AI Policy and the **AI Education Specialist role**
- AI guidance, frameworks, and **leadership blueprint**
- **Portraits** of an AI-Infused educator, learner, and company

Statewide Procurement & Infrastructure Support

- Negotiated statewide **AI tool contracts and pricing**
- Centralized **data privacy vetting** via Utah Education Network

Scaled, Incentivized Professional Learning

- Trained **6,500+ educators** on AI-infused **lesson plans**
- Training **families and caregivers**

Cross-Sector Coordination

- Internal “Sky Committee” **aligns work across departments**
- Partnerships with **higher ed and industry**



Strong SEA AI Leadership Attributes

Strong SEA leaders on AI...

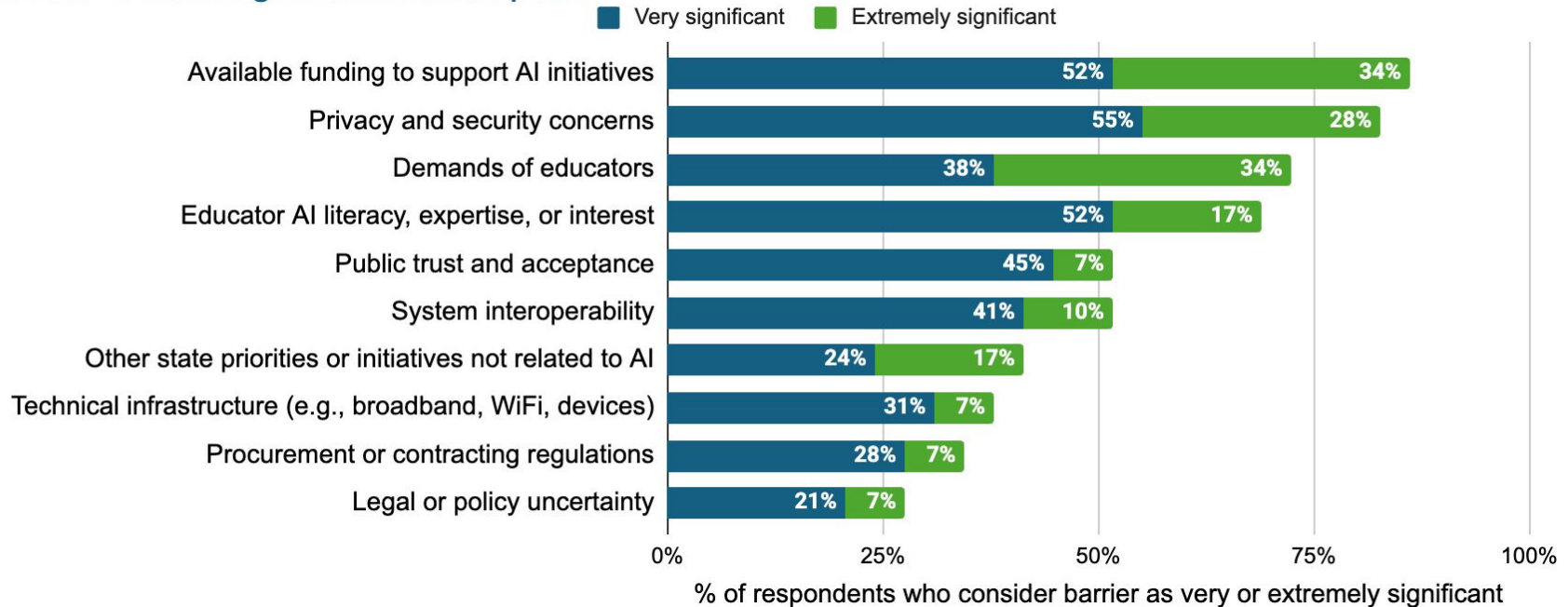
- Have a clear leader and articulate a clear strategic vision for AI integration
- Anchor AI to specific instructional or operational challenges
- Build deeper buy-in, with diverse audiences
- Invest in transferable knowledge
- Were growing digital literacy and leadership prior to AI

*“In terms of who's moving further fastest, it's when that top leader is really viewing this as a top priority. Regardless of what type of state and how they want to support LEAs, **[what] we see across the board, the one consistency, is that the top leader really wants this to be something their team is moving on.**”*

- SEA partner

SEAs name funding, capacity and politics as key challenges ahead.

Barriers to AI integration and adoption



SEAs face four political tension points.



Federal vs. State Regulation

In the absence of clear policies at the federal level, states must regulate.



Political Paradox

SEAs and districts feel urgency to explore and integrate AI while legislatures consider screen time limits and device bans.



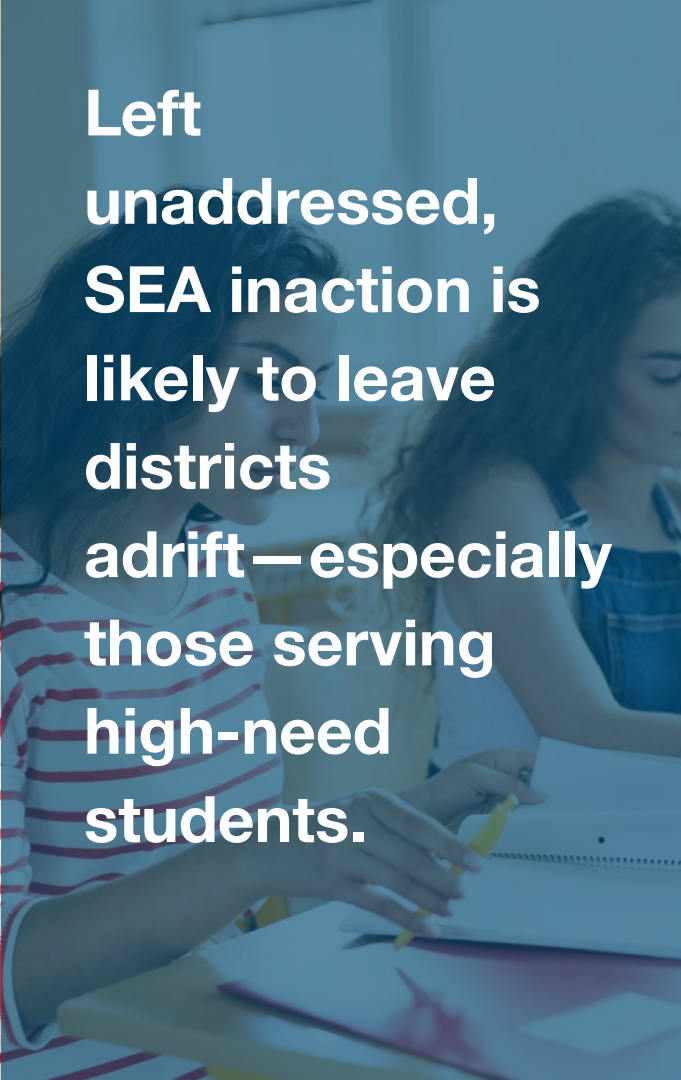
SEA Leadership vs. Local Control

Many SEAs feel they don't have authority to mandate actions or the capacity to enforce them.



Decision Paralysis

SEAs face a flood of AI tools, but have limited time to evaluate options and choose the best tool.

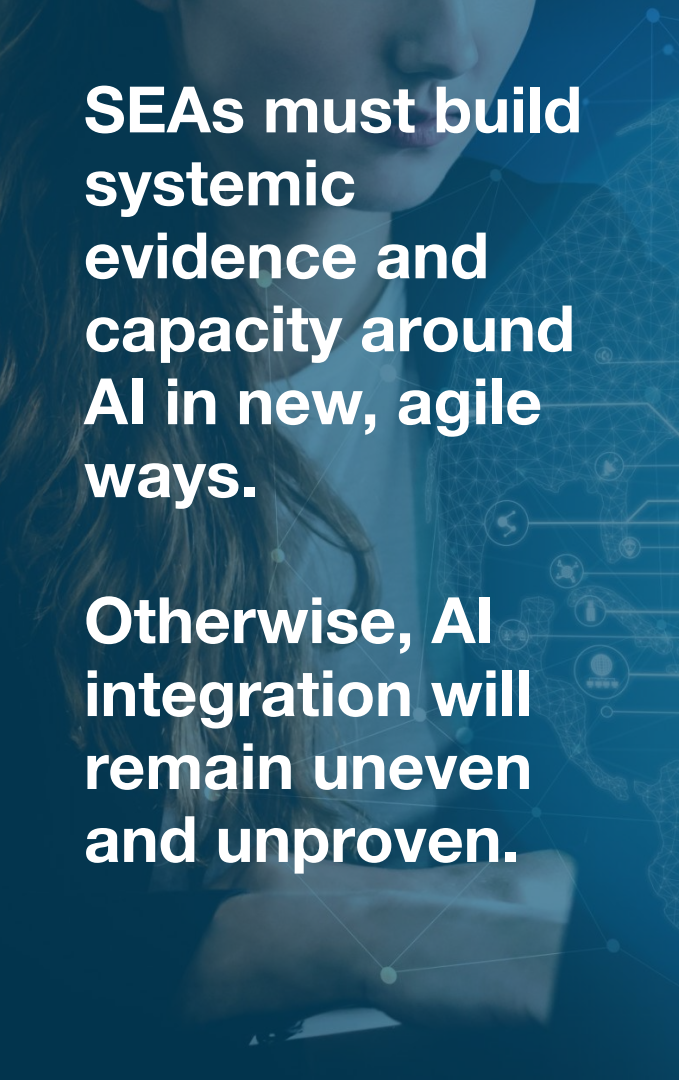


Left unaddressed, SEA inaction is likely to leave districts adrift — especially those serving high-need students.

Late and unguided AI expansion risks advancing and solidifying the status quo.

- Non-binding guidance without operational support produces uneven and inequitable uptake.
- The districts that most need support are often least equipped to act on voluntary guidance alone.
- Taking a “wait and see” stance may inadvertently exacerbate inequities.

*“State government in general lags behind....**Even though I see ways we could be more productive, we’re not there yet.**” - SEA staff member*



SEAs must build systemic evidence and capacity around AI in new, agile ways.

Otherwise, AI integration will remain uneven and unproven.

*“I think that's one of our biggest challenges right now is how do we build a system that isn't just these one-off pilots? This is where we are now—we've incentivized, we have our lighthouses, we have our beacons, we've got these communities of practice. **Now, how do we make sure that our whole state is moving ahead in the way that we need to and we aren't leaving people behind?**”*

—SEA staff member

Coordinating Change Across Two Time Horizons

NOW

- Collect evidence on AI tool effectiveness*
- Develop state-level visions plus aligned resources and partnerships*
- Coordinate coherence across ed tech, districts, and states*
- Equip parents and students to make AI choices and integrate them in decision-making*

FUTURE

- Pilot future-ready learning models*
- Design for future-ready states*
- Plan for a future-ready workforce*
- Develop future-ready standards and assessments*



Q&A

Thank you for attending!

Please take our short survey if you would like to give feedback or request more time with CRPE to unpack findings.

Thank you to the 100+ district, state, and partner organization leaders whose voices shaped this research and continue to lead this work on the ground every day.

Thank you also to our funders, Cinelli Family Foundation, Overdeck Family Foundation, Spencer Foundation, and Walton Family Foundation, for your investment and thought partnership.

Thank you!

Study Context

No one knows the “right” way to approach AI in education, but states are taking action.

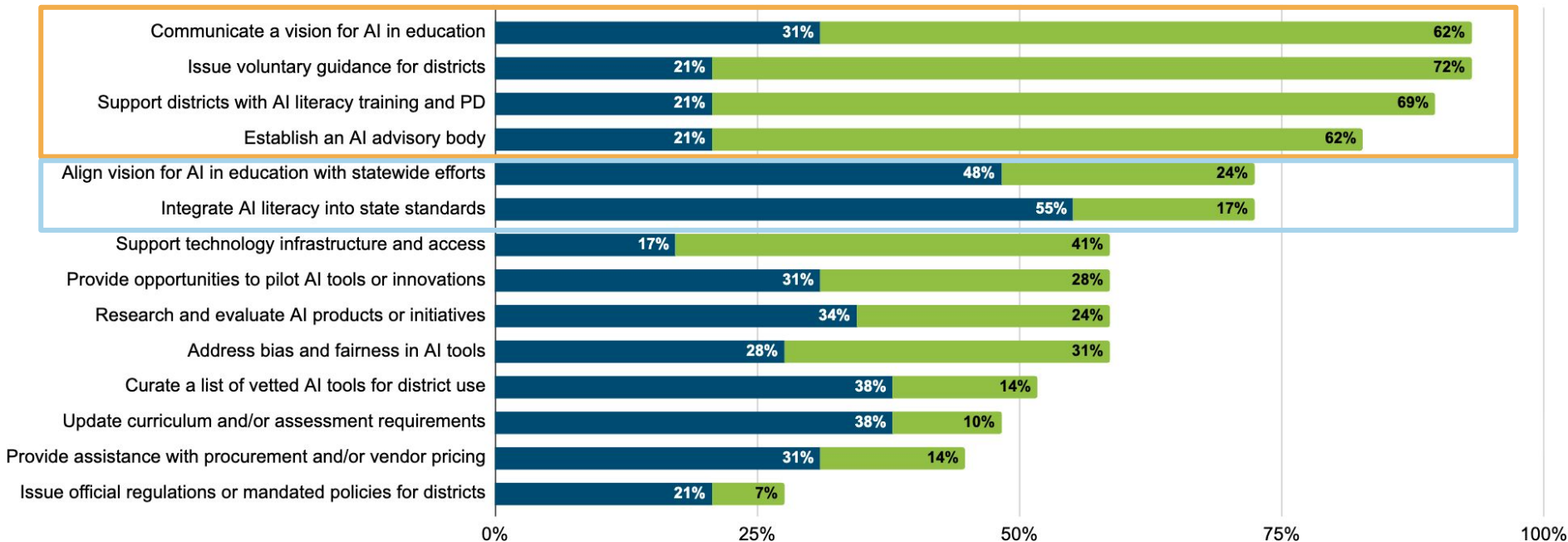
Against this backdrop, we set out to understand how early adopter states and education agencies (SEAs) are approaching AI generally: what actions, approaches, barriers, and enablers do they face? This study is not meant to track specific policies or legislation, or assess AI effectiveness, and it is not inclusive of all states.

We analyzed survey responses from 29 SEAs and 9 partner organizations, interviewed 14 SEAs and 9 partner organizations, and compiled a database of publicly available information on 20 states – representing a total of 39 states and territories and 18 partner organizations – to get perspectives on activities and approaches underway, challenges and bright spots, and lessons learned.

SEAs prioritize vision-setting, guidance, and tools that support local decision-making. They are preparing for more coordinated integration.

State-Reported AI Actions

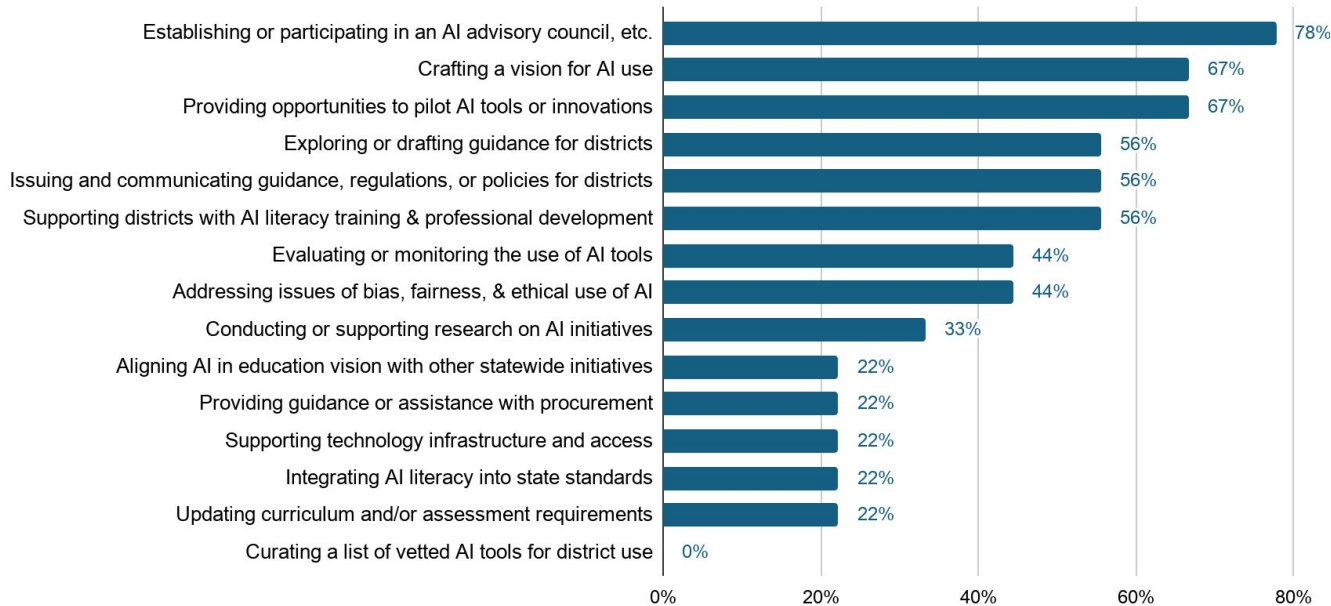
■ In planning or development ■ Active or implemented



% of respondents indicating action is in planning/development or is active/implemented in their state

Partners support and complement actions taken by states. In some cases, they also fill gaps when there is no state action.

How partner organizations support state AI initiatives



“Partners have a critical role.... They're very involved with legislative things and all of that.”
- SEA staff

“You have to think of the whole ecosystem to truly be doing AI safely, ethically, and responsibly.”
- SEA partner

“I survive on these collaborations.”
- SEA staff

Partners want SEAs to lead more visionary system transformation.

Partner organizations take a broader, more aspirational, and more critical perspective of AI than SEAs. They emphasize system transformation, stronger state leadership, and the urgency of coordinated action.



SEA staff see AI being:

- used to improve efficiency and reduce burden
- applied to strengthen instructional supports
- linked to existing priorities and workstreams



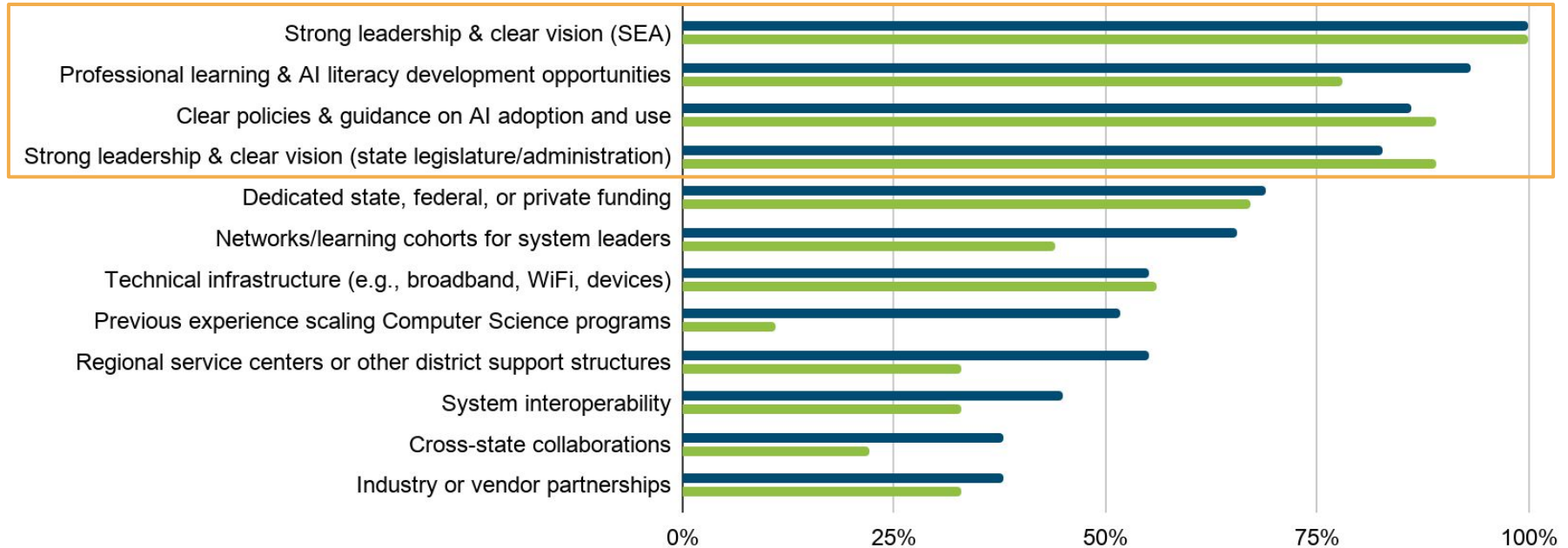
SEA partners see AI being:

- used to enhance human development
- positioned to enable transformation
- tied to systemic improvement needs

SEAs and partners both say that SEA and state leadership, vision and policy are critical.

AI Integration Enablers

SEA Staff SEA Partners




% of respondents who rated the enabler as "very" or "extremely" significant

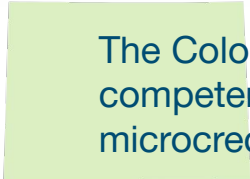
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HB96 (2025) required the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce to develop a model AI policy and **requires all districts and CMOs to adopt the model or create their own aligned version.**



The Colorado Dept. of Ed, UC, and Colorado Education Initiative are integrating AI competencies into existing computer science educator standards, offering competency-based microcredentials, and exploring **aligning teacher prep with national AI standards.**



Virginia is developing **AI-focused professional learning modules and micro-credentials** for educators. They're using a **train-the-trainer model** so school divisions can adapt and deliver content locally.

SEA partners see AI integration challenges as more systemic.

Top barriers identified by SEA staff and partners



SEA Staff

- Capacity limitations
- Funding constraints
- Rapid pace of change
- Political and public pressures



SEA Partners

- Fragmentation and a lack of coherence
- Structural constraints
- Lack of incentives and funding
- Leadership fatigue and competing demands

“No laws have been passed on this yet, so nobody has directed us to do work in AI.”

“We’re on a shoestring budget.”

A photograph of a teacher with glasses leaning over a desk to assist three students. One student is using a laptop. The scene is set in a classroom with other students visible in the background.

The nature of AI presents a unique policy challenge for states.

*“It will be a bumpy ride... **AI isn’t super compatible with the ways teachers teach and principals have to get support from communities.**”*

*“**One barrier is the speed at which things are moving... what’s the entry point?**”*

*“How do you make **evergreen policies that are nimble enough to withstand change?**”*

*“**We’re encouraging AI integration AND we’re banning cell phones, which are how many students access AI, at the same time!**”*



Adherence to local control prevents SEAs from providing the leadership that districts and partners demand.

SEAs describe their role as:

Influencer - Convener - Collaborator Communicator - Clarifier - Coordinator

They develop model policy, offer self assessment tools, develop portraits of a graduate and teacher, offer messaging support, and coordinate with partners and associations. **But they do not direct.**

*“We’re good at influencing and guiding. **For AI to be transformational, it needs to move beyond that.** But it proves difficult in a local control space.”*

*“Positional authority matters...**having the ability to push things forward.**”*

*“**It’s a cultural shift that needs to occur [with] our work and the LEAs’ work.**”*



Human capital investments are critical, but costly.

- SEAs report they need a lot of time and resources to train teachers adequately on how to use AI in the classroom.
- State-led pilots and tool agreements incentivize schools to try out tools.
- States have far fewer resources than edtech—they can't keep up with new tools in terms of capacity or training.

*“For the last twenty years, teachers haven’t been doing what we asked them to do with digital literacy. They’re still not doing that, and that gap is wide... **The divide will be greater because foundation was never there to begin with.**”*

*“Moving teachers from understanding the tool to how to really use it is hard... **it’s taking so much time.**”*



SEAs want evidence of AI impact, but they are disconnected from ed tech and other evidence collection strategies.

- SEAs feel that ed tech is misaligned with their data privacy, cybersecurity, and evidence collection needs—and that they're on their own.
- Funding cuts risk eliminating statewide educator and student surveys that collect AI tool use and perception data.
- States often don't know how to communicate with ed tech. Stewarding more evidence-based conversations is crucial.

“I would love to know where the evidence is: where can we look for the effectiveness data, outcomes data, things like that.” – SEA staff

Stabilize AI integration while seeding for the future

SEAs were designed for compliance-era governance, but current day realities, including AI, require adaptive, networked, and continuously learning governance.

Today's schools need SEAs to evolve to support them better, but this is not just an SEA responsibility. Other state actors and agencies also need to advance more adaptive statewide approaches to AI integration.

Future actions should coordinate for two time horizons:

1. Governing and stabilizing AI integration within the current system, while:
2. Seeding and advancing a subset of “future-building” states that aim to reimagine learning systems, state roles, and institutional capacity for an AI-enabled era.



The Big Opportunity: Rethinking Education

*“Maybe AI helps us solve the problem of kids actually **truly deeply understanding content**, making connections that will last long-term.”*

*“Investors **aren’t funding game changers** like mentorship networks.”*

*“How can we as educators lead without **centering and rethinking the institution** in all of the answers we come up with?”*