Leading Through Uncertainty: State Approaches to AI in K–12 Education

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Introduction

AI reached K–12 classrooms before state policies on its use and role in public education did. State actors[1] have taken steps to understand this new technology and put measures in place to guide its use, but most states have not yet built the coherent strategies, evidence base, or implementation supports needed to guide AI integration[2] at scale.

Many education leaders see AI as a means to reimagine learning, and its use is spreading among teachers, students, and employers. However, public concern about educational technology (ed tech) and screen time is rising and has dominated many legislative agendas and school policy discussions. Conflicting agendas and a desire to maintain local decision-making authority further complicate states' decisions about the integration of this new and evolving technology. No one knows the "right" way to approach AI in K-12 education, but states are taking action. And while most implementation decisions will continue to occur locally, state education agencies (SEAs) can help shape conditions for responsible and equitable AI use.

To better understand how SEAs and the partners[3] they work with are approaching AI in education, CRPE set out to learn from Early Adopter[4] states: **What actions and approaches are they taking, and what barriers and enablers do they encounter?** We drew on data collected from three sources between November 2025 and April 2026: survey responses from 29 SEAs and 9 partner organizations (November 2025); interviews with 14 SEA staff and leaders from 9 partner organizations (December 2025-April 2026); and desk research conducted between November 2025 and January 2026 that led to a database and a brief of publicly available information on 20 Early Adopter states. These sources represent perspectives from 39 U.S. states and territories and 18 partner organizations.

This report summarizes key findings from these data and provides recommendations for how state actors and their partners can help shape AI integration productively, limiting risks and maximizing opportunities for students. The study did not track specific policies or legislation or evaluate whether AI improves student outcomes; nor did it capture every action underway in every state and territory. Instead, it offers a

1 In this report, we use "state actors" to refer broadly to individuals and organizations operating at the state level, including governor's offices, legislatures, state education agencies, state boards of education, and offices or departments focused on innovation, workforce and economic development, higher education, or related policy areas.

2 In this report, we use "AI integration" to refer not only to the adoption and use of generative AI tools, but also to the broader work of preparing students, educators, and systems for AI's role in teaching, learning, school operations, workforce readiness, and civic life. This includes AI literacy and fluency, guidance and governance, professional learning, procurement, data privacy, evaluation, and the use of other forms of AI (e.g., machine learning, natural language processing, predictive analytics) embedded in existing education technologies.

3 In this report, "partners" refers broadly to organizations SEAs work with or draw from to support AI-related capacity-building, policy and guidance development, or implementation, including nonprofits, universities, vendors, philanthropy, advocacy organizations, professional associations, and technical assistance providers.

4 In this report, "Early Adopter" refers to states that demonstrated early-stage exploration of AI in the fall of 2025, meaning they had taken some form of action to address and/or integrate AI into their state educational priorities. Some states were recommended by experts in the field (state and national AI education experts, intermediary organizations, and advocates) during interviews conducted in the fall of 2025; others were identified by our research team.

look at how SEA staff and partners are addressing AI, supporting school systems, and navigating uncertainty. Our analysis revealed:

1. **States are taking action on AI, but approaches have been largely ad hoc and fragmented.** Common actions have been to establish AI advisory bodies, communicate a vision for AI in education, issue non-binding guidance, and support AI literacy. However, most states are still forming the conditions for a more coherent statewide AI strategy

2. **Partnerships are critical to how SEAs function in this space; they supplement (and sometimes substitute for) SEA capacity.** Partners support and complement SEA actions. This includes providing technical assistance and professional development, conducting research and advocacy, and producing technology tools.

3. **Promising state approaches begin with clear leadership, allow for flexibility, and invest in people.** Dynamic guidance and investment in professional learning, pilots, and local policy development can enable statewide AI integration.

4. **Capacity constraints, political dynamics, and competing policy signals are key challenges ahead.** AI presents a unique policy and community engagement challenge. While familiar issues around funding and capacity persist, SEAs must also grapple with swinging public sentiment about AI and a need for deep investment in building AI fluency across stakeholder groups

5. **Left unaddressed, fragmented state action risks widening equity gaps and leaving districts adrift—especially those serving high-need students.** Ad hoc and fragmented approaches carry risks: without coordinated state support, longstanding inequities may deepen, leaving historically underserved students with less access to high-quality learning experiences, academic supports, and safeguards for student well-being.

6. **State AI integration requires visionary leadership, investment, evidence, and agility from SEAs.** States need to equip and adequately resource SEAs to be evidence-based, agile organizations. Absent this, statewide AI integration will remain uneven and unproven.

Methodology

This study draws on multiple data sources collected between November 2025 and April 2026 to understand how Early Adopter states and SEAs are approaching AI in K–12 education. The research team examined publicly available documentary evidence from 20 states, surveyed state education agency leaders and partner organizations, and conducted interviews and focus groups with SEA staff and external partners.

The **20-state database** was developed from publicly available data gathered between November 2025 and January 2026. It focused on states identified as Early Adopters based on visible action related to AI in education and recommendations from experts we interviewed in the fall of 2025. States were selected to reflect geographic and political variety. The database was organized around a schema of AI-related actions that we developed from interviews with field leaders and prior research on AI Early Adopter school districts, then refined during the research process. The database is descriptive rather than evaluative and is not intended to provide an exhaustive account of all state AI adoption efforts.

Data collection also included two surveys administered in November 2025. The SEA staff survey was sent to leaders in 55 states and territories, including the chief executive and department lead(s) overseeing AI, ed tech, digital learning, and/or innovation initiatives. We received 29 SEA staff responses representing 28 states and territories (a 51% response rate). Unless otherwise noted, analyses included all 29 responses. However, when analyzing actions by state, we included only one response per state to avoid overrepresenting the one state with multiple respondents. In that case, we compared the two responses and counted the state as taking or planning an action if either respondent reported as such. The partner survey was sent to 100 partner organization leaders, who were selected based on their engagement with state and district leaders on AI. Nine responses were included in the analysis (9%response rate). Given the small sample, partner survey results are used primarily to surface perspectives and points of contrast with SEA staff views, rather than to make independently generalizable claims.

Finally, the research team conducted interviews and focus groups with 14 SEA staff members across 14 states and nine leaders from nine different partner organizations between December 2025 and April 2026. Interview outreach focused on staff from states that were also included in the database and those who responded to the survey, as well as partners leading networks or associations that include state leaders. Transcripts were anonymized and coded using both deductive codes aligned to the study's research questions and inductive codes to capture emergent themes. Across data sources, the analysis focused on identifying patterns in state and SEA activity, perceived enablers and barriers, and differences between state agency and partner perspectives.

This study has several limitations. The findings reflect a subset of states and are not generalizable to the full national landscape. The 20 states included in the database were selected because they were already taking visible action on AI and should not be interpreted as typical of all states. Survey and interview participants were also self-selected and represent state leaders and partner organizations already engaged in

AI-related work. As a result, the findings may overstate the extent of state and SEA activity, capacity, or urgency around AI.

Survey percentages are reported with raw counts throughout the report, such as 86%, or 25 of 29 respondents. These figures should be interpreted as directional signals, not nationally representative statistics. Partner survey findings should be read as illustrative of partner perspectives, not evidence of sector-wide consensus. In addition, publicly available documents may not capture informal, emerging, or internal state and SEA efforts that had not yet been publicly released at the time of data collection. Because AI policy and practice are evolving rapidly, the findings represent a snapshot of activity from November 2025 through April 2026.

Throughout the report, we distinguish between "state" and "SEA." "State" refers to the broader governmental apparatus, including legislatures, governors' offices, state boards, and executive agencies. "SEA" refers specifically to the state education agency. These terms are not interchangeable: SEAs operate within the state context but have distinct authority, staff capacity, political constraints, and implementation responsibilities.

1. States are taking action on AI, but approaches have been largely ad hoc and fragmented.

The states and territories included in our study were taking action to address AI and support integration in their school systems, but their approaches differ. Additionally, most actions were ad hoc and reactive to the changing realities in classrooms and workplaces. Still, the actions they have pursued do share commonalities.

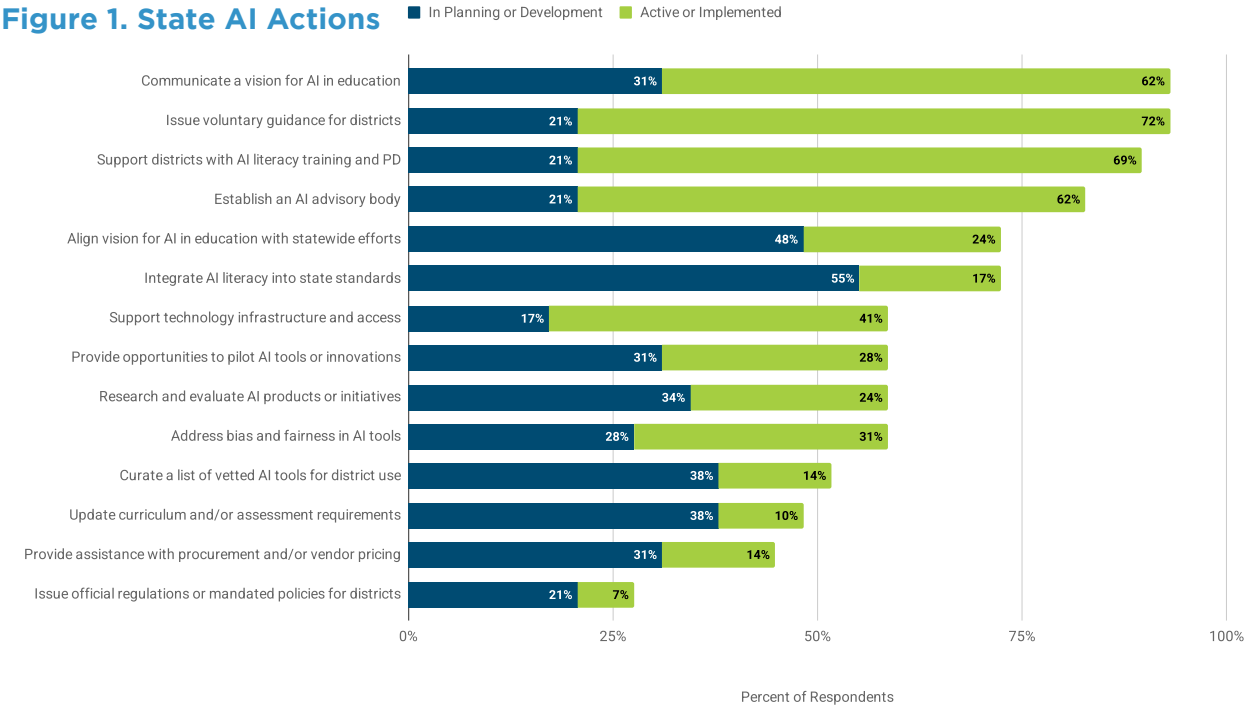
States are signaling direction, but providing less operational support.

Interviews, surveys, and our database research suggest that, to date, states are more comfortable with actions that signal direction and support local discretion (e.g., setting a vision, issuing guidance, establishing advisory bodies) than with actions that provide operational support (e.g., helping with procurement, conducting evaluations, creating model policies, updating standards).

The most common state- and territory-level actions identified by survey respondents were communicating a vision for AI use in education, issuing voluntary guidance for Local Education Agencies (LEAs), supporting LEAs with AI literacy training and professional development, and establishing an AI advisory council, task force, or working group. Advisory bodies were often the catalyst for developing LEA guidance, and in several states, guidance was mandated through legislation.

By the end of 2025, 93% (27 of 29) of SEA staff survey respondents said their states or territories had already communicated or were planning to communicate a vision for AI in K–12 education; 72% (21 of 29) already had aligned (24%) or were planning to align (48%) that vision to broader statewide efforts (see Figure 1 on next page).

Figure 1. State AI Actions



CRPE State Early Adopter Survey (Dec 2025); n= 29

About half of the states and territories represented in our survey said they had already or planned to curate a list of vetted AI tools for district use (54%, 15 of 28) and update curriculum and/or assessment requirements to better prepare students for the age of AI (50%, 14 of 28). Less than half said they had assisted or planned to assist with procurement and/or vendor pricing (43%, 12 of 28), or issue official regulations or mandated policies for districts (25%, 7 of 28).

Most states are still developing conditions that support AI integration.

Every state and territory in our study has taken some form of action to address and integrate AI. But fragmented actions do not yet add up to coherent, statewide AI integration. For most, the work has been focused on building conditions to support a more coherent strategy over time (e.g., creating guidance frameworks and supporting AI literacy). To better understand patterns in state behavior, we grouped those in our study into four emerging archetypes based on the actions they reported and the conditions they appear to be building. These archetypes are not meant to be fixed, not mutually exclusive, and do not prescribe a sequence of steps. Rather, they offer a snapshot of how state approaches clustered during the time of our study (November 2025 - April 2026).

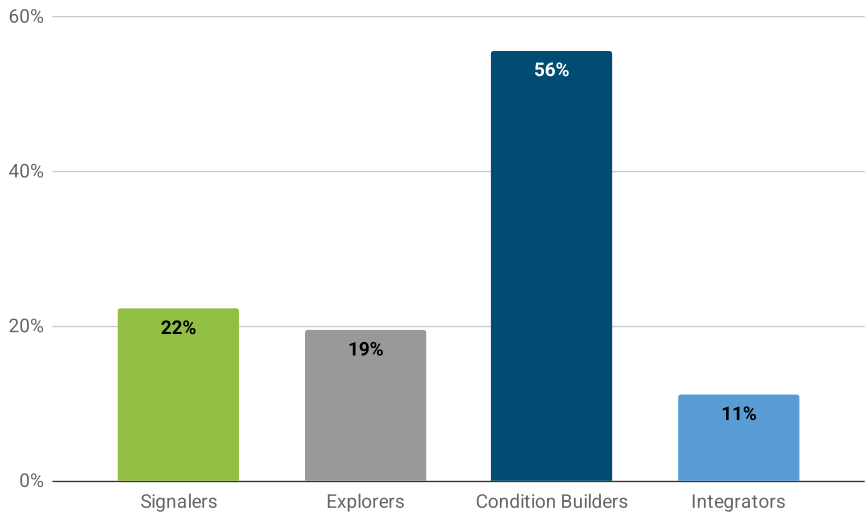
Emerging archetypes include:

- **Signalers:** States and territories that acknowledge AI's influence and are beginning to address its use through guidance development, partnerships, and limited professional learning.

- **Explorers:** States and territories that articulate AI visions and guidance while exploring implementation approaches, pilots, legislation, or educator support.
- **Condition Builders:** States and territories that invest in enabling conditions for AI integration through professional learning, infrastructure, governance, and early implementation efforts.
- **Integrators:** States and territories that help operationalize AI in education systems through pilots, evaluation, procurement supports, standards revisions, or implementation strategies.

Determining how many states fall into each archetype helped reveal how the field is developing. Based on our analysis, 56% of the 39 states and territories included in our study fell into the Condition Builders archetype, 22% were Signalers, 19% were Explorers, and 11% were Integrators (see Figure 2). This distribution suggests that while state action is widespread, most states are still developing conditions that support AI integration.

Figure 2. Emerging State AI Archetypes



CRPE analysis of state actions across database, survey, and interview data (Nov 2025 - April 2026); n=39

Vision-setting, guidance development, partnerships, professional development, and infrastructure support were among the most common actions taken. These actions help states create shared language, build foundational capacity, and support local decision-making (Table 1). A smaller group of states is beginning to move into more operational strategies. These include AI tool pilots, updates to learning standards, impact evaluation, and procurement support. These actions move beyond signaling a state priority or supporting local exploration and towards connecting AI to evidence and student outcomes.

Table 1. Emerging State AI Archetypes and Actions

	Vision and Guidance	Partnerships	Professional Development	Infrastructure	Tool Pilots	Learning Standards	Impact	Procurement
Integrators	Active	Active	Active	Active	Active	Active	Active	Active
Condition Builders	Active	Active	Active	Active	Planning	Planning	Planning	
Explorers	Active	Active	Planning	Partial				
Signalers	Planning	Partial						

Note: "Active" indicates the action is currently underway or already implemented. "Planning" indicates the action is in the planning stages and has not yet been implemented, and "partial" indicates the action has been partially developed or implemented.

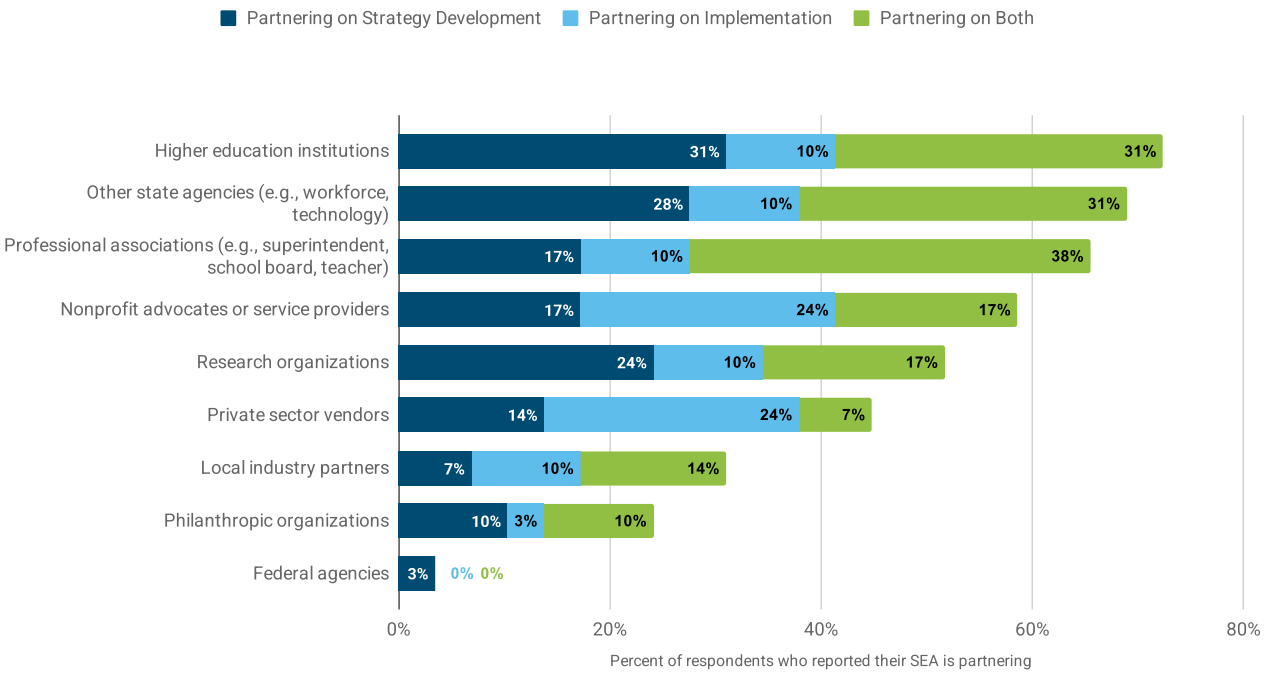
These archetypes and actions are not representative of all the AI-related work states and SEAs are doing. Rather, this framework offers a point-in-time map of the field and a transition guide for state leaders as they move from setting direction toward the conditions that allow AI to be tested, evaluated, and scaled.

2. Partnerships are critical to how SEAs function in this space; they supplement (and sometimes substitute for) SEA capacity.

In addition to the SEA leaders in this study, we also surveyed and interviewed leaders of partner organizations that work alongside SEAs to support AI integration. We heard from state, national, and global organizations, including professional networks and associations, advocacy and research groups, technical assistance providers, and funders.

High percentages of SEA staff survey respondents reported pursuing partnerships with higher education institutions (72%, 21 of 29), other state agencies (69%, 20 of 29), and several other types of partners to support AI strategy and implementation (see Figure 3 on next page). Partners play a key role for SEAs and can expand state capacity and reach, particularly for those with limited internal staff and AI expertise. As one SEA leader put it, "Partners have a critical role, actually. I've come a long way in [realizing] this in my time at the agency and recognizing the partner role."

Figure 3. SEA Partners in AI Integration



CRPE State Early Adopter Survey (Dec 2025), n= 29

Partners complement actions taken by states, and fill gaps in the absence of action.

SEA staff viewed support from partners as essential, particularly when they could not immediately respond to district and school needs. In these cases, partners stepped in to complement SEA action or to offer direct support to LEAs. Partners in our study most commonly reported supporting states and SEAs by establishing or participating in AI advisory councils, helping to craft a vision for AI use and draft guidance for districts, providing opportunities to pilot AI tools, and supporting districts with AI literacy building.

In Colorado and Arizona, for example, partner organizations led the development and publication of AI guidance for LEAs. The Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) formed a task force that included business leaders, district leaders, teachers, and students to create the Colorado Roadmap for AI. They have continued to collaborate with the Colorado Department of Education and expect to roll out updates to the roadmap in 2026. Similarly, the Arizona Institute for Education and the Economy (AIEE) at Northern Arizona University coordinated the development and publication of AI Guidance for Arizona Schools. Both Colorado and Arizona's state departments of education advised on and endorse the guidance documents on their websites.

Another example of effective partnership is the long-standing collaboration between the state of Tennessee and the advocacy and research group Tennessee SCORE. SCORE's relationship with the Tennessee Department of Education and districts across

the state positioned them well to support AI-related initiatives directly.[5] To date, they have helped vet the quality of AI tools, mediated an AI-learning tool pilot, and convened a working group of education leaders with other leaders across various sectors.

In states where SEA actions have been limited, partner organizations are stepping in. For example, the Texas Education Agency has been included in conversations, but partner organizations have taken a more visible role in helping district and charter leaders make sense of AI. EducateTexas, an initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas, launched the AI + Education Leadership Collaborative in 2025 to support leaders from Texas districts, charter organizations, and K-12 nonprofits as they navigate AI. Idaho provides a similar example of partners helping build capacity before state guidance was fully developed. During our study, the Idaho Department of Education had not yet issued formal AI guidance, but the agency worked with the Idaho STEM Action Center and other partners to offer AI-related professional development, including workshops on AI literacy and classroom implementation. The Idaho AI Ecosystems Project, a collaboration led by Playlab in partnership with the Idaho Department of Education and Google, connected districts and educators through AI capacity-building opportunities, student challenges, coaching, and shared resources. These examples show that partners are not only extending SEA reach; in some states, they have created the venues and provided the expertise and learning infrastructure that allow AI work to begin before the SEA issued formal guidance or built internal capacity.

Partners are pushing for visionary system transformation.

Although SEA staff and their partners work in parallel to support AI integration efforts, those in our study had differing perspectives on how to approach AI. SEA staff mostly prioritized pragmatic improvement, while partners often viewed AI as an opportunity to reimagine learning and change the status quo. Partners described themselves as connectors and catalysts for collective problem-solving, emphasizing system transformation and the need for stronger state leadership and coordinated action.

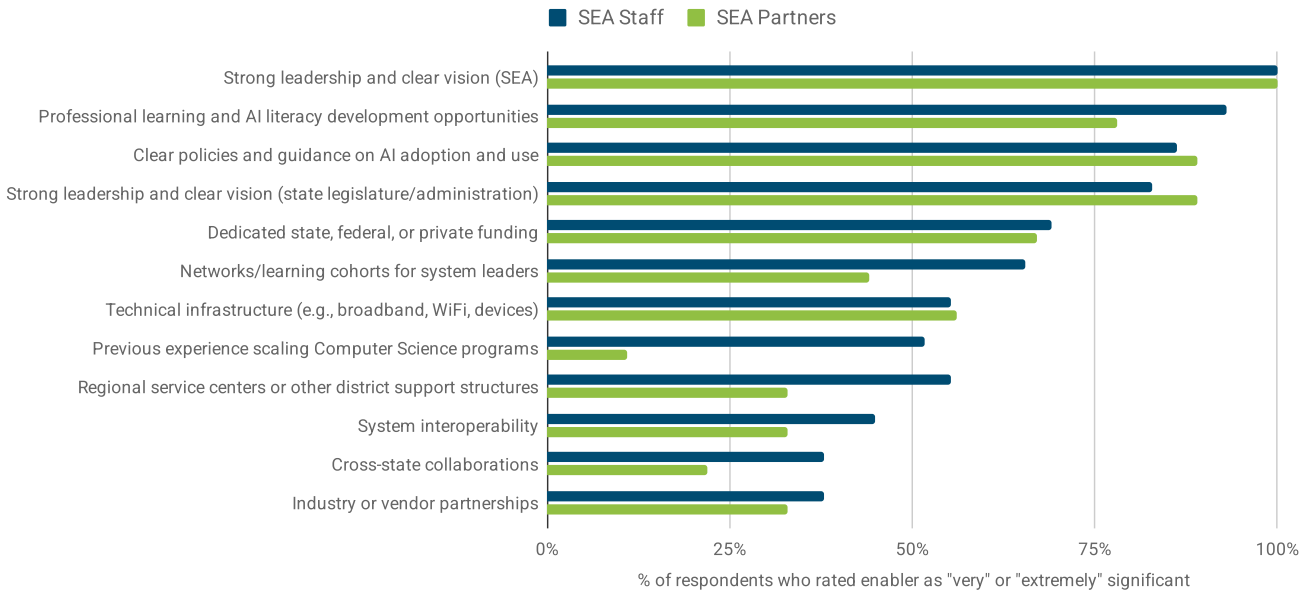
> **"We're at a space in time where we need to think real big and bold, not in incremental ways, but in big transformational ways. We know the structures and processes we have now [in K-12] can't get us there, but with the advent of AI, you can imagine bigger, bolder strategies, and that's what we should be coming up with." — SEA Partner**

In contrast, SEA staff described operating under practical constraints and suggested more incremental progress. Their approach to AI is cautious, grounded in existing responsibilities and authority, and focused on alignment and feasibility within current systems. They see opportunities for AI to reduce workload, increase operational efficiencies, and strengthen instructional supports that are already part of statewide priorities and initiatives. As one leader put it, "I think we need to be sure that we are charging ahead with prudence… I want us to be sure that as a state and as SEAs, that we have those guardrails in place and we're not moving too fast."

5 For a deeper dive into the state-intermediary relationship, see our profile, *From Exploration to Coherence: How SCORE Is Helping Tennessee Make Sense of AI in Schools.*

Partner organizations tended to have missions aligned to reforming education systems and do not sit within large, public bureaucracies. SEAs, on the other hand, are often limited in what they can do based on funding, capacity, and distributed public authority. Yet, despite their differing viewpoints, both SEA staff and partners agreed that strong leadership and a clear vision for AI within and outside the SEA are critical to advancing any approach. When asked to identify very or extremely significant enablers of AI integration, 100% (38 of 38) of SEA staff and partner survey respondents named strong SEA leadership; their perspectives on the significance of other enablers were also similar (Figure 4). This evidence was also consistent with data collected in interviews with SEA leaders and partner organizations.

Figure 4: SEA Staff and Partner Perspectives on AI Integration Enablers



CRPE State Early Adopter Survey (Dec 2025); SEA Partners n = 9, SEA Staff n = 29

3. Promising state approaches begin with clear leadership, allow for flexibility, and invest in people.

Across our data, we found that states are pursuing strategies to encourage responsible AI use, and early examples of what state leadership on AI can look like are emerging.

Strong state AI strategies start with clear leadership and a specific need or problem to solve.

Leading states (and those aligned to the "integrator" archetype described on page 7) have articulated a clear vision for what AI should help accomplish and anchor AI strategies to specific instructional, operational, or workforce challenges. They also clearly identify the leaders responsible for carrying those strategies forward. In some cases, such as in Massachusetts, governors have played a role in setting a broader statewide AI vision that includes education, workforce development, and economic competitiveness. In others, such as in California, SEAs have taken the lead by embedding AI within existing teaching and learning, digital literacy, computer science, or instructional improvement efforts.

> **"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**

This kind of leadership matters because without it, AI can become an unfocused solution in search of a problem. State leaders and partners repeatedly emphasized the importance of grounding AI work in specific needs, such as improving reading or math support, reducing administrative burden, strengthening lesson design, preparing students for a changing workforce, or helping districts make informed procurement decisions. One SEA leader said, "[Our state] is approaching AI as a tool to strengthen our instruction and strengthen our teachers to expand student opportunity… [We ask ourselves,] how is this going to help us influence the student outcomes and our strategic priorities—of which math and literacy are at the forefront?" When AI is tied to a concrete priority, states can more clearly communicate why the work matters, what risks must be managed, and what success will look like.

States are demonstrating different leadership approaches and show that state leadership can take multiple forms. A state does not need to control every district decision about AI to provide useful direction. Key early steps are establishing and communicating a clear vision, then structuring leadership to support that vision and coordinate execution.

State Leadership and Coordination in Utah

Utah's approach combines vision, capacity-building, coordination, and infrastructure to create one of the most coherent statewide AI strategies in the country.

A clear AI vision, anchored in state priorities

- Established an independent Office of AI Policy and created a dedicated AI Education Specialist role
- Developed statewide AI guidance, a strategic framework, and an AI leadership blueprint
- Anchors this work in portraits of an AI-Infused **educator**, **learner**, and what it looks like to be an **AI-ready company** to help inform education-workforce connections

Scaled, incentivized professional learning

- Trained 6,500+ educators statewide
- Incentivized the creation of AI-infused lesson plans and expanded training to families and caregivers

Deep cross-sector coordination

- The Internal Steering Committee on AI (SCAI) aligns work across departments
- Partnerships with higher ed and industry
- National leadership in AI in education convenings

Statewide procurement and infrastructure support

- Negotiated statewide AI tool contracts for no or reduced cost
- Partially centralized data privacy vetting via the Utah Education Network (UEN)

Some states are prioritizing flexibility.

The rapid evolution of AI technology and the surrounding fear that guidance will quickly become irrelevant and outdated was one of the most common fears cited by SEA leaders. As one participant put it, SEAs "have to be able to decide what is evergreen, and how we can be nimble." For many, flexibility has become a deliberate strategy.

One example is the use of dynamic guidance documents that can be added to or amended as the field evolves. States such as North Carolina and Oregon offer examples of more dynamic approaches, where guidance is treated as a living resource. This approach can help SEAs respond to emerging issues and questions from districts while signaling that state policy will continue to adapt as evidence and technology change. Dynamic guidance documents that are easily accessible on the web, iteratively updated, and widely disseminated across multiple communication channels offer a promising strategy in this fast-paced environment.

> **"Guidance should be an evolving document. You should always go back and visit [it] because AI, it keep[s] moving. This technology [is] moving so fast, policy cannot catch up." — SEA partner**

SEAs were often deliberate about the timing of their guidance. Some moved quickly and released high-level guidance so LEAs could discuss and form their local AI approach. One SEA staff member said districts appreciated that "somebody is saying something so they can at least have the conversation on a local level," even if the guidance and professional development were "very high level" and "very generic." That same participant said the agency later returned to school systems and partners to reassess needs and refine its approach. Other SEAs intentionally held off on issuing guidance, instead conducting needs assessments with stakeholders or working with partner organizations to gain expertise and learn about the needs of schools in their state before taking action.

> **"We did not jump right into the AI space. It was a deliberate wait, [an] intentional delay. Instead of jumping in and just creating PDFs, [we said] let's do this intentionally and give the field time to weigh in on what they think they need." — SEA Leader**

SEA leaders expressed a desire to be both humble and practical as they wrestle with how to support LEAs, acknowledging that they are still building their own expertise. As one participant explained, "In six months, everything that I'm saying now could be obsolete. So trying to keep up with that through guidance and through policy… I think that's the reason we've stayed at a very high level for the past year, just to make sure that we don't get out over our skis in an area that we're not the experts in yet."

States are supporting professional learning, pilots, and local policy.

Beyond approaches that allow for flexibility, other promising strategies are emerging that states newer to this work can emulate.

First, states are investing in AI literacy and professional learning. Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Virginia are examples of states working to build educator and leader capacity because they know guidance documents alone are not enough. These

approaches recognize that AI implementation depends heavily on human judgment. Educators and leaders need opportunities to understand what AI tools can and cannot do, how to evaluate outputs, how to protect student data, how to address bias and accessibility, and how to connect AI use to instructional goals. As one partner we spoke with shared, "What I have seen in multiple states is that the guidance is out, but it needs to be followed up with opportunities for districts to come together to talk about what they're doing and how they're implementing it."

Building AI Literacy: Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Virginia

Many states have supported professional development around building AI literacy. Some stand out for jumping in early and working to scale.

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)

DESE systematized AI literacy training by offering educators a Certificate of Completion for completing the online DESE **AI Literacy for Educators Course**. Educators could earn an additional certificate for completing a **six-week companion webinar series**, creating an incentivized approach to strengthen AI literacy across the teacher workforce. In summer 2026, DESE will launch an additional educator resource, the **DESE AI: Pedagogy and Principles in Action Cards**.

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI)

North Carolina has created collaboratives, communities of practice, and an extensive webinar series to support equitable access to **AI literacy** training. Their regional delivery model helps reach educators in every corner of the state.

Virginia Department of Education (VDOE)

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.

Second, states are supporting structured AI tool pilots. Louisiana and Indiana show how states are creating opportunities for LEAs to test AI tools in intentional ways. These pilots can support school systems in implementing AI thoughtfully, provide opportunities to learn from real-world use, and help states begin to understand whether specific tools are producing desired results.

AI Tool Pilots: Louisiana and Indiana

Many states have supported pilots and early AI tool adoption to help improve student learning outcomes and address other specific challenges.

Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE)

- The BESE has supported AI tool pilots across the state to support reading and math instruction (including Zearn, Amira, and Khanmigo).
- BESE required that implementations incorporate independent research.
- Early results have shown **positive effects**, and the state has expanded the use of promising tools.

Indiana State Department of Education (IDOE)

- Indiana is helping schools meet academic goals by funding initiatives that feature the purposeful use of AI tools in targeted areas, such as literacy, and expand access across the state.
- Reports from the IDOE examine pilots funded through **state grants** and provide **insight** into AI's influence on teaching practice, student learning, and attitudes about AI.

Third, a small number of states have set expectations for local AI policy. Ohio and Tennessee offer examples of states moving beyond optional guidance by requiring districts to adopt local policies. These approaches may help reduce confusion for districts and families by creating a baseline for acceptable use, privacy, and transparency.

Local AI Policy Mandates: Ohio and Tennessee

While most states have held off on mandating LEA action through legislation, some have used that as a lever to spark early AI discussions and policy development.

Ohio

HB96 (2025) required the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce (DEW) to develop a model AI policy. It also required all districts and charter schools to adopt the model policy or create their own aligned version by July 1, 2026.

Tennessee

Public Chapter 988 (2024) created the Tennessee AI Advisory Council. Their 2025 Action Plan provides strategic guidance and recommendations on AI in education.

Public Chapter 550 (2024) required local boards of education and public charter schools to adopt policies regarding how students, teachers, and staff use AI.

Human capital investments are costly, but critical.

Study participants consistently emphasized that responsible AI integration depends on people. States can publish guidance and approve tools, but educators, school leaders, district staff, board members, students, and families still need the knowledge and judgment to use AI well. Developing AI literacy requires far more than a one-time webinar or a resource guide that sits on a shelf.

SEA staff reported that they need significant time and resources to train educators adequately on how to use AI in classrooms. One leader said, "Moving teachers from understanding the tool to how to really use it is hard…it's taking so much time", which was a sentiment shared by many leaders in our study. Teachers need support to understand when AI may strengthen instruction and when it may undermine learning, how to evaluate AI-generated content, how to teach students about appropriate and ethical AI use, and how to use AI for planning, feedback, differentiation, or administrative tasks. District and school leaders need support with policy development, procurement, data governance, and change management. Study participants also expressed a growing need to ensure families and students get the support they need to understand the risks, opportunities, and expectations for AI use in school.

> **"One thing that I've said from day one is that if there are concerns, we have to face them head-on. We need to make better efforts to have that family engagement and parental engagement piece. [It] is always the hardest piece in the field of education to make those connections and really be transparent about what we're doing and what we're using the technology for." — SEA Leader**

Developing AI fluency is role-specific and iterative, which makes this type of investment costly. The knowledge a state board member needs is different from what a chief technology officer or a classroom teacher needs. As tools evolve, training must evolve as well. These factors make human capital development one of the most critical and

most difficult aspects of state AI strategy. State-led pilots and vendor agreements can help by lowering barriers to entry and giving educators structured opportunities to try AI tools. But these opportunities are not always available to LEAs, and long-term sustainability is uncertain as pilots often depend on temporary funding. When those funds expire, LEAs may struggle to continue training initiatives or to scale promising practices.

States also face a resource imbalance with ed tech. Vendors typically have more staff, more marketing capacity, and more resources to entice and train users on their own products. Limited capacity within SEAs makes it difficult to evaluate vendor claims, keep up with new tools and features, and ensure professional learning is not driven by vendor priorities. As one leader put it, "State government in general lags behind… Even though I see ways we could be more productive, we're not there yet." Partners can help fill this gap, but SEAs still need the internal capacity to coordinate efforts and serve as a trusted source for guidance and information.

4. Capacity constraints, political dynamics, and competing policy signals are key challenges ahead.

Most SEAs are operating under constraints, and AI work is often layered onto the responsibilities of existing staff—typically innovation teams or leaders already responsible for digital learning, instructional technology, or computer science. These SEA leaders are being asked to help districts make sense of a rapidly changing environment while they themselves are still learning how to integrate AI in their own agencies. As one participant put it, "We are way behind in terms of implementing AI in our own processes, and at the same time we're trying to help LEAs think through it." Few agencies have the dedicated AI staff, sustainable funding, or clear legislative or executive direction to adequately take on this new work.

Capacity constraints top the list of barriers to equitable AI integration.

Even as promising strategies emerge, SEA capacity remains one of the most significant barriers to coherent, equitable AI integration. Participants consistently described constraints in time, personnel, expertise, and funding. Few SEAs have a dedicated AI role or team. AI work is often folded into existing responsibilities, even as staff are already managing other priorities (e.g., instructional support, data privacy, cybersecurity, etc.).

> **"Currently, our AI consultant is funded off of a state budget line item. I'm hopeful that is something that will continue, but nothing is guaranteed. Unless there were a new bill or new legislation or a new stream of money, I don't know where the funding would come from." — SEA Leader**

This creates a mismatch between the scope of the challenge and the resources available to address it. The ed tech market is evolving rapidly, and both SEAs and LEAs are inundated with messages from vendors and community members. SEAs are being asked to help school systems evaluate tools, understand legal and privacy risks, design professional learning, respond to public concerns, and develop policy; yet many lack the internal technical expertise, research capacity, or implementation staff to keep up.

Capacity constraints and limited expertise at the state level have equity implications at the local level. LEAs with more capacity can hire consultants, experiment with tools, negotiate vendor agreements, provide training, and develop local policies with little external support. Those with fewer resources may have to rely more heavily on vendor claims, informal staff experimentation, or restrictive policies that avoid AI altogether. Without state support, the quality of AI integration may depend heavily on local resources, staffing, and leadership capacity.

Commitment to local control can complicate the state's role.

SEA leaders must navigate a delicate balance: offering enough direction to reduce confusion and inequity while respecting local decision-making and leveraging other state actors for AI integration support. Many SEAs operate in contexts where districts expect autonomy, and agency leaders are cautious about exceeding their authority. This can limit the ability of SEAs to provide the kind of leadership that some districts say they want and need.

Many SEA leaders said they lack the authority to mandate actions and the capacity to enforce them. They instead exert influence through guidance, frameworks, toolkits, and other "opt-in" support. While helpful, these approaches could widen gaps among LEAs who opt in and those who do not. As one state agency leader explained, "We are very much a local control state, so we can only offer suggestions at the state level. And without legislation or mandates, we can't really tell districts, 'This is what you should do.' I think it depends on the capacity of the district to be able to move the needle forward on effective use of artificial intelligence in the schools and within the district."

> **"We are really good at influencing at the guidance stage, but for AI to really be transformative we need to try to move beyond that, [which] proves difficult in the local control space." — SEA Leader**

Public sentiment and competing policy signals are reshaping the AI conversation.

Public sentiment about AI (and ed tech broadly) is shifting and, in some localities, is generating an anti-tech backlash that cannot be ignored. Legislatures and state boards are debating, and in many cases adopting, policies that ban cell phones, limit screen time, or set stricter guardrails around student data privacy and online safety. SEAs are encouraging AI literacy and preparing students for a future in which AI is likely to be part of work, civic life, and higher education, while simultaneously dealing with concerns about students spending too much time on screens and technology undermining their well-being. For districts, educators, students, and parents, these conflicting messages can feel confusing.

> **"On one hand, we're strongly encouraging responsible integration of AI. On the other hand, we've just banned cell phones, and that's how many people were accessing AI." — SEA Leader**

Concerns about AI and ed tech reflect legitimate questions about safety, privacy, learning quality, and student development. States that want to lead on AI will engage communities more deeply and more transparently given these mounting concerns. This means explaining not only what AI tools might make possible, but also what the state

will not support, what student safeguards are in place, how families and educators will be involved, and how decisions will be revisited as new evidence emerges. Most prior ed tech adoptions have not engaged communities in this way, and states may not have a playbook to do so without additional resources, staff, or deep agency expertise in AI.

One example of how the conversation is evolving comes from Utah. Leaders there are trying to both prepare students and educators for an AI-enabled world, while also responding to federal pushback on AI regulation and pressure from families and legislators to limit technology exposure and protect children. Utah's 2026 legislative session highlighted the tensions state leaders face as they try to strike a balance. Lawmakers moved to expand AI literacy through two bills: HB 218, which updates the required seventh- and eighth-grade digital skills course to include AI literacy, and HB 273, which, among other things, requires the Utah State Board of Education to include AI and digital skills in core learning standards and create a model AI-use policy for LEAs to adopt or adapt. But in the same session, lawmakers also passed SB 69, which banned students from using personal cell phones, smart watches, or other emerging technology during school hours, and, through HB 273, set limits on the use of instructional technology by grade level and required greater transparency with parents.

5. Left unaddressed, fragmented state action risks widening gaps and leaving districts adrift—especially those that serve high-need students.

AI is already in classrooms, homes, and workplaces, whether states act or not. In the 2024-25 school year, six in ten teachers said they used AI in their work. Over the course of 2025, one study showed substantial growth in the percentage of middle (46%) and high school (63%) students who reported using AI for help with their homework. Simultaneously, between 2023 and 2025, the demand for AI fluency and skills in the workplace grew nearly sevenfold. State legislatures are increasingly bringing forth bills on AI in education to address this new reality, while federal regulation remains limited. As of March 2026, lawmakers across 31 states had introduced over 130 education-related AI bills in that legislative session alone.

LEAs need help ensuring equitable access to AI.

A recent study conducted by our CRPE colleagues found that school systems are asking for help cutting through the AI noise, understanding the risks, and making decisions they can defend to educators, families, and board members. Well-resourced districts may have the capacity to experiment with AI in more intentional ways, but those serving high-need students face a narrower set of choices. In this environment, state inaction is not neutral.

If states do not intentionally support small, rural, and under-resourced LEAs, AI integration will likely follow familiar patterns: well-resourced LEAs will have greater access to tools, training, and expertise, while others will be left to navigate the risks and opportunities with far less support. State leadership matters and can help ensure that responsible AI use does not depend solely on local resources.

"States need to take on that policy and leadership position to really move the use of AI. I think that's particularly important for historically underserved communities, poor communities, [and] rural communities, which I am starting to get a really strong sense are going to be left behind. That's really troublesome in terms of what that means from a socioeconomic mobility perspective for our young people." — SEA Leader

Teachers need more time to build AI knowledge and skills.

Capacity gaps are not limited to districts. Participants in our study worried that inconsistent training in LEAs and in educator preparation programs could create new divides between teachers who are already serving in classrooms and those new to the field. This gap in preparation can place further burden on LEAs that may shoulder higher training costs for early career teachers. It may also disadvantage students being taught by teachers who did not receive proper support prior to entering the field. In the words of one SEA leader, "We need to get teachers prepared, because there's going to soon be another equity gap and knowledge gap between in-service and pre-service [teachers] if higher ed doesn't get on board." Without sustained professional learning and AI fluency building, states risk asking individuals to make complex decisions about the ethics and use of AI without the preparation to do so well.

States need better evidence to make informed decisions on statewide AI strategy.

In a sentiment expressed by many participants in our study, one SEA leader said, "I think people are recognizing the need to quickly have a research agenda to understand all the impacts on the system so that we're not flying blind on this." Small-scale tool pilots and early LEA use cases can help build confidence, generate proof points, and create the institutional trust needed for more complex uses of AI. But states and districts also need clearer expectations for what counts as promising, what should be scaled, what should be revised, and what should be stopped. Thoughtful, strategic AI integration does not presume "more is better" but rather seeks evidence to justify decision-making on AI use and limitations. The strength of evidence supporting a given use should inform if and how states move toward scaling.

Another recent CRPE study of stakeholders across ed tech, philanthropy, policy, teaching, and advocacy articulates a structural mismatch between what K-12 AI products promise and the realities of implementation. Many tools have a weak grounding in learning science because developers rushed them to market without sufficient evidence of efficacy. Often, vendor claims and peer recommendations drive adoption decisions instead of research. This gives states a critical responsibility to incentivize, require, and build greater evidence to support effective tool adoption. Without a stronger commitment to evidence, AI integration will remain vulnerable to vendor claims and anecdote-driven decision-making.

"One of the complex and really meaningful reflective spaces that our team is regularly sitting in is, 'What's best for kids?' The ed tech world, for the longest time, has been focused on the shiny new thing, the new ed tech that's coming out. Our team is really, really critical of [that]. Are we moving too quickly for our students? How [do we] put safeguards and guidance in place to help districts be

critical of when, where, and for what purpose [they use AI]? How do we make sure that we are focused on research-based best practice rather than industry drivers?" — SEA Leader

More agile SEAs can help bridge gaps and influence local conditions.

SEAs cannot direct every local decision, but they can help shape the conditions under which local decisions are made and leverage the authority they do have to level the playing field. Across interviews, SEA staff described their role less as directors and more as influencers, conveners, communicators, clarifiers, and coordinators. Several participants also suggested that AI may require SEAs to stretch beyond their traditional role. One noted, "It's a cultural shift that needs to occur," both for the SEA and for LEAs; another emphasized that "positional authority matters" when trying to move work forward, implying that traditional SEA functions may need to adapt.

Late, unguided AI integration risks advancing and solidifying the status quo. AI could become another domain where opportunity and innovation are distributed unevenly—at a moment when students are already struggling academically and achievement gaps are widening. But, both SEAs and LEAs must exercise caution as the evidence on AI's effectiveness and limitations evolves. If states want AI to support stronger and more equitable learning systems, they will need to act proactively, strategically, and with enough operational support to ensure that LEAs serving high-need students are not left to navigate this moment alone.

"I think 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 Leader

6. State AI integration requires visionary leadership, investment, evidence, and SEA agility.

This study suggests that, should AI integration efforts fall short, it will not be because states are failing to act, but rather because the conditions for coherent, responsible, and equitable integration are not yet in place. As we've described, SEAs are taking action to support school systems and address AI integration. But these efforts are often happening without the statewide vision, dedicated capacity, cross-sector alignment, or evidence base needed to sustain them.

What actions can state leaders take to support AI integration?

The promise of AI in education will not be realized through technology adoption alone. It will depend on whether states can build the systems, capacity, and evidence base needed to use it well. The findings we've reported here show that states are pursuing actions to integrate AI, and the path forward will not be limited to a single approach. Local context matters, and districts will continue to make many of the most

consequential decisions about classroom use. But states can play a critical role in helping to ensure that access to high-quality AI opportunities does not depend solely on local capacity.

The next phase of state AI leadership should operate on two time horizons. In the near term, states must pursue AI integration within the current system: clarifying expectations, supporting districts with implementation and training, protecting students' data and well-being, and building evidence. At the same time, states, SEAs, and partners that are ready to take the next steps should begin testing what more adaptive education systems could look like in an AI-enabled era, including new models for cross-sector coordination, research infrastructure, and learning design.

As CRPE's Director Robin Lake has argued, "[2026 is] a year that demands decisive action…AI cannot be an afterthought for education leaders. Instead, it must be front and center in legislative agendas and policy decisions." To do that, states and their partners should prioritize four actions.

1. Clarify and align statewide vision, roles, and resources.

States should move from scattered AI activities toward a more coherent statewide strategy. This does not mean centralizing every decision or moving faster than evidence allows. It means articulating what role AI should play in advancing state education priorities, where AI use should be encouraged or limited, and what supports districts need to make responsible choices.

A clear state vision should connect AI to broader goals already on the education agenda, including those tied to instructional quality, student engagement, educator capacity, career readiness, data privacy, and workforce development. It should also acknowledge legitimate public concerns about screen time, student well-being, data security, and the role of technology in schools. States can get ahead of growing resistance to ed tech by taking a balanced approach: neither uncritical adoption nor blanket restriction, but a strategy that establishes guardrails while creating space for responsible innovation.

To build alignment, state leaders (i.e., governors, cabinets, intermediary partners) should convene cross-sector advisory bodies, statewide learning cohorts, and working groups that include SEA leaders, district leaders, educators, students, families, workforce agencies, higher education, technology experts, community partners, and education and civil rights advocates. These groups should help states define shared outcomes, identify risks, coordinate resources, and update strategy as the technology and evidence evolve.

States also need dedicated capacity to sustain this work. At a minimum, SEAs should identify a clear internal lead or team responsible for coordinating AI strategy across offices. Without dedicated ownership, SEAs risk distributing AI work across departments in ways that are reactive, duplicative, or disconnected from broader priorities.

2. Build an evidence strategy.

States need a stronger evidence base to evaluate the impacts of AI in education. At present, many decisions about AI tools and implementation are being made faster than research can keep up. Districts are being asked to assess products, privacy risks,

instructional value, and implementation costs with limited independently generated evidence about what works, for whom, and under what conditions.

SEAs can help by developing statewide evidence strategies that connect data collection, research, procurement, and continuous improvement. This could include identifying priority research questions, supporting common measures across pilots, collecting information on district AI use, and partnering with researchers to evaluate implementation and outcomes. With a common framework in place, districts can also generate evidence through their own pilots and implementation efforts, rather than waiting for statewide studies to produce answers. Common measures, reporting templates, and shared research questions can help turn local experimentation into evidence that informs state strategy and benefits other districts. SEAs or advisory bodies should also create regular feedback loops with the people most affected by AI adoption, including educators, students, families, and district leaders, so that evidence includes not only product performance but also implementation conditions, user experience, and unintended consequences.

Procurement is another important lever. SEAs or intermediary partners can support LEAs by helping vet tool quality, clarify legal privacy and accessibility expectations, standardize contract language, and create shared guidance on pricing and vendor claims. Over time, states could also explore outcomes-based contracts or approved product lists tied to clear evidence standards. These approaches should be designed carefully so they do not limit innovation or advantage only large vendors, but instead reduce the burden on individual districts and create stronger market signals about what schools actually need.

An evidence strategy should not be limited to whether AI "works" (e.g., a tool improves student outcomes, reduces teacher workload, streamlines operations, etc.). The more useful questions are specific: Which tools support which instructional or operational goals, and for whom? What training is required for effective use? What risks emerge for different student groups? What conditions make implementation more or less successful? How will states and districts know when to scale, revise, or stop using a tool? Without this kind of evidence infrastructure, AI adoption is likely to remain uneven, vendor-driven, and difficult to assess.

3. Plan for deep, ongoing human capital investment.

Even the most cogent AI strategy will fail without investment in people. States cannot rely on static guidance documents or single, point-in-time trainings to prepare education systems for a technology that is evolving quickly and affecting many different roles. Instead, states and their partners should invest in building AI-fluent decision-makers across the system. This is especially important in the absence of clear statewide policies and limited federal regulation (though recent announcements from the U.S. Department of Education that incentivize AI use in classrooms could help).

AI fluency does not mean that every educator, policymaker, or family member needs to become a technical expert. It means that people in different roles need enough domain-specific knowledge to ask good questions, evaluate AI outputs, understand risks, and make sound decisions. Board members and policymakers need to understand governance, privacy, procurement, and workforce implications. SEA and district leaders need support on strategy, implementation, and change management. Educators need opportunities to examine how AI may affect instruction, assessment, student

support, and professional practice. Students and families need clear information about appropriate use, academic integrity, data privacy, and how AI may shape future learning and work. States should treat these stakeholders as decision-makers, not just audiences for training. Advisory councils, student and family listening sessions, educator design teams, structured feedback loops, and public review of model policies can help surface risks, barriers, and implementation challenges that state leaders may otherwise miss.

State actors can support this by legislating or funding targeted professional learning, communities of practice, model resources, and role-specific training. Partners can play a major role here, particularly when SEAs lack the internal capacity to design and deliver learning opportunities at scale. But state leaders should help ensure that training is coherent, aligned to state priorities, and responsive to local needs rather than a patchwork of disconnected offerings.

This investment must also include attention to equity. LEAs with greater resources are more likely to access high-quality training, technical expertise, and early implementation opportunities. Without state support, lower-capacity LEAs may either avoid AI entirely or adopt tools without sufficient safeguards. States should prioritize support for school systems serving high-need students so that AI does not become another area where opportunity depends on local resources.

4. Seed new SEA learning organization models.

AI is testing whether SEAs can operate with the speed, flexibility, and cross-functional coordination required for modern education challenges. SEAs are typically organized around compliance, program administration, and accountability. Those functions remain important, but AI requires additional capacities: rapid learning, ongoing stakeholder engagement, cross-agency coordination, iterative guidance, and the ability to support responsible experimentation.

A small number of future-ready SEAs in states with legislative support, philanthropic backing, and strong agency leadership should test new roles and operating models. These models would prioritize cross-functional teams, faster guidance cycles, shared learning across districts, and stronger connections between policy, implementation, procurement, research, and professional learning. They would treat AI not as a one-time policy issue, but as an ongoing systems challenge that requires SEAs to learn alongside districts.

States could also explore regulatory sandboxes, innovation zones, or structured pilot programs that allow districts to test AI tools and practices under controlled conditions. These efforts should be voluntary, time-limited, transparent to families, and tied to evidence requirements. Without those safeguards, they may intensify public concern rather than build trust. The goal should not be experimentation for its own sake, but rather disciplined learning that helps the field understand what is worth scaling and what should be avoided.

Federal, philanthropic, and advocacy partners can help seed this work. Many SEAs will not be able to build new operating models, research infrastructure, or statewide learning systems with existing resources alone. Targeted investments could support AI-focused SEA capacity, cross-state research consortia, shared procurement tools, and networks of states willing to test and refine new approaches. A shared research

consortium could be especially valuable, allowing states to pool pilot data, compare implementation models, and generate evidence that individual states or districts could not produce on their own.

Conclusion

AI is moving faster than state education systems were designed to move. That does not mean states should rush toward broad adoption or allow ed tech to define the agenda; it means states need the capacity and clarity to lead in a more agile, evidence-informed, and equity-focused way.

The early state actions documented in this report show that SEAs and their partners are not standing still. They are trying to respond to district demands, support responsible use, and understand what AI may mean for teaching and learning. But without more coherent strategies, stronger investments in people, and better evidence, AI integration will likely remain fragmented and uneven.

The stakes are highest for school systems and students who already have the least access to strong instructional supports, technology infrastructure, and specialized expertise. If states do not act with more coordination, longstanding inequities are likely to shape AI integration just as they have shaped access to other educational opportunities. Some districts will move ahead, while others will be left to make high-stakes decisions with limited resources, and students' access to meaningful, safe, and effective uses of AI will vary widely.

States do not need to have all the answers now, but they do need to create the conditions for better answers to emerge. That means setting direction, investing in people, learning from implementation, and ensuring that AI integration serves public education goals rather than simply reacting to technological change. With stronger coordination and investment, states have an opportunity to help districts navigate AI responsibly and equitably. Without it, AI risks becoming another force that widens gaps rather than helping to close them.

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The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a research organization at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, where transformative ideas are rigorously examined and tested, and research informs action. Since 1993, we have remained independent of any single ideology while holding firmly to our core belief that public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions.

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