

# Early Adopter Districts and AI: Strategic Pathways, System Strain, and the Conditions for Amplifying Transformation

MAY 2026

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## Introduction

School districts are ground zero for AI adoption in education. With limited federal guidance<sup>1</sup> and uneven state action,<sup>2</sup> districts are making consequential decisions largely on their own: purchasing tools, training teachers, setting policies for student use, and trying to figure out what responsible and effective AI adoption looks like. They're making these decisions about adoption, governance, and integration in real time, under pressure, and without a clear roadmap. What districts decide now will impact whether AI catalyzes more meaningful schooling or simply reinforces the status quo.

While many districts still wait on the sidelines, dabble with emerging tools, or try to restrict student use, a subset of districts and charter management organizations have taken a more proactive approach. CRPE has been studying these "Early Adopters" to understand what the most advanced districts are learning from their AI adoption efforts. In our 2025 report,<sup>3</sup> we found that most Early Adopters were still in the earliest stages, experimenting with tools but often without clear strategic goals, governance structures, or a coherent vision for how AI connected to their broader instructional priorities.

This brief examines how Early Adopter districts are integrating AI and whether AI is catalyzing system transformation or more innovative approaches to schooling through three central questions.

1 Sarah D. Sparks, "[Teachers Want 'Guardrails and Guidance' on AI Use, Experts Tell Congress](#)," Education Week, February 24, 2026.

2 Dana Harrison and Bree Dusseault, "[States and AI: An Early Look at How Early Adopters Are Approaching AI in Education](#)," Center on Reinventing Public Education, March 2026.

3 Bree Dusseault, Maddy Sims, and Michael Berardino, "[AI Early Adopter Districts: The Promises and Challenges of Using AI to Transform Education](#)," Center on Reinventing Public Education, August 2025.

1. **How are Early Adopter districts strategically aligning AI to their broader instructional goals?**
2. **What challenges are emerging as districts attempt to scale AI use?**
3. **What external conditions enable districts to pursue system transformation<sup>4</sup> and innovation?<sup>5</sup>**

Our analysis reveals that:

- **Early Adopters are becoming increasingly sophisticated in how they use AI. They are approaching it as a systemic improvement strategy while using the technology to achieve distinct, strategic goals.** However, this use has not been in the service of progressively more transformative projects, visions, or agendas. Instead, most Early Adopters are using AI to improve existing instructional and learning models within traditional definitions of student success. A smaller subset is leveraging AI to amplify preexisting transformation efforts that aim to change how learning is structured. Only a small number are using AI to explore more fundamental school redesign.
- **Across all these strategic pathways, however, AI adoption is exposing the limits of traditional change management processes.** AI's speed, ubiquity, and cross-cutting nature are, in fact, amplifying long-standing system weaknesses, particularly around evaluating the impact of initiatives and tools, community and family engagement, and learning from pilots.
- **At the same time, the current AI support infrastructure is built to reinforce the status quo, not transformation or innovation.** Networks, intermediaries, technical assistance providers, and peer districts play significant roles in helping districts implement AI within existing models, and states are more often seen as providers of foundational guardrails rather than as innovation partners. As a result, districts seeking to accelerate reform efforts or explore fundamentally new models of schooling are largely left to shoulder that work themselves.

Rather than treating AI adoption as a linear progression from novice-level to expert-level, this study examines how districts are embedding AI into existing instructional visions and reform efforts and what conditions may be needed to support more foundational systemic change over time.

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4 We define “transformation” as systemic efforts that aim to change underlying learning models and outcomes. Examples include mastery-based learning, competency-based learning, project-based learning, and academy or pathway models.

5 We define “innovation” as efforts to explore new models of teaching, learning, and school design. Unlike transformation, these efforts do not have a fully defined destination or an established evidence base; they are inherently experimental.

## Methods

This study draws on survey and interview data collected from 45 Early Adopter school districts between October and November 2025. Through desk research and referrals, the research team initially identified 119 districts as Early Adopters based on evidence of active systemwide AI experimentation, formal governance structures, or a system-level AI strategy; 45 districts (38%) responded to the survey. Among those respondents, we identified 28 districts as the furthest along in their AI adoption for follow-up interviews; 14 ultimately participated.

The sample varies in size, demographics, geography (with districts from 20 states), and governance structure, including both traditional school districts and Charter Management Organizations (CMOs). This study builds upon CRPE's 2025 AI Early Adopter study, with an overlapping but not identical sample (22 districts appeared in both studies).

Data collection included three components:

1. A structured survey of district leaders who are overseeing AI adoption (n = 45) that examined goals for AI use, structures supporting adoption, and enabling or constraining factors;
2. Semi-structured group interviews with district leaders from select districts (14 districts, 29 participants), including CTOs, AI leads, superintendents, and instructional leaders, focused on AI strategy, alignment to instructional goals, governance, and implementation challenges; and
3. Review of publicly available documents, including AI policies, guidance documents, and strategic plans.

We coded data inductively and iteratively to identify patterns across districts. Using survey responses, public documents, and interview data, we organized districts into a typology that reflects the current level of AI implementation, alignment with strategic goals, and adoption objectives. This typology builds on our 2025 typology (which included “Dabbler,” “Emerging User,” “System Changer,” and “Reimaginer”) with the addition of a new “System Improver” category, added to capture the large number of Early Adopters now using AI for system improvement within traditional instructional models. Findings represent cross-district patterns rather than evaluations of individual systems.

The study has several limitations. The sample captures a large group of AI Early Adopter school systems, but is not intended to be representative or exhaustive of all Early Adopter districts. Findings should not be generalized to all districts working on AI adoption. Group interviews primarily included technology and AI leaders, which may limit insight into how AI intersects with instructional strategy; relatively few superintendents participated, constraining our view of how AI fits into broader district leadership priorities. Taken together, these factors may skew findings toward overrepresentation of the depth embeddedness of AI adoption in participating systems. Additionally, cross-year comparisons in the typology should be interpreted with caution, as the 2025 and 2026 samples overlap but are not identical.

## Findings

### Finding 1. Early Adopters are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their use of AI, approaching it as a systemic improvement strategy and using it to achieve distinct strategic goals.

Technological adoption frameworks often suggest that increased comfort with a new technology leads to progressively more innovative uses (e.g., Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, and Redefinition (SAMR); Technology, Pedagogy, and Content Knowledge (TPACK)).<sup>6</sup> However, these frameworks apply to individual educator use, and it is less clear whether this pattern holds true for complex school systems.

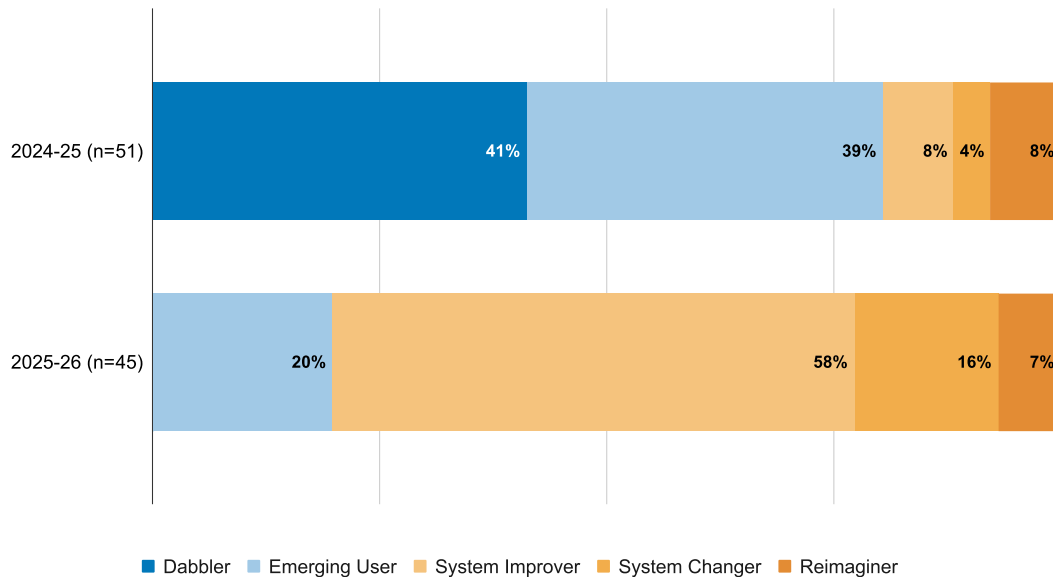
In CRPE’s 2025 research on AI Early Adopters, we found that most participating Early Adopter districts were in only the initial stages of AI adoption. They were experimenting with and piloting AI tools, but often without clearly articulated strategic goals. While our 2026 sample is not identical to our sample from 2025 (approximately half appear in both studies), we found that the overall profiles of Early Adopters in the current study have moved beyond “Dabblers” or “Emergent Users” toward more coordinated, system-level adoption. However, they do not progress along a linear pathway towards transformative change. Their AI use looks more like a typology wherein implementation aligns to different strategic goals: “System Improvers,” “System Changers,” and “Reimaginers” (see Table 1 below and Figure 1 on next page).

**Table 1. Description of AI Adoption Categories**

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.

6 Tyson Kendon and Lorelei Anselmo, “SAMR and TPACK: Two Models to Help with Integrating Technology Into Your Courses,” Taylor Institute for Teaching and Learning, August 2022.

**Figure 1. Distribution of AI Early Adopters by Current Strategic Pathway, SY25 and SY26**



**System Improver (58%):** The majority of Early Adopter districts in this study are using AI to improve their existing instructional and learning models, while continuing to operate within the traditional definitions of student success (e.g., test scores, graduation rates, college enrollment rates). Their goals for AI adoption primarily focus on improving teacher effectiveness and efficiency, increasing operational efficiency, expanding students’ access to rigorous content, and supporting students who are below grade level. While these districts often have a clear instructional vision, it is oriented toward helping more students succeed within the current model rather than redesigning that model. As a result, AI is typically layered onto existing structures, such as age-based grade levels, seat-time progression, and conventional assessment systems.

For example, these districts described AI-enabled tutoring, coaching, and learning supports that have resulted in improved test scores during summer school and in pilot classrooms, or lesson planning tools that reduce weekly planning time by more than five hours (according to teachers). One Chief Technology Officer explained their district’s goals for AI adoption:

*“From an instructional point of view, we really want to be able to provide teachers with tools that help them in lots of different ways. One of the big ones being freeing up time, giving them back time to be able to focus on [differentiated instruction] or whatever it is that they are focusing on at that particular moment in time, to provide them with tools and training for them to effectively be able to reduce the amount of time they do on things that are just more routine and time takers that these tools can help expedite.”*

**System Changers (16%):** A smaller group of districts is using AI to help shift their underlying learning model, often focusing on nontraditional measures of student success such as competencies or durable skills. These efforts are typically aligned with ongoing reforms, including mastery- or competency-based learning, project-based

learning, or academy models. In these systems, AI serves as an amplifier of a preexisting instructional vision, accelerating and extending work that was already underway rather than initiating new reform.

One district on this pathway is advancing mastery-based learning, an approach that requires teachers to fundamentally shift how they think about instruction, learning progressions, assessments, and grading. According to the Superintendent:

*“You move at the pace of the teachers understanding their standards, and move at the pace of the teachers understanding student performance meeting standards... We’re about a year and a half ahead of [our original implementation] schedule, and I think their organic AI use is what put it a year and a half further down the schedule.”*

**Reimaginer (~7%):** A small number of districts are using AI to rethink what and how students learn, as well as how to allocate resources. These districts are experimenting with new learning and school models—often in response to emerging AI capabilities—by rethinking staffing, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. While they have not yet settled on a single definition of student success or fully articulated new learning goals, they are actively testing alternative structures that may reshape how they organize learning. These efforts remain in early stages and typically operate alongside traditional models within the same system.

A Director of AI and Technology described how AI is pushing the way they approach instruction:

*“[We have seen] AI being a motivator for school systems to realize that outdated modes of instruction are no longer relevant... It’s a [moment of reckoning] where the economic forces are too strong, and if a kid has this tool and the skills, the sky is the limit. School systems [that work] to make learning better, and [have] student learning be first and foremost, would be ideal.”*

Importantly, these three pathways reflect differences in strategic intent rather than levels of technological sophistication, as leaders within each pathway are using AI in increasingly complex and integrated ways.

While these pathways reflect intentional strategic choices, they also reveal a clear pattern: the majority of Early Adopters are not using AI to pursue fundamentally new models of teaching and learning. Even among districts with strong technical capacity, relatively few are attempting to redesign core structures such as assessment, pacing, or staffing. This suggests that increased fluency with AI does not, on its own, lead to more innovative or transformative use. In other words, increased AI fluency is not a substitute for educational vision.

## **Finding 2. AI Adoption is exposing the limits of traditional change management.**

While these pathways clarify district intent, they do not insulate systems from implementation strain. Across pathways, districts are applying what we refer to as traditional change management approaches. In this dominant model, districts introduce initiatives through pilots or phased roll-outs, provide professional development, monitor

early implementation, and scale gradually once they establish buy-in and evidence of effectiveness.<sup>7</sup>

AI intensifies underdeveloped aspects of this model while introducing new pressures. Even prior to generative AI, districts struggled to engage families meaningfully, learn systematically from pilot efforts, and evaluate instructional initiatives using measures beyond test scores. AI amplifies these challenges. Unlike bounded initiatives seeking to improve specific instructional issues, AI is embedded across workflows, increasingly integrated across platforms, and evolving rapidly. Students are also experimenting with AI independently, while parents and guardians form their own opinions of the technology.

Districts described several implementation gaps that are emerging from taking a traditional approach to change management:

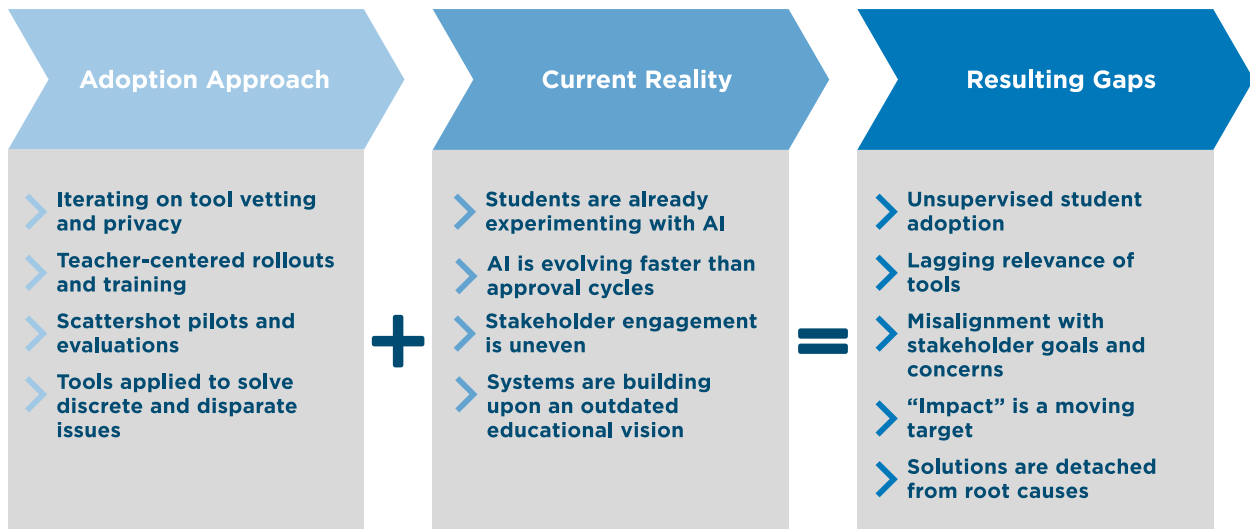
- **“Teachers first, students later” sequencing.** Districts are focusing first on teacher training and buy-in before moving to student adoption. Yet students are already experimenting with AI inside and outside of school, leaving districts with a narrow slice of what they can shape when it comes to how students engage with the technology. A Director of Innovation noted that students already have a different relationship with AI than the one schools are trying to introduce: “[*Students say things like*] ‘Oh yeah, I’m using AI. It’s generating my Snapchat captions.’” Districts, she argued, need to start from that reality rather than treat students as blank slates.
- **Delayed family engagement.** Many districts are prioritizing internal AI literacy among educators and administrators before engaging parents. Meanwhile, families are forming their own views about AI’s role in schooling. In some cases, this sequencing has led to parental pushback once initiatives become more visible.
- **Procurement lag.** Careful vetting of tools for safety, privacy, and cost effectiveness is necessary. However, AI tools evolve more quickly than procurement cycles, creating a persistent lag in which new features or improved tools emerge before previously vetted tools are even approved. One Chief Technology Officer shared, “*The rate of change for AI is exponential...because everything’s changing so quickly, it may be three or four months from now that we have to go back and revisit [our instructional plan] again. The tools are changing, the use is changing, the jobs are changing... everything is happening so fast.*”
- **Narrow evaluation approaches.** Districts recognize the need to assess AI’s impact, but most rely on usage data or narrow metrics such as comparing changes in standardized test scores. Leaders, particularly in districts pursuing broader innovation, acknowledge that these measures capture only a fraction of AI’s potential effects, especially as AI becomes embedded across multiple platforms and workflows.

These gaps reflect limits of organizational capacity and coordination rather than a lack of intent. In response, some Early Adopters are experimenting with more agile approaches. One district is intentionally delaying formal policy decisions to allow teachers and students to stress test AI tools before locking in guardrails. Another has created structures that combine top-down coherence with bottom-up experimentation,

7 Anthony S. Bryk, Louis M. Gomez, Alicia Grunow, and Paul G. LeMahieu, *Learning to Improve: How America’s Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2015).

encouraging teacher innovation while elevating effective use cases across the system. A third has built a district-hosted AI environment that allows students and teachers to safely experiment with multiple tools, supporting AI literacy and enabling leaders to monitor usage patterns across platforms rather than evaluating each product individually.

**Figure 2. Traditional Change Management Approach and Resulting Implementation Gaps**



**Finding 3. The current AI support infrastructure is built to reinforce the status quo, not transformation or innovation.**

While the broader support infrastructure surrounding districts is effective at supporting AI adoption, our findings suggest that it is designed to reinforce the status quo rather than support the deeper work districts must undertake to either accelerate reform efforts or explore fundamentally new models of schooling. Districts that are using AI to pursue transformation, amplify ongoing reforms such as mastery-based or competency-based learning, undertake genuine innovation, or explore new models of teaching, learning, and school design all require support structures that extend beyond compliance, literacy, and tool integration. These structures must also include sustained leadership development, shared R&D infrastructure, and cross-district learning focused explicitly on instructional redesign.

Early Adopter districts consistently report that they rely on a network of external partners to support AI adoption. These include peer networks, innovation cohorts, technical assistance providers, and select education technology partners. Together, these actors help districts make sense of emerging technologies, manage risk, vet tools, and build basic implementation capacity. As one Director of Technology described:

*“Because we were on the front end of this, a lot of us are interconnected with a lot of organizations across the state that are also doing this AI work. And so we just have all these external sources that are also keeping us up to date on what’s happening.”*

However, most of this support is oriented toward ensuring responsible adoption and early implementation rather than enabling deeper transformation. Networks and technical assistance providers often focus on AI literacy, compliance, and tool integration, all of which are essential for helping districts move from experimentation to coordinated adoption within their existing strategic pathway. But these partner organizations are not equipped to help districts rethink instructional models, redesign assessment systems, or build the governance and leadership capacity required for more pioneering work.

Similarly, Early Adopters typically view state agencies as providers of guardrails rather than innovation partners. Districts are looking to states to clarify standards, compliance requirements, and responsible use policies. Yet districts rarely describe states as catalysts for instructional redesign. This means that districts seeking to move beyond improving practice and toward amplifying innovation often shoulder the burden of research and development themselves.

In the absence of a coordinated external system focused on transformation, districts attempting deeper change efforts rely heavily on internal leadership capacity. Where more transformative progress is occurring, districts tend to share several characteristics: leaders with a strong learning orientation and tolerance for experimentation, deep technical fluency among key staff, collaboration across instructional and technology departments, and a willingness to adapt governance structures to support iteration. In these contexts, external partners play a reinforcing role, but the primary driver of innovation remains internal alignment and leadership.

## Recommendations

### **Districts need a strong internal vision and an aligned external support system to pursue AI-enabled transformation.**

The findings in this study suggest that advancing AI-enabled transformation is not primarily a function of technical capacity or quality tools, but of alignment between a clear instructional vision, technical capacity within districts, and implementation supports provided by external partner organizations, cohorts, and vendors. Transformation requires districts and key actors to shape an intentional and informed change strategy. Yet change management remains a major barrier to transformation, and relatively few districts are using AI to think big about fundamentally redesigning their approach to teaching and learning. A support infrastructure focused on the status quo reinforces this tendency.

**For district leaders**, this means that AI adoption should begin with clarity of purpose. Leaders who are using AI to amplify system transformation efforts or explore new models are not simply adopting tools; they are aligning AI to a broader innovative instructional strategy. Leaders should:

- **Articulate the problem they are trying to solve**, clearly define how AI supports address that problem, and establish governance structures that allow for both coherence and experimentation.

- **Develop stronger evaluation approaches** that capture changes in instructional practice, student experience, and system design.
- **Invite parents, students, and other critical communities** to identify, co-design, and test new solutions to the priority problems they identify.

**For networks and technical assistance providers**, the findings suggest a need to expand beyond AI literacy and tool adoption toward supporting instructional redesign. While current supports are effective in helping districts move from experimentation to coordinated adoption, they are less equipped to help districts rethink core elements of schooling. Support organizations should:

- **Design district communities of practice** that focus not only on how to use AI, but on how to align it with broader reform goals and rigorous, relevant instructional visions.
- **Develop adequate expertise in AI or partnerships with AI expert organizations** to help districts pilot, assess, and evaluate instructional redesign strategies through the lens of effectiveness on student and teacher metrics.
- **Provide change management curriculum and coaching** that helps district leaders navigate the uncertainties that come with system-level change.
- **Consider districts' work as R&D:** document lessons learned, encourage “failing forward,” and consider that there may be new change management strategies necessary to manage through this moment.

**For state policymakers**, the opportunity lies in providing foundational infrastructure that reduces uncertainty without constraining local initiative. While states are less frequently positioned as innovation leaders in this domain, they can play a critical role in lowering structural barriers to responsible adoption. State leaders should:

- **Provide public, clear guardrails, AI literacy standards, and shared evaluation frameworks** to help districts manage risk while preserving space for experimentation.
- **Provide a “sandbox” for districts or individual schools** to explore and safely pilot AI with waivers from state accountability measures.
- **Explore vendor procurement support, negotiated pricing with select ed tech tools, and outcomes-based contract exemplars and guidance** to help districts manage cost and risk while accelerating responsible adoption.

**For funders and national organizations**, the findings point to the need for more coordinated and sustained investment in system-level change. Funding that focuses primarily on tools or short-term pilots may accelerate adoption but is unlikely to support lasting transformation. Instead, help districts move beyond isolated examples of innovation toward more scalable, empowered, and sustainable models. Funders can:

- **Invest in leadership development, cross-district learning, and shared research and development infrastructure** to help districts move beyond isolated examples of innovation toward more scalable and sustainable models.
- **Convene field leaders, district leaders, and ed tech leaders** to align on and design evidentiary needs and strategy.

- **Assemble a consortia of districts, states, and schools** that can influence and provide signals to the ed tech community.
- **Support thought leadership and advocacy** around policies that message and require transparency, quality, and safety.

While districts are leading AI adoption locally, meaningful innovation and system transformation will depend on more aligned support from networks, states, and funders that addresses responsible implementation as well as the conditions required for instructional redesign. Without this alignment, AI will continue to improve existing systems but fall short of enabling the deeper changes many districts are beginning to explore.

## Conclusion

Early Adopter districts are demonstrating meaningful progress in integrating AI throughout their systems, but progress does not guarantee transformation or innovation. Most Early Adopters are using AI to improve existing models, which is a valuable but limited ambition. A smaller group is using AI to accelerate reforms, and fewer still are exploring genuinely new models of schooling. Each pathway demands different leadership, different support, and a different definition of success.

Yet across all pathways, AI is exposing the limits of how districts manage change by compressing timelines, outpacing procurement, and arriving in students' hands before schools are ready to shape its use. The support infrastructure surrounding districts has not kept pace. Networks, technical assistance providers, states, and funders remain oriented toward responsible adoption rather than the deeper work of transformation or innovation. Moving from adoption to transformation or innovation will require not only district leadership but also coordinated support across networks, states, and partners.

The field has a choice: build the coordinated infrastructure this moment demands, or leave districts pursuing deeper transformation to navigate AI-enabled change largely on their own.

## Acknowledgments

We are deeply grateful to the pioneering districts and the interviewees who took time to share what’s happening in their school systems with us. Their candor was essential in developing this brief. We are also thankful for the support of the CRPE staff, including our research team, project manager, and communications and editorial team. This work was made possible through the generous support of Overdeck Family Foundation, Cinelli Family Foundation, and Walton Family Foundation. This brief reflects the views of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of our funders.

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