

A Case Study in Scaling Innovation: Mesquite Independent School District and AYO

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Mesquite Independent School District built AYO, a custom AI platform to support personalized learning. This case study follows how rising development costs, a fast-moving commercial AI market, and thin buy-in from the teachers and principals stalled the initiative, even before budget cuts forced the issue.

Background & Bold Idea

Mesquite Independent School District (MISD) is a large suburban school district located just outside of Dallas, Texas. The district currently includes 50 schools and enrolls 36,650 students—down from 38,400 at the start of this study. Ninety percent of MISD’s students are students of color, 80% are from low-income households, and 36% are English learners.

MISD was one of the first districts in the nation to lead on integrating AI technology into schools. Alongside an external developer, they created AYO, an AI-enabled tool that compiles and synthesizes student-level data into one personalized learning tool. MISD sought to expand AYO to include a tool for tracking student mental health and well-being, a communication platform to connect schools and families, a lesson-planning tool for teachers, a resource for tracking school club activities, and a module to support student goal setting (see Table 1 below for a list of AYO functions). This was a districtwide effort, but school-level participation was initially optional: principals had discretion over which features their school adopted. One feature, a student goal-setting module, was adopted districtwide for all third graders.

Case Summary

MISD made real progress in developing new AYO functionality, but the district was never able to develop features that addressed the problems principals and teachers most needed to solve. AYO also fell short of achieving its initial purpose—to provide AI-supported personalized learning—and this gap became more pronounced as other AI tools in the market surpassed AYO’s capabilities. Most school-level staff still struggle to understand what AYO does or how to use it, and adoption remains sparse. Combined with limited resources to sustain ongoing software development, these challenges ultimately stalled AYO. The district is now pivoting toward new AI endeavors.

This case draws on 55 interviews with central office leaders, principals, teachers, and external coaches conducted between June 2023 and June 2026, six site observations, and implementation data supplied by MISD.

Table 1. Description of Key AYO Functions

Personalized Learning	Parent Communication	Social and Emotional Learning	Student Extracurriculars	Lesson Planning
Provides personalized ideas for learning to students based on interests and passions* A “portfolio” feature documents students’ work (e.g., resumes, schoolwork) all in one place* Student-centered goal-setting feature	Communication platform for teachers to share news with and directly message students/families (“Family Feed”)	Daily mood check-ins for students to communicate (“Mood Meter”) Signals to the counseling staff when a student wants to check in directly	Categorizes clubs at each school (“Club Hub”) Includes a way for teachers to communicate announcements about club-related news and events	Utilizes generative AI models to create materials for lessons in alignment with state standards (e.g., KWL charts)

**While AYO launched with these features, they were not prioritized during scaling*

How did AYO evolve from 2020 to 2026?

2019-20

First Launch

MISD rolled out AYO districtwide at the height of pandemic-era schooling. This original iteration of AYO sought to create a “truly student-centered learning environment” through an adaptable curriculum, an expanded and embedded social-emotional learning program, leadership development pathways, and training for educators. It was created by then-Superintendent Dr. David Vrooland, in partnership with Google. The rollout drew protest from teachers and families across the district over data privacy concerns, and the initiative struggled to gain traction.

2023-24

Relaunch and pilot phase

MISD participated in the first phase of our study. During the pilot, MISD leaders pivoted away from a one-size -fits-all approach and strategically scaled back implementation to a pilot of five schools. This relaunch also marked a shift in how AYO was developed: the Technology & Innovation team began collaborating with MISD’s Counseling department and Family and Community Engagement team, and continued their partnership with the Teaching & Learning team, to design AYO tools, including the Mood Meter, Club Hub, and Leadership Attributes framework. Instructional Technology Coaches (ITCs) played an instrumental role in supporting this piloting and early scaling.

2024-25

Scaling Up Family Feed

MISD joined the second, scaling-up phase of our study. During this phase, a sharp price increase from MISD’s family communication platform vendor prompted the district to build a communication platform directly into AYO, called Family Feed. The district set a districtwide expectation that all schools use Family Feed, prioritizing it above all of AYO’s other features. The early rollout was rocky. Teachers and families struggled to download the app and create accounts, and the tool performed markedly worse than the communication platform it replaced. As a result, usage was low, and many teachers admitted they abandoned Family Feed shortly after launch, returning to free versions of other communication tools.

Meanwhile, budget cuts hit the AYO initiative hard. The district eliminated ITC positions and reassigned roughly half of the ITCs to school-level coaching roles. The budget crisis also sharply limited the funding available for AYO’s continued development.



2025-26

Scaling Up “Learning to Lead”

The district rolled out a new AYO function to all third-grade classrooms to support a student goal-setting process. Teachers used a lesson plan developed by the Teaching & Learning department, then had students enter their goals into AYO to track over time. This rollout was described by district staff as the “smoothest yet,” largely because of the strength of the supporting instructional materials. Even so, AYO logins remained far below the district’s full third-grade population—many teachers reported that tool use was optional, and they had chosen to have students track their goals on paper instead.

2026-27

Pivot Away From AYO.

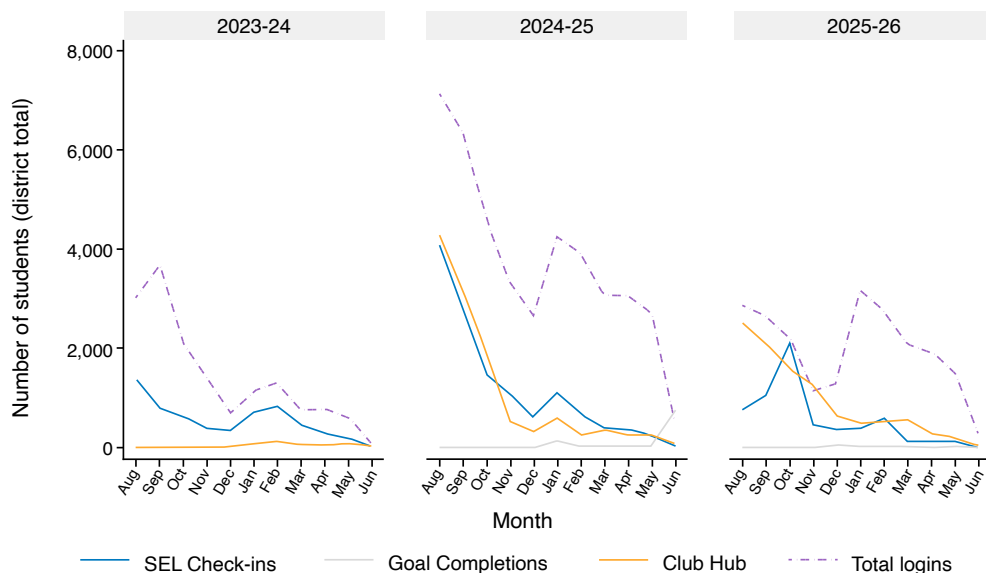
Facing both the budget crisis and persistently low usage, the district halted further development of AYO at the end of the 2025-26 school year. AYO remains available for staff to use if they choose, but the district is no longer providing ongoing support or development. MISD is now working to build a districtwide AI framework—something it lacked throughout AYO’s launch and pilot phases—that will outline ethical use, AI literacy, and instructional integration, which may lay the groundwork for future AI-related initiatives.

AYO Scaling Progress: In-Depth Assessment

To assess MISD's progress scaling AYO, we examined the same four dimensions of scale referenced in the main report (see the Appendix in the [main report](#) for more details): spread, depth, sustainability, and shift in ownership.

Spread: Low-Medium. AYO usage peaked in 2024-25 when the district rolled out Family Feed, AYO's family communication feature, but usage has since dropped off. Certain features saw meaningful uptake within the schools that piloted them, but overall adoption across the district never took hold (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Total number of students logging into AYO by Feature, SY2023-24 - SY2025-26



"Total logins" includes students' use of additional AYO features not shown in this figure.

Depth: Low. Most AYO features, used on their own or without clear schoolwide direction, had limited capacity to change instructional practice. With one exception, few teachers reported that AYO changed how they taught. That exception was the third-grade goal-setting pilot, which teachers and principals reported having some positive effect on instructional practice—but primarily through the lessons themselves, rather than through teachers' use of the AYO platform to track student goals and progress.

Ownership: Low-Medium. Ownership of AYO remained concentrated with executive leadership throughout the study; most school-level staff never developed a comparable sense of ownership over the tool. Within the central office, MISD's Technology & Innovation department consistently exhibited the highest level of ownership, working with AYO's third-party developers, building out staff trainings, and deploying Instructional Technology Coaches (ITCs) to support school-level adoption. ITCs' own ownership of the work varied. The Teaching & Learning department also supported AYO by developing the third-grade goal-setting lessons

and Portrait of a Graduate competencies embedded in the tool. At the school level, early pilot principals initially saw AYO as a way to advance specific goals for their schools. But momentum toward fully integrating AYO stalled when the district shifted AYO's focus to a parent-facing communication function called Family Feed. By the end of the 2025-26 school year, most school-level staff in pilot sites remained unaware of, or in some cases resistant to, some or all AYO features.

Sustainability: Low. A district budget shortfall has stalled further progress on AYO. ITCs have played a central role in establishing and sustaining AYO in schools by training staff on how to use the platform, but most ITC positions will be eliminated or converted into more traditional Instructional Coaching positions for the 2026-27 school year due to sizable budget cuts. This news was demoralizing to staff at the close of the 2025-26 school year, and it will limit the district's coaching capacity for any future efforts to scale AYO. At the same time, rapid advancements in AI technology have introduced a wave of new mass-market tools and vendors, changing the calculus behind maintaining a custom, in-house platform. Emerging tools are developing more quickly and offer more features than MISD can develop in-house. MISD has secured a vendor to maintain AYO in its current form, but further development of the tool has stalled.

What Helped and Hindered Piloting and Scaling AYO

What Helped

- **Leadership buy-in.** Sustained guidance from the superintendent and key central office leaders helped keep AYO a district priority, ensuring continuous attention and enabling its ongoing development.
- **Concentrated support.** Instructional Technology Coaches played a central role in providing professional development around AYO. The district also dedicated real resources, in particular staff time, to gathering and incorporating stakeholder feedback into the tool's development.
- **An iterative learning cycle.** Rather than pushing for large-scale implementation from the start, MISD strategically pulled back to generate proof points within a smaller subset of schools and classrooms. Over time, the district used what it learned to refine its piloting approach around more specific, targeted goals.

What Hindered

- **Unclear instructional vision.** While central office leaders understood AYO's overall vision and goals, that understanding never fully reached schools. As a result, AYO was widely perceived as an add-on rather than a solution to problems educators were actually facing in their classrooms.
- **A competing AI market and high software development costs.** Rapid advancement in generative AI and a growing field of competing ed tech vendors created a market that MISD could not realistically keep pace with as a public education agency. Commercial vendors can develop and iterate tools more

quickly than an in-house team operating within public-sector constraints and budgets.

- **Lack of buy-in.** Even as a working product, AYO faced the recurring challenge of overcoming staff's preconceived notions about the tool, particularly when it didn't offer an immediate, visible benefit and features shifted year to year. Beyond initial opt-in participation, there was little connection to core problems that would incentivize schools to fully embrace AYO, and school-level staff buy-in never fully materialized.
- **State policy.** State-level consent restrictions in Texas SB12 further stalled AYO's momentum. This halted use of the tool's Mood Meter function during the 2025-26 school year, since the district did not have a way to gather parents' consent.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

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