CRPE
REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation
Arizona State University

States and AI: An Early Look at How States Are Approaching AI in Education

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Introduction

Educators at all levels are grappling with how to address AI's risks and benefits. States have a critical role to play, particularly in the absence of clear federal policy. How are states playing this role, and what actions are they taking? A new database from CRPE provides insight.

For the last three years, CRPE has been studying and reporting on AI Early Adopter school districts to learn from their experiences. In early 2024, CRPE released an analysis of AI guidance issued by two states at that time.

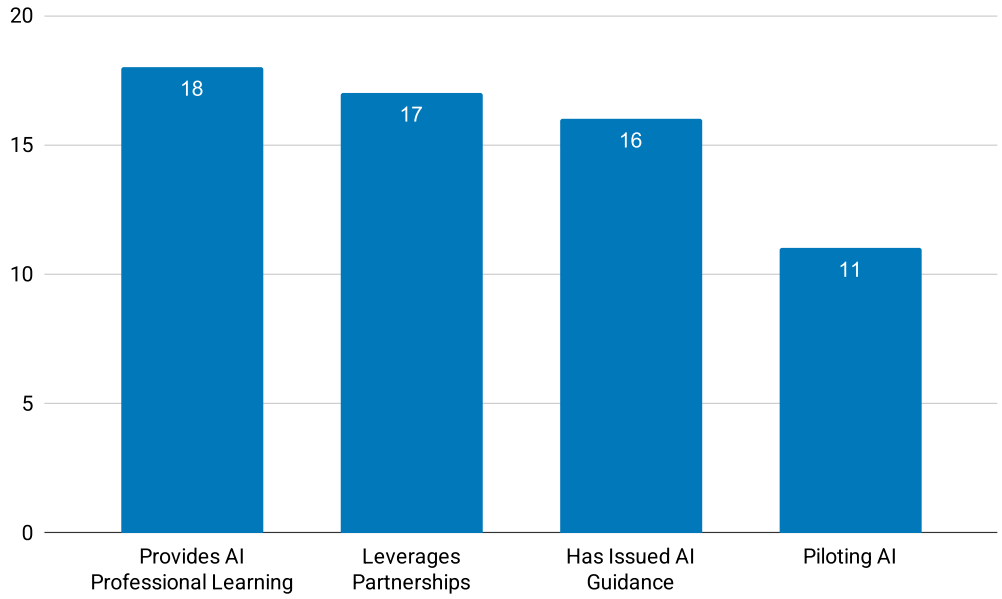
In the fall of 2025, we launched a new study on AI Early Adopter states to learn how they are approaching AI adoption and integration. Now, we are releasing a database of Early Adopter state actions on AI, alongside preliminary analysis. The database compiles publicly available information on how 20 early adopter states are exploring AI integration and adoption in K-12 education.[1]

This State AI Early Adopter database includes information ranging from the AI guidance issued by states to relevant legislation and executive orders issued in the past two years (2024 and 2025), to which professional development or pilot programs are in place, and more. Users of the database can choose to learn more about specific state actions, compare actions across states, and identify potential models for partnerships, professional development, or pilot programs to apply in their own context.

1 The database compiles publicly available information captured November 2025 through January 2026 on how 20 Early Adopter states are exploring AI integration and adoption in K-12 education. States were recommended by experts in the field (state and national AI educational experts, intermediary organizations, and advocates) during interviews conducted in the fall of 2025, or included because they took some form of action to address and/or integrate AI into their state educational priorities. Our research team also considered geography and political variety. We drew on interviews with field leaders and our AI Early Adopter School District findings to create a schema of potential AI-related actions states might take. We then reviewed and conducted thorough research on publicly available information on recommended states, updated our schema, and cataloged findings into our State AI Early Adopter Database. The database lists the sources and search terms used for each field. The database is not evaluative or meant to be an exhaustive account of all early actions and state AI adoption efforts.

In general, these early adopter states are—at this point—taking a very cautious approach to regulation, focusing more on building educator capacity and piloting than on large-scale regulation or tool adoption. Of the 20 states we examined, they commonly provide professional learning opportunities (18 of 20), leverage partnerships to support AI goals (17 of 20), issue guidance (16 of 20), and pilot AI strategies or tools (11 of 20). This caution towards moving beyond guidance may reflect uncertainty and a lack of legislative direction on how best to regulate AI in education in this rapidly evolving policy landscape.

Figure 1. State AI Early Adopter Strategies, 2025-26



Source: CRPE 2025-26 State AI Early Adopter Database (n = 20 states).

This database represents our initial, non-evaluative scan of the state AI integration landscape. It offers a snapshot of how 20 states are approaching AI, surfacing emerging patterns, areas of convergence and divergence, and where states are learning through experimentation. It is not intended to rank states or prescribe an approach, but to document how they are navigating AI amid uncertainty and capacity constraints. As of early 2026, we are currently collecting additional data through a national survey and focus groups with SEA leaders and partners. We aim to share deeper analyses on the challenges states hope AI can help solve and what helps (or hinders) their progress later this year.

Flexibility over Directives

These states appear to be using guidance to signal priorities while not positioning themselves as enforcers, relying on a "local control" approach to AI decision-making. Sixteen of 20 have issued AI guidance, all of which is non-binding, and many are

updating guidance regularly.[2] For example, since publishing guidance in May 2024, Arizona has issued three updates. North Carolina, which first released guidance in January 2024, has issued 20 updates in the two years since. This approach allows early adopter states to adapt, revisit, and update guidance as implementation and AI technologies progress.

State legislatures are also getting involved. In 19 of the 20 states (95%) in the database, legislatures introduced at least one AI-related bill in 2024 or 2025 that involved K-12 education and/or impacted the SEA. Examples include California's SB 1288 (effective September 2024), which required the Superintendent of Public Instruction to convene a working group, develop guidance, and provide local education agencies (LEAs) with a model policy for the safe and effective use of AI that LEAs may choose whether or not to adopt. In Ohio, the legislature went a step further with HB 96 (effective October 2025), which not only required the SEA to develop a model policy on AI use in schools in December 2025 but also mandated that LEAs adopt their own AI policies by July 31, 2026.

Pilots and Professional Learning: Early Levers for Exploring AI

Most states' AI actions center on learning and prioritize educators. Almost all (18 of 20) of the states in our database have helped facilitate AI-related professional development opportunities (e.g., summits, webinars, workshops, courses, grant programs) to build educators' understanding of AI and how it can support teaching and learning. While the depth and quality of these opportunities vary significantly, states seem to consider professional learning and AI literacy key elements of AI adoption.

- California offers an AI Webinar Series called "Learning with AI, Learning about AI." The webinars feature subject-matter experts and educators sharing actionable guidance on AI fundamentals, ethical use, bias and safety, instructional integration, data privacy, and strategies for maximizing workflow.
- North Carolina offered a weekly webinar series on the responsible implementation of AI and AI Literacy. Educators who participated in 2024-25 were eligible to receive credit and a certificate of attendance, and all educators can access recorded webinars on demand.
- In Massachusetts, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has created modules, a webinar series, and a course with a certificate of completion to build AI literacy for educators. In addition, the Massachusetts Executive Office of Education launched Future Ready: AI in the Classroom, a professional development pilot to support 45 educators in bringing AI into their classrooms.

About half of the states in the database (11 of 20) have created pilot opportunities to support educators and test AI tools with students.

2 While this database provides links to state AI guidance documents, we have not yet analyzed the guidance content. For more information on state guidance trends, see The Learner Agency's What States Get Wrong In Their AI Education Guidance – And How They Can Fix It (January 2026); CRPE's New State AI Policies Released: Signs Point to Inconsistency and Fragmentation (March 2024), which finds inconsistency and fragmentation in state approaches; or Digital Promise's Review of Guidance from Seven States on AI in Education (Feb 2024), which finds that finds that states emphasize AI literacy, AI safety and privacy policies, and human-centered AI approaches

- Rhode Island partnered with Khan Academy to offer Khanmigo, an AI teaching assistant tool for educators and a study buddy for students, to all LEAs during the 2024-25 and 2025-26 school years at no cost.
- In Indiana, 112 schools serving over 45,000 students and employing nearly 2,500 teachers received a one-time competitive grant to pilot an AI-powered platform of their choice for the 2023-2024 school year. The Indiana Department of Education produced a final impact report and continued to support AI literacy building and adoption through other state-led grants.
- In Louisiana, the Department of Education's Board of Elementary and Secondary Education endorsed and funded pilots for three AI educational tools across the state—Amira, Zearn, and Khanmigo. The state measured and shared results on the impact of these efforts and is using this data to explore additional evidence-based programs and pilots for future use.

Strong Reliance on Partners to Advance AI

Most of the states in the database (17 of 20) are leveraging partnerships with institutions of higher education, industry, or nonprofits with AI expertise (such as aiEDU, TeachAI, AI for Education, ISTE, CoSN, Digital Promise, and AI4K12) to expand AI literacy and capacity. In some cases, partners have helped SEAs develop AI guidance, provide professional development, and design or implement pilot programs. For example:

- In Colorado, the Department of Education and the Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) have leveraged their partnership to develop and disseminate resources, provide workshops and professional development, and foster coherence across the education ecosystem. The state's Office of Economic Development and Trade is funding CEI's Elevate AI program, which aims to develop shared AI competency frameworks, provide professional development and certification for teachers, integrate AI learning into student experiences tied to career pathways, and support systems-level leadership and partnerships that prepare learners for AI-related jobs.
- In Arizona, the Department of Education (ADOE) was a member of a statewide team that developed AI guidance for Arizona schools. Partners at the Arizona Institute for Education and the Economy at Northern Arizona University publish and maintain the document. The ADOE is also a member of the AZ AI Alliance, a group of education organizations committed to the responsible, ethical, and effective implementation of AI in Arizona's schools.

Fairly Uniform AI Actions across Political Contexts

State-level political leadership does not appear to significantly influence the type of action the 20 states in the database have taken to address AI in K-12 education. Of these early adopter states, seven are in Democratic-leaning states (35%), eight are in Republican-leaning states (40%), and five are in states with divided political leadership (25%). States are pursuing strategies at similar rates regardless of political context (with the exception of state-supported AI pilots, where just one Democratic-leaning state, Rhode Island, is running a statewide AI initiative).

Table 1. Early Adopter State Actions

State Action	Democratic-Leaning States (7)	Republican-Leaning States (8)	Divided States (5)
Issuing guidance	86% (6)	63% (5)	100% (5)
Supporting professional learning	71% (5)	88% (7)	100% (5)
Offering pilot opportunities	14% (1)	75% (6)	80% (4)
Leveraging partnerships	71% (5)	63% (5)	80% (4)

Rethinking the State's Role in the Age of AI

In the absence of leadership at the federal level, states may have to step up as the stewards of AI policy in K–12 education. This will raise challenging questions about their legal authority, capacity, and expertise to guide and implement policy responsibility. Politics will likely impact some of the choices states make, especially as local and national political contexts shift and more state legislators take notice of AI use in education. During the 2025 legislative session, 53 bills were proposed on the use of AI in education across 21 states. In 2026, legislatures now face increasing tension between federal pushes for AI deregulation and growing local concern about AI's safety, potential misuses, and impact on the environment. Our interviews with state leaders will provide more insight into what political dynamics or factors are influencing their decisions.

While state-level stances on AI may reflect necessary flexibility for this moment, they may also reflect the lack of clarity states have about how AI will reshape aspects of K-12 education and what meaningful AI integration truly entails. Without clear direction and investment, gaps in infrastructure, access, and capacity could deepen, leaving some states and districts positioned to harness AI's benefits while others fall further behind.

The states included in our database are, by and large, attempting to influence district use of AI through guidance, training, and pilot opportunities. This is a reasonable starting point, but AI advances aren't abiding by school year calendars and review cycles, and managing the pace of change is a real challenge. Given that students and educators are already using AI tools and that the technology is evolving at a breakneck pace, states could lead with clearer expectations and more durable guidance models, provide resources to catalyze responsible exploration, and support districts in defining (and refining) what responsible AI use does and does not look like. They have an opportunity to clarify expectations, coordinate strategy, and absorb some of the policy and compliance load that districts are struggling to manage on their own. This helps address districts' requests for more AI support.

Below are some actions that states might consider, informed by actions taken by some of the early adopters in our database:

1. **Signal a clear commitment to AI.** State legislatures can establish an office of AI policy to oversee responsible AI use in the state, or set up statewide task forces to

bring partners together to examine AI issues more broadly. At least four states and the Department of Defense Education Activity fund AI-specific support positions.

2. **Set guardrails for procurement and data privacy.** States can negotiate and steward statewide contracts with edtech vendors that make AI tools more affordable, secure, and vetted for quality, as Utah has done. Clear procurement guidance and model privacy standards reduce risk, lower costs, and prevent every district from reinventing the wheel.

3. **Act as a trusted source of information.** AI products and promises of effectiveness are flooding districts. SEAs can curate and disseminate high-quality resources on AI tools, responsible use, and AI literacy to help leaders and educators separate signals from noise.

4. **Create space and incentives for responsible innovation.** If states want to develop creative, effective AI integration, they need to make room for experimentation. That could mean rethinking universal assessment requirements, funding pilot programs to test new impact measures, supporting AI-enabled data collection tools, and launching RFP processes that prioritize responsible, evidence-informed AI-powered learning design. States can also provide common evaluation frameworks so districts don't have to assess tools without any support.

5. **Level the technology playing field.** States must expand broadband partnerships, invest in infrastructure, and ensure that rural and under-resourced districts have access to emerging tools. Tool quality and computing power are part of an emerging access gap: students who lack access entirely or who only have access to free or early edition models and tools are not on the same playing field as those with access to frontier or paid models. Access has to be built into adoption from the start to prevent AI from inadvertently widening gaps. While none of the states in our database have fully solved for this, some are closer than others. In Massachusetts and North Dakota, more than 99% of residential locations have fixed broadband availability. In Utah and Washington, more than 95% of residents live in households with both a computer and a broadband subscription. All states could do more to reduce gaps in technology infrastructure and to support districts with technology modernization.

If this moment calls for states to evolve, we have to be honest about what that means. Most SEAs do not have the resources to staff dedicated AI teams. Few have the procurement, data science, or legal capacity to vet a rapidly changing marketplace independently. Without new investment and cross-sector support, expectations will outpace reality.

This is a moment for shared responsibility. Philanthropy can fund pilots and capacity-building. Researchers can develop research agendas and evaluation frameworks to help generate evidence about the AI strategies and tools that are (and are not) working. Technology partners can commit to transparency and responsible design. State and federal policymakers can create sustainable funding streams that align with innovation and infrastructure. If we want states to lead, then the ecosystem must back them.

CRPE is holding conversations with state leaders in 2026 and will report back with deeper insight into the practical, political, and capacity challenges shaping states' approach to AI in education.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a nonpartisan research organization at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. We rigorously examine and test transformative ideas, using our research to inform action. We are truth tellers who combine forward-thinking ideas with empirical rigor. Since 1993, we have been untethered to any one ideology but unwavering in a core belief: public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we work to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice that will drive the public education system to meet the needs of every student.

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