Putting AI Into Practice: Lessons from Educator-Led Pilots in California

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Introduction

Rachel Elliot,[1] a high school English teacher, joined Silicon Schools Fund's AI Exploration Community of Practice with a challenge many teachers know well: how to give students writing feedback while keeping up with the rest of her workload. Rachel chose to grapple with this time-consuming task during her participation in the AI Exploration Community of Practice, one of four cohort experiences run by Silicon Schools Fund. These cohorts help educators identify problems that AI could help solve, then support them in designing and piloting AI-enabled solutions. Researchers at the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) partnered with Silicon Schools Fund to understand teachers' experiences of their pilots, including what enabled or constrained pilot implementation, and perceived changes to practices as a result.

Rachel's pilot explored whether an AI writing feedback chatbot could provide useful comments on students' early drafts before she responded to their final work. But her pilot was about more than just efficiency: like many educators, Rachel was beginning to feel the need to understand how and when AI belonged in her classroom. The pilot gave her structured time, funding, and peer support to experiment with AI while thinking through larger questions about student learning, teacher-student relationships, and the tradeoffs of AI use.

After her pilot, Rachel reflected that her understanding of AI had become more nuanced. She learned that while AI could be a useful tool for improving efficiency and reducing workload, the chatbot did not motivate students to revise their writing. She also worried that automating feedback could displace an important educator-student interaction. "Everything that we get from AI is taking something else away," she shared. "So what is being taken away, and is it worth the trade?"

Rachel's pilot was one of more than 80 that took place during the 2025-26 Community of Practice.[2] Pilot participation included at least six interactive sessions to help educators and school leaders learn about AI tools, identify problems of practice, and then troubleshoot and design AI pilots. Some participants also opted in to more personalized coaching and support. Pilot leads then showcased their pilots and results at Demo Day, a one-day event at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, California.

2025-26 was CRPE's second year studying the Community of Practice. Our findings in this year's report echo many of our findings from 2025,[3] including the time and effort needed to implement AI solutions well, challenges in measuring pilots' results and impact, and educators' concerns about the impact of AI use on social relationships—particularly student-teacher relationships. This year's report also discusses some new trends, including shifting attitudes toward AI. Students are now much more skeptical about AI and hold negative beliefs about using it. This reflects a broader societal shift; public sentiment toward AI is becoming more negative,[4] even as the technology's capabilities rapidly advance, making it harder for teachers to navigate classroom use.

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1 Name has been changed.

2 Refer to Appendix A for more information about the Silicon Schools Fund's AI Exploration Community of Practice.

3 Waite et al., *What California Teachers Are Trying, Building, and Learning With AI*.

4 For more information, see Megan Brenan, "Gen Z's AI Adoption Steady, but Skepticism Climbs," Gallup, April 8, 2026; Noemi Dreksler et al., "What the Public Thinks about AI and the Implications for Governance," Brookings Institution, April 9, 2025; and Michelle Faverio and Emma Kikuchi, *Key Findings About How Americans View Artificial Intelligence*, Pew Research Center, March 12, 2026.

Despite these shifting perspectives, educators' pilot experiences remain necessary and valuable. The AI marketplace is full of products that are disconnected from the real challenges educators face. The Community of Practice allows teachers and school leaders the time and resources to successfully and creatively address those challenges. Experiential learning opportunities like these are particularly critical as AI becomes more deeply embedded in education, even while important questions about its appropriate uses, effects on teaching and learning, and potential unintended consequences remain unanswered.

To support students and educators as they navigate the implementation of AI-enabled projects or pilots in the future, schools and districts should:

- Consider building in time for structured testing and adaptation
- Understand that a period of learning and adaptation will precede returns on investment
- Develop usable evidence systems to build on and learn from initial explorations
- Always center trust and human relationships.

About Silicon Schools Fund's AI Exploration Community of Practice and This Study

Silicon Schools Fund, in partnership with aiEDU, brought together over 100 California teachers, school leaders, system leaders, and instructional and operational staff from 30 districts, charter management organizations, and private schools to form the AI Exploration Community of Practice. Their goals were to explore AI, identify problems of practice, and gain insight about how AI might support their work. Educators in the Community of Practice and engaged in one of four cohort tracks, which influenced the pilot goals they set and the training they received (see Appendix A for more details). Over the 2025-26 school year, Silicon Schools Fund ran approximately 80 pilots.

During the study, participants attended in-person and virtual sessions, explored AI tools and lessons, collaborated with peers, and designed pilots aligned with their roles, classrooms, schools, or student needs. Participants were encouraged to explore a variety of AI-enabled products, gather evidence, reflect on what worked and what did not, and make informed decisions about whether and how to use AI in their work.

CRPE partnered with Silicon Schools Fund to study the larger Community of Practice. We wanted to understand what problems educators were trying to solve with AI, what happened as pilots moved from idea to implementation, and what educators and students learned along the way (see Appendix B for more details on our methods). First, we analyzed educator-reported data from 66 pilots of the 80 pilots in across three of the four cohort tracks to understand how pilot leads planned to use AI, which tools they planned to use, and what evidence they planned to collect (see Appendix C for a more detailed analysis of the educator-reported data). Second, we observed Community of Practice meetings and final pilot presentations at a "Demo Day," which allowed us to see what Silicon Schools Fund's support looked like in real time and how educators measured success. Third, we conducted follow-up interviews with eight pilot leads. This helped us understand pilot implementation in greater depth, including how

pilots evolved, what challenges and support shaped the work, and what educators and their students learned during the process. The findings are intended to provide in-depth descriptions of themes across a select group of AI pilots, not to represent all pilots in the Community of Practice or AI implementation more broadly.

In this report, we also included a small number of results from pre- and post-participation surveys that Silicon Schools Fund designed and administered. In total, 119 participants completed the pre-survey and 80 completed the post-survey. Survey items varied by track; pre- and post- comparisons reported herein include only respondents who answered the same item on both surveys. All results are self-reported, and there was no comparison group. Survey results reported here are supplemental data, not part of CRPE's data collection.

Findings

Our findings suggest that early AI implementation pilots may first produce better judgment and clearer use cases before measurable improvements in practice. Pilot leads tested, adapted, questioned, and sometimes rejected those tools when their limitations became clear. This process required more time and labor than many anticipated, especially when pilots involved students directly. But this extra time also helped educators and students develop more nuanced views of the benefits and drawbacks of using AI.

1. AI Pilots required substantial labor, time, and resources to implement.

Across the eight selected pilots, moving from an idea to a pilot required substantial time and effort. Educators began their pilots by identifying instructional or operational problems that they thought AI could help them solve, often hoping to save time or make processes run more efficiently. In 21 out of 41 pilots[5] that were designed to solve classroom pain points, educators cited efficiency as at least one of their goals. But when they started to test and implement their AI-enabled solutions, they found that AI use was not a simple plug-and-play endeavor. Instead, implementing their pilots revealed gaps between what educators wanted AI to do and what it could actually do, which required work to overcome.

Rachel Elliot, who we introduced in the beginning of this brief, wanted her AI tool to provide students with writing feedback. She began by using PlayLab to build a custom app that would give her students interactive feedback. As she tested the app, however, she found that it did not work as she had hoped. She ultimately switched to another tool (Flint AI) that her school had already adopted, which offered writing feedback capabilities. Her experience illustrates the work involved in identifying, testing, refining, and, when necessary, switching tools to find or create a solution that meets educator and student needs.

5 These 41 pilots were part of the Teacher AI Exploration and Next Gen AI Leaders cohorts. For more details, see Appendix B.

Educators also mentioned spending more time than expected refining prompts or adjusting tools that were unreliable or inaccurate. One educator described the challenge of using tools that "aren't mainstream," explaining that she had to "plan it, prep it, roll it out," and troubleshoot on her own before the tool became easier to use. Several other educators described how training and testing their tools took more time than they had originally anticipated**.** One team of educators who developed a pilot to generate narrative student progress reports found that while their app was partially successful, "the debugging process took a lot longer than we anticipated." They also noted that time to tinker with the app was a constraint: "If we [had] more time to work on [the app] during the year, I think we would have had a lot more features in the analysis."

In addition to time spent refining the tools, pilots required extensive instructional planning. Even when the tools seemed aligned with their goals, educators still had to figure out how to integrate the tools into instruction, explain them to students, set guardrails, monitor use, and determine whether the tools actually supported their pilot goals. For example, one system leader wanted to increase student AI literacy, so she set out to develop classroom lessons on AI for other teachers in her school. The school's messaging around AI was primarily focused on cheating, and she wanted to introduce a more nuanced conversation. While she had a vision for the lessons, she recognized that she needed to take extra steps to ensure that teachers could easily integrate the lessons into their instruction, so she worked with a principal and other team members to achieve that end.

This finding is not new and echoes much of what we heard from last year's cohort participants. What is telling, however, is that even after another year of rapid technological development, educators still needed to invest substantial time and effort in adapting the tools for classroom use. This burden is particularly notable because AI tools are often presented as a way to save educators time and make their work more efficient. **While AI-enabled solutions may aim to lessen educator workloads in the long run, it should be expected that educators will need substantial time and support, at least in the short run, to translate technological capabilities into meaningful instructional practice.**

Pilot Snapshot: Automated Award Letter Analysis for College Planning

Year after year, Christopher Jackson of Da Vinci Schools saw families struggle to understand college financial aid offers and often made high-stakes decisions without a clear picture of long-term costs. His goal was not simply to automate paperwork, but to help students and parents compare offers, distinguish grants from loans, and make more informed decisions about college affordability. To address this challenge, he built an AI-powered tool that allows families to upload financial aid award letters. It standardizes what is in the letters, separates gift aid from loans, and produces a multi-year financial breakdown. By extracting and standardizing key financial information, this tool compares offers side by side, highlights debt risks, and projects costs over time.

Building the tool required sustained experimentation and refinement. Christopher revised prompts, tested them across models, and used technical errors to improve the application and his understanding. Just as importantly, he designed the tool around families' needs rather than the technology itself. "I took off my financial literacy teacher hat and just said, 'Pretend I don't know anything,'" he explained. This perspective led him to simplify the language, specify reading levels, and redesign outputs for families without financial expertise. By the end of the pilot, he reported that the tool was helping students and families understand financial aid information and access what they needed to make critical decisions about postsecondary education. The pilot produced both a useful resource and a clearer model for designing AI tools around the people they are intended to support.

Pilot Snapshot: Identifying Learning Gaps

The Engineer Lab School[6] team set out to build an AI-powered academic support app. They wanted it to function as a personalized tutor, adapt to each student's yearly academic schedule, and help teachers and advisors better understand student progress. The idea was practical: the tool could help students make better decisions about how to spend their time studying. But as the pilot progressed, the team realized that identifying a learning gap was only the first step. The challenge was designing the right kind of practice and support once that gap had been identified.

One pilot lead explained that the app could identify gaps, but its practice support was still "just like throwing different questions [at students]" and sometimes repeating them. The team recognized that effective practice requires thoughtful pedagogy, not just accurate diagnoses. Figuring out the appropriate tutoring dosage and instructional support that will keep students engaged is much more difficult, and the team plans to continue working on these challenges.

6 School name has been changed.

2. Students expressed concerns about AI use in the classroom, which teachers needed to consider when implementing student-facing tools.

When designing student-facing pilots, educators had to do all of the technical and instructional work described up until this point—and address students' concerns about AI. They had to help students understand why they were using AI, its limitations, and how to evaluate its outputs.

In four of the eight pilots we included in our in-depth analysis, educators reported that students were initially hesitant about the AI pilots. Students were concerned about AI's inaccuracy or unreliability, its negative impacts on the environment, individual creativity, and critical thinking, as well as issues related to intellectual property rights. One educator remarked, "I was just kind of surprised about how bad [my students] thought [AI] was. [They said things like] it can take over the world. It can make mistakes. I don't trust [it]. It can be unreliable. It might not understand me. They just had so many negative feelings about it."

Some educators also reported that their students associated AI use with cheating, either because they (or their peers) had gotten in trouble for using it or because their schools had emphasized anti-cheating guidelines. One educator surveyed students before a pilot about their views on AI: "[They said things like,] 'Don't cheat. You shouldn't use AI because it's bad for your learning.' I think they said that because they'd heard it from their teachers."

The students we interviewed echoed these concerns. As one student explained, "I've seen kids [and] the way they use AI, and it basically just replaces their brains."

Pilot leads addressed student concerns by carving out space for frequent and honest conversations about AI. One teacher said, "If I use AI to come up with something for them to use…I'll just talk to them about it … but I'm conscious and deliberate about it because of their [feelings towards AI]." A pilot lead shared, "I made sure to really explain to them ahead of using [the AI tool] what the purpose was, how I set it up, and taught them about the tool so they would feel more comfortable and confident using it."

Another educator used classroom debates to help students grapple with ethical and responsible AI use. Students began with different perspectives about AI, but by emphasizing that "there's no wrong or right answer [about AI use]," she created space for honest discussion and more nuanced thinking. She reflected, "As we went through these exercises, I think some students were like, 'Oh, no way it could be used. Or if we did use it, how could we use it to the betterment of humankind?' And so I felt like that was really powerful."

Educators reported that these conversations about the risks and opportunities of AI use were beneficial for their own learning and for building trust with their students. One pilot lead said, "I think the student feedback was the most helpful [for implementing the AI tool] because they saw it through a lens that we as teachers couldn't, and they could tell better how each student actually studies and uses certain AI tools."

However, these conversations also required a significant time commitment. Educators had to prepare for these discussions in advance and devote instructional time to them.

Pilot Snapshot: Students Questioning AI: Building Trust Through Transparency

Sally Hubbard, a sixth-grade math and science teacher at Westlake Charter School, returned to the Community of Practice after spending the previous year piloting OKO. This AI platform supports collaborative small-group learning by assigning standards-aligned problems and prompting peer discussion. During the 2025-26 Community of Practice, she wanted to understand how a new group of students experienced the tool. But after surveying her current students, she was "shocked at how skeptical and untrusting they were about AI." Some students had strong reactions when asked what they knew about AI, including:

> **"I know we have to destroy AI."**
>
> **"What if AI makes a robot army?"**
>
> **"I know it's going to take over the world."**

Still, Sally believed AI literacy was essential: "I want my students to get to know about AI and its pitfalls and positives because it's going to be their world." Rather than only teaching students how to use AI, she invited them to evaluate how AI was being used in their math class for discussions, assessments, and feedback. Through exit tickets and classroom conversations, students shared what felt useful, confusing, or concerning. Although they still had complicated feelings about AI, they began to understand its utility. She asked students, "How did Mrs. Hubbard benefit from this use of AI?" They responded:

> **"She doesn't have to waste her time and can see where we need help."**
>
> **"See what feedback comes for us so you can sort of tilt the lesson into helping us learn better."**

The process of AI use in class became collaborative. Hubbard recalled asking students, "Can you let me know what it looks like? Can you let me know if it's easy to understand?" Their feedback made her more deliberate about being transparent when she used AI and explaining why she was using it. It also strengthened trust: "The project allowed our relationship to build in a stronger way because they trusted that I was going to take what they said and do something about it."

One student who entered the pilot with a negative view of AI also described developing a more nuanced perspective. While his view was "still mostly negative," he could now see some benefits. "It helps us do tasks efficiently, helps us with processes that would otherwise be very slow and hard."

3. Educators reported that structured use helped students become more discerning of AI's limitations and comfortable with its applications.

Although many students were already familiar with AI, educators found that this familiarity did not necessarily translate into strong AI literacy skills or feeling comfortable and confident using AI in school.

Many educators reflected that students who engaged with AI throughout the course of the pilot developed AI literacy, particularly around the strengths and limitations of AI and appropriate usage. One teacher said,

> **"I think [the students] started to realize AI is just not this answer machine that you could just pop in a question and it always gives you the right answer. They have to verify it, too. And that helped them to realize what [AI is] really good for… They started to realize [AI is] really good for summarizing information, maybe rewording things, maybe helping them to explain things in an easier way… [but] coming up with your claims and backing [them] up really needs to be done by the humans."**

Educators reported increased confidence supporting student AI literacy development, too. In Silicon Schools Fund's survey, the share of teachers who felt very or extremely confident teaching students to critically evaluate and responsibly use AI rose from 20% to 80%.[7]

Educators also shared that many students who entered the pilot with strong negative feelings about AI developed more moderate or nuanced views as they became more familiar with the technology, while others became more sensitive around misuse and overreliance. One pilot lead said, "[The students went from]. 'It's going to take over the world [and] take our jobs' [to] 'AI is actually pretty cool, but it needs some guardrails here and there.'" Another pilot lead reported that after experimenting with AI throughout the pilot, their students' attitudes towards the technology changed. Some who were very against AI realized it was okay to use it in certain contexts, while others realized that they were over-relying on AI and needed to scale back their usage.

Many pilot leads also emphasized that cultivating AI literacy is not a linear process, and that student skepticism is a natural part of developing informed and responsible approaches to AI use. One educator discussed how students' criticism of AI made them more intentional about using it. "We had a couple [of] conversations about what they said and what they're feeling now. And it's making me make sure to be really deliberate with students in my honesty and transparency about whenever I use AI…I want to model that for them…I'm conscious and deliberate about it because of their responses."

7 N = 20 teachers in the Building AI Literacy With Your Students cohort who responded to both surveys.

Pilot Snapshot: AI as a Document to Interrogate

Robert Moreno,[8] a seventh-grade social studies teacher at Nairobi Public Schools, wanted students to learn how to use AI without becoming overly dependent on it. As he used AI more often, he found himself wondering, "Am I getting more dependent on AI? Am I verifying these things, or am I just trusting it because it could do all of these awesome things?" He saw the same risk for students. AI could be useful, but only if students understood its limits. "If we just let the machine do all of the thinking, we still need critical thinking skills," he said. "Is [AI] going to inhibit our critical thinking skills, not just for students, but for society at large?"

He built his pilot with document-based questions, a familiar social studies assignment: Students first completed the assignment without using AI assistance, then reflected on where they thought AI might be helpful, how accurate they believed it would be, and which tasks should remain human-led. The teacher then led a discussion about how AI works, where it can go wrong, and how bias or inaccuracy can appear in AI-generated responses. Only after students had done their own thinking did they use tools like ChatGPT or Gemini to revisit the assignment.

After the pilot, he noticed that students did not necessarily become more accepting of AI, but they became more discerning. "They started to realize AI is just not this answer machine," he explained. Students learned that AI could help summarize information or explain concepts, but that claims, evidence, and verification still required human judgment. As students gained more structured experience with AI, they became better able to recognize both its usefulness and its limitations.

8 Name of individual and school have been changed.

4. Educators and students raised concerns about how AI use could affect student-teacher relationships.

As we also noted in our 2025 report, the pilot process raised questions for many pilot leads and their students about how AI use might affect educator-student relationships. Even in pilots focused on administrative tasks, such as grading and feedback, educators questioned whether AI might replace important opportunities to understand their students, build trust, and strengthen the relationships that support learning. "Students need to interact with a teacher, interact with other students, have conversations, and learn through discourse," one school leader shared. "I worry about the potential uses of AI to replace that in a way that is not going to help students."

Students brought up similar concerns with their teachers. Some preferred feedback from their teachers over feedback from AI, and worried that AI could not fully understand their work. One teacher reported that a student had told her, "I don't want anyone to grade my paper except my teacher... [My teacher] would know that I wrote my answer in a different way, but the AI didn't know that."

To address concerns like these, one cohort member who was testing AI tools for math discussions, assessments, and grading solicited students' input and adjusted her AI use based on their feedback. This collaborative approach strengthened trust.

> **"I feel like the project allowed [my] relationship [with students] to build in a stronger way because they trusted that I was going to take what they said and do something about it or with it....I just want fluidity, I want trust, I want communication. And so having worked through the pilot with them, I think that that is supported."**

She also said her students recognized that AI gave her more time to work with them. "The students see that it's saving me time or freeing me up to work with other groups." In this case, involving students in the pilot and using AI to create more time for direct support strengthened rather than diminished their relationship.

Importantly, many of the concerns about teacher-student relationships that pilot leads discussed were hypothetical; none of the pilot leads described real harm to their relationship with students during their pilots. Nonetheless, many pilot leads raised early concerns about the unintended consequences of offloading human-centered tasks, particularly those that involve direct interactions with students. They suggested that as AI adoption advances, leaders should consider not only what the technology can do, but also what educators and students may lose as it assumes more and increasingly complex responsibilities.

It is also notable that while some concerns about AI diminished as educators and students became more familiar with it, concerns about its effects on student-teacher relationships seemed more persistent. Understanding these concerns more fully and determining how AI can be used without undermining these relationships will likely be essential to building trust and buy-in.

Pilot Snapshot: Intentional Feedback Without the Workload

Rachel Elliot, who we introduced at the start of this paper, entered the 2025-26 pilot wrestling with what AI might mean for teaching. She used Flint AI, a platform her school had already approved and her students were familiar with, to create two feedback chatbots. One supported students in analyzing Shakespearean scenes, helping them think through word choice, denotation, connotation, and emotional meaning. Another gave rough draft feedback in a format similar to peer editing, offering three revision suggestions.

Elliot found that her chatbots could generate useful comments, but some students received strong suggestions and still did not revise much. As she put it, "They did exactly what high schoolers do... You give them feedback on it, and they change nothing." Students who were still developing the skills to receive and respond to feedback did not benefit as much from the AI tools; they still needed more support and scaffolding from a human teacher.

The pilot also raised deeper concerns about trust. "There's something very personal about writing," she said. "Just putting it into an AI generator breaks some sort of English teacher-student relationship." Students were also mixed in their reactions. While some appreciated the support, she noted, "Nobody was like, 'The AI [feedback] is the best.'" Even when AI increases access to feedback, educators and students may still need to grapple with what happens to the human relationships that make feedback meaningful.

5. While educators reported mixed success, all found the pilot experience worthwhile because it helped them better understand when and how to use AI.

The goal of the Community of Practice was to implement and experiment with AI, not necessarily to launch a successful pilot. Still, we asked educators whether they felt they had achieved their own goals as a way to understand their perceptions of early outcomes better.

Pilot leads reported mixed results: five said they achieved their goals, two described mixed success, and one considered their pilot unsuccessful. One educator who developed an AI tutoring and student progress tool viewed their pilot as an early proof of concept rather than a finished success. When asked if they achieved what they had hoped for with the pilot, they said, "Short answer, no. Long answer, I feel like it did open up a bunch of opportunities in the future that we can work on, and we plan on working on it." Although the tool did not yet support advisors across subjects, it demonstrated that AI could identify learning gaps and generate useful student summaries.

Another pilot lead who sought to strengthen students' AI literacy and critical thinking skills reported more success. "A lot of [students] were not looking at [AI] with a critical lens.... A lot of them were just thinking of it as just this magic answer wizard and things like that ... They started to realize, hold on, if you use it too often, then it's actually going to hurt your thinking skills long-term, especially if you don't verify it."

While our sample was small, we observed (unsurprisingly) that pilots with more straightforward goals, like building AI knowledge and using AI to support decision-making, more often met their goals than pilots with more complex goals, like using AI to achieve reliable scoring, affect behavioral change, or create a scalable product. These patterns do not necessarily suggest that educators should not engage in more ambitious pilots, but rather that a longer timeline is likely necessary to achieve meaningful change and should be built into the pilot design. One pilot lead who developed a pilot to generate student progress reports reflected that while he found the pilot to be useful, he did not build in enough time to adequately assess student progress. He said, "[A] limitation that we would like to work on more in the future is the length of the students' use of the tool. We have them use it for like two or three days, but I don't think that's enough to see long-term progress... so that's another thing that we should work on."

This pattern highlights a broader lesson for the field: Meaningful transformation takes time. While it is important to monitor progress and build a stronger evidence base to guide decisions about AI, the outcomes measured should reflect realistic expectations for each stage of implementation. Technology may evolve quickly, but real and durable change requires time for educators and systems to learn, adapt their practices, build trust, and establish the conditions needed to use it effectively.

Regardless of whether pilot leads considered their pilot a success or not, all described the Community of Practice and designing their pilot as meaningful and valuable learning experiences. Silicon Schools Fund's survey suggests this held more broadly: 77 of 80 respondents would recommend their cohort to a colleague, and none disagreed. In the Teacher AI Exploration cohort, the share who agreed they had effective strategies for integrating AI into their classrooms rose from 61% to 91%.[9]

9 N = 23 educators in the Teacher AI Exploration cohort who responded to both surveys.

This result is similar to our findings from last year—educators said the Community of Practice provided them with a baseline level of knowledge about generative AI, increased their understanding of tool options and capabilities, and helped them refine their prompting skills. One of the pilot leads, Christopher Jackson, said,

> **"[Running the pilot] has shifted my idea of AI by really just increasing my knowledge of what I don't know… there's so much that I don't know, and that's what I love about learning. [Experimenting with AI] pushes me and it exposes me to new ideas, and it makes me uncomfortable… it [makes me] do things that I've never done in order to receive things that I never have."**

Another pilot lead who experimented with AI tools to grade interim assessments also noted,

> **"I think I'm more open to possibilities for AI tools that can make educators' lives easier… I think that if AI allows for that workload to be reduced for teachers, I think that that's a positive. I think my perspective [about AI use for teachers]…[is that] it could be a benefit and it's just a matter of figuring out how to make it more reliable and overcoming the technical hurdles."**

These reflections on individual growth throughout the Community of Practice underscore a few key reasons why educator-led pilots are important and where they offer value. Teachers in the pilot were able to tailor solutions to the specific needs of their classrooms, while also deepening their own AI literacy. Pilot leads left the Community of Practice with a clearer understanding of AI's capabilities, limitations, and conditions for successful implementation, emphasizing the importance of creating structured opportunities for educators to experiment thoughtfully with AI. Even when a pilot does not produce an immediately successful or scalable solution, the professional learning it generates is still a meaningful outcome.

Pilot Snapshot: How Accurate is AI-Powered Scoring?

Dr. Ruth Wei Chung, a school leader at Envision Education, wanted to help teachers spend less time grading and more time helping students improve their writing. She hoped AI could reliably score eighth-grade writing tasks, giving teachers more assessment support while producing results they could trust.

She evaluated three AI scoring tools: Enlighten AI, Co-Grader, and Gemini. She compared each tool's scores with pre-scored papers to see whether any model could score student writing accurately enough for classroom use. Gemini seemed most promising because she could train the tool by correcting scoring from the provided sample papers before asking the model to score independently.

However, all three AI tools scored between only 50% and 66% accuracy, which was not reliable enough for classroom use. Improving accuracy appeared possible, but it would require breaking the rubric into smaller indicators and investing significantly more time. She reflected that building a custom scoring tool would require teaching it "from the beginning, like a baby," an investment she could not realistically make alongside her other responsibilities. Not every AI pilot produces a ready-to-use solution; sometimes the value comes from clarifying what AI cannot yet do reliably.

Implications and Conclusion

Silicon Schools Fund's Community of Practice helped educators and students build their AI literacy, grapple with the potential unintended consequences of using AI in the classroom, and develop clearer views about where the technology could support teaching and learning and where it might fall short. The experience allowed some pilot leads to test an AI-enabled solution to a real problem and achieve promising results. But regardless of the results achieved, every interviewed pilot lead described their participation as valuable. The cohorts offered professional learning that participants viewed as beneficial and increasingly necessary amidst the changing professional demands of an AI-enabled world.

At the same time, the pilots suggested that early AI implementation may not produce immediate, measurable results. They also showed that implementing, testing, and refining AI-enabled approaches can require at least as much time and effort as selecting the tools themselves. If the AI-enabled instructional and administrative tools tested in these pilots are to support educators and students, schools must invest in the conditions needed to implement them purposefully and responsibly, with careful attention to what these tools may change or displace.

For AI to support educators and students, the field should:

- **Build structured testing and adaptation into AI implementation.** The pilots showed that educators could not determine whether an AI-enabled tool would work simply by selecting and adopting it. Educators needed opportunities to test it on authentic tasks, examine the quality of its outputs, gather students' feedback, adjust how it was used, and, in some cases, switch tools altogether. Schools and districts should prepare for these implementation realities by giving educators time for this work, establishing clear goals and guardrails for each pilot, and involving instructional and IT staff in troubleshooting. They should also create regular opportunities for educators and students to assess whether a tool is improving practice without undermining trust or valued human interactions. Ed tech developers can also support this process by making tools easier to configure and test on a limited scale, offering responsive technical support, and creating clear mechanisms for educators and students to influence product improvements.
- **Expect learning before returns on investment.** Since educators reported mixed success but still found the pilot process useful, early AI work should be seen as a learning process. School and system leaders should treat early pilots as opportunities to learn what works and what conditions are needed before scaling. Ed tech developers should avoid overpromising immediate impact—they should be transparent about what their tools can and cannot do and what support is necessary to use them effectively. They can also build structures for collecting and analyzing early data seamlessly into the platform itself.
- **Build usable evidence systems.** While early pilots may be more valuable as an exploratory learning experience, longer-term implementation efforts should generate evidence that advances the field. Widespread AI implementation will require better ways to understand what is working, for whom, and under what conditions. School and system leaders, as well as education researchers, should help educators collect practical evidence on feasibility, educator and student experiences, time savings, learning outcomes, and unintended consequences.

This will allow educators to assess progress and course correct if AI strategies are not meeting intended goals. Ed tech developers should also build measurement supports into their tools, including usage data, accuracy checks, feedback loops, and guidance on which outcomes their tools are designed to support.

- **Keep trust and human relationships at the center**. AI implementation should be about more than just increasing efficiency. Educators and students are worried about what might be lost if AI assumes tasks like giving feedback, grading, tutoring, or providing writing support. School and system leaders should ask which educator-student interactions might be affected by AI use, what should remain teacher-led, and how AI affects whether students feel known and supported. School and system leaders should also give educators and students decision-making power around AI tools, acceptable use, guardrails, and implementation. The American School Superintendents Association (2026) has released similar guidance—they convened 90 student senators representing 50 states, who drafted the Students First Act, the nation's first student-led AI policy for K-12 schools. While the act is not an official state or federal law, it demonstrates that students and educators alike want to preserve student-teacher relationships. Ed tech developers should design tools that keep educators in the loop, prioritize student feedback, simplify teacher use, and support the relationships at the center of learning.

AI's loftier potential outcomes, such as driving large-scale change across school systems or delivering fully personalized learning experiences, will not be realized immediately through educator-led pilots. But experiences like these are nonetheless a critical step toward building the AI knowledge and fluency that educators and students need to thrive in a rapidly changing world. Just as the pilots required time for implementation, testing, and refinement, so will these loftier goals—and experiences like the ones described in this study are the first building blocks toward one day achieving them.

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Appendix A: About Silicon Schools Fund's AI Exploration Community of Practice

Silicon Schools Fund's AI Exploration Community of Practice was designed to give educators space to explore AI, identify problems of practice, and make informed decisions about whether and how AI could support their work. In collaboration with aiEDU, Silicon Schools Fund brought together more than 100 California educators from 30 districts and charter management organizations, including teachers, school leaders, system leaders, and instructional and operational staff and leaders.

Educators participated in the 2025-26 Community of Practice and engaged in one of the following tracks, which influenced the pilot goals they set and the training they received.

Teacher AI Exploration supported educators in building foundational AI knowledge and piloting AI to support teaching and learning.

Building AI Literacy With Your Students focused on strategies to build AI literacy and readiness skills with middle and high school students.

School Leadership in the Age of AI supported school leaders in assessing school readiness and developing action plans for AI implementation, pilots, and guardrails.

Next Gen AI Leaders supported educators with prior AI experience, or those who had participated in the 2024-25cohort, in building the skills and confidence to support AI literacy at scale.

Participants received resources to support experimentation, including access to AI tools, cohort-based learning, and funding that could be used for stipends, release time, travel, or other pilot-related needs. Across all pilots, educators tested a range of AI uses and implemented lessons for students in their classrooms, then shared what they learned during Demo Day. Each pilot lead selected an AI-enabled tool that was appropriate for their use case; most pilot leads used generative AI tools, including ChatGPT, PlayLab, SUNO, Deepseek, Gemini, Enlighten AI, Grok, Snorkl, AI Studio, Claude, Flint AI, LLMs, Co-teach.ai, AI Studio, Magic School AI, Replit, Course Mojo, LMS, N8N, and Antigravity.

Appendix B: Methodology

Who did we study?

CRPE studied 66 educator-reported pilots across three of the four cohort tracks: Teacher AI Exploration, Building AI Literacy With Your Students, and Next Gen AI Leaders. These data helped us understand what problems educators wanted AI to help address across the broader Community of Practice. All study participants were motivated, self-selected volunteers who opted into the Community of Practice with support from their home institutions.

We also interviewed participants from eight pilots across all four cohort tracks. To identify the interview sample, CRPE reviewed pilot tracking reports, met with educators and school leaders as they shared final pilot stories and results, and coordinated with Silicon Schools Fund. Our sample was not intended to represent all pilots. Rather, we tried to select unique pilots that had progressed to classroom implementation or role-related context, and that had collected some form of evidence on their results. These interviews help illustrate how pilot topics played out in practice and gave us deeper insight into implementation, educator and student experiences, and questions about responsible AI use. Interviews included pilot leads and, in some cases, pilot participants such as teachers or students (see Table 1).

Table 1: Interview Sampl

Pilot Name and Description	Cohort	Interview Participant(s)
Automated Award Letter Analysis for College Planning—Families used an AI-powered portal to upload financial aid letters, extract and standardize key numbers, compare college offers, and better understand costs.	Next Gen AI Leaders	Teacher (pilot lead)
Empowering Students to Navigate AI at Work—Students explored AI ethics and prompting in workplace contexts, building their understanding of responsible AI use while showing that they still needed more confidence using AI in internships.	Building AI Literacy With Your Students	Teacher (pilot lead)
How Accurate is AI-Powered Scoring?—Educators tested AI scoring tools on Grade 8 ELA performance tasks and found that models like Gemini showed more potential for calibration than dedicated scoring platforms.	School Leadership in the Age of AI	School leader (pilot lead), teacher (participant)
AI as a Document to Interrogate—Seventh graders used AI to evaluate source accuracy, bias, and credibility, strengthening their understanding of how to verify AI-generated information.	Building AI Literacy With Your Students	Teacher (pilot lead)
Identifying Learning Gaps—Educators designed an AI-powered academic support app that gives students personalized tutoring aligned to their academic schedules and helps teachers and advisors understand student learning gaps and progress.	Teacher AI Exploration	Teacher (pilot lead)
Building AI Literacy Through Ready-to-Use Lessons—Teacher-ready AI literacy lessons and materials helped educators facilitate student conversations about responsible AI use and increased students' reported understanding and confidence.	School Leadership in the Age of AI	School leader (pilot lead)
Intentional Feedback Without the Workload—Students received targeted writing feedback and clarification from Flint AI, increasing the volume of feedback while allowing the teacher to review and add context.	Teacher AI Exploration	Teacher (pilot lead)
Students Questioning AI: Building Trust Through Transparency—Students evaluated classroom AI tools for math discussion, assessment, and grading, revealing mixed trust in AI and a strong preference for teacher oversight.	Building AI Literacy With Your Students	Teacher (pilot lead), student (participant)

How did we learn from them?

We analyzed educator-reported documentation about the pilots to understand whether AI use is most useful when it is tied to a problem of practice. From December 2025 to March 2026, CRPE analyzed educator-reported data. At each Community of Practice session, pilot leads reported on the problems they were trying to solve, how they planned to use AI, which tools they planned to use, and what evidence they planned to collect. We categorized pilots by their primary focus, such as feedback and grading, lesson planning, differentiation or student support, student AI literacy, family support, tool development, and leadership or operations.

We then conducted 60-minute follow-up interviews with participants from our eight selected pilots. We asked interview participants how pilots evolved, what challenges and supports shaped implementation, how pilot leads assessed progress toward their goals, and what questions surfaced for educators and students as they introduced their pilot.

We coded each interview using a common analytic matrix organized around our research questions. For each pilot, we summarized evidence about its goals and design, how it evolved, the challenges and supports that shaped implementation, participants' perceptions of progress, and educators' and students' responses to AI. We then compared findings across pilots to identify recurring themes, important differences, and examples that helped explain how and why implementation experiences varied.

Appendix C: Goals of Educator Pilots

This appendix summarizes the goals of 66 educator-reported pilots across three Community of Practice tracks: Teacher AI Exploration, Building AI Literacy With Your Students, and Next Gen AI Leaders. Because the tracks served different purposes, we examine the goals of the educator-facing exploration pilots separately from those focused on student AI literacy.

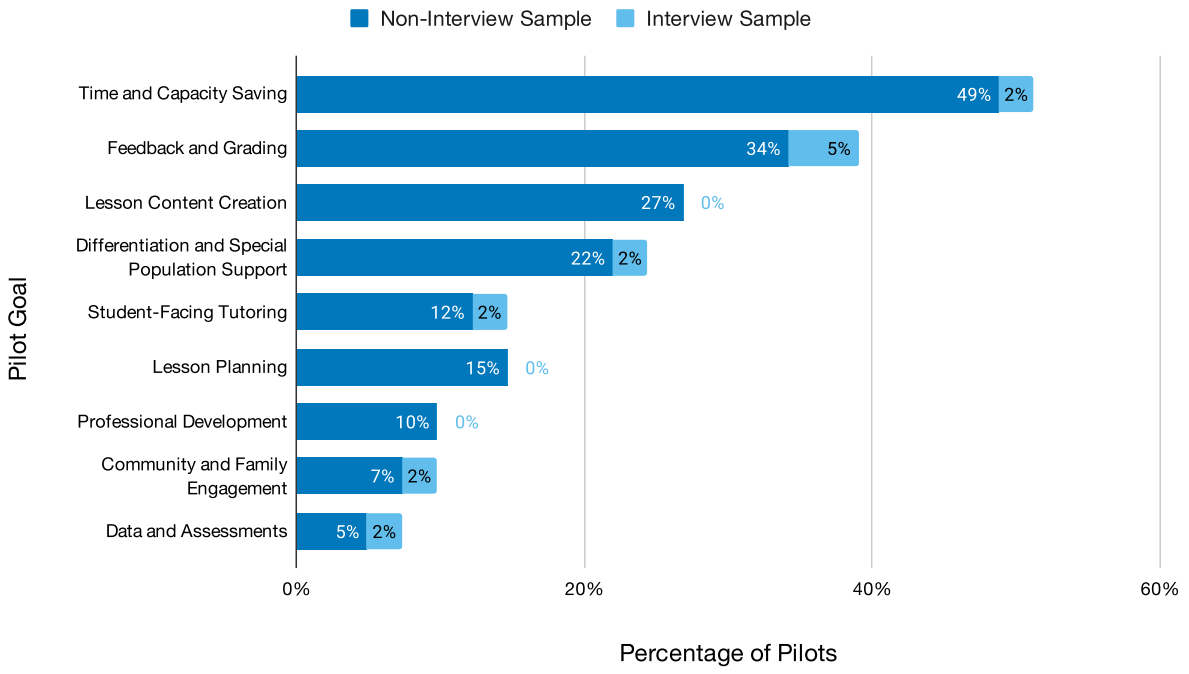
Educator-facing pilots focused primarily on existing workload and instructional challenges.

Educators' pilots generally began with practical problems they already faced: limited time, high feedback demands, and the need to tailor materials or support to individual students. Educators primarily explored whether AI could improve existing practices and workflows rather than replace educators or create fundamentally different models of teaching and learning.

The pilots covered a wider range of goals as well, including lesson planning, student-facing tutoring, professional learning, family engagement, and data and assessment. These categories describe what educators intended to address; they should not be interpreted as evidence that AI successfully addressed those problems.

Figure 1: Most pilots across the Teacher AI Exploration and Next Gen AI Leaders cohorts were designed to improve instructional and operational challenges.

Goals of pilots in the Teacher AI Exploration and Next Gen AI Leaders pilots, in non-interview and interview samples (n = 41)

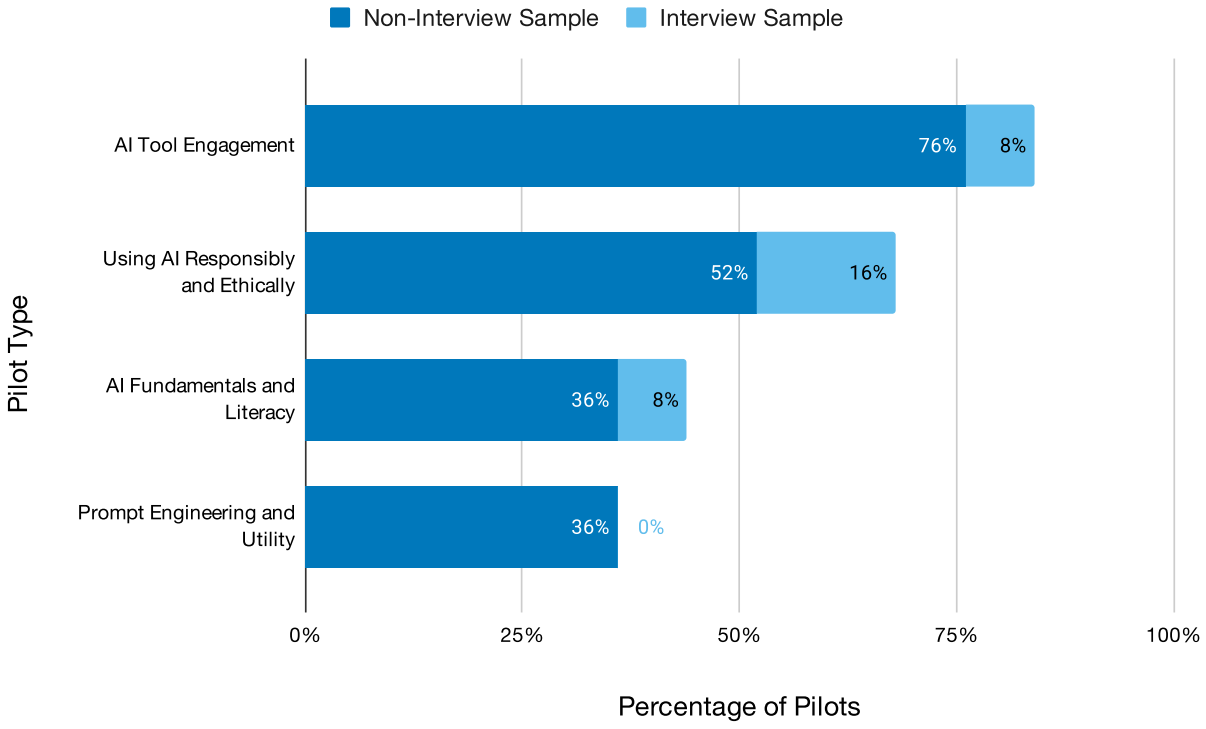


Notes: N = 41 educators who participated in the Teacher AI Exploration and Next Gen AI Leaders cohorts. Pilots could be categorized with more than one goal, which is why the percentages do not add up to 100%. CRPE categorized pilot goals using educator-reported data about their pilots. All percentages are relative to the full sample. For example, 21 of the 41 teachers who participated in the Teacher AI exploration or Next Gen AI Leaders cohorts listed time and capacity saving as one of their goals (20 non-interview participants, 1 interview participant), or 51% (49% plus 2% in the chart).

Student AI literacy pilots focused on use, judgment, and responsibility.

Figure 2: Most pilots in the Building AI Literacy With Your Students cohort aimed to help students engage with AI and use AI responsibly

Goals of pilots in the Building AI Literacy With Your Students cohort, non-interview and interview samples (n = 25)



Notes: N=25 educators who participated in the Building AI Literacy with Your Students cohort. Pilots could be categorized with more than one goal, which is why the percentages do not add up to 100%. CRPE categorized pilot goals using educator-reported data about their pilots. All percentages are relative to the full sample. For example, 21 of the 25 teachers who participated in the Building AI Literacy with Your Students cohort listed AI tool engagement as one of their goals (19 non-interview participants, 2 interview participants), or 84% (76% plus 8% in the chart).

Pilots in the Building AI Literacy With Your Students track started from a different problem of practice: students were already encountering AI, but often lacked structured opportunities to understand how it worked, evaluate its outputs, and make informed decisions about when to use it.

Eighty-four percent of these pilots gave students opportunities to engage directly with AI tools. Sixty-eight percent addressed responsible and ethical use, 44% focused on foundational AI literacy, and 35% on prompt development. Because pilots could address more than one goal, these categories overlap.

Appendix D: Additional Pilot Vignettes

Pilot Snapshot: Empowering Students to Navigate AI at Work

Crissel Rodriguez, a leader at Da Vinci Schools, saw a gap between how students were being prepared in school and what they might encounter in the workplace. In her role supporting real-world learning and internships, she saw AI beginning to affect education and the economy, even as students' exposure to AI varied across schools. "In our school systems, we feel that students may not be ready to use AI, and it might impair their learning, but then in the professional world, there is an expectation that these young people need to come with a tech edge," she explained.

To address that gap, she developed two lessons for students in a work experience class. One focused on AI ethics, asking students to consider how AI was showing up across industries, what risks it raised, and when they would need permission from a mentor or employer before using it. The second focused on prompting, giving students practice refining prompts and adding context, format, references, and equity considerations.

The pilot revealed areas for refinement. Because students came from different schools with staggered schedules, some needed more background on AI. She also realized students needed practice talking with employers about AI use and planned to add roleplay in the future.

Pilot Snapshot: Building AI Literacy Through Ready-to-Use Lessons

After learning about youth experiences with AI through interviews with current students and alumni, Amy Tran, a Managing Director of Schools at KIPP Public Schools Northern California, wondered if her network could have more discussions about AI with students. Across her experiences in education, most educators seemed to frame AI use solely as a cheating problem, even though students' experiences were more complex. "Our kids know so much, and they can offer us so much," she said. She wanted students to have structured opportunities to discuss how AI works, when it is useful, when it is risky, and how to make responsible choices.

She also recognized why those conversations were not happening consistently: teachers and leaders were stretched thin and did not have time to design AI lessons from scratch. To lower those barriers, she created ready-to-use AI literacy lessons that helped teachers discuss acceptable and unacceptable uses of AI, how AI might affect human connection, and the basics of how AI works. She hoped that by equipping them with these learning experiences, students would practice discernment and develop their own judgment around AI use.

After teachers facilitated the lessons, survey results showed that students developed more nuanced views, including when AI could help them and when they might avoid using it. Teachers also benefited from the materials, coming away with an understanding of why students might turn to AI and why adults needed to guide those conversations rather than avoid 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. 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. From that foundation, we study what it will take for public education to meet every student's needs and use those insights to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice. Learn more at crpe.org.

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About Silicon Schools Fund

Silicon Schools Fund is a nonprofit venture philanthropy dedicated to improving educational opportunities for students throughout California. It partners with visionary leaders to launch new school models that drive transformational outcomes. To learn more, visit siliconschools.com.

Cover photo taken by CRPE staff at Demo Day.

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