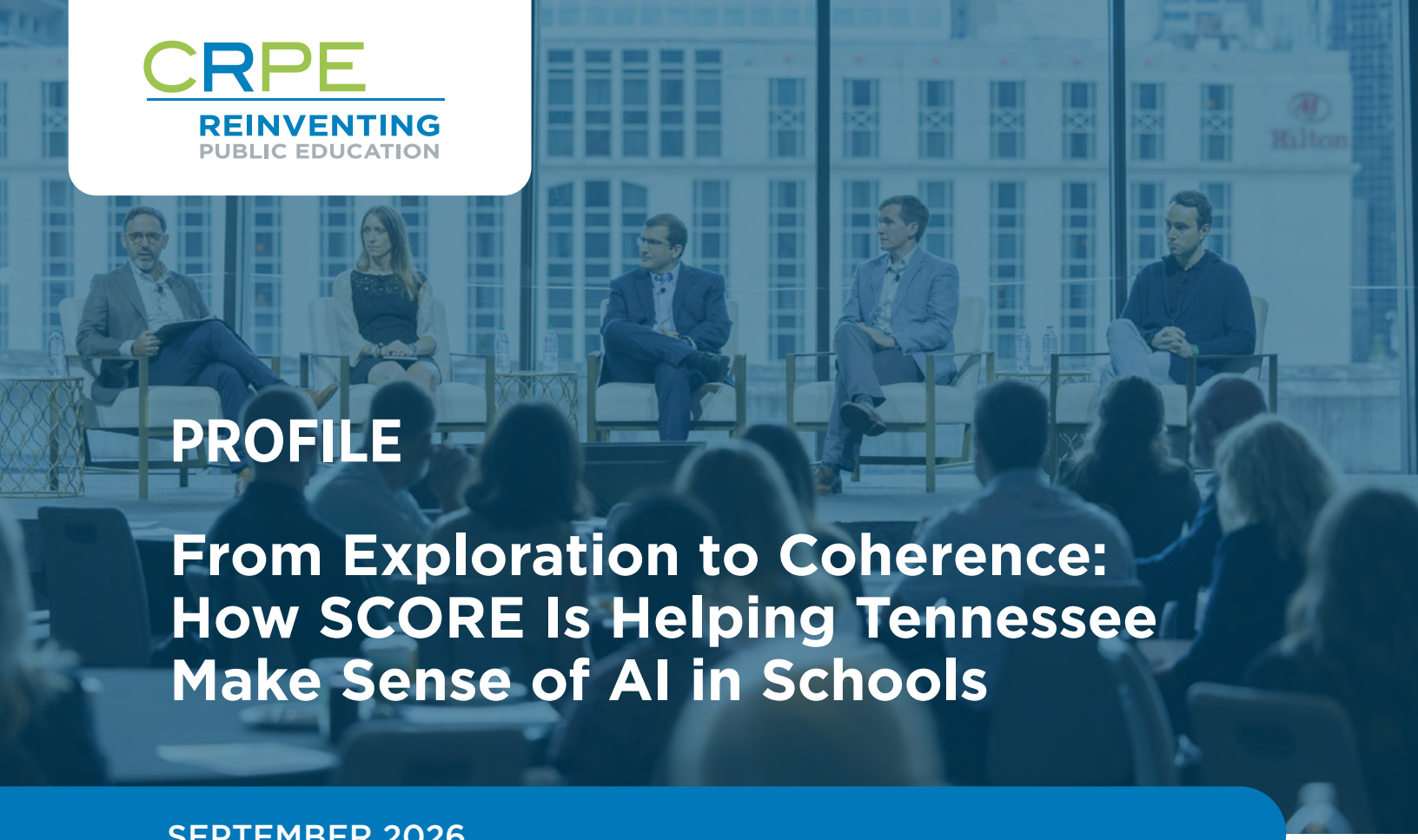

CRPE
REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

PROFILE

From Exploration to Coherence: How SCORE Is Helping Tennessee Make Sense of AI in Schools

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Introduction

Tennessee has been a national leader in advancing instructional improvement, with sustained statewide efforts focused on literacy, learning acceleration, career-connected learning, and school funding. But like many states, Tennessee is now grappling with whether and how AI can reinforce its broader K-12 priorities.

State leaders have established basic guardrails for AI use, including legislation requiring districts to adopt AI policies and the creation of a statewide AI advisory council. However, while the state is beginning to expand its guidance and support for AI, districts[1] still bear primary responsibility for navigating a rapidly evolving marketplace with limited evidence about what works. Survey findings suggest that many Tennessee educators need more professional learning and implementation support as they try to keep up with new AI technologies and products.

Recognizing the growing complexity of AI adoption, The State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE), a Tennessee-based intermediary organization, is adopting strategies to help districts, state leaders, and other partners make more coherent, evidence-informed decisions about AI. CRPE's research on state AI integration finds that many states rely on such partners to expand capacity and

1 Throughout this profile, we use the term "districts" to refer to both traditional public districts and charter management organizations.

support learning.

To learn more about this partnership and its role in stewarding systemic AI adoption, CRPE conducted interviews with Tennessee state officials, district practitioners, higher education partners, education technology providers, and SCORE leadership. We also reviewed public-facing reports, legislation, and guidance to understand the role an intermediary organization can play in advancing coherent statewide AI adoption. This profile of SCORE is not an endorsement of the organization or an evaluation of its effectiveness. Instead, it is a descriptive example of how one organization is working to support statewide coherence.

SCORE is helping Tennessee create the conditions for more coherent AI adoption by helping leaders across the state build capacity for learning, coordination, and evidence generation as AI adoption accelerates. While Tennessee's experience suggests that intermediary organizations across the country can help strengthen statewide coherence, it also suggests that these organizations cannot do it alone. Sustained progress will depend on continued district participation, state leadership, and investment in evidence-building and implementation support.

Why is SCORE positioned to lead, and how is the organization helping the system?

Long before AI became a statewide priority, SCORE's ability to convene partners, support local innovation, and share evidence was built into the organization's infrastructure. Interviewees consistently pointed to SCORE's long-standing relationships, credibility, and cross-sector partnerships as key enabling conditions for advancing districts' understanding of education-related issues. One superintendent described this as a defining feature, noting that "what's most exciting about SCORE is that they're always willing to be two to three steps ahead [of] where we are." Interviewees suggested that this forward-looking orientation has shaped SCORE's work across issues such as literacy, instructional quality, and students' career readiness, and that the organization has approached AI in much the same way: by helping districts tackle emerging challenges before clear models or consensus exist.

One superintendent first connected with SCORE as a high school teacher and has partnered with the organization for more than a decade. Reflecting on that experience, he said he had been a strong classroom educator but "didn't understand the power of instructional leadership" before working with SCORE. He described the organization and its network of educator reform partners as having "grown up together" through a collective journey to strengthen educational opportunities for students across Tennessee. Those shared past experiences have positioned SCORE to act as a convener, translator, and implementation partner in the present, at a moment when many districts and state leaders are still determining how to approach AI.

SCORE has worked to connect AI to priorities already familiar to districts, including literacy improvement, high-quality instructional materials, tutoring, and career-connected learning. This has helped districts see AI as a way to strengthen existing improvement efforts rather than as a standalone technology initiative.

SCORE's Contributions to AI Decision-Making in Tennessee

SCORE plays three primary roles in helping district leaders, state officials, educators, and other partners navigate AI adoption. The organization helps connect district implementation to state strategy, identifies high-quality AI solutions, and builds evidence through pilots and learning networks.

Shaping State-Level Sensemaking and Strategy

SCORE helps Tennessee build a more coherent approach to AI adoption by connecting the right people and ensuring that statewide decisions are informed by evidence-based strategies and districts' implementation experiences. Though SCORE does not have formal authority, the organization has a sensemaking role that helps state leaders identify effective practices, understand implementation challenges, and determine where districts need additional guidance and support.

After Tennessee passed legislation requiring districts to adopt AI policies that addressed safety, academic integrity, and risk mitigation, SCORE convened a cross-sector working group to help state and local education leaders across K–12, higher education, and industry, researchers, and other state partners understand AI's possible implications for teaching and learning. Over roughly 18 months, the group met regularly to discuss emerging use cases and trends, both in Tennessee and nationally.

Interviewees emphasized that these convenings served a purpose beyond information sharing. They created opportunities for leaders from different parts of the education system to wrestle with uncertainty together, compare approaches, and see where AI might support broader educational goals. The convenings also helped build alignment and buy-in across innovative districts, higher education institutions, state agencies, and other stakeholders, creating a broader base of support for continued AI exploration and learning. As one higher education leader observed, there is often "both great enthusiasm and great skepticism, sometimes from the same people," around AI in education. Convenings provided a forum for navigating those tensions and making more informed decisions about which ideas to pursue, adapt, or avoid.

Crucially, SCORE does more than just facilitate conversation. Interviewees described the organization translating lessons from local pilots into state-level sensemaking and strategy. They noted that SCORE helps ensure that state-level discussions among the State Board of Education and the Department of Education about AI adoption and governance are informed by Tennessee schools' actual experiences and lessons emerging from districts nationwide. For example, SCORE drafted and presented recommendations to Tennessee's AI Advisory Council that were ultimately reflected in the state's AI Action Plan. SCORE also drew on implementation lessons from districts to develop recommendations on integrating AI literacy skills and competencies into Tennessee's existing English language arts standards. The State Board of Education considered these recommendations as it convened its ELA standards review committee.

SCORE's influence at the state level is grounded in the same work it does alongside districts. The next two sections examine how the organization builds that credibility through vetting emerging tools and generating evidence from implementation.

Helping Districts Navigate an Evolving Marketplace of AI Solutions

In our conversations, Tennessee district leaders consistently described difficulty evaluating AI tools. This is consistent with what district leaders report across the country.

SCORE supports both districts and state leaders by identifying, vetting, and elevating ed tech tools that appear most aligned with statewide instructional priorities. SCORE leaders described maintaining conversations with roughly 20 to 25 technology providers and investing significant time in understanding the rapidly evolving AI landscape. The organization continually assesses emerging products based on district needs, quality, evidence of impact, and alignment with instructional goals. As one leader at SCORE explained, "We take it upon ourselves to learn and become experts… so we can share those learnings with partners who are grappling with these changes."

SCORE sees its role as a "learner-in-chief." The organization helps districts by being "really visible about what we're learning" and sharing those insights through ongoing conversations with district partners across the state rather than through formal endorsements.

In deciding when to elevate a particular tool, SCORE seeks to "find [education technology providers] who have evidence of impact and who we trust to get the work done," while remaining highly selective about which providers warrant that level of engagement.

In a small number of cases, SCORE also serves as a bridge between districts and education technology providers. District leaders gave examples of SCORE gathering feedback from educators, helping technology providers better understand district needs, and, when appropriate, facilitating connections between districts and promising tools.

Interviewees also emphasized that when it comes to AI tools, "high-quality"[2] means more than strong product design or the inclusion of safeguards for student privacy and data security, both of which are necessary but not sufficient. District leaders pointed to the importance of technology providers being nimble, highly responsive

2 For SCORE, "high-quality" AI tools are those that align with instructional priorities, demonstrate evidence of improving teaching and learning, protect student privacy and data security, and are developed by technology providers that actively partner with educators to refine products based on system-wide needs and implementation. SCORE emphasizes that identifying a tool as high quality does not mean it is the right fit for every district or school in the state. Rather, adoption decisions should also weigh whether the tool aligns with local instructional strategy, addresses a clearly defined problem of practice, fits existing staff capacity and technology infrastructure, and can be implemented effectively within the district's broader improvement strategy.

to educator feedback, and willing to adapt tools based on classroom experience. One superintendent described SCORE's relationships with technology provider CEOs and leadership teams as creating a different kind of partnership than districts typically experience. Districts had direct access to provider leadership, making it easier to raise concerns and receive timely responses to implementation questions.

One example is Coursemojo, an AI-enabled literacy solution that attracted SCORE's attention because early evidence suggested it improved student outcomes, aligned with Tennessee's literacy priorities, and embedded AI-powered Tier 2 interventions (additional support for students who need it) within core Tier 1 instruction. SCORE invested time in understanding Coursemojo's instructional approach, learning from early district implementation, and determining whether it warranted broader attention.

District leaders said SCORE's work has helped them make more informed decisions about which tools to pilot, adopt, and scale. Several interviewees described feeling overwhelmed by the pace of technological change and the number of products entering the market. In that context, SCORE's vetting and curation role reduced uncertainty and allowed districts to focus their attention on tools more likely to support instructional priorities.

By identifying, evaluating, and elevating high-quality AI tools, SCORE fills a gap many state agencies cannot easily address because the tools evolve faster than traditional policy and procurement processes. As one state leader noted, state agencies are "not always excellent" at keeping up with evolving areas like AI and often lack the staff capacity to dedicate full-time staff to this work. These constraints are especially acute during leadership transitions, such as Tennessee's upcoming gubernatorial transition, when agencies are simultaneously managing leadership changes and existing reform priorities alongside emerging issues like AI.

Using Pilots And Networks to Build Evidence and Coherence

SCORE relies on pilots and facilitating strategic practice networks to generate proof points and practice-based evidence about how AI can support teaching and learning. SCORE launches some of these pilots and supports others that originate with districts, technology providers, or partner organizations. Rather than providing direct technical assistance, SCORE seeks to identify effective practices, help districts learn from one another, and generate evidence about when and how AI can best support teaching and learning.

After identifying Coursemojo as a promising AI solution, SCORE helped expand opportunities to learn from its implementation. During the 2024–2025 school year, Sumner County Schools piloted the tool as part of its middle school English language arts improvement efforts. Encouraged by early evidence from Sumner's pilot, SCORE then partnered with a Tennessee family foundation to co-fund a 2025-2026 cohort of seven districts. These districts are piloting Coursemojo across 20 schools that serve over 4,000 students.

In the expanded pilot, teachers reported adjusting instruction based on insights generated through the tool, while students engaged more deeply with texts and revised their work in response to feedback. All participating district leaders reported

being "highly satisfied" with the pilot, and all participating teachers reported that the tool positively impacted student learning. Participating districts have since renewed and expanded the work, often using their own funds. This suggests the tool is both instructionally useful and operationally viable.

Interviewees emphasized that SCORE's credibility and ability to mobilize resources were essential in making this work possible. Several leaders noted that districts were more willing to pilot a relatively new AI tool because SCORE had already evaluated the provider, assessed its alignment with instructional priorities, and identified the tool as a strong fit for schools. SCORE also reduced the financial and political risks of innovation by securing philanthropic funding that allowed districts to test the tool and make more informed adoption decisions.

SCORE's role extends beyond just supporting individual pilots. The organization also helps districts learn from one another through structured learning networks. One such network is the Tennessee AI Ecosystem Project, a yearlong cohort led by PlayLab that has brought together nine school systems from across the state. SCORE helped recruit participating districts and schools, provide context about local conditions, and coordinate convenings. Participating districts assemble cross-functional teams, often including district leaders, educators, and students, and participate in three convenings. Those in the cohort also receive ongoing support from PlayLab throughout the year.

The cohort focuses on district problems of practice, not on selecting a particular AI tool. Some districts focus on leadership readiness and AI literacy, while others explore challenges related to instructional practice, family engagement, curriculum access, or college and career pathways. As a PlayLab leader explained, the central question is not which AI tool to adopt, but rather what problem the district is trying to solve and whether AI is an appropriate part of the solution. District teams begin by identifying their goals, priorities, and the barriers preventing them from achieving those goals before determining where AI might help and where it should not be applied.

Interviewees suggested that SCORE's involvement helped ensure that the Ecosystem Project was more than just a generic AI initiative. By connecting cohort districts to peers already implementing AI projects and other organizations leading AI-related work in Tennessee, SCORE helped districts learn from one another and stay connected to broader developments across the state.

More broadly, interviewees described pilots and learning networks as mechanisms for generating the proof points needed to guide future policy and practice.

Building on this approach, SCORE recently launched an AI Innovation Fund to support educator-led AI pilots across Tennessee. Through grants of up to $50,000, SCORE is investing in projects designed to address authentic problems of practice while generating implementation lessons that can inform educators statewide. The initiative prioritizes projects that strengthen teaching and learning, improve student outcomes, and produce practical evidence that can benefit the broader field.

SCORE is also expanding opportunities for districts to learn together. Following their statewide AI symposium, SCORE will partner with nonprofit Leading Educators to convene around 15 district and charter organizations. Leading Educators provides

direct support to teachers and helps school systems strengthen professional learning and instructional improvement. The convening will focus on strategies for pursuing and sustaining instructionally coherent AI implementation.

Through initiatives like these, SCORE plays a critical role in catalyzing districts' implementation experiences into both evidence and shared learning that inform broader state-wide strategy.

Recommendations

No single organization can guide statewide AI adoption alone. Partnership is essential. SCORE's work in Tennessee demonstrates that intermediary organizations can play an important role in helping districts and states navigate uncertainty when they are embedded within a broader ecosystem of district leaders, state agencies, higher education partners, and funders.

1. State education agencies should build strategic partnerships that extend their capacity to support learning and coherence.

District leaders often want stronger state support in evaluating AI tools, surfacing promising use cases, and understanding how AI can strengthen existing instructional priorities. At the same time, many state agencies report that they lack the staffing, funding, or expertise to play a significant role in AI procurement and implementation support. SCORE's work demonstrates that states should identify and cultivate trusted intermediary partners that can help fill these roles. Rather than attempting to manage every aspect of AI adoption directly, state agencies can work alongside intermediary organizations to vet promising approaches, coordinate learning across districts, and bring local lessons into state decision-making.

2. Intermediaries should focus on both evidence generation and evidence sharing.

Tennessee's experience highlights two complementary functions that districts often struggle to perform on their own: identifying high-potential AI solutions and generating evidence about their effectiveness, and learning from other districts' implementation experiences to avoid reinventing the wheel. Intermediary organizations can help reduce this fragmentation by coordinating pilots, screening ed tech providers for effectiveness and instructional alignment, convening cross-district learning networks, and translating local lessons into evidence that informs future decisions. As AI continues to evolve, these functions may become increasingly important for helping districts make informed decisions about adoption and scale.

3. Philanthropy should invest in the intermediary capacity needed to turn local AI innovation into system learning.

Coherent AI adoption requires more than funding individual tools or pilots. Philanthropies should prioritize regions where trusted intermediary organizations are well-positioned to connect district innovation with state strategy. These regions also tend to have engaged district leaders and supportive state partners that can help spread lessons from individual pilots across districts and into state policy. In

states without a well-established intermediary like SCORE, funders should build intermediary capacity by investing in organizations such as statewide nonprofits, universities, regional service agencies, research-practice partnerships, and professional associations that have earned deep trust in the education community. The credibility of these organizations often enables them to convene diverse stakeholders, generate buy-in around emerging approaches, and translate local implementation lessons into broader guidance. By investing in these intermediary functions and reducing the financial and political risks of early AI exploration, funders help ensure that successful pilots generate broader system knowledge rather than remaining isolated successes.

Looking Forward

Tennessee's approach to AI is still in flux. But the state's experience already highlights a broader lesson: the challenge is not simply adopting new technologies, but creating the infrastructure for systems to learn from those adoption efforts. As AI continues to evolve, districts, state agencies, higher education institutions, philanthropies, and intermediary organizations will all need mechanisms for testing new approaches, sharing evidence, and adapting strategy over time.

Tennessee's experience suggests that coherent AI adoption is less likely to emerge from a single policy, tool, or organization than from the relationships and learning structures that connect them. By helping stakeholders learn together, organizations like SCORE can play an important role in ensuring that AI-powered innovation contributes to long-term improvement rather than becoming another disconnected reform effort.

Appendix : Methodology

This profile draws on semi-structured interviews conducted between April and May 2026 with 10 individuals representing SCORE, state education leadership, district practitioners, higher education, and education technology providers supporting AI implementation work in Tennessee. Interviews included one state-level leader, three district leaders and practitioners, one higher education leader, two edtech partners, and three representatives from SCORE.

Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. Each session followed a semi-structured protocol designed to ensure consistency across participants while allowing for probing and follow-up questions. With participants' verbal consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Research team members analyzed interview transcripts using a thematic approach aligned with the study's central research questions. Researchers reviewed transcripts iteratively to identify recurring themes, patterns, tensions, and examples related to AI implementation, evidence generation, intermediary roles, and state strategy. These themes informed the development of a coding framework, which the team then applied across all interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns and points of variation across participants. Throughout the analysis, the research team engaged in structured discussions to compare interpretations, examine areas of convergence and divergence, refine the coding framework, and clarify emerging themes.

The research also included a review of Tennessee's recent education reform efforts and district landscape, as well as publicly available reports, memos, legislation, guidance documents, and related materials focused on AI and education in Tennessee. In addition, CRPE reviewed internal documents provided by SCORE summarizing the organization's AI-related work, partnerships, pilots, and convening efforts. SCORE was given the opportunity to review this profile for factual accuracy but was not invited to provide editorial feedback.

This study has several limitations. Researchers intentionally selected interview participants, some of whom were recommended by SCORE, to reflect multiple parts of Tennessee's AI and education community. Consequently, the findings should not be interpreted as representative of statewide perspectives on AI adoption. Instead, they provide qualitative insights into one intermediary organization's efforts. Because the study examines SCORE's role in supporting AI implementation, several interviewees either worked for SCORE or had direct experience with the organization through its convenings and partnerships. This firsthand involvement may have influenced their perspectives on the organization's work. Researchers addressed this limitation by including participants from multiple organizations, comparing perspectives across interviewees, and triangulating interview findings with publicly available reports, guidance documents, news coverage, and other available evidence wherever possible.

Acknowledgments

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Cover image: The opening panel discussion at Tennessee SCORE's August 2026 symposium, "AI in K-12 Education: Keeping Students at the Center." Pictured from left to right: David Mansouri, President & CEO, SCORE; Bree Dusseault, Principal & Managing Director, CRPE; Dr. Babak Mostaghimi, Founding Partner, Learner Studio; Andrea Pasinetti, Co-founder & CEO, Kira; Davis Zaunbrecher, Founding Director, New Orleans AI Education Fund.

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