

The Leadership Imperative: Defining AI Guidance to Prepare Students for a Changing World

JANUARY 05, 2026

Author



Gladys Cruz

Superintendent & AASA Past President, Questar III
BOCES in Castleton, N.Y.

(<https://www.aasa.org/about-aasa/person/gladys-i.-cruz>)



Two decades ago, my state's education commissioner lamented that schools "powered off kids" when they arrived. This is no longer the case. Technology is now a ubiquitous presence in our classrooms.

The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) is a paradigm shift far greater than any previous EdTech product. AI is reshaping the workforce and automating memorization, rote tasks, and basic information synthesis.

For superintendents, the essential question facing our school districts is no longer if AI belongs in schools, but how to integrate it responsibly and effectively to prepare students for a future being fundamentally reshaped by this technology.

The Conflicted Reality of AI Use in Schools

The collective voice of 60,000 students, parents, and educators in [Project Tomorrow's Speak Up National Report](https://www.tomorrow.org/speak-up-congressional-briefing/) (<https://www.tomorrow.org/speak-up-congressional-briefing/>) provides a clear, yet often conflicted, snapshot of AI in education.

According to the research, two-thirds of grade 6-12 students say they are familiar with AI tools, though this familiarity is largely the result of their own experimentation outside of school. The lack of in-class experience is likely connected to a lack of teacher familiarity:

- Only 34 percent of teachers use AI tools to design lesson plans or activities.
- Just 13 percent of teachers are very confident using AI tools to advance learning or support productivity.
- Only 15 percent of teachers say their school or district is providing ample professional development to support their effective use of AI.

While one-third of middle school students and nearly half of high school students report using AI regularly on their own, students (61 percent) and their parents (70 percent) are generally not familiar with any school policies or guidelines.

This lack of policy often leads to different views on the appropriate use. As of December 2024, [data](https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/spp/results.asp) (<https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/spp/results.asp>) from the U.S. Department of Education showed only 31 percent of districts had a formal



- Brainstorming ideas (56 percent)
- Analyzing class notes (52 percent)
- Getting feedback on their writing (52 percent)
- Access tutoring outside of school (45 percent)
- Summarize text (40 percent)
- Researching a topic (38 percent)
- Managing due dates (36 percent)
- Translation (33 percent).

is no longer if AI belongs in schools, but how to integrate it responsibly and effectively to prepare students for a future being fundamentally reshaped by this technology.

Policy and the Need for Guardrails

While many districts lack formal guidelines, **33 states** (<https://www.aiforeducation.io/ai-resources/state-ai-guidance>) (plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) have official guidance or policy on the use of AI in school. These efforts center on the following principles to ensure responsible adoption and prevent risks:

- **Data Privacy and Security:** Protecting student information, aligned with existing laws like the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA).
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Stressing the need for explainable systems and centralizing human oversight and educator judgment.
- **Bias Awareness:** Acknowledging the risk of algorithmic bias perpetuating existing inequities and calling for mitigation strategies.
- **AI Literacy:** Emphasizing the need for age-appropriate AI education for students and competency development for educators.

President Trump signed an April 2025 **executive order** (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/advancing-artificial-intelligence-education-for-american-youth/>) promoting the integration of AI into education. This includes creating a task force and public-private partnerships as well as prioritizing federal spending for AI teacher professional development.

The integration of AI directly aligns with three AASA principles:

- **Prioritize Student-Centered Learning.** AI tools, when used effectively, enable personalization, tailoring instruction to individual student needs and moving learning beyond one-size-fits-all outcomes.
- **The New Basics: Real Skills for Real Life.** This principle defines the need for skills that go beyond traditional learning, including digital literacy. We need to shift assessment from tasks easily automated by AI to higher-level thinking, collaboration, and creativity, or skills AI cannot replicate.
- **Measure What Matters.** We need to move away from assessment solely based on test scores to a system that measures whether students are becoming "productive and engaged citizens" ready for the workforce and life. This requires adopting multiple measures that reflect real-world competencies and the emerging needs of the AI-driven economy.

The time for observation is over. AI is being used by our students and educators with or without official guidance, or whether it is embraced or banned by your district. District leaders must define clear goals and guidelines, provide training, ensure data privacy, and remain transparent in AI implementation to foster trust with students, families, and educators.

By adopting the future-ready perspective championed by AASA, we can move past the initial apprehension and harness AI to fulfill the promise of public education: to equip every student with the skills, confidence, and character to thrive in a future we cannot yet fully imagine.

“

By adopting the future-ready perspective championed by AASA, we can move past the initial apprehension and harness AI to fulfill the promise of public education: to equip every student with the skills, confidence, and character to thrive in a future we cannot yet fully imagine.



Subscribe via RSS feed below. [Learn more about RSS feeds here \(/rss-feeds\)](#).

 [Schools of Thought Blog \(https://www.aasa.org/feeds/schools-of-thought\)](https://www.aasa.org/feeds/schools-of-thought)

 [The Leading Edge Blog \(https://www.aasa.org/feeds/aasa-blogs\)](https://www.aasa.org/feeds/aasa-blogs)
