DIGITAL TRAILBLAZERS

LESSONS FROM A SCHOOL ON THE FRONTIER OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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Foreword

Artificial intelligence has arrived in America's schools faster than most educators and policymakers were prepared for. In less than four years, generative AI tools have moved from novelty to everyday reality for millions of students and teachers, reshaping how young people complete assignments, access information, and increasingly, how they learn.

The speed of that change has left many schools scrambling to respond, to identify the best and most responsible uses of a powerful new technology.

To help educators and education policymakers and practitioners navigate that task, FutureEd Policy Analyst Tara Moon, a former teacher, has profiled a school in the vanguard of the AI revolution in education. Within days of the release of ChatGPT in November 2022, Washington Leadership Academy, a charter high school in the District of Columbia serving predominantly Black, Brown, and low-income students, began exploring ways to weave AI into the school's fabric.

This report examines what has happened at WLA in the three and a half years since then, providing a revealing window into what meaningful AI implementation can look like in schools, while illuminating the difficult questions about cheating, creativity, privacy, and the future role of teachers that AI poses. It explores how schools can help students become not merely consumers of AI, but critical thinkers capable of understanding its strengths, limitations, and consequences. And it highlights the conditions, tradeoffs, and resources required to ensure that many of the nation's students aren't left behind in the coming AI revolution. It is the first in a series of FutureEd projects on AI in education.

We're grateful to the staff at Washington Leadership Academy for inviting us into their school and sharing their story.

FutureEd Senior Policy Analyst Bella DiMarco managed production of the report, while Molly Breen and Merry Alderman lent their considerable talents to editing and design.

Thomas Toch
Director, FutureEd

On a Friday morning in early March, about 100 high schoolers at Washington Leadership Academy (WLA), a public charter secondary school in the District of Columbia, gathered in the school's assembly hall for a "Hackathon," a hands-on event designed to teach students how generative artificial intelligence (AI) can be used in real life. On this day, the Hackathon took the form of a challenge, which students could tackle alone or in groups, with or without the input of a volunteer educator: Build a chatbot powered by AI to address real-world needs and challenges.

Though most of the participants had never heard of a Hackathon before that day, let alone participated in one, they were not strangers to AI. When asked what they knew about the technology, students described it as useful but controversial, powerful but prone to error. One junior offered a more precise critique than many adults: "The term 'artificial intelligence' isn't real because to be intelligent you have to be able to teach yourself. It should be called artificial prediction—all it does is predict answers."

By the end of the day, students had created a variety of chatbots. Members of the school's student government association shared a bot to help students convey concerns to school leadership. A senior showed me a personal AI receptionist he had built on his own time that answers emails, handles phone calls, and organizes calendars, which he plans to sell to local businesses. The projects were modest but significant, reflecting that students understood the technology well enough to use it to help others.

That level of AI literacy remains the exception in U.S. schools. Since the public release of ChatGPT in November 2022, schools have faced growing pressure to respond to AI, but policy guidance and systemwide support has lagged. While many schools are still deciding whether to allow AI at all, the technology has already crept its way into classrooms, and increasingly so: in December 2025, the share of high school students who reported using AI for homework rose to 63 percent, up from 49 percent just months earlier.[1]

Meanwhile, WLA has been deploying AI throughout the school in everything from administrative tasks to lesson planning to independent student work.

The school's decision to embrace AI was not incidental. As D.C.'s first computer science charter high school, WLA was already preparing students for a technology-driven world. But for WLA's leadership, AI does more than enhance instruction or improve operational efficiency. It has the potential to correct longstanding educational inequity. At WLA, the majority of students are Black, Brown, and low-income—groups historically among the last to gain access to new technologies in school. This digital divide means they enter the workforce less prepared to use technologies that more privileged

peers have already mastered, compounding existing inequities in economic opportunity.[2]

WLA's extensive experience in technology education, its focus on equity, and its eagerness to integrate AI into student learning combine to offer a compelling window into what meaningful AI implementation can look like in the nation's schools, while revealing the conditions, tradeoffs, and supports required to achieve that goal without leaving many of the nation's students behind.

Digital Trailblazers

WLA's journey with AI began almost immediately after ChatGPT's public release in November 2022. Within days, then-executive director Stacy Kane met with school leadership and urged them to take the technology seriously, test emerging tools, and start thinking about what it might mean for the school and its students.

Initial reactions were mixed. Eric Collazo, current executive director and principal at the time, was not immediately on board. As a former English teacher, the "teacher pride" in him resisted the idea that an AI tool could match what a skilled educator brings to a classroom. Some teachers felt AI was just another task to master, layered onto already demanding workloads. Others worried about the potential for student plagiarism, adopting a new technology they did not fully understand, and whether AI would replace them.

But some staff were interested, and an AI task force of administrators, students, and teachers began meeting at least once a month to experiment with tools, test use cases, and figure out what applications were most promising. Members were encouraged to speak candidly about their concerns. Giani Clarkson, a history teacher, was among the early adopters. "You're either going to put your arm around it, or it's going to find its way to use a foot and get you out the door," he reasoned.

What emerged from these meetings was a coalition of educators finding success with AI who were willing to bring others along. Throughout the 2024-25 school year, they led professional development sessions demonstrating how specific tools were saving them time and transforming what was possible in their classrooms. Collazo's own turning point came during a session on how to build chatbots. He designed a bot to generate motivating metaphors to close staff meetings, a long-standing habit of his. When it came up with material he liked, he was sold. "It felt like playtime," he remembered. "And then I realized, alright, I see the potential here."

Three factors helped accelerate this early experimentation. First, WLA's structure as a single-site charter school allowed for faster decision-making, with fewer layers of bureaucracy between idea and implementation. Second, school leaders were willing to move ahead in the absence of clear guidance or established models. Third, the school purchased premium versions of AI tools for teachers to test.

> **"[With AI,] you're either going to put your arm around it, or it's going to find its way to use a foot and get you out the door."**
>
> — Giani Clarkson
> history teacher at WLA

The early experimentation eventually narrowed to a more defined set of tools and practices. Today, AI is not confined to a single course or initiative. It shows up across every dimension of school life, from classroom instruction and student support to teacher tasks and behind-the-scenes operations.

As part of the school's broader approach to AI literacy, all freshmen take a computer science course designed and taught by teacher Adrienne Lockhart that introduces core concepts in AI and

machine learning. After that it's up to teachers to deploy AI in their classrooms, guided by a school rubric developed to help determine appropriate student AI use on various assignments, from zero for no use up to four for unlimited use.

Most of the school's teachers are using AI. In a February 2025 survey, 85 percent reported using it professionally, with more than 80 percent doing so on a daily or weekly basis.[3]

In the Classroom

WLA teachers have deployed AI in instruction in a variety of innovative ways.

In Giani Clarkson's AP Government class, students explored political strategy by building, refining, and launching mock election campaigns, which they then ran through the ElectorBot 3000, a chatbot that simulates elections to see who can build the most convincing campaign and garner the most votes. In the same class's unit on imperialism, students chose their country's resources to resist being conquered by "Clarksonia," a fictional nation Clarkson controls. They input their countries into a chatbot—allocating population across soldiers, scientists, artists, and educators, and selecting a key natural resource—to see if they could survive a three-year simulated war against Clarksonia. The bot delivered a verdict at the end, revealing Clarksonia's resources for comparison, but did not explain why a country won or lost, forcing students to think through the causes themselves. "It's not good enough to just tell them, 'This is how it happened,'" Clarkson said. "They have to see it in real time and kick the tires themselves."

When I visited Tyrell Garner's ninth-grade English-Language Arts class, students were studying ethos, pathos, and logos by designing advertisements for a fictional small business, using ChatGPT to generate a logo that conveyed their chosen rhetorical strategy. One student, a Spanish-speaker, showed me his brand, "Global English Academy," with the tagline, "Take your English to the next level," applying pathos, an emotional appeal to learners like himself who are navigating a new language. He came up with the concept and the words, while ChatGPT produced the design, a logo featuring the business name and tagline alongside images of books and a school building. As students worked, Garner reminded them to clearly label any AI-generated content, emphasizing the importance of transparency and artistic integrity.

Beyond teaching students how AI works and how to use it, WLA is exposing students to the technology's limitations.

Niyesha Coleman, the school's math instructional coach, built a gamified chatbot that walked students through practice problems, offering hints and feedback in a voice trained to sound like her. Students had to explain their reasoning for every answer, and sometimes, Coleman noted, the bot got the answer wrong and students had to defend their thinking against an incorrect response. It was a lesson in both mathematical reasoning and the limits of AI.

> **The takeaway is not that AI on its own helps or hurts students, but that the answer depends on how it is designed and deployed.**

In an English class, students wrote essays and received feedback from both peers and an AI chatbot, then compared the two as a class. They found that AI offered more structural feedback while peers offered more personal responses to the content, a lesson in both the utility and limits of the technology, as well as in the value of human judgment.

WLA students seem to be getting the message. In a fall 2025 survey, two thirds of the school's students reported learning strategies for effectively using AI tools, such as prompting, evaluating output,

and selecting the right tool—key components of AI literacy. But 70 percent said they thought AI could be both helpful and harmful in their schoolwork.[4]

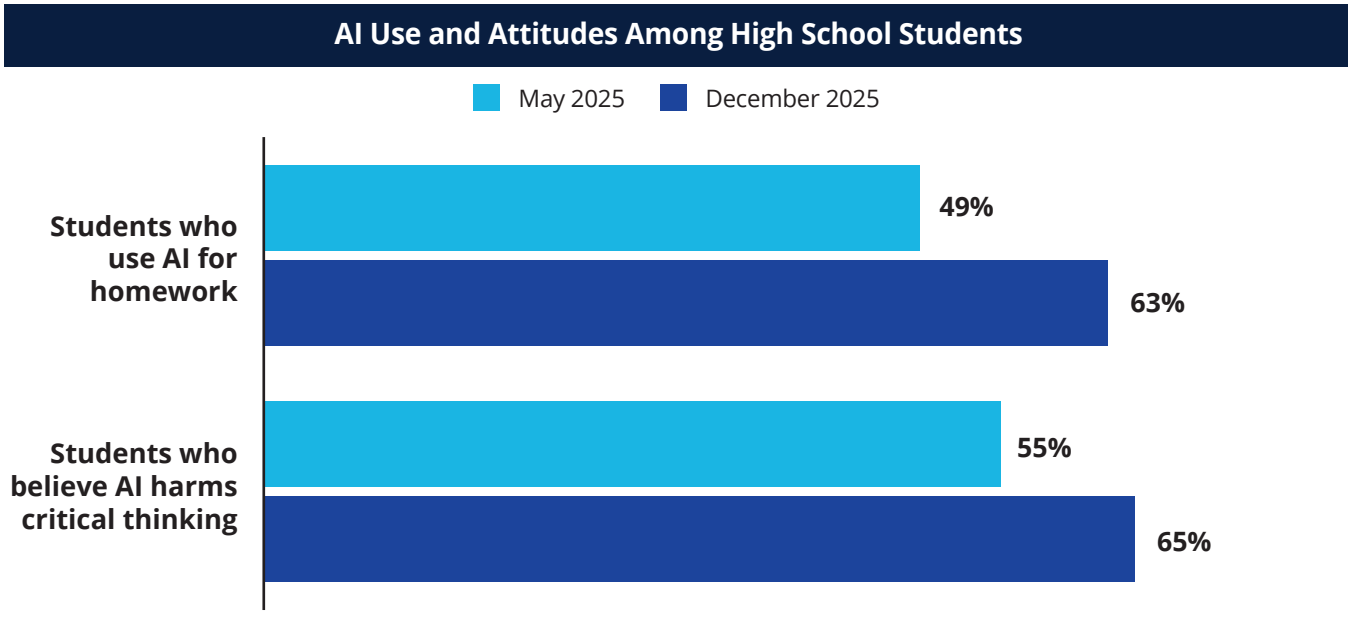
That raises an obvious question: does AI help students learn? A recent Stanford review of 20 AI research studies illustrates just how much remains unknown: students tend to perform better with AI access but gains often disappear when the AI is taken away.[5] Not surprisingly, perhaps, the study found that AI tools designed with "guardrails," like tutoring chatbots that offer hints rather than direct answers, show more promise in supporting long-term learning than general-purpose chatbots that simply hand students the answer. The takeaway is not that AI on its own helps or hurts students, but that the answer depends on how it is designed and deployed.

Teachers at WLA, meanwhile, are using AI to support students in ways that weren't previously possible.

Adam Browning, WLA's director of academic innovation and AP Psychology teacher, used the new technology to address a typical problem. The College Board, the organization that writes Advanced Placement exams, recently overhauled the AP Psychology curriculum, leaving teachers few practice questions to give their students. So, he created an AI tool that generated questions modeled on the few already released by the College Board. Students submitted answers to a chatbot, which gave them immediate feedback and flagged Browning if they continued to struggle. The system has more than doubled scores on practice questions.

Nicole Latimer noticed that many students in her ninth- and 10th-grade special education humanities classes knew the answers to her questions but struggled to express themselves clearly in writing. She developed a chatbot to help. When I visited, Latimer gave her students a writing prompt, which they answered and submitted to the chatbot. If the answer was incomplete, the chatbot asked follow-up questions to encourage the student to give more information. It then offered targeted feedback and suggestions for improvement. In addition to strengthening their writing, the tool gave students greater confidence, Latimer told me.

Donald Alexander, WLA's Spanish teacher, uses AI to support English-learner students. When a student with very little English joined his classroom, Alexander showed him how to use AI to translate class materials. He then shared that knowledge



Source: Results from national student surveys conducted in May and December 2025 by RAND.

schoolwide, working with the English-learner coordinator to show other teachers how to apply the same approach across subjects. Over time, colleagues observed the student becoming more vocal, less afraid to ask questions, and more engaged in learning.

32%
Teachers who report using AI weekly

5.9 Hours
Estimated weekly time savings from AI tools

SOURCE: GALLUP

WLA teachers are also using AI to address the day-to-day administrative challenges that plague their professional lives.

Clarkson, for example, uses AI to generate a weekly newsletter for the parents of his 86 students, something he says he would never have time to do otherwise. "I would love to be able to call all 86 parents weekly," he said, "but that's a bad use of my time." The newsletter keeps parents informed about upcoming assignments and office hours and offers words of encouragement, bridging the gap between home and the classroom. Informed parents often mean better supported students, both at home and in school.

Alexander, the Spanish teacher, is using AI as he prepares to adopt a new curriculum next year. He loaded vocabulary from his new textbook into an AI tool that used the words to generate independent practice questions and self-paced presentations that incorporated each student's accommodations, such as read-aloud support. But he says double-checking the AI-generated content is non-negotiable. He is also transparent with his students when he uses AI, modeling the same standards of disclosure he expects from them: if AI made it, don't pass it off as your own.

Educators across the nation are also experimenting with AI. In the 2024-25 school year, three in 10 teachers nationwide reported reducing the time they spend on administrative tasks by up to 11 percent, or roughly six hours a week, by using AI.[6]

While WLA teachers have embraced AI to handle the behind-the-scenes work of teaching, the school has also begun integrating AI into its operations. Mark Deegan, the school's chief innovation officer, has led the effort to automate workflows that staff once managed manually. AI now centralizes daily attendance data on a single dashboard, synthesized with a historical record of absences so that staff can identify and reach out to struggling students sooner, rather than waiting until absences have become chronic. Deegan is also using AI to build an in-house ticket system that would handle IT and registrar help requests more efficiently than the school's existing process. The goal is to have staff submit tickets directly to the system, which the AI would categorize and route to the appropriate team member based on historical ticket data. If it works as envisioned, he plans to expand it to cover facility needs as well, from maintenance requests to building issues, creating a single streamlined workflow for the entire operations team.

Facing the Future

AI integration at WLA has not been entirely smooth, reflecting the struggles of schools across the country as they navigate this fast-changing and still poorly understood technology.

Despite the high profile of AI at WLA, buy-in is not universal among teachers or students. Both groups are concerned about job security. A junior who hopes to become an animator told me he's worried about what kind of work will exist for him in an AI future. Another student, an aspiring psychologist, shared her fear that AI is eroding the human connection and social skills her future profession

depends on. WLA does not shy away from this anxiety. Teaching leadership continues to facilitate both formal and informal peer-led professional learning, creating space for staff to voice fears, acknowledge the unknowns, and discuss the future of teaching in the age of AI together. Browning told a meeting of AI-skeptical students that part of AI literacy is being able "to push back on the places we don't want to see AI because it's going to limit the creativity of humans." Creative professions will survive, he predicted, but they'll have to find ways to collaborate with AI.

The Cheating Challenge

Students' use of AI to cheat on assignments is a continuous challenge and source of tension, both at WLA and nationally. With tools like ChatGPT, students can generate full assignments in seconds, raising questions about authorship, original thinking, and academic integrity. One WLA senior explained how this issue extends beyond his school community: "It's my cousins, my friends' cousins. They don't think for themselves anymore because they can just ChatGPT." The Pew Research Center recently found that nearly 60 percent of teenagers reported that classmates used chatbots to cheat "very often" or "somewhat often."[7]

WLA's approach reframes the issue. If a student can paste an entire assignment into ChatGPT and get a passing answer, the problem may not be the student; it may be the assignment. Tasks focused on summary, recall, or formulaic response are often the easiest for AI to complete and may require little analysis or creativity from students. In this sense, AI may be exposing weaknesses in traditional assignments that prioritize completion over deeper thinking. Ashley Jeffrey, chief strategy officer at WLA, asked, "Was it rigorous enough for them in the first place? Was it challenging them? Does our education system need to redefine cheating?" This is not a new tension. Collazo drew a parallel to when he was in school and wasn't allowed to use Wikipedia, a tool his teachers saw as a means of cheating but he saw simply as a way to find sources. The line between using a resource and outsourcing your thinking has always been contested. AI is just making that contest harder to ignore.

Teachers have responded in different ways. Some, like Adam Browning, WLA's AP Psychology teacher, design assignments where AI use is expected and evaluated as a skill integral to the assigned task. In one case, students had 30 minutes to produce a full advertising campaign using as much AI as they wanted—a level four assignment. "This is what kids are going to need to do in their workspace," he said. "You have a deadline. You have to hit it."

Other teachers assess their students using no technology at all. Clarkson, who teaches AP Government, is one example. "Test day, it's paper and pen," he said. Presentations, too, are non-digital: "It's just you and the rest of the class."

> **The question then becomes not how to stop students from cheating with AI, but how to design learning so that they don't want to cheat in the first place.**

The school's rubric for AI use helps clarify expectations, defining when and how AI is appropriate for students to use independently. When students violate those expectations, the response is both educational and disciplinary. Students must meet with a teacher, administrator, and parent to discuss their behavior, why it happened, and how to prevent it in the future. School leaders then determine consequences based on the unique situation, sometimes allowing the student to redo the assignment. Under the school's tiered disciplinary policy, cheating may result in in-school suspension or, in rare cases, out-of-school suspension or expulsion. [8]

More broadly, AI has forced educators to consider whether the way we measure student learning truly captures thinking or something more easily replicable. The question then becomes not how to stop students from cheating with AI, but how to design learning so that they don't want to cheat in the first place. With student disengagement at historic highs, that shift is likely overdue.[9] It requires creating assignments that are relevant to students' lives and require the kind of creativity that a chatbot cannot replace. Preparing students for these assignments may involve a harder kind of teaching, but many at WLA would argue it is better teaching.

Like most of the nation's high schools, WLA is well aware it has not solved the problem of student cheating. But WLA sees cheating less as a reason to abandon AI than to move forward with it thoughtfully. As the student who plans to sell his chatbots to local businesses told me, cheating is always going to happen, AI just makes it easier and quicker. What matters, he believes, is that WLA is at least getting students to talk about it openly.

The Privacy Problem

The privacy of student data is another serious AI-related concern nationally. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the federal law governing student data, was last updated over a decade ago and is largely outdated in the AI era.[10] As AI tools that collect increasingly granular information about how students think, write, and learn have entered the classroom, schools have been left to figure out their own guardrails for protecting student data. The consequences of a mistake can be dire—a recent report by Clever found that in 2025 more than 50 percent of K-12 schools in the U.S. experienced a cybersecurity breach.[11]

At WLA, protecting student data has meant choosing AI tools that are FERPA-compliant, meaning the vendor agrees not to sell or share student data, to use data only for education purposes, and to maintain security standards via encryption and access controls to protect the data. When staff must use tools that are not FERPA-compliant, such as ChatGPT, they are regularly reminded to manually remove students' names and sensitive information. WLA is doing what it can within a regulatory framework written before AI entered classrooms.

Lagging Policies

WLA's experience with AI has unfolded largely without policy guidance from the U.S. Department of Education or District of Columbia education officials. It isn't alone. Although ChatGPT arrived in late 2022, most states didn't release regulations on the use of AI in schools until 2024, more than a year later. In that vacuum, implementation at WLA fell to a small group of teachers and school leaders experimenting on their own time, and building protocols from scratch.

Most schools lacked, and still lack, the leadership and resources to do the same, leading to widespread inconsistency in AI adoption across the nation's schools. As of December 2025, only about one-third of students nationally reported that their school had a schoolwide AI policy, and those with policies were two to three times more likely to restrict AI than permit it.[12]

States are now catching up, and meaningfully so. To date, 35 states have released some form of guidance on AI in education.[13] Most of it is not an enforcement mechanism, but a framework that defines AI, outlines its opportunities and risks in the classroom, and encourages schools to use AI to enhance rather than replace teaching. During the 2026 legislative session, lawmakers in at least 27 states have proposed 68 bills, a sign that states are moving beyond broad principles toward concrete support for implementation, focused largely on AI literacy, integration, and guardrails.[14]

Recent actions at the federal level have reinforced those priorities. President Trump

issued an executive order promoting AI literacy and encouraging classroom integration, while the U.S. Department of Education identified AI in education as a grantmaking priority, directing federal grant funding towards projects that expand AI literacy and integrate AI into classrooms.[15, 16] The U.S. Department of Labor recently released an AI literacy framework to guide nationwide AI literacy efforts across education and workforce systems.[17]

These developments represent meaningful, if overdue, progress. The 2029 PISA, an exam of 15-year-old students from a wide range of international jurisdictions, will include an assessment on AI literacy. Meanwhile fluency with the technology is already becoming a baseline expectation of the U.S. workforce, not a technical niche.[18, 19]

But for many schools navigating daily decisions about tools, policies, and student outcomes, policymakers' response to AI has been inadequate. WLA's experience—marked by trial and error, self-directed experimentation, and systems built without a roadmap—highlights the possibilities of AI in the nation's schools. It has become a school where students understand the technology, teachers use it to do their jobs better, and the conversation about what AI means for the future is happening with students at the table. The March Hackathon made this impressively clear: WLA students weren't just talking about AI; they were building it.

But WLA's experience also points to the support schools need to navigate the AI revolution successfully: dedicated funding for professional learning, clear standards for AI literacy and values across classrooms, and networks for schools to learn from one another to speed implementation. If such support isn't forthcoming, many students, especially those in under-resourced schools, may find themselves unprepared for the world they're inheriting.

LESSONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Washington Leadership Academy's experience with artificial intelligence offers lessons for education policymakers at every level who are navigating the challenges of the new technology.

Prioritize equitable access to AI literacy

As AI increasingly shapes how students access information, learn, and create, AI literacy is essential. WLA demonstrates that when students understand how AI works, where it falls short, and what it means for their futures, they are better equipped to use it critically and on their own terms, knowing when to reach for it and when to push back. Policymakers must ensure that all students have access to AI literacy instruction, not just those in schools with the resources to move first.

State legislators can mandate that AI literacy be taught in all schools, while state education departments can require implementation to include topics beyond basic instruction, such as how AI works, where it fails, and what it means for students' lives and futures. Massachusetts, for example, launched an AI curriculum pilot in 30 school districts in September 2025, with plans to expand statewide in future years.[20] Utah legislators recently enacted two bills—H.B. 218 and H.B. 273—to introduce AI literacy, including a mandatory middle school digital skills course and updated computer-science standards.[21, 22]

LESSONS FOR POLICYMAKERS (Continued)

Fund AI professional learning

Effective AI literacy implementation depends on educator capacity. If teachers are not AI-literate, their students won't be either. Funding for teachers to learn AI should be "a non-negotiable baseline," says WLA's chief strategy officer Ashley Jeffrey.

The National Science Foundation recently invested $11 million to expand AI professional development for K–12 teachers nationwide.[23] States should build on this by dedicating funding for teacher-driven AI professional learning that goes beyond tool instruction to ensure genuine pedagogical understanding of how AI works and how it shapes teaching and learning. Michigan's department of education, for example, is supporting a paid AI and Media Literacy Leadership Collaborative this summer, open to educators at multiple locations across the state, pairing hands-on professional learning with personalized virtual coaching.[24]

Resource cross-school learning

Many schools are navigating the arrival of AI on their own. To change that, WLA has launched a D.C. AI Collaborative, bringing together educators and school leaders to share best practices and compile recommendations for how policy can better support schools.[25, 26] Jeffrey hopes WLA can serve as a guide: "We tried these tools. We tried these processes. Learn from us. And hopefully, you can just hit the ground running as opposed to having to do the learning process like we did."

State education agencies can support this work by investing in networks, convenings, and shared resources that allow lessons learned by early adopters to inform broader implementation. Washington State offers one model, with its Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction convening an AI Innovation Summit to support cross-district learning and planning.[27] Massachusetts has taken a more ongoing approach, convening 45 high school teachers across districts throughout the 2025-26 school year for peer collaboration and shared curriculum design.[28]

Support access to high-quality AI tools

WLA had the time, leadership, and funding to experiment with a range of AI tools, ultimately identifying those that were most useful for teachers and students. Not all schools have the capacity to do this on their own and risk wasting money and student learning time on ineffective tools. State and district leaders can reduce this burden by vetting high-quality AI tools and providing clear guidance on instructional alignment. New York City Public Schools, for example, has adopted a 10-step review process before any AI tool can be used with student data and publishes approved tools on a staff portal.[29]

Establish clear student data privacy standards

Schools should not have to build data privacy protocols from scratch. FERPA was last updated over a decade ago and has not kept pace with the granularity of the data now collected by AI.

State legislators and federal policymakers should establish clear, enforceable standards for what AI tool providers can and cannot do with student data, and state education departments should provide guidance so that schools, particularly smaller ones without dedicated legal or technical staff, are not left to navigate data security on their own. Idaho's S.B. 1227 is encouraging on this front, directing the state's education department to develop a comprehensive AI framework to address privacy and procurement standards for AI tools.[30]

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