The AI Landscape and Lessons from Early Adopters

Center on Reinventing Public Education

January 2026

CRPE REINVENTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

ASU Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College
Arizona State University

Recent CRPE Research: Examining AI in Education

State Policy and Guidance

System & Educator Adoption

Teacher Prep Program Readiness

Idea & Network Building

AI Learning Forum

Forward: Learning with AI Newsletter

School System Early Adopters Network

Think

National Research Agenda

Agenda

1. Centering Student Voices in AI
2. The 2025 AI Landscape: District and State Early Adopters; AI and Coherence
3. AI Gap Analysis Study and Expert Interviews

Centering Youth Voices in our Conversations

In October 2025, CRPE joined Project Tomorrow for a panel discussion with high school students on their thoughts about AI.


AI more, I'm scared
that like I'll rely more on AI rather

Crowdsourced Responses

Consider the video you just watched and any conversations you've held with a young person in your life about AI.

- What stood out to you or surprised you?
- What do adults not understand about how young people are using AI or how it's changing their lives?
- How might these ideas inform the ideas and questions you bring to your work?

Add your thoughts to Slido.

The AI Landscape

Sources: CRPE AI Early Adopter rapid response research, RAND nationally representative surveys (2023-2025)

The Situation Report

Five years after the pandemic, public schools are still struggling to recover.

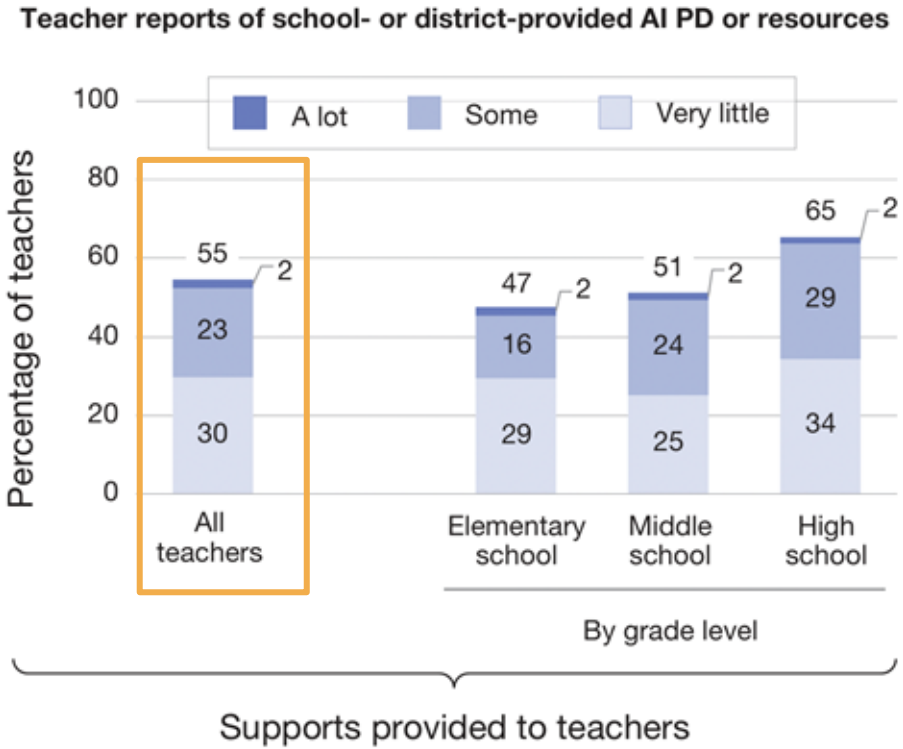
- **Achievement gaps** have widened.
- **Student enrollment** is in decline.
- The **teaching profession** is at an all time low.
- Many schools have reverted back to an **outdated system** that wasn't built to meet today's challenges.

The Situation Report

- Efforts to **dismantle federal infrastructure** signal dissatisfaction—but need a vision for solutions.
- **AI is becoming mainstream**, causing fears about everything from cheating to workforce upheaval.
- Amidst the disruption, **states and districts must ask: *"What could be?"***

CRPE
REINVENTING
PUBLIC EDUCATION

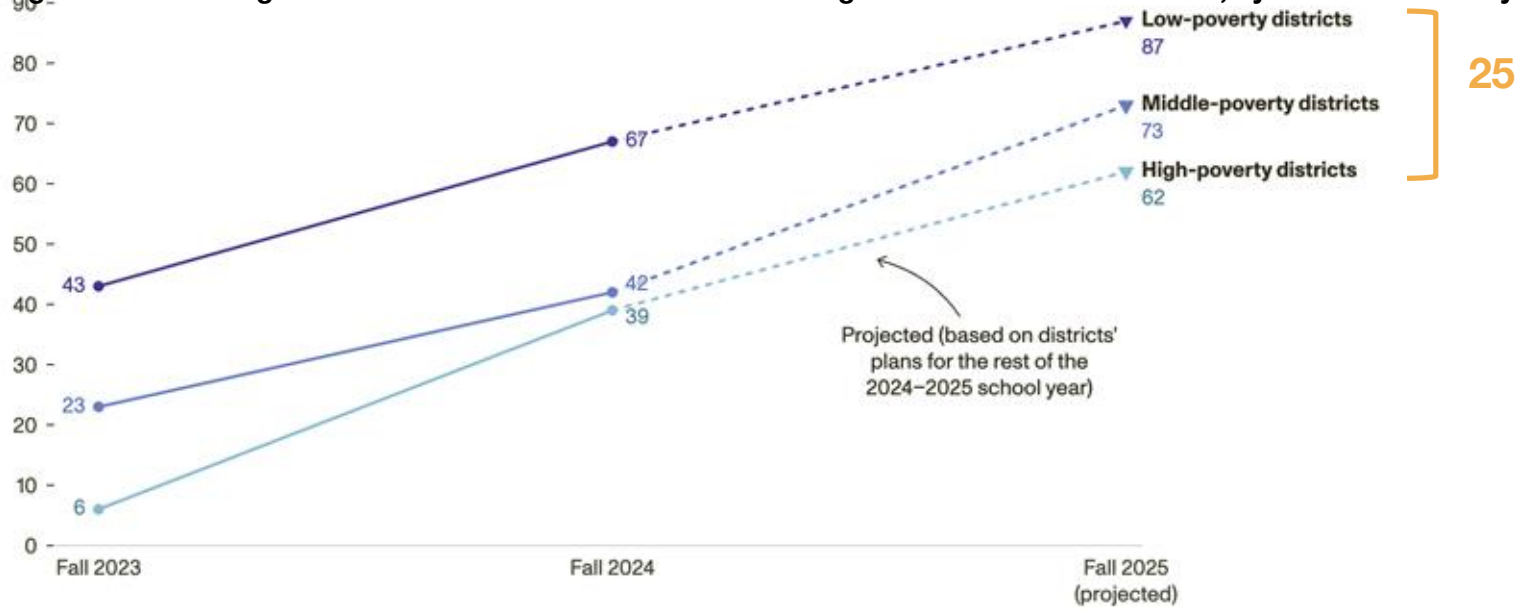
AI teacher training is mixed



Source: RAND/CRPE Sept. 2025

Access gaps in districts persist

Figure 2. Percentage of Districts That Have Provided Training to Teachers About AI Use, by Year and Poverty Status

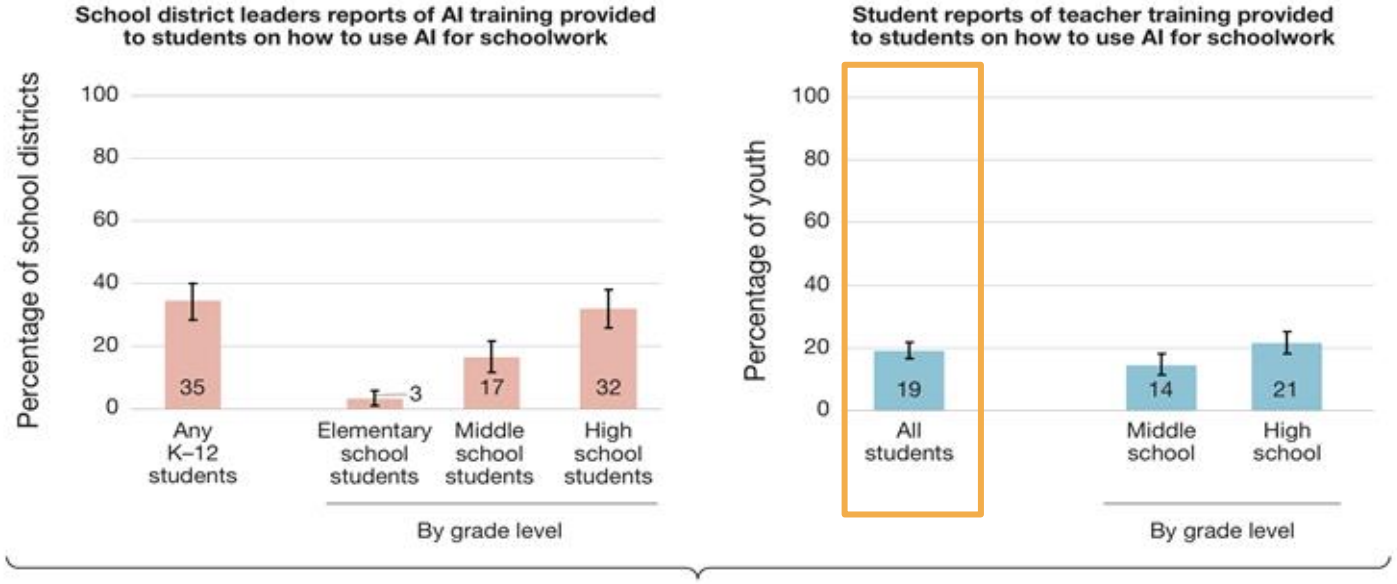


Source: RAND/CRPE Sept. 2025

Students report getting little support

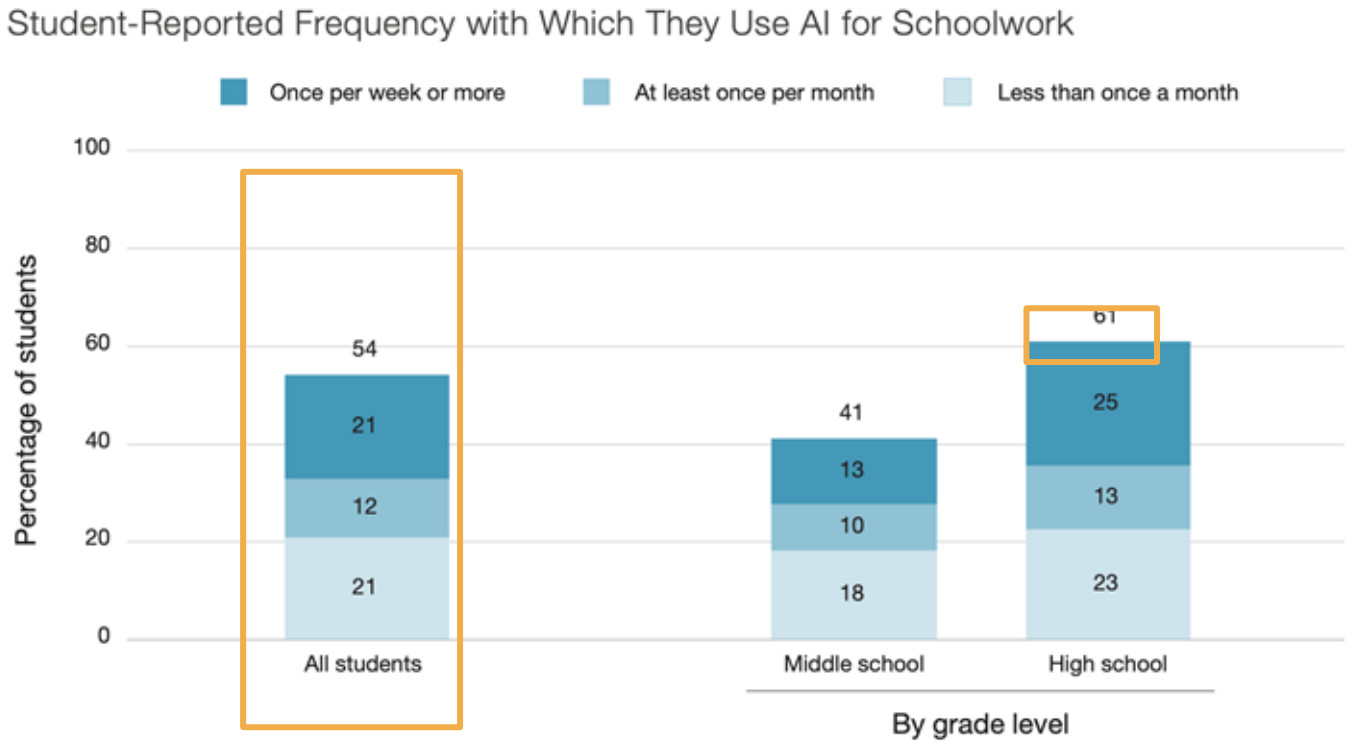
FIGURE 7

Reports of Student Training on AI and the Provision of AI Professional Development and Resources to Teachers



Source: RAND/CRPE Sept. 2025

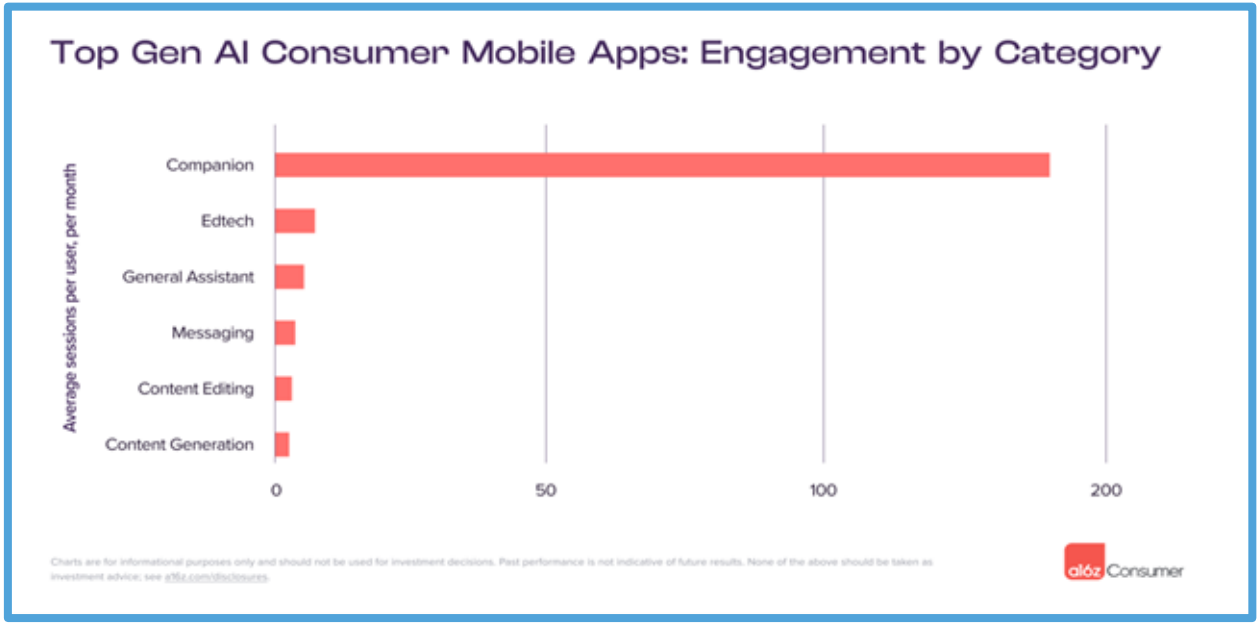
Students report increasing use of AI



Source: RAND/CRPE Sept. 2025

Trends on Student Consumption of AI
(courtesy of The Rithm Project)

Companions are the fastest growing market, estimated at a $28 billion industry.

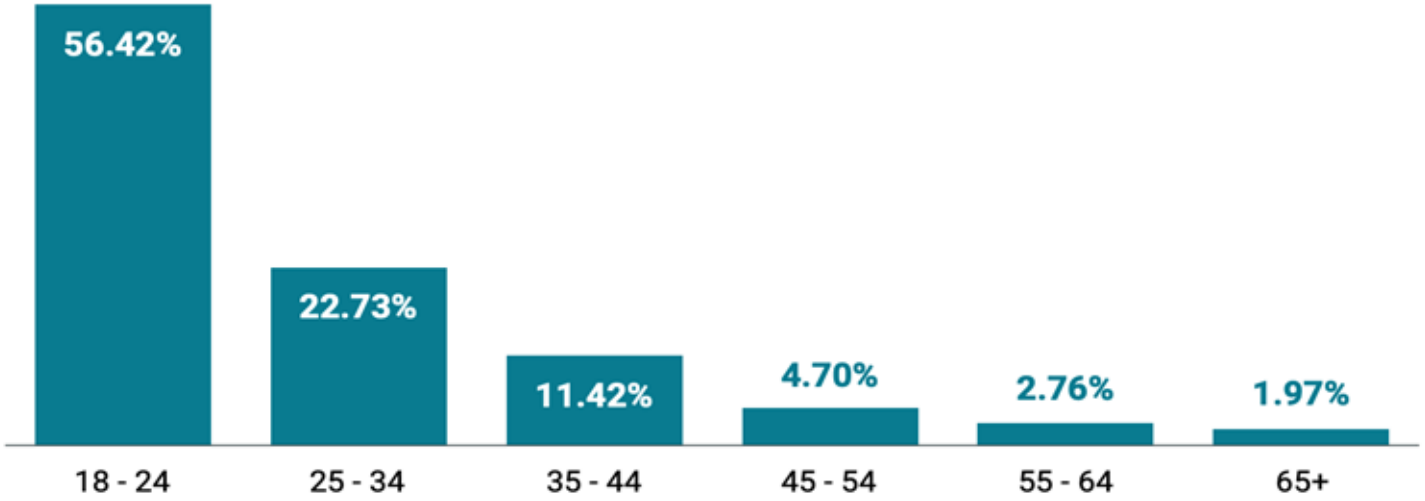


Top 10 GenAI Web Products

by Unique Monthly Visits, **August 2025**

1. ChatGPT
2. Gemini
3. deepseek
4. Grok
5. character.ai
6. perplexity
7. Claude
8. JanitorAI
9. Quark
10. Google AI Studio

Over half of Character AI's 28 million users are under 24.

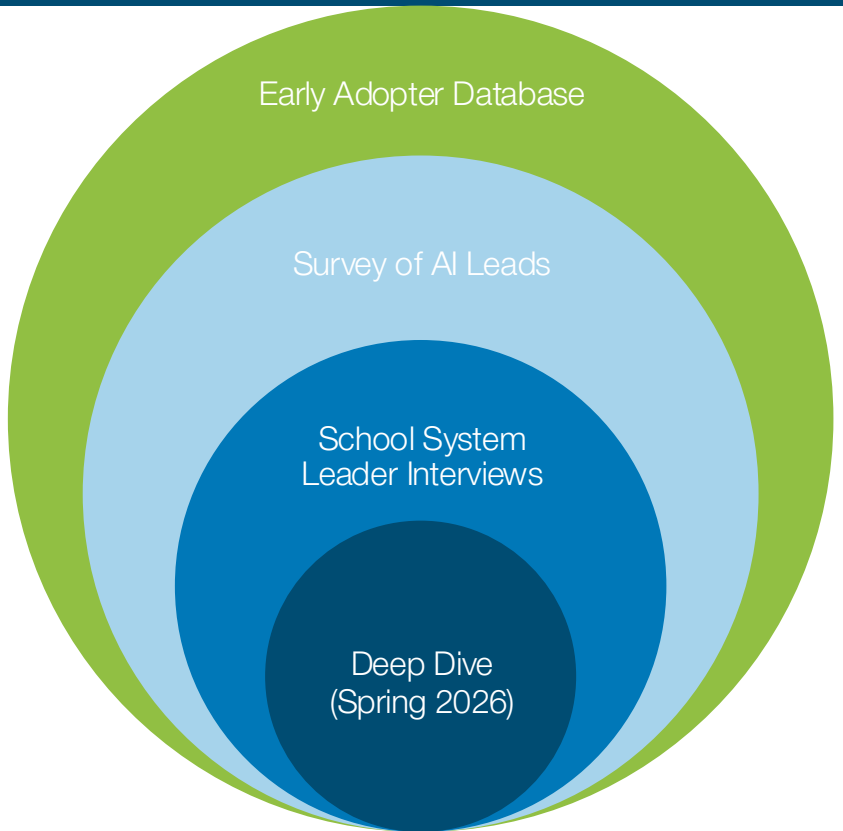


(Feb 2025)

District AI Early Adopters Study: Timeline and Components

Timeline: Jul 2023 - Aug 2026

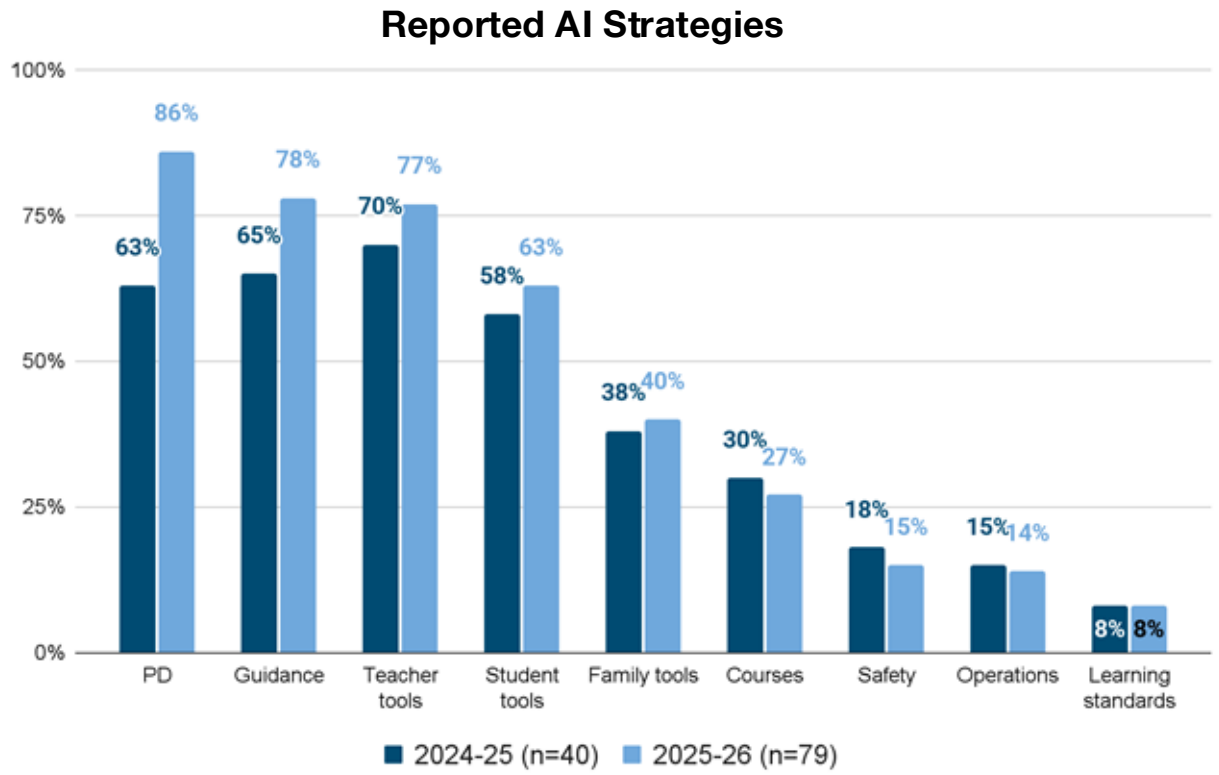
- Identified **100+** potential early adopter school systems through outreach, solicitation, and desk research
- Profiled **79 systems** for the early adopter database
- Survey sent to **119 systems**, **45 responses** (38% response rate)
- Interviews with **28 participants** across **14 school systems** (**6** school systems were also interviewed in SY 24-25).



District AI Early Adopters in 2025-26 ***[Preliminary]***

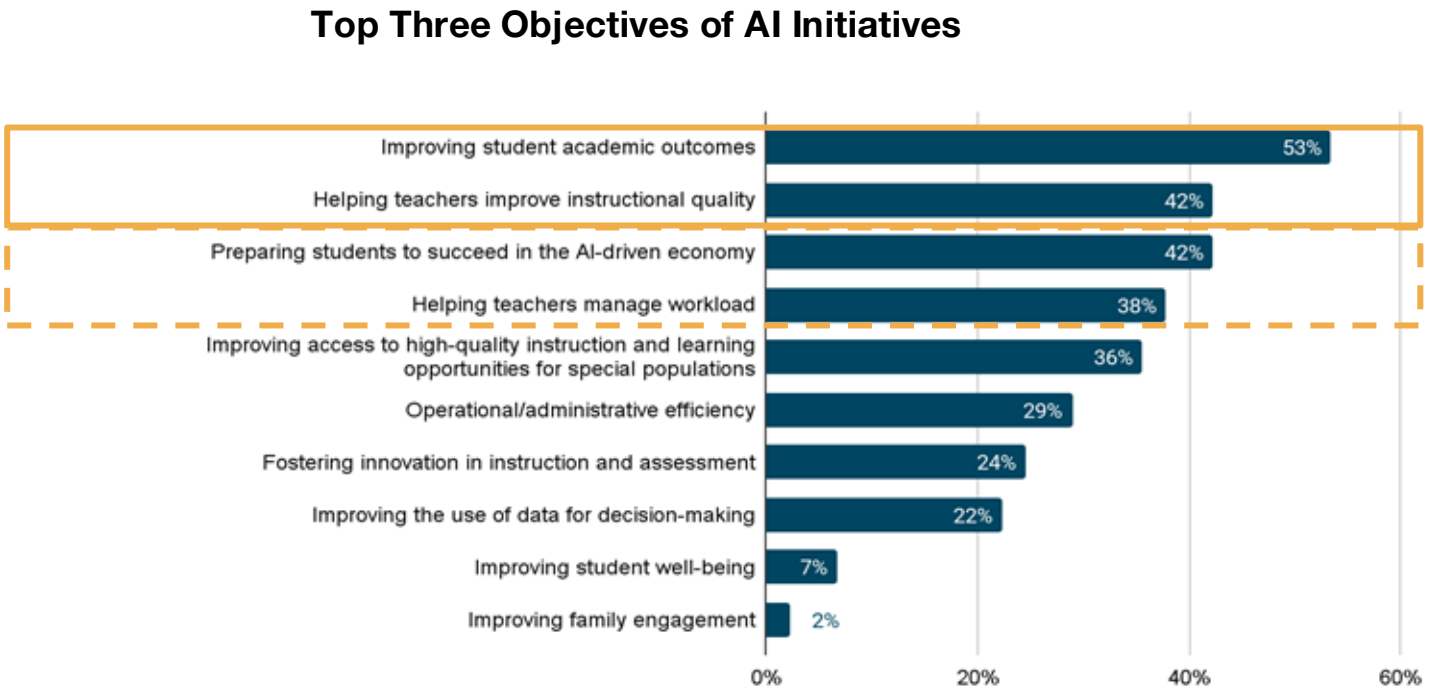
1. Early adopters are doing more with AI this year, expanding their focus on teachers to address students and operational efficiencies.
2. They are selecting tools more strategically, aligning AI to systemic goals, and informally measuring AI tool impact.
3. Almost all are using AI to improve (and reinforce) the traditional model of schooling. A few “reimaginers” are piloting new models, though pilots are early and isolated within their own systems.
4. Early adopters are contemplating how to prepare students for the age of AI, but conversation remains aspirational at this point.
5. To truly transform, reimaginers will need dedicated time and space to craft new visions and practice agile leadership. This requires more thought leadership, investment in leaders’ capacity building, and increased buy-in across stakeholders.

Early Adopters deepen AI engagement in 2025-26



CRPE District Early Adopter Database (Summer 2025)

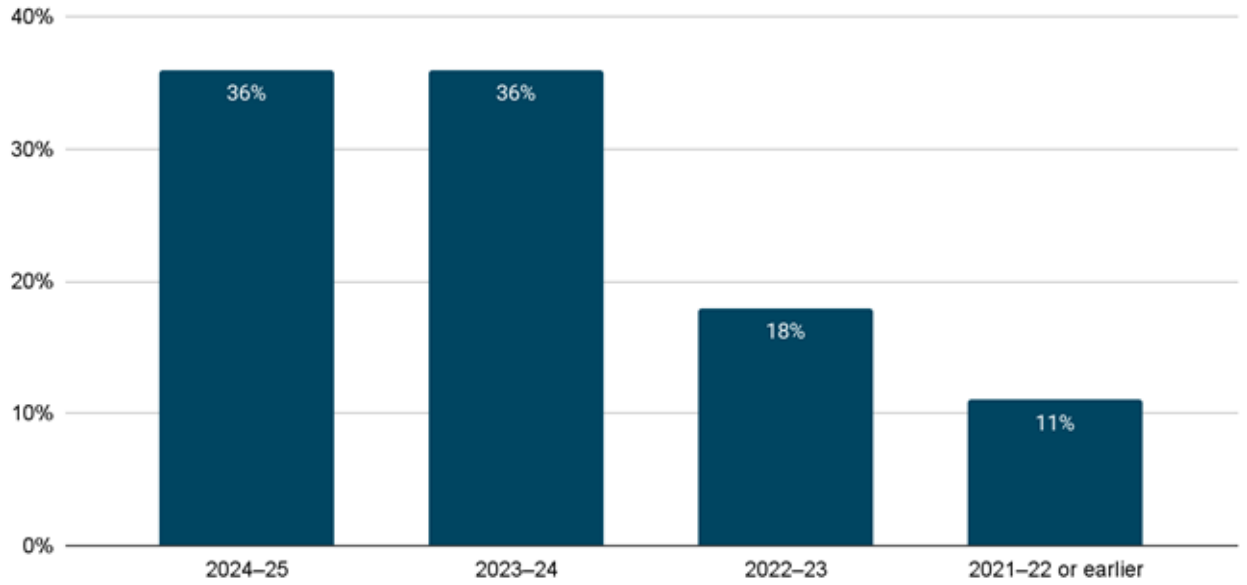
District goals increasingly emphasize students



CRPE District Early Adopter Survey (Oct 2025)

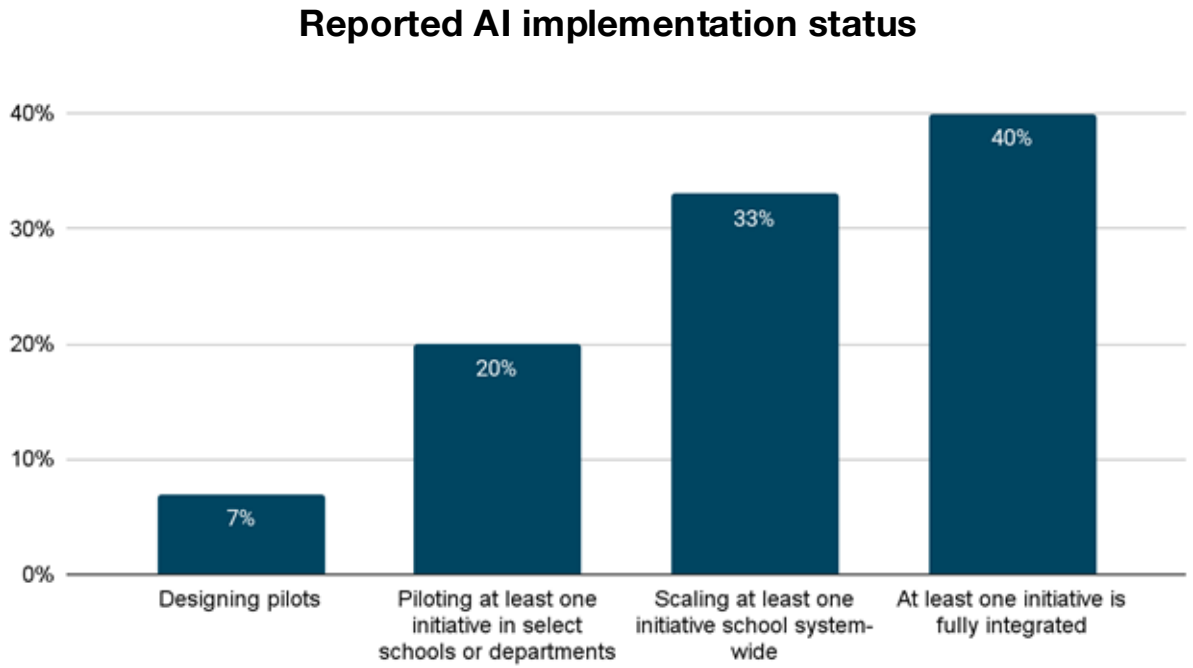
Most have just begun strategic AI adoption…

When did systems begin systemically piloting or implementing AI initiatives?



CRPE District Early Adopter Survey (Oct 2025)

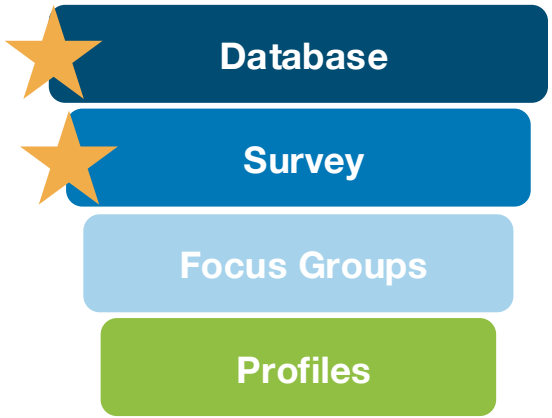
…But report scaling at least one initiative.



CRPE District Early Adopter Survey (Oct 2025)

State AI Early Adopters Study: Timeline and Components

Timeline: Aug 2025 - Aug 2026



Data Collection	Purpose
First release (Jan 2026): 20 states **Second release (TBD):** up to 50 states	Desk research to build understanding of landscape
Outreach to all 55 states and territories plus partner organizations	Gather perceptions on SEA actions
Targeted outreach and small group interviews with early actors/adopters	Expand on learnings from database and survey
One-on-one deep dive interviews with a few states of interest	Go under the hood and surface case studies and example approaches

State AI Early Adopter Learnings *[Preliminary]*

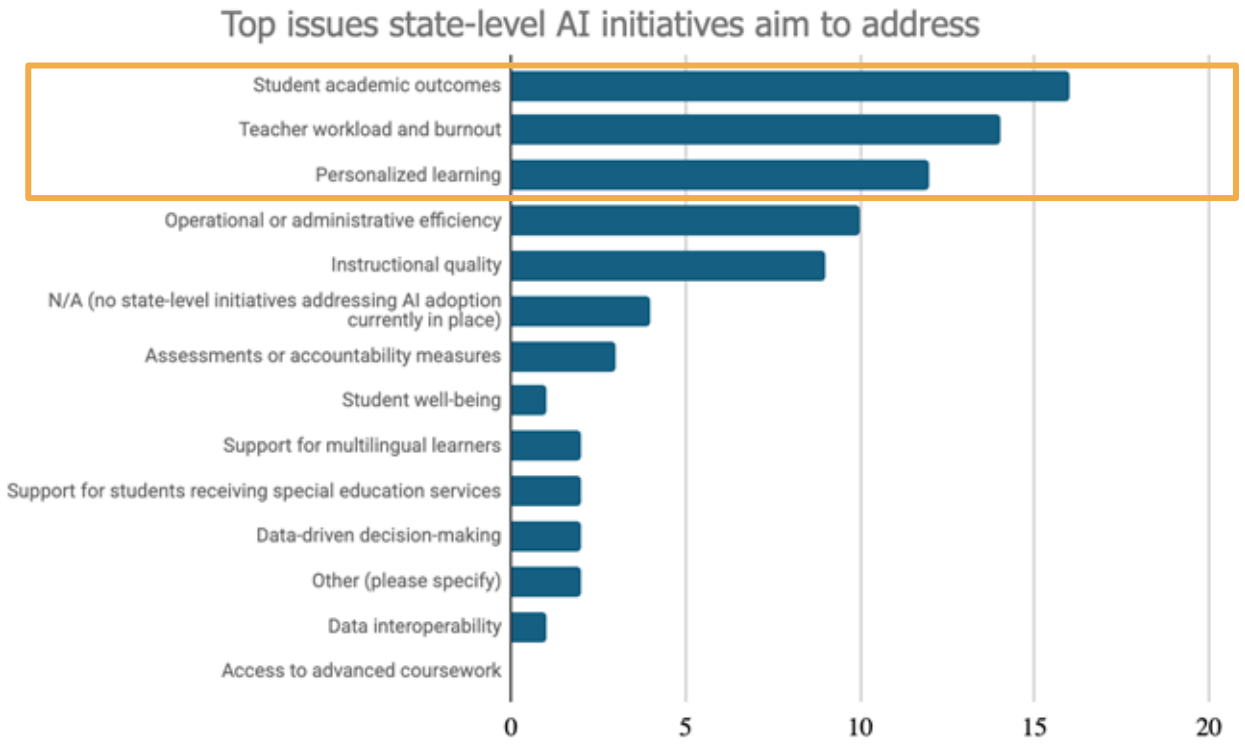
- **Vision and leadership** matter.
  - AI is not a niche issue but a whole-of-government concern.
- Most are taking a **“learn first, direct later”** approach
  - **Pilots, not mandates**, are likely the entry point to adoption.
- Partnerships are playing a key role
  - Higher ed and intermediary organizations can play **critical bridging roles.**
- State enablers include **strong leadership, vision, and collaboration across agencies and partners.**
- State barriers include **limited resources, time, AI expertise, and infrastructure.**

Publicly observable behavior emphasizes leadership, partnerships, and pilots

- **The legislature, governor, or both have taken AI-related action in most of these states**, varying from the establishment of an AI task force or governing body, to directives on creating guidance, to promoting AI literacy and learning opportunities, to ensuring safety and data privacy, to studying impact and more.
- Just over half of SEAs (11 out of 20) in these states have developed **partnerships** with higher education institutions, industry, and intermediaries in one or more ways.
- Half (10 out of 20) of these states have provided or are seeking funding to provide statewide **pilot opportunities**.

CRPE State Early Adopter Database (Fall 2025)

States prioritize AI for advancing student outcomes and reducing teacher burnout



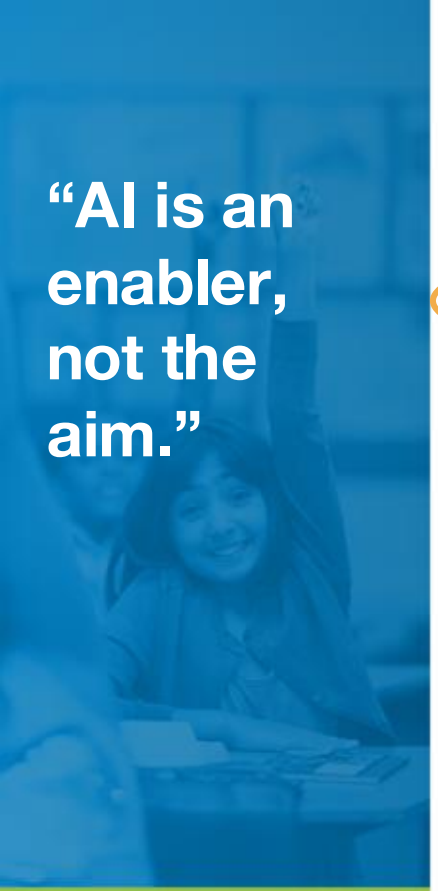
CRPE State Early Adopter Survey (Dec 2025)

Examples of state AI-related actions

Florida is engaging the broader community around AI. The state's AI Task Force is pursuing events including a Virtual AI Family and Friends Night, Student-Led AI Workshops, Local Business AI Demo Days, an AI Maker Fair, and Future Classroom Demos.

Utah hired a full-time AI specialist to help support interagency collaboration around AI implementation. They have secured statewide pricing for AI tools, helped secure funding for basic AI training for more than 4,500 teachers, and created a system for training participants to contribute lesson plans to the state's Open Educational Resources hub.

North Carolina is providing educators with tangible, practical examples. Their state-level guidance includes example lessons that vary in the level of intensity for AI use. The state rolled out (optional) training to district leaders in alignment with its guidance.

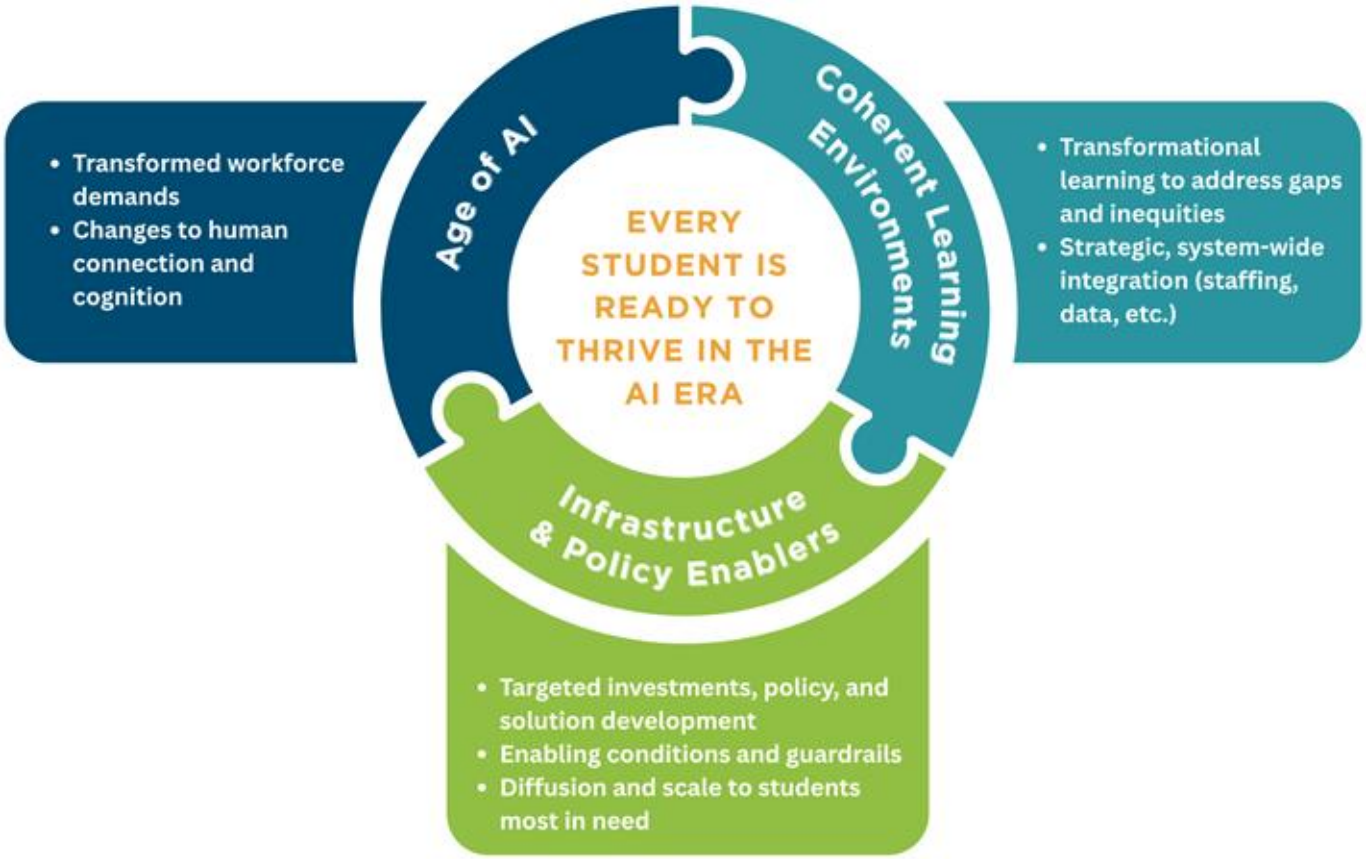


“AI is an enabler, not the aim.”

District leaders face big questions…

- What should the **goals** of public education be in an AI-powered future?
- What **current and emerging technologies** could help achieve those goals?
- Where are the **biggest gaps** between today’s system and that vision?
- What types of **learning experiences** (inside and beyond traditional schools) best foster student agency, adaptability, and future readiness in the age of AI?

Three Dimensions of AI Coherence



“Gap Analysis” study with AI education experts: Supply vs. Demand

There is a **massive gap** between what edtech is building and what students need, now and in the future. Developers are not meeting the moment, but neither are education leaders—and it’s a toxic combination. **To bridge the gap, leaders must catalyze building vision, instructional coherence, and systemic change—not just better tools.**

Supply Side

Weak understanding of education problems, poor link to evidence, “in the box” orientation.

Demand Side

Lack of vision, specification of problems. Misaligned policy and politics, inequitable uptake.

Topline Themes

To date: many exciting innovations and potential. However…

- Tool obsession without a vision/plan for large scale implementation, training, and redesign
- Lack of classroom/school integration and coherence
- Misalignment with education's underlying challenges
- Poor preparation for future realities
- Missed opportunities to address key education pain points, build for coherence and transformation

The Tool Mentality vs. Systemic Change

The market is currently flooded with point solutions, but education's real challenges are structural.

"Funders are WAY too focused on tools… we need more investment in capacity and change management."

"We are likely over tooled and over solutioned at the moment."

"Companies are remaking how they structure their systems—over here in education we're talking about chatbots."

Poor Integration into Classrooms and Schools

AI tools are not yet meaningfully embedded into a coherent strategy for teaching and learning.

“Edtech thinks engagement means balloons, not integration.”

“An app isn’t a lesson plan. Any tool needs to come with a pedagogy.”

“Teachers often have a core curriculum plus a handful of supplementals plus products or programs they like plus tutoring programs down the hall—all might be good, but they don't talk to each other, and **the teacher is saddled with the job of understanding how to use all of them together.”**

Disconnected from Instructional Science and Good Practice

Evidence is too often an afterthought.

"What's coming out is not necessarily very useful or meaningful to improving learning or **may not be grounded in learning science**."

"We have decades of research on science of learning that hasn't gone away, those things are still true; **[we] need to hang on to learning principles and not make it feel so untethered."**

"I have a hard time thinking through [how] AI is…**expanding the reach of a highly effective teacher**, or making a teacher more highly effective at delivering great instruction."

Misaligned with Education's Core Problems

AI tools largely ignore student motivation, creativity, and social connection.

"The biggest problem is that **students don't like school."**

"AI tools are all about **self-help, not human help."**

"It's abundantly clear that **young people need more social connectedness, social support, PERIOD."**

"We're not talking at all about **what we should or should not be teaching in the age of AI."**

Not Preparing Students for the Future

Today's tools reinforce the old system rather than help students build future-ready skills/knowledge.

"If we want creative and collaborative people, we can't keep putting them through a factory."

"The market is providing tools that are not about the future."

"Investors **aren't funding game changers** like mentorship networks."

"How can we as educators lead without centering and rethinking the institution in all the answers we come up with?"

Low- Hanging Fruit

AI could address real pain points for educators and systems:

- Teacher coaching
- Scheduling
- Special Education
- Assessment
- Communication
- Mental Health

“We could revolutionize special ed with AI.”

“Start by asking teams what they need for scheduling, feedback, communication.”

“Most folks don't know what's possible because they haven’t had exposure to it. They don't know what’s available because they haven't seen it.”

What could help?

Investment in demand-side redesign.

“There is already a capital market for tools and solutions; there's not a market for the emerging cross section of educators and technology.”

Center student and educator demands

“We need principles that don't let us forget the science of learning and student/educator experience.”

“Can we drive versus being driven? That would require a tectonic shift in our approach to education.”

Design AI for the margins

“Products aren't designed with underserved students in mind.”

“We need to design environments where teachers can play.“

Three Models of Future Ready Schooling

The transition from the current system to an AI-native future is a progression along a continuum of integration, requiring increasing levels of organizational redesign and capacity building.

"AI is not a tool we add to schools—it is the architecture that can reinvent them."

– Bob Hughes, Gates Foundation

Three Models

Model 1: AI-Assisted

Efficiency & Support

- Keeps traditional structure (grades, periods)
- AI automates tasks and offers adaptive practice
- Improves efficiency but limited impact

Model 2: AI-Integrated

Redesign & Integration

- Partial redesign: flexible schedules, competency-based progression
- Teachers become facilitators; AI supports daily learning
- Blends relationships with AI-guided personalization

Model 3: AI-Native

Transformation & Personalization

- Full redesign—age/subject barriers dissolve
- Persistent AI tutors; teachers as learning architects
- Students progress by mastery through real-world collaboration

Small Group Reflection

In a pair or triad, share your thoughts.

- As you reflect on how AI is reshaping our world, what is most important for education systems to pay attention to right now?
- What will it take to unlock education systems' capacity to truly adapt to this moment?