



# ETHICAL INNOVATION

A DEEP DIVE INTO A BRIDGE (KEY THEME) FROM THE  
2025 DRIVING K-12 INNOVATION REPORT

Driving K-12 Innovation Bridges are important themes that span Top Topics for education innovation, connecting today's education challenges with tomorrow's opportunity. The 2025 Bridges are Ethical Innovation, Personalization, the Future of Work, and Critical Media Literacy. This resource focuses on the Ethical Innovation.

# ETHICAL INNOVATION

## DEFINITION

Ethical Innovation centers on the “why” of change, aligning efforts with educational goals like fostering growth, equity, and responsible digital citizenship. It emphasizes the importance of responsible design and implementation of new technologies, safeguarding student privacy and promoting equitable access and benefit. When it comes to emerging technologies, ethical innovation ensures that advancements prioritize equity and the well-being and success of students, educators, and communities. Innovation and change are neither inherently “good” nor “bad”; the value lies in the purpose and impact.

Ethical Innovation requires an inclusive design approach including educators, students, and parents in key decision-making processes. This ensures transparency and responsiveness to real needs. Furthermore, it reinforces the importance of teacher training to navigate the ethical implications of technology and integrate it responsibly into the classroom. This approach not only prepares students for academic success but also equips them to navigate and contribute ethically to a rapidly evolving world.

## SUMMARY

As technology accelerates, education leaders are rethinking what it means to innovate responsibly. Ethical Innovation goes beyond adopting new tools: it’s about aligning decisions with purpose, centering student well-being, and ensuring equity isn’t an afterthought. It requires **building the capacity of educators\*** and **giving learners agency** to use technology wisely, safeguarding privacy from the start, and engaging communities in shaping what comes next. Innovation’s impact depends on how — and why — it’s applied. In a time of complexity and change, Ethical Innovation offers a path forward rooted in reflection, collaboration, and the values that matter most in education.

\* Top Topics from the Driving K-12 Innovation 2025 report are marked with bold, blue font

If innovation is going to be meaningful, it must be grounded in ethics — as well as equity and shared purpose. At CoSN’s EdTech Innovation Committee meeting in May 2025, members brought forward this powerful consensus.

Their conversation on Ethical Innovation centered on five interconnected focus areas: purposeful change, ethical capacity building, responsible tech design, inclusive decision-making, and a value-neutral view of innovation.

**What emerged was a shared understanding: Ethical Innovation requires clarity of purpose, community collaboration, and the courage to rethink our assumptions.**

## Purposeful Change

Innovation isn’t about chasing trends, but aligning with strategic goals and student well-being. “Ethical innovation is intentional. It prioritizes impact over impulse and purpose over hype,” noted Celia Gossett (Guilford County Schools, North Carolina). “Ethical innovators ask: Why are we doing this? Who asked for it? Whose needs are being addressed — and whose are overlooked?”

Members agreed that the learner must drive learning, not the technology. Reflecting on pandemic-era spending, Samantha Reid (Jenks Public Schools, Oklahoma) observed, “COVID-19 money was used to buy so much ‘stuff’ without considering the why. As that technology reaches end of life, we are being more thoughtful about what is purchased and why.”

## Ethical Capacity Building

Building ethical capacity means equipping both educators and students to engage with technology critically and responsibly. EdTech Innovation Committee member Ruben Puente (Hippasus, Massachusetts) pointed to Action Research as a powerful strategy to meet this need. “Action Research, while it is not a magical cure-all, can go a long way towards addressing the challenges referenced in the context of Ethical Capacity Building and Professional Learning (PL),” he explained. “In particular, in the context of a technology that is evolving as fast as **Generative AI**, I’m not sure that any traditional PL approach that does not incorporate some form of Action Research can keep up with the technology.”

Committee member Michael Fort (Baltimore County Public Schools, Maryland) added the need to bring ethical AI use into the classroom culture, starting with educators. “Teaching students ethical use of AI is critical. Teaching the teachers how to recognize ethical use by students and to celebrate it and not hide from the AI tool is a key factor,” he said.

Ethical capacity-building should also include helping students “develop their own guardrails” in their digital lives and teaching ethics explicitly — especially in high school, where students are particularly impressionable. Committee member Mark Leslie (Richland School District One, South Carolina) agreed that this work needs structure and clarity: “This is why Professional Development for teachers and a structured process for using AI (or any other new technology) in the classroom is critical. Students and teachers both need to be clear on how and when it is okay to use it and when not to.”

## Responsible Tech Design & Implementation

EdTech Innovation Committee member Stacy Hawthorne (Learn21, Ohio) shared that student data privacy must be a proactive, not reactive, consideration: “In a world where digital footprints start before kindergarten, ethics can’t be an afterthought.”

Reid pointed to the often-confusing layers of privacy policy across tools — general consumer, educational, age-specific, and paid vs. free versions — all of which must be carefully navigated. Vetting platforms through questions like “What does this tool do with student data?” is becoming a baseline standard in ethical implementation.

## Inclusive & On-Going Decision-Making

Ethical Innovation must be co-created with the people it impacts most. EdTech Innovation Committee member Dr. Beverly Knox-Pipes (Retired CTO, Michigan) emphasized the importance of creating environments where educators help shape the appropriate use of technology rather than simply reacting to it. “Teachers understand instruction,” she noted. “What they need is the support to design teaching and learning environments where technology is meaningfully integrated—not just handed tools without purpose.”

Inclusive processes aren’t just about representation — they’re essential for relevance, equity, and trust. Committee member Johannah Arndt (District 279 Osseo Area Schools, Minnesota) reminded the committee that people adopt change at different speeds, and ethical implementation must accommodate those variations. Flexibility, patience, and intentional pacing all contribute to more sustainable, community-centered innovation.

## Value-Neutral View of Innovation

Technology itself is not inherently good or bad — its value lies in how it is applied. Hawthorne shared a key mindset shift: “Don’t chase tools. Define your goals first. Then ask what technology can help you get there — with less friction and more joy.”

But Jess Thomas (Guilford County Schools, North Carolina) reminded the committee that, in our current climate, the connection between inclusive decision-making (equity) and value-neutral view of innovation has become much more complex. “Equity no longer seems to be value-neutral in some views. That introduces new barriers and complexity to our work,” she explained.

Ethical innovation isn’t just about what we implement: it’s about how, why, and for whom. As this conversation made clear, educational technology must be guided by purpose, shaped by inclusive processes, and held accountable to real-world outcomes.

## TIPS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE EDTECH INNOVATION COMMITTEE

### START WITH LEARNING GOALS, NOT TOOLS

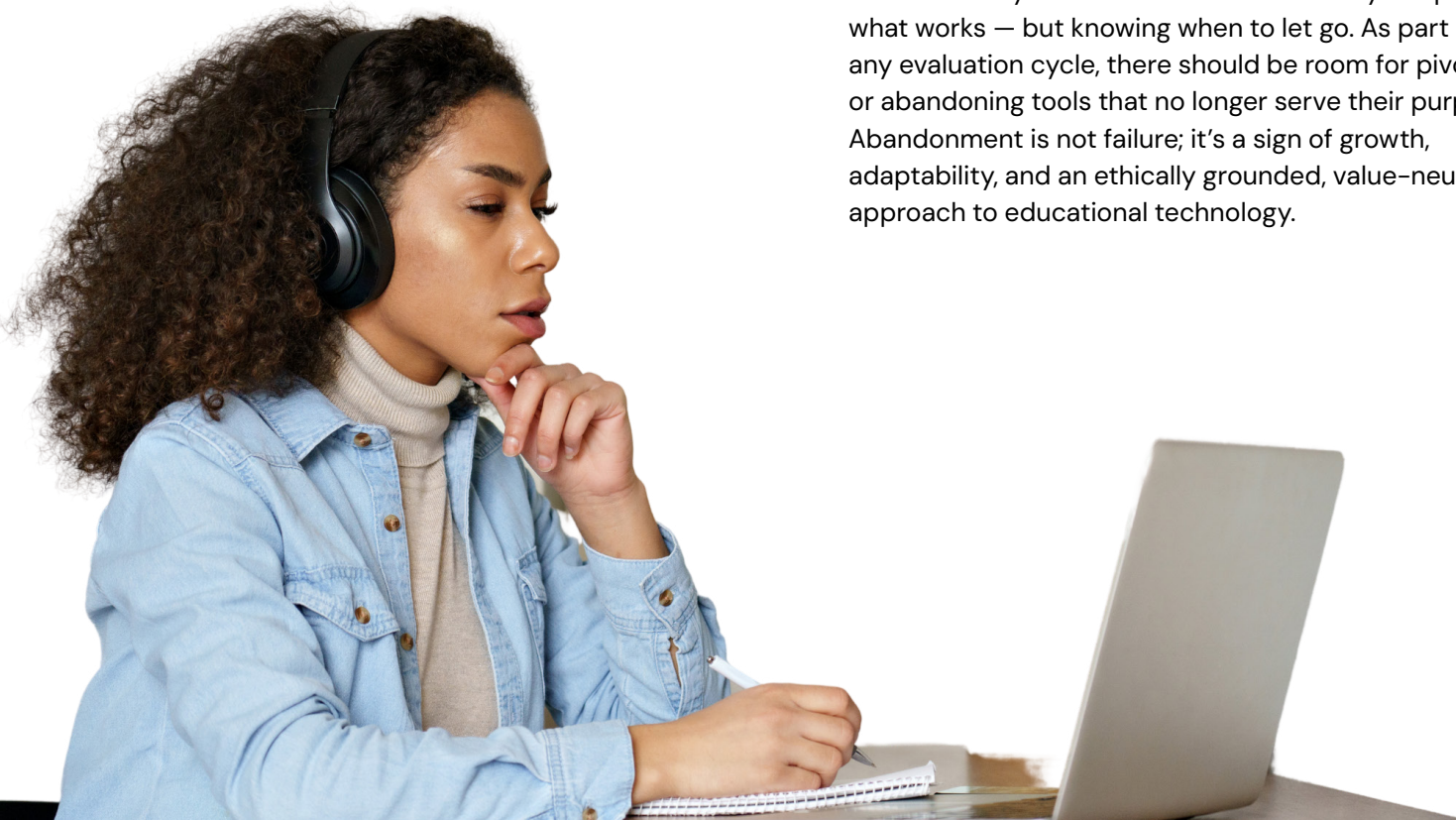
Before selecting any technology, ask: What do we want students to be able to do? Let learning objectives drive the search for tools — not the other way around. Educators often begin by browsing for solutions, but without a clear goal, they risk choosing tools that aren’t well-matched to instructional needs. Grounding the conversation with purpose allows for better alignment and more effective use of technology.

### UNDERSTAND AND CHALLENGE AI BIAS

EdTech leaders must take an active role in understanding how AI tools are developed and how their algorithms function. This includes recognizing potential biases that can perpetuate stereotypes or produce inequitable outcomes for students. Ethical use of AI requires transparency, fairness, and a willingness to question how decisions are made behind the scenes.

### MAKE SPACE FOR STRATEGIC ABANDONMENT

Accountability in innovation means not only adopting what works — but knowing when to let go. As part of any evaluation cycle, there should be room for pivoting or abandoning tools that no longer serve their purpose. Abandonment is not failure; it’s a sign of growth, adaptability, and an ethically grounded, value-neutral approach to educational technology.



# RESOURCE

[Learning First, Technology Second: Triple E Framework](#), Dr. Liz Kolb

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