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DRIVING K-12 INNOVATION

2026 HURDLES • ACCELERATORS • TECH ENABLERS

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ABOUT CoSN - THE CONSORTIUM FOR SCHOOL NETWORKING

CoSN, the world-class professional association for K-12 EdTech leaders, stands at the forefront of education innovation. We are driven by a mission to equip current and aspiring K-12 education technology leaders, their teams, and school districts with the community, knowledge, and professional development they need to cultivate engaging learning environments. Our vision is rooted in a future where every learner reaches their unique potential, guided by our community. CoSN represents over 14 million students and continues to grow as a powerful and influential voice in K-12 education. CoSN also provides opportunities for companies that support the K-12 EdTech community to participate as corporate members.

FOREWORD

K-12 education is facing a pivotal moment. Around the world, educators and education technology professionals are navigating rapid advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), intensifying cybersecurity threats, shifting workforce expectations, and evolving understandings of how students learn and demonstrate knowledge. This year's Driving K-12 Innovation initiative's Top Topics reflect these realities with clarity and urgency.

While our 2026 Accelerators remain unchanged from those of 2025, the landscape around them has meaningfully shifted. **Critical Media Literacy enters the Hurdles list for the first time**, highlighting the global imperative for students to navigate AI-generated content, misinformation, and the blurred lines between fact and fabrication. **Data & Information Visualization joins the Tech Enablers**, signaling a growing recognition that making data usable and actionable is essential for equity and instructional decision-making. And, for the first time since 2020, **Tools for Privacy & Safety Online returns as a Tech Enabler**, underscoring how dramatically cyber risks and data governance needs have intensified.

Designed to help schools around the world innovate with confidence into 2026 and beyond, this report offers grounded insights from districts of varying sizes, instructional contexts, and global perspectives, showing how these Top Topics work in concert to impact the future of K-12 learning.

Most importantly, the report affirms a shared truth: **Technology will keep accelerating, but intentional innovation in K-12 education depends on the strength, creativity, and humanity of educators and IT leaders**. This report invites you to lead that future boldly and responsibly, and together.

Keith Krueger
CEO
CoSN - The Consortium for School Networking
Washington DC, United States

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INTRODUCTION

CoSN's Driving K-12 Innovation initiative proudly convenes an international Advisory Board of approximately 130+ education and technology experts to select the most important Hurdles (challenges), Accelerators (mega-trends), and Tech Enablers (tools) Driving K-12 Innovation for the year ahead.

The Advisory Board engages in discussion via CoSN's online forum, synchronous virtual calls via Zoom, and also participates in two surveys to select the top themes in each category that are transforming teaching and learning. This year, the Advisory Board's work took place over approximately 11 weeks.

Jump to page 35-36 for a convenient, printable summary of the 2026 Top Topics.

METHODOLOGY

STEP 1: INITIAL SURVEY

The Advisory Board completed an initial survey to select the topics for subsequent discussion. This survey narrowed down the original list of Hurdles from 40 to 14, Accelerators from 28 to 12, and Tech Enablers from 29 to 13.

STEP 2: DISCUSSION

Six weeks of fruitful virtual conversation followed the initial survey. Each week, the Advisory Board responded to prompts and engaged in conversation focused on one of the initiative's key lenses: Hurdles, Accelerators, and Tech Enablers. Discussion opportunities were offered via the online forum and synchronous Zoom calls.

STEP 3: FINAL SURVEY

In the Final Survey, Advisory Board members voted[1] on the Hurdles, Accelerators, and Tech Enablers most affecting their work. Of the many important topics considered, nine emerged as the top key considerations for driving innovation in K-12 education in 2026. The Final Survey also helped describe the nature of each topic: the surmountability of Hurdles, the intensity of Accelerators, and the timeliness of Tech Enablers.

STEP 4: SYNTHESIS WEEK

Once the Advisory Board completed the Final Survey and Top Topics were known, they were invited to return to the online forum for 1.5 weeks of asynchronous discussion to share their perspectives, and to comment on any Bridges (or themes) they noticed from the 2026 selected topics.

1 Final Survey Methodology Update: Inspired by feedback from past Advisory Boards, the leadership team decided to adjust the voting method this year. In previous years, each Advisory Board member was asked to select exactly three topics in each category: Hurdles, Accelerators, and Tech Enablers. In the new voting approach, each Advisory Board member was given six "points" to spend in each category (Hurdles, Accelerators, and Tech Enablers). This allowed Advisory Board members to prioritize their votes amongst topics based on importance. For example, they could assign all six "Hurdles" points to a single Hurdle, spread the points amongst six Hurdles, or choose a strategy between these two extremes.

TOP TOPICS FOR DRIVING K-12 INNOVATION IN 2026

Most important Hurdles, Accelerators, and Tech Enablers for education systems to address/leverage in 2026*

HURDLES

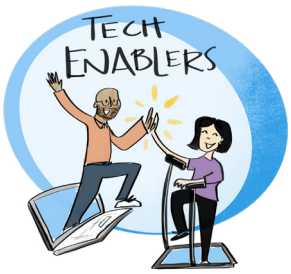
Barriers to innovation and student success that require considered effort to overcome.

1. Attracting & Retaining Educators and IT Professionals
2. Ensuring Cybersecurity & Safety Online
3. Critical Media Literacy

ACCELERATORS

Megatrends or catalysts that help motivate and increase the momentum of innovation.

1. Building the Human Capacity of Leaders
2. Changing Attitudes Toward Demonstrating Learning
3. Learner Agency



TECH ENABLERS

Tools that make new learning approaches possible, enable schools to surmount Hurdles, and empower them to leverage Accelerators.

1. Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI)
2. Data & Information Visualization
3. Tools for Privacy & Safety Online

* 82 Advisory Board respondents

IN CONTEXT

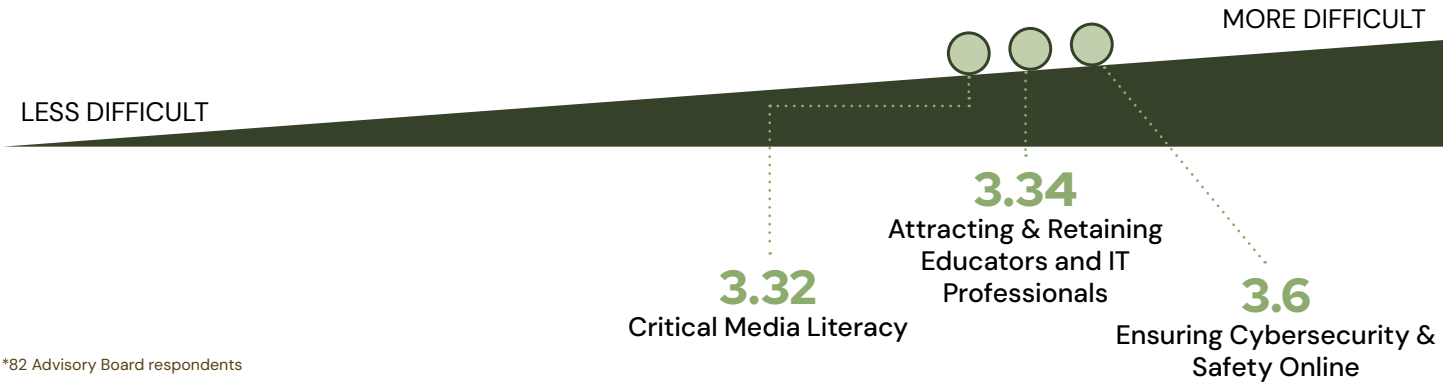
This report will serve as your guide to drive K-12 innovation in 2026 and beyond. Taken together, these perspectives reflect shared global priorities shaping innovation in 2026.

SURMOUNTABILITY OF HURDLES

How easy (or hard) is it to overcome these barriers? Here's how the Ad Board ranked the difficulty to surmount each one. (Scores reflect the average score out of 5, with 1 being the easiest to surmount and 5 being the most difficult*):

From easiest to most difficult to surmount:

- **Critical Media Literacy** (3.32)
- **Attracting & Retaining Educators and IT Professionals** (3.34)
- **Ensuring Cybersecurity & Safety Online** (3.6)



*82 Advisory Board respondents

HURDLES IN CONTEXT: TOP TOPICS FOR THE PAST FIVE YEARS

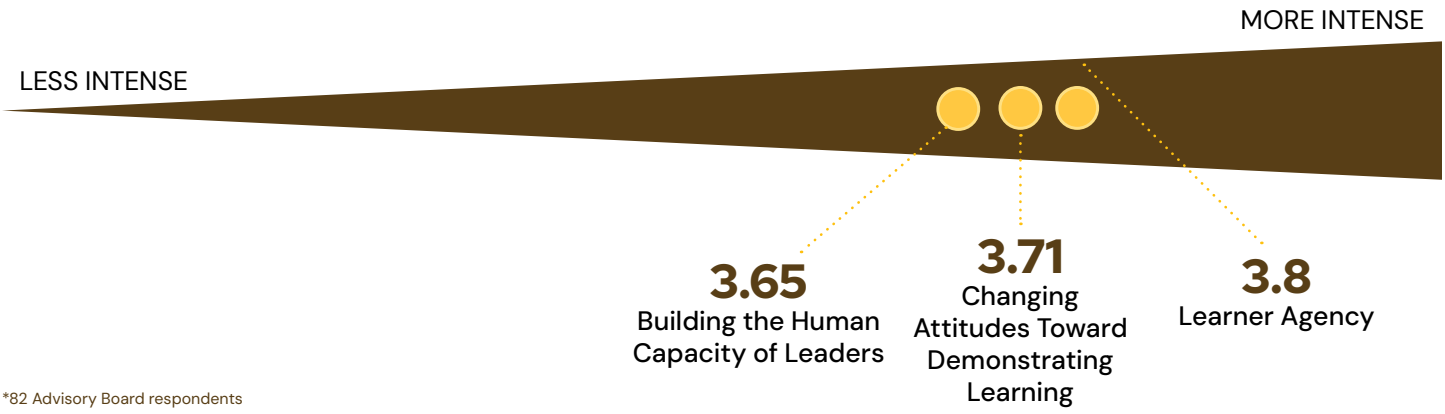
2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Attracting & Retaining Educators and IT Professionals	Attracting & Retaining Educators and IT Professionals	Attracting & Retaining Educators and IT Professionals	Attracting & Retaining Educators and IT Professionals	Attracting & Retaining Educators and IT Professionals
		Ensuring Cybersecurity & Safety Online		Ensuring Cybersecurity & Safety Online
	Designing Effective Digital Ecosystems			
Digital Equity	Digital Equity		Digital Equity	
			Evolution of Teaching & Learning	
Scaling Innovation & Inertia of Education Systems		Scaling Innovation & Inertia of Education Systems		
				Critical Media Literacy

INTENSITY OF ACCELERATORS

How influential are each of these megatrends or catalysts motivating innovation? The Ad Board ranked the Top 3 Accelerators by how intense their impact on K-12. (Scores reflect the average score out of 5, with 1 being the least intense and 5 being the most intense*):

From least to most intense:

- **Building the Human Capacity of Leaders** (3.65)
- **Changing Attitudes Toward Demonstrating Learning** (3.71)
- **Learner Agency** (3.8)



*82 Advisory Board respondents

ACCELERATORS IN CONTEXT: TOP TOPICS FOR THE PAST FIVE YEARS

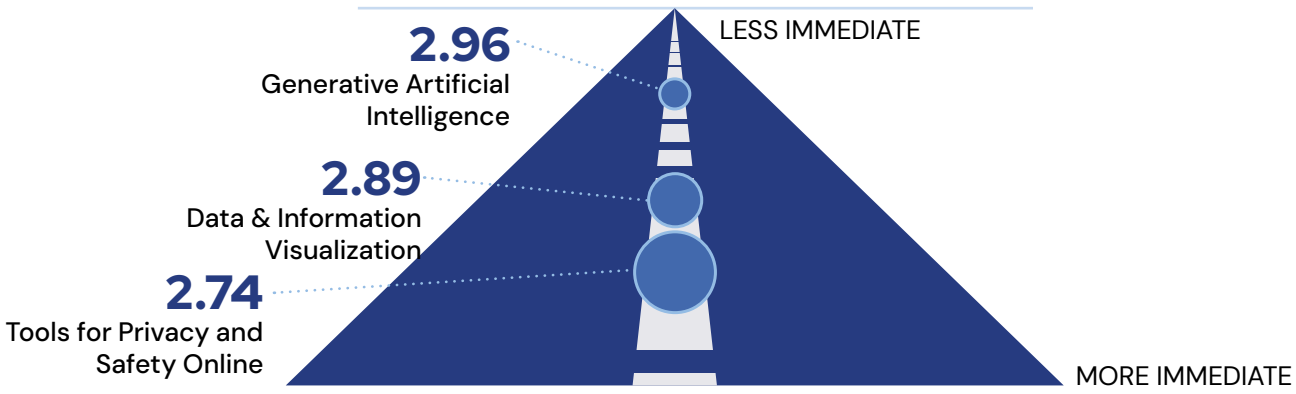
2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Building the Human Capacity of Leaders	Building the Human Capacity of Leaders	Building the Human Capacity of Leaders	Building the Human Capacity of Leaders	Building the Human Capacity of Leaders
		Changing Attitudes Toward Demonstrating Learning	Changing Attitudes Toward Demonstrating Learning	Changing Attitudes Toward Demonstrating Learning
	Learner Agency	Learner Agency	Learner Agency	Learner Agency
Personalization				
Social & Emotional Learning	Social & Emotional Learning			

IMMEDIACY OF TECH ENABLERS

How quickly are these tech tools being incorporated by schools? The Ad Board ranked how immediately Tech Enablers are being adopted globally. (Scores reflect the average score out of 5, with 1 being the most immediate adoption; 5 being the furthest away from adoption*):

From most immediate to least immediate adoption

- **Tools for Privacy and Safety Online** (2.74)
- **Data & Information Visualization** (2.89)
- **Generative Artificial Intelligence** (2.96)



*82 Advisory Board respondents

TECH ENABLERS: TOP TOPICS FOR THE PAST FIVE YEARS

2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Analytics & Adaptive Technologies		Analytics & Adaptive Technologies	Analytics & Adaptive Technologies	
	Artificial Intelligence (AI)	Generative Artificial Intelligence	Generative Artificial Intelligence	Generative Artificial Intelligence
				Data & Information Visualization
Digital Collaboration Environments	Rich Digital Ecosystem	Rich Digital Ecosystem		
Untethered Broadband & Connectivity	Untethered Broadband & Connectivity		Untethered Broadband & Connectivity	
				Tools for Privacy and Safety Online

BRIDGES (THEMES)

The boundaries between Hurdles, Accelerators, and Tech Enablers are blurring; innovation increasingly requires cross-topic solutions. 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 2026 Bridges are:

Ethical Frameworks & Trust as Non-Negotiables

Innovation without ethics erodes trust, and trust is the cornerstone of safe digital learning.

Equity & Access Are Key

Innovation without equity leads to widening gaps; innovation with equity drives transformation.

Cultural Change > Technical Change

The culture of a school system determines the success of its technology.

NOTABLE INTERSECTIONS

During Synthesis Week, Advisory Board members were asked to share their insights on the 2026 Top Topics and connect them. Here are some highlights:

"**Ensuring Cybersecurity & Safety Online, Critical Media Literacy**, and **Tools for Privacy & Safety Online**. I think the emphasis on making sure students and staff know how to be digitally well and are supported with professional learning and resources to assist in this is a growing need," (Nicole Bond, Lincoln Intermediate Unit 12, Pennsylvania, United States).

"I love the intersection of **Data and Information Visualization** with **Changing Attitudes toward Demonstrating Learning**. If educators focus on the data and make data-informed decisions about their instruction, reteaching, class activities, and individualized instruction, they can start to think beyond a grade on a piece of paper, especially when we are talking about standards-based data. Focusing on the standards instead of the prescribed textbook or worksheet has far more impact on student learning and growth. I have seen it here in my district. When teachers start to assess the standards rather than right/wrong answers on a test/quiz, we have begun to see better decisions on what comes next. We are using Pear Assessment for common assessments so that teachers can look at the data together," (Katie Harmon, Westhill Central Schools, New York, United States).

"The three **Accelerators, Building the Human Capacity of Leaders, Changing Attitudes Toward Demonstrating Learning, Learner Agency,** all speak to a larger theme/need around recognizing the power of learners and educators. If young people and educators were seen as the capable, curious, creative leaders that they are, their opportunities to engage their agency and demonstrate their skills and expertise would be built into our education systems. Our social and cultural mental models about students and teachers make us think that the system we have now is necessary and the best or only way. Mindsets and beliefs justify the structures that we have, so were those mindsets and beliefs to change, the current structures would no longer seem viable or desirable," (Katie King, KnowledgeWorks, United States).

"Simply put, innovation is built on a foundation and on a purpose that is the same: people. We seek, and we embrace innovation because we believe it will better our lives, and/or the lives of others around us. I know this is a bit obvious, but every single Hurdle, Accelerator, and Tech Enabler is about empowering and/or caring for people. Both of these are focused on **Building the Capacity of Humans**. We build capacity through **Attracting & Retaining Professionals, teaching/spreading Critical Media Literacy, building up leaders, Changing Attitudes Toward Demonstrating Learning, elevating Learner Agency, and through AI, data, and privacy tools**. This makes perfect sense, since our work is completely focused on the benefit of humans," (Craig Chatham, Lincolnshire-Prairie View D103, Illinois, United States).

ATTRACTING & RETAINING EDUCATORS AND IT PROFESSIONALS

DEFINITION

Recruiting and keeping school staff is a significant problem that is only growing for school systems. Many educators are experiencing low financial compensation, heavy workloads, and social and emotional burnout, causing them to set aside their passion for teaching and leave the field. In addition, educators often experience a lack of trust and respect from both society and institutional systems, undermining confidence in their ability and commitment to support students' academic, social, and emotional success.

For IT professionals and technology-focused educators, the challenges are compounded. Schools struggle to compete with private companies that can offer higher salaries, remote work options, flexible schedules, and more time off. At the same time, there is a critical shortage of staff with the expertise to integrate complex legacy and modern systems, or to teach and support students in rapidly evolving fields like computer science. As experienced staff retire, finding and retaining skilled professionals, across both teaching and technology roles, has become one of the most pressing challenges in education today.

Across the country and around the world, school systems are experiencing unprecedented challenges in attracting and retaining both educators and IT professionals. "Retaining educators and IT professionals requires more than competitive salaries; it demands a climate of trust, professional respect, and continuous learning. When schools empower teachers to integrate technology creatively, and IT teams to participate in instructional design and strategic decision-making, both groups see tangible impact in their work. This sense of contribution is a key retention factor," (David Deeds, Footprints International School, Phnom Penh, Cambodia).

As Deeds alluded, compounding that strain is a growing sense that society and even school systems no longer trust educators as capable professionals. In a recent Gallup poll, 50% of U.S. respondents rated the "honesty and ethical standards of high-school teacher" high or very high; however, that number has been declining in recent years, with this year being a record low. This erosion of respect and belonging can be just as harmful as the workload itself.

For IT professionals and technology-focused educators, the pressures are even sharper. Districts rely on staff who can integrate complex legacy systems with modern infrastructure, safeguard cybersecurity, support AI-enabled learning tools, and teach emerging fields like computer science.

Yet schools must compete with private-sector employers offering higher salaries, remote work options, flexible schedules, and significantly more time off. As veteran staff retire, districts face the dual challenge of replacing technical expertise and maintaining continuity of operations. Retaining skilled people across both instructional and technical roles has become one of the most pressing and foundational issues in education today.

Across districts, however, leaders are proving that intentional, people-centered strategies can dramatically improve retention. Advisory Board member Kelly May-Vollmar (Desert Sands Unified School District, California, United States) shared that her district maintains an impressive 96% staff retention rate, an outcome rooted in strategic culture building. “We work hard to ensure that our salaries are competitive, but we also believe that climate and culture are the most important focus,” said May-Vollmar.

Each year, May-Vollmar’s district sets a climate and culture theme alongside academic goals, ensuring that staff experience a workplace that is “welcoming, engaging, fun, respectful, ethical and consistently growing from strength to strength.” This commitment is coupled with a strong emphasis on professional development and internal growth: “The majority of our promotions are from in house due to our focus on capacity building … which directly impacts retention,” said May-Vollmar.

This connection between culture and retention was strongly reinforced by Ad Board member Beatriz Arnillas (1EdTech Foundation, Massachusetts, United States), who reflected on lessons learned while she was employed at Houston ISD and their school was collaborating with the team at Mooresville Graded School District. “The first lesson they taught us: Welcome all your staff every day, make them feel appreciated, and respected!”

This concept also emerged as critical in districts undergoing leadership transitions. James “Seamus” Cummins (The School District of Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, United States) described how his district has had four different elementary principals since 2017, each identifying the same issue upon departure: “the need for a cultural change in the building.” His district has since taken action and is now intentionally focused on cultural restoration.

"We are fortunate to have several new members on our district admin team, including a new elementary principal, whose primary goal is to repair the culture and rebuild trust within the building," said Cummins. "Hopefully, restoring the climate will help us retain not only our new principal but also the members of the elementary teaching staff, strengthening the entire community for the long term."

Additionally, Ben Bayle (DeKalb CUSD 428, Illinois, United States) highlighted that retention is essential not only for stability but also for innovation. “Investing in the human capacity, strategically supporting and retaining educators by reducing hurdles and building positive culture … ensures that new technologies like AI are implemented with learner agency, personalization, and staff well-being at the center.” Without this foundation, schools struggle to make transformative initiatives sustainable.

Retention is not a standalone HR function but a cultural and strategic priority. When districts invest in people, through trust, appreciation, growth pathways, and positive climate, they create the stability needed to innovate, integrate new technologies, and support long-term student success.

TIPS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ADVISORY BOARD

STRENGTHEN RECRUITMENT THROUGH MISSION-ALIGNED PARTNERSHIPS

"Partnerships with universities, professional associations, and educational technology communities can help attract a strong pool of candidates who are not only qualified but aligned with the mission of the school. When recruitment, professional growth, and recognition come together, schools can build stability, creativity, and innovation across both instructional and technology teams," (Lisa Gustinelli, St. Vincent Ferrer School, Florida, United States).

INVEST IN STAFF GROWTH

"I have found some success with offering reimbursements for IT certifications but that also opens the door to more opportunities in the future. I believe we have to be aware of the opportunities out there for our staff and be very clear with expectations and coaching for their next position, even if it means writing a letter of recommendation to the private sector," (Pam Batchelor, Wilson County Schools, North Carolina, United States).

USE TECHNOLOGY TO PROTECT EDUCATORS' TIME & HUMANITY

"We must leverage technology to automate administration so teachers can humanize instruction. The only way to make the job sustainable is to use tech to give them back time. … The strategy to retain teachers is to aggressively deploy tools that handle the 'machine' work, freeing them for the human work (1-on-1 calls, personalized feedback) that brought them to teaching. We must use our technology to protect and enable that human connection, not bury it in administrative tasks," (Zainab Adeel, Bayaan Academy, Maryland, United States).

ENSURING CYBERSECURITY & SAFETY ONLINE

DEFINITION

Teaching, learning, and conducting business in education are all increasingly happening online. Schools must be proactive in building systems to protect every user, at every level, in every technology system, at home or school, 24/7. The risk is intensified as technology needs expand, new cybersecurity threats continuously enter the landscape, and malicious actors evolve their tactics.

Schools are expected to keep up with these risks while increasing protection measures, employing and training qualified staff, and raising industry standards to strengthen the safety and security of the online world. To effectively manage this risk is costly and now, non-negotiable.

Digital tools now touch every aspect of school operations, including instructional materials, communication systems, enrollment platforms, transportation software, and district financial systems. Even in schools where learning is primarily in person, teachers, students, and administrators rely on technology for essential daily tasks. But, confidence in the safety and security of these digital environments is weakening, as districts face growing concerns about data breaches, phishing attempts, identity theft, and system vulnerabilities.

Schools must protect every user across every device, application, and network, and must do so in a threat landscape that evolves by the hour. In response to technology infrastructure expansion and malicious actors becoming more sophisticated, cybersecurity has shifted from a background IT function to a core operational responsibility. Managing this risk requires significant investment in people, processes, and systems, and has become both expensive and essential for school systems of all sizes.

For many districts, the challenge begins with staffing and capacity. Advisory Board member Elizabeth Freeman (Cedar Grove-Belgium School District, Wisconsin, United States), a superintendent at a small rural Wisconsin district, mentioned that even though her small IT team takes online safety and security very seriously, cybersecurity cannot fall solely on the shoulders of a small IT team.

“We are all responsible for the safety of our network,” said Freeman. “As the bad actors get more sophisticated in their approaches, I encourage staff to be vigilant and to confirm anything that looks suspicious.”

Other districts describe an equally complex balancing act. Advisory Board member Morgen Wilson Merritt (Eanes Independent School District, Texas, United States) highlighted the tension between maintaining security and preserving instructional fluidity. “A big stressor is the sheer complexity of how to keep a constantly expanding digital ecosystem secure, while keeping instruction running smoothly and not creating a bunch of roadblocks,” said Wilson.

The district instead centers buy-in and culture change: "Our focus has been on reframing cybersecurity as a culture of care rather than just an IT initiative in which everyone has a role," said Wilson. This includes embedding cybersecurity awareness into ongoing professional learning, using "short scenarios and real-world examples…so they see security as part of their daily workflow." By normalizing conversations about incidents as learning opportunities, the district aims to strengthen security without increasing fear, shame, or burnout.

Meanwhile, Ad Board member Laura Pollak (Nassau RIC, Nassau BOCES, New York, United States) mentioned the importance of strong policy frameworks to support these cybersecurity efforts. In New York, the K-12 Data Privacy and Security Law, Education Law 2-d, requires districts to vet applications and providers for robust privacy and cybersecurity practices before sharing student data.

"All third-party service providers that access student data must legally attest to Ed Law 2-d compliance," explained Pollak, with enforcement from the NYSED Privacy Office. Additionally, districts must align their policies with the NIST Cybersecurity Framework and ensure "all employees with access to student PII [personally identifiable information] receive annual information security training." These requirements not only strengthen protection but also reduce uncertainty for districts making technology decisions.

Lack of funding amplifies these issues. For context, according to CoSN's 2025 State of EdTech District Leadership, most school districts do not have dedicated funding to keep their networks and data secure. The report goes on to state that districts typically use general funds to pay for their cybersecurity efforts (61%) and the vast majority (78%) are spending cybersecurity dollars on monitoring, detection, and response tactics.

Ensuring cybersecurity and safety online goes far beyond technical safeguards. It requires shared responsibility, staff capacity, proactive policy, ongoing training, and an organizational culture where security supports teaching, learning, and equity.

TIPS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ADVISORY BOARD

BUILD UNIFIED DATA GOVERNANCE

"There is a balance between security and learning access. I have also found that unfortunately there is a segmentation between efforts.

1. Cybersecurity measures
2. Data Privacy Efforts and overall data governance*[1]
3. App selection and vetting
4. Professional Development for understanding and action

It takes all of these pieces to create a safe and secure environment. A strong data governance committee that has network folks, curriculum folks, technology folks, teacher representation, and building level administrators working together and understanding the why and what is involved helps tremendously. I would recommend a local school committee that then feeds into a district committee," (Donna Williamson, CoSN K-12 CTO Academy, Alabama, United States).

BALANCE STRONG SAFEGUARDS WITH CREATIVE DIGITAL EXPLORATION

"Ensuring cybersecurity and online safety in K-12 education is essential for protecting students, staff, and institutional data — while also supporting open access and creative exploration. As schools adopt digital tools and cloud-based platforms, it's vital to implement safeguards like secure networks, multi-factor authentication, and responsible data practices. At the same time, students should be empowered to explore, collaborate, and innovate in a safe digital environment. By striking a thoughtful balance between protection and creative freedom, schools can foster digital literacy, encourage responsible online behavior, and create a vibrant learning ecosystem that prepares students for the future," (Todd Pickthorn, CETL, Marshall Public Schools, Minnesota, United States).

BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN IT & INSTRUCTION

An important challenge around cybersecurity and schools is finding that balance point between maintaining the security of our systems and allowing for an open system that supports the needs of our students and staff. All too often, the pendulum swings too far one way or to the other, thus creating a series of hurdles for school districts to overcome. I do believe that both sides — those responsible for protecting the cybersecurity of our systems and educators in our classroom — fully support the mission and purpose of the other," (Ryan Cox, District 279 Osseo Area Schools, Minnesota, United States).

1 Data Privacy frameworks exist, including the CoSN Trusted Learning Environment framework. Organizations can measure and monitor their data privacy efforts by using an evaluation framework for data privacy.

CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY

DEFINITION

The current technology landscape has made it increasingly complex for students to determine what information is authentic, credible, and trustworthy. Critical Media Literacy has risen in importance due to the increase in access to deep fake creation platforms and other AI-enhanced resources, which can be created quickly and shared just as expediently, making it more difficult for learners to determine between real, manipulated, and fabricated content across media types and platforms.

Critical Media Literacy equips students with the mindset and skills to critically analyze, evaluate, and discern the authenticity and credibility of information.It focuses on meta-cognition (learning how to learn), fact-checking, technology, and AI literacy, and recognizes students' roles as not just consumers but creators of media. As a cross-cutting skill that can be universally applied to all content areas and grades, Critical Media Literacy is now an essential aspect of postsecondary education and adulthood, supporting responsible participation in civic, social, and digital life.

As the lines blur with digital content becoming more abundant, persuasive, and difficult to verify, students must learn to critically analyze and evaluate the information they encounter across multiple platforms. Advisory Board member Sarah Margeson (Tippecanoe School Corporation, Indiana, United States) noted that while media literacy "has always been a topic of discussion in digital citizenship," the landscape has shifted dramatically. "AI is making it much more difficult for our students to determine real vs. fake information on the web," said Margeson. What was once centered on evaluating text (think Wikipedia) now includes "fake videos, images, news stories, etc."

The pace of change makes this need for Critical Media Literacy even more urgent. Ad Board member Beatriz Arnillas (1EdTech Foundation, Massachusetts, United States) highlighted that "in the early 1900s, human knowledge doubled every 100 years," but "today, it doubles every 12 hours." In such an environment, Arnillas mentioned, that education can no longer be treated as a static, hierarchical collection of facts. Instead, schools must prepare students with:

- **Meta-cognition skills**: learning how to learn.
- **Fact-checking skills**: evaluating the validity of information.
- **Technology and AI literacy**: reinforcing methods that leverage new tools without replacing critical thinking.
- **Responsible AI use**: understanding risks and ethical implications.

"Our children's futures — and our democratic future — depend on it," said Arnillas.

Another Advisory Board member shared a similar evolution in their district, noting that today's students must now discern the authenticity of images, videos, audio, and AI-generated content that often looks indistinguishable from reality. They advocated for a holistic approach to digital citizenship, explaining that the conversation now spans media, information, digital, and AI literacy.

Lindy Hockenbary (LindyHoc, Montana, United States) agreed, urging schools to broaden the conversation even further. "In the age of AI, we have a critical need to develop good citizens," said Hockenbary. She cautioned against separating digital citizenship from citizenship itself: "If you are driving down the interstate and see a billboard, you now have to evaluate whether the image on that billboard is AI generated or not. That is not 'digital' citizenship, just citizenship."

Critical Media Literacy is no longer optional. It is a foundational competency for students and educators alike, one that blends discernment, ethics, civic reasoning, emotional intelligence, and responsible technology use. Equipping learners with these skills is essential for navigating today's information ecosystem in a rapidly evolving digital age.

TIPS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ADVISORY BOARD

KNOW THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DIGITAL LITERACY AND DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

"Digital Literacy encompasses the core knowledge and skills associated with digital technology use. Digital Citizenship involves the behaviors and attitudes that are considered and applied when using technology," (Kimberly Martin, National PTA, Virginia, United States).

MAKE CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY A CLASSROOM ESSENTIAL, NOT AN ELECTIVE SKILL

"Critical Media Literacy is both a Hurdle and an opportunity for professional and student growth. Learners who are able to critique and analyze media for accuracy, bias, and intent will be prepared to enter the workforce and the world," (Pam Batchelor, Wilson County Schools, North Carolina, United States).

TEACH STUDENTS TO NAVIGATE THREATS AND TRUTH SIMULTANEOUSLY

During the Hurdles Zoom discussion call, Ad Board member Sandra Paul (Retired, Twp of Union Public Schools, New Jersey, United States)'s group talked about the importance of combining Critical Media Literacy with Ensuring Cybersecurity & Safety Online, arguing that these topics are often treated separately but should be integrated. They highlighted the need to train both teachers and students to recognize digital threats (like scams or phishing) while also promoting digital citizenship and responsible technology use across school communities.

BUILDING THE HUMAN CAPACITY OF LEADERS

SUMMARY

When schools invest in their staff by offering coaching, training, and pathways that broaden access to leadership, they foster the skills, agency, and entrepreneurial mindsets needed for systemic innovation. Strengthening the professional community of schools and creating opportunities for educators and K–12 professionals to develop new skills can lead to innovative practices that enrich student learning. By encouraging ethical use of emerging tools such as AI, embracing universal design and accessibility, and supporting the freedom to take risks without fear, schools create environments where diverse and inspired leaders can thrive, and where innovative people will want to be a part of the work.

When districts focus intentionally on professional learning, coaching, and leadership pathways for their educators and staff, they not only expand the skills of individual educators but also create conditions where new ideas, ethical practices, and courageous experimentation can thrive. This work is especially vital in an era defined by rapid technological shifts, growing complexity, and the expanding role of AI in both instruction and operations.

A central theme across districts is the essential connection between leadership development and AI literacy. Advisory Board member Justin Thompson (National Education Association, Washington D.C., United States) said, "It is of critical importance that students and educators become fully AI literate to be able to utilize AI technology in education effectively, safely, and equitably. Before our students can have this as a part of their basic education, it must be a part of every educator's professional development and preparation."

As noted in NEA's Task Force Report on Artificial Intelligence in Education, "Educators must be afforded high-quality, multifaceted, ongoing professional learning opportunities that help increase their AI literacy and understand what, how, and why specific AI is being used in their educational settings. Learning opportunities must be provided to educators in all positions and at all career stages. Leadership capacity is inseparable from the readiness of staff to use emerging technologies ethically and pedagogically."

Other Advisory Board members highlighted the deeply human side of leadership. Ad Board member Kelly Sain (Thompson School District, Colorado, United States) said: "This is the work — this is why we serve, and this is why we support education." She noted that leadership extends far beyond supporting current staff; it includes shaping the future leaders of our society.

"The most powerful leadership skill is the ability to reflect, to coach both up and down, and to engage in open, honest conversations about the realities we face," said Sain. "One of our greatest challenges is overcoming a fixed mindset. We are living in extraordinary times — economic uncertainty, declining enrollment, and profound first-order technology shifts with social media, AI, and 1:1 learning. In this environment, being agile and resilient is essential. The hardest leadership challenge we face is guiding others away from fixed thinking and toward growth, adaptability, and human capacity building."

Despite its importance, leadership development is far from consistent. Advisory Board member Gaby Richard-Harrington (Greater Commonwealth Virtual School, Massachusetts, United States) captured this succinctly: "This is the most important task we have, yet in too many spaces it happens without any intention. We must change this."

Ad Board member Tom Ryan (K12 Strategic Technology Advisory Group, New Mexico, United States) expanded the conversation by connecting leadership readiness to system design. He argued that the question for 2026 isn't what will change, it's who will lead the change, and how ready we are to help others come along?

Innovation, Ryan said, "isn't about adopting tools — it's about leading people and systems through transformation."

When leaders are reflective, well-prepared, AI-literate, and supported by intentional systems, schools create cultures where educators feel empowered to take risks, collaborate, and design future-ready experiences for students. This human-centered foundation is what makes meaningful innovation possible.

TIPS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ADVISORY BOARD

BUILD HUMAN-CENTERED LEADERSHIP FOR AN AI-SUPPORTED FUTURE

Ad Board member Mary Lang (Center for Leadership Equity and Research, California, United States) mentioned: "Tomorrow's education leaders must be equipped to challenge AI, and challenge their own certainty. They must easily travel a continuum of perspectives, zooming in for focus and out for context. This is the essence of navigation and sensemaking, two essential leadership qualities in the AI-infused future. Foundational navigation and sensemaking skills include Data Fluency; Basic Neuroscience; Policymaking; Cyber-social Literacies; Ethics, Judgement & Justice; and Multistakeholder Collaboration."

LEAD WITH THE HUMAN WHY

"The most important thing for educators and school system leaders to keep in mind to drive impactful K-12 innovation in 2026 is the need to shift focus from implementing technology to reimagining human capacity. In an era dominated by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and rapid change, leaders must prioritize the 'human why' behind every digital tool. The key is to build teacher and student resilience, critical thinking, and social-emotional skills, which are the non-automatable skills that fuel innovation," (Beverly Knox-Pipes, BKP Solutions, Michigan, United States).

CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD DEMONSTRATING LEARNING

DEFINITION

There is a rising groundswell of discussion around how student learning is assessed, documented, and valued. Memorization, cultural biases, limited real-world applications are just some of the reasons why traditional testing may not be an effective means of assessment and may not accurately reflect a student's true understanding of a subject.

There's increasing emphasis on learner agency, personalization, and lifelong learning. At the same time, ongoing debates continue about the role of traditional educational institutions, the value of their experiences, and the challenges of aligning education with evolving career pathways. As a result, student trajectories through and beyond K-12 systems are shaped by both innovation and the pull of long standing educational norms.

Across K-12 education, attitudes about how students demonstrate learning are shifting in profound ways. Traditional tests, which are shaped by memorization, time limits, and a small range of acceptable responses, are increasingly seen as insufficient for capturing a student's deeper understanding, creativity, or real-world problem-solving abilities.

As Advisory Board member David Deeds (Footprints International School, Phnom Penh, Cambodia) noted, "Education is shifting away from a narrow focus on standardized tests and memorization toward a more holistic view of how students learn and demonstrate understanding." This movement reflects a growing recognition that learning is not defined by what students can recall at a single moment in time, but by how they engage, create, iterate, and apply their thinking in authentic contexts.

Deeds also highlighted the importance of computational thinking as one example of a learning process that cannot be captured on a multiple-choice test. Students are encouraged to "think like problem-solvers: breaking down challenges into smaller parts, spotting patterns, filtering out unnecessary details, and designing step-by-step solutions."

For other districts, the shift toward authentic demonstrations of learning is reinforced by Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the realities of artificial intelligence.

One Advisory Board member shared how this creation-centered mindset is evident in their school's makerspaces, where students as young as four design, prototype, and iterate. Whether part of a Grade 2 science unit or a high school engineering challenge, these projects offer students authentic opportunities to demonstrate learning through design, problem-solving, and community-focused innovation.

Technology also plays a key role in expanding how learning is demonstrated. Advisory Board member Carla Puppo Perfumo (Colegio Franklin D. Roosevelt, The American School of Lima, Peru), observed that traditional assessments "often fall short in capturing the depth, creativity, and complexity of student learning." As education shifts toward authenticity and purpose, more schools are adopting "multimodal, student-driven demonstrations of learning — portfolios, performances, prototypes, podcasts, and projects." These methods allow students to showcase not only what they know but "what they can do with that knowledge." From multimedia platforms to AI, digital tools enable students to reflect their thinking in personalized, accessible ways aligned to their strengths and passions.

However, a shift in educators' mindset is required for assessment practices to change. In order to assist in the shift of that mindshift, EdTech leaders need to look at how they (locally, statewide, or nationally) value educators based on assessment data. That mindshift in student assessment is difficult to navigate when educator livelihoods are linked to statewide assessment scores.

Puppo Perfumo mentioned that this mindset shift means moving "beyond grading efficiency and embracing a culture of feedback, iteration, and celebration of diverse pathways." It involves designing assessments with students and ensuring the tasks mirror real-world challenges. When learning is demonstrated through meaningful creation and purposeful application, Puppo Perfumo said assessment becomes a process of empowerment, not just evaluation.

These evolving attitudes reflect a broader reimagining of the role of schools in preparing students for higher education, vocational pathways, and lifelong learning. As traditional norms intersect with new expectations for agency, personalization, and relevance, K-12 systems are redefining what it means for students to truly demonstrate understanding.

TIPS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ADVISORY BOARD

COMBINE LEARNER AGENCY & PERSONALIZATION TO AMPLIFY MASTERY

During the Accelerators Discussion Call, Advisory Board member Amy Zock (Decatur County Schools, Georgia, United States) represented her group, which explored the intersection of Learner Agency and Personalization, particularly in the context of Shifting Attitudes Toward Demonstrating Learning. The group questioned whether mastery is about how students show what they know or what they choose to pursue and how. "If we bring Learner Agency and Personalization together, then we will amplify impact," said Zock.

DE-EMPHASIZE MEMORIZATION

"Leaders must shift assessment away from easily automatized tasks (like rote memorization) toward projects that require complex problem-solving, synthesis, and creativity," (Beverly Knox-Pipes, BKP Solutions , Michigan, United States).

TRUE AGENCY REQUIRES SYSTEMIC CHANGE

"If learners had true agency, if we had an expansive view of demonstration of learning that measured what we say we prioritize, and if the development of the people in the system were at the forefront, the other powerful opportunities (the world as a learning environment, learners as creators, etc.) would be possible and could be carried out in authentic ways," (Katie King, KnowledgeWorks, United States).

LEARNER AGENCY

SUMMARY

Learner Agency centers students as active choice-makers in their education; it's about reconceptualizing their role from that of "student" to that of "learner." Supported by an agentic learning environment with trusted guardrails, students could transform from order-takers to innovators, learning more authentically and engaging with technology in meaningful ways.

Learner Agency is essential for lifelong learning and requires a different approach to school structure and practices. Truly embracing Learner Agency will require transforming education systems and encouraging educator agency.

This Accelerator is deeply intertwined with personalization of the learner experience.

Learner Agency represents a transformative shift in how schools conceptualize learning, student identity, and the purpose of education. Rather than viewing students as passive recipients of instruction, Learner Agency positions them as individuals who are curious, empowered, capable of shaping their learning pathways, and prepared to use tools and technologies with intention.

Fully realizing this vision requires structural changes, a culture of trust, and a commitment to educator agency, as well. Examples from districts implementing agency-centered approaches demonstrate how important this shift can be. Advisory Board member Craig Chatham (Lincolnshire-Prairie View D103, Illinois, United States) shared that his district's adoption of inquiry-based practices has ignited renewed enthusiasm across classrooms: "The basic premise is that students learn to create questions about something they are studying, or the world around them, and then develop the methodology and pathway as to how to answer their own questions," said Chatham. "This can be used in every subject area, and has promoted quite a bit of excitement and joy amongst students, staff, and families." Agency here is not a program; it is a mindset shift that nurtures curiosity, ownership, and authentic problem-solving.

Importantly, these practices extend to adults, as well. To begin the school year, Chatham explained that his district did not mandate prescriptive AI training. Instead, they invited educators to share their AI strategies, hosting flexible mini-sessions where staff could choose what mattered most to them. "The purpose of this approach was to allow all staff to explore topics of interest to them," said Chatham, noting that participants found entry points whether they were beginners or advanced users. And this approach worked: "There was a buzz of excitement both in the sessions and during the 'passing period' between sessions," he added. When educators experience agency, they are better equipped to foster it for students.

Ad Board member Carla Puppo Perfumo (Colegio Franklin D. Roosevelt, The American School of Lima, Peru) added that Learner Agency cannot be developed without educator agency happening as a parallel investment. "Coaching cycles that empower teachers to experiment, professional learning communities that nurture reflective practice, and leadership models that value co-creation all contribute to building the foundation for student-driven learning," she said. "When teachers are trusted as designers and leaders, they're better equipped to extend that trust to their students."

Yet despite these encouraging shifts, systemic forces often push in the opposite direction. Ad Board member Jason Zagami (Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia) highlighted that "Learner Agency is the greatest benefit from recent advances in AI technologies, but the area

that has been most opposed by education systems that require learning to occur within measurable frameworks." When students have the freedom and tools to direct their learning, traditional systems "struggle to cope," leading to efforts to constrain pedagogy or reduce flexibility. Zagami mentioned that many trends marketed as learning science are really attempts to restrict Learner Agency and restore control over the educational process.

But what can happen when you give learners the tools to grow? "Innovative progress will come less from new tools and more from nurturing epistemic and ethical agency, enabling students and educators to think critically, make meaning responsibly, and act ethically in a digital world," said Ad Board member Mary Lang (Center for Leadership Equity and Research, California, United States). "Remember that with AI tools everywhere, classroom education is becoming less about what students know and more about how they learn and decide what matters. Guiding an innovative transition requires fostering curiosity, teaching students to navigate information wisely, reflecting on the human meaning behind technology, and building school cultures that value ethical reasoning as much as academic success."

These insights show that embracing Learner Agency requires both cultural and structural transformation. It demands environments that empower students to choose, create, collaborate, and explore, supported by educators who themselves experience agency. Ultimately, Learner Agency is not a trend: it is the foundation for future-ready learning and the key to preparing students for a world that demands curiosity, adaptability, and self-directed growth.

TIPS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ADVISORY BOARD

BUILD AI-READY LEARNERS, NOT AI-DEPENDENT STUDENTS

"Empowering learners to understand what they are learning, how they are learning it and how well they are progressing is key. Knowing what to do next is critical to their individual learning journey too. Access to devices and information is foundational to this process and must be enhanced by the anytime anywhere nature provided by tech. Rather than just getting feedback from AI though, AI can be leveraged to guide the student in their learning. Building student capability to know how to use AI to support their learning, how to use AI to co-develop their learning strategy/action plan (instead of simply creating a response for the student to submit) is where a strong intersection sits for tech and learner agency," (Karen Swift, James Nash High School, Queensland, Australia).

IDENTITY & PURPOSE EQUALS AGENCY

"Learner Agency requires that the learners have a sense of who they are. This opens the door for Career Connections. Ed Hidalgo believes that if we start with strengths, interests, and values and then make career connections, we end up with learners who have agency and purpose. This process should start in the elementary/lower grades and build throughout a learner's life," (Norton Gusky, NLG Consulting, LLC, Pennsylvania, United States).

LEARNERS EXPECT AGENCY & PERSONALIZATION

During the Accelerators Zoom discussion call, Ad Board member Will Goodman's (Boise School District, Idaho, United States) group noticed a pattern of trends related to personalization, learner agency, and the current generation of students who are more connected and expect learning tailored to their needs. They felt this active generation of students could potentially accelerate many of the other trends discussed. "They expect their learning to come to them the way they want it, the way they need it, what works best for them, and they want to be able to pursue their goals in their learning," said Goodman. "It's a great, positive thing."

GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

DEFINITION

In an era defined by rapid technological advancements, generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI) has emerged as a transformative force in education. As school systems worldwide explore the benefits and challenges of this technology, they are working hard to meet the urgent need for safe, effective, and responsible use of Gen AI. As with seismic technological shifts before it, educators have a responsibility to model and communicate how Gen AI is an enormous opportunity that comes with potential risks.

As enthusiasm for AI is increasing rapidly, concerns about equity, responsible use, and the capacity of current systems to adapt are rising, as well. Educators and IT professionals are being asked to adopt and adapt in real time, frequently without clear roadmaps or shared standards. As a result, Gen AI is emerging not just as a powerful tool, but as a system-wide inflection point, one that will determine whether schools harness its potential to drive innovation and efficiency or unintentionally deepen existing challenges across education.

"Right now, we're at a crossroads in the adoption of new technologies: Gen AI and other forms of AI have the potential to open up new possibilities for learning that go far beyond percentage point increases in English and Math. These possibilities include bringing learners into contact with domains that they would not have otherwise encountered, allowing them to create things they could not have, at ages younger than ever before. But by the same token, poor use of these technologies risks locking in outdated teaching patterns, with perhaps marginal improvements in outcomes, but also with a loss of agency and deeper meaning by students and teachers. The choice of what comes next is ours to make" (Ruben Puentedura, Hippasus, Massachusetts, United States).

Across districts, leaders are taking intentional steps to integrate AI safely and responsibly. Advisory Board member Kelly May-Vollmar (Desert Sands Unified School District, California, United States) explained that "we have a responsibility to model and communicate the opportunity and risks of AI," describing how her district created a guidance document that frames AI as a teammate and humans as the leaders of these teams.

This framework, grounded in the district's RISE (respect, integrity, support, empathy) values, guides staff and students through reflective questions designed to ensure safe, ethical, and meaningful use. As their document states, "Fostering meaningful collaboration between humans and machines requires more than simply using AI. It takes intentional efforts to maximize learning and model effective human-machine interaction. DSUSD is committed to integrating AI thoughtfully into its educational framework, ensuring that students, teachers, and the district benefit from its capabilities in ways that are safe, ethical, and impactful."

For smaller schools, having access to shared guidance is essential. Advisory Board member Lisa Gustinelli (St. Vincent Ferrer School, Florida, United States) praised May-Vollmar's values-based approach, noting, "It is so important that we model responsible use for students." Gustinelli's school is testing Gen AI as a "co-pilot for

teachers," supporting lesson planning, differentiated practice, and communication so educators can focus more on instruction and relationships. Yet, she highlighted the role of equity: "If students don't have reliable access at home, they can't practice these skills outside of school." AI readiness and connectivity must advance together.

Importantly, this is not just a local or national conversation — it is global. Ad Board member Claus Gregersen (Herning Gymnasium, Region Midt, Denmark) noted that "Gen AI is on the agenda in the global education sector," reflecting widespread international attention to both its potential and its complexity. Around the world, students and teachers are already using AI for explanation, preparation, inspiration and improvement, often with little guidance. "The problem is that the schools' framework, rules and guidance on the use of the technology cannot keep up with the rapid adaptation," said Gregersen. "This creates a high risk of inappropriate use that does not promote learning and does not comply with ethical and responsible use. Both students and teachers lack training in the area, while the area is developing rapidly."

In addition to training, educators and technologists must also consider how Gen AI is purposefully used in the classroom. Ad Board member James "Seamus" Cummins (The School District of Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, United States) has seen the transformative potential of AI in his small suburban K-12 district within social-emotional learning and whole-child philosophy. "Thoughtfully implemented, AI empowers our educators with tools to personalize instruction, identify and support student needs, and foster resilience and engagement, while also enabling us to address mental health and well-being more proactively," said Cummins. But he cautioned that AI must "amplify, not replace, the human connections at the heart of education," and that equity, ethics, and inclusion must stay at the center.

As Gen AI is integrated across education systems, its influence extends far beyond instructional use. Outside the classroom, Gen AI also has the potential to transform other aspects of education, like technical, HR/staffing, procurement systems, requiring school leaders to navigate how this technology intersects with both academic and operational functions, often faster than policies, training, and infrastructure can keep pace.

Generative AI is impacting education whether systems are prepared for it or not. The challenge and the opportunity is to shape AI's role intentionally, ethically, and in service of meaningful, human-centered learning.

TIPS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ADVISORY BOARD

EMBRACE AI AS THE NEXT BIG SHIFT IN EDUCATION

"We are the cusp of great change within education with the advent of AI. AI never will be as bad as it is now but our reaction to it needs to be the best it can be. In some ways, it is like the COVID pandemic where schools had to change from classroom instruction to online instruction. This time it will be a bit more difficult as we do not know where the finish line will be and there is a risk of an AI bubble burst, as well. Change is uncomfortable, mistakes may be made and the future is uncertain but we will rise to the challenge," (John Heffernan, Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board).

EQUITY FIRST

"To me, the most vital element of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) is ensuring equity. Our educational community must not only have the access to the technology, but they need the opportunity to learn and responsibly utilize it as well. We must ensure that our plans do not only include students and staff. We must include all rightsholders in our educational community. This includes, but is not limited to, parents/guardians, caregivers, and local school connections (like libraries, law enforcement, etc.). Proceeding with plans that don't include all rightsholders shifts that Enabler to being a Hurdle very quickly," (Patrick Hausammann, Clarke County Public Schools, Virginia, United States).

BRING THOSE LESS EXCITED INTO THE AI CONVERSATION FIRST

"We all recognise that the speed to tech change outstrips the rate of change in education, and that the professional digital divide continues to widen in teaching staff. I've witnessed the positive and engaging impact of cloud infrastructure on the workflow of typically tech laggard teachers and recognise a shift in their perspective of the value of tech, a mind-opening towards learning/applying more tech for their learners. After many years of working with innovators and early adopters, and seeing how they accept, adopt and adapt tech use for learning so readily, I see that it is this group that widens the gap, and believe our focus should be more on building belief and capability in those who are more reluctant to use tech in their teaching. I'm curious about how we can get in early with Gen AI to engage tech laggards, help them to understand the practical, personal values of it as soon as possible, to spurn their interest sooner towards leveraging AI in how they support students to learn," (Karen Swift, James Nash High School, Queensland, Australia).

TREAT AI AS A TEACHING TOOL, NOT A THREAT

"Instead of worrying that AI is a cheating tool, teachers should focus on pedagogy through experimenting with Generative AI (GenAI) to create custom lessons, give specific feedback to students, and develop new, adaptable ways to teach," (Lisa Spencer, Prince George's Community College (PGCC), Maryland, United States).

START SMALL AND SMART

"Find out the top 5 AI tools or apps for your teachers in your school," (Guoyon Li, XINYUN (BEIJING) EDU-TECH LTD., China).

DATA & INFORMATION VISUALIZATION

DEFINITION

Technologies that help educators, students, and administrators visualize and interact with complex data in comprehensive, approachable, and meaningful ways. These tools amplify the meaning of data and make evidence-based decision-making accessible to a broader range of users.

New to the Tech Enablers list for 2026, Data & Information Visualization has become an essential tool for educators, leaders, and students seeking to understand increasingly complex information. When done well, visualization turns raw numbers into meaningful stories that guide instructional planning, support early interventions, uncover equity gaps, and strengthen communication with families.

But visualization is only as impactful as the data culture, systems, and human capacity supporting it. Several Advisory Board members highlighted the importance of this cultural foundation. Tom Ryan (K12 Strategic Technology Advisory Group, New Mexico, United States) appreciated the shift toward making information clearer and more usable, noting, "Clear dashboards and visual tools can make learning progress tangible — but as many districts are discovering, data visualization is only as effective as the data culture behind it."

Ryan explained that many dashboarding initiatives fail not because the tools aren't powerful, but because they rely on incomplete or low-quality data, lack timely data feeds, or sit atop disconnected systems that don't communicate. Yet the "biggest issue isn't technical — it's cultural," said Ryan. "Districts without a strong data culture can't buy one through software. … Until we build that human capacity — data literacy, analytical skills, and cross-department collaboration — the most beautiful dashboard will still be just a pretty picture."

Developing this culture requires reframing how data is used. Ad Board member Morgen Wilson Merritt (Eanes Independent School District, Texas, United States) explained, "I'm a data nerd, but I appreciate that most people aren't," adding that data is often treated simply as a compliance measure or a hammer to wield in evaluations. Merritt's district has shifted toward using data as a storytelling tool and not just an evaluation metric, which requires a culture of trust and curiosity and open dialogue.

To normalize this shift, Merritt embedded a brief "data in action" segment into team meetings, guiding staff through a structured approach: introduce the visualization, objectively observe the patterns, and collaboratively consider recommendations. She prompts teams with questions like, "What story do these numbers tell in your words?" and "What's the smallest change we could pilot next week?" This routine creates a shared, low-stakes entry point into data-informed decision-making.

At a systems level, Ad Board member David Jarboe (Harrison School D2, Colorado, United States) described a central challenge: “School districts have traditionally been data rich but information poor. While they collect massive quantities of data — from assessments and attendance to behavior, staffing, and finances — much of it sits in silos or raw formats that are difficult for educators and leaders to interpret. Simply having data does not automatically translate into better decisions; without context, clarity, and accessibility, data remains an under-leveraged asset.”

Jarboe went on to explain that effective visualization bridges this gap by transforming complex data into intuitive insights that help educators spot trends, identify inequities, and act quickly. He noted that AI enhances this even further. “AI not only helps visualize data — it helps tell the story behind the data, making it easier for educators to understand what is happening, why it is happening, and what steps they might take next,” said Jarboe.

For some schools, visualization is not just helpful, it is essential to daily operations. Advisory Board member Zainab Adeel (Bayaan Academy, Maryland, United States), who works in a fully online school, explained, “‘Data Visualization’ isn’t just a supplement for us; it’s our primary sensory input.” Without the ability to see students physically, her team relies entirely on data to understand student engagement and needs.

Adeel described how her school is building a unified dashboard connecting their Student Information System (SIS), Learning Management System (LMS), assessment platform, and help desk system. “Before this, our staff lived in a world of data silos. A teacher could see a student's failing grade in the LMS but had no idea that the student had three open, unread-by-tech-support tickets in our Help Desk system. They were flagging an academic problem, but it was really a technology access problem,” said Adeel. This new visual dashboard is materializing as the school’s 'digital eyes-on' solution. “It allows a teacher, in one glance, to see the story: 'Low grade' + 'Low LMS logins' + 'High help-desk tickets' = a student we need to support technically, not just academically," added Adeel.

Data visualization is not simply about charts; its real impact lies in how it contributes to clarity, insight, and human capacity. When schools strengthen the systems and cultures surrounding data, visualization becomes a catalyst for smarter decisions, earlier interventions, and more equitable, student-centered learning.

TIPS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ADVISORY BOARD

USE GRAPHICS TO FOCUS ON DIGITAL STORYTELLING

"Teachers during conferences can more easily paint a picture of where a child was and goals can be set with teachers, parents and students as to where they'd like to be by the end of the quarter, semester, or year," (Lisa Gustinelli, St. Vincent Ferrer School, Florida, United States).

STRONG DASHBOARDS START WITH STRONG DATA

"Districts often want a dream dashboard, but have a difficult time bringing together the data points that would drive the visualization they seek. I think the right data elements powering a dashboard would allow administrators to make investments and decisions that improve student outcomes and guide learning," (Laura Pollak, Nassau RIC, Nassau BOCES, New York, United States).

VISUALIZATION WORKS WHEN DATA CULTURE & INTEROPERABILITY WORK FIRST

"Data and information visualization plays a vital role in enhancing learning and decision-making in K-12 education. I would also like to stress that data visualization is only as effective as the data culture surrounding it. Too often dashboards are set up that are missing key elements of data for effective use or are overly complicated. I have seen improvements in this area with effective interoperability tools that allow information to flow and identify areas of improvement. As schools increasingly adopt data-driven practices, effective visualization becomes a cornerstone of both academic success and operational transparency," (Todd Pickthorn, CETL, Marshall Public Schools, Minnesota, United States).

TOOLS FOR PRIVACY & SAFETY ONLINE

DEFINITION

Technologies, resources, and platforms that help ensure the privacy and safety of learners as they interact with online technologies. These tools range from app-vetting and student monitoring solutions to advanced cybersecurity infrastructure, including zero-trust frameworks, cloud security, and AI-enabled defenses.

Privacy and safety can be in tension, particularly when monitoring tools are involved. Effective systems must be guided by clear, transparent, and community-vetted data governance policies that negotiate the sometimes-conflicting priorities of student safety and student privacy. Technology is only one part of the equation; ethical use, communication, and accountability are equally critical.

By combining privacy protections with robust cybersecurity and responsible data practices, schools can create secure, trusted digital environments that protect both learners and educational operations.

Tools for Privacy & Safety Online form the backbone of every digital initiative in K–12 education. Unlike instructional technologies that directly enhance learning, these tools operate behind the scenes to ensure that online environments remain safe, private, and trustworthy. These technologies are essential for protecting sensitive student information and ensuring compliance with laws such as COPPA and FERPA (in the United States), GDPR (in the European Union), and others. As cyber risks escalate and digital learning expands, the need for robust, coordinated approaches to privacy and safety become increasingly urgent.

For many districts, these tools are no longer optional — they are foundational. Advisory Board member Claus Gregersen (Herning Gymnasium, Region Midt, Denmark) shared that this Top Topic "forms the foundation for all the other digital technologies."

Gregersen explained that in Denmark and across Western Europe, the work is both urgent and intense: "We are experiencing both a significantly increased cybercrime and an actual cyber war, where there is a massive increase in cyberattacks that also affect the education sector. Every day, schools are hit by phishing and ransomware attacks."

As Generative AI accelerates both threats and defenses, Gregersen added that schools are caught in "an AI race, where AI is used to create increasingly sophisticated attacks and AI tools to detect, respond to and prevent these." The result is not only a strategic challenge but also a financial one: "Security has led to a 10% increase in our IT expenses next year," he said.

In the United States, districts are facing similar pressures and difficult questions about the balance between safety and privacy. Ad Board member Ryan Cox (District 227 Osseo Area Schools, Minnesota, United States) highlighted recent Minnesota legislation designed to provide greater protections for student data, both in how companies use student information and how schools monitor behavior on school-issued devices.

He noted that while regulating external vendors is relatively straightforward, "it feels much harder when we have to set up protections to limit our own monitoring of privacy." The tension between protecting student safety and respecting student autonomy is real: "Protecting the learning is important, but also ensuring a sense of privacy is equally important." This blurry line is one of the biggest challenges districts face when deploying privacy and monitoring tools.

Other states are exploring new structural solutions to streamline this work. Advisory Board member David Jarboe (Harrison School District 2, Colorado, United States) described Colorado's launch of a centralized student data privacy and accessibility platform (CASE Connective) to ease the burden on both districts and vendors. "Districts currently spend thousands of hours duplicating privacy and accessibility reviews," explained Jarboe, and vendors are overwhelmed by repeat, identical requests. A statewide system, he noted, can finally provide a centralized, easy-to-use system to track compliance and reduce redundant work.

But not all states have such coordinated efforts. Nicole Bond (Lincoln Intermediate Unit 12, Pennsylvania, United States) shared that in her state, no statewide solution exists, which leads to widespread duplication of effort. "Districts are duplicating this work as we each individually vet applications for COPPA and FERPA compliance alongside cybersecurity concerns," said Bond. This decentralized approach strains capacity, slows innovation, and places unequal burdens on districts with fewer resources or smaller IT teams.

Across all contexts, Advisory Board members agreed that privacy and safety tools must continually evolve to protect individuals and the technologies that support learning. The sector needs stronger data governance, shared best practices, cross-district collaboration, and clear expectations for both external vendors and internal monitoring practices.

As digital ecosystems grow more interconnected and more vulnerable, schools must invest in the systems, people, and partnerships that can support secure, ethical, and transparent learning environments.

TIPS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ADVISORY BOARD

PRIVACY FAILURES BECOME TECH DERAILERS

"Thinking about the Data Privacy and Safety Online as a Tech Enabler can also be framed in thinking of poor data Privacy and safety online as a "Tech Derail-er" especially in a climate where there is sometimes a lack of trust between families, community leaders, and education when it comes to technology usage," (Amy Zock, Decatur County Schools, Georgia, United States).

SAFETY, PRIVACY & WELL-BEING MUST LEAD INNOVATION

"Student safety, privacy, and well-being must remain top-of-mind as various technologies are integrated into learning systems and curricula," (Kimberly Martin, National PTA, Virginia, United States).

BUILD A LIVING LIBRARY OF WHAT WORKS

"Often, knowledge and experiences are shared in presentations at conferences and in webinars, but it often isn't retained beyond the event, or organized in a way that is easily accessible and correlated to a framework. A best-practice clearinghouse would enable us to systematically capture and build on what's presented over time," (Frankie Jackson, Project Director for the Cybersecurity Coalition for Education, Texas, United States).

TAKING A HOLISTIC VIEW

As Advisory Board members identified the Top Topics for 2026, they surfaced ideas that transcend individual priorities: illuminating a shared path toward lasting impact and transformation in K-12 education.

Let their global perspectives inspire you as you continue to innovate and reimagine what's possible in the year ahead.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING FOR EDUCATORS AND SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS TO KEEP IN MIND IN ORDER TO DRIVE IMPACTFUL K-12 INNOVATION IN 2026?

"The ability to realize an educational ecosystem that humanizes instruction at all levels (learners, families, educators, and administrators) will be a tipping point for the societal and political shifts that are needed to evolve education, " (Mary Wegner, University of Alaska Southeast, Alaska, United States).

"To drive meaningful innovation in K–12 education, leaders must design educational systems around learner variability; human brains are as unique as fingerprints. When we build for the margins, we elevate success for every learner," (Christine Fox, CAST, Massachusetts, United States).

"If we lose the trust of parents, the community and policy makers, it will be impossible to deliver a high-quality education, regardless of the innovation we envision. Trust is at the heart of enabling a better education system," (Keith Krueger, CoSN, Washington, D.C., United States).

"A good heart and a strong belief in the power to change the life of education," (Mai Ngoc Khoi, True North International School, Hanoi, Vietnam).

"Time for professional development that is built with personalization and purposeful play. Balancing funds to support available resources for student empowerment. Leadership development," (Jody Kokladas, Shady Side Academy, Pennsylvania, United States).

"Digitalization must not be reduced to a question of "screen time," Leaders and Teachers must master professional digital competence, and technology must be understood as a cultural force, not merely a tool. AI and data-driven insights can support personalized learning, formative assessment, and inclusive education. However, national governance, ethical frameworks, and public ownership of data are crucial to prevent commercial control or surveillance-based education. Do not reduce complex educational issues to nostalgia for a pre-digital past. Instead we need evidence-based debate and investment in teacher training, learning design, and digital ethics," (Morten Søby, Log on network Norway, Oslo, Norway).

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO EDUCATORS AND IT PROFESSIONALS TO HELP THEM INNOVATE IN 2026?

"Time for professional development that is built with personalization and purposeful play. Balancing funds to support available resources for student empowerment. Leadership development," (Jody Kokladas, Shady Side Academy, Pennsylvania, United States).

"Innovation thrives when educators and IT professionals work as co-designers, not separate departments. Share your goals, your pain points, and your wild ideas. The best breakthroughs happen when teaching and technology move in sync," (Stacy Hawthorne, EdTech Leaders Alliance, Ohio, United States).

"Have an open mind, keep challenging current theories and status quo, and have a world wide perspective," (Jennifer Williams, Newton County Schools, Georgia, United States).

"I believe every educator needs to be vulnerable by exhibiting curiosity," (Noor Shammas, Naperville 203, Illinois, United States).

"Focus on people first. The most impactful innovations in 2026 will emerge when educators and IT professionals work together to deeply understand the needs, challenges, and aspirations of students and teachers," (Christy Hilton, Central Indiana Educational Service Center, Indiana, United States).

"To innovate with purpose four elements must be considered:

1. Dedication to students, understanding and respecting students' agenda.
2. Willingness to learn, consider all instances as learning opportunities.
3. Ability to work in a team, generate a new professionalism based on collaboration.
4. The school connected to the real world environment, understanding and solving real world problems with empathy, " (Laura Motta, Uruguay without Limits Foundation, Montevideo, Uruguay).

"In 2026, the most visionary school leaders will not ask 'What technology should we use?' but 'What kind of learning ecosystem do we want to nurture — and how can technology, AI, and community help us sustain it?'" (David Vidal, EIM Consultores, Spain).

DRIVING K-12 INNOVATION
2026 REPORT SUMMARY

Explore the Hurdles, Accelerators, and Tech Enablers that will drive K-12 innovation in 2026.

cosn.org/k12innovation

HURDLES

Barriers to innovation and student success that require considered effort to overcome.

ATTRACTING & RETAINING EDUCATORS AND IT PROFESSIONALS

School districts are struggling to attract and retain educators and IT professionals due to low compensation, heavy workloads, and competition from private-sector employers, making culture and trust essential drivers of stability. Advisory Board members shared that intentional investment in climate, appreciation, and professional growth (not just salaries) is what ultimately keeps talented staff committed and enables sustainable innovation.

ENSURING CYBERSECURITY & SAFETY ONLINE

Schools face growing cybersecurity risks as digital tools become essential to daily operations, requiring districts to protect every user across expanding systems and in a world of increasingly sophisticated threats. Advisory Board members mentioned that effective security depends on shared responsibility, strong policy frameworks, and cultivating a culture of care that supports both safety and seamless instruction.

NEW! CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY

As AI-generated text, images, audio, and video increasingly blur the line between real and fabricated content, districts emphasized that Critical Media Literacy now requires far more than fact-checking — it demands deep discernment, ethical judgment, and holistic digital citizenship skills. Advisory Board members stressed that preparing students for this reality means strengthening metacognition, emotional intelligence, and responsible media creation, ensuring they can navigate an information ecosystem defined by speed, complexity, and misinformation.

ACCELERATORS

Megatrends or catalysts that help motivate and increase the momentum of innovation.

BUILDING THE HUMAN CAPACITY OF LEADERS

Building the Human Capacity of Leaders is essential to meaningful K-12 transformation, demanding deep investments in AI literacy, reflective practice, and intentional professional growth. Advisory Board members agreed that innovation succeeds when people (not technology) are prepared, supported, and empowered to lead change across systems.

CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD DEMONSTRATING LEARNING

Traditional tests no longer capture the depth of understanding, creativity, or real-world problem-solving skills students need, prompting a shift toward project-based, multimodal demonstrations that make thinking visible. Universal Design for Learning (UDL), computational thinking, and student-created products empower learners to show what they can do, not just what they can recall.

LEARNER AGENCY

Learner Agency requires shifting students from passive recipients to active decision-makers, supported by inquiry-based learning, educator agency, and structures that encourage curiosity, autonomy, and responsible technology use. Despite growing pressure to increase control, especially in response to AI, true transformation depends on empowering both students and teachers with the skills, trust, and flexibility needed for future-ready learning.

TECH ENABLERS

Tools that make new learning approaches possible, enable schools to surmount Hurdles, and empower them to leverage Accelerators.

GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (GEN AI)

Generative AI is transforming education globally, offering influential new possibilities while raising critical concerns around responsible use, equity, and system readiness. Meaningful progress requires intentional, values-driven leadership to ensure AI amplifies human connection and deep learning.

DATA & INFORMATION VISUALIZATION

Data visualization enables educators to quickly interpret complex information and respond to students' needs, but its impact depends on the quality of the data and the culture surrounding its use. When systems and people are aligned, visualization becomes a powerful tool for clarity, equity, and informed decision-making.

TOOLS FOR PRIVACY & SAFETY ONLINE

Tools for Privacy & Safety Online form the essential trust infrastructure of modern education, protecting sensitive student data and securing school operations amid rising cyber threats and evolving legal requirements. While strong technologies and policies are critical, true system readiness requires shared frameworks, cross-district collaboration, and careful balancing between enhanced online access, student safety, and student privacy.

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- AFT (American Federation of Teachers)
- All4Ed/Future Ready Schools
- ATLIS (Association of Technology Leaders in Independent Schools)
- CAST
- CLEAR (Center for Leadership, Equity, and Research)
- Digital Promise
- EEA (European Edtech Alliance)
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- National PTA
- NCLD (National Center for Learning Disabilities)
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