

AI K-12 Readiness Framework

What students, educators, and leaders need to know



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Overview

Artificial Intelligence is reshaping today's generation, transforming how students learn today and how they will work tomorrow. As AI rapidly accelerates digital transformation across K-12 education, school systems are navigating complex, real-world challenges: fragmented AI and cybersecurity strategies, uncertainty around classroom instruction and academic integrity, operational pressure to "do more with less," unclear funding pathways, and growing concerns about student online safety.

In 2026, Artificial Intelligence readiness in education is no longer a "future trend" it's a day-to-day reality that schools are trying to manage in real time. Research is also starting to challenge the assumption that more AI use automatically better learning. What's changing is that the conversation is moving from "Should we use AI?" to "How do we use it safely, consistently, and in a way that actually improves learning?" [Carahsoft's education resources](#) and partner ecosystem are built for this exact moment: helping public-sector education teams move from experimentation to procurement-ready implementation (training, governance, security, and scalable tools).

A widely discussed preprint from [MIT Media Lab](#) tracked students writing essays with and without an Large Language Model (LLM) and reported measurable differences in EEG-based connectivity and engagement across groups. Whether or not later peer review changes the interpretation, the takeaway for schools in 2026 is clear: AI use needs guardrails and intentional instruction.

At the same time, the workforce signal is impossible to ignore. The [World Economic Forum](#) reports job disruption equivalent to 22% of jobs by 2030, and employers expect 39% of key skills to change by 2030. For K-12 and higher ed leaders, that means students need both durable foundations and modern AI fluency because the shape of work is shifting, not just the tools.

Student behavior is moving even faster than policy. [Pew Research Center](#) found 26% of U.S. teens report using ChatGPT for schoolwork (about double the share from 2023).

[RAND](#) Corporation documents that AI use in schools are rising quickly while training and consistent guidance lag meaning many students are already using AI without being explicitly taught how to use it well, ethically, and safely. This is where Carahsoft-aligned resources become especially relevant for 2026: district leaders don't just need ideas they need practical implementation pathways, policy templates, and "how to operationalize" learning content, security, and procurement. Carahsoft's education and emerging-tech content hubs (blogs, webinars, and solution pages) are designed to support that shift from awareness to execution.

What this means for an "AI Readiness Framework" package:

A Carahsoft readiness message lands best when it connects learning goals to operational requirements:

- **Students:** AI literacy + critical thinking + integrity (how to prompt, verify, cite, and recognize limitations/bias).
- **Educators:** Classroom-ready guidance (how to teach with AI without losing cognition/skill-building; how to design assessments that still measure learning).
- **Leaders:** Governance and risk controls (privacy, security, data handling, vendor review, accessibility, monitoring, and staff training plans).

Carahsoft's public-sector education positioning consistently emphasizes modernization support and procurement guidance for framework that can be read as both a learning strategy and an implementation roadmap.

Defining AI Readiness

In 2026, AI readiness means an education organization can adopt and use AI in ways that improve learning and operations without increasing risk. Practically, it's the ability to move from experimentation to repeatable, scalable use while balancing security, compliance, ethics, and cost.

This is why AI readiness must mean more than adopting tools. AI readiness is the ability to use AI safely and effectively at scale through trained people, clear governance, protected data, and measurable impact while balancing security, compliance, ethics, and budget. Carahsoft makes this definition actionable by helping education and public-sector teams move from experimentation to implementation through practical guidance, a vetted partner ecosystem, and procurement pathways that support compliant, scalable adoption.

A 2026-ready definition also needs to reflect where federal guidance is landing: AI should be educator-led, accessible, transparent/explainable, and data-protective (including compliance with privacy laws like [FERPA](#)).

What “AI ready” includes in practice

- **People readiness:** Students and staff have baseline AI literacy (how AI works, limitations, verification habits, and safe use). This is increasingly becoming a formal expectation, which is why districts need role-based enablement and training models not one-time PD. Carahsoft supports this through education-focused resources and partner-led enablement options that help teams operationalize AI literacy at scale.
- **Governance readiness:** Clear rules exist for acceptable use, academic integrity, and human oversight, AI supports teachers and services rather than quietly replacing decision-making. [Carahsoft's February 2026 AI Buyer's Guide](#) emphasizes the “roadmap” approach to adoption governance, evaluation, and responsible implementation leadership can set consistent standards across schools and departments.
- **Data + security readiness:** The organization can protect data and manage risk across the AI lifecycle (what data goes into tools, what comes out, and how it's monitored). Many public-sector teams use the [NIST AI RMF](#) structure (govern, map, measure, manage) to organize trustworthy AI practices, especially important when AI and cybersecurity strategies have been fragmented. Carahsoft's ecosystem helps districts align AI adoption with security expectations and enterprise controls.
- **Operational readiness:** AI use cases can be piloted and scaled with procurement and compliance in mind vendor evaluation, contract pathways, and measurable outcomes. This is where [Carahsoft](#) is especially relevant: its guidance and acquisition pathways help districts transition from pilots to scalable implementation while staying compliant and budget aware.

AI readiness is the ability to use AI safely and effectively at scale with trained people, clear rules, protected data, and measurable impact while balancing security, compliance, ethics, and budget.

AI Literacy & Readiness Competencies

AI readiness starts with students, but it only works when the whole K–12 system is aligned. This framework organizes AI Literacy & Readiness Competencies across three levels **Student, Educator, and School District** that way expectations are consistent and safe. Students build the skills to use AI as support without replacing their thinking; educators integrate AI readiness into curriculum, instruction, and assessment while setting clear classroom norms for acceptable use and integrity; and districts enable success at scale through system-wide policy, approved tools, training, data protection, monitoring, and continuous improvement. The outcome is that students use AI responsibly while strengthening foundational learning and human skills, and success looks like students

being able to explain when and why they used AI, what they changed themselves, and how they verified the output is accurate and appropriate.

1. Student

- set students up for success on student competencies
- integrate AI Readiness into existing curriculum, instruction, and assessment
- set consistent classroom norms for acceptable use and integrity

2. Educator

- align expectations across classrooms
- support teacher training and coaching
- standardize tools/workflows used in the building

3. School Districts

- set system-wide policy and guardrails
- choose approved tools and monitor use
- plan training, data protections, and continuous improvement

The outcome we're building is that students can use AI responsibly while strengthening foundational learning and human skills (critical thinking, communication, collaboration). Success looks like students being able to explain when and why they used AI, what they changed themselves, and how they checked that the output is accurate and appropriate. End goal: Increase student learning and preparedness for the changing workforce and world.

Student Competencies

Student AI Literacy & Readiness Competencies describe what K–12 students should know and be able to do to use AI responsibly while still building strong academic foundations and human skills like critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. The competencies are designed to be developmentally appropriate and cumulative: students begin with safe, basic understanding in elementary school, strengthen verification and integrity habits in middle school, and apply deeper reasoning, stronger sourcing, and structured disclosure in high school. The goal is consistent across all grades students use AI to support learning, not replace it, and can explain when they used AI, why they used it, what they changed themselves, and how they checked the result for accuracy, safety, and integrity.

Audience

- ❖ Teachers - To understand what skills students need, how to reinforce them in daily instruction, and how to set consistent expectations for appropriate AI use.
- ❖ Parents & Caregivers - To know what to expect from their children, how AI may show up in schoolwork, and how to support safe, responsible use at home.
- ❖ School & District Leaders - To define student AI readiness outcomes that inform vision, policy, training, tool approval, and measurement across the system.

Technology-Relatable Progression (2026)

This progression matches the technology students use, including school accounts, learning platforms (LMS tools), search and research, and AI chat or writing assistants. As students move from K–5 to 6–8 to 9–12, they go from basic safe use to more independent use with stronger verification, clearer privacy/data boundaries, and more consistent disclosure. The goal is the same across tools: protect personal information, check outputs with trusted sources, and show their own learning.

Elementary (K-5)

In elementary grades, students begin with safe, simple understanding of AI in everyday technology. They recognize AI in tools they already use (like search, voice assistants, or recommendations) and understand that AI can be wrong. They use AI only for teacher-approved help and keep their work in their own words, rather than copying answers. They practice asking clear questions and try again when an answer is confusing, usually with teacher support. When they use AI, they verify information by checking class materials or teacher-approved sources. They learn basic digital safety habits, including not sharing personal information and using school-approved accounts with adult guidance. They also know how to stop and tell a trusted adult if something AI shows them feels unsafe or inappropriate.

Middle School (Grades 6-8)

In middle school, students deepen their understanding and become more independent in how they use AI tools. They can explain that AI learns patterns from large amounts of data and that different AI tools may behave differently. They use AI for practice and feedback while still showing drafts, steps, and thinking, and they understand that “allowed vs. not allowed” can change by assignment. Their prompting gets stronger: they add useful context (grade level, topic, directions), ask for formats or examples, and compare more than one output before deciding what to use. Verification becomes a consistent habit for students’ cross-check facts using credible sources and learning to notice weak evidence or contradictions. They also build stronger privacy awareness by avoiding sharing sensitive school information and recognizing scams, unsafe links, or suspicious messages. Students begin basic bias awareness by noticing when AI outputs make unfair assumptions or leave out important perspectives, and they know how to raise concerns appropriately.

High School (Grades 9-12)

In high school, students apply AI with more precision, responsibility, and documentation. They use more accurate language (for example, models and training data) and can compare AI tools by strengths, limits, and tradeoffs such as accuracy, bias, and privacy. They use AI strategically for planning, revision, and feedback while clearly demonstrating original reasoning and mastery. Their prompting is more structured and intentional: they include constraints, reference criteria or rubrics, request sources when appropriate, and test edge cases to check reliability. Verification expectations become rigorous: students use authoritative sources, evaluate credibility, and document how they verified claims and corrected errors. They follow clear integrity expectations and, when required, provide structured disclosure or citation describing how AI was used. Students also understand technological realities at a higher level, such as how inputs may be logged or stored, and they follow district rules for safe use, privacy settings, and reporting issues.

Student Readiness Outcome

Students are AI ready when they can clearly explain which AI tool they used and why it made sense for the task, and they can still show their own learning through drafts, reasoning, and work completed in their own words. They can point to what they created or changed themselves (ideas, steps, conclusions, revisions) and what AI contributed (suggestions, examples, feedback). They also demonstrate that they did not trust the output automatically by verifying key facts or claims with class materials or reliable sources, catching mistakes, and correcting anything inaccurate or inappropriate. Finally, AI-ready students follow school expectations for privacy, safety, and integrity by avoiding personal or sensitive data in tools, using approved accounts when required, and disclosing AI support when expectations call for it.

Educator Competencies

AI Literacy & Readiness Competencies for teachers highlight the key knowledge and skills teachers need to build their own AI literacy and AI readiness and to support students in developing theirs. These educator competencies are organized into three overarching domains: Know and Model the Basics, Foster and Model Critical Thinking, and Lead with the Teacher Advantage. While these domains echo the student competency domains, they are not intended to be a one-to-one match. For each educator competency below, you'll see the most relevant student competencies it supports.

Audience

- ❖ School Leaders, District Leaders - To inform AI readiness expectations and support for teachers (policy, training, tools, coaching).
- ❖ Teachers - To understand the skills they should be developing to use AI safely and effectively in instruction and operations.

Know and Model the Basics

AI Foundations & Classroom-Ready Understanding: Teachers can explain what AI is (and isn't), where it shows up in everyday tools, and why it can be inaccurate or biased. They model healthy "AI habits" like not trusting outputs blindly and using age-appropriate language with students.

Safe Use, Privacy, and Data Protection: Teachers understand what information should never be entered into AI tools (student PII, sensitive records), use district-approved accounts/tools, and model secure behaviors (privacy settings, safe sharing, avoiding risky links).

Tool Use + Basic Prompting for Teaching Tasks: Teachers can use AI appropriately for planning and productivity (drafting lesson ideas, generating practice examples, adjusting reading levels) while keeping the teacher in control and ensuring outputs match standards, accuracy, and student needs.

Lead with the Teacher Advantage

Teachers bring something AI cannot: professional judgment, human relationships, and real-time instructional decision-making. In an AI-ready classroom, educators lead with a "teacher-in-the-loop" approach—using AI to support planning, differentiation, and feedback while keeping learning goals, accuracy, and student independence at the center. They maintain high expectations by ensuring students still practice core skills, explain their reasoning, and show authentic work, rather than relying on AI to do the thinking for them.

Educators also use AI in ways that support equity without lowering learning standards. They can scaffold instruction with language support, examples, and accessible explanations while watching for over-reliance and making sure all students have fair access to support. At the same time, they stay attentive to student well-being, recognizing that AI tools can influence attention, confidence, and online behavior. Teachers strengthen readiness through clear communications, setting classroom norms, explaining expectations to students and families, and giving school leaders practical feedback on what policies, tools, and training are working (or not working) in real classrooms.

School Districts Competencies

District AI Readiness describes what a school system must have in place to adopt AI in a way that is safe, consistent, and beneficial for learning and operations. It focuses on system-wide governance, policy, security and privacy protections, procurement and vendor management, staff enablement, and ongoing measurements. AI use is not fragmented across schools or dependent on individual classrooms. District readiness is about building the conditions for success: clear expectations for educators and students, approved tools and workflows, protected data, and a plan to scale what works while monitoring risk.

Audience

- ❖ **District Leaders (Superintendent, Cabinet, CIO/CTO, CISO, Curriculum & Instruction, Legal/Privacy, Procurement, Student Services)**- To set strategy, policy, approvals, and accountability for AI use across the system.
- ❖ **School Leaders** - To implement district expectations consistently and support teachers with tools, training, and communication.
- ❖ **IT, Security, and Data Teams** - To ensure AI tools meet technical, privacy, and security requirements and can be supported on a scale.

Governance and Strategy

A district is AI ready when it has clear ownership and decision-making structures for AI. District leaders define the vision for how AI supports learning and operations, assign responsible roles (instruction, IT/security, legal/privacy, procurement, communications), and create a repeatable process for approving tools and use cases. This prevents “random adoption” and ensures schools don’t end up with fragmented approaches where each site does something different.

District readiness includes clear rules and guidance that teachers and students can follow. The district sets acceptable-use expectations, academic integrity guidance, and age-appropriate student protections, then translates those rules into classroom-ready resources (templates, example language, assignment guidance). The district also sets expectations for how AI can be used in instruction and assessment, so educators aren’t left guessing and so students experience consistent norms across grade levels and schools.

Data, Privacy, Cybersecurity, and Student Safety

District AI readiness requires strong protection for student data and a clear system for managing risk before, during, and after AI tools are used in schools. The first step is setting simple, district-wide rules about what information is allowed vs. not allowed in AI tools. For example, districts typically restrict students and staff from

entering sensitive details like student IDs, addresses, health or counseling information, discipline records, or special education information. These rules should be easy for teachers and students to follow and should match the district’s existing data privacy responsibilities.

Next, districts need a consistent process to review and approve tools before they are used in classrooms. That includes checking how the vendor handles data (storage, retention, sharing), confirming security protections, and ensuring tools follow district account standards (like using school logins, access controls, and activity logging when possible). This prevents “shadow AI,” where people use random tools that haven’t been reviewed and may expose student data or create safety issues.

Finally, districts should plan for what happens when something goes wrong because AI issues can appear quickly. Schools need clear reporting and response steps for problems like inappropriate outputs, misinformation, harassment or bullying, deepfakes, or unsafe interactions. This matters even more in 2026 because AI isn’t only used for schoolwork students are also encountering AI through everyday apps and online platforms. When districts put these protections in place, teachers can use AI with confidence, and families can trust that student safety and privacy are being taken seriously across the entire system.

Where Carahsoft helps: Carahsoft supports districts by connecting them to a public-sector-focused partner ecosystem and acquisition pathways that make it easier to standardize and scale safe technology. On the security side, Carahsoft’s Cybersecurity Solutions portfolio can help districts align AI tools with enterprise protections (identity, access management, monitoring/logging, and incident response support) rather than treating AI as a standalone tool. On the procurement side, Carahsoft’s Buy resources and contract pathways help districts move from pilots to approved, supportable solutions using established contract vehicles reducing time and risk when selecting and implementing vetted tools.

Methodologies & Acknowledgments

K–12 AI Readiness package was developed using a mixed-method approach designed to be instructionally useful and implementation-ready for district operations. We started with a structured review of current public-sector AI adoption guidance and procurement considerations, using [Carahsoft’s AI Buyer’s Guide \(Feb 2026\)](#) to anchor what “ready” looks like in practice especially around vendor evaluation, compliance, and scaling beyond pilots.

Next, we translated those implementation requirements into education-friendly outputs (student, educator, and district readiness components) that can be used for planning, professional learning, and communications. To keep the package realistic for district rollouts, we incorporated an “acquisition-aware” lens: how districts typically move from needs:



This was informed by Carahsoft’s public guidance on education purchasing contracts (the pathways districts commonly used to procure and expand technology in a compliant way).

Finally, we aligned the framework language to how education technology is commonly deployed and supported (accounts, access, data handling, security expectations, and support models), referencing Carahsoft’s education technology solution framing to ensure the competencies and readiness actions connect to real tools and real constraints schools face.

Leading AI K-12 Partners



Leading Cyber K-12 Partners



Resources

Linked resource	Resource type (article, pdf, etc.)
Education Carahsoft	Carahsoft Website
Your Brain on ChatGPT: MIT Media Lab	Article
Future of Jobs Report 2025	Press Release
Share of teens using ChatGPT for schoolwork doubled from 2023 to 2024	Report
AI Use in Schools Is Quickly Increasing but Guidance Lags Behind	Article
Advancing AI Education for American Youth – The White House	Executive Order
Guidance on the Use of Federal Grant Funds to Improve Education	Guidance
Government IT Contract Vehicles Carahsoft	Carahsoft Website
Carahsoft AI Buyers Guide	Buyers Guide
EdTech Help Desk Carahsoft	Carahsoft EDU Help Desk
AI Risk Management Framework	Report