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and AI Integration in Schools**

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Leading with Purpose: Reimagining EdTech and AI Integration in Schools

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Effective educational leadership boils down to two critical responsibilities: maximizing the capacity of the individuals we have the privilege of serving and aligning individual efforts with the school's broader mission. In today's world, that mission must evolve to meet the demands of an AI-driven, tech-saturated society.

Schools must understand that for us to stay relevant, we must change commensurate with the speed of change of society. If you don't believe that statement, look at the mission statement of any school. Our job is to create students who are ready to participate in, and lead, our society in the future. Given that, the unfortunate reality is that while the world accelerates, many schools are still preparing kids for yesterday.

The reluctance to increase our speed and embrace technology at the rate society does isn't just a missed opportunity - it's a disservice. Our students are growing up with social media, generative AI, and online ecosystems baked into their daily lives. If we're still debating whether to let kids use tools like ChatGPT or Khanmigo - we're not preparing them, we are restraining them.

To lead with purpose in this new environment, educational leaders must do more than tolerate technology. We must model it, integrate it, and reimagine systems that prepare students not just to navigate the world, but to shape it.

Remove Barriers, Build Confidence

Technology isn't neutral - it either empowers or intimidates, amplifies or deadens. And for many educators, the world of edtech and AI still feels foreign. There's a fear of breaking something, of doing something wrong, of being accused of letting students cheat. That fear creates paralysis.

Research supports what many of us have experienced firsthand: without confidence, change stalls. A [RAND Corporation report](#) found that teacher self-efficacy is a strong predictor of both classroom technology use and instructional quality. But self-efficacy doesn't magically appear. It's cultivated - and that's our job as leaders.

So, what does confidence-building look like in the context of tech and AI integration?



✓ Model It, Even Imperfectly

During a staff meeting, the principal opens the session by using a digital whiteboard tool (like ClickUp or Padlet) for brainstorming - acknowledging ahead of time, "I'm still learning this, so bear with me." When the tech inevitably glitches or they click the wrong button, they laugh it off and keep going, showing that mistakes are no big deal. Later, they follow up with a staff email reflecting on the experience and sharing a short tutorial video they found helpful.

✓ **Set Clear, Supportive Guardrails**

Create a short, teacher-friendly “AI in the Classroom” document that outlines what’s acceptable and encouraged (e.g., using ChatGPT to generate quiz questions or brainstorm lesson hooks) and what’s not (e.g., having AI write student feedback word-for-word). For those of you that just read that and panicked, do not worry because many of these resources have been created and shared on the internet. You do not need a CIO or to be an expert yourself to get this started. Then, hold a lunch-and-learn session to walk teachers through it, give examples, and encourage questions. Ensure the document is co-developed with a few trusted teachers so it feels collaborative, not top-down.

✓ **Normalize Risk and Mistakes**

Start an “Innovation Highlight” segment at every staff meeting where one teacher shares a new tech tool or strategy they tried - even if it didn’t go perfectly. Encourage honesty about what went wrong and what they learned. Celebrate their effort with a small token - like a silly “Tech Adventurer” badge or a coffee gift card - and publicly thank them in the weekly staff newsletter.

✓ **Protect Educators Who Try**

Explicitly communicate to staff that when trying new tech or AI strategies, they are *not* being evaluated on polish or perfection. Update the teacher evaluation rubric or walkthrough form to include a non-punitive checkbox like “Evidence of experimentation with new instructional strategies,” and make it clear that mistakes made while innovating won’t be held against them. When a parent complains about a new tech tool a teacher used, the principal defends the teacher’s intent and invites feedback through a constructive, supportive lens.

We don’t need every educator to become a tech expert overnight. But we do need to create an environment where they feel safe enough to start. As a [McKinsey & Company article](#) noted, “low confidence and lack of time” are the two biggest barriers to edtech implementation. Leaders must remove both.



Make the Case: This Helps Kids Learn Better

Technology is only worth our time if it improves learning or instruction. That’s the non-negotiable. Yet many edtech initiatives are launched with vague intentions, unclear expectations, and little return on instructional investment. This lack of direction is how school leadership has lost trust around technology with some staff members. We cannot repeat the same mistakes.

Let’s be clear: this is not about bells and whistles. It’s about what works. [The Education Endowment Foundation \(EEF\)](#) has shown repeatedly that technology’s impact on learning depends not on the tool itself, but on how it’s used. If implemented with clarity and purpose, edtech can lead to meaningful learning gains. If not, it’s just noise.

We must relentlessly connect tools to purpose, if not any old anti-technology argument can win. Technology in schools must work to solve the three very real issues noted below:

✓ **“This helps students learn better.”**

If it doesn’t improve comprehension, engagement, or application - why are we using it?

✓ **“This helps teachers teach better.”**

Tools that free up time, support differentiation, or enhance feedback loops are worth the investment.

✓ **“This helps our system stay relevant.”**

Let’s stop pretending this isn’t about survival. The digital divide isn’t just about access - it’s about mindset. Systems that fail to evolve are being left behind.

Getting to critical mass starts with shifting the conversation. It's not about convincing people to adopt a tool because it's trendy or mandated - it's about showing how it solves real problems. When educators see that a new approach genuinely helps them teach more effectively or supports student learning in a tangible way, momentum builds naturally. The focus must be on relevance, not compliance.

✓ **Tie Tools to Real Problems**

Don't pitch new software, introduce solutions. Pitch solutions to everyday issues: grading overload, limited student feedback, missed opportunities for differentiation. When tools solve pain points, adoption follows.

✓ **Show Real Outcomes**

Share student success stories, even if they are not from your school. Heck, show your own growth and what you can do now compared to before. Show before-and-after examples. Use data, yes - but also use stories. People change because of emotional connection, not just statistical significance.

✓ **Get Honest About AI**

Our kids are using AI. While schools scramble to "AI-proof" assignments, students are teaching themselves how to code, generate content, and solve complex problems. We can treat AI like the next cheating scandal, or we can embrace it as the most powerful learning accelerator in modern history. Heck, we must realize that many, if not all, articles (including this one) that educators read to learn and be professionally developed are being supported in development by AI.

Instead of guarding against AI, we should teach students to engage critically and ethically with it. A [Brookings Institution report](#) argues that AI fluency - including skills like prompt engineering and bias recognition - will become a basic requirement for participation in the modern economy. If our students aren't learning these skills in school, where will they learn them?



Make Innovation the Culture, Not the Exception

Culture is what happens when the principal walks out of the room. In most schools, when the leader stops talking about tech, it disappears. That's not innovation - that's compliance. The best systems don't rely on a single champion. They build structures that sustain momentum and allow innovation to scale. That means developing environments where tech isn't a niche - it's the norm. So how do we build that culture?

✓ **Celebrate Educators Who Take Risks**

Highlight those who try new things. Tell their stories. Showcase messy prototypes, not just polished products. When risk-takers are celebrated, others follow.

✓ **Start Young**

If tech and AI are seen as "high school only," we miss critical windows of exposure. The earlier students are introduced to tools that support creation, inquiry, and reflection, the more naturally they will integrate them later.

✓ **Create Time and Space for Professional Growth**

The biggest barrier to teacher learning is time. That's not an excuse - it's a leadership problem. If professional development is only focused on compliance or technical use, we're not developing leaders - we're training technicians. We need PD that inspires big-picture thinking and redefines what's possible.

✓ **Empower Internal Champions**

Not every voice has to be the leader's. In fact, the most effective tech adoption often comes from trusted peers. Identify and elevate teacher-leaders who can advocate from within and help bridge the gap for others.

✓ **Reinforce the Non-Negotiable**

Innovation isn't optional anymore. Global competition, automation, and rapid information cycles have redefined what it means to be "college and career ready." If our systems don't reflect that urgency, we are part of the problem.



Final Thoughts: Leading from the Front

Leading schools today is harder than it's ever been. The expectations are higher. The scrutiny is constant. The consequences are real. The change is faster and more profound. But the opportunity to impact the future has never been greater.

Technology isn't the answer to every problem. But ignoring it is not an option. Leading with purpose means stepping into discomfort, asking the hard questions, and building systems that serve not just today's students - but tomorrow's world.

To do that, we need fewer mandates and more modeling. Less fear and more vision. We need to build cultures where trying new things is normal, where failure is expected, and where learning - at every level - is relentless.

Because if we don't lead with purpose, we'll find ourselves following the status quo. And in the world our students are walking into, that's simply not good enough.



PJ Caposey is the Superintendent of Schools for Meridian, Illinois Community Unit School Districts #223, a former Illinois State Superintendent of the Year and a finalist for the National Superintendent of the Year for the American Association of School Administrators. He is a best-selling author of ten books, a dynamic speaker, and a transformational educational leader with an incredible track record of success. He works with two universities as well as the Illinois Principals Association as a Principal Coach and as the author of the first complete stack of microCredentials offered in the state of Illinois.



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