



Ready or not: How are schools responding to Artificial Intelligence?

Practical insights for secondary school leaders and teachers

As part of its national review programme, the Education Review Office (ERO) looked at how leaders, teachers, and students are using Artificial Intelligence (AI), and what can be learnt from how they are managing this.

This guide shares practical insights for secondary school leaders and teachers. It focuses on what we found, the effective practices we saw secondary schools using for managing AI, and useful resources to draw on.

What did ERO look at?

At the start of 2026, AI was already being used in New Zealand schools, but clear system-wide expectations were still developing. ERO looked at what guidance is currently available to schools, how New Zealand compares with other countries, and how schools were responding. Through surveys, school visits, and key informant interviews, ERO gathered information about how students, teachers, and leaders are using AI, the challenges they are experiencing, and what is working well.

What did ERO find?

AI is increasingly becoming part of everyday school life in secondary schools. Leaders are using it to support planning, communication, and administration. Teachers are using it for lesson planning and creating learning resources. Students are using it to find information, generate and refine ideas, and support their schoolwork.

Most schools are still in the early stages of responding to AI. In many schools, there is variation between teachers in how students are allowed to use AI, and there is no consistently implemented school-wide approach. This can create uncertainty for teachers, students, and parents and whānau about what appropriate use looks like.

A key challenge in secondary settings is ensuring the authenticity of student work, particularly in Years 11 to 13 where assessment outcomes are high stakes. Teachers reported spending time monitoring AI use, tracking drafts, questioning students, and drawing on their knowledge of students' work to judge authenticity. This is especially difficult for internal assessments completed over time and outside controlled conditions, where AI-generated content can be hard to detect reliably.

When managed carefully AI can be used to support thinking, planning, problem-solving, and checking work in secondary schools. However there are also concerns about accuracy, privacy, over-reliance, and students using AI in ways that replace their thinking rather than support it. Where schools choose to use AI, the most effective approaches are deliberate, age-appropriate, and supported by clear guidance for both teachers and students. When teachers have certainty, students have certainty.

How can schools take a strategic approach to managing AI?

ERO's evaluation highlighted some key strategic actions secondary school leaders and teachers can take to support safe and deliberate use of AI within their school.

Creating systems that support academic integrity helps schools use AI more confidently and appropriately

Develop systems and practices that help maintain academic integrity while enabling appropriate use of AI.

When expectations around how AI can be used in assessment tasks are clear, and approaches are adapted for an AI-enabled environment, schools are better able to support authentic learning and build confidence in assessment outcomes.

Schools are taking different approaches to assessment in response to AI. Some have increased the use of supervised classroom assessments, including completing tasks in class or under controlled conditions. While these approaches can help strengthen confidence in the authenticity of student work, they can also require additional time and careful planning.

Clear expectations about when and how AI can be used in assessment are critical. Schools with well-established processes communicate these expectations clearly, helping students understand appropriate use and reducing uncertainty about assessment requirements. This provides greater consistency for students, teachers, and parents and whānau.

Some schools are also using digital tools to support oversight and accountability. These tools can help teachers monitor student activity during assessment tasks and identify when AI is being used in ways that do not align with school expectations, enabling timely conversations and support where needed.

There is also a growing focus on assessment design that values both the learning process and the final product. This includes examining how students develop their work, document their thinking, and demonstrate progress over time, rather than focusing solely on what is submitted. Students talked about having to submit initial brainstorming, note-taking and learning journals as evidence of independent thinking.

Together, these approaches help ensure that assessment remains credible, meaningful, and fit for purpose in an AI-enabled environment. They support confidence that qualifications and achievement reflect genuine learning, while helping students develop a strong understanding of academic integrity and responsible AI use. As these expectations become increasingly important in further education and the workplace, students are better prepared to participate ethically and effectively in a world where AI is part of everyday learning and work.

Having an AI champion helps schools use AI better

Identify the right person, and give them the time and support to upskill, before using them to build confidence and expertise across the school.

Schools that take a strategic approach to managing AI benefit from having an AI champion, as this can help support deliberate, informed, and educationally focused decision making. Their role is to support staff and students to understand the opportunities and risks of AI (especially around safe tools, privacy and assessment integrity). AI champions play a key role in building AI literacy, leading professional learning, sharing emerging knowledge, and helping develop school policies and guidance. They can also help schools move beyond solely being concerned about plagiarism and assessment integrity, towards a more balanced approach where AI is utilised strategically to support teaching and learning.

To help champions succeed, schools must support champions to build their expertise. This could include giving them time to research emerging tools and different educational uses, attending seminars and conferences, enrolling in short courses, and connecting with other schools. Taken together, the purpose of these steps is to allow the champion to bring back new ideas to help sharpen and solidify their school's AI policy. AI champions also have the role of creating an environment where staff are comfortable reflecting openly about different AI uses, and swapping ideas.

It is important for the AI champion to bring others along with them and aim to move away from a single person dependency. Moving towards having an AI lead in each department provides a more long-term sustainable model of AI capability within a school.

Real-life example: Developing a learning programme for staff

One secondary school recognised that building staff confidence with AI required more than a policy alone. After reviewing staff use of AI and identifying varying levels of confidence and experience, leaders developed a structured AI literacy programme to support teachers in using AI safely, effectively, and professionally.

This work was led by the school's AI champion, who drew on external expertise, research, and examples of good practice from other schools. School leaders and key staff members also participated in professional learning opportunities, including conferences, workshops, and university short courses, to deepen their understanding of emerging AI technologies and their implications for teaching and learning.

A key outcome was the creation of a modular professional learning programme designed by the school's AI lead and supported by AI champions from across different learning areas. The programme focused on both practical applications of AI and the professional judgement needed to use these tools responsibly. For example, teachers explored how AI could assist with planning, generating learning resources, differentiating instruction, and streamlining administrative tasks. Training also included guidance on protecting student privacy, evaluating the reliability of AI-generated content, and understanding the limitations of AI tools.

Real-life example: Developing a learning programme for staff (*continued*)

To meet the diverse needs of staff, the programme was organised into three levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. This allowed teachers to engage at a pace that matched their confidence and experience. New staff were introduced to the programme as part of their induction, helping to ensure a consistent understanding of the school's expectations and approaches from the outset.

The school also established a sustainable model for ongoing capability building. As teachers became more confident and experienced in using AI, they were encouraged to take on leadership roles as AI champions within their teams, sharing successful practices and supporting colleagues. The AI lead regularly reviewed and updated the programme to reflect developments in technology, emerging evidence, and the evolving needs of the school.

By investing in a structured and ongoing programme of professional learning, the school built staff capability, strengthened confidence in responsible AI use, and created a collaborative culture where teachers could continue to learn from one another as AI technologies evolved.

Having clear policies and guidelines in place helps ensure teachers and students understand when and how AI can and cannot be used

Create shared expectations across the school community to support more confident, consistent, and responsible AI use.

Schools that are managing AI effectively have clear, practical guidance for both teachers and students. This guidance sets out what is not allowed, but also gives examples of appropriate use, so students understand when and how to use AI responsibly.

Clear guidance reduces uncertainty. Students told us they want to know when AI use is permitted, when it becomes inappropriate, and how to avoid accidentally breaking the rules. Teachers also need clarity about how to apply expectations consistently, respond to misuse, protect student information, and maintain professional judgement when using AI themselves. Schools can make guidance easier to understand by using visible and accessible resources, such as posters, year-level guidance, classroom examples, and policy documents. These help create shared expectations across the school community and support more confident, consistent, and responsible AI use.

Real-life example: Comprehensive policy and guidance with safeguards

One school recognised that supporting effective AI use required clear expectations and strong safeguards. The school developed a comprehensive AI policy that applied to both staff and students, balancing opportunities for innovation with a strong focus on privacy, safety, and academic integrity.

The policy limited use to a set of approved AI tools that had been assessed for their educational value, age-appropriateness, and privacy protections. It also established a clear principle that AI could support learning and professional practice, but that important decisions and judgements must always remain with people.

Maintaining assessment integrity was a key feature of the policy. Students were only permitted to use AI in assessments when explicitly authorised by their teacher, and were required to acknowledge any approved use. Existing plagiarism and cheating procedures were applied to inappropriate AI use, and teachers used a range of approaches to verify the authenticity of student work, including reviewing drafts, planning notes, and students' explanations of their learning process.

Specific guidance was also provided for teachers. While AI could be used to assist with tasks such as planning and drafting feedback, responsibility for assessment decisions and professional judgement remained with the teacher. Staff were expected to model responsible AI use, teach students how to use AI critically, and actively supervise its use in the classroom.

A non-negotiable expectation for both staff and students was that personal or identifiable information could never be entered into AI tools. By providing clear guidance and consistent expectations, the school created a culture where conversations about AI focused on supporting responsible learning and helping students use AI to enhance, rather than replace, their thinking.

Delivering explicit AI literacy learning for students and staff helps them to understand the capabilities and limitations of AI

Make sure staff and students can use AI effectively to enhance teaching and learning.

Where schools choose to introduce AI tools or AI-supported learning, leaders should take a deliberate and school-wide approach to building AI literacy among both staff and students. This involves providing ongoing professional learning for teachers so they understand how AI works, its opportunities and limitations, and how it can be used safely and effectively in teaching and assessment. Students should be explicitly taught how to use AI as a learning tool, including how to write effective prompts, critically evaluate AI-generated information, recognise bias and errors, protect privacy, and acknowledge AI use appropriately. Schools should create clear expectations and practical guidance, encourage open discussion about responsible use, and provide opportunities for safe experimentation with approved AI tools. By embedding AI literacy across teaching, learning, and school policies, schools can help staff and students become confident, critical, and ethical users of AI who are prepared for a rapidly changing digital world.

Real-life example: Explicit teaching of AI for students

One secondary school recognised that helping students use AI effectively required explicit teaching, rather than simply providing access to AI tools. Leaders wanted students to develop the skills needed to use AI safely, responsibly, and critically from the beginning of their secondary schooling, so they introduced a dedicated AI learning programme for all Year 9 students.

The programme was designed and delivered alongside the school's professional learning for staff, ensuring that expectations for AI use were consistent across the school community. It was structured into four learning modules that introduced students to how AI systems work, the opportunities and risks associated with AI, and the school's expectations for appropriate use. Leaders also saw this as the foundation for a broader AI curriculum that could be expanded to other year levels over time.

A key focus of the programme was helping students become critical consumers of AI-generated content. Through practical activities and discussions, students learned that AI systems can make mistakes, produce misleading information, and reflect biases present in the data they were trained on. Leaders considered this especially important in the context of a girls' school, where understanding and recognising potential gender bias in AI-generated content was seen as an essential aspect of digital literacy.

Teachers also recognised that the growing availability of AI had increased the importance of teaching students how to think critically, and reflect on the information they encounter online. Rather than accepting AI-generated responses at face value, students were taught to question outputs, check facts against reliable sources, and consider whose perspectives might be represented or omitted. Classroom activities encouraged students to compare AI-generated content with other sources, identify inaccuracies, and discuss how different prompts could influence the responses produced.

The programme also focused on how AI could be used to support learning without replacing thinking. Teachers modelled appropriate uses of AI, such as generating ideas, exploring questions, or receiving feedback on drafts, while emphasising that students remained responsible for their own learning and work. Students were encouraged to see AI as a tool that could assist their thinking rather than a substitute for it.

By explicitly teaching AI literacy from the start of secondary school, the school helped students build the knowledge, judgement, and confidence needed to engage with AI critically and responsibly. This approach supported students to become reflective users of emerging technologies and provided a strong foundation for navigating a rapidly changing digital world.

Reflective questions for school leaders

- 1) Are our decisions about teacher and student AI use planned and strategic, or are we responding ad hoc to manage risks as they occur? Do we have a clear sense of how AI is being used, and how we might take a deliberate approach to maximise potential benefits while avoiding potential pitfalls?
- 2) Who is leading AI capability within our school, and do we have identified AI champions or staff with the expertise, time, and support to guide strategic decision-making and professional learning?
- 3) How are we building AI literacy among both staff and students so they can use AI confidently, critically, ethically, and safely?
- 4) Do our teachers have sufficient access to professional learning, approved AI tools, and opportunities to experiment and share practice in a safe and supported environment?
- 5) To what extent have students and teachers been involved in shaping our AI policies, guidance, and expectations, and how well do these reflect the realities of teaching and learning in our school?
- 6) Is our guidance on AI clear, practical, and context-specific, providing examples of both appropriate and inappropriate use so that staff and students understand when, how, and why AI can be used?
- 7) How are we ensuring our approach to AI remains responsive and future-focused by regularly reviewing emerging opportunities, risks, technologies, and the needs of our school community?
- 8) What systems, expectations, or teaching approaches could we strengthen to help students understand and uphold academic integrity in an AI-enabled learning environment?

Reflective questions for classroom teachers

- 1) How am I helping students use AI as a tool to support thinking, learning, and creativity, rather than simply completing work for them?
- 2) Do my students clearly understand when AI use is appropriate, when it is not appropriate, and what responsible use looks like in my classroom?
- 3) How confident am I in my own understanding of AI, and what professional learning or experimentation could help me use it more effectively in my teaching practice?
- 4) Am I explicitly teaching students the AI literacy skills they need, such as effective prompting, evaluating AI-generated information, recognising errors and bias, protecting privacy, and acknowledging AI use appropriately?
- 5) How am I creating opportunities for open conversations with students about the benefits, risks, and ethical considerations of AI use in learning?
- 6) Do my classroom expectations, assessment practices, and learning activities encourage appropriate AI use while maintaining student agency, authenticity, and academic integrity?
- 7) How am I monitoring and reflecting on the ways students are already using AI, and using those insights to adapt my teaching, guidance, and support?
- 8) How confident are we that our current assessment practices allow students to demonstrate authentic learning while also enabling appropriate and transparent use of AI?

Useful resources

What is it?	Link
Introduction to Artificial Intelligence A resource containing information to support teaching about artificial intelligence. It is a good place to start if you would like to integrate learning about AI into your local curriculum. (Ministry of Education)	
Guidance on the Acceptable use of AI Helpful information for schools on AI, and when its use is acceptable in assessment. (NZQA)	
AI Literacy Framework for Schools This Framework offers teachers and education leaders a shared understanding of the competencies students need to understand to use AI responsibly and ethically. It provides guidance and examples of activities for the classroom. (Insight EU)	
Empowering Learners for the Age of AI A framework to explore key AI literacy competencies that empower students to engage, create with, manage and shape AI. (AILit Framework)	
AI Competency Framework for Students and Teachers These frameworks aim to guide countries in supporting students and teachers to understand the potential, as well as risks, of AI in order to engage with it in a safe, ethical and responsible manner in education and beyond. (UNESCO)	
AI and Education: Guidance for policy-makers This publication offers guidance for policy-makers on how best to leverage the opportunities and address the risks, presented by the growing connection between AI and education. (UNESCO)	

What is it?	Link
Beginner's Guide to AI Literacy for Educators This article explores what AI is, how it's changing education, and how to engage with it safely and purposefully in Aotearoa New Zealand. (Ako Aotearoa)	
The Day of AI: A teacher's drive for responsible AI literacy in New Zealand schools This article outlines the journey one New Zealand educator took to develop a localised, culturally responsive resource designed to help build foundational AI literacy in New Zealand schools. (Education Gazette)	
Day of AI Aotearoa New Zealand Free ready-to-teach units and educator resources to help bring AI literacy to the classroom.	
Technology Education New Zealand (TENZ) This network is a non-profit professional association supporting and promoting all levels and areas of technology education in Aotearoa New Zealand.	
Digital Technologies Teachers Aotearoa (DTTA) A nationwide network of educators.	

What ERO did

For this report, we collected data in Term 1, 2026. We looked at English-medium state schools and Years 5 and above. We collected responses from students, parents and whānau, teachers, and school leaders. We also spoke with a range of experts and used other evidence and research to support our findings. The findings of our review are evidenced by a range of data and analysis from:

Where we looked	Who we talked to
Over 1500 survey responses from:	→ 561 secondary school students → 441 secondary school teachers → 114 secondary school leaders → 489 secondary school parents and whānau
Interviews and focus groups with over 50 participants:	→ Including students, teachers, school leaders, and parents and whānau
Site visits at:	→ Three secondary schools
Data and evidence from:	→ A review of international and New Zealand literature → Administrative data on school use of AI

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