



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

Practical insights for primary 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 primary school leaders and teachers. It focuses on what we found, the effective practices we saw primary 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?

Use of AI is common across primary schools. Leaders are using AI to support planning, communication, and administration. Teachers are using it for lesson planning and creating learning resources. Student AI use is generally more limited, and closely managed by teachers than in secondary schools. Younger students are less likely to have independent access to devices, accounts, or AI tools, and expectations around safe and supervised use are stronger. As a result, AI is less often used independently or as a routine part of day-to-day schoolwork. As in secondary schools, primary school students mostly use it to find information, and generate ideas. Primary students are more likely than secondary students to say they use AI to create music or pictures.

We did hear that student use may be higher than adults perceive. Nearly four in ten parents and whānau reported that they were unsure if their children were using AI at school. Leaders reported that some intermediate-aged students are already using AI despite age restrictions, and that much of this use is self-directed and learned through peers, making it less visible to teachers and parents and whānau. We also heard examples of students using AI tools to support their schoolwork without their teachers being aware.

Schools are making different decisions about whether, when, and how AI should be used, depending on their context, priorities, and the age of their students. 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.

When managed carefully, AI can offer benefits to teaching and learning in primary 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 – especially for younger students. 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 primary school leaders and teachers can take to support safe and deliberate use of AI within their school.

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, limitations and risks of AI, and to help schools make informed decisions about whether and how it should be used (especially decisions 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 them 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 syndicate provides a more long-term sustainable model of AI capability within a school.

Real-life example: Giving teachers time and permission to experiment with AI

One school recognised that teachers would need both practical learning opportunities and the confidence to trial AI tools before they could make informed decisions about their use. At the beginning of the year, staff participated in targeted professional learning and development (PLD) focused on understanding what generative AI can do and how it might support teaching practice.

The PLD combined external expertise with in-house support. Sessions led by an external IT provider explored the ethical considerations of AI and demonstrated how AI tools could be used in authentic teaching contexts. The school's AI champion also ran workshops, showing staff how to write effective prompts and use AI to create teaching resources. Many teachers were surprised by the capabilities of the tools. As the principal observed, staff were impressed by how quickly AI could transform a photo of handwritten planning notes into a polished and usable resource.

Following the PLD, leaders deliberately gave teachers the time and permission to experiment with AI in ways that were relevant to their roles. Teachers explored how AI could help customise learning materials, support lesson planning, and reduce administrative workload. For example, one PE teacher used AI to help organise the school's swimming programme. While some staff had already begun using AI independently, leaders believed it was important that all teachers understood both the opportunities and limitations of AI before encouraging wider adoption.

As staff became more confident, they began using a range of different AI tools, each suited to different tasks. Rather than requiring a single platform, the school introduced an approval process in which new AI tools were reviewed by the AI champion or principal before being used for classroom or administrative purposes. This approach enabled innovation while ensuring that staff and students used approved tools in ways that aligned with the school's guidelines and expectations.

Creating safe, well-supported environments for experimentation helps schools build confidence and capability in using AI

Focus on fostering an environment where staff and students can experiment, and reflect openly about AI use. When experimentation is guided and supervised, teachers and students are more likely to use AI safely, confidently, and for learning.

Schools that created safe, well-supported opportunities for experimentation were better able to build staff and student confidence in using AI. These schools didn't leave AI use to chance – they identified the best tools, considered privacy and data protection, and made clear when, where, and how AI could be used.

For teachers this meant being given time and permission to try AI tools in low-risk ways. Schools supported this through staff meetings, professional learning conversations, shared examples, and open discussion about what works, what the risks are, and what still needs guidance. As teachers build their own understanding, they become better equipped to guide student use of AI and respond to questions and concerns.

Where AI is introduced, students can benefit from structured opportunities to learn about AI. This includes teaching how to write effective prompts, fact-check AI-generated information, and using AI as a tool for supporting thinking rather than just a shortcut to find the answer. In primary schools, this learning should be carefully scaffolded, age-appropriate, and closely guided by teachers.

Real-life example: Creating a 'safe sandbox' for AI use

One school found that involving students in discussions about AI helped create a culture of openness and trust. Because students had opportunities to contribute to the development of the school's AI expectations, they were more willing to be honest about when and how they were using AI and more likely to seek guidance from teachers when they were unsure.

This approach helped create what staff described as a "safe sandbox" for AI use. Rather than treating AI as something students should avoid or conceal, the school established clear boundaries within which students could explore AI with teacher support. Students were encouraged to ask questions, experiment with different uses of AI, and discuss challenges or mistakes without fear of being immediately penalised.

Teachers used these opportunities to help students think critically about the outputs AI generated and to consider when AI was helpful and when it might undermine learning. The focus remained on using AI as a tool to support learning, rather than as a substitute for independent thinking and effort.

By creating an environment where AI use could be openly discussed and guided, the school reduced the likelihood that students would use AI inappropriately or in secret. Instead, students were supported to develop the confidence, judgement, and critical thinking skills needed to use AI responsibly within clear and agreed expectations.

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 choose to take a strategic approach to managing AI use are best placed when they 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. In primary settings, this guidance should reflect the developmental stage of students and make clear the role of teacher supervision in any AI use.

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: Developing a clear school-wide policy for staff and students

One school recognised that effective AI use required a shared understanding of expectations across both staff and students. Drawing on the expertise of the school's AI champion, as well as survey feedback from staff and students about their current use of AI, leaders developed a comprehensive AI policy aligned with the school's digital citizenship framework and the New Zealand Curriculum key competencies.

The policy established a set of guiding principles for everyone in the school community. These included maintaining academic integrity, being transparent about when and how AI had been used, and ensuring that all AI-generated content remained subject to human judgement and oversight. The policy also encouraged a culture of continuous learning, where staff and students could explore AI, reflect on its impact, and build their confidence and digital literacy over time. To protect privacy, the policy clearly stated that sensitive or personally identifiable information must never be entered into AI tools.

The school also co-constructed clear expectations for use with students. They could use AI for tasks such as brainstorming ideas, generating questions, or creating writing outlines, but only with teacher permission and through approved, age-appropriate tools. At the same time, the policy made it clear that students were not permitted to use AI to complete learning tasks on their behalf, or to present AI-generated work as their own.

Specific guidance was provided for teachers as well. Staff could use AI to support professional tasks such as resource creation and marking, but responsibility for professional judgement remained with the teacher. For example, AI could assist with feedback and assessment processes, but final decisions about student achievement could not be delegated to AI tools. Teachers were also expected to model responsible AI use, teach students how to critically evaluate AI-generated content, and actively supervise student use in the classroom.

By articulating clear expectations for both staff and students, the school created a consistent and transparent approach to AI that supported innovation while safeguarding learning, wellbeing, and trust.

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.

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. If AI is being used for learning activities, 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. For younger students, the focus may be on understanding what AI is, questioning information, and learning simple habits for safe and responsible use. Schools that adopt AI in the classroom should create clear expectations and practical guidance, encourage open discussion about responsible use, and provide opportunities for safe experimentation with approved AI tools. Schools may also decide that AI use is not appropriate in some year levels, learning areas, or contexts. 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. Schools should make decisions about AI use carefully, taking into account the age of students, community expectations, privacy considerations, and the school's educational priorities.

Real-life example: Helping students to use AI responsibly

One school recognised that students needed clear guidance and explicit teaching to use AI appropriately. The school adopted a graduated approach, with no AI use permitted in Years 1–4, very limited use in Years 5–6, and carefully managed use in Years 7–8. To make expectations easy to understand, leaders developed a visual guide showing when AI could and could not be used. The guide reinforced that AI should support learning – for example, by helping students plan, refine, or check their work – but should never replace their own thinking and effort.

Rather than assuming students already knew how to use AI effectively, teachers explicitly taught AI literacy skills. This included showing students how to write effective prompts, evaluate AI-generated responses, and use AI feedback appropriately. Teachers viewed this instruction as essential, particularly because some students were tempted to rely on AI to produce work they believed was of a higher quality than they could achieve independently.

Clear expectations were supported through active monitoring in the classroom. Teachers used screen-monitoring software to oversee student device use and address concerns as they arose. When students used AI inappropriately, staff responded through a graduated process that began with immediate conversations about what had happened and why it was a problem. Where needed, access to devices or AI tools was restricted, and parents and whānau were involved in more serious or repeated cases.

Importantly, teachers approached these situations as opportunities for learning rather than punishment. By combining clear rules, explicit instruction, and supportive monitoring, the school helped students develop an understanding of responsible AI use and the importance of maintaining ownership of their own learning.

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?

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?

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)	
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 with students in Year 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 2000 survey responses from:	→ 1004 primary school students → 417 primary school teachers → 353 primary school leaders → 400 primary school parents and whānau
Interviews and focus groups with over 70 primary school participants:	→ Including students, teachers, school leaders, and parents and whānau
Site visits at:	→ Five primary schools
Data and evidence from:	→ A review of international and New Zealand literature → Administrative data on school use of AI

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