

THE NEXT WORD

Cyborgs in Schools: Where to Next?

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Start human. Use AI. Stay human.

Matt Esterman

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- 20+ years in K-12 schools — History Teacher, IT integrator, School Leader
- Author — The Next Word: AI and Teachers (2024) with Dr Nick Jackson
- Australian Schools Plus Teaching Fellow 2023
- Adobe Creative Educator 2025
- Working with schools across Australia, Macquarie Uni, WSU, University of Oxford

What I do

- AI keynotes & workshops
- AI Projects (6 or 12 months)
- Events, books etc
- Staff, student & family workshops
- Educator Intelligence platform

nextwordnow.com

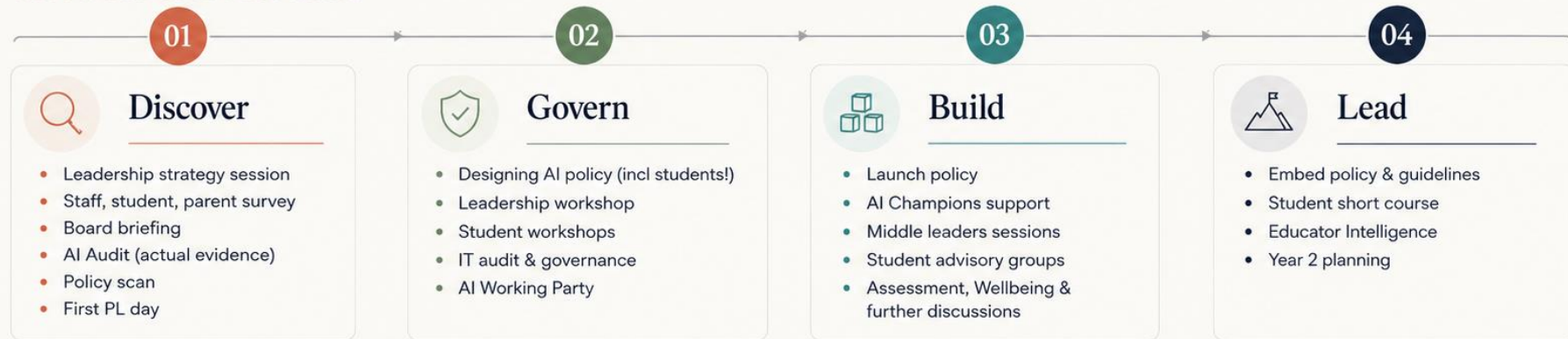
Working with schools: we design the journey with you.

A practical pathway from first engagement to long-term capability.

WHERE SOME SCHOOLS START



THE TYPICAL SCHOOL JOURNEY



T O D A Y

What we're here to do

- 01 Understand where schools actually are with AI right now with real data
- 02 Look honestly at what's working and what isn't
- 03 Think through the most likely scenarios for the next 12 months and beyond
- 04 Leave with something concrete to do on Monday morning

We were already cyborgs.

AI didn't change us, it made the merger visible.

We have moved on from 'should we let AI in?'

It's already in.

The **very urgent** question is: what do we do about it?

What we mean when we say 'AI'

Generative AI: tools students, teachers and families can access right now

ChatGPT

The one everyone knows

Microsoft Copilot

Embedded in Office 365

Google Gemini

Built into Google Workspace

Anthropic Claude

Reasoning & analysis

DeepSeek

Fast-rising alternative

NotebookLM

Research & synthesis

Plus tools built for educators: Canva, Brisk, MagicSchool, Diffit, Quizizz, Grammarly...

OECD TALIS 2024 — Australian Teachers

66%

of lower secondary
teachers used AI
in 2024

4th

highest AI use
among OECD nations
(avg. is 36%)

47%

of primary teachers
used AI — uneven
across stages

4 in 5

teachers concerned
AI enables academic
dishonesty

Source: OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2024, reported October 2025

The policy vacuum

The problem

Two schools in the same suburb: one government, one independent, took diametrically opposed positions on AI in assessment. Students gamed the inconsistency. Parents were confused. Teachers felt exposed.

One teacher was disciplined for using AI to write report comments, while colleagues in the next staffroom did the same without scrutiny.

The insight

The absence of a system-level position doesn't prevent AI use.

It prevents consistent, fair, and defensible AI governance.

Only 25% of school boards have been properly briefed on AI.

10

BILLION

messages sent to **Snapchat's My AI**
by June 2023... mostly teenagers

Ask your students

Students are talking to AI about things they might not talk to anyone else about. School. Stress. Loneliness. Identity.

Most schools don't know it's happening and **can't see it**.

One of the best things you can do costs nothing: **ask your students what apps they're using**.

Listen for learning, not for policing.

AI as therapist, friend, companion

This is already happening. In your school. Right now.

20M+

daily active users on Character.ai
— majority aged 13–25

1 in 4

teens report using AI chatbots
for emotional support

24/7

always available — no waitlist,
no Medicare card, no stigma

The appeal is real

AI doesn't judge, doesn't tire, doesn't cancel. For isolated or anxious students, that feels safer than a human. We need to understand why before we dismiss it.

The risk is also real

AI companions cannot recognise crisis. They cannot call for help. They can reinforce unhealthy patterns and deepen isolation while appearing to help. Character.ai faced legal action in 2024 following a student's death.

Schools are on the front line

Students won't tell you they're talking to an AI about how they're feeling. But they are. Wellbeing policy, digital literacy, & staff training all need to catch up right now.

There is a student in your school that has an AI boyfriend, girlfriend, or best friend.

The four tensions schools are living with

Academic Integrity

When a student can generate a plausible essay in 30 seconds, what counts as their work?

Teacher Workload

AI can save hours. But who gets to use it, and what happens to those left behind?

Student Wellbeing

AI companions, tutors, therapy bots. Support? or substitution for human connection?

The Equity Trap

Students with premium AI tools and fast internet are gaining compounding advantages.

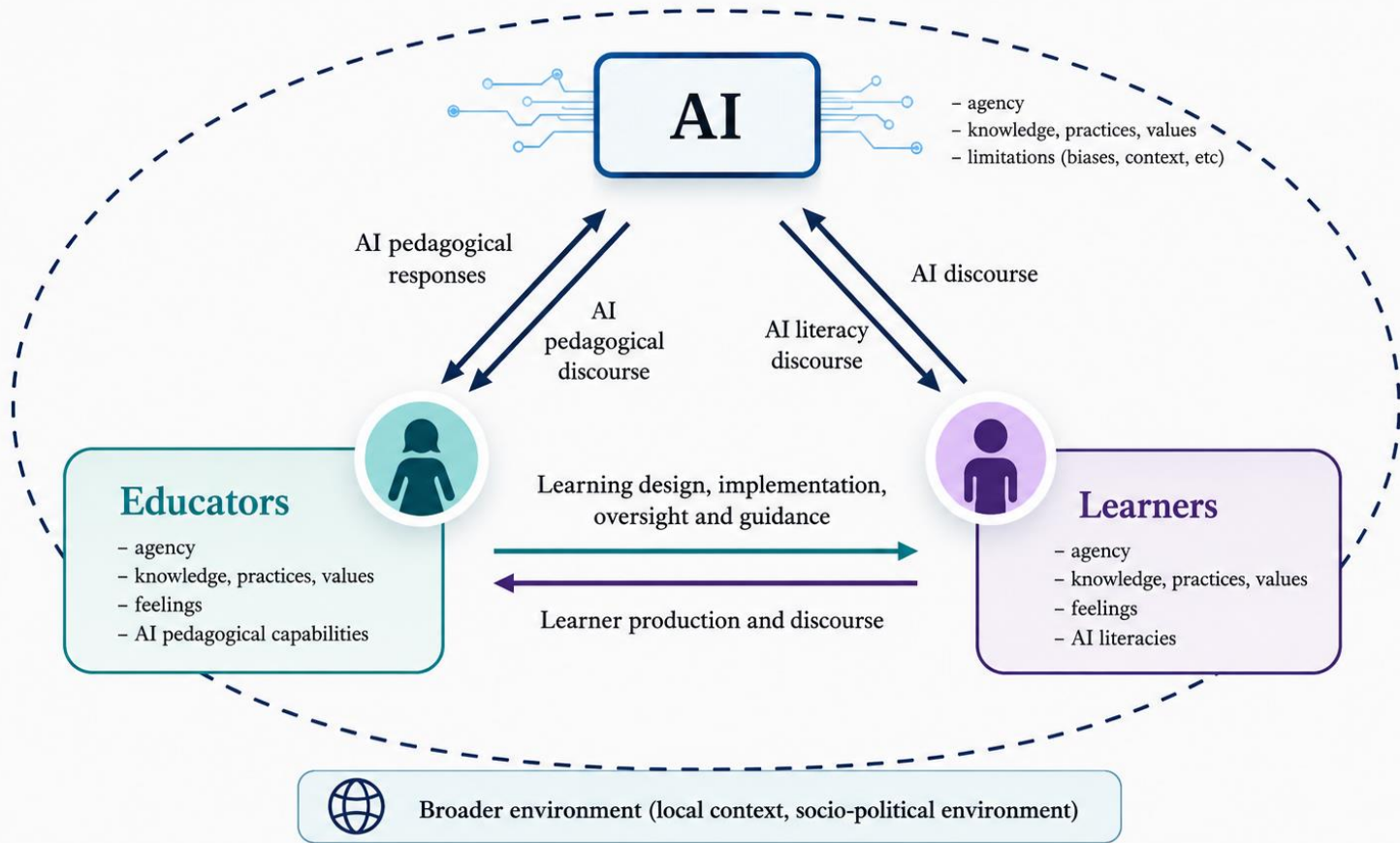


Figure 1. Conceptualization of learning and teaching in an AI world

Bower (2026) *Reconceptualizing Education for an Artificial Intelligence World*, SITE Philadelphia.

"The biggest risk is doing nothing."

Schools that engaged early with AI with governance structures and an AI champion/lead are significantly better positioned than those that waited.

What happens when teachers get time back

9.3

hours of administration
saved per teacher per week

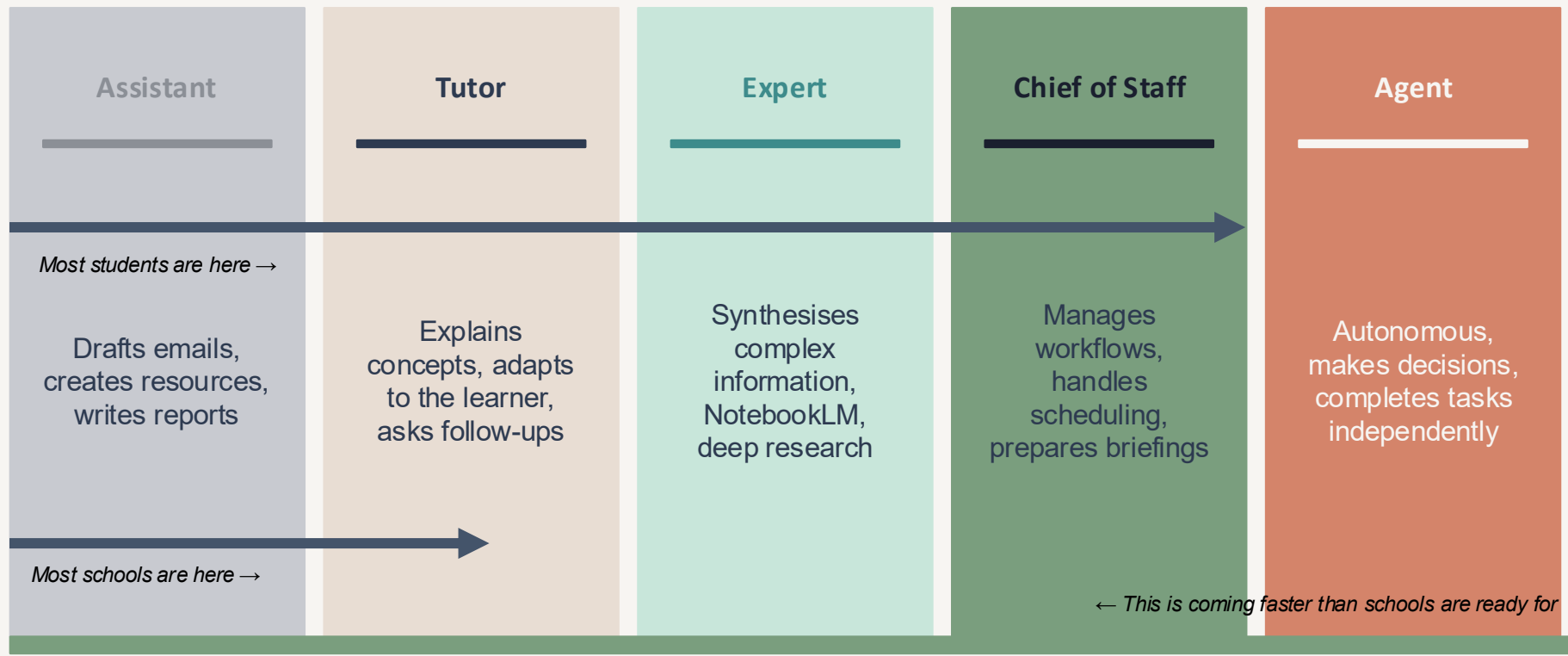
Brisbane Catholic Education × Microsoft

That's more than a full day back per week.

What becomes possible when teachers have that time for students?

**Student anxiety was lower - not higher - in the
- in the lead-up to assessment when AI was
was used thoughtfully.**

The capability stack: from bot to agent



What it looks like when it's working

The working party

A school built their AI policy, with students, as a working group. Eight weeks. By the end, they didn't just have a document, they had **a community that understood why it existed.**

The time gift

A deputy principal used AI to draft her annual report. 40 minutes, not a day and a half. She **used the time saved to check in with three students she'd been meaning to reach.**

The differentiation win

A head of department used AI to create personalised lesson plans for 14 students with documented learning needs. **First time she'd felt she could genuinely meet the brief without burning out.**

Structured approaches

Governance > Strategy > Integration

- 01 Governance** Appoint an AI Lead. Form a cross-functional team with IT, curriculum, welfare, student and parent reps.
- 02 Policy** Draft your core AI policy. Start with what's already happening and build the framework around reality.
- 03 Data Audit** Create a digital software inventory: know every tool in use, what data it touches, where it lives.
- 04 AI Literacy** Professional learning for leaders, teachers, students, and parents. Age-appropriate. Practical. Ongoing.
- 05 Risk Assessment Assessment** Run a proper risk assessment before Stage 2. The AI Safety Capsule is your launchpad, not your finish line.

Five forces shaping the next 12 months

These are coming: whether schools are ready or not.



PISA 2029

The OECD will assess AI literacy for the first time. Australian students will sit it. The framework is set. Most curricula aren't.



Assessment Redesign

When AI can write any essay, assessment must evolve. The question: what constitutes genuine evidence of learning?



Accreditation Shifts

Teacher professional standards don't yet reference AI capability. That will change. Schools need to get ahead of it.



The Agentic Shift

AI agents: autonomous, decision-making, action-taking, are arriving. Who's accountable when AI makes the decision?



The Equity Gap

Students with premium AI access are gaining compounding advantages over those without. This is happening now.

Four paths schools are taking right now

Which one is yours?

Governance-First

Adoption-First

Wait & See

Student-Led

The four paths

01

Governance-First

The school moves deliberately. Appoints an AI Lead, builds a cross-functional team, spends a term building foundation — policy, literacy, data governance — before rolling out AI tools widely.

Result: by mid-2027, a community that trusts the framework.

This is the school you want to be.

02

Adoption-First

The school moves fast. Teachers experimenting, students using AI freely, productivity gains visible. Exciting.

But governance hasn't kept pace. No clear policy. Data privacy unaudited.

Without governance, innovation is fragile. One incident exposes everything.

The four paths (continued)

03

Wait & See: The Dangerous One

The most common scenario. AI acknowledged. A few leadership conversations. Policy 'in development.' Staff doing their own thing, quietly.

"We're watching what other schools do first."

This feels prudent. It's actually the most dangerous place to be. Clarity doesn't come from waiting. It comes from doing.

04

Student-Led Transformation

The students are already there. They've been using AI for 18 months. They know which tools work and which hallucinate.

The school that handles this well does something counterintuitive: it invites students into the conversation.

The students are breaking new ground in the dark. Turn a light on, together.

THE THING THAT'S COMING

The agentic shift

AGENT

Bots wait to be prompted. **Agents** receive a goal and go complete it — browse the web, send emails, make decisions, take actions.

This is not five years away. And when AI makes decisions, who is accountable?

Assessment: the pressure point

"We're not reviewing AI. We're reviewing assessment. AI just made us do it earlier than we planned."

Oral components

Conversations where understanding can't be faked

Process evidence

Mark the thinking, not just the product

Live demonstrations

Skills performed in real time

AI transparency

Students explain and justify AI they've used

Critique tasks

Start from AI output: ask students to **challenge** it

The equity gap is opening further.

Gaining advantages

Students with access to premium AI tools, fast internet, and digitally literate parents are gaining compounding advantages in learning, assessment, and life readiness.

Falling further behind

Students in regional, remote, and low-SES communities — disproportionately without these resources — are falling further behind. AI literacy is becoming a determinant of educational opportunity.

Five things every school should do in the next 3 months

1

Appoint an AI Lead

One person whose job it is to keep the school moving. Don't just pick the most tech-savvy, select the most thoughtful.

2

Run an honest audit

What tools are actually in use right now, by staff and students? What data do they touch? What is in the school's control?

3

Draft a policy with the community

Write it with input from teachers, students and parents. A policy handed down is a policy no one follows.

4

Build AI literacy everywhere

Not just teachers. Support staff, students and parents too. Short, focused, practical sessions to start.

5

Ask your students

Run a student AI forum. Ask what they're using, how, and what adults get wrong about it.

AI is very good at many things.

**What it cannot do,
what it cannot replace
is being genuinely present with a young person
who is struggling.**

Use AI to do the things AI does well.

Protect the time and energy that frees up for the things only humans can do.

**Start human.
Use AI. Stay human.**

Treat AI like a new colleague

01

Write the job description

What role does this AI play in your work? What are its capabilities — and its limits? Be specific. 'Help me draft reports' is a job description. 'Do my job' is not.

02

Onboard properly

Introduce it to your context. Share your school's values, your students, your constraints. Give it background. A colleague who knows nothing about your school can't do great work.

03

Support & train it regularly

Give feedback. Correct it when it's wrong. Refine your prompts. The relationship improves with investment — just like it does with a person joining your team.

04

Have a cup of tea

Don't just task-dump. Explore. Ask questions. Be curious about what it can do. The best working relationships aren't purely transactional — they're built over time.

Three things to argue about

1

What do you want to tackle first with students: assessment, thinking, or therapy & companionship? **WHAT DO HEALTHY HABITS WITH AI LOOK LIKE?**

2

The most at-risk roles in schools aren't teachers, they're admin and support staff. Is your school thinking about what that means? **WHO WILL THINK OF THE RECEPTIONIST?**

3

PISA 2029 will test AI literacy. We're deciding right now whether Australian students will be ready. Are you confident? **DO WE CARE ABOUT PISA?**

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Thank you.

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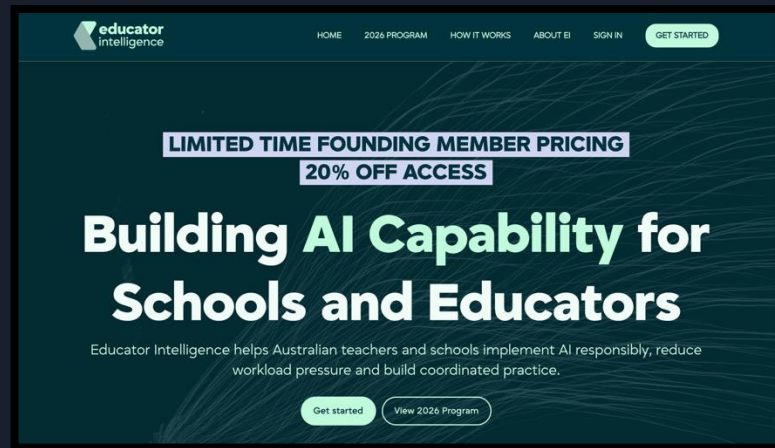
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Start human. Use AI. Stay human.



**Educator Intelligence launches
in coming days!**

