AI Buyer's Guide for K-12 Education

How to Evaluate and Select the Right AI Solution for Your District

PANORAMA EDUCATION

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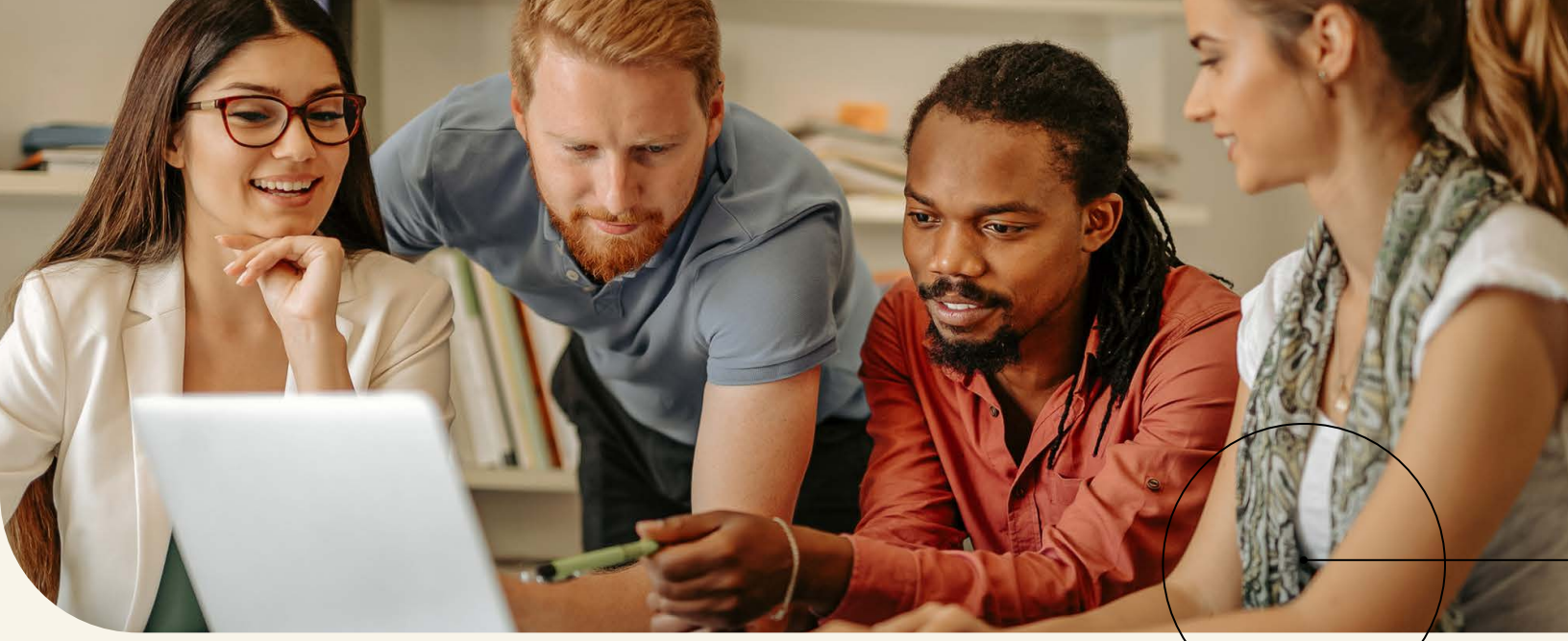
Building an AI Roadmap With Purpose



INTRODUCTION

AI is Here—But How Do You Choose the Right Solution?

Education leaders recognize that AI has the potential to transform teaching, learning, and district operations—but they also feel overwhelmed by the rapid changes and sheer number of AI tools on the market.

In a recent survey, district leaders shared common concerns: they struggle to evaluate AI solutions due a lack of clear criteria, overwhelming amounts of information, and uncertainty about distinguishing quality tools from hype. While leaders see AI's potential, they don't know what questions to ask or how to vet vendors effectively.

This guide is designed to cut through the confusion and help districts confidently evaluate AI tools. Whether you're considering an AI platform for instructional support, administrative efficiency, or student interventions, this framework will walk you through the essential questions to ask, evaluation criteria to use, and red flags to watch for.

To help organize your thoughts, each section includes a dedicated space for notes, allowing you to jot down key takeaways as you evaluate AI platforms.

STEP 0

Assess Security, Privacy, and Compliance

Security and privacy are table stakes when considering AI adoption, as AI in schools must be trusted and secure. Many AI tools collect and store user data, but district leaders need to ensure that student information remains protected and that AI decisions are transparent and auditable.

Key Questions to Ask:

Does the AI vendor comply with key student data privacy laws?

- FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act)
- COPPA (Children's Online Privacy Protection Act)
- SOC 2 Type 2 (Industry-leading security compliance)

How does the AI vendor protect student and staff data?

- Is district data used to train AI models? (It shouldn't be!)
- Does the AI tool use encryption and secure authentication? *Note: We strongly recommend for data privacy and security that your school district utilize Single Sign-on and Multi-factor authentication.*
- Does the platform allow for role-based access to ensure data is only available to authorized staff?

Has your technology leader evaluated the vendor's privacy and security agreements and/or terms of service?

Does the vendor differentiate between security and privacy?

- Security refers to how information is protected (e.g., preventing breaches or unauthorized access).
- Privacy refers to how information is used (e.g., whether student data is being sold or leveraged).

Are we jumping to enable AI features without first considering their impact on teaching, learning, and data security?

Why Solara? ✦

Panorama Solara prioritizes data security and privacy. With built-in security protections in place, you can trust that your district's information is safe. No data or PII is used to train AI models. Panorama fully complies with SOC 2, FERPA, COPPA, and the Student Privacy Pledge. Role-based access ensures that teachers can only view data for their own students, while school and district leaders have broader access for reporting and resource creation.

STEP 1

Identify District Challenges & Needs

Before selecting an AI solution, clarify your goals. What specific problems can AI help your district solve? Without a clear focus, AI can become just another tech tool rather than a meaningful solution. Instead of leading conversations about AI adoption, start with the fundamental problems your district is trying to solve.

Key Questions to Ask:

What are our district's most pressing needs?

- What are the biggest challenges our district is facing right now? What could we solve with a lot more capacity?
- Where are teachers struggling most with time-consuming tasks like lesson planning, grading, or documentation?
- What obstacles make it difficult to create effective, personalized student interventions?
- What barriers prevent administrators from making fully data-driven decisions?

What are the biggest pain points for teachers, counselors, and administrators?

- What are the biggest inefficiencies in our day-to-day work?
- Where are we spending unnecessary time on manual tasks?

If AI is currently being used in our district, who is using it and how?

- How are teachers, staff, and students already using AI, whether officially or unofficially?
- Do you know if your AI tools have proper security and permissions setup? Is anyone able to access data they shouldn't be able to?
- Instead of just saying yes or no to AI tools, are we pausing to evaluate how to use them intentionally?

STEP 2

Align AI With Your District's Goals—Not the Other Way Around

When adopting AI, start with your district's priorities rather than letting technology dictate your approach. Identify your biggest challenges and ensure AI solutions are purpose-built to address them

Key Questions to Ask:

What are our top district priorities (e.g., literacy, chronic absenteeism, graduation rates), and how can AI support them?

- Are we allowing AI products to drive our strategy, or are we using AI to support our existing educational goals?
- If AI implementation is successful, how will we measure its impact on student learning and success?

Are we involving teachers, families, and students in shaping how AI is used in classrooms and schools?

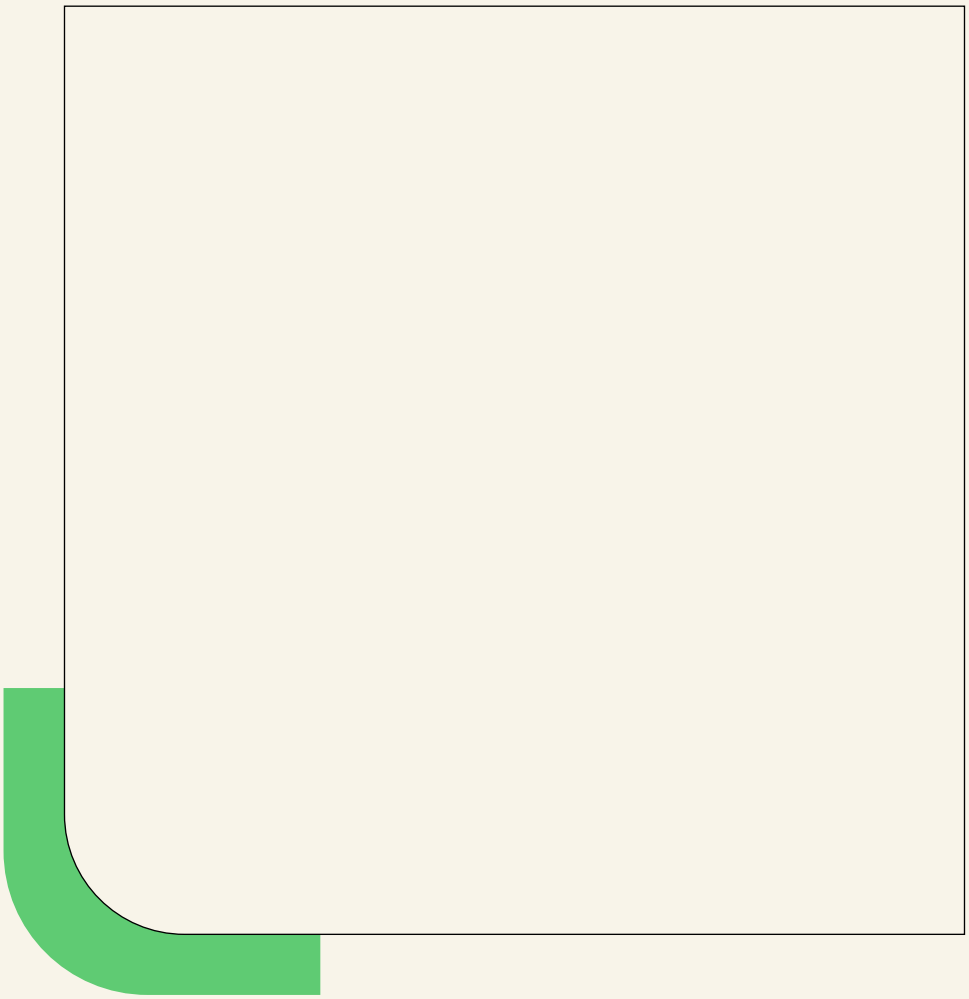
- How are we gathering input from teachers, families, and students on their concerns, needs, and expectations for AI in education?
- How are we ensuring transparency about how AI is being used in classrooms and addressing any misconceptions or fears from educators, families, and students?

Who will be using AI in our district?

- Teachers? (For lesson planning, student supports, and instruction)
- Administrators? (For tracking AI use, analyzing trends, and governance)
- IT teams? (For security, privacy, and compliance oversight)
- Do administrators need AI to improve data-driven decision-making?
- Students? Will the district implement policies to define approved student usage?

What kind of AI tool are we looking for?

- Chat-based AI?
  (For generating plans, responses, and instructional materials)
- Predictive AI?
  (For analyzing student success patterns and trends)
- Automated AI tools?
  (For grading, scheduling, or administrative tasks)
- Customizable AI?
  (Educators and administrators can build custom tools)



Why Solara? ✦

Panorama Solara is built specifically to align with your district's strategic goals, providing AI-powered student supports, time-saving instructional tools, and district-level controls for governance and compliance. With Solara, educators and administrators can access a secure chat interface and prompts and tools customized to fit district needs and focus areas, from addressing attendance to streamlining family communication.

STEP 3

Evaluate AI Capabilities and Student Data Integration

Not all AI tools are created equal. Many claim to “help teachers” or “improve student outcomes,” but what does that really mean? Evaluating AI features carefully ensures your district selects a tool that actually enhances educator effectiveness and student support.

Key Questions to Ask:

Does the vendor have extensive experience in K-12 education?

- Do they understand the unique challenges of schools and districts?
- Does the vendor have a proven track record of successfully working with districts to meet state and local requirements?
- Do they have a track record of successful AI implementations in education, and can they provide case studies or references from other K-12 districts similar to yours?

Does the AI tool provide real, research-backed educator support?

- Does the tool include customizable prompts for personalizing evidence-based interventions?
- Can it support with special education-related tasks (e.g., IEP drafting, support plans)?
- Can educators generate rubrics, differentiate text?
- Are there tools for improving feedback and formative assessment?

Can the AI provide personalized student support?

- Does it connect with district data (attendance, behavior, assessments) to provide holistic, contextual information on students?
- Can it draft personalized intervention plans, progress reports, or outreach letters in seconds for specific students (or groups of students) based on their data?
- Does it provide real-time, actionable insights for student support teams?

Does the AI tool include transparency and oversight for administrators?

- Can district leaders monitor AI usage trends?
- Is there a dashboard for tracking engagement and themes?
- Can administrators review and audit AI-generated content?

Why Solara? ✦

Panorama Solara securely connects with your district's documents and Panorama data, providing AI-powered insights at the student level across academic performance, attendance, behavior, and survey results. This enables educators to quickly draft personalized resources, such as IEPs, attendance nudge letters, and behavior improvement plans, tailored to each student's unique needs.

STEP 4

Consider Implementation and Professional Development

Even the best AI tools fail when educators are not adequately trained on how and when to use them. A strong AI platform should provide professional learning resources and integrate seamlessly into existing district workflows.

Key Questions to Ask:

How easy is it to implement the AI platform in schools?

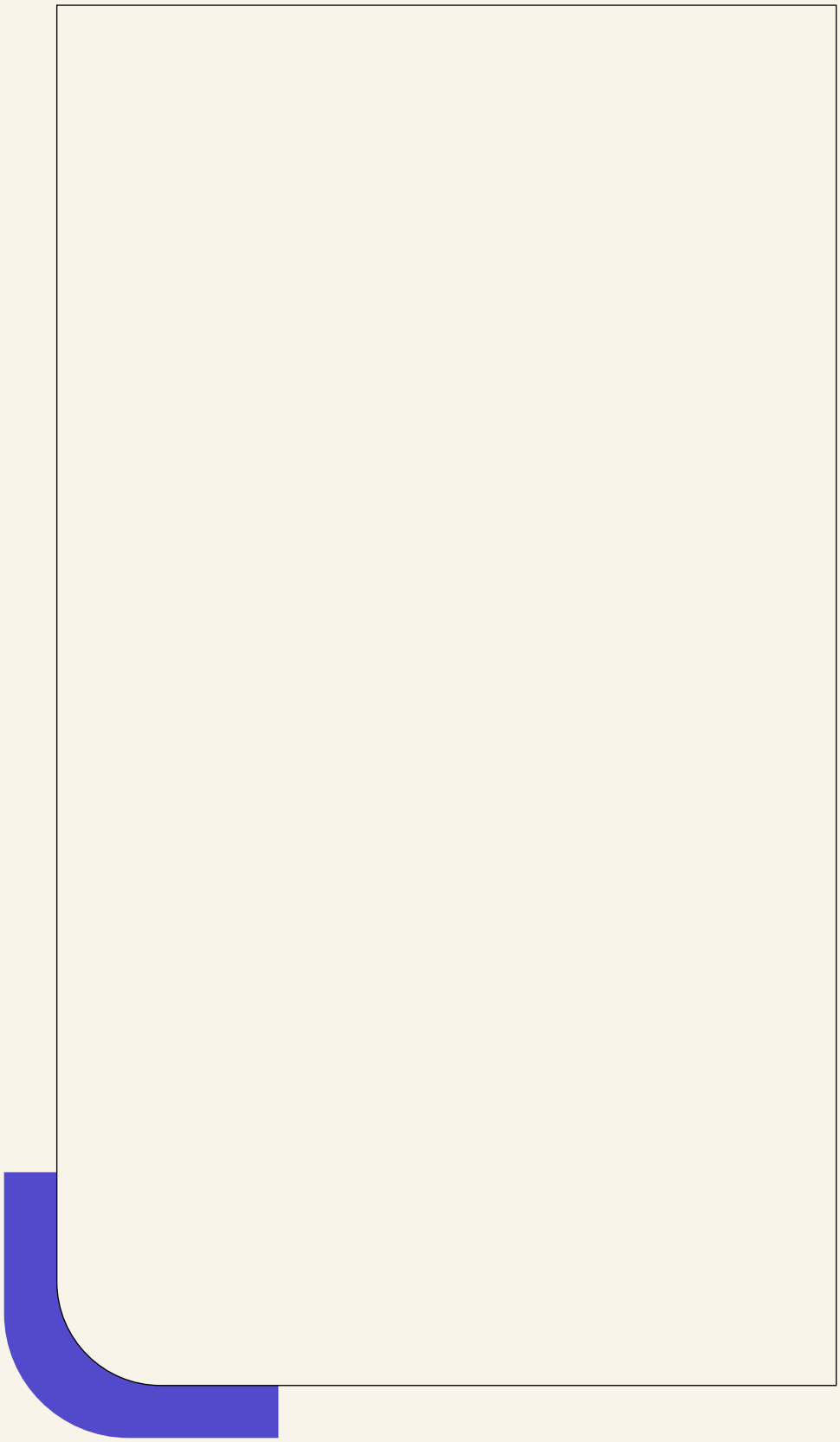
- Does the platform integrate with existing tools and applications?
- Does the vendor provide a dedicated project team to assist with rollout?

What are our district's specific integration needs?

- What existing district tools and platforms does the AI solution need to integrate with (e.g., SIS, LMS, MTSS platforms, assessment tools)?
- Does the AI platform support single sign-on (SSO) and data interoperability with our current systems?

Does the vendor provide training and professional development for staff?

- What types of professional development does the vendor provide?
- Does the vendor offer training on both the AI platform and AI's role in education?
- Does the vendor provide training on prompt generation?
- Does the vendor provide advising services on broader change management related to AI policy and practice?



Can the AI tool be customized to align with our district's policies and needs?

- Are educators able to create custom tools that leverage their expertise and resources?
- Are administrators able to manage the visibility of tools?
- Does the vendor provide role-based permissions for tool usage?

Why Solara?

Panorama offers a comprehensive professional development pathway to help school and district teams understand AI, its applications in education, and how to integrate Solara into daily workflows. Our professional development team, composed of former educators and administrators, works closely with districts to tailor training progression and provide ongoing support. Sessions may include an introduction to AI concepts, hands-on training on using Solara, and guidance on adapting Solara to fit specific use cases, needs, and goals.

With over a decade of experience in K-12 education, Panorama is a trusted partner to 2,000+ districts and 11 state agencies, representing 15 million students. We have a proven track record of managing extensive state and district requirements to help school systems achieve meaningful outcomes.

STEP 5

Governance, Transparency, and AI Monitoring

Without oversight, AI use in schools can quickly become unstructured. Districts need AI solutions that provide clear monitoring and governance tools to ensure AI is being used effectively and responsibly.

Key Questions to Ask:

Can administrators track AI engagement trends across the district?

- Does the platform include a dashboard that provides insights into how AI is being used?
- What key metrics and visualizations are provided?
- How does the platform help administrators identify trends in tool usage and participation?
- Can users filter data by roles, school, or grade level?
- Is data from the platform exportable?

Can the platform be configured based on a district's definitions and AI practices?

How customizable is the tool to district and state requirements and process?

- Are the tools included in the platform customizable?
- Does the platform 'work the way we work?'

Does the AI provide governance tools to ensure responsible use?

- Can administrators track and audit AI-generated content?
- Are there safeguards to prevent bias and ensure ethical AI use?
- Does the AI platform allow districts to review and approve AI-generated responses?

Panorama Solara is designed to support the unique way your district operates. Customize to align with your district's specific definitions, approaches, and strategies. From attendance plans to college recommendation letters, educators can trust that they are generating high-quality content using district-approved prompts. You can tailor Panorama Solara to align with your district's needs, instructional goals, or administrative workflows by creating district-level, custom AI tools. Solara includes built-in reporting tools that allow district leaders to track AI usage, monitor trends, and ensure compliance with district policies.

STEP 6

Cost Considerations and Return on Investment (ROI)

Investing in AI for education is not just about the upfront cost—it's about long-term value. Districts should evaluate both the total cost of ownership (TCO) and the return on investment (ROI) to ensure that the AI solution delivers measurable benefits without straining budgets.

Key Questions to Ask:

What is the full cost of implementing and maintaining the AI platform?

- Are there additional costs, such as integration fees or additional charges for premium features?
- What level of IT support is required to maintain the system, and does that add to our operational costs?
- What are the vendor's pricing models (e.g., per-user, per school, or district-wide licensing)?
- Are there grant opportunities or funding sources available to help cover costs?

What is the expected return on investment (ROI) for our district?

- How will this AI tool improve efficiency and reduce workload for educators and administrators?
- Can the AI solution help optimize staffing and resource allocation?
- Will this tool lead to improved student outcomes, such as higher attendance, engagement, or graduation rates?
- How does the AI solution align with our district's strategic goals and long-term planning?
- A district using AI for attendance interventions saw a 5% increase in attendance and saved X hours of staff time.

Building an AI Roadmap With Purpose

As districts navigate the rapidly evolving landscape of AI, the key to success isn't just choosing the right tools—it's ensuring AI is implemented with intentionality, security, and a clear connection to student success.

AI in education should start with district priorities, not just the latest technology. If an AI platform doesn't integrate securely, if it lacks student context, or if it's not aligned with real classroom needs, it risks becoming a distraction rather than a solution. Schools must demand both privacy and security, ensuring AI is built on trustworthy foundations while unlocking real value for teachers and students.

The best AI solutions don't just automate tasks—they enhance teaching, reduce barriers, and create new possibilities for learning. By prioritizing data protection, educator input, and strategic alignment, districts can move beyond the "wild west" of AI adoption and intentionally shape its role in schools.

One year from now, successful AI implementation won't be measured by how many tools were purchased, but by how well AI has solved real problems, saved teachers time, and improved student outcomes. The opportunity is here—let's ensure AI in schools is built to truly matter for students.

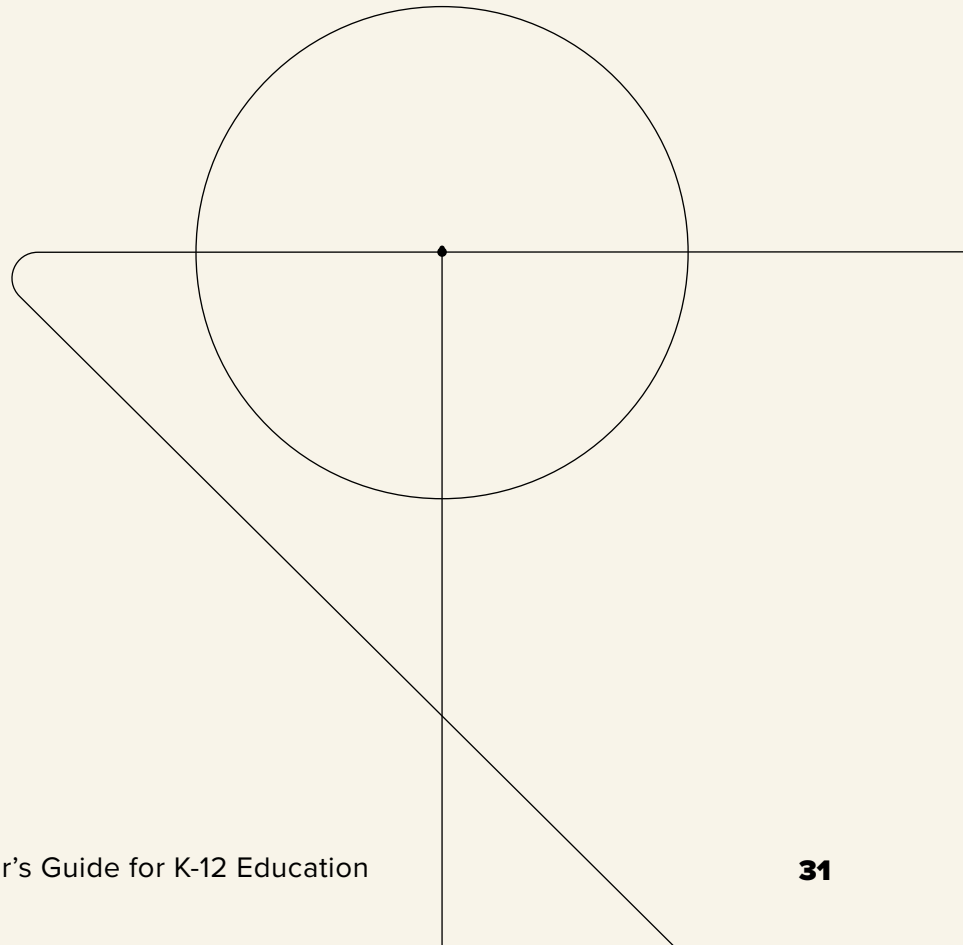
Panorama Solara: AI That Works How Your District Does

As your district explores AI adoption, prioritize tools that are built for K-12 education, offer strong data privacy protections, and provide real, measurable benefits for educators and students. Panorama Solara is designed with these priorities in mind, ensuring that AI is secure, effective, and seamlessly integrated into district workflows.

The best AI solution is one that works for your district—not the other way around. By using this framework, you can select an AI tool that supports your schools, safeguards student data, and empowers educators with meaningful insights and timesaving solutions.

Ready to take the next step?

Schedule a Demo of Panorama Solara Today



PANORAMA EDUCATION

About Panorama Education

Panorama Education is the leading platform for student support and learning in K-12 education. Panorama partners with districts and states to serve more than 15 million students across 25,000 schools and 2,000 districts nationwide. By connecting academics, attendance, behavior, and engagement in a unified solution, Panorama gives educators the full picture of every student. With AI grounded in district context, educators can quickly understand what's happening, why it matters, and what to do next—so they can take faster, more effective action across instruction, student support, special education, and graduation pathways. This leads to higher student achievement and better preparation for life beyond the classroom. Backed by secure, research-based technology and hands-on professional development, Panorama is how the modern school system drives student success.

Get in Touch

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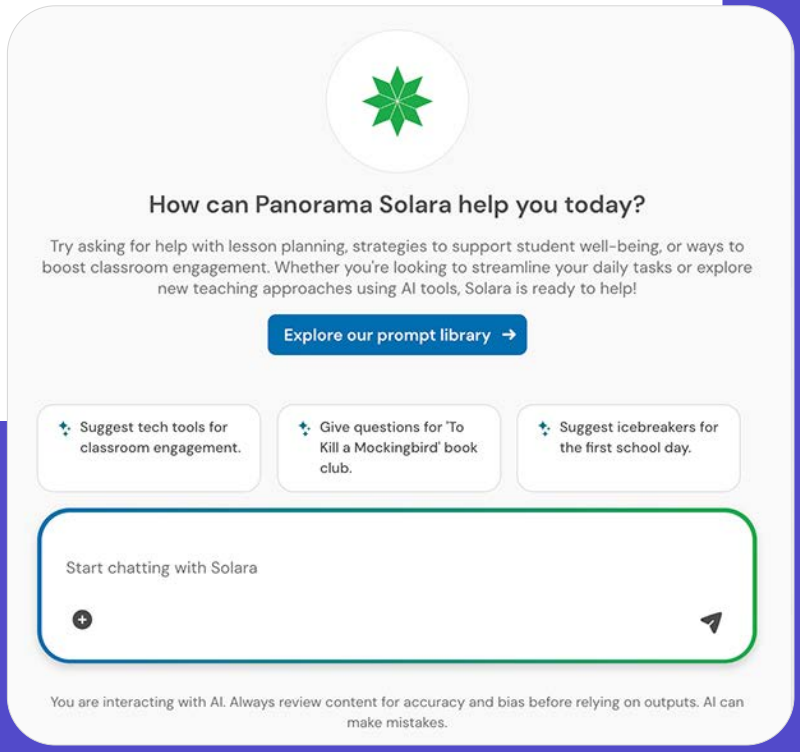
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