

EdWeek Market Brief

Exclusive Data

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The Features School Districts Want From Artificial Intelligence Products

EdWeek Market Brief Asked K-12 Officials About Must-Have Elements of Design and Function

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Education technology companies have been weaving artificial intelligence into their products for years. Now, many of them have ambitions to give the emerging

technology a more prominent role.

But what kinds of reactions can product providers expect from district and school leaders and teachers — some of whom are already skeptical of the technology? And if they are open to a bigger place for AI, what features do vendors need to provide to reassure K-12 officials that their investment in the technology will reap results?

EdWeek Market Brief looked at these issues through a pair of survey questions put to the school district community by the EdWeek Research Center this summer.

Responses to the nationally representative survey were collected in August from 218 district leaders, 271 school leaders, and 453 teachers.

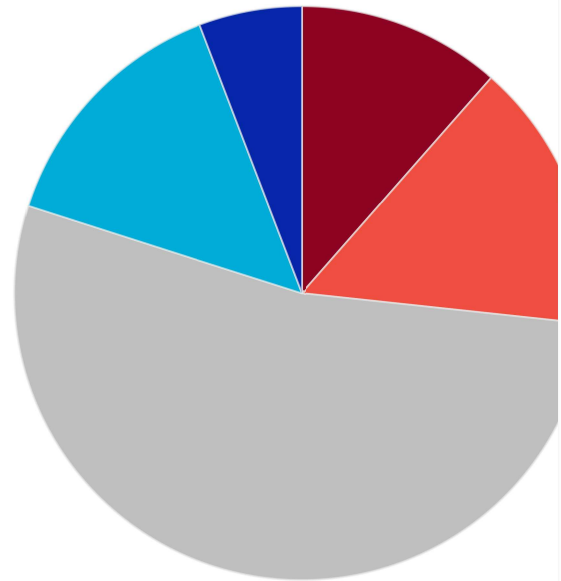
The first question asked how likely districts would be to recommend purchasing a product if a vendor announced the development or use of AI for that tool.

Most respondents, 55 percent, say their opinion wouldn't be affected at all. But of those who did say it would sway their opinion, the use of AI was viewed more negatively than positively.

Twenty-six percent say their likelihood to recommend purchasing that product would decrease if they knew it used AI, while 18 percent indicated they would be more likely to tout it.

Most K-12 Officials Are Unmoved by AI Tech in Education Products

If a vendor announced the development or use of a product or service, the likelihood that I would purchase that product or service for my district/school is likely to:



Decrease a lot

Decrease a little

Not be affected at all

Increase a little

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SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative survey of 271 district leaders, 271 school leaders, and 453 teachers

The overall views of how impressed K-12 officials would be by AI tech in a product did not vary significantly by job title — district administrators, school leaders, and teachers.

District and school leaders and classroom educators might be slightly turned off by the mention of artificial intelligence right now because it's still a developing technology, with many questions left to be answered, said Jeff McCoy, associate superintendent of Greenville County Schools in South Carolina.

McCoy has spoken around the country to superintendents and senior leadership teams on how districts can make effective use of artificial intelligence in the classroom. He sees a similar breakdown when he polls his audiences about their comfort with AI.

"There's still a lot of misunderstanding about what AI is," he said. "A lot of [school leaders] have no knowledge on it."



There's still a lot of misunderstanding about what AI is.

Jeff McCoy, Associate Superintendent, Greenville County (S.C.) Schools

There are many products on the market today touting the potential of AI. But clear guidelines for districts on how to use it responsibly, and to their students' benefit, are lacking, McCoy said.

Technology advocacy organizations like 1EdTech, for which McCoy sits on the board of directors, and the Consortium for School Networking, have issued checklists to help districts know what to ask of vendors when it comes to privacy and security of AI systems.

Education companies can help bridge that knowledge gap by being transparent about what their products do, how they designed it to function, and how the data it collects are used, he said.

"Not everyone knows the questions to ask," McCoy said, so the responsibility "falls on vendors."

Focus on Results, Not The Tool

The fact that the majority of K-12 respondents say the inclusion of AI in a product, on its own, wouldn't influence their opinion of it isn't surprising, said one company official with an extensive background in artificial intelligence.

Districts aren't likely to be won over by a new technology that isn't guaranteed to provide results, said Steve Ritter, founder and chief scientist at Carnegie Learning, a provider of ed tech and curriculum.

Carnegie Learning has been building products based on artificial intelligence for more than 25 years. But there's more public interest in new iterations of the technology, through generative AI than Ritter's ever seen before, he said.

Ritter urges ed-tech providers to think from the perspective of district leaders. Administrators and educators are going to be overwhelmingly focused on the benefits AI can bring to student learning, not the intricacies of the tools themselves.

"It's easy to focus on the technology side and try to build the most sophisticated product, but you really need to understand how schools work, how students think, and what teachers' jobs are," Ritter said. "You see a lot of whiz-bang products out there that don't really focus on what students and teachers need."

High Value in Built-In PD

The survey also asked respondents what features they'd want to see in an AI product in order to feel comfortable using it in their classroom, district, or school.

Professional development for teachers that introduces them to AI was the most common response, cited by 48 percent of respondents.

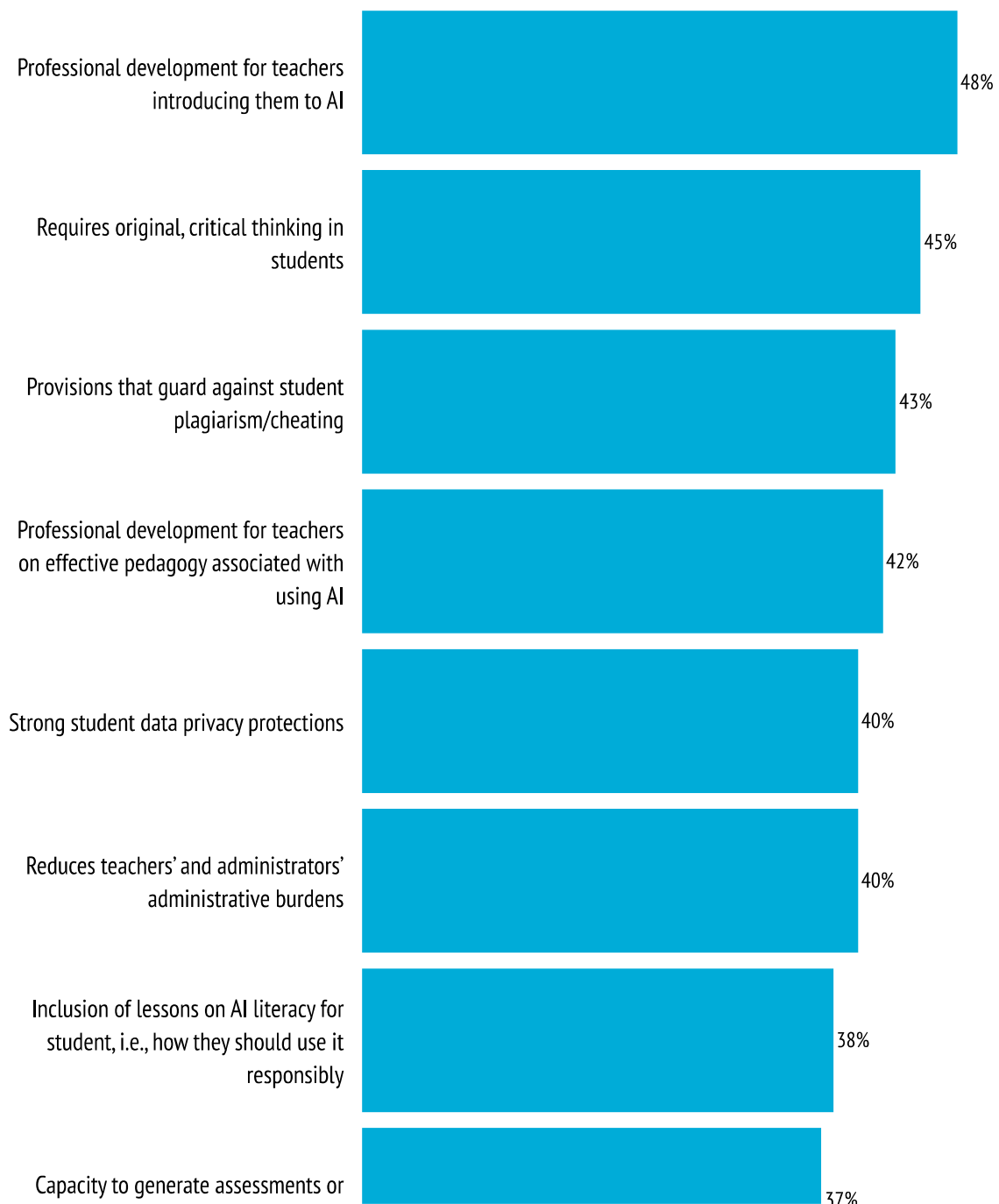
District leaders were more likely to want PD as an AI feature (56 percent) than were school principals (50 percent) and teachers (44 percent).

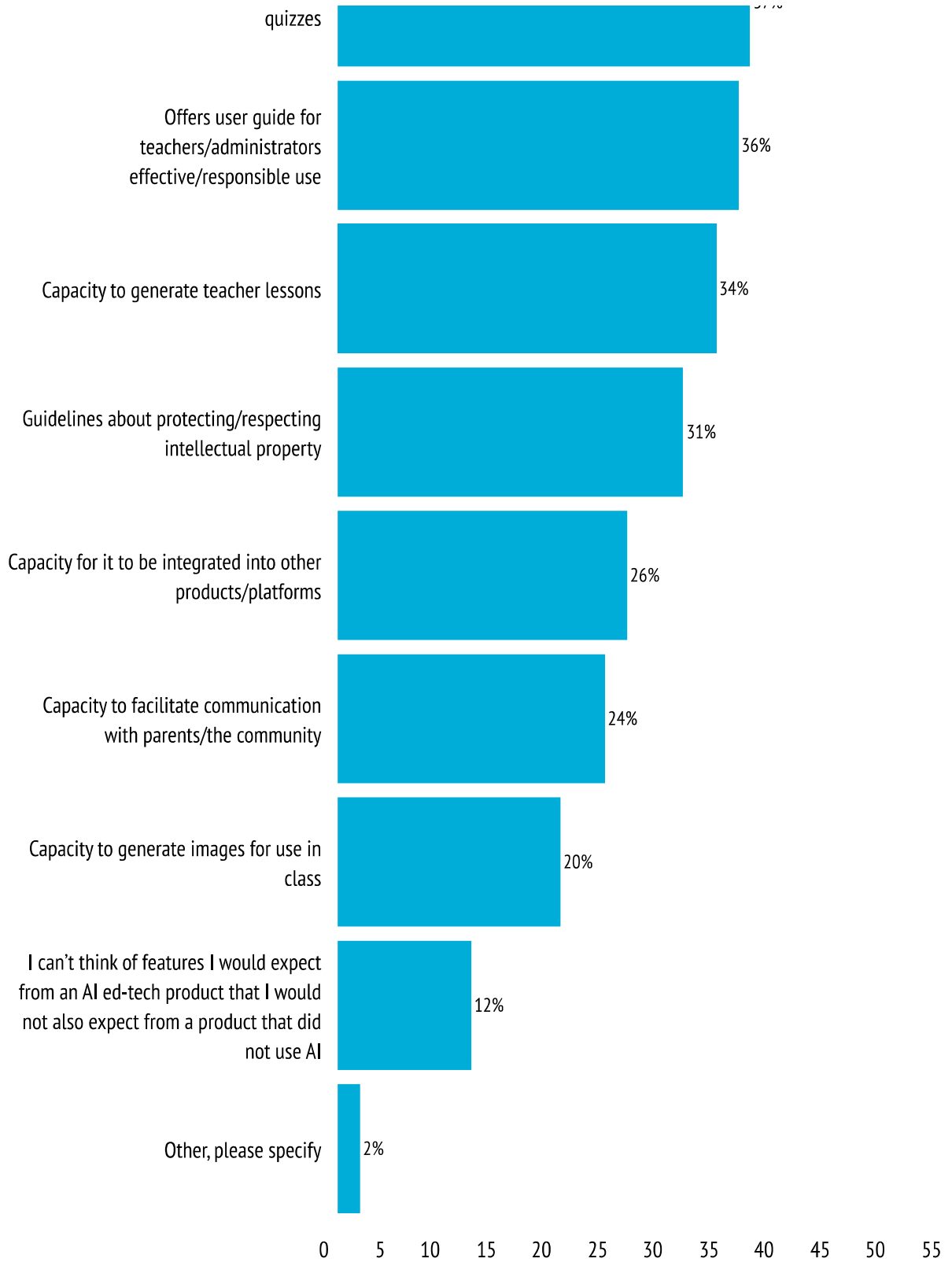
Other features that districts want to see in AI products are those that require original, critical thinking in students – 45 percent – and provisions that guard against student plagiarism/cheating – 43 percent.

High-ranking answers also include professional development for teachers that goes beyond an introduction to AI, and focuses on effective pedagogy for using it; strong student data privacy protections; and products that reduce teachers' and administrators' administrative burdens.

AI Features That Matter: Support for Teachers, and Requiring Critical Thinking of Students

In order to feel comfortable using an ed-tech product that incorporates artificial intelligence in your classroom, district, or school, what, if any, features would you want to see that you would not necessarily expect if the product did not incorporate AI? Select all that apply.





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SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center nationally representative August 2023 survey of 21 district leaders, 271 school leaders, and 453 teachers



McCoy, Greenville's associate superintendent, said he often hears concerns from school district officials around the country that reflect those interests.

Part of the reason McCoy travels to present to district leaders on AI is because he often hears that administrators and classroom educators don't have the time themselves to go outside their districts for PD on that topic. District officials are especially interested in the potential to integrate AI into curriculum.

However, he said he would've expected that features of AI products like student AI literary (38 percent) and interoperability (26 percent) would have ranked higher in the responses.

"A lot of products out there still don't integrate, and you have to have third parties pull in the data from multiple products," McCoy said. "Most educators, at least in my circle, are always advocating for more integration."



AI should never be the final decisionmaker – it should be like your co-teacher or thought-partner, but the teachers need to be the ones making that final decision.

David Jarboe, Director of Instructional Technology, Harrison School District 2

With almost all of the responses, there were no statistically significant differences between district leaders, school leaders, and teachers in the types of features they want.

For David Jarboe, director of instructional technology at the Harrison School District 2 in Colorado Springs, professional development for teachers is also a crucial factor he would look for in an AI product.

"It's critical for us to educate our staff on a high level about how AI really works," he said. "What are the benefits and the limitations?"

It's also important for districts to assess AI tools for whether they're student-facing or not, he said, as that will help determine different guidelines and trainings around it.

Students in his district have shared that they want to have a deeper understanding of AI and its benefits when used effectively, and that begins with having the appropriate PD for it starting at the educator level, Jarboe said.

"AI should never be the final decisionmaker – it should be like your co-teacher or thought-partner, but the teachers need to be the ones making that final decision," he said.

Takeaway: District and school administrators and teachers are largely ambivalent about whether the inclusion of AI in a product, on its own, is a good or bad thing. That suggests vendors have the opportunity to shape their opinions, if school districts see AI tools as being of high value.

The survey offers insights on the qualities that bring value to districts.

District and school leaders and educators clearly believe that support for teachers is an essential feature in AI products. It's a sign of the broad anxieties in districts about what the technology will bring. The importance that the survey respondents place on AI supporting critical thinking may also reflect concerns that students will use the technology for collecting others' ideas, rather than developing their own.

Companies that show they're committed to giving educators solid grounding, not only on the basics of AI, but on how to use it to improve the quality of instruction will have a leg up.

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- [How ChatGPT Could Transform the Work of Education Companies](#)
- [Ed-Tech Industry Group Calls for Equity, Data Privacy Safeguards in AI](#)

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