FullScale

AI in Rural Schools

What We're Seeing in Practice

Contents

About FullScale

We unite education leaders and organizations together to drive collective learning, action, and systems transformation. We break silos, bridge divides, lift up new evidence and unseen innovations, and accelerate change for lasting impact for every learner.

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Introduction

For a field seeking to understand how AI adoption translates into meaningful instructional change, rural systems offer a critical vantage point. In these systems, which serve over 40% of students in the United States, close relationships, few bureaucratic layers between decision and practice, compressed roles, and strong community alignment allow new approaches to move quickly across classrooms and schools.

Together, these conditions keep decisions, supports, and implementation tightly coupled, reducing the space for diffusion or delay, making it easier to understand where innovation succeeds and scales, or breaks down. In this way, rural systems function as "compressed laboratories," in which the interactions between decisions, context, and implementation become visible in real time.

Despite the potential for the broader field to learn from rural settings, it is not yet organized to do so at scale. As a result, many conversations shaping AI's future in K–12 education either exclude the perspectives of these schools and systems entirely, or treat them as downstream recipients of approaches developed elsewhere. In doing so, they overlook both the local realities of rural systems and the meaningful innovation already underway within them.

In early 2026, FullScale conducted a national field scan as part of its Rural AI Strategy Lab to better understand how rural schools and districts approach AI. This brief draws on four sources of evidence:

- A scan of publicly available documents from 241 rural schools and districts across 12 states;
- 22 interviews with national, state, intermediary, and local leaders working at the intersection of rural education and AI;
- Applications from 114 teams to participate in FullScale's Rural AI Strategy Lab from schools and districts across 34 states; and
- In-depth interviews with 33 finalist teams.

The findings that follow present a snapshot of how rural schools and districts apply AI, the conditions shaping its use, and considerations for the broader field.

A Note on Digital Access in Rural AI Adoption

Conversations about rural education and technology have long centered on connectivity, including whether students have devices, schools have broadband, and the infrastructure needed for powerful digital learning exists. This framing has been, and continues to be, important for many rural communities working to close those gaps. Of the 114 applications we received, 24% mention broadband access, internet infrastructure, or device availability, and several describe home internet gaps that continue to shape what students can access outside of school hours. **The work of closing technology access divides is not finished.**

At the same time, **framing rural AI adoption primarily as an access problem is increasingly incomplete.** Among the 24% of applications that mention connectivity challenges, many describe infrastructure that they have already built, including 1:1 device environments, Chromebook deployments, and upgraded school networks, often accelerated through COVID-era investments. These schools and systems are ready to move beyond the focus on connectivity to build the systems and skills to powerfully use technology, including AI. As one leader in Utah put it, *"Every student has a Chromebook and access to good internet. What we lack is the specific education to leverage emerging technologies."*

The field must continue to address connectivity gaps where they persist, while also accelerating support for educators who are ready to use technology in powerful ways. Recognizing this, this brief focuses on the latter, sharing what we are learning about how rural systems are using AI in practice and what it takes to support meaningful, sustained use.

Current Applications of AI in Rural K-12 Settings

Through our research, we discovered that AI use in rural schools and districts is not defined by a single entry point or unified strategy. Instead, it is emerging through a range of applications shaped by local priorities, available capacity, and immediate instructional and operational needs. In many cases, AI is not introduced as a standalone initiative, but as a tool layered into existing work, supporting planning, communication, and student learning in ways that align with current responsibilities.

At the same time, patterns across the landscape suggest that these uses are not random. Educators consistently point to a set of opportunities that AI makes more accessible, and early use reflects how systems are beginning to act on those instructional priorities within existing system conditions.

How AI is Driving Opportunities

In rural schools and districts, AI use is best understood not through tools or programs, but the opportunities educators seek to unlock for their students. Across applications, interviews, and early cohort engagement in our Strategy Lab, three clear opportunity areas emerged:

- Expanding student access;
- Recovering and extending capacity; and
- Preparing students for economic and civic life.

Expanding Student Access

For many rural educators, AI is first and foremost about expanding what students can access. Distance, staffing, and limited program availability often define the boundaries of opportunity. They are exploring AI as a way to push beyond those boundaries, opening up access to advanced coursework, personalized academic support, and exposure to future pathways that might otherwise be out of reach.

> **From the Data on Digital Access in Rural AI Adoption**
>
> Of the 114 applications received, 66% reference equity, access, or underserved students. Across the 33 finalist teams, expanding access is repeatedly identified as a central driver of early efforts.

As one rural school leader put it, *"Why not our kids?" Another elaborated to describe AI as a way to unlock "personalized tutoring, career exposure, and advanced resources previously not possible because of geography."* Across these examples, and others like them, AI is framed as an opportunity to extend what is possible for students within their existing community.

Recovering and Extending Capacity

For many rural educators, AI is also about sustaining and extending what their teams are able to accomplish. In small systems, limited staffing and overlapping roles often mean that core responsibilities are distributed across a small number of people. Across rural contexts, teachers, and school and system leaders are exploring AI as a way to stabilize workload, protect time for instruction, and extend the reach of existing staff without requiring additional hires.

> **From the Data**
>
> 54% of the 114 applications referenced time, capacity, or workload, and 44% explicitly named staffing constraints or role compression as challenges for AI to solve. In interviews, these conditions were consistently described as defining features of rural systems.
>
> "We're a small district where everyone wears many hats. AI has the potential to help us do more for our students without burning out our staff," -District leader

Preparing for Economic & Civic Life

For many rural educators, AI is also about ensuring that students are prepared for the realities of a rapidly changing economy. In communities where schools play a central role in connecting students to local workforce pathways, shifts in industry are often felt quickly. AI serves as both a signal of these changes and a tool to help students build the skills and awareness needed to navigate them.

> **From the Data**
>
> Across the 114 applications, 57% reference CTE or economic readiness, and 81% point more broadly to career or workforce opportunity.

Among the 33 finalist teams, career-connected learning emerged as a common focus of early AI implementation. Across these systems, a clear tension is emerging: AI is being understood simultaneously as a potential driver of new inequities and as a powerful opportunity to better align learning with rapidly evolving industries.

"If we don't prepare students now, we risk leaving an entire generation unprepared," one district leader noted, reflecting a concern that without intentional action, students may fall further behind as AI reshapes the workforce.

At the same time, another shared, *"Our CTE teachers saw immediately this was going to reshape the industries our students were preparing for,"* highlighting how some educators, particularly those focused on career-connected learning, are moving quickly to adapt instruction in response.

How AI is Showing Up in Practice

To address the priorities described above—expanding student access, recovering and extending capacity, and preparing for economic and civic life—we observed a number of different implementations. At this early stage, AI use is emerging within three domains or workflows within existing systems: non-instructional or operational, instructional or teacher-facing, and direct student-facing uses.

Non-Instructional, Operational, or Administrative Workflows

In many rural systems, AI is entering through administrative and operational workflows. These uses offer immediate, visible value and are often easier to implement within existing structures.

This pattern is widespread:

- 74% of applicants reported some level of engagement with AI for administrative or time-saving tasks, and
- 33% are actively piloting these various administrative uses.

Among finalist teams, operational workflows surfaced as the most common focus for future pilots. One regional leader shared that "*Bus route analysis could be done with AI. That's hours back in a week.*" Another noted, "*We want an AI agent in Zendesk to help us solve our own IT problems first.*"

Instructional Workflows

Across rural systems, educators are using AI to support planning, preparation, and instructional design. A large majority of applicants (85%) describe some level of engagement with AI for instructional planning, though only 32% are actively piloting these uses, suggesting that much of this use remains exploratory with limited visibility into how deeply these tools are shaping instructional practice or outcomes. *"Teacher tools are dominant here—MagicSchool, Gemini, Brisk, NotebookLM. Student use is still rare,"* one state leader noted. Others pointed to uneven depth of use. For example, "*Teachers are using AI for lesson planning but not optimizing it—we don't know how much depth is actually there.*"

Direct Student-Facing Uses

Across rural systems, direct student-facing use of AI seems to be emerging more gradually. It is less often the starting point and more often a next step.

While 84% of applicants report exploring or piloting student-facing use, only 24% are actively piloting. Likewise, 8 of 33 finalist teams report current implementation of student-facing tools. In interviews, this work is consistently described as intentional and staged. *"We want to give students real-world AI experience, but we're opening access carefully,"* one district leader shared. Another noted, *"The problem isn't that students are using AI—it's how we teach them to use it in ways that build their skills."* Educators also point toward a longer-term goal: using AI not just to build skills, but to enable more applied, relevant learning experiences that reflect how these tools are used in real-world contexts.

Where Gaps Are Emerging

The distance between the three ways that AI has started driving opportunities and the three workflows associated with current use reflects how systems work to navigate implementation in real time. Across the applications and interviews, three gaps emerged as potential limiters of what could be possible:

- Policy and guidance;
- Professional learning systems; and
- The tool and provider landscape.

Policy & Guidance

Across rural systems, governance and policy are developing alongside implementation. Interviews suggest that many systems are moving forward while still developing shared expectations. "We don't have a playbook, but the work is already happening and we're having to figure it out as we go," one superintendent shared. Of the 114 applications received, 35% reference governance or policy, indicating a growing need for guidance.

> ***"We don't have a playbook, but the work is already happening and we're having to figure it out as we go,"***
>
> **-SUPERINTENDENT**

This gap helps explain the difference between the opportunities educators describe and the uses currently in place. While leaders point to more advanced, student-centered applications of AI, many systems are deploying AI for readily available, lower-risk uses, such as lesson planning, content generation, and other teacher-facing workflows, rather than more complex student-facing or instructional redesign efforts. In the absence of clear guidance, policies, and protections, educators often default to tools and applications that feel safe, familiar, and easier to implement.

Professional Learning Systems

Evidence from applications and interviews suggests that professional learning structures are widely present but not yet aligned to support deep AI integration. 62% of applicants reference professional learning, and interviews suggest that experimentation is often outpacing structured support. In many systems, professional learning takes the form of one-time sessions, introductory training, or informal sharing among educators rather than sustained, practice-embedded support. As one district leader explained, *"It's hard to run PD when the tools change every week."*

> *"It's hard to run PD when the tools change every week"*
>
> -DISTRICT LEADER

This pattern limits how deeply educators can integrate AI into instructional practice. Without ongoing, coherent support, educators are less likely to move beyond early experimentation into more complex or sustained use.

Tool & Provider Landscape

Across applications and interviews, a small number of educator-facing AI tools appear repeatedly, suggesting that adoption is concentrated among a limited set of highly visible platforms. Tools such as MagicSchool are frequently named, while many other tools are mentioned infrequently or not at all. As one school leader shared, *"There are so many tools out there—we'd need help knowing what to choose."* This reflects a broader challenge: navigating a rapidly expanding but uneven landscape of tools without clear guidance on quality, fit, or use.

> *"There are so many tools out there—we'd need help knowing what to choose."*
>
> -SCHOOL LEADER

This pattern shapes how systems select and use AI tools in practice. While the number of available AI tools continues to expand rapidly, adoption is shaped less by the full range of options and more by what is most visible, accessible, and already in use across peer systems. In this context, decision-making often begins with the tool rather than the problem, with systems adopting what is readily available instead of identifying and selecting tools aligned to specific instructional or operational needs.

Connecting Opportunities, Use, and Gaps

Taken together, a consistent pattern has surfaced across the research. Rural educators are clear about what they want AI to enable: expanded access, sustained capacity, and preparation for evolving economic realities. Early use reflects what is most immediately actionable, with adoption clustering in administrative workflows and teacher-facing tools. The distance between these priorities and current use is shaped less by interest than by system conditions, including policy clarity, professional learning structures, and access to clear guidance on selecting and implementing tools from an increasingly crowded and uneven landscape.

The table below synthesizes our findings and illustrates how the driving opportunities are translating into early AI use across instructional and operational contexts. These relationships are not linear; each opportunity appears across multiple domains of use and is shaped by overlapping system conditions.

Table 1. Connecting Opportunities, Emerging Uses, and Gaps in Rural AI Adoption

DRIVING OPPORTUNITY	WHAT THIS MAKES POSSIBLE AT SCALE	WHERE AI IS SHOWING UP TODAY	WHAT IS SHAPING WHAT'S POSSIBLE RIGHT NOW
Expanding Access	Students access advanced coursework, personalized support, and career pathways regardless of geography or staffing constraints	Appears across all three domains: instructional workflows (differentiation, lesson design), non-instructional workflows (freeing time/resources), and emerging student-facing uses (tutoring, exploration tools)	Policy clarity influences student-facing use; tool availability and quality shape what access looks like; professional learning affects how effectively tools are used for differentiation
Recovering and Extending Capacity	Educators have sustained time for instruction, with AI supporting planning, communication, and operations in integrated ways	Most visible in non-instructional workflows (efficiency, operations) and instructional workflows (planning, preparation), with indirect impact on student-facing work	Policy clarity influences student-facing use; tool availability and quality shape what access looks like; professional learning affects how effectively tools are used for differentiation
Preparing for Economic and Civic Life	Students build future-ready skills, explore career pathways, and engage with AI as part of real-world learning	Emerging primarily in student-facing uses (career exploration, skill-building), supported by instructional workflows and occasionally operational infrastructure	Tool landscape gaps are most visible here (especially for student-facing and specialized contexts); policy and professional learning shape how confidently systems move into this space

System-Level Conditions Shaping Rural AI Adoption

The patterns described in previous sections raise a deeper question: why does AI adoption take shape differently across rural systems with some districts moving quickly and coherently, while others take different paths?

Two structural forces consistently shape these differences: coherence and constraint.

These are not opposing forces, but interacting systemic conditions that define how change happens. Rural systems possess structural assets that enable and require alignment, trust, and rapid coordination. At the same time, they operate within long-standing design conditions—staffing structures, role configurations, and resource landscapes—that shape what is possible. Understanding how these forces interact systemically helps explain both the opportunities rural educators are pursuing and how those efforts take shape in practice.

Coherence

Proximity, networks of relationships, and smaller system size shorten the time and distance between leadership decisions and classroom practice. Across 96% of our 114 applications, educators referenced community, relationships, or engagement as central to their work, and more than half pointed to peer networks as a key motivation for engaging in AI. In interviews, 18 of the 33 finalist teams described community trust not as a stakeholder strategy, but as the foundation that allows new efforts to take root.

This coherence shows up in how direction is built and shared. In rural systems, where schools and districts are often smaller in scale, alignment is often developed through ongoing interaction rather than formal processes. Leaders are close enough to classroom practice to observe what is working, validate it, and create shared expectations that allow it to spread. In Pennsylvania, one superintendent described this simply, *"I watch what teachers are doing, I vet it, then we work together."* In Massachusetts, another leader pointed to *"fewer silos"* and more direct coordination between district leadership and classrooms. These structural features enable faster feedback, clearer direction, and more consistent implementation.

Across contexts, we observed a consistent pattern: coherence emerges through relationships, shared direction, and community trust. The balance across these elements varies from one rural community to the next, but together they enable systems to move with clarity and sustain that work over time.

Constraint

The same conditions that enable coherence in rural systems also shape how new work is taken up and sustained. Without extensive external partnership infrastructure or specialized roles, rural districts often build governance, professional learning, and implementation structures in tandem with early use. This can create unevenness, but it also reflects a pattern of integrated system-building rather than sequential rollout. Privacy considerations in small communities, reliance on key individuals, and the need to prioritize carefully all influence how efforts take shape. As one school leader reflected, *"We can do hard things—but the sustainability story here is mostly one person going above and beyond."* The capacity is present, though the challenge is ensuring that it is supported in ways that allow it to extend beyond specific individuals over time.

These patterns are shaped by long-standing design conditions that define how work is organized in rural systems. Across 44% of applications, educators described role compression or staffing structures that require individuals to operate across multiple responsibilities. In interviews, every finalist team named this as a defining feature of their context. *"It's me and my assistant,"* one superintendent explained, describing the scale of central office operations. Another leader pointed to the tension between growing demands and limited staffing capacity, reflecting that gaps in capacity are not temporary, but are structural results of how work is organized and distributed.

Within these conditions, rural systems develop particular strengths. When roles are broader and teams smaller, coordination often happens laterally rather than through layered structures. Field leaders consistently described how they operate with a form of adaptive capacity, including the ability to focus effort, build cross-role alignment, and move quickly when direction is established. As one leader put it, *"smallness enables agility but strains sustainability."* Both are true, and both emerge from the same underlying structure that enables coherence while placing limits on scale and sustainability.

The Intersection of Coherence and Constraint

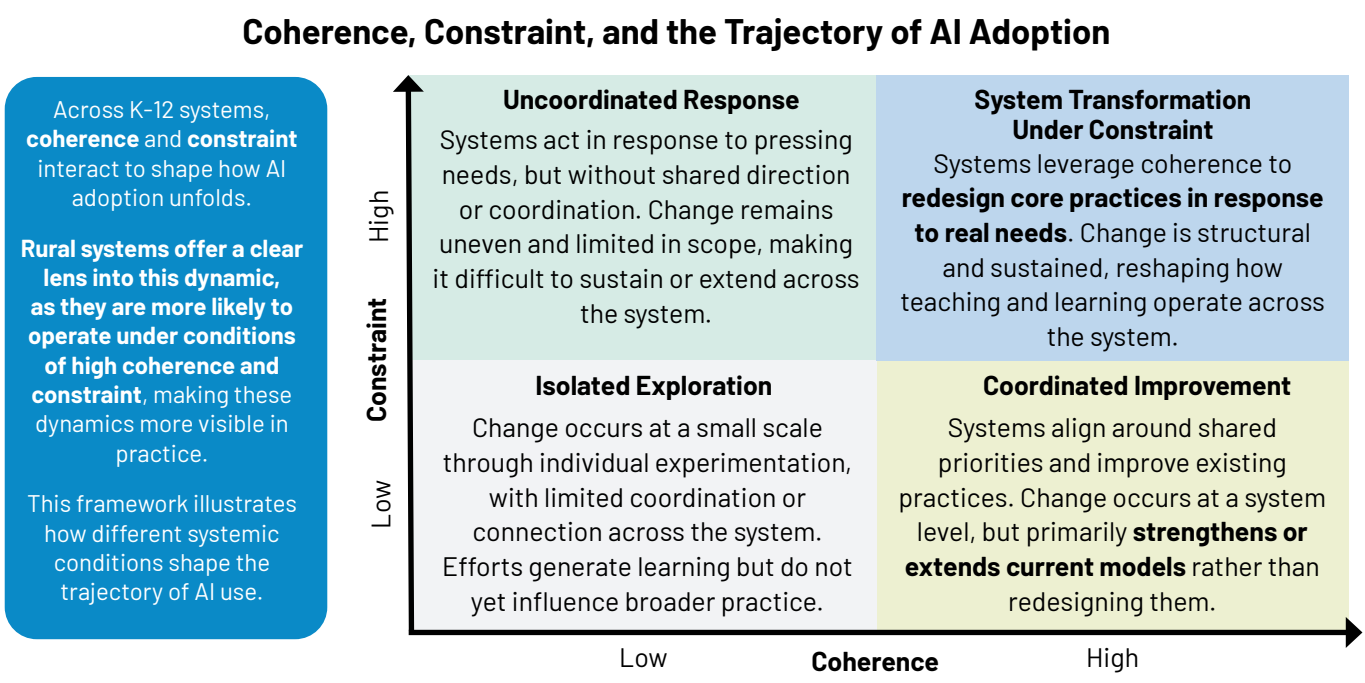
Coherence and constraint interact to shape how AI adoption takes hold within a system, what gets prioritized, how quickly efforts align, and whether early experimentation spreads or stalls. Together, they shape the scale and nature of change that systems are able to achieve. Looking at these conditions together makes visible patterns that are not apparent when each is considered on its own.

Across our research, four distinct conditions emerge. These are not stages or pathways, but different environments in which AI adoption is unfolding, each reflecting a particular combination of alignment and system conditions. In some districts, AI use emerges through isolated experimentation, generating early learning but remaining disconnected from broader system practice. In others, systems respond to pressing needs, but without shared direction, efforts remain uneven and difficult to sustain. Where coherence is stronger, systems are able to align around shared priorities and improve existing practices at a broader scale. In a smaller but critical set of cases, the combination of coherence and constraint makes more fundamental change necessary, enabling systems to redesign core aspects of teaching and learning.

For the field as a whole, these patterns point to an important insight: some of the most instructive examples of AI adoption are emerging, not despite rural conditions, but because of how systems are able to work within them. While this dynamic applies across K–12 systems broadly, rural systems offer a particularly clear lens into how coherence and constraint interact. They are more likely to operate under conditions where alignment is strong and resources are limited, making visible how systems move from isolated experimentation toward coordinated improvement and, in some cases, toward system-level transformation.

The sections that follow describe each of these conditions in turn, illustrating how different combinations of coherence and constraint shape the pathways systems take as they move from exploration to implementation and, ultimately, to transformation.

Image 1. Coherence, Constraint, and the Trajectory of AI Adoption



Interpreting the Matrix in Rural Contexts

The examples in this section are not evenly distributed across all four quadrants. Most of the systems represented in our data demonstrate some degree of coherence, and fewer examples reflect conditions where coherence is largely absent. As a result, the high-coherence quadrants are grounded more directly in reported cases from interviews and applications. These sections reflect patterns we observed consistently across systems.

By contrast, the low-coherence quadrants are less directly represented in the data. In these cases, descriptions reflect partial observations and extrapolated patterns based on early-stage efforts or gaps described by participants. These sections should be understood as hypotheses about how AI adoption may unfold when shared direction is not yet established.

This distribution is itself instructive. It suggests that coherence may be a prerequisite for visible or sustained AI adoption, and that systems without it are less likely to surface in formal initiatives, applications, or documented examples. It also reinforces a central hypothesis of this work: rural systems, by virtue of their structural conditions, are more likely to operate in high-coherence environments, making them critical sites for understanding how AI adoption can move beyond isolated exploration toward coordinated improvement and, in some cases, toward system transformation.

High Constraint / High Coherence — System Transformation Under Constraint

In some rural systems, strong alignment exists alongside constrained staffing and infrastructure. In these contexts, AI adoption is focused, deliberate, and sustained. The work often begins with a clear instructional or community-grounded purpose and evolves into coordinated efforts that reshape practice across the system. Typically, these systems prioritize a small number of use cases and build from early classroom use and small-scale pilots into system-wide implementation over time, allowing early experimentation to inform broader redesign.

This pattern surfaced across interviews and applications, particularly in systems with established routines for collaboration, examples including:

- One district in Tennessee prioritized building AI literacy through PLCs and teacher leadership before introducing tools, resulting in sustained use without ongoing purchasing. This reflects how coherence enables systems to build internal capacity first, creating the foundation for sustained, system-level change without reliance on external resources.
- In Kentucky, a rural district convened a cross-functional AI task force to align policy, instruction, and community expectations over time. This alignment enabled deliberate progress and supported coordinated changes across core system functions despite constrained staffing and infrastructure.
- In Arizona, a geographically large district serving predominantly Indigenous students leveraged existing PLC structures to extend AI-supported practices across its system with a focus on closing learning gaps. This illustrates how building on existing structures supports system-wide scale and enables shifts in instructional practice without adding complexity.

These examples suggest that when coherence is strong, constraint functions as a focusing mechanism that clarifies priorities and concentrates effort, supporting disciplined, system-wide adoption and enabling more fundamental changes to take hold.

Low Constraint / High Coherence — Coordinated Improvement

When schools and systems have greater access to resources or external infrastructure that lower constraint, coherence enables experimentation to translate into system-level learning. Efforts align with instructional priorities and are reinforced through professional learning and policy. In these cases, coherence is often supported through networks, partnerships, or state-level infrastructure that provide shared language, tools, and learning opportunities.

This pattern appeared across the landscape scan, particularly among systems connected to structured networks or coordinated state efforts, including:

- In Wyoming, a majority of rural districts developed AI policy using shared scaffolds such as statewide AI literacy courses, templates, and communities of practice. This reflects how shared infrastructure reduces the burden on individual systems while maintaining alignment.
- In Utah, long-standing investment in statewide infrastructure has enabled systems to align quickly as new challenges emerge. This illustrates how coherence built in advance supports rapid, coordinated response.
- In South Carolina, districts participated in a national network, receiving support to develop shared approaches to AI integration grounded in instructional priorities. This highlights how external networks reinforce coherence and collective learning.

Cumulatively, these examples and others suggest that supporting coherence within systems enables them to better align and extend emerging practices across the system. However, without constraint as a focusing mechanism, systems may be more likely to adopt AI in ways that strengthen and entrench existing approaches, rather than transforming teaching and learning.

High Constraint / Low Coherence — Uncoordinated Response

In other systems, educators and leaders are actively engaging with AI, but shared direction has not yet formed. Efforts are often driven by pressing needs, but remain distributed rather than connected. In these contexts, change is underway, but it is uneven and limited in scope, emerging through individual initiative rather than coordinated system effort.

This pattern surfaced in early-stage efforts described in interviews and applications, though it was less consistently represented than high-coherence contexts, including examples such as:

- Teachers experiment with AI tools for lesson planning and feedback while district guidance is still in development. This reflects how constraint without shared direction can lead to parallel efforts that do not accumulate into broader system change.
- Small groups of educators introduce AI practices within their own classrooms, generating early momentum that remains localized rather than extending across schools or the system. This highlights how early innovation can remain contained without coherence.
- Leaders may return from professional learning energized to act, while still working to define a shared approach for their system. This illustrates how urgency can outpace alignment, resulting in action that is not yet coordinated.

Together, these examples suggest systems in motion, where meaningful activity is underway but has not yet translated into sustained or system-level change.

Low Constraint / Low Coherence — Isolated Exploration

The final set of patterns includes systems where access to tools enables widespread experimentation, but shared direction has not yet taken shape. Educators explore AI in parallel without a common framework to guide or connect their efforts. In these contexts, change occurs through individual or small-group experimentation, with limited connection to broader system priorities or learning. This pattern was less directly represented in interviews and applications, but surfaced through partial observations and early-stage efforts described by participants.

In such systems, tools are available but system-level vision and supports have not yet caught up. For example, this might look like:

- A growing number of AI-related initiatives emerge across schools without a shared definition of effective use. This reflects how access without coherence can lead to fragmentation rather than coordinated progress.
- Rapid experimentation is enabled by access to tools, but leaders struggle to connect those efforts into a coherent strategy. This highlights how access alone does not ensure alignment or shared learning.
- Multiple pilots may be underway, but each operates independently without shared structures for learning or scaling. This illustrates how parallel efforts can limit a system's ability to learn from its own work.

These patterns suggest that access alone does not produce progress without coherence. In these contexts, experimentation remains diffuse until structures for shared direction and learning are established.

Field Actions for Moving Forward

The patterns in this brief reveal that advancing AI in rural systems requires approaches that align with the realities of how local systems actually operate. The work is already underway. The question is how the field chooses to respond.

We have identified three interconnected actions that reflect not only what rural systems need, but how the field can better support and learn from the work already happening:

- Treating rural context as a design condition;
- Investing in the intermediary layer; and
- Making rural innovation visible.

Treat Rural Context as a Design Condition

Rural systems are not edge cases. They represent a significant and diverse portion of the education landscape, serving roughly 40% of students nationwide. Across our landscape scan, rural context was rarely centered in how AI tools, frameworks, or supports were designed, and only a small number of intermediary efforts explicitly focused on rural conditions.

At the same time, rural systems are already developing approaches that reflect their contexts. Across applications and interviews, teams consistently described work shaped by staffing structures, geographic realities, and community priorities. These are not constraints to work around. They are inputs to design with.

This points to a shift in how the field approaches innovation. **Rather than adapting solutions developed elsewhere, design should begin with the realities of rural systems themselves—starting with clearly defined problems of practice and building outward, while continuing to learn from and contribute to approaches developed across diverse contexts.**

> **The Rural AI Strategy Lab** is designed with this approach at its core, beginning with a structured diagnosis of each team's problem of practice and supporting locally grounded design and small-scale testing before taking any effort to scale.

Invest in the Intermediary Layer

Rural systems rarely do this work alone. Across our landscape scan, the most structured examples of AI adoption were consistently connected to intermediary organizations, networks, regional agencies, and partners that provide shared infrastructure and support.

This layer is both essential and underrepresented. **While intermediary support showed up repeatedly in interviews and applications, it appeared far less frequently in publicly documented efforts, suggesting a gap between how this work happens in practice and how it is recognized across the field.** Demand for this kind of support is also clear as 51% of applicants identified peer learning or network participation as a primary motivation for their interest in joining this program.

When intermediary infrastructure is strong, systems are more likely to develop shared approaches, move beyond isolated experimentation, and sustain work over time. The field has an opportunity to invest more intentionally in this layer, not only by expanding access to networks and supports, but by recognizing intermediary organizations as key drivers of coherence across systems.

> **The Rural AI Strategy Lab** reflects this by operating through a cohort model that brings teams together for shared problem-solving and ongoing support, serving as an intermediary, and reporting back our learnings to intermediary partners that can extend and sustain the work.

Make Rural Innovation Visible

Rural innovation is already happening. What is missing is visibility. Nearly half (47%) of the schools in our scan of 241 schools and districts showed no publicly visible signal of AI use. At the same time, applications and interviews revealed a wide range of active efforts across rural systems—many of which are not reflected in national conversations about AI in education.

These efforts often take forms that differ from dominant narratives in the field. Teams described work grounded in local challenges and opportunities, from strengthening student support systems to connecting learning with workforce pathways and engaging communities in new ways.

This gap matters. When rural perspectives are absent, the field's understanding of AI adoption remains incomplete.

Making this work visible is not about representation alone. It is how the field learns, improves, and builds more relevant solutions. This requires more intentional documentation, amplification, and sharing of rural approaches, especially those that do not fit dominant narratives.

> **The Rural AI Strategy Lab** is structured not only to support participating teams but to capture and share emerging practices, helping ensure that rural systems contribute to and shape the field's broader understanding of AI in education.

Closing Invitation

The Rural AI Strategy Lab is not a study of rural AI adoption; it is a response to it. The 114 applications received from 34 states are not just a pool of participants. They are a signal that rural systems are already engaging with AI and seeking the support to do so in ways that are thoughtful, aligned, and sustainable.

The 33 finalist teams represent a cross-section of districts and schools identifying problems of practice, designing AI-enabled approaches, engaging their communities, and defining what success looks like in their contexts. Of these 33, we have selected 13 participating schools and districts to participate in a six-month learning network, ongoing coaching, and a culminating convening. These teams are working in partnership with FullScale and All4Ed to develop approaches that can extend beyond individual sites.

This work is ongoing and intentionally public. The goal is both to support participating teams and contribute to a broader field understanding of what it takes to implement AI in ways that are responsive to local context and grounded in student needs.

As one applicant put it, *"Rural schools need a voice in shaping what effective and responsible AI implementation looks like—not just having solutions handed down."* This brief, and the work that follows, is an invitation to the field to listen, learn, and build alongside them.

Building Bridges. Transforming Systems. Realizing Potential.

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