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Top Trends in K-12 Education for 2023

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Top Trends in K-12 Education for 2023

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Four crises – faculty/staff shortages, learning losses, enrollment losses and IT staff shortages – have escalated K-12’s top business and technology trends to priority status. K-12 CIOs need to use these trends to help the organization adapt, optimize and transform to meet these historic challenges.

Overview

Opportunities

Identifying and understanding the four major crises facing K-12 today (faculty/staff shortages, learning losses, enrollment losses and IT staff shortages) will become critical to marshal digital strategies to meet the organizations’ needs. Opportunities for the CIO to prepare that plan include:

- Preparing for and adopting artificial intelligence (AI)-enhanced and other intelligent technologies that can help address the shortages of resources – people, time and money – with solutions that can scale, automate and streamline. Examples include analytics, adaptive learning and expansion of AI.
- The issue of student and staff well-being has become a dominant one today that K-12 organizations have to address to deal with all the other challenges present. This complex problem requires systems that enable collection of data and tracking the interventions and support programs being provided.
- Addressing what is a large and growing challenge in many places with retaining IT talent, particularly at a time when digital solutions are needed now more than ever. This requires new retention strategies and careful redesign of the IT organization for the future.

Recommendations

K-12 education CIOs seeking education digital transformation and innovation should:

- Focus initially on technology initiatives to tackle the hardest realities currently faced by the organization by leveraging new delivery models and innovations that were not options before. Examples include hybrid models redistributing teacher and paraprofessional talent, AI-enhanced personalized instruction, etc. This is where digital can prove its value.
- Assess and improve student and staff well-being by ensuring you provide appropriate systems to support this important area of focus.
- Redesign your IT organization for the future by leveraging digital capabilities that:
 - Lighten the department workload.
 - Streamline and automate current processes and services.
 - Study what is no longer of sufficient value and should be removed from your services catalog.

What You Need to Know

For the purposes of this research, the term “K-12 education” is used to reference all primary/secondary education programs.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to be what feels like a never-ending challenge for K-12 education. Problems that were long-standing – but slow-moving – prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, exploded even further in size and scope in the last year, and are now critical drivers for technology planning that cannot be ignored:

- The historic challenges of serving as a teacher became more than many could bear, particularly with the physical risks, low pay, lack of respect, and vastly increased pressure and complexity created upon students’ return.
- The impact of school closures on learning loss, rather than being addressed, has actually expanded as organizations have been forced to put noncertificated personnel in the classroom in the absence of teachers.
- Enrollment losses, previously a slow-moving phenomenon exacerbated by slowing birth rates globally, became a much bigger problem when many students did not return to their former schools upon reopening.

- With competition from the private sector, most K-12 organizations were unable to recruit and retain IT talent. This was the time when digital solutions were needed more than ever.



As a result of these, organizations are being forced to consider changes previously unthinkable. These changes include redistributing teacher talent in new ways, adopting new delivery models with hybrid or other time- and place-shifting options, and rethinking how to best utilize noncredentialed paraprofessionals to supervise and monitor classrooms. Students then have the opportunity to engage in more synchronous and asynchronous modes of digital learning. The role of the teacher becomes more critical than ever, and must be rethought to ensure they are used to maximum advantage, but in a way that ensures they can operate in reasonable work conditions.

The importance of the K-12 CIO role amid all this change, challenge and opportunity has never been greater, as the CIO must be able to tie the organization's mission-critical priorities to the necessary technology capabilities and investments.

An adaptable, agile and composable K-12 organization of the future will be one that recognizes the key strategic technologies and business trends represented by the top trends shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Top Trends Impacting K-12 Education 2023

Top Trends Impacting K-12 Education 2023

 Instructional Trends	 Business Trends
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learning Insights/Analytics• Adaptive Learning• Expansion of AI Use in K-12	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student and Staff Well-Being• Ransomware in K-12 Education

Source: Gartner
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Table 1: Trend Profiles

<i>Top Trends Impacting K-12 Education in 2023</i> ↓	
Instructional Trends	
	Learning Insights/Analytics
	Adaptive Learning
	Expansion of AI Use in K-12 Education
Business Trends	
	Student and Staff Well-Being
	Ransomware in K-12 Education

Source: Gartner

Instructional Trends

Learning Insights/Analytics

Analysis by Marlena Brown and Kelly J Calhoun Williams

SPA: By 2025, 80% of all K-12/primary and secondary education organizations will be leveraging some type of analytics applications designed specifically for K-12 to speed insight.

Description: “Learning insights” is a broad umbrella term intended to describe a collection of technologies specifically focused on faster, more-accurate and more-actionable insight into a student’s learning. These technologies include:

- Digital assessments
- Analytics
- Learning management systems (LMSs)

Why Trending:

The COVID-19 pandemic created a shocking impact on students around the world, as they faced weeks or months or, in some cases, nearly two years of disrupted learning. This gap in time spent in quality learning environments (or spent in less than ideal ones) created learning losses for students in subject matter areas that now hold them back from reaching their appropriate grade levels. For nations globally, the impacts of learning loss are expected to lead to at least an average of 1.5% lower annual GDP for the remainder of the century. Some organizations have responded more quickly and effectively than others to execute on strategies in an attempt to close the learning gaps. Organizations have rapidly moved to leverage analytics and digital technologies to improve learning insights around gap identification, informing gap strategies and effectiveness measurement of gap outcomes.

This requires data, tools and processes that are more effective than traditional means of assessment on which education has long depended (e.g., simple quiz or test). A combination of technologies, strong data integration architecture and ability to utilize data to effectively impact insights into learning and instruction are needed. CIOs who can provide these will enable “just-in-time” critical insights faster and, more specifically, provide the ability to target and address students’ learning gaps as quickly as possible.

Learning insights via analytics can provide information that will:

1. Align to the organization’s strategic needs
2. Inform prioritization of resources on how organizations should address gaps
3. Provide metrics on success of intervention methods

In addition to analytics, CIOs can explore learning technologies that can make this process more personalized, scalable and faster to get to the best course of action. For example, adaptive learning systems can be leveraged to create assessments of a particular curriculum provider’s content, target key prerequisite skills and recommend a personalized remediation plan for each student. Combining learning technologies with analytics offers potential to provide a continuous individual student assessment and early identification of students not ready to move forward.

Analytics and digital learning technologies allow CIOs to address COVID-19-related learning gap challenges by delivering insights that otherwise would require extensive resources in people and time.

Implications:

It is unlikely organizations will ever be able to completely reverse the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic learning loss. However, strategies should be adopted that look to mitigate the long-term impacts as much as possible. Doing this will require the ability to identify areas of students' weaknesses that will then inform a "stepping stone" capability development plan for each student. This targeted approach will ensure critical concepts are prioritized thus providing students the best foundation for future needs.

A combination of digital technologies and analytic capabilities will be needed to help address this global problem. The K-12 CIO, along with key stakeholders across the organization, will need to work in unison to address these challenges. The CIO will be critical in their ability to articulate how these technologies will help position the organization to address learning loss and create new educational systems for the future.

Actions:

K-12 education CIOs should:

- Assess the organization's current capabilities across the full spectrum of learning insights technologies by engaging partners from the teaching and learning/curriculum division, and other key stakeholders, to help clearly define the needs.
- Create a data and analytics vision, strategy and plan, in partnership with executive leadership, that intentionally connects new and existing outcomes to the value propositions and operating approaches to establish the foundation for a data-driven culture.
- Advance your organization's analytics capabilities to meet these learning loss challenges by adopting analytics and digital learning solutions to meet the needs of your organization.

Further Reading:

[Innovation Insight: Formative Digital Assessments in K-12 Education](#)

[Leverage Inspiring Data and Analytics Case Studies and Use Cases to Create Business Value](#)

Adaptive Learning

Analysis by Saher Mahmood and Kelly J Calhoun Williams

Description:

Adaptive learning platforms and content delivery learning resources are customized to meet the needs of an individual student. Using technology as an interactive teaching tool, adaptive learning dynamically adjusts the way instructional content is presented to students based on their responses or preferences (see Hype Cycle for K-12 Education, 2022). It is increasingly dependent on a large-scale collection of learning data and algorithmically derived (including AI) responses.

Dependent on a foundation in learning insights, adaptive learning uses continuous assessment and learning analytics to give an accurate insight into a learner's existing knowledge and skill set. This is followed by the alteration of sequence, pace and type of learning resource to meet a user's unique needs. The advances in the use of AI and related technologies will likely be the means to significantly advance and scale up adaptive learning in the future beyond the progress already made to date.

Why Trending:

- In the United States, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic performance on national math and literacy tests shows steepest declines ever recorded. This trend is mirrored by regional data emerging from parts of Asia, South America and Africa, which also shows substantial numeracy and literacy losses with notable variations across socioeconomic status, gender, grade level, etc. This has adverse implications for student retention and their long-term economic growth.
- Adaptive learning is, therefore, a timely capability today, as organizations continue to struggle to quickly identify individual learning gaps and help students catch up to where they need to be for the new year.
- For teachers, adaptive learning technology can boost instruction, reduce administrative burdens and deliver actionable insights into students' progress.

- For students, adaptive learning technology can deepen comprehension of instructional concepts. Interactive lessons and assignments, real-time feedback, and just-in-time support can aid progression through lessons in ways that meet individual learner needs and help increase the likelihood of success.
- Today, vendors provide products and platforms that achieve varying degrees of adaptivity through a variety of means, from the simple to the significantly complex.
- LMSs and other instructional and analytics products now often include AI-enhanced adaptive learning tools, with more diverse subject matter than ever before.

K-12 organizations are being offered more options today for adaptive learning thanks to the advent of AI enhancements in this area. However, due to the complexity of this endeavor, progress is moving at different rates depending on the specifics of the types of data available and functionality needed.

- A significant volume of learning data is needed to power these adaptive platforms, which remains a technically necessary aspect to adaptive learning that requires further advancing trust and security in the use of student data.
- Vendors continue to use the term “adaptive learning” in a less-than-accurate manner, suggesting capabilities the product may not actually have.

Implications:

For all its progress, some learning theories and algorithms on which a number of these technologies are based are not necessarily highly sophisticated yet. However, since AI is constantly learning, over time, its value increases if appropriately designed:

- The continuous evolution of this capability (and the rapid maturity and learning happening in the field of AI) potentially brings a much greater level of sophistication to the personalized adaptation of curricula.
- AI-based technologies typically mature and improve (and personal comfort improves as trust and understanding of what it is doing builds).
- The potential impact of Generative AI technologies (e.g., OpenAI’s ChatGPT) will likely require rethinking how we assess learning altogether to adapt to AI-generated content from students.

As a result, while progress is uneven, the offerings and adoption are on a steady rise, steadily inching toward reaching this category's massive potential in K-12.

Expect to see continuing progress in this arena in the next few years as technology improvements for commercial uses continue to deliver opportunities for education.

Actions:

K-12 education CIOs should:

- Invest in educating and training your educators and allied staff on the value and implications of adopting new technologies to enhance classroom teaching and learning. As key enablers, their buy-in will be critical in effective adoption and outcomes – change management is key here, including changes in culture and attitude needed.
- Identify any adaptive learning capabilities you may already have, such as options that integrate with your LMS. These may include adaptable content and assessments. Expand on these by creating pilot projects on a small scale to explore the practical applications of this technology in your environment.
- Anticipate the increased volume of learning data being collected (especially as AI-enhanced products arrive) by developing policies that address concerns around data privacy and security. Ensure that stakeholders are aware of the benefits and the purpose (as well as the ethics) of this additional data usage, and build trust.

Expansion of AI Use in K-12 Education

Analysis by Kelly J Calhoun Williams and Saher Mahmood

SPA: By 2028, 70% of all K-12/primary and secondary education organizations will be utilizing a product built upon or enhanced by AI.

Description:

The trend of the expansion of AI use in K-12 education is being defined by the steady increase in products now available in the marketplace incorporating AI/machine learning (ML) to enable or enhance product capabilities, whether instructional, administrative or business.

Why Trending:

- The explosion in use of AI across all aspects of modern life has put a spotlight on its potential to benefit education with a wide variety of challenges. ^{1,2}
- Incorporation of AI into common K-12 product categories has lagged behind other industries, as vendors have struggled with identifying effective use cases and sufficient corpora of data. However, it now appears to be making headway, particularly in less complex, more repetitive use types, such as with some administrative tasks. ³
- The crises currently facing K-12 are creating demand for solutions that can automate, streamline, optimize and speed turnaround to insight needed to assist with these urgent issues, perhaps increasing some levels of risk tolerance.
- The K-12 education community has been wary about potential issues and sensitivities with AI for parents (e.g., loss of privacy, misinterpretation of student learning data, inaccurate “branding” of students, ethical issues, etc.). However, vendors seem increasingly aware of and responsive to these issues.
- The explosion of progress with Generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT) is creating multiple transformative opportunities for education, along with major complexities to address.

Implications:

- Effective use of AI holds the potential to tackle previously intractable challenges involving time, scale, cost and inability to provide more personalized learning opportunities for students. Intelligent digital assistants, tutors, school counseling, interventions and special needs assistants are among several possible ways that AI can make a difference, especially given existing shortages of all of these.
- Expectations and demands for AI capabilities in more products will challenge vendors to look for more opportunities to differentiate their offerings through enhancements that provide significant value to education and assist with the current crises faced.
- Some categories of K-12 products leveraging AI are likely to be easier places to start, as they often have predictable patterns and parallels to existing products across industries. Examples include administrative tools like help desk chatbots, ERP financial and HR reporting, and organizational analytics. K-12 is already adopting products that provide these benefits.

- Other AI applications have potentially much higher levels of complexity, particularly those involving new frontiers of learning assessment and adaptive learning. Several such products exist today, but their capabilities will evolve significantly as vendors advance their own AI design understanding and abilities.

Actions:

K-12 education CIOs should:

- Target the strategic goals for the year, looking for those that could be advanced or enabled through the use of AI-enhanced products.
- Develop criteria for evaluating use of AI in products, particularly those containing student or employee data, such as how privacy is protected, how algorithmic bias is avoided, how validity and reliability can be assessed, etc.
- Start now with planning for a comprehensive communications strategy of transparency to ensure all AI-based products likely to impact student learning data have been evaluated for safety and can be readily explained to parents and other stakeholders. Building (and maintaining) trust in these areas is of critical importance.
- Plan training opportunities for you and your staff to understand AI basics well-enough to be effective consumers. This is to ensure what you're buying does what you think it does. You do not have to be experts in developing AI solutions, just understand it well-enough to explain it sufficiently to others.

Further Reading:

- [What Is Artificial Intelligence? Ignore the Hype; Here's Where to Start](#)
- [Hype Cycle for K-12 Education, 2022](#)
- [Quick Answer: How Should I Use Chatbots in K-12 Education?](#)

Business Trends

Student and Staff Well-Being

Analysis by Saher Mahmood

Description:

Student and staff well-being in K-12 education is the desired state of physical and mental health that enables optimal teaching and learning. K-12 organizations need digital systems to manage and evaluate the data captured during monitoring of student and staff well-being – particularly relating to emotional and mental wellness – due to its impact on daily teaching and learning.

Why Trending:

While student and staff well-being has always been a general concern and priority in K-12 education, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have brought this topic to the forefront.

- Faculty burnout, learning inequities, financial insecurities, personal loss and a partial or complete absence of social connections for over two years, among other factors, have led to mental and physical challenges.
- While some implications for students can be identified and quantified, such as performance on assessments, most others are largely intangible and likely to go unnoticed. For those belonging to racial, ethnic, special healthcare needs, sexual and gender minorities, and other marginalized groups, these challenges are magnified. ⁴
- School closures negatively impacted the delivery of physical education curriculum as well as routine health screenings, ⁴ impacting overall physical well-being. ⁵
- A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study indicates that adolescents who experienced adversity during the COVID-19 pandemic reported an alarmingly higher rate of suicidal behavior and poor mental health than those who didn't. ⁶ Another recently published study concluded that the brains of U.S. teens have physically changed, aging faster than normal ⁷ – the adverse impact of which could continue to show for many years.
- A survey of 4,665 PreK-12 teachers in March 2022 showed that 81% felt that their overall workload has increased. Over a half felt they had less planning time now due to teacher shortages, and three-fourths of them were spending more time on addressing students' mental health than before ⁸ – all while largely uncompensated.
- Recognizing the importance of the aggravation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, governments around the world have released dedicated funds to support the health and well-being of students and educators. ^{9,10}

Implications:

- The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data from the U.S. on student performance in 2020 and 2022 shows the largest average score decline in reading since 1990, and the first ever score decline in mathematics. While this may be an outcome of a combination of factors, a skewed state of well-being contributes to all indicators of performance. ¹¹
- Enrollment losses were accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with many parents withdrawing their children from the education system altogether. ¹²
- Failure to address teacher burnout and stress will also directly impact the ability of the school/district/institution to minimize staff churn and upheaval, compounding the existing financial and attrition challenges.
- The market for well-being apps and trackers, especially targeted toward students, is growing, offering school licenses and integrations with LMSs and collaboration tools. ^{13,14} That said, it remains to be seen if these evolve into interventions capable of making a positive impact in schools.

Actions:

K-12 education CIOs should:

- Integrate student and staff well-being into the IT strategy by embedding it into policies and procedures of the digital ecosystem and overall adopting a human-centric design approach.
- Leverage the growing body of data and sophisticated analytics practices by introducing collaboratively devised indicators of well-being relevant to your institution. This will, however, require breaking down of silos and better flow of data across the organization in general.
- Develop frameworks that regulate the capture and ethical use of this data, ensuring compliance with local and national privacy and health laws while meeting the vision and mission of K-12 education.

Ransomware in K-12 Education

Analysis by Paul Furtado

SPA: K-12 education will remain a prime target for ransomware through 2028.

Description:

Ransomware is malware that employs encryption to hold a victim's information at ransom. A ransom is then demanded to provide access. Ransomware is often designed to spread across a network and target database and file servers. Thus, it can quickly paralyze an entire organization.

Why Trending:

Unfortunately, given the difficulties created by this trend for several years now, statistics seem to suggest the issue is getting worse for K-12 in 2023.

Several law enforcement agencies expect attacks to increase on K-12 institutions. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), and the Multi-State Information Sharing and Analysis Center (MS-ISAC) anticipate a potential increase in attacks from 2022 through 2023, as criminal ransomware groups perceive opportunities for success.

Also, ransomware in K-12 is a global challenge. In a recent survey of 320 K-12 facilities in over 31 countries, 56% stated they have been hit by ransomware.

In the U.S., during 2021, there were 62 instances of K-12 ransomware attacks in 24 different states.¹⁵ A total of 26 school districts with a combined 1,727 schools have been hit with ransomware in 2022.¹⁶

Additionally, bad actors are very aware of the impact of shutting down a K-12 environment. They know these organizations not only manage sensitive data, but are also under significant time pressures to sustain school operations. These constraints, compounded by the ransomware countdown timer, put a lot of pressure on K-12 administrators to fall prey and pay ransoms as expeditiously as possible. Indeed, millions of dollars of ransom have been quietly paid to date.^{17,18} In several states, organizations are not required to report these events, suggesting losses may actually have been higher.

Implications:

Expect your environment to be targeted by a ransomware attack in the near future and prepare for an acceptable level of response.

- Impact in K-12 environments is significant due to the flat network architecture that is typically found in school districts. This allows the malware ease of lateral movement and greater penetration of critical systems and applications.
- Ransomware events have historically caused disruption or cancellation of in-class learning between one to three days. There have been incidents where classes have been canceled for a week or more.
- Recovery of all services to preincident levels takes several weeks or months depending on the size of the school district and level of infection across all assets. Some school districts have experienced permanent loss of certain datasets.
- Some data breaches have resulted in the personal data of students, faculty and staff being posted on the dark web and public internet.
- Threat actors know that the education sector employs the least number of security employees when compared to other industries (see IT Key Metrics Data 2023: Industry Measures – Education Analysis). This reduced staffing typically results in gaps in coverage, monitoring and incident response.

Actions:

In order to be able to successfully defend and respond to a ransomware attack, CIOs and security leaders in K-12 must:

- Have a comprehensive incident response plan (IRP).
- Implement a ransomware playbook to augment the IRP.
- Lock down endpoints – preventing access to command prompt – running Microsoft PowerShell scripts.
- Enable monitoring of endpoints to protect against process thread sprawl.
- Deploy strong endpoint protection to limit against lateral spread of malware.
- Segment student and faculty/employee networks.
- Stay vigilant with patching and vulnerability management.
- Implement multifactor authentication for all faculty/staff accounts.

- Implement strong network monitoring with traffic analytics to identify deployed payloads quickly.
- Control outbound access routing to limit connectivity to known care-and-control domains.
- Augment internal staff with external resources (e.g., managed security service providers [MSSP], managed detection and response [MDR], and endpoint detection and response [EDR]). They can also include sharing of chief information security officer or other expertise across multiple organizations or agencies.

Further Reading:

Toolkit: Creating a Ransomware Playbook

Toolkit: Cybersecurity Incident Response Plan

How to Prepare for Ransomware Attacks

The Cybersecurity Leader's Guide to Ransomware

Evidence

- ¹ How AI Will Permanently Disrupt The Education Industry, Gold Penguin.
- ² AI and the Future of Learning: Expert Panel Report, Center for Integrative Research in Computing and Learning Sciences (CIRCLS).
- ³ The Worldwide AI In Education Industry is Expected to Reach \$12.8 Billion by 2028, PR Newswire (Cision).
- ⁴ Headed Back to School: A Look at the Ongoing Effects of COVID-19 on Children's Health and Well-Being, Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF).
- ⁵ Keeping Children Healthy During and After COVID-19 Pandemic: Meeting Youth Physical Activity Needs, BMC Public Health.
- ⁶ Adverse Childhood Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Associations With Poor Mental Health and Suicidal Behaviors Among High School Students — Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey, United States, January-June 2021, CDC.

⁷ Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health and Brain Maturation in Adolescents: Implications for Analyzing Longitudinal Data, *Biological Psychiatry: Global Open Science*.

⁸ State of Teaching Statistics 2022, [AdoptAClassroom.org](https://www.adoptaclassroom.org/).

⁹ Mental Health Fund and Menu, Department of Education and Training, State Government of Victoria, Australia.

¹⁰ McIlveen Welcomes Further £5million Education Wellbeing Funding, Department of Education, U.K.

¹¹ Math Scores Fell in Nearly Every State, and Reading Dipped on National Exam, *The New York Times*.

¹² Learning Loss and Student Dropouts during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Review of the Evidence Two Years after Schools Shut Down, Center for Global Development (CGD).

¹³ Best Education App on Microsoft Teams, *School Day*.

¹⁴ Edsby for Student Well-Being, *Edsby*.

¹⁵ The State of K-12 Cybersecurity: Year in Review, K12 Security Information eXchange (K12 SIX).

¹⁶ The Tools and Strategies Schools Need for Ransomware Defense, *Cybersecurity Dive*.

¹⁷ Ransomware Attacks on U.S. Schools and Colleges Cost \$6.62 Billion in 2020, *Comparitech*.

¹⁸ University of Maastricht Says It Paid Hackers 200,000-Euro Ransom, *Reuters*.

Acronym Key and Glossary Terms

Adaptive learning	Adaptive learning platforms and content deliver learning resources that are customized to meet the needs of an individual student.
Digital learning environments	Learning technology ecosystems created to support fully online, hybrid and physical teaching practices.
Ransomware	Malware that employs encryption to hold a victim's information at ransom. A ransom is then demanded to provide access. Ransomware is often designed to spread across a network and target database and file servers, and can thus quickly paralyze an entire organization.

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Top Five Strategic Technologies Impacting K-12 Education in 2019 - 4 February 2019

Recommended by the Authors

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Table 1: Trend Profiles

Top Trends Impacting K-12 Education in 2023 ↓

Instructional Trends

Learning Insights/Analytics

Adaptive Learning

Expansion of AI Use in K-12 Education

Business Trends


Student and Staff Well-Being

Ransomware in K-12 Education

Source: Gartner

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