SENTRAL

AI for Strategic School Leadership

A practical guide to enhancing efficiency, communication, and vision

By Matt Esteman, in collaboration with Sentral

Table of Contents

Beyond the hype: What AI really means for your leadership

We get it. The daily reality of school leadership is a relentless demand on your time and energy. Between complex stakeholder communication, mounting administrative tasks, and the core responsibilities of driving pedagogical excellence and a thriving culture, there's little time left for strategic thought. Artificial Intelligence is often discussed in abstract or futuristic terms, but its true value for you is here, now.

Think of AI not as a replacement, but as your new strategic thought partner and on-demand executive assistant. This guide is designed to cut through the noise and show you how to use AI to reclaim your most valuable asset – time – so you can focus on the work that truly matters. Inside, you'll find a practical framework (L.E.A.D.), real-world scenarios, and a library of prompts to get you started immediately.

This guidebook is intended to be a quick-reference guide to your thinking, with some ideas that may not arise in the professional learning, resources and conversations you have had so far.

From overwhelmed to empowered: 4 Pillars of AI support

Our overarching goal for thinking about AI as leaders is to provide clarity and alignment across all the people and teams in our school communities. Here are four pillars to consider immediately:

1. **Amplify efficiency: Instantly reduce your administrative load.** AI can draft weekly bulletins, create meeting agendas from bullet points, summarise long reports, and organise your to-do list, freeing up hours in your week.

2. **Enhance communication: Master your messaging.** AI helps craft clear, empathetic, and consistent communications for every stakeholder – from a sensitive email to parents to an inspiring address for staff or a formal report for the board.

3. **Strengthen strategy: Move from reactive to visionary.** Use AI as a brainstorming partner to develop new school initiatives, analyse complex survey data for key themes, and draft foundational documents like your School Improvement Plan.

4. **Support staff: Empower your team more effectively, including those beyond the classroom.** AI can help you create observation feedback frameworks, generate professional development resource lists, and draft materials that support the growth and wellbeing of all your staff.

Our students need us to think about AI

AI is becoming an increasingly larger part of our daily lives. AI is a part of our lives from the voice assistant on our phones, to the chatbots on company websites to the assistants that can help with students' revision. And this is just the beginning.

Aarushi, age 15

Scan the QR code to read
The Children's Manifesto for the Future of AI

A leader's responsibility: Privacy, Ethics, and Governance

> (!) **IMPORTANT:** Your primary responsibility is to protect your community. Always adhere to your school, system (e.g., Department of Education), and federal (e.g., The Privacy Act 1988) policies regarding data privacy and student information. The guidance here is a supplement to, not a replacement for, official policy.

Three elements of responsible AI use:

1. **Keep the human in the loop:** AI provides a first draft, not a final decree. Your professional judgment, context, and ethical lens are irreplaceable. Always review, edit, and own the final output. Start human. Use AI. Stay human.

2. **Handle data with care:** Never input personally identifiable or sensitive information (names, contact details, medical information, specific student struggles) into public AI models. Use anonymised data and general scenarios.

3. **Establish Governance:** Establishing robust governance frameworks is essential when deploying AI models, given their potential to perpetuate and amplify societal biases present in training data. Rigorous oversight is required to ensure that all AI outputs adhere to principles of fairness, equity, and inclusive language.

Who's governing AI at your school? Who's leading it?

Big technology companies do not take on your responsibilities to children, or the adults who work with them.

Scan the QR code to read
Australian Framework for Generative AI in Schools

Scan the QR code to read
UNESCO AI Competency Framework for Teachers

How to 'Talk' to AI: The L.E.A.D. Framework

Getting great results from AI depends entirely on giving it a great prompt. Use this simple framework to get targeted, high-quality outputs every time.

L – **Lens:** Define your role.
"As the Principal of a high school…"

E – **Expectation:** State the format and tone.
"Draft a persuasive and optimistic email…"

A – **Audience:** Specify who it's for.
"…for all teaching staff."

D – **Details:** Provide context, key points, constraints.
"…explaining our new 'Focus on Feedback' initiative. Mention it starts Week 3, is based on the work of Dylan Wiliam, and PD is available."

Don't stop at the first prompt. This is not a simple Google search.

By using high quality first prompts and following up with further clarification or detail, you will create a much better output and result from the conversation.

From prompt to polish: What a good interaction looks like

AI is a dialogue. Your first prompt gets a draft; your follow-up questions refine it into a finished product.

1. **The Leader's Goal:** "I need to draft a warm and inspiring opening for the Year 12 graduation ceremony speech."

2. **The Prompt (Using L.E.A.D.):** "As the Principal, draft a 150-word inspiring opening for a Year 12 graduation speech. The audience is students, their families, and staff. The tone should be proud, warm, and slightly nostalgic. Mention their journey from Year 7 to today and their resilience."

3. **The AI's First Draft (The Output):** "Welcome, families, staff, and most importantly, the graduating class of 2025. It feels like only yesterday you were walking into our school as Year 7s… Today, you stand before us as resilient young adults, ready for the future…"

4. **The Leader's Refinement (Human in the Loop):** The leader edits the draft, adding a specific, personal anecdote: "…I still remember your Year 7 camp and the torrential rain that couldn't dampen your spirits. That same resilience has defined your journey…" This makes the message authentic and personal.

Activity:

Choose an upcoming task for which you need to prepare: a report, an article, a speech, a phone call, a meeting. Use L.E.A.D. to create a prompt for AI to support you in that task. Take 5 minutes to annotate the output and think about whether it solves 10% of the task, or 90%. How might you improve your prompt next time?

Scenario: Drafting the School Improvement Plan (SIP)

The Situation: You need to write the introduction for the 'Community Engagement' section of your new three-year SIP. You want it to be visionary and welcoming.

The L.E.A.D. Prompt: "**L:** As the School Principal, **E:** draft an inspiring 300-word introduction for our School Improvement Plan. The tone should be collaborative and forward-looking. **A:** The audience is our entire school community (parents, staff, students). **D:** Key points to include are: our commitment to two-way communication, the launch of a new parent feedback portal, and our goal to strengthen partnerships with local businesses for student work experience."

Example AI Output: *"At Northwood High, we believe that education is a shared journey. Our success is built on a foundation of strong partnership between the school, our students, and the families we serve. As we look to the next three years, we are deepening our commitment to this partnership. This plan outlines a future where communication is not just a broadcast, but a genuine conversation. A key part of this will be the launch of our new digital Parent Portal, a dedicated space for feedback and dialogue. Furthermore, we will be actively strengthening our ties with local businesses, creating authentic work experience pathways that connect classroom learning to real-world careers. We invite every member of our community to join us in these efforts..."*

Bonus points:

Try asking the AI platform for an image, a poem, an infographic, or a game that will help others understand what you are trying to achieve.

Scenario: Addressing parent concerns

The Situation: Parents are complaining on social media about a new healthy eating policy. You need to draft a calm, informative, and firm email.

The L.E.A.D. Prompt: "**L:** I am the Principal. **E:** Draft a clear and empathetic email of about 400 words. The tone must be professional, reassuring, and firm. **A:** This email is for all parents. **D:** Acknowledge the concerns. Restate the rationale for the policy (based on national health guidelines and student wellbeing). Correct misinformation about the cost. State the policy will remain in place. Invite parents to an online Q&A session next Tuesday at 7 PM and provide a link."

Example AI Output: "*Dear Parents and Carers, We are writing to you today regarding our new Healthy Eating Policy. We understand there has been discussion online and we want to thank those who have shared their feedback. The core purpose of this policy, developed in line with national health guidelines, is to support student wellbeing and energy levels for learning. We want to clarify that the new options have been selected to be budget-friendly... While we have heard all feedback, the policy will continue as planned. To discuss this further and answer your questions directly, we invite you to a Q&A session... We look forward to a constructive conversation.*"

The Leader's 5-Minute AI Risk Assessment

Introduction: Whether you have a policy or not, AI is already in your school. Teachers are using it for planning and students for homework. A quick 'risk frisk' helps you understand your current landscape and proactively manage potential issues before they become problems. Use these questions to start a conversation at your next leadership meeting.

**Essential questions to ask:**

Staff usage:

- What AI tools are our teachers and admin staff currently using for their work? How do we know?
- Have we provided crystal-clear guidance on what constitutes sensitive school data (e.g., a student's performance or behavioural notes) that must NEVER be entered into a public AI?

Student usage & academic integrity:

- How are we explicitly teaching students the difference between using AI as an ethical research assistant and using it for plagiarism?
- Looking at our Year 9 History assessment, could it be completed entirely by AI? If so, how do we need to redesign it to assess genuine understanding and skills?

Data security & vetting:

- Do we have a list of approved, vetted AI tools? If not, who is responsible for creating one?
- What is our exact procedure if a staff member accidentally pastes a list of student names and assessment data into a public AI tool?
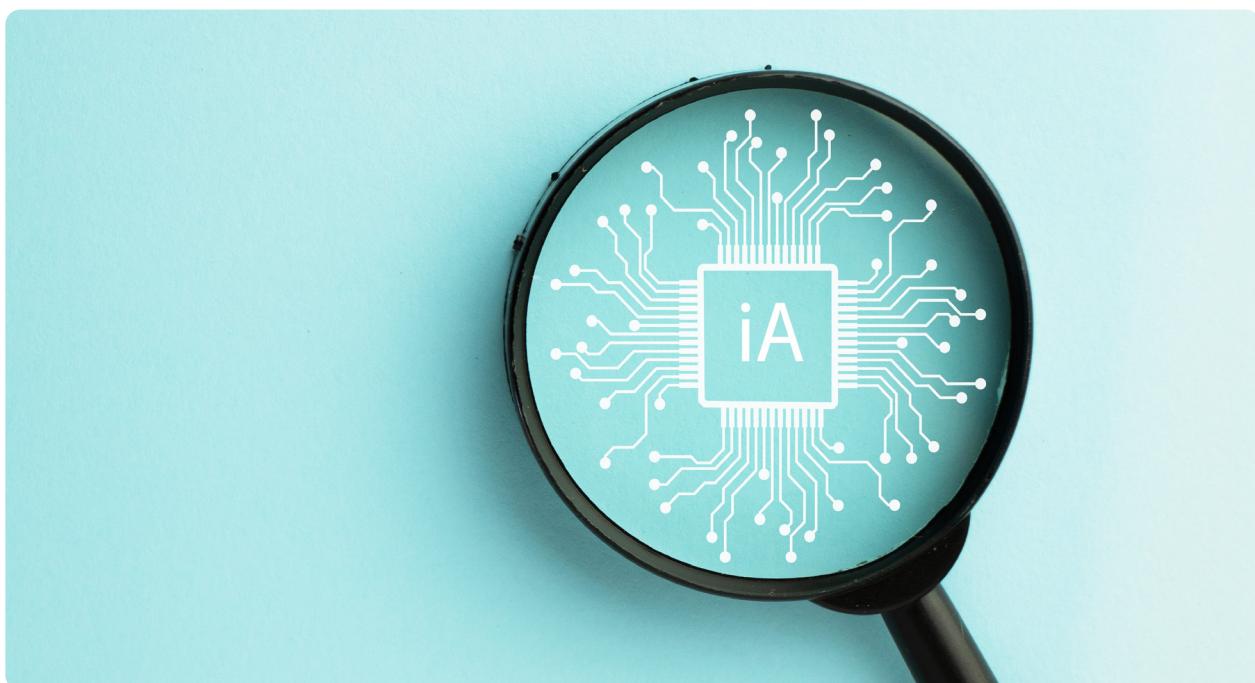
Embedding AI into your weekly rhythm

Building a new habit is about starting small and being consistent. Don't try to do everything at once. Instead, weave AI into the existing rhythm of your week to save time where it counts.

Monday Morning: *Goal: Start the week organised.* Prompt starter: "Create a meeting agenda for my weekly leadership meeting based on these points: [list points]. Also, draft a brief, upbeat weekly staff bulletin."

Mid-Week: *Goal: Tackle communications.* Prompt starter: "I need to call a parent about a uniform issue. Draft a script for me that is calm and solution-focused."

Friday Afternoon: *Goal: Plan ahead & celebrate.* Prompt starter: "Draft a 150-word blurb for the parent newsletter celebrating the Year 8 debating team's success. Also, give me 5 ideas for a staff wellbeing initiative next term."

Try using an AI notetaker such as Fireflies to take an alternative set of notes for you, and have it email the digest. Test this out as a way to model bringing AI into a meeting as a secretary. Every one of your senior leadership team can try this.

Using AI across the school's annual cycle

Beyond the daily tasks, AI can be a powerful partner during the key strategic phases of the school year, helping you to think bigger and plan more effectively.

- **Term 1 (Planning & setup):** Use AI to brainstorm and draft the initial text for a new anti-bullying policy, or to create a detailed project plan for rolling out a new literacy program across Years 7-9.

- **Term 2 (Reporting & review):** After exporting anonymised assessment data to a spreadsheet, use an AI tool like Copilot or Gemini for Sheets to analyse trends and generate charts summarising student performance for a staff meeting.

- **Term 3 (Budgeting & strategy):** Use AI to draft a budget proposal for a new STEM lab, including a rationale, potential equipment list, and benefits for student learning, ready for you to refine and verify.

- **Term 4 (Celebration & forward planning):** Use AI to draft award ceremony scripts, personalised commendations based on templates you provide, and the end-of-year report to the school board.

For each of the priorities above, try to clarify who you need to consult with and bring into your AI leadership journey. In each Term, you can integrate a new group of champions, collaborators, and challengers into the conversation.

Beyond the basics: Refining your AI prompts

Once you've mastered L.E.A.D., use these techniques to get even more nuanced and powerful results.

1. **Give it a persona:** This puts the AI into a specific 'character'. **Prompt:** *"Act as an expert educational consultant specialising in change management. I need to get staff buy-in for a new timetable. What are the top 5 challenges I will face and how can I proactively address them?"*

2. **Provide examples (Few-Shot prompting):** Show the AI what 'good' looks like. **Prompt:** *"Here is an example of a great newsletter post I wrote: [paste text]. Now, write a new post in the exact same style and tone, but this time it's about our upcoming school fete."*

3. **Iterate and refine:** Treat it like a conversation. Initial **Prompt:** "Write an email about the athletics carnival." -> **Follow-up 1:** "Good, now make the tone more enthusiastic and add a section about needing parent volunteers." -> **Follow-up 2:** "Perfect. Translate that into a 280-character Twitter post with relevant hashtags."

AI Platform championship

Compare and contrast the output of at least two leading platforms such as Claude and Perplexity against ChatGPT and Gemini/Copilot. Consider which gives you more options, more accuracy, or more depth – depending on what you are looking for. How might you improve your prompt next time?

Copy, paste, and adapt: Some go-to prompts

Developing a role description for a Head of Department position

Prompt (L.E.A.D. format):

L – Lens: As the Principal of a high school in New South Wales,

E – Expectation: Draft a detailed, professional role description document,

A – Audience: For prospective applicants to the position of Head of Department (Mathematics),

D – Details: That includes key responsibilities, leadership expectations, line management responsibilities, required qualifications (e.g. NESA accreditation), and links to the school's strategic priorities around instructional leadership, curriculum excellence, and data-informed practice. Emphasise the collaborative nature of the role, include example KPIs, and note that applications close in 2 weeks.

Preparing a presentation for a Board meeting regarding recent results from a major test such as PISA or NAPLAN

Prompt (L.E.A.D. format):

L – Lens: As the Deputy Principal responsible for Teaching and Learning,

E – Expectation: Create a clear and visually engaging PowerPoint presentation (10 slides max),

A – Audience: For the School Board at next week's meeting,

D – Details: Explaining the school's recent NAPLAN results in Years 7 and 9. Highlight comparative performance over time, national/state benchmarks, literacy and numeracy breakdowns, and areas for improvement. Include context about catchment demographics and outline proposed next steps. Keep the tone strategic and data-informed but solution-focused.

Building a business case for a new timetable due to increased enrolments

Prompt (L.E.A.D. format):

L – Lens: As the Business Manager of a co-educational secondary school,

E – Expectation: Draft a formal and financially sound business case,

A – Audience: For the Principal and Executive Team,

D – Details: To propose restructuring the school timetable in 2026 due to enrolments increasing from 780 to 950 students. Include modelling of room use, staffing implications, cost estimates, potential risks, and options (e.g. staggered starts, extra periods, dual campus operation). Ensure it aligns with student wellbeing and curriculum delivery goals.

Creating a tender document for a school canteen

Prompt (L.E.A.D. format):

L – Lens: As the Facilities and Compliance Officer at a K–12 independent school,

E – Expectation: Create a clear, professional tender invitation document,

A – Audience: For prospective canteen providers,

D – Details: Outlining expectations for daily operations, healthy menu compliance with NSW Healthy School Canteen Strategy, food safety certification, pricing expectations, staff clearances, and hours of operation. Include evaluation criteria (e.g. cost, experience, menu quality, sustainability) and a deadline for submission within 4 weeks.

Reviewing the school's wet weather policy

Prompt (L.E.A.D. format):

L – Lens: As the Assistant Principal (Operations),

E – Expectation: Draft a revised and practical policy document,

A – Audience: For internal staff use and inclusion in the staff handbook,

D – Details: That outlines wet weather procedures for recess, lunch, and end-of-day pick-up for all year groups. Address duty of care, indoor space use, communication protocols, and supervision duties. Take into account recent issues raised by staff and WHS compliance. Ensure it's clear, easy to follow, and suitable for term-time distribution.

Rethinking the school's student leadership election process

Prompt (L.E.A.D. format):

L – Lens: As the Director of Student Wellbeing,

E – Expectation: Draft a detailed proposal with rationale and timeline,

A – Audience: For the Executive Team and Student Representative Council,

D – Details: Proposing a revised student leadership election process for 2026 that enhances inclusivity, leadership development, and student voice. Include elements such as leadership portfolios, peer and teacher feedback, student forums, and voting systems. Address current system limitations and propose how student voice and wellbeing can be better integrated into leadership pathways.

Your next steps

- **AI Platforms:** Most generative AI tools can help with the prompts in this guide. Well-known starting points include **Google Gemini**, **OpenAI's ChatGPT**, and **Microsoft Copilot**. Start with the environment you're in, test those capabilities, then explore other options.

- **A note on integration:** The future of AI is seamless integration. Microsoft Copilot, for example, is already being built into Word, Outlook, and Teams. This will soon make using AI to draft an email or summarise a meeting transcript as easy as using spellcheck.

- **Check your policy:** Before using any tool for work, check your school or system's list of approved software and applications. Ensure that a qualified ICT / IT professional has conducted a security and compatibility check.

- **Your next step:** Don't try to boil the ocean. Choose just one task from your to-do list this week that is frustrating or time-consuming. Use the L.E.A.D. framework to draft a prompt for it. See what happens. Start small, build confidence, and grow from there.
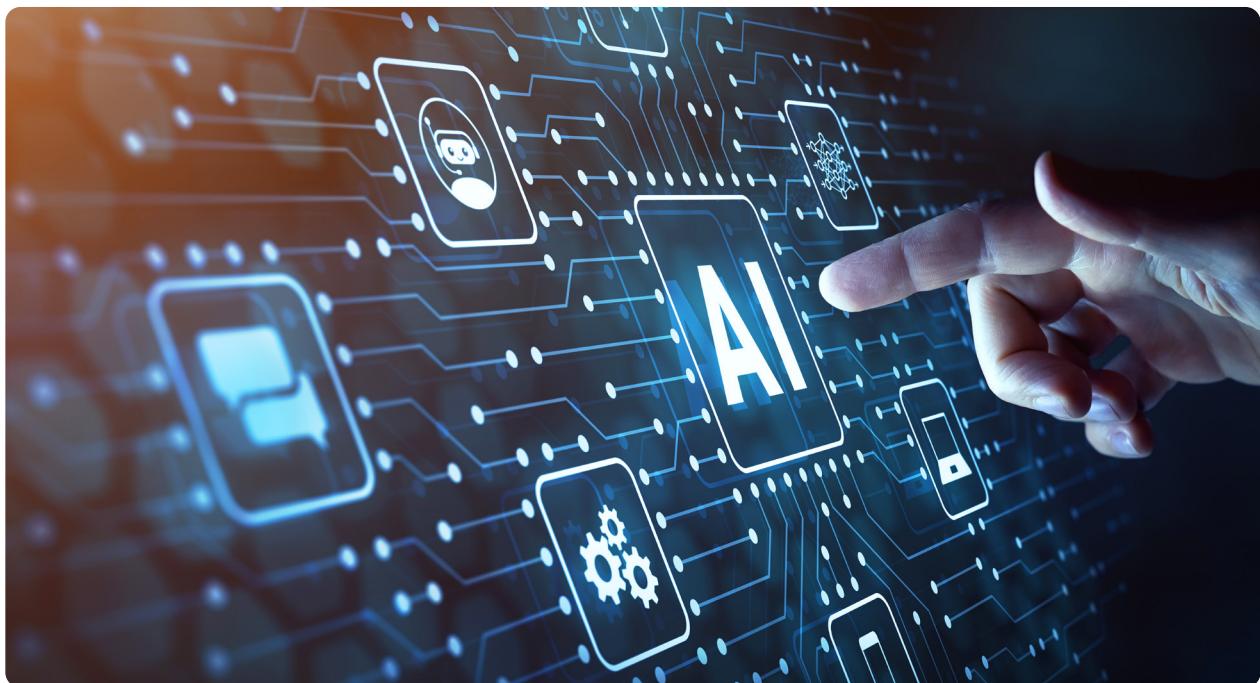
Let's continue the conversation

SENTRAL

You've explored the framework for AI in leadership; the next step is implementation. A powerful strategy requires a powerful platform.

Sentral is more than just a school management system; it's a strategic partner that streamlines everything from student data and reporting to payments and parent engagement, freeing your team to lead with confidence.

Schedule a strategic call:
Book a no-obligation demo with our team to see how Sentral can power your school's vision.

Discover the platform:
Learn more about how Sentral empowers strategic school leadership across Asia Pacific.

🌐 **www.sentraleducation.com**

in **www.linkedin.com/company/sentral/**

The Next Word

Navigating the complexities of AI in education requires more than just prompts; it requires a strategic partner. At The Next Word, we help school leaders move beyond the hype to build robust AI strategies, deliver practical staff training, and create ethical frameworks that enhance learning while managing risk. We ensure you lead the change, not just react to it.

Ready to build a future-ready school?
Book a complimentary, no-obligation AI strategy call with our education team to map your school's next steps.

🌐 **www.nextwordnow.com**

✉ **admin@nextwordnow.com**

in **www.linkedin.com/in/mesterman/**

SENTRAL