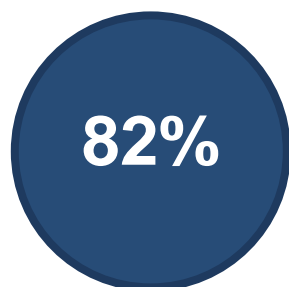


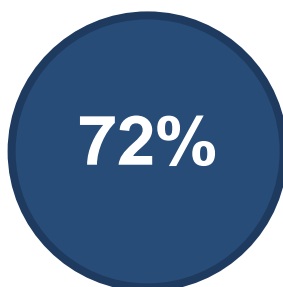
# The State of School IT in 2026

## From Help Desk to Strategic Partner

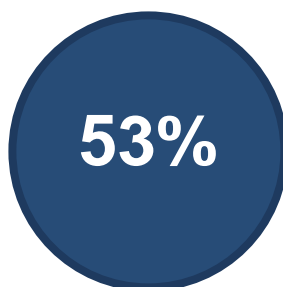
*A Leadership Brief for Heads of School, CFOs, and Boards*



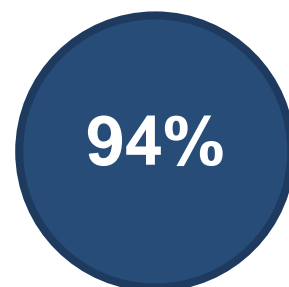
**schools hit by cyber incidents**



**leaders rely on digital tools**



**of educators report burnout**



**see AI as positive impact**

*Sources: CIS/CoSN 2025, RAND 2025 Teacher Survey, CoSN EdTech Leadership Report*

School technology has reached an inflection point. Most schools are no longer asking *whether* technology matters—but many remain unsure **what role IT should actually play** in advancing learning, well-being, and institutional sustainability. In 2026, the most effective schools treat IT not as a support function, but as a **strategic partner** in teaching, learning, operations, and leadership decision-making. For school leaders, this gap increasingly shows up as faculty frustration, rising cybersecurity risk, budget pressure, and stalled innovation. **This brief:** • Describes the current state of school IT • Identifies five warning signs that technology leadership is holding learning back • Explores what it means to move from help desk to strategic partner • Offers practical, leadership-level actions that can be initiated quickly **This is not a technology problem. It is a leadership and alignment problem.**

# The Current Landscape: What the Data Tells Us

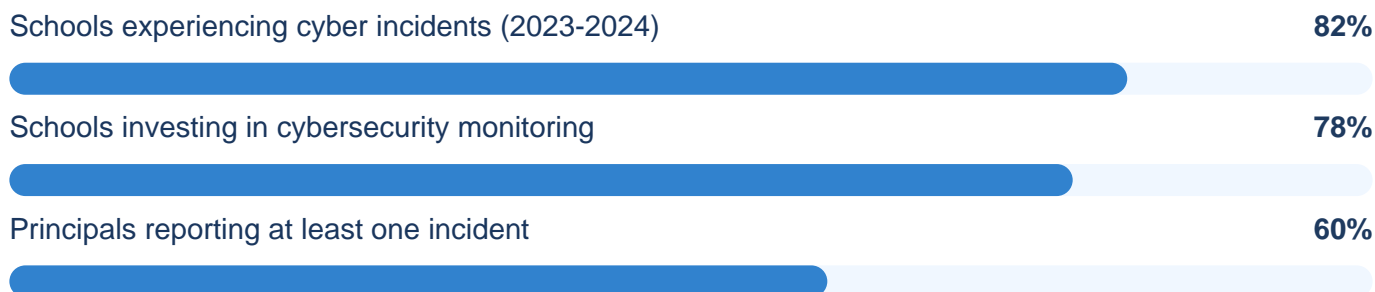
Research from CoSN, RAND, and the Center for Internet Security paints a clear picture: digital infrastructure has become the backbone of K-12 education—and the gap between schools that leverage it strategically and those that don't is widening.

“ *Digital infrastructure is now the backbone of teaching, learning and school operations — and EdTech leaders are the architects holding it all together.*

— Keith Krueger, CEO, CoSN — 2025 State of EdTech Leadership Report

## The Cybersecurity Crisis

Between July 2023 and December 2024, the Center for Internet Security documented over **9,300 confirmed cyber incidents** across approximately 5,000 K-12 institutions. The average ransom demand now exceeds **\$847,000**, with average remediation costs reaching **\$3.76 million**.



Sources: CIS MS-ISAC 2025 K-12 Cybersecurity Report, CoSN 2025, RAND School Leader Panel 2024

## The Talent Challenge

The workforce crisis extends beyond teachers. CoSN's 2025 report reveals a significant shift: in 2015, **58% of EdTech leaders came from education backgrounds**. By 2025, **52% now come from technology backgrounds**—reflecting the role's growing focus on infrastructure, cybersecurity, and systems integration. Meanwhile, **70% of K-12 teachers** report their schools are understaffed, and **53% of educators** report burnout. When IT is understaffed and teachers are overwhelmed, technology becomes a source of friction rather than support.

Sources: CoSN 2025 State of EdTech Leadership, RAND 2025 State of the American Teacher, Pew Research 2024

***As digital infrastructure becomes inseparable from school operations, leadership clarity—not technical sophistication—has become the defining factor.***

# The Widening Gap: Thriving vs. Struggling Schools

The difference is not budget—it is **clarity of role, trust, and leadership integration.**

SCHOOLS THAT ARE THRIVING	SCHOOLS THAT ARE STRUGGLING
IT leaders participate in strategic conversations before decisions are made	IT is brought in after decisions are finalized
Technology decisions are tied to pedagogy and mission	Success is measured solely by uptime
Faculty feel supported—not surveilled	Faculty frustration with technology is rising
Systems are stable and adaptable to change	Security and privacy are reactive, not proactive
Boards understand technology as infrastructure	Technology spending lacks a coherent narrative

*Data point: CoSN 2025 reports that 94% of EdTech leaders see AI benefits, yet only 35% have generative AI initiatives*

**The gap between these models compounds over time—financially, culturally, and instructionally—making course correction harder the longer misalignment persists.**



# Five Warning Signs Your IT Model Is Holding Learning Back

These patterns appear consistently in schools where technology creates friction rather than enabling learning:

1

## IT Is Measured Only by What Doesn't Break

If success equals 'nothing went wrong,' innovation is compromised. When IT is evaluated solely on uptime, leaders unintentionally discourage experimentation.

**IMPACT:** Leadership check: How is IT success described—outcomes or ou...

2

## Technology Decisions Lack Pedagogical Context

Devices and tools are selected based on price or urgency—without a clear instructional rationale. Districts use 2,000+ apps, yet only 97 drive 95% of engagement.

**IMPACT:** Leadership check: Can leaders articulate why core tools exis...

3

## IT Is Positioned as Enforcement, Not Partnership

When IT is primarily associated with restrictions and 'no,' trust erodes. Faculty work around systems, paradoxically increasing security risks.

**IMPACT:** Leadership check: Do faculty see IT as collaborators or comp...

4

## Leadership Cannot Articulate the Technology Strategy

If Heads, CFOs, or Board members struggle to explain why tools exist—the strategy lives only in people's heads, or nowhere at all.

**IMPACT:** Leadership check: Could you explain your strategy in 3 sente...

5

## IT Staff Are Burned Out—but Deeply Committed

Burnout here doesn't look like disengagement—it looks like heroics. And heroics are not a strategy. Are systems resilient—or dependent on individuals?

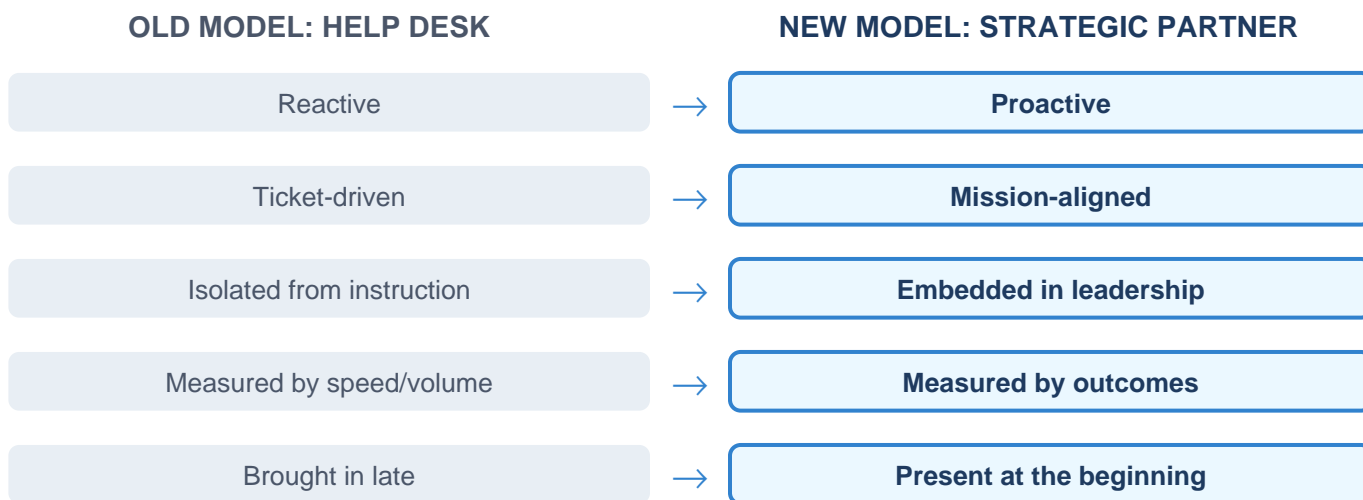
**IMPACT:** Leadership check: Is this sustainable—or a countdown to fail...

*Data: Lightspeed Systems 2024 EdTech App Report*

# From Help Desk to Strategic Partner

The most effective schools are making a deliberate shift. This transformation does **not** require a reorganization, a new title, or more tools. It requires **intentional leadership alignment**.

## The Maturity Shift in School IT Leadership



## What Strategic IT Partnership Looks Like

In high-functioning schools, IT leaders participate in **academic planning conversations** from the start, translate technical risk into **plain-language leadership insights**, help faculty experiment safely, anticipate change instead of reacting to it, and serve as **connective tissue** between departments. Technology becomes predictable, purposeful, and trusted—**invisible in the right ways**, supporting learning without dominating it.



# What CFOs and COOs Should Expect

For finance and operations leaders, strategic IT partnership isn't about innovation for its own sake—it's about **predictability, risk reduction, and process discipline**. When IT operates strategically, schools experience:

- **Fewer emergencies** — Proactive monitoring replaces reactive firefighting
- **No mid-year surprises** — Renewal calendars and vendor management are systematic
- **Renewal discipline** — Software audits prevent redundant tools and unexpected costs
- **Controlled pathways for innovation** — New ideas get evaluated without triggering unbudgeted purchases or mid-year transfers

**What some call 'being innovative' can feel like process failure to a CFO. Strategic IT creates space for both—excitement without chaos.**

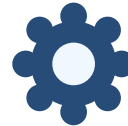
## The Financial Case for Strategic IT

When IT leadership is reactive rather than strategic, costs become unpredictable. Emergency remediation, unplanned purchases, and duplicative tools drain budgets without clear return. Consider the data:



Strategic IT doesn't mean spending more—it means spending with **intention, visibility, and alignment** to institutional priorities. CFOs who partner with IT leadership early gain better forecasting, fewer surprises, and clearer narratives for board presentations.

*Sources: CIS MS-ISAC 2025 Report, CoSN 2025 State of EdTech Leadership*



## A Better First Step

Most schools don't need a full audit, a new platform, or a crisis response. They need **clarity**.

1	LISTEN	Gather input from stakeholders—IT, teachers, administrators, parents
2	MAP	Identify misalignments between technology investments and mission
3	NARRATE	Create a shared story that everyone can articulate clearly
4	PRIORITIZE	Identify high-leverage changes that compound quickly

*This process replaces reactive fixes with shared understanding—often the fastest path to meaningful change.*

“ Small, intentional shifts compound quickly. The goal is not to do more—it's to do what matters.

— Strategic IT Leadership Principle

## Closing Perspective

The question facing schools in 2026 is not *"Do we have good technology?"* It is: **"Does our technology leadership reflect who we say we are as a school?"** When IT moves from help desk to strategic partner, the entire institution benefits—students most of all.

## Next Steps

If these patterns feel familiar, the most productive next step is often a **confidential conversation**—not a sales pitch. Sometimes clarity emerges fastest through dialogue with someone who has seen these patterns across many institutions.

Many leaders begin with a short listening conversation to validate where their school sits today and identify high-leverage opportunities.

### Think Forward Solutions

Helping schools align technology with mission

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