Case Study 1: Agua Fria Union High School District

This case study spotlights how Agua Fria Union High School District, serving 10,000 students in Arizona's West Valley, has embraced artificial intelligence as a powerful tool for learning, innovation, and operational improvement.

By aligning AI efforts with its strategic plan and empowering educators through grassroots leadership, the district demonstrates how thoughtful, ethical AI integration can prepare students—and systems—for the rapidly evolving future. Their story offers practical insights, tested strategies, and a clear vision to guide other districts on their own AI journeys.

Agua Fria Union High School District

The Agua Fria Union High School District (AFUHSD) offers a compelling example of how a mid-sized, diverse district can thoughtfully embrace artificial intelligence (AI) to advance its educational mission. Serving approximately 10,000 students across five (soon to be six) comprehensive high schools in the West Valley of Phoenix, AFUHSD is committed to intentional technology integration, digital citizenship, and enhancing the student experience. This case study walks through their AI journey—why they began, what they have done, what they have learned, and where they are headed—offering valuable insights for other districts exploring similar work.

Why AI?

For AFUHSD, the motivation to engage with AI is rooted in responsibility. As AI transforms industries and reshapes the world, the district believes it must prepare students not only to navigate these shifts but to lead within them. By equipping students to use AI safely, ethically, and creatively, the district aims to bridge the AI divide and ensure all learners are empowered to thrive in an increasingly technology-driven future.

Getting Started

The district's journey began by bringing together a cross-section of leaders to collaboratively shape an AI Strategic Plan. This inclusive process ensured alignment with academic priorities and set the stage for sustainable implementation. Policies and frameworks, such as the Acceptable Use Policy and the CARE Framework (Clarity, Accuracy, Relevance, Ethics), were developed to anchor practices in ethical, responsible use. Importantly, the district empowered an AI Ambassadors team—a group of teachers, coaches, librarians, and administrators—who became champions for innovation and professional development.

With a strong foundation in place, AFUHSD began piloting initiatives and embedding AI into both instructional and operational practices.

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What They Tried

AFUHSD launched a wide array of initiatives, from providing ChatGPT Edu access to all staff and developing over 600 custom bots, to integrating AI into curriculum writing and piloting Khanmigo in classrooms. The district also partnered on ACT prep initiatives using AI, developed asynchronous training modules for staff, and hosted an AI Innovation Challenge to inspire creative applications. Notably, their efforts extended beyond the classroom, bringing AI into human resources, finance, facilities, and parent engagement to improve overall efficiency. Through these efforts, the district has uncovered key lessons and insights, which continue to shape its evolving approach.

Lessons Learned

AFUHSD's early successes stem from fostering collective ownership and embedding AI into existing systems, making integration natural and sustainable. The AI Ambassadors model proved especially powerful, helping scale innovation and build grassroots momentum. However, the district also faced challenges, including addressing staff fears about AI's impact and navigating external misconceptions fueled by media narratives. Proactive communication, ongoing support, and transparency have been critical in building trust and overcoming these hurdles.

Importantly, AFUHSD's AI work is not an isolated initiative, it is deeply aligned with the district's broader vision and long-term goals.

Connection to Broader Goals

By aligning AI integration with its strategic plan and graduate profile, AFUHSD ensures its efforts directly support key competencies such as critical thinking, collaboration, communication, integrity, and responsibility. AI serves as a force multiplier, advancing both academic and operational excellence while preparing students for jobs and industries that are still emerging. This integrated approach fosters future readiness and reinforces the district's mission of equitable empowerment.

Stakeholder Engagement

AFUHSD has prioritized inclusive, transparent engagement by offering Lunch & Learn sessions for staff, hosting student-centered AI Hackathons, and convening an AI Advisory Group composed of educators, leaders, and community partners. These initiatives have not only demystified AI but also created shared ownership, ensuring the district's approach remains grounded in the needs and values of its community.

Next Steps

The district's next priorities include expanding structured student access to AI tools, launching targeted pilots to personalize ACT preparation, scaling differentiated professional development, and increasing operational AI

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integration. AFUHSD aspires to transition from an AI adopter to an AI-native district, where AI is seamlessly woven into teaching, learning, and leadership, anchored by critical thinking, ethics, and a student-centered vision.

AFUHSD's journey offers a valuable roadmap for other districts: align AI efforts with strategic goals, empower grassroots leadership, invest in literacy and ethics, and maintain open, proactive communication. Their work reminds us that AI is not about replacing human capacity—it is about expanding what is possible and preparing students for the world they are stepping into.