

RESEARCH REPORT · SEPTEMBER 2026

The AI policy gap in English schools

We checked the published policy pages of 603 schools for one thing: a stated position on artificial intelligence. 476 had none.

603

schools checked

575

with a live policies page

488

with no AI position

81%

of the sample

What we checked, and how

Over July and August 2026 we examined the public websites of **603 English schools**: 449 independent schools and 154 single-academy trusts, selected by size and profile across the South East, London and the East of England.

For each school we located the policies page and every linked policy document, then searched for any stated position on artificial intelligence — a standalone AI policy, an AI clause inside an acceptable use or safeguarding policy, or a published statement of any kind about staff or pupil use of generative tools.

We recorded three outcomes:

OUTCOME	SCHOOLS	SHARE
No AI position — policies published, nothing on AI	488	81%
Some AI mention — a clause, statement or policy found	99	16%
Inconclusive — site structure prevented a reliable check	16	3%

Of the 488 with no AI position, **476 had a live, maintained policies page** at the time of checking — meaning the absence is not explained by a school simply not publishing policies online. This report uses that 476 figure wherever it refers to schools that publish policies but say nothing about AI.

What this report is not. We checked what schools publish, not what they do. A school may have a clear internal position it has not put on its website, and several told us so. But a position staff cannot find is a position staff cannot follow, and it is not one a parent or inspector can see either.

Four in five publish nothing

81%

of the schools we checked publish a full policy library — safeguarding, behaviour, data protection, acceptable use — with no stated position on AI anywhere in it.

The first assumption worth discarding is that this reflects weak governance. It does not. **575 of the 603 schools — 95% — maintain a live, current policies page.** These are diligent institutions with complete documentation, published inspection reports and named policy owners.

They have simply not addressed this one thing.

Independent schools and academies are in the same position

SECTOR	CHECKED	NO AI POSITION	SHARE
Independent schools	449	370	82%
Single-academy trusts	154	118	77%

We expected a wider gap. Independent schools have more discretion and fewer statutory reporting obligations; academies sit inside a tighter accountability framework. Neither advantage shows up here. The five-point difference is smaller than the difference between regions, and far smaller than the gap between what schools have addressed and what they have not.

Size does not solve it

If this were a capacity problem — too few hands, no compliance officer, no time — larger schools would have addressed it and smaller ones would not. The data does not support that.

PUPILS ON ROLL	CHECKED	NO AI POSITION	SHARE
Under 500	276	236	86%
500–899	132	103	78%
900–1,299	132	100	76%
1,300 and over	63	49	78%

Smaller schools fare worst, as you would expect. But the improvement stops almost immediately. **Schools with more than 1,300 pupils — institutions with business managers, compliance leads and dedicated IT staff — are at 78%.** Ten points better than the smallest schools, and no better than schools half their size.

Adding resource does not close this gap, which means it is not primarily a resource problem.

By region

REGION	CHECKED	NO AI POSITION	SHARE
South East	259	215	83%
London	216	174	81%
East of England	128	99	77%

Regional variation is modest and the sample is concentrated in the South East and London, so we would not read much into the ordering. The useful observation is the floor: no region we examined falls below three-quarters.

Why diligent schools have missed this

Across the schools we have spoken to since completing this research, one explanation comes up repeatedly and it is not the one most people expect.

AI does not obviously belong to anyone.

A safeguarding question goes to the DSL. A data question goes to the DPO. A device question goes to whoever runs IT. An AI question touches all three and sits cleanly with none of them, so it is passed sideways rather than owned — usually to whoever seems most technical, who is frequently the person with the least authority to set school-wide policy.

The result is that nobody refuses to deal with it. It simply never becomes anyone's next action.

The three questions that expose it

In conversations with school leaders, the same three questions produce the same response: a clear instinct, and nothing written down.

01 Can staff put pupil work into ChatGPT to mark it?

02 What do we tell parents when they ask whether we're using AI?

03 Who signs off a new AI tool before a department starts using it?

None of these is a technology question. They are governance questions, and the reason they stay unanswered is that answering them requires a decision rather than a document.

This matters because a policy written before that decision has been taken produces language like *"staff should use AI responsibly and in line with school values"* — which tells a teacher on a Tuesday morning nothing at all.

Four steps, in order

If your school is among the 81%, the sequence below is the one we would suggest. It is deliberately short, and none of it requires buying anything.

01 Find out what is actually happening

Survey staff anonymously before you write anything. Every school underestimates current use, and a policy written against an imagined baseline addresses the wrong risks. A four-minute survey is enough.

02 Name an owner

One person, named, with authority to decide. Not a working group. The absence of an owner is the single strongest predictor of the gap persisting.

03 Make the decision before writing the policy

Settle the specific permitted and prohibited uses — with the staff who will have to follow them in the room. This is the part that takes real time, and the part most schools skip.

04 Publish it

A position staff cannot find is not a position. Put it where the other policies live, date it, and name the owner on it.

On policy templates. Free AI policy templates are widely available and most are perfectly adequate. We would encourage you to use one. But a template completes step four. It cannot do steps one to three, which is why schools that download one often find themselves no further forward six months later.

If you would like help closing it

Cursoria Consulting works with schools, academies and trusts on AI governance — the policy, the staff position and the safeguarding side. We do not resell AI platforms and we take no commission on any tool we might recommend, which is why our advice can be neutral on whether a school should adopt something at all.

The AI Governance Twilight

A 90-minute session for your whole staff, delivered online. You finish it with a one-page AI position you can publish, the permitted and prohibited use list your staff have agreed to, and a short summary for governors. **£495 + VAT for the whole staff**, deliverable within three weeks.

cursoriaconsulting.com/twilight.html

The staff AI use survey

The 14-question survey referred to in step one is free and yours to use without attribution. Email us and we will send it.

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