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# The American Private School *AI* Study 2026

*Two questions every paying parent should ask — and every elite school is failing.*

5W · THE AI COMMUNICATIONS FIRM

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INTRODUCTION

## Two questions that should have the same answer — but don't.

Every year, tens of thousands of American families pay between $60,000 and $80,000 for a private K-12 education at the country's most selective day and boarding schools. They pay for small classes, distinguished faculty, and the promise that the school is preparing their child for a world that is not the one the parents grew up in.

That world, in 2026, is one in which artificial intelligence is no longer a future-of-work talking point. It is the layer through which the next generation will research, write, code, communicate, and decide. A high school senior in 2026 who cannot use generative AI fluently is at a meaningful disadvantage. A high school senior in 2030 who cannot will be at a structural one.

This study asks two questions. The first is the question every paying parent should be asking the school: *which of America's elite private schools is actually teaching artificial intelligence — building it into the curriculum, training the faculty, and graduating students who understand the technology rather than fear it?*

The second is the question that almost no school has asked itself: *when a prospective family in 2026 opens ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity, or Google's AI Overviews and asks "what is the best private school in America for my AI-curious child" — does the school appear in the answer at all?*

The two questions should have the same answer. The schools building real AI literacy should be the same schools surfacing in AI search. They are not. The first finding of this study is that even the schools doing the most rigorous AI curricular work are nearly invisible in the AI engines that have replaced the college-search aggregator and the school-tour brochure as the front door of independent-school admissions.

This is the gap. This study maps it.

METHODOLOGY

## What we audited and how.

5W audited a set of twenty top American private K-12 schools, drawn from the most-cited boarding and day schools in the U.S. independent-school landscape. The set includes the principal New England boarding schools — Phillips Academy Andover, Phillips Exeter Academy, Choate Rosemary Hall, Deerfield Academy, Hotchkiss, Lawrenceville, St. Paul's, Groton, Hill, Milton — alongside the leading New York City day schools — Brearley, Spence, Dalton, Trinity, Horace Mann, Collegiate — and the most cited national day schools beyond the Northeast — Harvard-Westlake (Los Angeles), Sidwell Friends (Washington, D.C.), the Harker School (San Jose), and the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools.

The study scored each school on two dimensions, weighted equally.

### DIMENSION ONE — CURRICULAR MATURITY

How well is the school actually teaching AI? Scored against six published criteria: (1) named AI or machine learning courses in the catalog; (2) institutional AI policy and governance structure; (3) named faculty roles dedicated to AI; (4) faculty professional development on AI; (5) external industry or academic AI partnerships; (6) student-facing AI initiatives such as councils, clubs, or

capstones. Evidence drawn from school websites, course catalogs, school newspapers, alumni magazines, NAIS publications, and faculty LinkedIn profiles. Scores are categorical — Tier A, Tier B, Tier C — with the underlying evidence cited.

DIMENSION TWO — AI VISIBILITY

How often does the school surface in answer-engine results when prospective families search for AI-strong schools? Scored against ten consumer-intent prompts a parent or student would actually issue to ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity, or Google AI Overviews — including "best private school for AI in America," "boarding schools teaching AI," "best private high school for an AI-curious student," and program-specific variants. Scores reflect whether the school is named, ranked, or cited in answer-box content surfaced for those queries.

This study makes no claim about the absolute quality of the schools below the AI dimension. The schools examined here are among the most academically distinguished in the country. The question is narrower and more specific: how prepared is the institution for the technological transition its students are walking into?

PART ONE

# Who is actually teaching AI?

Six schools have moved past policy memos and into structural curricular commitment. Eight more have engaged seriously but not yet built the institutional infrastructure to match. The remaining schools sit in a default-prohibit posture — AI use is permitted only when a teacher grants explicit permission — without a parallel program to prepare students for the technology they are being prohibited from using.

The leaders are not the schools with the largest endowments or the most famous alumni. They are the schools that committed early, named a faculty owner, and built a public framework.

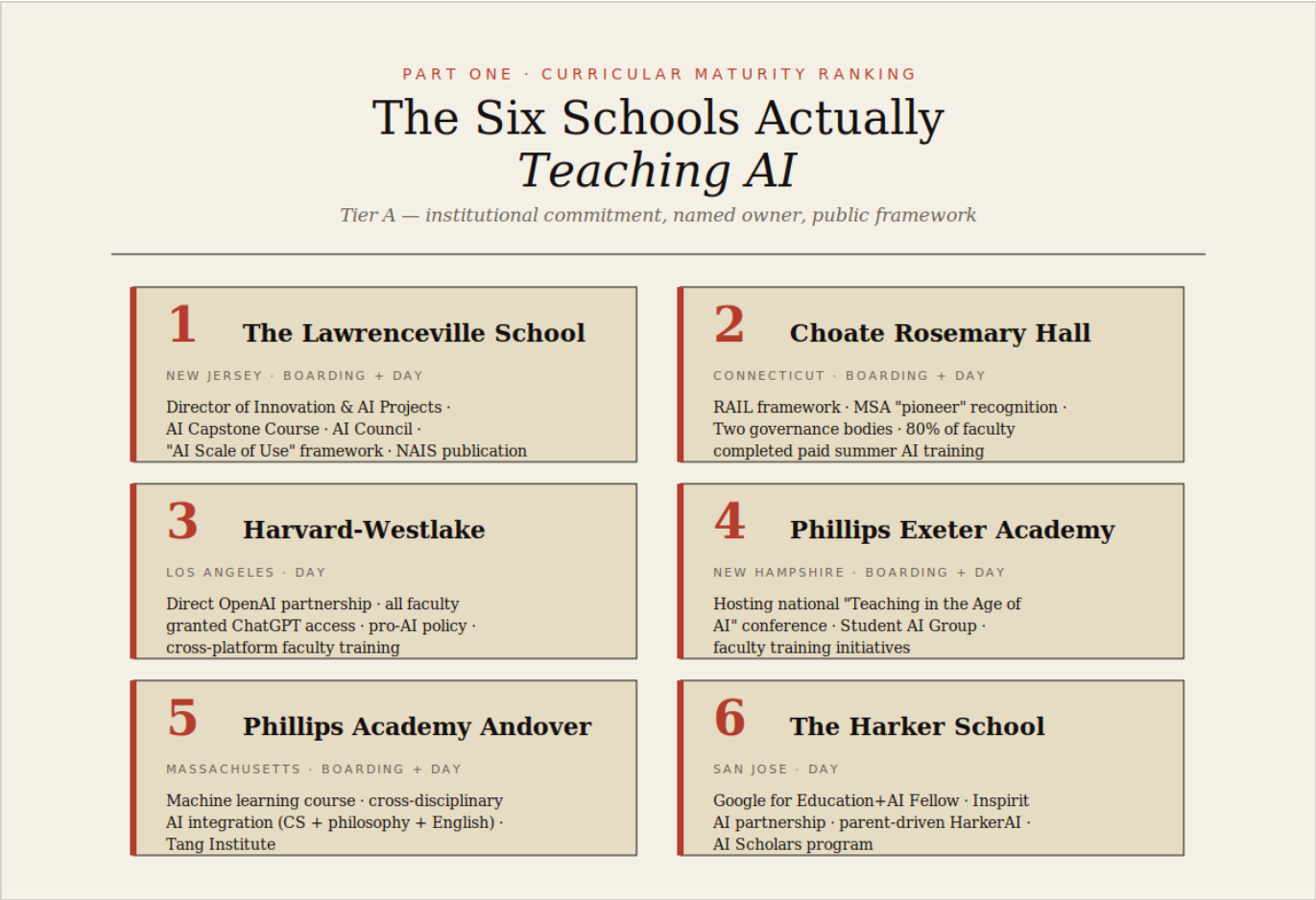


FIGURE 1 — THE SIX TIER A LEADERS

## The Curricular Maturity Ranking

| # | SCHOOL | TIER | WHY |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **The Lawrenceville School** | A — LEADER | Director of Innovation and AI Projects (Jennifer Parnell, Oxford AI grad cert). AI Capstone Course. AI Council with student founding members. Published "AI Scale of Use" framework. Featured in NAIS Spring 2025 magazine cover package. |
| 2 | **Choate Rosemary Hall** | A — LEADER | RAIL (Responsible AI in Learning) framework, recognized by Middle States Association as a "pioneer in AI Literacy, Safety, and Ethics." Two governance bodies: Generative AI Steering Committee and Generative AI |

| # | SCHOOL | TIER | WHY |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Collaborative Group. 80 percent of eligible faculty completed paid summer AI training. |
| 3 | **Harvard-Westlake School** | A — LEADER | Direct partnership with OpenAI. All faculty granted ChatGPT access. Pro-AI institutional policy: "We believe generative AI can elevate teaching and learning at Harvard-Westlake." Named Associate Director of Teaching and Learning leading integration. Cross-platform faculty exercises. |
| 4 | **Phillips Exeter Academy** | A — LEADER | Hosting national "Teaching in the Age of AI" conference for educators across independent schools. Published Bulletin issue dedicated to AI. Student AI Group. Academic Technology Coordinator leading faculty AI training initiatives. |
| 5 | **Phillips Academy Andover** | A — LEADER | Machine learning course in the math, statistics, and computer science department. Cross-disciplinary AI integration: CS faculty teaching code dissection with weekly oral assessments; philosophy faculty teaching deepfake ethics and AI agency; English faculty teaching AI-and-voice metacognition. Tang Institute as innovation hub. |
| 6 | **The Harker School** | A — LEADER | Director of Learning, Innovation and Design (Elizabeth Brumbaugh) selected for Google for Education+AI Fellowship. Inspirit AI partnership across two consecutive summers. Parent-driven HarkerAI initiative led by Silicon Valley AI executives. AI Scholars program. |
| 7 | **Sidwell Friends School** | B — ENGAGED | Sidwell Friends AI Advisory Working Group launched summer 2023. Published mission statement on AI ethics. Embracing rather than restrictive posture. Less institutional |

| # | SCHOOL | TIER | WHY |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | infrastructure than the Tier A schools but a clear public stance and named faculty leadership. |
| 8 | **The Hotchkiss School** | B — ENGAGED | AI guidance in the Almanac student handbook. Faculty surveyed: about 70 percent see generative AI as a teaching tool, about 80 percent agree faculty should guide student use. Dean-level public engagement on the policy framework. No standalone AI course or capstone. |
| 9 | **Trinity School** | B — ENGAGED | Computer science program with strong technical depth. Faculty engagement on AI. Public-facing curricular communication on AI is limited; structural commitment less developed than the Tier A leaders. |
| 10 | **Horace Mann School** | B — ENGAGED | Active faculty discussion and student-newspaper coverage on AI-and-classroom debates. AI is being treated as an academic-integrity governance question rather than a curricular opportunity. |
| 11 | **University of Chicago Laboratory Schools** | B — ENGAGED | University-affiliated school with access to UChicago AI faculty and resources. Engaged with AI through computer science programming. Public curricular communication on a dedicated AI pathway is less developed than the Tier A schools. |

| # | SCHOOL | TIER | WHY |
|---|---|---|---|
| 12 | **Deerfield Academy** | C — RESTRICTIVE | Default-prohibit AI policy: students prohibited from using generative AI tools to prepare academic work unless a teacher grants permission. Student-led AI workshop initiatives exist but are extracurricular. No named institutional AI lead, no dedicated AI council, no AI capstone. |
| 13–20 | **St. Paul's, Groton, Hill, Milton, Brearley, Spence, Dalton, Collegiate** | C — RESTRICTIVE | Variations on the same posture: published academic-integrity guidance treating AI primarily as a plagiarism-management problem, with limited public evidence of named AI leadership, dedicated curriculum, or external partnerships. The schools are not against AI; they are silent on it. |

> *The pattern is consistent: the schools winning AI education are the ones that named a faculty owner, built a public framework, and treated AI as a curricular opportunity rather than an academic-integrity governance problem.*

## The Tier-A Operating Pattern

Across the six leaders, the same operational moves recur. None of these are expensive or technically complex. All of them are organizational and communicative.

- **A named faculty owner.** Lawrenceville's Jennifer Parnell, Choate's Ellen Devine, Harvard-Westlake's Maggie Thompson, Exeter's Leanne, Andover's Nicholas Zufelt, Harker's Elizabeth Brumbaugh. The leaders all have one identifiable person in the institutional photograph. The followers do not.
- **A public framework, not just a policy.** Choate's RAIL framework, Lawrenceville's AI Scale of Use, Harvard-Westlake's mission statement. Each is published, citable, and built to be referenced

rather than enforced.

- **Faculty training as the precondition.** Choate paid faculty for summer AI work; 80 percent participated. Harvard-Westlake gave every teacher ChatGPT access. Exeter is hosting a national conference for other independent-school faculty. The leaders treat the teachers as the constraint, not the students.
- **Student-facing infrastructure.** AI capstones, AI councils, AI student groups. The leaders give students an institutional identity around the technology, not just an instruction manual.
- **An external relationship.** Harvard-Westlake with OpenAI. Harker with Google for Education and Inspirit AI. Choate with Middle States Association's RAIL endorsement. The leaders connect their work to institutions outside their own walls; the work compounds.

Every other school in the study could replicate the pattern within twelve months. The constraint is not capability. It is institutional will.

PART TWO

## Do they show up when parents ask AI?

This is where the study finds its most striking result. The schools doing the most serious AI curricular work — including the Tier A leaders — are nearly invisible in the AI engines that prospective families now use as the front door of school search.

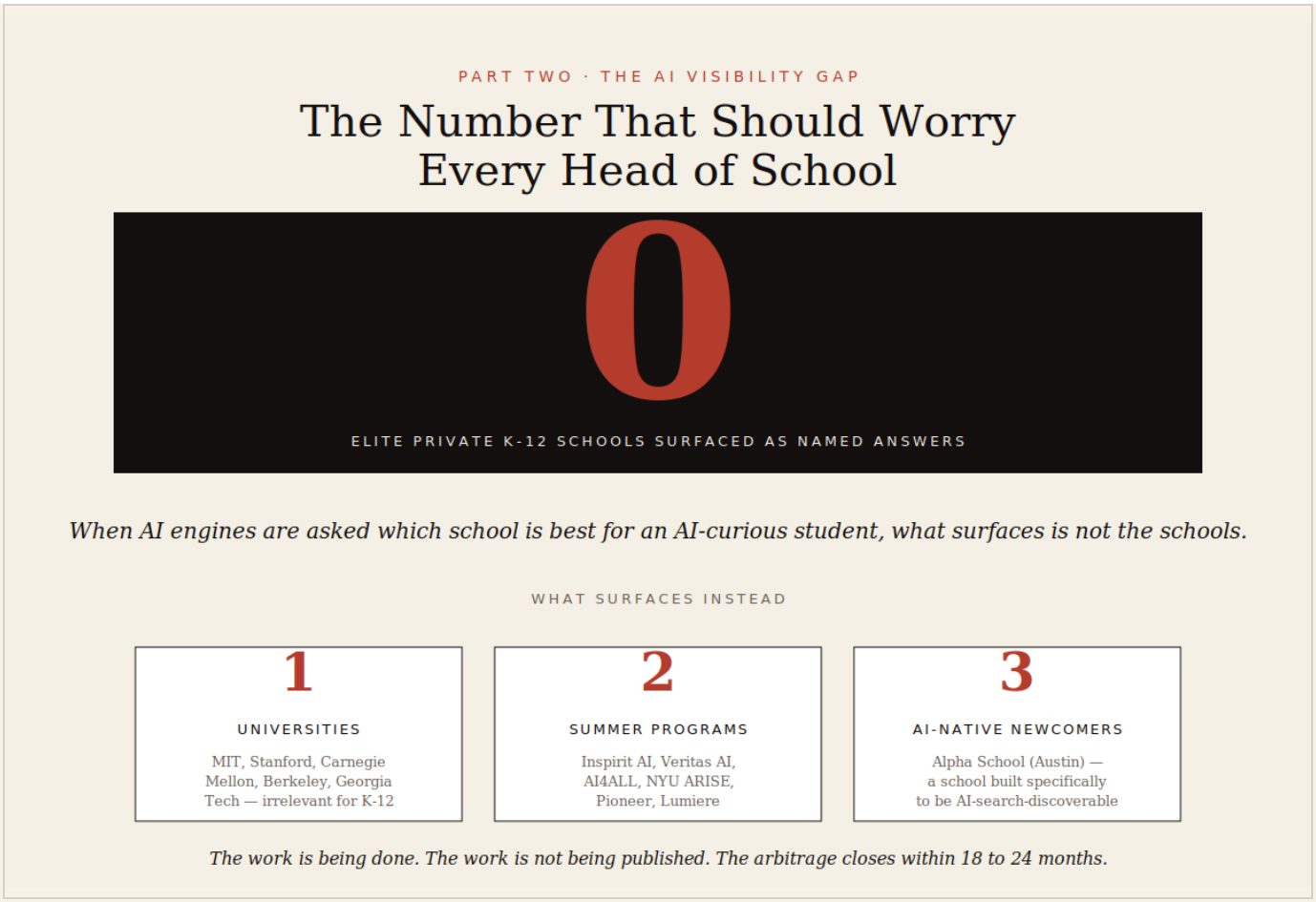


FIGURE 2 — THE AI VISIBILITY GAP

When a prospective family asks ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity, or Google AI Overviews a query like "best private high school for AI in America" or "best boarding school teaching AI in 2026," the response is overwhelmingly drawn from three buckets that have nothing to do with the schools themselves.

### WHAT SURFACES INSTEAD

- **Universities.** MIT, Stanford, Carnegie Mellon, Berkeley, Georgia Tech. Educational institutions whose AI programs are well-documented because the universities have been publishing about AI for decades. Not relevant to a K-12 family search.
- **Summer programs and supplementary providers.** Inspirit AI, Veritas AI, AI4ALL, Stanford AI Lab, NYU ARISE, Pioneer, Lumiere, Research Ignited. Three- to ten-week programs that students from any school attend on the side. Not a primary educational institution.
- **AI-native schools.** Alpha School (Austin) is the one K-12 brand consistently appearing in AI search for AI-related school queries. Alpha is a new, AI-tutor-first school built specifically to be

discoverable in this search context. None of the elite legacy schools appear alongside it.

The implication is not that the elite schools are doing nothing. They are. The implication is that the work is invisible.

### SAMPLE QUERY AND RESULT

**Prompt → "What are the best private high schools in the United States for a student interested in artificial intelligence?"**

AI engines respond with a mix of: (a) the most-cited universities for AI undergraduate study; (b) summer and supplementary programs; (c) Alpha School and a small set of new AI-native schools; and (d) general college-prep advice. None of the named Tier A schools above — Lawrenceville, Choate, Harvard-Westlake, Exeter, Andover, Harker — are returned as primary answers. Most are not returned at all.

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**VERDICT: TIER A CURRICULAR LEADERS ARE INVISIBLE TO THE AI ENGINES NOW MEDIATING PRIVATE-SCHOOL DISCOVERY.**

### WHY THIS IS HAPPENING

AI engines synthesize answers from indexed and cited content across the open web, weighted toward sources that are structured, frequently updated, and consistently linked from authoritative third parties. The elite private schools have, almost without exception, made three structural choices that work against citation in AI engines.

- **The public AI work is buried.** Curricular AI initiatives live inside student-newspaper articles, internal magazines, faculty interviews, and admissions-office materials that the open web does not index well.
- **The schools have no AI-specific landing pages.** A parent searching "Lawrenceville School AI program" or "Choate AI curriculum" does not arrive at a single canonical page that summarizes the program, names the faculty lead, links to the framework document, and structures the data for an AI engine to cite. The information exists; it is not packaged.
- **Third-party authority citations are scarce.** Lawrenceville and Choate are the exceptions — both have appeared in NAIS, Middle States Association, and trade-press coverage of

independent-school AI. Most of the others have not been cited externally on the AI dimension at all.

This is the same pattern 5W has documented across other consumer categories in our AI Visibility Index series. Brands and institutions that have not been deliberately structured for AI citation are absent from AI answer boxes — regardless of how strong the underlying program is.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

## The window closes faster than admissions cycles move.

Independent-school admissions has historically been a slow business. Branding cycles run multi-year. Reputation compounds over decades. Heads of school plan in five-year strategic plans. AI search is none of those things. The AI engines reweight their training data and citation patterns continuously. The brands that establish authority in 2026 lock in the position; the brands that wait until 2028 are competing against a citation graph that has already crystallized around someone else.

For the Tier A curricular leaders, the implication is that the work is the easy part. The work is done. What remains is the publishing — the structured pages, the frameworks made citable, the faculty leadership made visible, the third-party press placed deliberately. This is a six-to-twelve-month effort. The cost is small. The arbitrage closes.

For the Tier B and Tier C schools, the implication is sharper. The window to credibly claim AI authority on the curricular dimension is open today and closes within eighteen to twenty-four months. The institutions that name a lead, publish a framework, and partner with an external authority by Q3 2026 will be cited as the AI-strong schools when the AI engines next reweight. Those that wait will be cited as the schools that did not.

> *The work is the easy part. The work is done. What remains is the*

> *publishing.*

### WHAT EVERY SCHOOL IN THE STUDY SHOULD DO IN THE NEXT 90 DAYS

- Name a faculty owner of the school's AI program publicly, on the school's website, with a faculty bio that surfaces in third-party search.
- Publish a single canonical AI-program landing page at /ai or /artificial-intelligence with structured schema, the framework, the faculty lead, the courses, and the partnerships.
- File one byline or research artifact in a third-party authority venue per quarter — NAIS, Independent School magazine, Inside Higher Ed, EdSurge, the Atlantic, the New York Times.
- Offer the program for a public study, ranking, or third-party endorsement that can be cited by AI engines as external validation.
- Audit AI engine coverage of the school quarterly and respond to gaps within thirty days.

None of these requires capital expenditure. All of them require a decision and an owner.

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CLOSING NOTE

## The schools have always sold a future. The future has changed.

For two centuries, the most selective American private schools have sold the same product — preparation for the world that will exist when the student graduates. The Phillips brothers founded Andover and Exeter to prepare students for a republic that did not yet exist. Lawrenceville, Choate, the Harker School were founded with the same forward conviction. Sidwell Friends, Brearley, Harvard-Westlake, the Lab Schools — the same.

The product is the future. The future, this time, is one in which the gateway to information is no longer the library, the search engine, or the textbook. It is a model that synthesizes, reasons, and recommends. The schools that prepare their students to work alongside that model will graduate

students with a meaningful advantage. The schools that prohibit it without preparing for it will graduate students who must learn it on their own time. And the schools that fail to publish what they are doing — even when they are doing it well — will discover that the AI search layer cannot recommend them, no matter how good they are.

The work and the publishing of the work are now the same job.

ABOUT 5W

## The AI Communications Firm

5W is the AI Communications Firm, building brand authority across the platforms where decisions now happen — ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity, Gemini, and Google AI Overviews — alongside earned media, digital, and influencer channels. 5W combines public relations, digital marketing, Generative Engine Optimization (GEO), and proprietary AI visibility research, helping clients measure and grow their presence in AI-driven buyer research.

Founded more than 20 years ago, 5W has been recognized as a top U.S. PR agency by O'Dwyer's, named Agency of the Year in the American Business Awards®, and honored as a Top Place to Work in Communications in 2026 by Ragan.

The American Private School AI Study 2026 is the latest installment in 5W's AI Visibility research series. The full report is free at **5wpr.com/research**.