Analysis of LIFToFFS Extant Data

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A Note From Our CESA 4 Partners

The findings presented here reflect an early stage in the development and implementation of Wisconsin's Learning Innovations for the Teaching of Future-Focused Students (LIFToFFS) project, developed by Cooperative Educational Service Agency #4 (CESA 4). From the beginning, LIFToFFS was driven by a question: *What if artificial intelligence (AI)-supported tools could help students acquire foundational knowledge more effectively, while freeing educators to spend more time doing what matters most: engaging students in meaningful, personalized, hands-on learning experiences that develop the skills needed for their futures?*

The goal was never simply to integrate AI into classrooms. Rather, LIFToFFS sought to explore how emerging technologies might improve experiences for both educators and students while enabling broader shifts in classroom instruction, culture, and learning. Could AI-supported personalization create more opportunities for authentic inquiry, rigorous project-based learning, deeper engagement, and durable skill development?

As implementation progressed, experiences and feedback from educators, students, and district leaders, alongside findings from this research partnership, helped to inform a more sophisticated understanding of the conditions necessary to realize that vision. This ongoing learning has contributed to an expanded emphasis on intentional instructional design, student and educator agency, durable skills development, leadership capacity, and the organizational structures needed to sustain meaningful innovation.

Today, LIFToFFS Learning Collaborative, Inc. serves as a nonprofit intermediary that connects leaders, ideas, and resources across education, industry, and communities to advance educational transformation throughout Wisconsin. Through its partnership with the Learning Innovations Hub at CESA 4, that collective vision is translated into action through professional learning, coaching, and systems-level support that help schools and districts bring meaningful, learner-centered innovation to life. The findings that follow offer a glimpse into the early stages of this statewide movement, capturing the experiences, challenges, and discoveries that have helped to shape its continued evolution.

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Study Overview

LIFToFFS, developed by CESA 4, is a model of classroom instruction designed to transform education in rural districts in Wisconsin. Leveraging AI, LIFToFFS explores how emerging technologies might improve experiences for educators and students while enabling broader shifts in classroom instruction, culture, and learning. The model integrates four core experiences into the classroom: personalized learning, authentic inquiry, durable skills development, and global readiness.

The American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) conducted a mixed-methods study of the LIFToFFS model. This memo presents interim findings from the study's first phase. These findings are based on an analysis of extant data generated by CESA 4 during LIFToFFS' initial pilot year (2024–2025). AIR conducted the analysis in December 2025 and January 2026. Future phases of the study incorporate additional data collected in spring 2026 through surveys, focus groups, classroom visits, student feedback, and educator interviews.

Supported by AIR, the study has three overarching goals:

- explore implementation approaches for LIFToFFS,
- engage in short co-learning cycles for continuous improvement, and
- identify conditions under which LIFToFFS thrives in rural classrooms across Wisconsin.

This memo summarizes the methods used in the extant data analysis, highlights key findings and insights, and offers considerations for future phases of the study. The findings from this analysis informed protocol development for co-learning cycles in spring 2026. In collaboration with CESA 4, AIR used these findings to better understand promising practices in LIFToFFS and the conditions that support successful implementation, both of which will support ongoing implementation.

Exhibit 1 identifies the research questions examined in this study. The sections that follow describe the methods used for the analysis, the findings by theme, and considerations for further learning in the next phases of this study.

Exhibit 1. LIFToFFS Research Questions

Number	Research question
1	How do educators and students experience LIFToFFS? How does variation in LIFToFFS implementation shape these experiences?
2	How, if at all, does the use of AI-driven platforms in the LIFToFFS model increase the capacities of educators to facilitate student learning experiences that are project-based, future-ready, and focused on durable skills development?
3	How do educators' experiences with LIFToFFS influence their practices and short-term outcomes (e.g., increased self-efficacy to create personalized learning experiences, increased motivation to continue teaching in the future)?
4	What are the conditions in which classrooms, schools, and districts thrive and/or struggle with LIFToFFS implementation?

Note. AI = artificial intelligence. LIFToFFS = Learning Innovations for the Teaching of Future-Focused Students.

Methods

Data Sources

The data sources examined in this analysis included interviews with implementing educators and participating students, open-ended responses to an educator survey, and educator reflection forms distributed after a professional development session. Exhibit 2 reports the numbers of interviews and responses for each data source.

Exhibit 2. Extant Data Sources for LIFToFFS

Data source	Number of transcripts or responses
Educator interviews	• 4 elementary educator transcripts • 6 middle school educator transcripts • 3 high school educator transcripts
Student interviews	• 20 elementary student transcripts • 10 middle school student transcripts • 26 high school student transcripts
Educator survey	• 174 open-ended survey responses
Educator reflection forms	• 18 reflection forms

Note. LIFToFFS = Learning Innovations for the Teaching of Future-Focused Students.

Qualitative Analysis

AIR conducted thematic coding of these interviews, survey responses, and reflection forms using a grounded theory approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers created a codebook and analyzed the data using NVivo software. The codebook aligned with the research questions, and researchers allowed for emergent themes as they coded. Throughout the coding process, researchers used a constant comparison process to identify similarities, differences, and patterns among the codes and continually refine them. The following sections provide details of key themes regarding educator and student experiences with AI platforms, perceived changes in student learning, and implementation challenges.

Findings

The data from educators and students offered a detailed glimpse into practical experiences of using the LIFToFFS model in classrooms. Much of the data revealed how (a) educators were integrating AI platforms (Course Mojo, eSpark, Khan Academy), personalized learning, and project-based activities into their classrooms and (b) students were engaging with them. Educators described how their feelings of stress, their professional fulfillment, and their capacities to support students had changed during the initial implementation of LIFToFFS. Student interviews revealed that some responded positively to LIFToFFS implementation and found it beneficial to their learning, whereas others had difficulty transitioning to the model. Both educators and students discussed challenges they faced with LIFToFFS implementation, including difficulty adjusting to self-paced learning and accommodating various student needs and skill levels.

Educator and Student Experiences With AI Platforms

AI platforms were widely used by educators to monitor progress in real time

Educators organized class time through a progression of whole-class instruction, individual work time with AI platforms, and project-based group work. Several educators mentioned that they tracked student data and progress using analytic tools and reports built into AI platforms. These reports provided real-time information that educators could use to personalize learning for each student, such as organizing additional practice if needed. One educator noted that the AI platform they used *"helps me reflect on what I say or do in my teaching that [students] didn't understand . . . or the way [the AI platform] is changing their thinking."*

The use of AI platforms increased capacity for some but not all educators

The use of AI platforms increased capacity for some educators, but others needed more dedicated time to effectively incorporate AI into their classrooms. Some educators quickly adopted AI platforms and found them to be useful for formative assessment, student tracking, and freeing up time for more targeted support to individual students. These educators were able to identify students who needed

more one-to-one instruction and work with them while the rest of the class engaged with AI platforms individually or participated in group work. One educator shared, *"By letting the top students move ahead, they can take initiative and ask questions when needed. This would give me time to help the students who need more support to meet the standards and move to the next level."*

However, some educators shared that the initial implementation of AI platforms was challenging because it required substantial planning time amid other school initiatives and curriculum needs. Others described how they wished they had more time to fully use the data generated by AI platforms to create more in-depth lesson plans.

Going forward, this study presents an opportunity to further examine the structures and systems (e.g., professional development, coaching) that educators may need to address these issues and effectively use AI platforms.

Students had mixed experiences using AI for self-paced learning

Students were able to engage with content on AI platforms at their own pace based on their skill level. Most students who were interviewed appreciated having control over how quickly they moved through the content. One student said, *"I wasn't held back. There's nothing really restraining me. It was just go time."* However, students also described the pressure of knowing that their peers were progressing more rapidly through the content: *"I don't like it because everybody's ahead of me."*

When educators described the benefit of students progressing at their own pace, they were mainly referring to students who performed above grade level: *"I think some [students] have not embraced [the AI platform], but a lot have. And I feel like my stronger students really embraced it."* One educator explained that it was challenging when students were behind their peers on the AI platform and then participated in group work. Among students who resisted the use of AI platforms, their reasons included wanting more support from an educator and struggling with working independently on the content.

Additional research will help to identify (a) ways that educators can ensure AI platforms contribute to inclusive learning environments and (b) the knowledge and skills that students need to use AI effectively and thrive in personalized learning environments.

Many students found the integrated chatbot to be a useful feature

Some students were more willing than others to seek assistance from the chatbot instead of the teacher. Others appreciated the quick hints they could receive from the chatbot, instead of waiting for a teacher or peer to help. However, some students described the chatbot as being glitchy or providing limited answers.

Most educators felt that using AI platforms gave them more opportunities to integrate personalized, student-centered, and project-based learning

Overall, most educators described AI platforms as a positive change that enabled their roles to shift from sharing knowledge to facilitating student learning. Educators noticed that they spent less time directing students or keeping them engaged, and that students were more accountable for their own learning. One educator said, *"Everything just feels more student led. . . . I no longer feel like I have to put on a performance to get students engaged. . . . How can we set this up where I am not on the center of the stage? I think that's been a huge shift."* This shift from educator-centered instruction allowed educators to spend more time working with students individually rather than directing the whole class: *"I am not in front of the room as much but instead have more time to talk with small groups."*

Perceived Changes in Student Learning

Students seemed more confident and engaged

Educators noted that students appeared to become more engaged, confident, and present throughout the year. One educator said, *"All kids are participating more than they would have."* Another educator shared, *"I saw [students] who did more than I asked them just because they wanted to."* Those who may have been less engaged in whole-group instruction became more focused when using AI platforms or working in small groups.

One feature of AI platforms that really excited students was the ability to track their own progress and set goals. Students discussed this in their interviews: *"I'm really proud that I'm able to keep on track and not get off track."* Other students described having more confidence in class, particularly in math: *"I realized I'm not as bad at math as I thought, but I'm actually pretty good at it."*

Educators felt that using AI helped students build future-ready skills

Many educators discussed how the ability to work independently, direct the pace of learning, and be responsible for progress will benefit students in the future. One educator compared their classroom to a workplace: *"The analogy that we used in the beginning of the class this year was, 'This is our business. This is our place of work. You are all co-workers. I'm the manager and our job is to be productive and be engaged.'"* Educators also noted that learning to use AI effectively and critically will benefit students in the future. As one educator said, *"They definitely have more understanding of what AI is, and I think that was the best thing that I taught them. AI isn't a person. It can make mistakes."*

Students were more accountable for their learning

When educators focused less on directing the classroom and more on personalized instruction, students who were not engaged in individual instruction learned to manage their own learning. Some educators described this as "accountability" for their learning. One educator shared, *"They really know exactly what they're supposed to be doing, and they don't have to wait on me."* Another educator said, *"I would look out in my classroom [before LIFToFFS] as I'm standing up in front teaching, and there*

would be at least seven kids not even looking at me, not even paying attention. And I feel like this has made them more accountable, because they are in a smaller group, and the other kids are kind of encouraging each other to be more engaged."

Students improved durable skills in communication and collaboration

Some educators reported that implementing the LIFToFFS model in their classroom—for example, through small-group activities—enabled students to further develop durable skills (e.g., conflict resolution, resilience, collaboration). They noted that increased small-group interactions encouraged students to help and collaborate with their peers, including those with whom they would not normally interact and those with differing perspectives. For instance, one educator said, *"I've seen an improvement in how they interact with each other. Sometimes, I think they're a little bit more accountable for where they're at. . . . The kids that are falling behind and stuff like that, I think they help each other more . . . and they have more quality interactions."* Students also described the benefits of small-group activities, with one stating, *"I think just doing more projects with groups helps me understand what we're doing better . . . just helps me . . . improve my communication skills, especially just, like, eye contact skills."*

Challenges Experienced by Educators and Students

Integrating AI into the instructional approach came with a learning curve

Some educators shared that it took time and preparation to integrate AI platforms into instruction for both educators and students. Many educators described the beginning of the year as difficult in terms of setting up the approach and managing student resistance to the reduction in teacher-led instruction. One educator shared*, "I'm new to AI and LIFToFFS, and at times it can feel overwhelming."* Some educators had difficulty aligning and integrating all the elements of the LIFToFFS model into their existing curriculum. For instance, one educator said, *"Our biggest thing has been trying to figure out how to do curriculum, plus [the AI platform] plus building thinking classrooms . . . and fitting in small-group time . . . kind of fitting it all together."* Another educator reflected that the use of AI in general needed to be frontloaded for students because they were not used to learning with this tool: *"I'm trying to brainstorm, like, what I'm going to do for the first couple weeks to really emphasize what is learning [with the AI platform] and what does it take?"* However, while the transition presented challenges at the beginning of the year, many educators noted that student buy-in and engagement increased as the year progressed.

Going forward, additional research will illuminate the "why" behind this shift in buy-in and engagement for some students and educators. This information will be critical for identifying best practices and changes needed for onboarding and ongoing support as more districts adopt the LIFToFFS model.

AI platforms were not always inclusive of all subject areas

Some educators found that not all content areas were fully covered on AI platforms. Social studies and science teachers noticed missing subjects or units they had to cover elsewhere. Educators for electives, such as music or art, also had more difficulty integrating AI than those in core subjects. One educator shared, *"The current platform was not helpful with our research project. [My students] tried to put in prompts, and it couldn't answer questions about real-world applications."*

The focus on personalized learning was a benefit and a challenge

While most educators found benefit in the ability to personalize learning, others noted that it was a challenge to do so for a large number of students. *"I'm one person trying to individualize instruction for 180 students,"* said one educator. Another educator shared, *"It's harder now because they're all in different spots. You could group them every single day . . . every day they're going to switch again."* Other educators were unsure how to move forward if some groups finished their projects before other groups, or if some students were not far enough through the content to engage in groups. Future learning opportunities will help to illuminate best practices and supports that are needed for building educator capacity in this area.

Technology policies may prohibit the expansion of AI use

Blocked applications or school technology policies posed challenges for some educators and students who attempted to use additional AI platforms or tools online. The same educator whose students faced challenges using their AI platform for a research project shared, *"I can't tell them to use school devices to access certain AI tools because they're blocked. They know they can access it on their phones, but we're told they're not supposed to be on phones in class."* The use of cell phones also varied among educators in the same school, so it was allowed in some classrooms but not in others.

Educators had concerns about overreliance on technology being detrimental to student learning

Educators' concerns included students having too much screen time and losing the human connection in instruction. One educator shared, *"Teachers may just put the screens in front of students and not pursue deeper engagement."* Other educators noted that the amount of screen time students experienced may not be helpful: *"My biggest concerns are that students will learn to rely solely on technology for everything and that they will lose the ability to critically think alongside [each other] and communicate and problem-solve together. They already spend so much time every day on devices, and I hesitate to add more technology to their daily life."*

Conclusion

Through this analysis, AIR gleaned several key insights from LIFToFFS' pilot year that will help to guide and inform this rapid-cycle evaluation. In reviewing these early findings, AIR identified the following

focus areas that warrant further investigation (Exhibit 3). These areas are intended to deepen our understanding of what success looks like under the LIFToFFS model and of the contextual supports that are needed to achieve success.

Exhibit 3. Suggested Areas for Future Learning

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The integration of AI into classrooms

- What structures and systems need to be set up for educators and students to use AI platforms effectively?
- What kind of professional development or other supports might be beneficial for teachers who are adjusting instruction to include a more diverse series of learning options?
- Which methods of integrating AI into classroom instruction are most valuable for educators and students? How might this vary by grade level or subject area?
- How do we define "success with AI" in the LIFToFFS model for educators? For students?
- What individual factors contribute to educator success in integrating AI into their classrooms?
- What do students need to know to be successful with AI? How does this differ from overall technology use?

The connection between AI and competency-based learning

- Under what conditions does the use of AI platforms build teacher capacity for facilitating personalized and project-based learning? Conversely, under what conditions does the use of AI platforms detract from teacher capacity?
- In addition to AI, what supports do educators find most valuable for creating relevant learning experiences for students?

Buy-in for LIFToFFS

- For educators who were initially reluctant to implement LIFToFFS or experienced initial challenges in implementation, how, if at all, have their perspectives changed throughout the school year?
- For students who were initially reluctant to engage in the LIFToFFS model of learning, what changed for them to increase buy-in to this approach by the end of the school year?

Student experience with LIFToFFS

- How can educators ensure that LIFToFFS facilitates an inclusive classroom environment for students across all learning paces and/or ability levels?

Reference

Merriam, S., & Tisdell, E. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.

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