

How Ottawa Catholic School Board fosters AI learning and literacy with Gemini

About Ottawa Catholic School Board

The [Ottawa Catholic School Board](#) (OCSB) is a publicly funded school board in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. OCSB operates 89 schools in the greater Ottawa area, with about 50,000 students and 5,000 staff.

The objective:

AI with guiding principles

At the Ottawa Catholic School Board, mission and principles come before technology. For adoption of artificial intelligence (AI), creating goals and a mission for using AI was a key step, given concerns about AI tools being shared in classrooms.

Once the board's [AI guiding principles](#) were published, the board sought a partner—not simply a vendor—to equip its communities with AI solutions that supported its principles. OCSB made an intentional and well-planned decision to bring Gemini to its schools, positioning Gemini as a transparent and secure partner to students and staff.

Sharing AI tools with the OCSB community was an obligation, not an option, explains



Geoff Edwards, superintendent of learning technologies for OCSB. “I can’t imagine an area that wouldn’t have an expectation of using artificial intelligence in their work moving forward,” Edwards explains, noting the growing use of AI in many industries. “To prepare our students so they’re familiar with AI and all its opportunities, especially when it comes to equity, we use Gemini to make sure they’re on the forefront of what they need to know about AI.”

As of early 2025, 100% of eligible¹ OCSB students have Gemini enabled, and 100% of faculty and staff have Gemini enabled.

The solution: Gemini as an AI partner

OCSB educators skilled with technology realized that AI was not to be avoided, but embraced and championed. “We have a responsibility as educators to keep up with AI, and commit to learning about it so that we can help prepare our students,” says Erin Doak, geography and religion teacher at Ottawa’s Sacred Heart High School.

“We have to understand how to leverage AI in a good way and how to mitigate its risks.”

¹[Eligible students are 13 and older.](#)

Because OCSB has a long history with Google for Education solutions starting in 2010, board educators kept a close eye on the development of Gemini for Google Workspace—AI built into the tools that students and staff were already using, including Google Docs and Google Sheets. Users don't need to stop what they're doing and access another app to use AI, since Gemini is right at their fingertips.

In addition to ease of use, OCSB leaders liked Gemini's "walled garden" approach to security. Gemini does not share the school's content outside the organization, and it includes enterprise-grade data protection. In addition to your data not being reviewed by humans or used to train AI models, educators get additional admin controls and reporting, as well as several compliance certifications.

"Since we're giving teens access to Gemini, it was very important to us that students are protected," Edwards says. "It's very important that students use AI that we've chosen for our schools. That way students learn how to use AI safely, and teachers learn right along with students."

Before Gemini was shared widely, the board made sure educators and staff were prepared to learn, and teach, the basics and benefits of AI. In monthly leadership meetings, Ottawa school leaders have created professional development (PD) opportunities to teach AI literacy.



A big part of the messaging that we share with our educators is that AI isn't here to replace them"

Heather Bilder,

K-12 learning technologies consultant to OCSB

"The relationships that you have with your students, your knowledge of curriculum, your knowledge of their needs and their interests, are all irreplaceable. The magic of our utilization of AI lies in how we personalize it, and how we guide it, and how we get it to create something," says Bilder.

The impact: AI that fosters critical thinking

The benefits of AI in the OCSB community step from its positioning of Gemini as a "thought partner" for students, admins, and teachers—that is, an assist for brainstorming, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

"In my classroom, I try to shift the mindset from AI as the answer-giver, to AI as the thought partner," says Doak. "It's a tool that's working to help the students think, not to think for the students."

Personalized learning for students

In keeping with directives from the Ontario provincial government, OCSB has "de-streamed" classrooms, bringing together students with different abilities and a wide range of learning needs.

During every school day, teachers like Tara Potter, a special education resource teacher at Ottawa's St. Francis Xavier High School, address all student needs individually with Gemini.

"Students can empower themselves by using Gemini to create their own study materials, in whatever way they like to learn," says Potter. Much in the way she can suggest students learn in different ways, students can ask Gemini to create note summaries, generate a multiple-choice test, or simply ask Gemini to explain a topic in a simpler way.

"Summarizing long notes into shorter things, explaining a lesson step by step, doing check-ins, asking for feedback—these are all things that Gemini is really good at, and can do instantly for the students," Potter says. "Then students can empower themselves. They're differentiating learning on their own, they're not waiting for the teacher to do it."

To encourage her students to use Gemini as a learning partner, Doak asks them to write an "elevator pitch"—that is, a short personal description that they might present to a potential employer. Doak gives students a list of questions to answer about themselves; students add the responses to Gemini and ask for an elevator pitch. "Now they're using Gemini not only as a thought partner, but also to enhance what they've already done," Doak says.

Improved staff efficiency

The benefits of time savings and improved processes are seen across administrative staff and educators alike. For Edwards, the process improvements in the board office run the gamut

from creating formal emails instantly to running analysis on spreadsheets directly from Workspace.

"When I'm working on financial data, I'm gaining insights quickly right in Google Sheets itself," Edwards says. "Not everyone is a data analyst—they're principals and educators. To be able to give them the power of a data analyst right on the same screen is a big advantage." He and board colleagues ask Gemini to perform comparative analytics among schools, using the results for decision-making on where to boost resources and where greater equity is needed.

Empowerment for educators

Gemini is designed to encourage confidence and empower users to seek new ways to learn and teach. For students, Gemini fosters independent learning; for educators and staff, Gemini can improve communications and meet the needs of de-streamed classrooms.

"I'll cut and paste student accommodations and their strengths and needs into a spreadsheet and will ask Gemini to create easy explanations of curriculum expectations," says Potter, who assists other teachers with special-needs students. "I'll also write easy prompts to get the teachers thinking about how they could best use Gemini to meet those curriculum expectations."

Teachers have also discovered the value of NotebookLM, the ultimate tool for understanding information, with AI grounded in your own documents.



“I’ll take a lesson that my students didn’t seem to understand, put it into NotebookLM, and turn it into a podcast,” Doak says. “It’s a good recap of the lesson.”

Doak uses Google Forms to ask students how AI has helped them learn more that day. One student told Doak, “AI helped me answer questions that I was too embarrassed to ask the teacher.” Says Doak, “That was the data point I needed about how so many kids have questions, but will not put their hands up.” With Gemini, Doak explains, students find the answers on their own.

Teachers are also hungry for more guidance on AI. Bilder provides support and professional development sessions on AI, and has seen full attendance at her “Lunch and Learn” sessions on Gemini. She also works with ESL educators on using Gemini to support language learners.

“When we talk to teachers about what AI can do to support their students and to make the content that they’re teaching accessible, it’s always a wow moment,” Bilder says. “If you need a vocabulary list to complement a novel that students are reading, Gemini can create a vocabulary list with student-friendly explanations translated into these languages and ready for your students to use immediately.”

Creating vocabulary lists with Gemini saves teachers time, Bilder adds, but that’s not the most impactful benefit: “We use it to improve our practice, and to make sure our students have the resources and tools they need.”

Accelerating AI literacy during K-12 and beyond

Because learning and teaching AI literacy skills are part of OCSB’s guiding principles, educators are intentional in encouraging students to think critically about how they use Gemini. The school’s board’s longtime [“Samaritans on the Digital Road”](#) program has recently been updated by Bilder to include AI literacy.

“It’s not just about giving our students unfettered access to AI tools,” Bilder says. “It’s about educating them in the ethical and responsible use of these tools in a way that allows them to develop their critical thinking skills and to grow and learn.”

The analytics of AI use among OCSB schools show that AI adoption is taking off. “The number of educators using Gemini has been steadily climbing,” Bilder says. “And when teachers know how to use AI, they’re empowered to experiment.” As of early 2025, almost half of OCSB students have logged into Gemini through the district’s portal in the first five months - and district leadership anticipates near 100% student adoption of Gemini by the start of the new school year in September 2025.

“We’re in a generation of distracted learners, and engagement is hard,” says Doak. “AI is making learning personal and relevant. Students ask their own questions, they make their own connections, and they have it reflected back to them. Gemini is a win for us because it’s so engaging.”