POLICY BRIEF

Compliance Without Capacity

Why making AI literacy a condition of school funding without building the capacity risks widening Brazil's digital divide, and how the instrument could be strengthened

National survey data in Brazil show that, among secondary students who use the internet, seven in ten already use generative AI for schoolwork, yet only about three in ten report receiving any guidance at school on how to use it. In response to AI's growing presence in education, the federal government has made adoption of the computing complement to the national curriculum — which carries the school system's AI-literacy competences — a condition for part of its main school-funding system. The requirement applies to every network, while the means to meet it exist in only some places. This brief examines why this approach risks widening Brazil's digital divide, and sets out recommendations to address it before the condition takes full effect.

Brazil runs basic education through a highly decentralised federation, in which the federal government sets the national curriculum but does not run schools directly, since 26 states, a federal district, and 5,570 municipalities each manage their own networks. The federal level therefore steers the school system largely through funding. Its main fund for basic education (Fundeb) has a results-and-equity component (VAAR) that is paid to a network only when it meets certain conditions. The national curriculum (BNCC) has a Computing complement that carries much of the country's AI-literacy content and, in 2025, this complement became one of the conditions to receive the VAAR funding. In other words, in the cycles ahead a network will receive the VAAR top-up only if it can show it has adopted the complement.

The governance question this brief addresses is therefore not whether AI literacy should be part of the school curriculum, which is already settled in Brazil, but how the state can best require, fund, and support the literacy it now requires. The sections that follow set out the key pressures facing implementation and the recommendations that could strengthen the instrument.

Students' reality

Adoption is outpacing guidance, and access is unequal

According to the ICT in Education 2024 survey, run by Brazil's reference centre for ICT statistics, among secondary students who use the internet, seven in ten report using generative AI for schoolwork. Yet only 32% say a teacher has talked to them about how to use it, and across all grades that share falls to 19%. Guidance on judging AI outputs is just as limited. Only 33% of students say a teacher has shown them how to spot errors and bias in what it produces. In terms of access, the gains have been uneven. School connectivity has improved markedly, with internet access now reaching 96% of schools overall, and rural schools rising from 52% to 89% since 2020. But internet at the school is not the same as devices in students' hands, and that is where inequality persists. Across all schools, only 59% have both internet access and a computer for students to use, a share that falls to 28% in rural schools and 47% in municipal networks.

Teachers' reality

A requirement not yet matched by a capacity programme

A curriculum can be introduced quickly, but the capacity to teach it develops more slowly, and the current instrument design requires the first without supporting the second. The sector agrees on where the gap is. A sectoral study on AI in education asked stakeholders across Brazilian education to name the main barriers to adopting AI, the two most cited were inequalities in access to technological infrastructure and teacher training. Teachers are already using the technology, but that use is uneven across the profession. Around 43% reported using generative AI to prepare teaching materials. The study shows that use is more common in private schools than public ones (51% against 41%), among younger teachers (55% of those up to 30, against 37% of those over 45) and in urban areas (45% against 31% in rural areas). It is also more common among men, at 50% against 40% of women, even though women make up 79% of basic-education teachers.

Overall, what teachers lack is structured support and it is worth recognising what already exists. Brazil has a National Digital Education Policy that includes digital capacity-building among its aims, and the Ministry of Education (MEC) has issued guidance for AI in schools with domains for teacher training, alongside national continued-training courses. These are valuable foundations. What is missing here is

the means to make the requirement deliverable, since none of these is funded against the new requirement, made a condition of it, or designed to reach the least-resourced networks first. As a result, much of the responsibility is falling on teachers and school managers who have not been resourced for it. Teacher preparation is weakening where it is most needed, with teachers' participation in training on digital technologies falling from 65% (2021) to 54% (2024) and the lack of it a barrier for 86% of municipal teachers against 59% of private ones. It is into this uneven and under-supported landscape that the AI literacy requirement is being introduced.

Governance instrument's track record

A lever that tends to exclude by capacity, not by choice

When the VAAR funding was first distributed, in 2023, 66% of municipalities and 12 states (almost half) received nothing. The research behind these figures attributes this largely to gaps in technical, administrative, and political capacity rather than to choice. Those exclusions turned on conditions unrelated to computing or AI literacy, such as reducing measured learning inequalities and formalising the intergovernmental arrangements the transfer requires, which the under-resourced networks were the least equipped to meet. The point that carries across is structural. The VAAR operates as a single gate that a network passes only by meeting all its conditions at once, and the AI literacy requirement now forms part of that gate.

None of this means the design lacks a rationale, since a binding funding condition may be one of the few levers able to move a decentralised system, and without it AI literacy could remain a low priority precisely in the networks that can least spare attention for it. That case has merit, and the disagreement here is narrower than it first appears, since it concerns the choice and implementation of the lever rather than the use of one.

Governance instrument's current design

Tying AI literacy to a results-based, capacity-rewarding lever

Most of Fundeb's resources are distributed by need, sending more funding to the less-resourced networks. The VAAR is the part of the fund that rewards results instead, so it does less to reduce inequality and tends to favour networks that already have the capacity to comply, as the 2023 cycle showed. The use of this instrument for AI literacy is very recent. Resolution CIF No. 15 of June 2025 tied

the BNCC Computing complement to the conditions a network must report against to receive the VAAR top-up. Attaching it to the part of the fund that does least for the less-resourced, rather than to the need-based transfers that already reach them, risks deepening the exclusion rather than closing it.

The new requirement is being introduced gradually, since a network that has not yet embedded the complement is not disqualified in 2026 but is expected to align in the cycles that follow. That said, the question that matters here is whether the least-resourced networks will have the means to clear the bar when that grace period closes. Some states are not waiting. The state of Piauí, for instance, has made AI a mandatory subject, now taught across 540 public schools and reaching over 90,000 students a year, work that UNESCO has recognised with an international award. A case like this suggests the capacity can be built at scale, and that the obstacle may lie less in whether AI can be taught than in whether the federal instrument is designed to develop that capacity rather than assume it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Every proposal here shares one aim, to make the instrument build the capacity it currently assumes rather than only require it, and so to reduce, rather than amplify, the existing inequalities.

1. Turn the condition into a capacity ladder, not a gate.

Index each network's timeline to its own starting point, drawn from the infrastructure and staffing data the state already collects, so that networks starting further back follow an agreed improvement path rather than a single uniform deadline.

2. Fund capacity before requiring it.

Ring-fence resources for connectivity, devices, and teacher training, delivered through a needs-based channel that reaches the least-resourced networks first and ahead of any compliance deadline, so the money builds the capability the condition then verifies rather than rewarding those who already had it. Teacher and school-manager preparation, with the classroom guidelines and structured training programmes the sector says are missing, would be the priority. Delivery can draw on bodies that already help systems adopt technology, such as CIEB, a non-profit that offers technical support to state and municipal education systems, and university AI research centres that partner with state

governments, such as the Centre of Excellence in AI at the Federal University of Goiás. It can also build on curricula already in classrooms, such as Piauí's computing curriculum for upper secondary, which makes AI a mandatory subject built around data and algorithms, with ethics throughout, rolled out by training its own teachers.

3. Build capacity while improving infrastructure.

Allow a network to satisfy the Computing complement through device-free AI literacy, covering the concepts, ethics, and critical reasoning of AI. This draws on AI Unplugged, an established international approach built on the longer tradition of unplugged computer-science teaching and with a recognised Brazilian research base, so under-resourced networks can keep the funding and begin teaching AI without waiting for connectivity infrastructure.