

The Conference ISTE Hasn't Built Yet

What I saw at ISTE Live 26, and what I hope to see next time

[Nick Potkalitsky](#)

This post is being released early as added value for paid subscribers. The full piece goes live for free subscribers on Thursday. Thank you for your continued dedication to this space and to the work of transforming education. Meeting so many of my readers at ISTE this year was genuinely humbling, knowing that this newsletter's framing is landing with readers means a great deal. This post offers a nuanced read on the world's largest education technology conference, one I hope you find useful.

I didn't know what to expect. Five days, over 10,000 attendees from more than 85 countries, a convention center in Orlando kept at a temperature that seemed calibrated to prevent anyone from getting too comfortable.

Right out of the gate, [Richard Culatta made a significant announcement](#): a new name . The combined organization, ISTE (International Society for Technology in Education) and ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), merged in 2023, would now be called the International Society for Transforming Education. ISTE lives on as the acronym, but the "T" has been quietly reloaded. Technology has become *Transforming*.

Culatta framed the shift as a move from how to why: from describing the means of the organization's work to describing its purpose. The timing is deliberate. We are deep

in a techlash. The reflexive enthusiasm for ed-tech that characterized the last two decades has given way to something more skeptical: parents questioning screen time, legislators debating phone bans, districts pulling back on devices. To plant a flag for transformation rather than technology in that climate is to make a genuine argument. The organization is not here to defend a category of tools, but to insist that something about how we educate children needs to fundamentally change, and that technology, wielded thoughtfully, is one lever among several for doing that. Culatta said as much: "We can't just keep doing the things that we used to do."

The question the name opens is whether the conference itself rises to meet it.

ASCD remains a separate entity in this year's branding, but for how long?

The Form Is the Message

A conference is not a neutral form. It carries assumptions about how knowledge moves, who holds it, and what counts as professional learning. The conference ISTE has built over decades reflects the organization it was: technology-centered, tool-forward, organized around exposure and demonstration. That structure made sense for an organization whose mission was to accelerate adoption. It is

less obvious that it serves an organization whose mission is transformation.

This is not a criticism so much as an observation. The conference is a microcosm of the broader challenge facing the field: the infrastructure was built for one purpose and is now being asked to serve another. Seeing it clearly is a precondition for changing it.

Inside the Sessions

Most sessions I attended bore the marks of the older model. The dominant mode was instrumental: here is a problem, here is a product. The exhibit hall energy moved freely into the session rooms. Tools were everywhere: Padlet, Brisk, Knowt, Snorkl, SchoolAI, and dozens more. The sheer volume made it easy to mistake exposure for education. Presenters were often skilled and the tools frequently impressive, but the frame stayed narrow. Technology as answer, rather than technology as question.

Three sessions broke that pattern in ways that felt substantive.

WestEd's session on humanizing math learning through ed-tech asked something most sessions avoided: how do we actually know whether a technology supports belonging,

identity, and authentic mathematical learning? The researchers presented an equity-centered evaluation framework and pushed back on assumptions that have gone largely unexamined in ed-tech circles. Personalization, they argued, is not the same as belonging. Completing a pathway is not the same as owning it. Real-world contexts are not automatically relevant ones. The session foregrounded student voice, or rather its troubling absence in the design of most ed-tech tools, and insisted on data equity as a non-negotiable dimension of evaluation. This is the kind of thinking that should anchor every ed-tech decision. It was striking to encounter it so rarely.

The AI and SEL session offered different depth. The presenter, Amanda Brown, moved down into the audience when attention was lagging, a small pedagogical gesture that told you something about her instincts. Her animating idea, that AI should reduce barriers to human connection rather than substitute for it, felt like exactly the right north star. Students are not being taught to talk about themselves, she argued, and AI scaffolds can open that door in both personal and academic contexts. The tool earns its place not by being impressive but by making something human more possible.

[Matt Miller's session on AI literacy](#) was participatory and a little loose in the best way. His argument is one that the field

resists: AI literacy doesn't belong in a standalone tech class or a one-off unit. It belongs embedded in the daily work of every subject-area teacher, worked into existing content, present where learning is actually happening. Miller returned to the Spanish classroom in part because he wanted to see this moment with his own eyes, and that showed. He wasn't describing what teachers should do from the outside. He was reporting from inside.

These three sessions start from the learner, from questions of identity, belonging, agency, and meaning, and work backward to the technology. Most sessions I attended moved in the opposite direction. They represent, I think, what the new name is genuinely reaching for, and they exist within a conference structure that doesn't yet fully support them.

I should note that the digital wellness and techlash sessions were among the most oversubscribed at this year's conference, and I couldn't get into any of them. Even a review of their summaries suggests the conversation is still running ahead of implementation, more fluent in frameworks than in practice. The urgency is clearly being felt. Whether it's being metabolized is a harder question.

Got to love the branding of the demonstration hall as the "solutions hub," but in my mind, this framing downgrades the solutions being offered by teacher in the event's over 1000 sessions/presentations.

The Conference Within the Conference

Some of the most clarifying things I learned this week didn't come from sessions at all. In conversations with state AI leaders, members of a CRPE cohort, and a researcher from [LeanLab](#), I began to understand that ISTE contains a second, less visible gathering running alongside the first: higher-level

meetings, state tech leaders convening across the duration of the conference, longer conversations about system redesign. This, I got the sense, is where broader visioning gets staged and eventually implemented.

I appreciate that an educational event for teachers and administrators also becomes a site for this kind of work. The two things aren't in conflict. But the layering is itself a reflection of the microcosm. The people closest to the work, the ones in classrooms every day navigating the actual conditions of teaching, move through sessions. The people with positional authority to redesign systems meet in smaller rooms. Both things happen at the same conference, largely unaware of each other. If transformation requires aligning those two levels of knowledge and authority, the current structure doesn't facilitate that. It reproduces the separation.

Toward a Different Design

The dominant modality at ISTE is sit-and-get. Attendees move through a succession of sessions, accumulating tools and ideas that they carry home to implement, or not, in their individual contexts. This can produce punctual, gradual change. But I keep wondering whether punctual and gradual is adequate to the moment. Transforming education is not something that happens one teacher at a time, in isolation, after a conference.

ISTE has already begun the harder work: framework building, publications, webinars, standards that have been adopted across all fifty states. The intellectual infrastructure for transformation is largely in place. What lags is the conference itself, still organized around the delivery of content to individuals rather than the development of collective capacity.

For interactive sessions, check out the “solutions hub.” “Presenters” in this space go out of their way to offer audiences live engagement with tools in pursuit of specific solutions.

What if there were tracks, not organized by topic but by problem, where participants traveled together across the five days, working toward something, becoming a network rather than an audience? I've written elsewhere about the particular power of teacher cohorts: the way that sustained, structured collaboration generates not just ideas but commitment, not just knowledge but agency. A cohort doesn't merely learn things. It develops the collective capacity to act on them.

You could argue that 10,000 people at a conference constitute a cohort of sorts. But a cohort of that size, without structure or continuity, has diffuse power and diffuse intelligence. It disperses on the last day and mostly stays dispersed. The conference ISTE has built is the one the older name required. The conference the new name calls for is still ahead.

Nick Potkalitsky, Ph.D.

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