



What Will Montessori Leadership Look Like in 2030?

Featuring Industry Voices



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CONTEXT

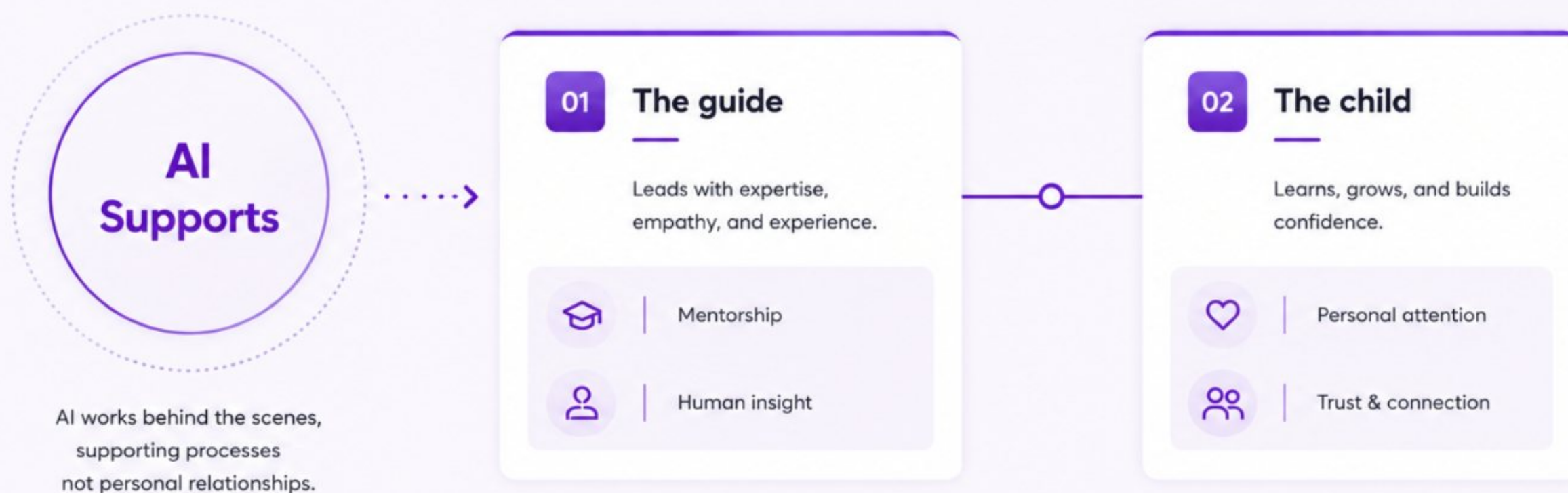
About this report

Developed by illumine in collaboration with The Montessori Foundation, this report examines a question most Montessori leaders are already being asked by their boards, their staff, and increasingly their families: **what role, if any, should artificial intelligence play in a Montessori organization?**

Artificial intelligence is already part of the world Montessori schools operate in. The question is whether we can use it deliberately to make school life more human, more responsive, and more faithful to Montessori principles.

Montessori education rests on capacities like: attentive presence, disciplined observation, empathy, ethical judgment and knowledge of the individual child. Those capacities must remain at the center of the school.

Drawing the line: where AI belongs



How to read it

Chapters 1–3 make the case for why this question has become unavoidable. Chapters 4–8 examine the four functions where AI creates real leverage. The final chapters offer a decision framework for leadership teams.

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Where does **AI** belong in Montessori?

AI is becoming a leadership imperative. For Montessori, the question is how to approach it without losing what matters.

- ① AI and the Montessori standard
- ② The Montessori growth paradox
- ③ Building the next generation of Montessori operations

AI and the Montessori Standard

Montessori has never had a standards problem. Montessori education rests on capacities technology cannot replace: attentive presence, observation, empathy, ethical judgment, knowledge of the child, and trust built over time. These are the qualities that define the Montessori experience, and protecting them is ultimately a leadership responsibility.

That is why the question of administrative work matters. It is not simply about how much work leadership carries, but what that work takes them away from.

✎ Translating messages

✉ Following up on inquiries

💰 Reconciling accounts

📄 Assembling reports

Each of these consumes time that could be spent on people, decisions, and the work that moves the school forward. Used well, AI can give that time back.

The standard should be simple: AI should help adults notice more, communicate more clearly, respond more promptly, and make better-informed decisions. The role of AI is to return time and attention to the people who serve children and families.

The opportunity is not to make Montessori more technological. It is to build an organization that **protects the time and attention** of the people responsible for leading it. Montessori has always been intentional about preparing the environment for the child. That same intentionality has to extend to the systems around the adults.

The paradox of growth

As Montessori networks expand, leaders become further removed from the day-to-day reality of each school. With enrollment, attendance, billing, communication and progress records living in different tools, often five or six across teams, information is fragmented, and leadership time is spent finding and piecing together the picture. AI can help close that distance by bringing the right information together, surfacing patterns earlier, and giving leaders more time to focus on what to do next.

The hidden cost of scale

These costs rarely appear on a P&L. They show up in slower decisions, inconsistency, and leadership fatigue.



Leadership needs visibility

When every campus runs a different set of tools and each report has to be pulled from a separate system, the picture arrives late, making it harder to spot patterns and act on them.



Campuses operate differently

When campuses create their own workarounds, small differences in how enrollment, communication, and operations are handled begin to compound. Families experience each network differently.



Retention of the experienced

The leaders and guides with the most institutional knowledge often become the default problem-solvers, putting the people the network most needs to retain under strain.

Building the Next Generation of Operations

Montessori organizations spent two decades digitizing the work around education. Paper became digital, enrollment moved online, operational data became easier to access. That era solved an important problem: **it made information available.** Today leaders can see everything, and must still assemble, interpret, and chase most of it themselves. This is what changes now.

Digitization changed how we manage information.

-  Paper became digital
-  Enrollment moved online
-  Data became more accessible.

AI changes how we use it.

-  Surfaces what matters most
-  Carries routine workflows
-  Notices patterns that would take hours to find

The measure that matters is not automation. It is capacity.

Capacity for executives to think about strategy rather than assemble reports.
For heads of school to develop their teams rather than chase their systems.
For guides to observe children rather than document around them.



Where AI earns its place

Four functions where AI creates real leverage for Montessori organizations, and what remains human in each.

Where AI creates the most value for teams

- ① Enrollment
- ② Finance & billing
- ③ Guides & administration
- ④ Leadership

Where AI creates the most value **for teams.**

The chapters that follow look at each team in turn: enrollment, finance, guides, and leadership. Across every team, AI takes on the routine work that surrounds a decision, never the decision itself. For leadership, that means fewer bottlenecks waiting on one person, one clear picture across campuses instead of six separate systems, and consistency that families feel wherever they enroll.



Enrollment teams

Every inquiry answered the moment it arrives, in any language. Teams spend their time on tours and conversations, not on chasing replies.



Finance teams

Invoicing, reminders and reconciliation run on their own. Finance moves from collecting numbers to interpreting them.



Teaching teams

Observations and updates become documentation without the evening paperwork. Guides get more time back for the children.



Leadership

One live picture across every campus instead of fragmented systems. Patterns surface early enough to act, not after the incident.

AI in the Family Enrollment Journey

Every enrollment journey begins with a moment of intent. A parent may discover a school through a search, a referral, or a conversation at the playground. From there, they visit the website, submit an inquiry, or request a tour. At this stage, they are not yet evaluating pedagogy. They are evaluating the experience.

Was the school easy to reach?

Did someone respond?

Was the process clear, warm, unhurried?

These moments may look operational, but they are deeply connected to the Montessori experience. **Enrollment is often a family's first encounter with the school's values before they meet a guide, enter a prepared environment, or see a classroom in action.** A philosophy grounded in respect for the child should extend to how the school welcomes and responds to the family. For growing networks, keeping that experience consistent across campuses becomes harder as inquiry volume shifts, admissions teams balance tours and follow-ups, and each campus develops its own way of working.

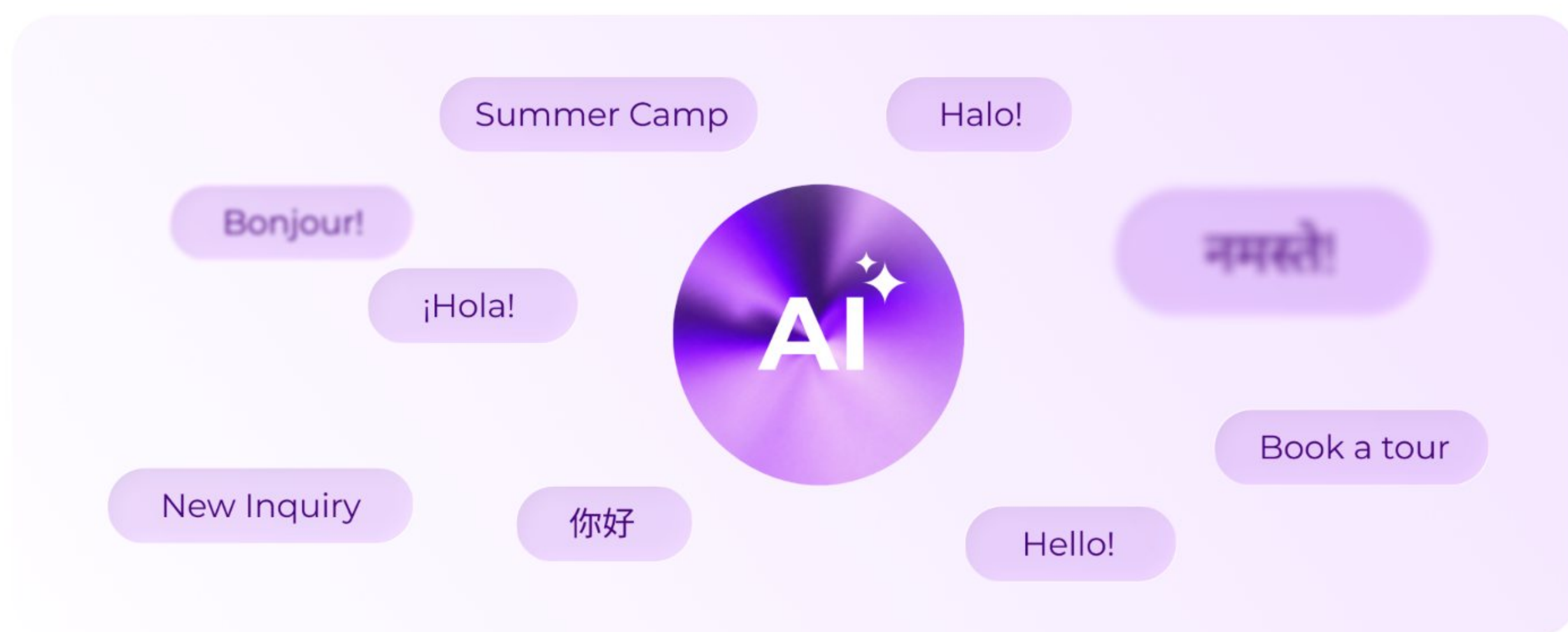
Capture every family inquiry automatically.

This is where AI belongs in enrollment: **not in the relationship, but in everything that gets in its way.** It can provide instant responses to routine inquiries, ensure follow-up never lapses, answer questions at midnight, and help ensure no family is lost because a team member is giving another family their full attention.

IN PRACTICE

How illumine supports enrollment teams

Every inquiry answered and every tour request captured, at any hour, in the caller's own language. A human still builds and closes the relationship, AI makes sure nobody waits for a callback to feel heard.



Every inquiry answered in **under 2 seconds, 24/7**



Tours booked **directly into your calendar**



Families reached in **20+ languages**

illumine's AI enrollment agent responds to inquiries instantly, answers routine questions, and helps families take the next step at any time. It handles the repetitive conversations, so teams can focus their time on the families who need a human connection. Leadership gains real-time visibility into inquiry volumes, response times, tour conversions, and occupancy trends across the network.

AI and the future of billing

As Montessori organizations grow, more students mean more invoices, tuition plans, payment schedules, subsidies, and discounts across campuses. At a smaller scale, the team's knowledge holds it all together. At network scale, the same work starts to slow everyone down.

AI can organize billing information, summarize, surface unusual patterns, compare enrollment against revenue, forecast cash pressure, and translate a complex report into **questions the leadership team should investigate..**

LEADERSHIP CAN FOCUS ON



Which accounts are newly overdue?



Are particular tuition plans creating recurring problems?



Where is enrollment below the level needed to sustain costs??



How would a tuition or staffing change affect the budget?



Which expense categories need attention?

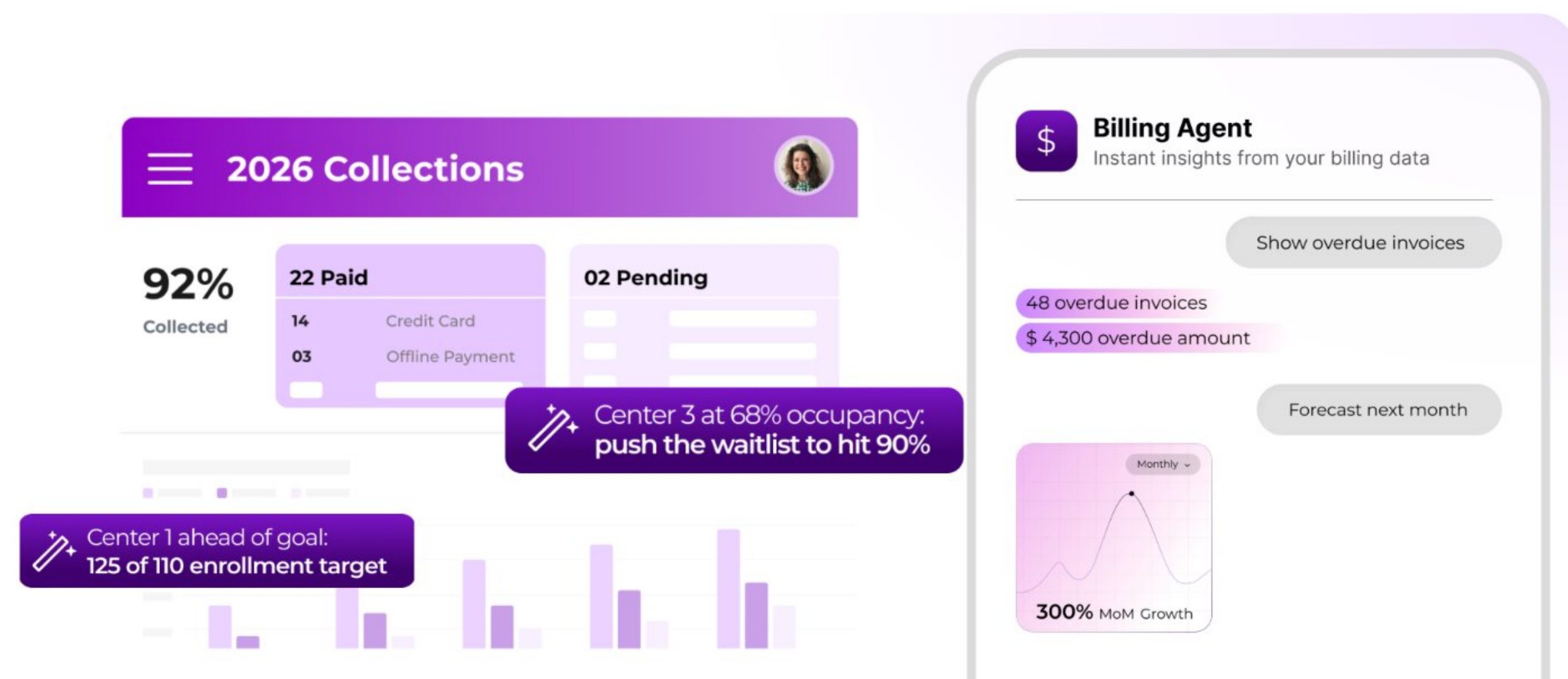
The real cost is not the administrative work. It is the lack of visibility.

This is where AI belongs in finance: not in the judgment behind your policies, but in the work of **assembling, reconciling, and watching**, so your team spends less time building the picture and more time acting on it.

IN PRACTICE

How illumine supports **billing teams**

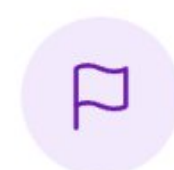
Ask about occupancy, billing, collections, or outstanding balances in plain language and get the insight in seconds. AI prepares the information; leaders make the financial decisions.



Financial questions asked and, **answered within seconds**



Recurring invoices, tuition plans, reminders and payments automated



Unusual patterns flagged early, **before the month-end surprise**

illumine's AI billing agent handles routine billing questions and follow-ups, helping teams stay on top of collections without adding more administrative work.

Leadership gets **one consistent view of revenue, collections, balances, and occupancy across every campus**. That makes it easier to spot early warning signs and act before small issues grow.

AI and the Work of the Guide

Montessori education depends on something no technology can replicate: **the guide's ability to observe, interpret, and respond to a child.** Guides do far more than deliver lessons. They observe with intention, prepare environments that foster independence, recognize developmental readiness, and make nuanced decisions about when to step in and when to step back. These are deeply human responsibilities, and they should remain that way.

The difficulty is that the modern guide's day now extends far beyond the classroom.

Documentation must be completed.

Observations recorded.

Conference reports prepared.

Families kept informed.



“Strong parent partnerships thrive when communication is multidimensional, predictable, and continuous across every stage of a child's development... parents move from passive observers to empowered partners.”



Dr. Lindsey Pollock, LCSW-S

Provost, Sarasota University,
The Montessori University

[Read more →](#)

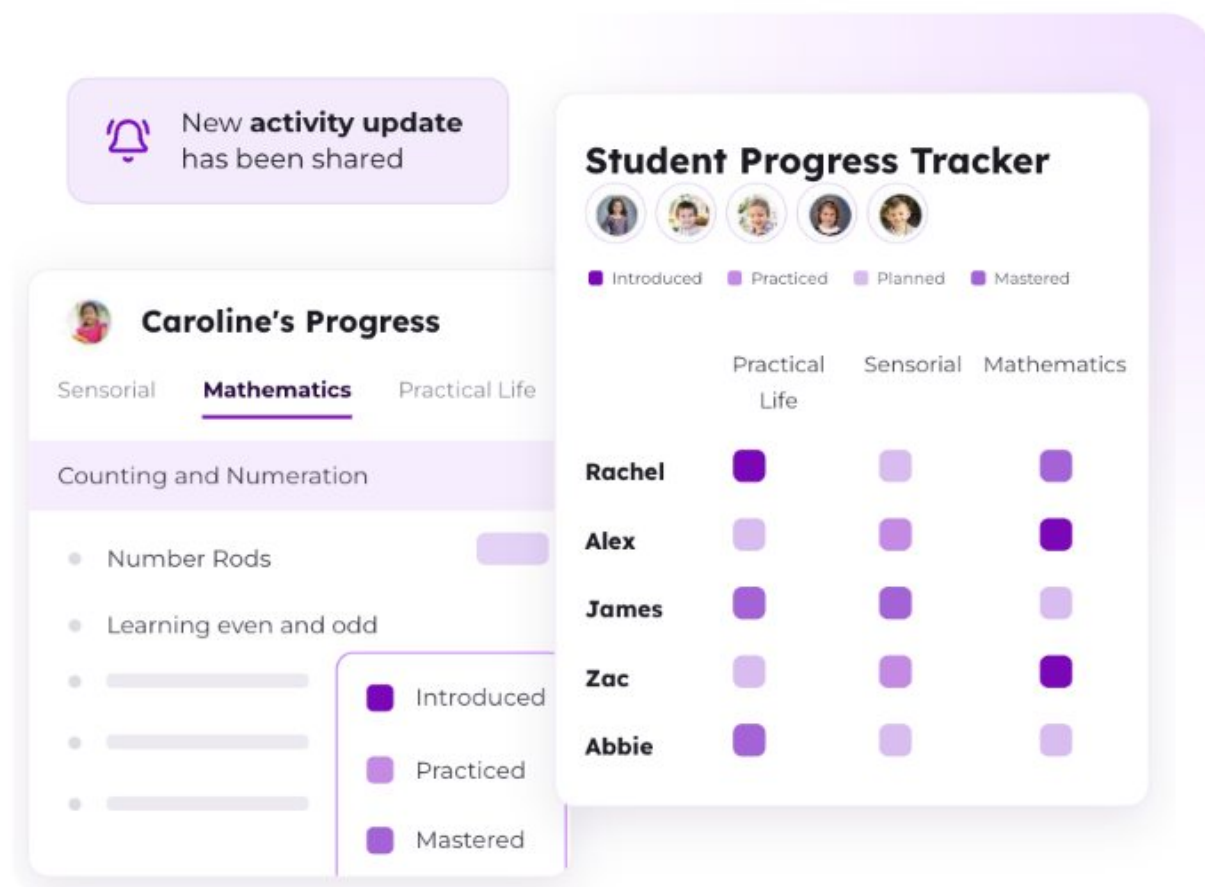
How illumine supports teaching teams

Giving your guides their time back. Documentation is where your most experienced guides' hours quietly go. AI takes on three areas, each reviewed by the guide before anything is sent or saved.



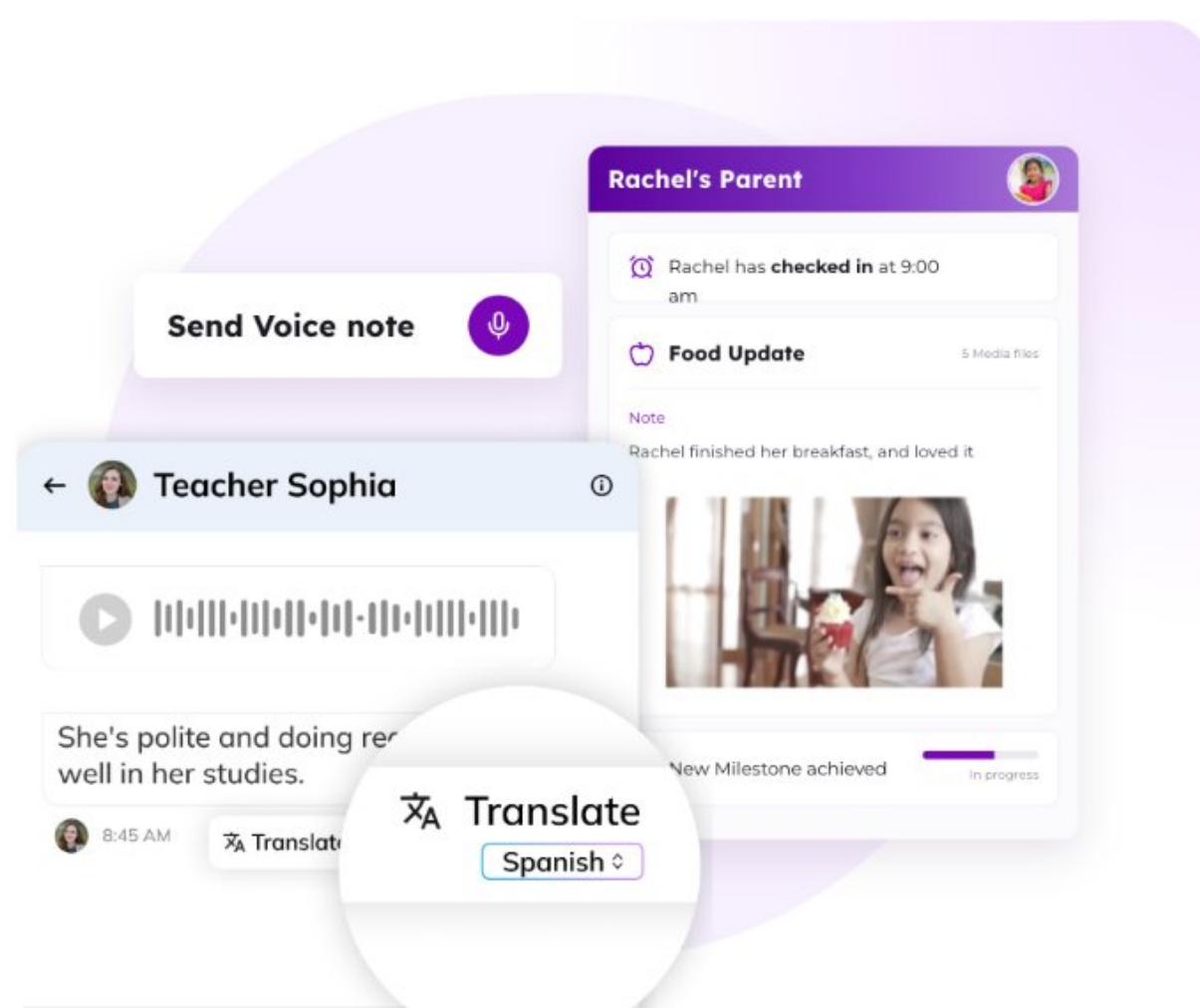
Assessments & observations

- Observations and milestones become structured, consistent documentation across campuses.
- Guides get back hours each week that would otherwise go into write-ups, giving them more time with the children.



Parent communication

- Paraphrase conversations for quick, clear communication and get instant, refined suggestions
- Teachers can instantly translate messages, observations and updates in 20+ languages



Bringing your **team** with you

The most meaningful AI conversations in schools start with the people who will use it. Guides bring valuable perspectives and important questions to the table. Including them early helps schools understand those concerns, build confidence, and **introduce AI in a way that works for everyone.**



“Is this going to replace my job?”

The work being automated is administrative, not pedagogical. Be specific about which tasks change and which do not, before rollout.



“Will this tell me how to teach?”

AI can surface patterns in observations; a guide decides what they mean for a child. Nobody should encounter a system that grades their judgment.



“I don’t have time to learn another platform.”

Roll out one function at a time, replace something rather than adding to it, and measure adoption by what stopped being done manually.



“Nobody asked us.”

Involve stakeholders in evaluation, not just training: let them test the tool on their own records, and hold the authority to say what works.

The people closest to the work know where the friction actually is. **A rollout designed with them takes longer to start and far less time to succeed.**

Turning Insight Into Action

The hardest part of leading a growing Montessori organization is deciding what deserves your attention. **AI can give school leadership teams visibility into what needs their attention.** Instead of piecing together attendance, staffing, enrollment, tuition, and campus data from multiple reports, leaders can ask a question in plain language and quickly see where patterns, gaps, or emerging concerns warrant a closer look.

A LEADER MIGHT ASK

🔍 What needs my attention today?

📉 Where are we falling behind?

✉️ Where are the enrollment gaps?

👥 Where are staffing gaps emerging?

📍 Which campuses are off track?

📈 What patterns need my attention?



“Leaders of multi-site organizations must stop treating standardization and personalization as competing priorities. The most effective childcare systems standardize developmental goals, assessment practices, and operational systems, while giving educators flexibility in how learning comes to life for the families they serve.”



Bisa Batten Lewis, EdD (Dr. Bisa)

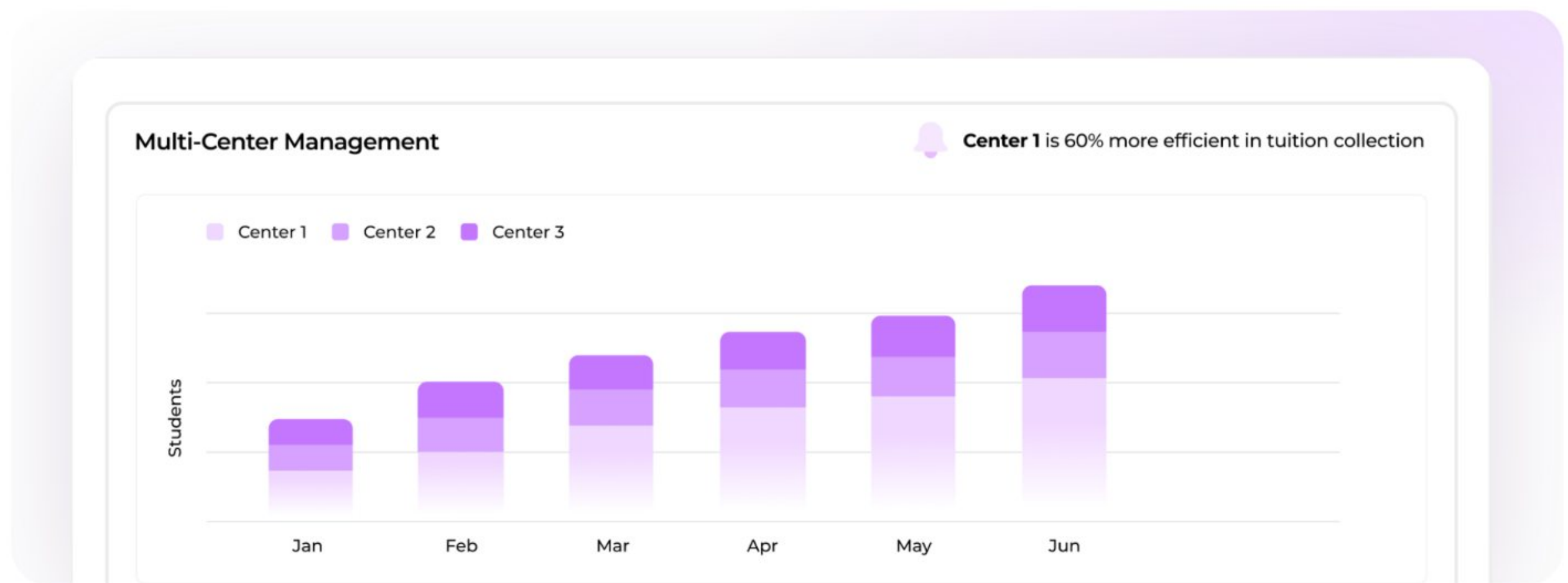
Managing Partner, Ideal Early Learning LLC ·
Creator of WINGS Curriculum

[Read more →](#)

IN PRACTICE

How illumine supports leadership teams

One view across every campus, instead of multiple reports chased individually. illumine runs enrollment, classrooms, attendance, billing, communication, staffing, and compliance on one platform, so leaders ask a question in plain language and receive an answer drawn from the entire network in seconds. A human still sets the direction, AI keeps the full picture in front of them.



From Chasing Data to Instant Insights

Which campuses need attention?

How does enrollment compare?

Where are payments pending?

Where will staffing shortages hit?

Any compliance risks requiring action this week?

Leadership teams receive contextual insights in seconds, **solving problems instead of gathering information.**

What AI Must Never Compromise

Every question in this guide ultimately comes back to trust. The trust families place in a school each morning, and the trust guides place in the systems that hold a child's story. **AI does not change that responsibility. It makes getting it right even more important.**



Keep human judgment in the loop.

AI can assist, but every AI-generated output is reviewed, validated, and approved before it reaches a child, family, or staff member.



Keep the guide-child relationship human.

AI should reduce administrative work around the classroom, never replace the relationships and interactions at its center.



Keep automation intentional.

Leaders decide where AI adds value, where it does not, and where human involvement remains essential.



Keep people focused on what matters.

AI can take on repetitive administrative work so people can focus on observation, relationships, judgment, and the work that requires a human presence.

AI's role is to reduce the administrative work that takes leadership away from what matters, while keeping judgment, relationships, and trust in human hands. Used this way, AI becomes a support for the people at the heart of Montessori, not a replacement for them.



The decision framework

The questions leadership teams should be asking, and what the strongest organizations do differently.

- ① The questions leadership teams should be asking
- ② What the strongest organizations do differently
- ③ Why illumine · Voices from the industry

Questions every leadership team **should be asking**

As Montessori organizations scale, the questions become more complex. These are the questions we hear from Montessori leaders.

-  How do we continue growing without adding the same level of administrative overhead?
-  Can we deliver the same high-quality family experience across every campus, not just our best-performing ones?
-  Why are our most experienced educators spending valuable time on administrative work instead of mentoring?
-  Do we know what's happening across every school today, or only after someone prepares a report?
-  How can we ensure every campus operates with the same standards and processes as we expand?
-  Are leadership teams making strategic decisions, or spending time assembling the information needed to make them?

The right questions turn information into direction, helping leaders decide where to focus next.

What the strongest organizations **do differently**

The organizations best positioned for the next phase of growth are not treating AI as another technology initiative, but as a question about **how the organization should operate**. Five principles stand out.

- 1 **Build on a connected foundation**
AI delivers value when systems are connected. Shared foundation across enrollment, billing, communication, and reporting gives leaders a clear view.
- 2 **Protect what makes Montessori unique**
Use AI to reduce administrative work, not human judgment. Observation, relationships, and decisions about children and families remain human.
- 3 **Drive consistent growth**
Shared workflows and visibility help create a reliable experience across campuses while preserving each community's identity.
- 4 **Turn data into decisions**
The goal is not more data, but better visibility. AI can surface patterns, flag risks, and bring the right information to leaders sooner.
- 5 **Measure success by capacity created**
The measure of AI is what it gives back. Less time on routine work means more capacity for educators to focus on children and leaders to lead.

Growth should create more capacity to lead, not more complexity to manage.

Why illumine

Growing Montessori organizations need more than individual tools for enrollment, billing, communication, or classroom documentation. They need a way to bring these parts of the organization together without creating more work for the people running them.

illumine gives leaders a connected view across the areas that shape the day-to-day operation of a school, from enrollment and family communication to billing, attendance, observations, and reporting. AI then works within those workflows to reduce routine work, surface information sooner, and help teams respond faster.

For leaders, that means less time piecing together information, more consistency across campuses, and greater capacity to focus on the decisions, people, and growth that matter.

Your schools are growing. Your capacity to lead should grow with them.

Explore what's possible with illumine

See how illumine helps Montessori organizations build the next generation of leadership.

[Explore illumine for Montessori schools →](#)



Voices from the industry

Perspectives from industry leaders on the trends, challenges, and opportunities shaping what's next for Montessori.



Bisa Batten Lewis, EdD

Managing Partner, **Ideal Early Learning LLC** ·
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VOICES FROM THE INDUSTRY



Insights from

Bisa Batten Lewis, EdD (Dr. Bisa)

Managing Partner, Ideal Early Learning LLC · Author and Creator of WINGS Curriculum

“ To deliver a consistent standard of quality while remaining responsive to local communities, leaders of multi-site organizations must stop treating standardization and personalization as competing priorities. The most effective childcare systems **standardize children's developmental goals, assessment practices, staff expectations, and operational systems** while giving educators flexibility in how learning comes to life for the children and families they currently serve.

Family engagement is intentionally embedded into the foundation of WINGS Curriculum, rather than treated as an add-on. Teachers invite families to share stories, traditions, occupations, and cultural experiences as children explore monthly themes and weekly studies. A lesson becomes richer when a parent shares a favorite childhood book, a grandparent demonstrates a family recipe, or a community member connects classroom learning to real life. The same curriculum can be implemented year after year without ever looking exactly the same, because the content evolves with the children, families, and communities participating in it.

True quality comes from **balancing consistency with authenticity**. When childcare leaders establish clear expectations while empowering educators to adapt learning experiences to their local communities, they create environments where every child has access to high-quality learning and every family feels valued. Consistency provides the framework. Meaningful relationships and community connections bring the curriculum to life.

VOICES FROM THE INDUSTRY



Insights from

Dr. Lindsey Pollock, LCSW-S

Provost, Director of the College of Education · Sarasota University, THE Montessori University

“ The parent journey in Montessori education often represents a profound mindset shift, a journey into the unfamiliar world of new paradigms, especially for parents new to Montessori. It moves them away from single-age classrooms and standardized assessments toward a holistic, process-oriented understanding of a child's development. A successful journey begins when schools proactively demystify these principles, helping parents view their child's independence, intrinsic motivation, and concentration as core indicators of developmental success.

To build authentic trust, schools must engage parents as **true educational partners through consistent, transparent communication, different from parent "education."** Trust grows when schools clearly articulate how cosmic education, peace curriculum, and individualized learning plans align to support the child. Some strategies to engage parents in all settings include regularly opening classrooms for guided observations, sharing regular pedagogical updates, and offering solution-focused and affirming insights into both achievements and challenges in academic and social-emotional areas of development.

Strong parent partnerships thrive when communication is multidimensional, predictable, and continuous across every stage of a child's development. Today's Montessori schools maintain this connection by utilizing digital portfolios, hosting interactive workshops, and holding collaborative conferences that center on the child's progress. When schools create consistent channels for two-way dialogue, feedback, and active involvement, parents move from passive observers to empowered partners. This shared responsibility creates a stable, cohesive foundation where home and school values intersect and amplify the potential of the child.

Global reach & impact

1.5M+

Monthly parent
interactions

3000+

Preschools
served

55+

Countries of
operation

Where illumine leads

illumine is a modern childcare management platform purpose-built for large, multi-site preschool and childcare groups. We empower leadership teams with **centralized visibility, standardized workflows, and real-time operational insights**, while enabling individual centers to deliver consistent, high-quality experiences at scale.

By centralizing data and standardizing workflows, illumine helps organizations operate as one connected system rather than isolated locations. AI-powered automation flags risks early, supports compliance, and reduces repetitive administrative work, freeing directors to focus on quality, people, and growth.

TRUSTED BY LEADING SCHOOL GROUPS





The future of Montessori is AI that creates more room for
what matters most.

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school management
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