

Generative Engine Optimization Field Guide for Cradle-to-Career Partnerships

How to ensure AI tools accurately tell your partnership's story

Key stakeholders, funders, legislators, and collaborators are now asking AI tools like Claude, CoPilot, and ChatGPT to research partnerships before meetings, grant reviews, and convenings. When stakeholders ask these tools to look for published evidence of the outcomes and successes your cradle-to-career partnership has had, they often come up short. This guide explains how large language models search for and surface indexed facts and information, how publishing information to the internet is evolving from the strategy of search engine to generative engine optimization, why it matters, and what your team can do this month and beyond to shape what the world sees about your organization.

What cradle-to-career partnerships and intermediaries should know about this guide:

This is the first guide published by the Measure Well team on generative engine optimization for cradle-to-career Place Based Partnerships. This field is new and evolving, and even its name (GEO) is still being decided on. We are building this guide with initial insights from technology experts and partnership leaders who are testing what works, and we will update this resource as the field evolves. Use this guide as a starting point to educate your organization and network about simple steps you can take to shape the public narrative about your critical work and systems change.

1. What is GEO (Generative Engine Optimization)?

Generative engine optimization is the practice of shaping your website, reports, and public content so that AI tools such as ChatGPT, Claude, Perplexity, and Google's AI Overviews can find your partnership and networks, understand them, and describe them accurately when someone asks a question via a web browser. Typically, when people work with AI tools, they ask them a question. Your job is to format your information in the form of an easy-to-understand answer.

For about 20 years, being visible online meant your organization's website would show up in a list of ten links on a search results page. The work of earning your spot in the top 10 is called "search engine optimization" or SEO. Today, a search often produces a single written answer generated by AI instead of a list. That answer is pulled together from a small number of typically two to seven sources that the AI tool decided it could trust. Generative engine optimization, or GEO, is the work required to become one of those trusted sources.

Search engine optimization (SEO)

Helping your page rank near the top of a list of search results. Success means someone clicks through to your website.

Generative engine optimization (GEO)

Helping an AI tool trust your content enough to quote or summarize it in its answer, often without the reader ever visiting your site.

	Search engine optimization	Generative engine optimization
What you are competing for	A spot among about 10 ranked links	A spot among the 2 to 7 sources an AI tool chooses to use as input to a generated answer or cite as a reference
What success looks like	A person clicks through to your site	Your partnership is named and described accurately (i.e. the AI tool pull/read all available relevant information on your organization), anyone clicks to your website
Main techniques	Keywords, links from other sites, fast pages, page titles and descriptions	Direct answers to questions, numbers with sources, clearly organized pages, consistent information on trusted outside sites in an AI-readable format
How you measure it	Rankings, website visits, share of people who click	How often AI tools mention you, and whether what they say is accurate

This new field of AI optimization does not replace your existing website work. A website that is well organized and easy for search engines to read gives AI tools something strong to work with. If those website basics are weak, there is very little for this newer field of practice to build on.

2. Why should cradle-to-career Place Based Partnerships care?

The Measure Well team has heard directly from funders that they now use AI tools to research partnerships before grant review meetings. These funders are looking for published stories and case studies grounded in evidence and outcomes that show system-level results, but too often, they are not finding them. This is not necessarily because the evidence doesn't exist. The information is often not readable by large language models based on the way organizations publish information to their websites today. Our goal is to demystify this work and help cradle-to-career Place Based Partnerships learn how to tackle and improve their GEO results.

And funders are not the only ones who receive information online in new ways. Families looking for programs, policymakers, reporters, and job seekers are also turning to AI tools and summaries first, before they open a search engine or visit a partnership's website.

44%

of people say AI is now their main tool for finding information online

[Guardian Strategic Communications, 2026](#)

When Google shows an AI summary at the top, far fewer people click through to websites

Share of people who click a link to the website, with and without an AI summary on the Google results page

Google results with no AI summary (typical past range)



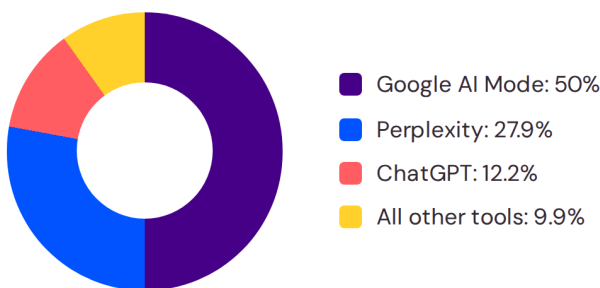
Google results with an AI summary shown (2025)



Source: [Pew Research Center, July 2025](#), as cited by [Forum One](#). This finding applies to Google's AI Overviews. Chat tools such as ChatGPT and Perplexity have their own click patterns.

Where nonprofits are being cited in AI answers

Share of nonprofit citations by AI tool, January to May 2026



Source: [Conductor, 2026 AI Search and AI Overview Benchmarks, nonprofit sector](#)

Pro Tip

Ask an AI tool what it knows about your partnership

Do this as a learning exercise and discuss the results with your colleagues. Plan for a 15-minute exercise)

Before you change anything about how you publish or catalog public information, find out what your current state is. Open two or three AI tools, such as ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Perplexity, or Microsoft Copilot, and ask each one the same questions:

Type this: What is [partnership name] and what does it do in [city or region]?

Type this: What results has [partnership name] achieved for children and young people?

Type this: Who are [partnership name]'s main partners and funders?

- Start a new chat each time, so the tool is not drawing on your earlier conversations.
- Write down what is wrong, what is missing, and what is out of date.
- Look at which sources the tool lists. Those are the sources AI tools currently trust about you. If your own website is not on the list, that is your first clue about where to focus.

3. Actions you can take today

The improvements listed below can be made by your partnership for free without a developer, an agency, or a new budget line. Most changes can be made with current staff over a few weeks. Start with one simple concept: AI tools are best at reading *words*.

AI tools read words, not dashboards

If data, evidence, or numbers live only on a dashboard, assume AI tools cannot see it.

Many partnerships share their results through interactive dashboards, data charts, and maps on their websites. People can explore these tools easily, but most AI tools cannot. When tools like ChatGPT, Claude, and Perplexity visit a web page, they read the text written into the page. They do not click, use filters, or run the programs that make a dashboard work. A 2024 study by [MERJ](#) of roughly 1.3 billion AI-crawler visits found that the major ones download those programs but never run them, and tests in 2025 and 2026 found the same thing. Google's AI tools are the main exception, but you cannot count on every tool a funder might use.

This part matters a lot in our field: In Measure Well's June 2026 review of 177 data and technology leaders across 84 cradle-to-career organizations, publishing public dashboards was one of the most common activities for data leads, and Tableau and Power BI were among the most-used tools.

If your best results only appear inside a dashboard or a chart image, an AI tool researching your partnership may conclude that you have limited or no published results.

What AI tools can usually read

- Sentences and paragraphs written on a web page
- Headings and bulleted lists
- Tables built from text on the page
- Captions and written descriptions of images
- Many reports saved as PDFs, if the text can be selected

What AI tools often cannot read

- Interactive dashboards, such as embedded Tableau or Power BI views
- Charts, infographics, and tables saved as pictures
- Numbers that only appear when you click, hover, or pick a filter
- Data maps
- Anything behind a login, sign-up form, or password

Keep investing in your dashboards because they are valuable for people. Just make sure every important result *also* appears in plain written words on the same page.

Six actions you can take

Choose one or two items from this list to get started with

1 Answer real questions at the top of the page

Rewrite the first two or three sentences of your mission, program, and frequently asked questions pages so they directly answer the question a family, funder, or reporter would type or ask about your organization, intermediary, or network. Avoid internal terms and jargon. If you don't have a frequently asked questions page, consider adding one, as this will help provide AI tools with clear answers to questions related to your work.

2 Make your basic facts match everywhere

Your name, mission, service area, and leaders should be stated way on your website, Google Business Profile, LinkedIn, and every directory listing. Mismatched information is one of the fastest ways to lose an AI tool's confidence.

3 Complete your nonprofit profiles

AI tools often draw on Candid (formerly GuideStar), Charity Navigator, ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer, and the Better Business Bureau Wise Giving Alliance. Keep your Form 990, budget, and current on those platforms as well as on your own site. Fiscally sponsored projects should be direct and transparent about their fiscal sponsor, which is likely a registered nonprofit organization.

4 Add a behind-the-scenes label to your website

Ask whoever manages your site to add "nonprofit organization" and/or "cradle-to-career and place based" structured data. This is a short, hidden label in your site's code that tells computers who you are, where you work, and what you do. Most website platforms, such as WordPress, Squarespace, and Wix, support it through a free add-on. Visitors will not see any change.

5 Get mentioned beyond your own website

Local news coverage, mentions on partner websites, and research that cites your data all help AI tools trust you. Note: Do not write your own Wikipedia page, as it is against Wikipedia's rules and tends to backfire. Instead, pitch stories to local reporters and ask partners to share your results.

6 Test what AI tools say about your partnership every three months

Changes take time to show up. Set a calendar reminder, ask the same set of questions on the same tools every quarter, and keep a simple record so you can see progress. The companion worksheet provided by Measure Well gives you a practical and manageable checklist of questions to ask on a regular basis.

Make sure AI tools can find and read your website

Share this list with whoever manages your website. Most items on this list take less than an hour to implement.

- 1 Ask whether your security settings block AI tools.** Some website hosting and security services now block AI tools automatically. For example, [Cloudflare](#) began blocking them by default on new sites in July 2025. Ask your web manager or host to confirm your settings allow AI search tools to visit.
- 2 Submit a site map to Google and Bing.** A site map is a list of all your pages. Both Google Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools are free and let you submit one. Bing matters more than many people expect, because its search results feed Microsoft Copilot and are one of the sources ChatGPT draws on.
- 3 Keep your most important pages public and easy to reach.** Your "about" page, results page, and latest annual report should not sit behind a login or sign-up form. Link to each of them from your home page so AI tools can follow the path.
- 4 Try the two-minute "can AI see it?" test.** Open your results page. Right-click and choose "View page source." Press Ctrl+F (Command+F on a Mac) and search for one of your key numbers, such as your graduation rate. If the number does not appear, most AI tools cannot see it either.

Publish your evidence and results so AI tools read them correctly and funders and partners can find them

Use this list for your results page, annual report, and success stories. This is the piece most results pages are missing.

- 1 Write every key result as a full sentence.** Include who, what changed, by how much, where, when, and the source. Put that sentence right next to the chart or dashboard it describes.

Hard for AI to use

A chart titled "Graduation" with no text around it

Easy for AI to use

"The high school graduation rate in River Valley rose from 71% in 2022 to 89% in 2026, according to district data."

- 2 Connect the result to your partnership by name.** Write "Through the River Valley Partnership, schools and community partners..." rather than "we." AI tools need to see your name next to the result to give you credit for it. This matches the final check on Measure Well's Impact Story Worksheet: if you can delete every sentence that names your partnership and the story still works, it is an awareness story, not an impact story.
- 3 Show how the change happened.** Funders look for proof of mechanism and replicability: what the partnership did, why it worked, and whether it could work again. Name the specific action — what someone actually did, beyond stating the outcome. Measure Well's Impact Storytelling Recipe and Impact Story Worksheet walk you through this. These tools are available in our Resource Library.
- 4 Use the outcome names funders use.** Describe results with standard terms such as "kindergarten readiness," "3rd grade reading proficiency," or "8th grade math proficiency," which match [StriveTogether's cradle-to-career outcomes and the Education-to-Workforce indicators](#). Funders and AI tools look for these terms, which means your local program names alone won't surface in results.
- 5 Use real text tables, not pictures of tables.** If you share a table of results, ask your web manager to build it as text on the page instead of an image or a screenshot from a spreadsheet.
- 6 Describe every chart in words.** Add a caption under each chart that states the main finding and add a short description (called "alt text") to each image.
- 7 Put reports on a web page, not only in a PDF.** When you release an annual report or case study, create a web page that lists the key findings in text, then link to the full PDF from that page.
- 8 Date everything:** the time period, the data source, and how you measured it, and then update it whenever the numbers change.
- 9 Describe your role honestly.** Say "contributed to" or "worked alongside" when many partners share the credit. Overstating it undermines trust with funders, and AI tools will repeat exactly what you claim.

Research your partnership the way a funder would

Set aside 30 minutes with two or three colleagues. One person plays a foundation program officer preparing for a grant review. Using an AI tool, they ask:

Type this: I am a program officer at a foundation preparing for a grant review. Using publicly available evidence, summarize [partnership name]'s impact on [an outcome, such as kindergarten readiness] in [city or region] over the past three years. List your sources.

Then follow up:

Type this: What evidence shows this partnership has changed systems, beyond simply running programs?

Type this: What gaps or concerns would a funder want to ask about?

As a group, check the answer against what each audience needs to see. Funders are looking for the first one.

Funders

Proof of mechanism
and replicability

Boards

Proof of stewardship

Community members

Proof of dignity

The field

Proof of method

Compare the answer to what you would want a funder to read. Pick the three biggest gaps. Each one becomes a writing task, such as a new results page, a short case study, or a correction to an outdated listing. Repeat the exercise each quarter with the same questions.

Companion worksheet | AI Discoverability Worksheet

A one-page worksheet that walks your team through the two Pro Tips and both Act Now checklists. Fill it out once now, then again each quarter to track what changes.

4. Next Steps

This is the first version of Measure Well's resource on generative engine optimization. It focuses on background knowledge and simple steps that don't require a big budget. As we work with technology experts and partnership leaders to test how implementing these changes impacts the quality and volume of evidence-based stories published by the field, we will publish deeper strategy and guidance.

If your partnership tries any of the steps out, we want to hear about it. Please reach out to our team at contactus@measurewell.org to connect.

Sources referenced in this guide

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