
Guidance from Common Sense Education for district-level decision making

By Jessica Lindl

Bewildering, Confusing, Overwhelming. Those are some of the milder terms I’ve heard educators use to describe the landscape for educational technologies. The good news: If you have a learning requirement in your school district, there’s probably a mobile app that promises to solve that for you. The bad news: There are likely to be hundreds, if not thousands, to choose from. On Apple’s App Store alone, more than 80,000 learning apps are available.

Navigating through EdTech options can feel like a tightrope walk for school administrators hoping to balance the desire for innovation with the need to make fiscally sound choices. Fortunately, it does not need to be a binary choice. Over many conversations I’ve had in recent months with digitally savvy educational leaders, I’ve learned that it’s possible to do both. I’d like to share with you what I’ve learned.
Where to Start?
Most educators I’ve spoken with agree that defining your need is a good way to begin.

“Let’s say you want kids to learn more math,” says Steven Hodas, former executive director of the New York City Department of Education’s Office of Innovation and now practitioner in residence at the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington. “An administrator might see the problem as kids doing poorly in math. But a teacher might say that the problem is they’re unable to give students sufficient individual attention. Both point to kids learning more math, but they define the nature of their objectives differently.”

Hodas suggests administrators engage people who work with the problem on a daily basis to help refine the need before jumping to possible solutions. That also includes parents, school staff, classroom aides and even the community at large. Once the need is better defined, it becomes easier to narrow down the universe of digital tools to the ones that address your need.

Next, Barton Dussinger, principal of the César Chavez Multicultural Academic Center in Chicago, likes to proceed with a “research question” — turning the need into a testable hypothesis. This forces people to think of ways to quantify their objectives. “An example of a research question is: ‘Do students using product X show higher gains in Y than similar students not using the product?’” where Y is the metric used to gauge progress, whether that’s behavioral referrals, attendance, college admissions or test scores, Dussinger explains.

“Before you make a purchase, you can work with the company to provide the data that will help you answer your research question,” adds Dussinger, who recommends pressing vendors for weekly data reports. “That way, you can evaluate their claims on the metrics that matter to you.”

Improving Discovery
With tens of thousands of choices, finding the right tool can seem like searching for a needle in a haystack. Many educators have devised their own systems for filtering in the most relevant tools while remaining open to changing possibilities.

The Omaha Public Schools in Nebraska developed an app approval process that allows any educator in the school district to submit recommendations for digital products throughout the year. Since the process launched last fall, Omaha’s teachers have submitted more than 200 apps. Most receive a decision within five to seven days. If the app is rejected, the teacher receives feedback on why the product didn’t pass muster.

“Before this system, it was a manual process that would take months” to process a recommendation, says Rob Dickson, Omaha’s executive...
director for information management services.
In Chicago, Dassinger prefers to interact
directly with teachers within the classroom envi-
ronment and have informal conversations to sur-
face new products, keeping a list of prospects on a
spreadsheet.

Shared Characteristics
These examples suggest there’s room for a wide
range of approaches. But the most effective
systems tend to have several characteristics in
common — they are ongoing, transparent and
adaptable.

ONGOING. Technological advancements occur
nonstop, and teachers’ needs don’t always coin-
cide with adoption cycles. The best systems con-
tinually evaluate what’s new in the market.

TRANSPARENT. Danny Wagner, manager of Com-
mon Sense Education’s STEM Education Content
and a former science teacher in Boone County,
Ky., believes teachers need feedback so they can
better understand why their submissions did or
didn’t make the grade. This is critical. Feedback
shows teachers their voices are valued, and it will
help them stay involved, providing a fresh flow of
ideas.

ADAPTABLE. Dickson calls his system in Omaha
“a workflow for change” because he can update it
with new curriculum requirements and learning
standards. “If we create a sound system for
evaluating apps, it shouldn’t matter what new
technologies are thrown at us,” he says. “We can
still do what’s best for our kids.”

If your district’s discovery process involves
issuing a request for proposals, Hodas recom-
mends focusing on the learning goal, not the solu-
tion. “If your RFP contains a list of specifications,
people try to check the boxes and tell you what
you want to hear. That’s not likely to be produc-
tive,” he advises. “You need to reach out in a way
that gives people the freedom to give you creative
solutions.”

Filtering Options
Let’s assume your discovery phase leads to a flood
of options. An efficient way to narrow the field,
Hodas says, is to ask teachers to watch a five-min-
ute demo of each product (most tech products
have video demos posted on their websites). After
viewing, ask the teachers to answer this question:
Would you use it in your classroom? If the answer
is no (or mostly no), toss it out of consideration.

Once you have a manageable list of candidates,
you can put them through a more rigorous eval-
uation. In Omaha, reviewers use a wide range of
criteria, from compliance with the federal Child-
ren’s Online Privacy Protection Act and best prac-
tices to pedagogy and alignment to P21’s

In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Dis-
rict in North Carolina, Valerie Truesdale, the
chief technology officer, says she first determines
whether the products are interactive and adap-
tive. “Students have to be interacting with the
software and not just be given digitized work-
sheets,” she says. “And the software has to adjust

Questions To Cut Through
the Marketing Spiel

Whether you’re putting out a formal request for proposal or you just want
a conversation with the vendor, here are some questions to help educators
move past the marketing script and on to how the proprietor’s products can
improve student learning. I’ve collected some of these from Danny Wagner,
head of Common Sense Education’s STEM Education Content, to spark your
thinking.

► CUSTOMIZATION: Can the company customize the product to fit the needs
of a wide range of schools and populations in your district? Can teachers cre-
ate custom content? How well does the tool integrate with other tools teach-
ers are using in your classrooms?

► CONNECTEDNESS: How does the technology help connect stakeholders,
including parents, students, teachers, administrators and community mem-
bors? The stronger these connections, the more students will take owner-
ship of their learning, teachers will become engaged facilitators, parents will
become decision makers and empower learning at home, and businesses will
give their time, sponsorship and donations to educational initiatives.

► EQUITY: How can a variety of student populations access the product? Is it
available in multiple languages? Can resources be printed or read out loud?
Are there options for library access or home access?

► TECHNOLOGY REQUIREMENTS: What are the platform and systems
requirements? Does it work with existing school devices? Does it require the
school to upgrade its infrastructure? What support does the company offer
schools to help integrate the product? Can the product or service scale to sup-
port thousands of students?

These will surely prompt a dozen other questions for school district leaders
to ask. If so, you are well on your way to being an expert educational technol-
ogy evaluator.

— JESSICA LINDL
Jessica Lindl, general manager of Common Sense Education, during a classroom visit.

its pace to individual progress so every student can have a personalized learning experience.” Products then are evaluated using North Carolina’s Standard Course of Study.

At Common Sense Education, where we’ve reviewed more than 2,500 educational technologies, our rubric includes engagement (how compelling the product is), pedagogy (how well it supports deep learning) and support (how accessible the experience is to students and teachers).

Recently, we added a fourth pillar: privacy. Over the past two years, we’ve worked with more than 100 school districts to create two free resources for schools: (1) a program that evaluates educational software products on their safety, security and privacy policies, along with how well they comply with government regulations; and (2) an open source toolkit for districts that want to do their own evaluations. By the end of the school year, our director of privacy review, Bill Fitzgerald, plans to have completed evaluations for 300 educational technology products on our site (https://privacy.commonsense.org).

Start Modestly

Finally, once you’ve selected a technology to try out, start small and iterate.

“Think of the first implementation as a pilot,” Hodas advises. “Don’t think of pilots as free software to try out. Think of the vendor as someone who is collaborating with you to create a product that will result in the changes you both want to see.”

This can be a cultural leap for school districts used to being given fully developed materials from established publishers. With technology companies, particularly the younger and more innovative startups, products are in constant evolution, and their developers are continually adding features, fixing bugs and improving the overall experience. While it can be frustrating to deal with a moving target, schools can take advantage of that flux by jumping in to influence which features get added and how the product is improved.

At the end of the day, I am reminded of some sage advice for maintaining perspective, provided by Truesdale, a veteran school leader in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. “The key is to remember that these are all digital tools,” she says. “Just like building a house, you have many tools in your toolbox. What tools we use depends on the job we want to accomplish. But there’s no substitute for quality teaching.”

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