

Strategies for Education Technology

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An Ounce of Preparation is Worth a Pound of Procurement

Digital tools and 21st century technology have changed the way that many educators approach teaching. The challenge is technology changes so fast that education leaders are struggling to keep up with what are the best tools to improve student learning. Add new assessments, Common Core State Standards, and online services to the mix and it's no wonder that school and district technology purchasing can be so intimidating.

Despite the intricacies of today's ed-tech landscape, educators and administrators have never had more options, granting schools and districts phenomenal purchasing power and access to countless qualified vendors eager to provide smart, integrated and affordable solutions.

1) Set Goals

To help navigate the procurement process, first start with your school's academic goals and desired outcomes, not simply the latest, greatest device, system, or strategy. Technology is a tool, but you need the right tool for your school's or district's unique learning needs. Once these goals are defined, then meaningful research into available technology solutions can commence. Thoughtlessly piling technology on top of a problem only makes more of a problem.

Keep in mind that, regardless of the buyer, the technology needs to work for who will actually be using it: students and teachers. Ensure that users are part of the decision-making process so that their needs are being met by the appropriate vendor solution. Starting the process with clear, strategic goals will provide direction during the purchasing process.

2) Assess

Before you decide where you want to go, it's best to make a thorough inventory of where you are and what you have right now. A thorough audit of hardware, software, and any online services and third-party apps is a good place to start, and it paves the way for cost analysis. This will reveal any areas of waste and need. These measures will also expose any discrepancies amongst school or district staff perceptions regarding access, support, challenges, frustrations, and desired solutions.

Another guiding principle of any potential procurement should be the following: Whom is the desired technology or solution intended for? Many decisions are made without a full understanding of the needs of those that will be most affected by the technology. In addition to who will be using it, ask yourself how often it will be used and to what purpose. How will the technology improve student academic outcomes and how will this improvement be measured? Polling a wide sampling of relevant stakeholders will reveal much—perhaps too much. So be sure to have a decision-making process in place before opening up the matter to peers and those with the most at stake in your procurement outcomes. Getting early buy-in will also do much to avoid last-minute “opinions” that could complicate the process.

3) Prioritize

As mentioned before, all decisions regarding technology should connect directly to established learning goals, not technology-for-technology's sake. Are your device considerations aligned to learning goals or grade level? Tablets might be a trendy option, for instance, but for higher grades they may prove incapable of a student's content creation needs. Devices must also be appropriate for testing, unless they are being purchased for other more specialized uses.

To help define your school or district's ed-tech priorities, assign dedicated teams to explore the matter. Establish clearly articulated expectations for this research. If the outcome is murky, chances are so would your implementation. This is a great opportunity to work issues out before they become expensive problems down the road. If your teams come back with discrepancies or “holes” in a proposed solution, then perhaps your organization would benefit by submitting a Request for Information (RFI) instead of a Request for Proposal (RFP) at this point in your procurement process. This will ultimately result in a more focused RFP, which will attract more relevant vendors.

4) Collaborate

There is safety in numbers. Explore purchasing consortiums and education cooperatives in order to secure the best pricing through demand aggregation. Not only will larger purchases result in lower cost per device, but many of these entities have already undergone the RFP process, which could save you both time and money.

That said, your district might still benefit from the RFP process, not only in terms of clarified goals and objectives, but also with the result being more aligned with your school's or district's unique needs and context. Utilizing the research of other education organizations can still be useful, though, in order to better forecast what solutions are relevant and, perhaps more importantly, which ones aren't.

Schools and districts should also explore technology bundles, such as learning management systems bundled with content and reporting systems, which could save money while ensuring that everything works together.

5) Compare

When preparing RFPs, be sure that your requests are outlined in such a way so that your responses can be adequately compared. This will save time and frustration when assessing a vendor's solutions based on your proposed learning outcomes and unique criteria. Vendors, when citing past experience, should be requested to provide relevant schools, districts, and situations.

6) Test

Depending on the scale of the proposed solution, a test or pilot might be in order to see if the technology or services is indeed the best fit for your needs. A pilot can also test the relationship between your school or district and a vendor. As with a full-scale implementation, a pilot must have clear objectives and expectations if it is to serve as a true test.

A pilot must last a few months in order to capture useful data. A pilot of only a few weeks isn't really a valid test of a solution and its impact on student outcome. How these results will be measured should be worked out well before any pilot, or else it will render any data meaningless.

While a pilot should pale in terms of cost when compared to a full-scale implementation, it will most likely require some investment—and should if it is to be a valid test. Vendors may be willing to provide some services for free or at a low cost, but you do tend to get what you pay for. Be clear with vendors before embarking on a pilot. If they see value in the relationship, they will view the experience as an investment. Though be wary of vendors that may seem too accommodating, as they may be overpromising to secure the deal. Worthwhile vendors can also utilize any learnings to strengthen their offerings.

7) Ensure Optimum Service

Remember: schools and districts have considerable purchasing power these days, so don't be afraid to get the most out of a contract. Ask to see prices for relevant projects to ensure that you're being charged fairly.

One crucial element that often gets overlooked is professional development. The proper training can be the difference between success and failure. Professional development is often provided by vendors who are confident in their offerings and are willing to invest the time and energy in ensuring that your staff understands how to most effectively utilize their solution.

Consistent and responsive service is vital to any implementation. Be sure that service terms and expectations are clearly spelled out in any contract and thoroughly understood by all parties. This includes tiered support options, renewal rates, and account management. Quality service should be both reactive and proactive, ensuring smooth, seamless operation. Is the vendor's account manager accessible? Does the partnership feel "personal"? Will the relationship and services evolve as does your school's needs?

8) Think "TCO"

School decision-makers must take into account an offering's Total Cost of Ownership. This includes installation, technical support, licensing, professional development and any other associated costs. All price points should be contractually covered and agreed-upon before anything is signed.

Be careful to examine how one vendor's licensing fees stack up against another's. While the price may look good at first, you might actually be getting much less for your money, or you might be setting yourself up for a number of unexpected charges along the way.

Also see how costs break down over time. A long-term commitment with the right vendor can result in considerable savings; just make sure they are, indeed, the right vendor for you. Warranties also factor into the cost of a solution as does the projected life of a device.

9) Get References

Decision-makers should ask vendors to provide several relevant references before sealing the deal. Allow for time to contact these references and ask them for a brief walk-through of their relationship with the proposed vendor. Discuss day-to-day support and troubleshooting situations, as well as overall account management. Satisfied customers should be eager to provide detailed feedback, while less enthusiastic customers may not even return your call.

10) Implement

This is where the rubber hits the road. Regardless of the solution you are able to secure, it won't be of any use if it is improperly implemented. Will training be a one-time affair, or consistent over the lifecycle of the implementation?

What variables, such as school culture and change management, need to be considered? Are teachers on board regardless of technological skill? How usable a device is regardless of a teacher's familiarity is an important factor to be considered. If a strong case can be made for the educational merits of a more complex device, then professional development plays more of a factor.

Seamless integration is what separates beneficial technology from cumbersome technology. Your solution needs to play well with other products and materials for 21st century learning to occur. Data should be easily "shareable" across multiple programs. And a new implementation is an excuse to trim any products that no longer serve you, or dig deeper into the offerings of existing solutions.

Your implementation should also be forward-focused—part of a chain of smart upgrades rather than a one-time, fix-all solution. Be sure that proper milestones, metrics, and measurements are set so that the efficiency and effectiveness of a solution can be assessed across the implementation continuum. Likewise, secure sustainable, long-term funding options to fuel future endeavors without disrupting the success of your programs. Think less in terms of cost and more on maximizing overall value.