Select the Right Edtech:

How to Leverage Certified Products During the Procurement Process

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Digital Promise®
Accelerating Innovation in Education

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Executive Summary

In this report, edtech decision makers can access three tools that enabled their districts to seamlessly incorporate evidence into their edtech decision making processes:

1. **a sample request for proposals,**

2. **a template to filter vendor pitches, and**

3. **a rubric to support inventorying of existing edtech tools.**

This report serves to provide context around the development of these resources.

Edtech Decision Making Persists as a Major Challenge for Districts

Across the country, education leaders spend countless hours evaluating quality, fit, and cost to inform edtech selection, procurement, and implementation decisions. While this challenge has persisted for over a decade, the rapid uptick and reliance on edtech from the pandemic and now the end to emergency relief federal funding have amplified the need to develop streamlined processes that provide clear, concise, and trustworthy information about product quality.

Often, education leaders identify the following pain points in their edtech evaluation processes:

- **The lack of a formal process, which may lead to divergent and siloed processes**

Building a formal process leveraged across a school or district calls for buy-in across educators, staff who lead implementation, and those with ultimate decision making power. To further complicate matters, the process must be nimble, adaptive, and timely to minimize the workload placed on any individual or team while ensuring decisions can be made efficiently. The process must be clear and straightforward and include the voices and perspectives of all staff who will interact with the technology.

- **Disparity or disconnect between curriculum and instruction teams and technical infrastructure teams to collaboratively inform decisions**

Districts regularly report that curriculum and instruction have established rubrics to evaluate content, typically developed from the textbook perspective, while technical infrastructure teams have a different set of priorities to ensure the technology protects student data and interacts seamlessly with existing hardware and software. It is uncommon for these experts to have an established partnership to collaboratively make edtech decisions.

- **Depth of evaluation processes vary depending on factors such as urgency and size of investment in an edtech tool**

When district leaders consider the processes used to inform edtech procurement decisions, the leading question is, How large is the investment? If it's free or low-cost, there likely isn't any evaluation or vetting. If it's a significant investment, typically the technical team drives the decision. However, all edtech tools have the potential to incur harm and therefore should be evaluated for quality in design and intention in creating inclusive and powerful learning content.

- **Establishing an up-to-date inventory of the edtech used across classrooms and schools**

Even prior to 2020, districts struggled to maintain up-to-date and active inventories of educational technologies used in classrooms and schools. In part, this challenge is exacerbated by funding structures where, in some cases, schools have distinct edtech budgets outside of the district. To add to the complications, most districts do not have a single bucket for edtech spending and leverage funding across a variety of grants and funding sources to support learners. Similarly, when tools are free or low-cost, educators may incorporate the tool into their instruction either without thinking about the need to vet the tool or to avoid a slow process for approval. Ultimately, districts rarely know the tools being used, which tends to mean redundancies in the types of tools used. Further, when individual classrooms or schools create contracts with a vendor across a district, they tend to pay higher per-student license fees than they would if the full district purchased the product in a single contract.

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[1] https://oese.ed.gov/offices/education-stabilization-fund/elementary-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund/

How Do Districts Engage with Edtech Vendors?

Districts primarily engage with edtech products in three scenarios: (1) Districts put out requests for proposals (RFPs) to find a product that serves a specific need; (2) vendors' sales teams pitch to those in roles that may have edtech decision making authority; and (3) peers offer recommendations about tools. Recently, a new scenario has emerged that calls for edtech decision making—determining which products to continue to leverage as funding sources lessen and most instruction moves back to in-person.

A powerful thread underscores these interactions: How do decision makers know if a product is worth their time and consideration? Historically, the resources available to find such evidence have been efficacy studies—with aggregated results from a static duration of time that represent learners, educators, and an ecosystem unique from your own district—claims made by the vendors' sales and marketing teams, or peer recommendations. Though each of these resources hold merit and value on their own, they do not paint a full picture to understand how a product was intentionally designed to support learning for a school or district's students.

Moreover, in many cases, the reality is that districts' boards advocate for the lowest bid and thus move forward with that option because there are not any clear signals to compare the products against each other.

Thus, the question remains:

> *How do decision makers determine if a tool is likely to create powerful learning experiences for their students?*

Digital Promise's Strategy: Product Certifications

In collaboration with the League of Innovative Schools, nonprofit thought partners, and ecosystem drivers, Digital Promise settled on a straightforward solution: competency- and evidence-based signals to provide districts with an independent, trustworthy overview about the quality of edtech products (see Appendix A to learn more about the history behind the project).

The vision driving this work is simple: Product Certifications can serve as megaphones for learners, educators, and education leaders to share their needs and expectations with the edtech industry. By co-designing the certification criteria with those who will interact with the product and content experts, our work serves two functions:

1. **Provides a reliable and timely overview of the quality of an edtech product by considering whether the product meets decision makers' expectations in key areas; and**

2. **By unifying and amplifying the priorities and needs of learners, educators, decision makers, and content experts, the Product Certification ecosystem can drive the direction of the edtech industry.**

So far, the Product Certification ecosystem has issued over 150 certifications to products that demonstrated that the tool is intentionally designed to support districts, schools, and learners. Once an application has been co-designed with learning communities and content experts, product teams must apply by submitting evidence from the product to demonstrate that the tool meets the requirements described in the criteria. Expert assessors at nonprofit organizations review submissions to determine whether the evidence submitted is sufficient to earn. When a product has met the certification requirements, they are awarded an Open Badge to serve as a signal to edtech decision makers that they have satisfied that expectation.

Total Awarded	162
Research-Based Design	77
Learner Variability	34
Research Based Learning Analytics	1
Prioritizing Racial Equity in AI Design (The Edtech Equtiy Project)	1
LER Inclusive Design	4
Universal Design for Learning Product Certification (CAST)	1
Project Unicorn Interoperability Certification	45

* These are certification numbers as of May 31, 2023.

How Do Districts Leverage Product Certifications?

Product Certifications were created to provide edtech decision makers with independent, trustworthy and straightforward information about the quality of an edtech product. There are several ways districts can seamlessly incorporate certification status into their touchpoints with edtech vendors.

Request for Proposals and Requests for Applications

Requests for Proposals (RFPs) and Requests for Applications (RFAs) are consistently used to discover edtech options to fulfill a crucial need in a district or school. However, evaluating RFP responses poses a major challenge for districts. Typically, vendor submissions are based on unsupported claims about the quality of the tool, and responses tend to mean decision makers are trying to compare apples to oranges. By incorporating questions that ask about products' certification status, districts will gain a valuable tool to (1) determine which products were thoughtfully built to support powerful learning and (2) have a direct comparison across vendor submissions to better evaluate the quality of tools.

RFPs contain several sections, including details about deadlines, an executive summary, and background context on the learner population and district context. In the main section of the RFP that describes the specifications and requirements, districts can incorporate questions about certification status.

For example, the RFP could include questions such as these:

1. Who is the intended audience for the product?

2. Which subject areas does the product cover?

3. What learning or challenge does the product intend to address?

4. How is the target audience intended to use the product? How and to what end do they engage with the product?

5. Which operating system(s) and/or platform(s) are required for compatibility?

6. Does your company accept and agree to the following commitments?

    a. The organization will comply with FERPA and any applicable State Privacy Laws. ☐

    b. The organization has signed or will sign, and will abide by, the 2020 Privacy Pledge. ☐

7. Which of the following Product Certifications has the product earned? Please include the Open Badge in the submission for confirmation that the certification has been awarded and has not expired.

    a. Research-Based Design for Instructional Learning Products: Product Certification and/or Research-Based Learning Analytics: Product Certification ☐

    b. Learner Variability: Product Certification ☐

    c. Prioritizing Racial Equity in AI Design (The Edtech Equtiy Project) ☐

    d. Universal Design for Learning Product Certification (CAST) ☐

    e. Project Unicorn Interoperability Certification ☐

While there can be hesitation around including open-ended questions, there is real value in asking questions that require vendors to provide an accurate response about their tool. Yes/No questions will often elicit "yes" responses that are not something a district can authentically audit. Developing an RFP/RFA that combines open-ended and yes/no questions that all require evidence via screenshots and documentation will ensure the evaluation team has reliable information about the current version of the product.

Incorporating questions about product certification status lightens the procurement team's workload as it outsources some of the evidence review to reliable nonprofit teams who can confirm whether specific criteria have been met. This allows districts to more seamlessly assess quality and compare RFP/RFA proposals without needing to spend significant time investigating the accuracy of claims as trustworthy nonprofits have done the assessment on the district's behalf. Moreover, Product Certifications expire every two years to confirm that a product consistently meets those requirements as the tool undergoes updates. This enables districts to be sure the product meets the certification expectations recently.

Vendor Pitches

Vendors bombard edtech decision makers across districts and schools with pitches, however, sifting through the pitches proves to consume an enormous amount of time. Often, education leaders have shared that they are so worn down by the pitches that they disregard many of them, which leads to a concern that high quality products are slipping through the cracks. An efficient way to cut down on the number of products to talk with is requiring vendors to respond to a brief questionnaire that asks vendors to share any product certifications they have been awarded as a signal for quality. The questionnaire could include questions such as these:

1. What impact does the product expect to achieve?

2. How will the product learn about my district/school's unique community and learning ecosystem?

3. Which of the following Product Certifications has the product earned? Please include the Open Badge in the submission for confirmation that the certification has been awarded and has not expired.

   a. Research-Based Design for Instructional Learning Products: Product Certification and/or Research-Based Learning Analytics: Product Certification ☐

   b. Learner Variability: Product Certification ☐

   c. Prioritizing Racial Equity in AI Design (The Edtech Equtiy Project) ☐

   d. Universal Design for Learning Product Certification (CAST) ☐

   e. Project Unicorn Interoperability Certification ☐

This process will require vendors to demonstrate that they are worth decision makers' time, cutting down on the amount of hours spent listening and responding to vendor pitches. Moreover, it will help elevate research-based products that are learner-centered to the top for meaningful conversation.

Inventorying Tools and Cross-Team Collaborations

Though interacting with new products will continue to have a significant role in edtech decision making, evaluating and making decisions about existing tools will increasingly become a priority for districts. Collaboratively designing a checklist is a powerful strategy to compare multiple products intended to accomplish the same impact while gaining widespread buy-in across decision makers and those who interact with and use edtech. A sample checklist to begin with could look like this:
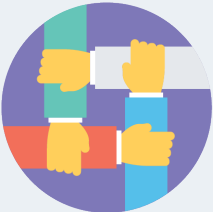
Product Name	Product A	Product B
Per-student cost		
Instructional goal		
Hardware compatibility		
Login requirements		
Educator review (based on survey data, interview data)		
Student review (based on survey data, interview data, observations)		
Curricular alignment		
Alignment to state standards		
Has the product earned the Research-Based Design Product Certification?		
Has the product earned the Learner Variability Product Certification?		
Does the product have a responsive customer support team?		

A checklist template could be a great opportunity to identify the priorities across educators, instructional and technology coaches, school leaders, curriculum and instruction leaders, technology leaders, and district leaders. Similarly, a collaboratively designed checklist will provide transparency in decision making.

Conclusion

Edtech decision making has remained a challenge for over a decade. Each district is a unique case in building a process that makes the most sense for their staff capacity and learning community. However, these realities do not mean every district needs to reinvent the wheel on their own. By leveraging Product Certifications, districts can get independent, trustworthy information about a product that enables decision makers to compare apples to apples when trying to make informed decisions. There are a variety of opportunities to incorporate a simple yes/no question to ask vendors about certification status and more easily sift through the multitude of options at the table. Digital Promise Product Certifications simplify decision making processes, establish clarity, and outsource the lift of vetting products to trustworthy nonprofits with standards co-designed with educators, education leaders, learners, and content experts.

Appendix A: Project History

	2012	The League of Innovative Schools surfaced challenges around edtech selection and procurement.
	2013-2015	Digital Promise partnered with IDEO, Johns Hopkins University, and Carnegie Mellon University to explore edtech piloting best practices. We learned about the ideal pilot process while leading Rapid Cycle Pilot studies across the country (Lessons Learned from Math Trials in Six Districts and Summer Ed-Tech Programs).
	2016-2018	Digital Promise launched the Edtech Pilot Framework to share our synthesized eight-step pilot process, along with over 150 free, open-source tools and resources. We partnered with districts to pilot edtech products intended to support English Learners. Through this work, we learned that few products are designed for historically and systematically excluded learners. Additionally, we invited educators to join professional learning cohorts to help schools and districts build capacity to pilot edtech products and innovative programs. We published Use Research Like A Champion to share best practices for building districts' research capacity, particularly around piloting.
	2019	Districts continued to share that edtech selection is challenging. Through a listening tour with more than 50 stakeholders, Digital Promise sought diverse perspectives to understand how to ease product discovery and selection for education leaders. We aimed to develop a solution that helps consumers identify high-quality edtech tools designed using research that attends to educators' and learners' authentic needs.
	2020–Today	Digital Promise launched Product Certifications, including Research-Based Design for Instructional Learning Products: Product Certification, Research-Based Learning Analytics: Product Certification, Learner Variability: Product Certification,and LER Inclusive Design: Product Certification. Additionally, we partnered with nonprofits to launch the Project Unicorn Interoperability Certification, Prioritizing Racial Equity in AI Design (The Edtech Equity Project), and UDL Product Certification (CAST). Moreover, we established partnerships to display Product Certifications on ISTEs EdSurge Product Index and EdCuration.