

# Driving Edtech Coherence and Intentionality: Denver Public Schools' Innovative Procurement Process

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# Executive Summary

Denver Public Schools (DPS) is committed to centering learner outcomes and safety in every edtech decision the district makes. This report documents the journey to building and rolling out their edtech evaluation process, highlights successes that have come from this process, and offers recommendations to district leaders who would like to develop similar processes in their contexts.

By assembling a cross-functional, collaborative team at the district, DPS designed a robust evaluation process that each edtech product must undergo before being approved for use across the district. Additionally, the team developed an approved product repository to make it clear which tools have been approved or denied through this process. This process has already led to several early successes, including improved access to secure, high-quality edtech products, significant savings through cohort purchasing, stronger commitment to effective tool usage, and a more consistent system for evaluating each tool's impact on learning.

Based on learnings from the first-year rollout of the process, we recommend these practices for districts interested in designing evaluation processes for their communities:

- Develop a staged rollout plan to support change management and communication, and allow more time and capacity for the work to impact school leaders and classroom educators.
- Include representatives from multiple district departments and school leaders and staff to review and approve each edtech tool before the tool is authorized for use.
- Develop a repository of approved tools to support edtech discovery and to offer alternative options in the instances that a request is denied.
- Include effective use information about each tool, such as recommended dosage and access to professional learning, to best position educators to get the most out of each tool.
- Ensure that the evaluation process prioritizes student data privacy and requires evidence of the tool's impact on learning.
- Consolidate tools to strengthen vendor partnerships and focus conversations on the impact of tools at the district, school, and classroom level.
- Provide open communication and opportunities for involvement throughout the process to ensure more staff buy-in and trust.
- Share the rationale and provide clarity so that staff are more likely to understand and support the evaluation process.
- Develop templates and additional examples for vendors to alleviate the burden of multiple conversations when a staff member requests for the review of a new tool.
- Build opportunities for teacher-leader collaboration to alleviate contextual gaps when leaders submit tools for review.

Learn more about the team's development, evaluation process, and repository, along with early successes and recommendations for engaging in this work.

# Introduction

## Introduction



*“We ultimately believe our students deserve better, and it’s our collective responsibility to ensure educational equity. It is our responsibility, with that mindset, to make sure what’s in front of our kids is worth being in front of our kids.”*

—School Leader, DPS

Educational technology (edtech) holds promise in offering learners differentiated, engaging, and high quality learning opportunities to support their success. However, despite spending about \$50 billion nationally on edtech each year, there is a lack of evidence suggesting that learner outcomes are improving ([EdTech Evidence Exchange](#); [NAEP’s 2024 Report Card](#)).

The market hosts an overwhelming number of products—over 400,000 apps in the Apple App Store’s Education category alone—resulting in an inundation of tools to consider throughout edtech selection, procurement, and contract renewal decisions ([Liptrot et al., 2024](#)). On average, schools used over 2,900 distinct edtech tools in the 2024-25 school year ([Instructure, 2025](#)). With this oversaturation of options, critical evaluation of each product can feel nearly impossible for leaders. In fact, only 11 percent of education leaders report using any type of evidence to make purchasing decisions on edtech ([Peterkin, 2024](#)). In addition, while K-12 districts have diverse staff roles who each bring key insights necessary to determine which edtech products could support identified needs, most districts rarely have established the time or capacity to enable a collaborative process that could incorporate each perspective into procurement decisions.

Currently, many district procurement processes drop edtech tools into classrooms without a clear purpose or implementation plan, limiting educators’ ability to intentionally and effectively leverage edtech tools ([EdTech Evidence Exchange](#)). While the edtech industry overall has underdelivered on evidence of its impact on learning, there are some randomized controlled trials (RCTs) that have found certain edtech tools to drive improved learner outcomes ([LearnPlatform, 2024](#)). However, these outcomes were only found for learners who used the tools at the prescribed rates, which represents a maximum of 5 percent of the learners included in these studies ([Holt, 2024](#)). This emphasizes how critical implementation is to the success of edtech investments. A well-designed implementation and evaluation plan with a clearly identified purpose and appropriate professional learning and ongoing

support for school leaders and educators can only happen when districts procure edtech tools with intention. Districts that do not prioritize this level of planning risk losing any positive impact on learning from their investments, if the tools see any usage at all.

Intentional and collaborative procurement processes need to be in place to ensure each edtech tool purchased has an explicit purpose for learning ([Digital Promise & IDEO, 2013](#); [McLemore & Rae, 2024](#)). Emerging innovations in this space have begun to demonstrate the value of creating a collaborative and coherent process around procurement. By including the content expertise across district-led teams and context expertise across school leaders and classroom educators, districts can establish edtech selection, procurement, and implementation processes that save money and time for teachers, coaches, school leaders, and students, while also improving learner safety and outcomes.

Denver Public Schools (DPS) represents an innovative district deeply invested in the work to create an intentional, collaborative process for edtech procurement. This case study of the DPS edtech evaluation and procurement process aims to serve as a resource to enable districts to develop and codify collaborative processes to evaluate edtech in their own communities. The findings offer guidance to districts who seek to iterate on existing procurement practices or develop evaluation strategies from scratch. These processes should consider both current contracts with edtech tools as well as needs analysis and product quality and fit evaluation before initiating new edtech contracts. Often, districts are tasked with solving challenges in siloes. This report aims to break down the walls by celebrating and sharing the innovations led by Denver Public Schools, providing guidance for other districts to engage in cross-team collaborations to create effective processes for edtech procurement and implementation.

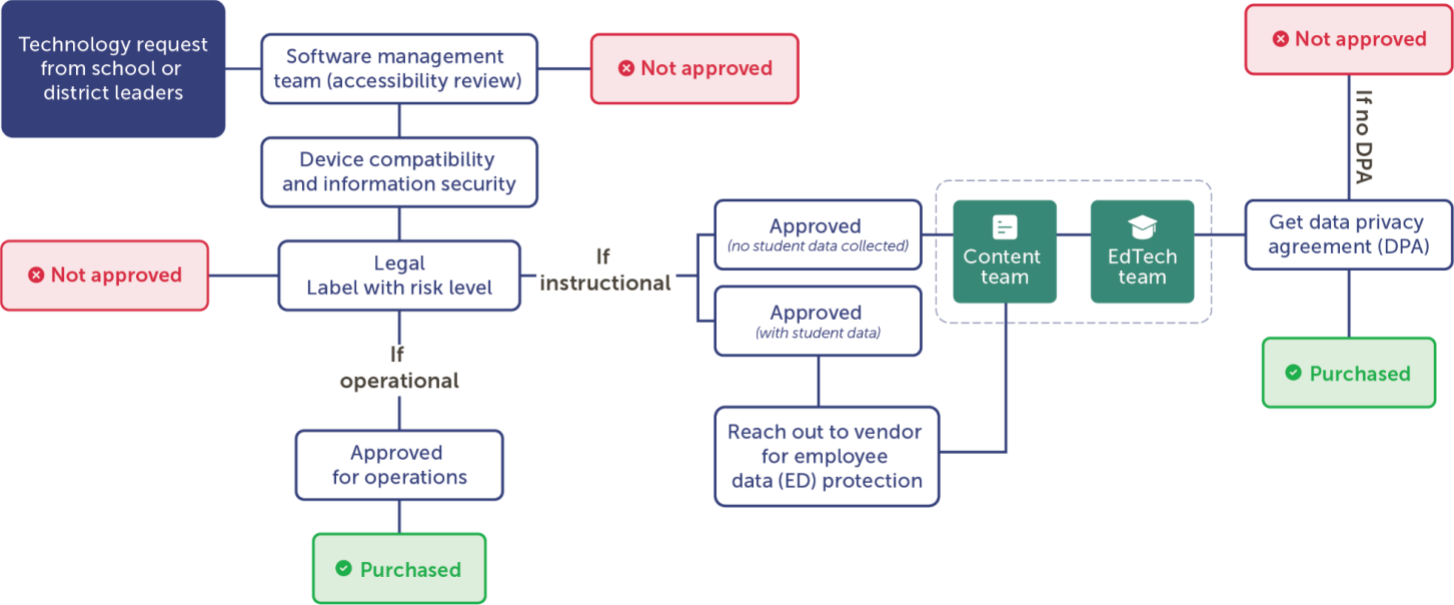
# Evaluation Process

# Evaluation Process

*“To have a step-by-step process where everyone is communicating and informed across the team— there are a lot of ways to get nos and a few ways to get yeses. By putting everyone together, it helps us work through the process better. It’s a streamlined user process and makes sure we’re in alignment across all the teams.”*

—DPS core team member

**START HERE**



# Implementation Learning

# Methodology

Through a deeply collaborative partnership with the Denver Public Schools (DPS) leadership team, Digital Promise sought to investigate the impact of the new process that DPS created to help evaluate existing and new edtech contracts. Our goals were to learn more about the process and the levers that set the development of this process into motion and then understand the impact it has on the district leadership team, school leaders, teachers, students, their families, and students' learning. Research activities included interviews and focus groups with district leaders driving this work, district leaders impacted by the work, school leaders, classroom teachers, and community members as well as observations of classrooms affected by the implementation of this process. This case study details DPS's story and processes, along with lessons learned and impact, to empower district leaders across the state and country to develop similar processes that critically evaluate their edtech options to inform procurement and adoption.

Digital Promise worked closely with individuals involved in developing and supporting the edtech evaluation process to gain context. These leaders also assisted with the recruitment of DPS staff who could provide different perspectives of the impact on the district, schools, and teaching and learning experiences. In total we interviewed 23 individuals across the district in the fall and spring semesters including members of the core development team, represented by the edtech, IT, purchasing, and legal teams (4); school leaders, including principals, assistant principals, and collaborative directors (leaders who support networks of schools within the district at the principal level) (6); school teachers across disciplines and grade levels (11); and community members with students enrolled in the DPS system (2). In addition, we talked with teachers and observed classrooms across three schools to contextualize the work. Across these discussions and observations, we heard about the successes and opportunities that come with this work. Using emergent coding, we discovered key themes that addressed our core questions and co-interpreted our findings with the DPS team to contextualize our learnings, shared in the sections that follow. While we were able to speak with a range of educators across the district, each with their own unique perspective, we acknowledge that we only heard from a small percent of voices that make up this large and diverse district, in particular noting a lack of student voice due to challenges collecting parental consent. These limitations should be taken into consideration when reviewing the findings, as we can only report on the perspectives from which we heard. Across these discussions and observations, we heard about the successes and opportunities that come with this work.

## Evaluation Process Development

### Background

The Denver Public Schools leadership team was motivated to develop a robust evaluation process after learning about the more than 1,100 edtech applications that staff were acquiring or using on their own.

A number of events contributed to an overwhelming need for this process. The global COVID-19 pandemic created an emergency response to move learning exclusively online and procure edtech tools at high levels of urgency. This was paired with standing practices of acquiring edtech tools discovered through conferences, events, peer recommendations, and, increasingly, social media, leading to an explosion of untested edtech tools in classrooms, often with overlapping purposes and features. After a visit to multiple classrooms across the DPS district, one leadership member noted that no two classrooms were using the same edtech tools. This finding was alarming for a variety of reasons. For instance, they recognized that with so much variability across tools, there could not be collaborative, streamlined professional learning about the most effective ways to leverage each tool. In addition, there were changes to digital accessibility requirements established through state-level legislation, leading to a need for visibility into current tools and data to verify that they meet these requirements.

With these events in mind, the DPS leadership team recognized the need to build a system that led to more coherence and established standards for the tools they put in front of their learners. They discovered that if educators were vetting tools, they were doing so by looking at publicly available information. Unfortunately, they found that a large number of vendors in the existing database do not have policies on security, privacy, or accessibility on their website, making it nearly impossible to verify without more intentional processes. This was particularly concerning given the high threats to student data privacy, a risk further exacerbated by the push for AI in edtech tools, as these tools tend to rely on high volumes of data to operate. This evaluation extended to free tools, which research finds often appeals to educators given the cost savings, but often have hidden costs, such as unknown collection of learner data and privacy risks (Malgieri & Custers, 2018; University of Pittsburgh, 2025).

The DPS team realized their existing approach made it impossible to track edtech adoption decisions and maintain an up-to-date list of all of the products used across the schools in the district. The DPS leadership team knew the sustainable and consistent path forward would require creating a process to review the large number of existing tools and any potential new tools to be used in the district, prioritizing data privacy.

## Vision

Through the development of the evaluation process, DPS aimed to become, as one leadership member shared, “a school district, instead of a district of schools.” DPS wanted to create a user-friendly process for schools. The development team focused on flexibility when designing the evaluation process, both to meet the diverse needs of the approximately 90,000 learners served in 197 schools across the district, as well as to ensure the team could continue to respond to the rapid evolution of technology. For example, the DPS leadership team was able to build out an AI rubric since the initial launch of this work, leveraging guidance from third party partners such as [Digital Promise’s Responsibly Designed AI product certification](#). Moreover, the team sought to ensure compliance with evolving Colorado

and federal laws and establish standards to ensure the adoption of high quality instructional materials (HQIM).

This evaluation process seeks to ensure that educators achieve the following outcomes:

- A clear understanding of the purpose for each approved tool
- Trust that the tool is safe to use and designed to support learning in alignment with district goals
- Access to opportunities for professional learning and collaboration with peers and coaches for more effective use of the tool, ultimately leading to student success.

The final version of the edtech evaluation process (see *Figure 1*) aimed to serve as a streamlined and robust decision tree structure for easy navigation. The evaluation process is a bit shorter for tools that only serve operational purposes, whereas tools intended for instructional use go through deeper content review to ensure alignment with district standards and priorities.



*Improving instruction, teacher practice, and student learning at scale through technology comes with its challenges. The first step is building a system that values stakeholder voice, student data privacy, and instructional impact and strategic alignment.*

—Dr. William “Billy” Sayers  
Director of STEAM at Denver Public Schools

Through research conducted across the first year of implementing this evaluation process, several key findings emerged. Each finding is described in the subsequent sections.

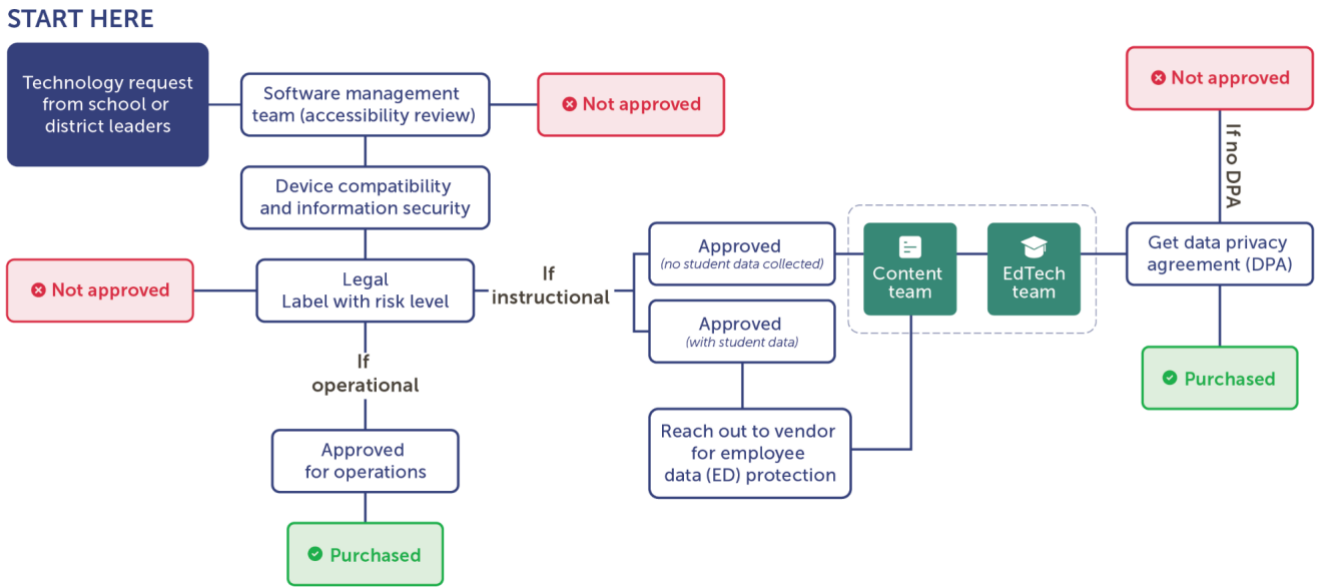


Figure 1. Denver Public Schools' Edtech Evaluation Decision Tree

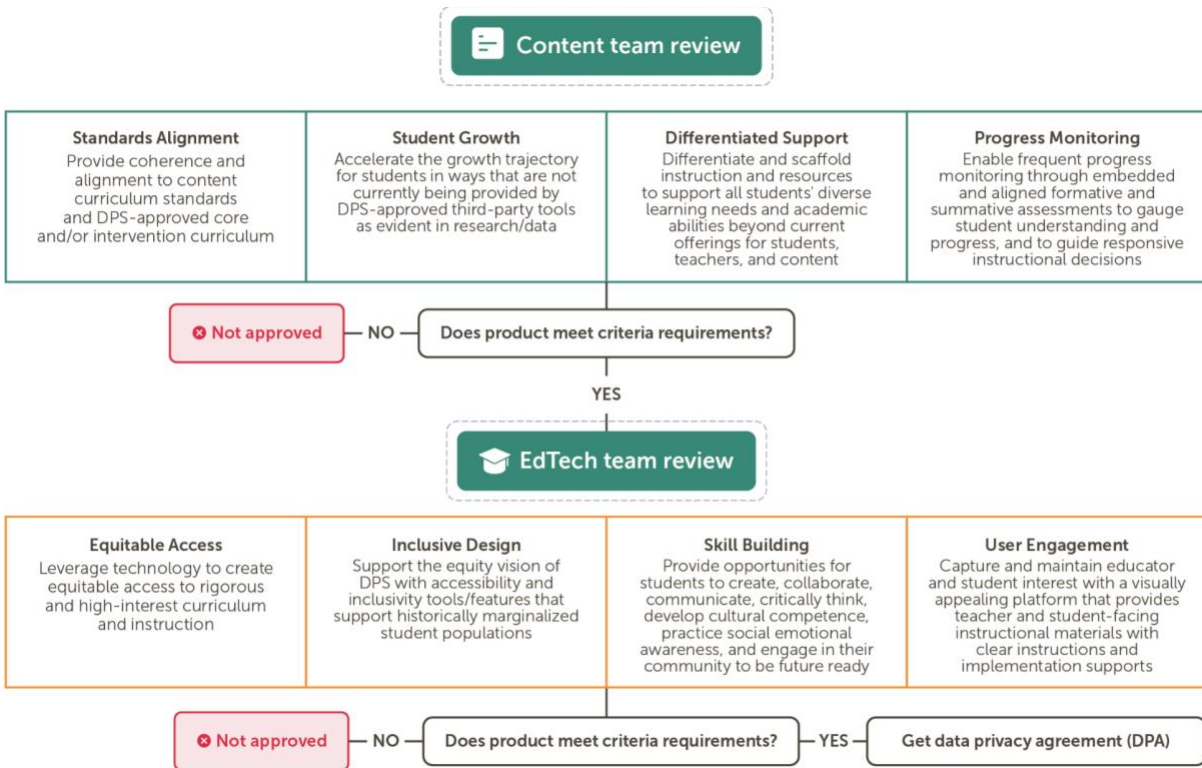


Figure 2. Content and edtech team criteria detail

## Key Assets

The evaluation process resulted in two key assets: a cross-department collaborative team and a streamlined repository of approved tools. Both of these assets are described in the following sections.

### Cross-Department Collaborative Team

*The evaluation team requires representatives from multiple district departments to review and sign off on each edtech tool before the tool is approved for use. The district team is exploring how to expand the review team to include school staff.*

### Design

The DPS evaluation and procurement process brings together district staff that hold diverse areas of expertise and perspectives to create and iterate on the process (see *Figure 1*) and to support ongoing evaluation of tools.

*“I would say one of the biggest successes is creating a streamlined process that brings multiple teams together.”*

—Lucas Mund, Manager of Educational Technology

One of the high priority tasks for the DPS edtech team and Department of Technology Services (DoTS) was to identify which district teams should be represented in designing the evaluation process. The list of who should be involved quickly grew as it became clear that there were a multitude of considerations to include in the edtech approval decision process. To ensure that the process included expertise from departments across the district team, the development work was driven by a cross-functional team that included staff members from DPS' DoTS, legal, purchasing, and curriculum departments. While departments like DoTS and edtech were identified early, the team quickly found that involving the purchasing and legal departments as a part of this collaborative team was essential to the process's success. DPS also made sure to include teams across DoTS to review criteria including device compatibility, accessibility, and information security. DPS staff participating in the evaluation process were divided into four core teams: EdTech, DoTS, Purchasing, and Legal, and 14 content teams: EdTech (content), Humanities, Math, Assessment, Multiple Language Education (MLE), Social Emotional Learning (SEL), Arts & PE, Exceptional Student Services (ESS), College and Career Success (CCS), Career and Technical Education (CTE), Library Services, Science, Early Childhood Education (ECE), and Gifted and Talented (GT). The content teams received training to support the evaluation process as reviewers by providing their content expertise to determine whether the tool being evaluated was beneficial to that content instruction.



*“The process was really confusing and overwhelming before. Now it’s a really streamlined process: Submit approval, the edtech team [on the instructional side] does the review. They can interface with the schools, have the conversation, bring back to DOTs, go to legal, get the data privacy agreement, and submit requisition.”*

—District Leader, DPS

The team is currently in governance mode with standing, bi-weekly, 30-minute meetings for the collaborative team to have a regular check point. Each member of the cross-department team joins to discuss any suggested iterations to the process or applications in the evaluation pipeline.

## Outcomes

This established process and team enables nimble, responsive adaptations to continuously adjust the process to respond to school needs, legislative changes, and the exponential evolution of technology. For example, having an evaluation process in place has enabled the district to respond to new accessibility requirements established by state law by simply integrating an accessibility review into the current process—an effort that would have been challenging without the existing framework and review process. Moreover, the team has been able to strategically consider the ways they will incorporate new requirements to evaluate AI-enabled tools to continue to prioritize safety and learning in decision making, rather than adopting all the shiny new tools as they appear on the market. As another benefit, this process enables the district to readily track and respond to legal compliance.

Now that the team and process has been established at the district level, DPS leadership is focusing on continuously incorporating the voices of school leaders, Collab Directors, and teachers. Incorporating the expertise of school leaders and educators will support alignment to the unique priorities and software needs across DPS schools (see the [Recommendations](#) section for more).

## Repository of Approved Tools

*The evaluation process enables the development and real-time maintenance of a repository of approved tools to support edtech discovery and to offer alternative options in the instances that a request is denied.*

### Design

When DPS built the [platform](#) to inventory the edtech products used throughout the districts, they became positioned to verify the number of tools being used across classrooms. Within this inventory of over 1,100 tools, they discovered that 30 tools were used by a single classroom or school to support math learning, with no throughline across curriculum. This vast and unvetted inventory not only puts learners at risk of data breaches and wasting time on tools that prove ineffective for learning; it also puts a burden on the teachers to both find and learn how to use and manage tools that can actually improve teaching and learning.

To address the need for an organized and concise inventory, DPS developed an online repository sharing the list of tools that were approved through the evaluation process. In addition to the list of approved tools, the repository lists the tools that have been reviewed and not approved, along with an explanation for why they were not approved, supporting educators in becoming more critically aware of the risks or concerns with many tools. The development team shared that if a requested tool is denied, their goal is to always offer an alternative, approved tool. In fact, they developed a [repository for alternative approved tools](#), which is ever growing. The district team aims to ensure consistent use of approved tools across the district, enabling the district to provide more targeted professional learning for each tool.

*“We also try to provide an alternative [when a tool is denied]. If we’re going to say a tool isn’t approved, we are always hoping we have something to offer as an alternative. There will probably always be limited alternatives, but the goal is always to offer.”*

—Lucas Mund, Manager of Educational Technology

### Outcomes

The repository of approved tools supports the district in monitoring approved and unapproved tools and creates visibility across the district to create opportunities for consolidation and collaboration.

For example, one first-year teacher we spoke with used the repository as a resource to support discovery for high-quality tools to integrate into their classroom. We also heard from educators that the clear steps to request new tools provides an opportunity to make the ask with a simple form that supports them in thinking through some key elements of the tool, such as data privacy.

Additionally, one community member with ties to Denver Public Schools shared that there was a general call from caregivers for more transparency around the tools available to their learners. This concise list of options is also available for the public to access, providing families with the ability to familiarize themselves with the tools their students may be interacting with in school. The repository not only serves as an asset to the district and educators, but also addresses DPS community members' calls for more transparency around the tools available to their learners.

While this repository of approved and alternative tools will continue to grow, there is early evidence that it can continue to support teachers, learners, and family members in more deeply understanding which tools students have daily access to and why.

## Key Outcomes

DPS staff and leader interviews highlighted several benefits to the new evaluation process, including higher usage of secure products, financial savings, and increased understanding of effective tool use and impact.

### Prioritizing Access to Secure and High Quality Edtech Products

*The evaluation process enables the intentional prioritization of student data privacy and impact on learning.*

The evaluation process allowed DPS to be more intentional when reviewing a product, particularly with determining which data it is collecting, specifically about students. This process has helped some teachers recognize the importance of data privacy and what student information they are entering into these tools. While this messaging is not fully resonating with all staff, DPS has found that the priority and rigorous consideration for privacy and accessibility has led to schools using safer edtech products by reducing the risks of data breaches and concerns around legal action. In addition, through the process of documenting the edtech products in the district, DPS recognized the risks that come with the use of tools that do not have data privacy agreements with the districts. This work demonstrated a need for increased professional learning, so the DPS team provided educators with cybersecurity professional development to help them become more cautious about where they're inputting learner data.



*“Something I think a lot about is the amount of time each individual school, department leader, teacher, staff have spent in the past trying to find a tool that they want to use — giving them time back because we’ve identified good tools for them is a win that is harder to measure. How do you identify time we’ve lost over the years in everyone shopping for their own products? A few extra minutes in the day.”*

—District Leader, DPS

The evaluation process also calls on content teams to deeply evaluate the quality of instruction offered by the tool. One principal explained the value they saw from this process in saving time and supporting learning: **“If someone is really vetting apps, there really has to be a process—if there is a tool that’s not leading to achievement, we don’t want it ... There are some apps out there that one teacher wants that we don’t have time to vet.”** Different members of the content review team evaluate products to determine whether they are fully aligned to grade-level state standards and district curriculum, provide opportunities for students to progress toward mastery on grade-level standards, and have demonstrated evidence of impact on learning. This team also incorporates product certifications from nonprofits to support confirmation of a research-based design and documented impact on learning as claimed by the provider. Through this process, the team ensures the tools that are approved meet rigorous standards to empower educators and learners with the best tools available for their community.

## **Financial Savings Through Cohort Purchasing**

*Consolidating the number of edtech tools allows for larger group purchasing, leading to significant savings and higher engagement.*

The development of this process has enabled the DPS team to recognize significant savings per license across a variety of products through an approach they call cohort purchasing. By limiting the number of tools available, the district can maximize benefits for group purchasing. The district pre-negotiates rates and establishes a district contract with the vendor and then offers the rates to any school in the district that chooses to opt in and leverage these tools by completing this [form](#). Currently, the district

has cohort purchasing agreements in place with seven edtech tools—Seesaw, Pear Deck, Pear Practice, EdPuzzle, ClassDojo, Kami, and Kahoot!—and this list is growing. When we started this research collaboration, there were three tools on this list, and in one year, the size of the list more than doubled. The team is actively exploring expansion on this approach.

Cohort purchasing has already made significant savings of nearly \$200,000, and enables teachers to continue using the same tools that already have high user engagement (see *Figure 2*). For most of these agreements, the district is finding a 50 percent user discount. One example from the 2024-2025 school year was Kahoot!, which costs \$149.99 per teacher when schools purchase the tool. When the district went into 2024 negotiations with the provider for a bulk price, they agreed to \$44.60 per teacher, saving the district over \$25,000 on Kahoot! licenses alone.



Figure 3. Savings gained through the cohort purchasing model at Denver Public Schools for the 2024-2025 school year.

## Increasing the Effective Use of Edtech

*Reducing hundreds of tools to a consolidated and organized list not only allows for an easier selection process for the user but provides transparency for purpose and benefits.*

Through this process, the DPS team has been able to significantly consolidate the number of tools available to the schools, which leads to two major benefits: more intentional professional learning and more effective implementation.

The team aims to have two to three tools approved for each category of use for tiered instruction or instructional need (e.g., quizzing, math supplement, photo/video editing, etc.), which allows for more focused professional learning for educators and coaches. The district hopes that by providing the set of approved options, teachers will have more time to invest in learning about the available tools, coaches will have a deeper expertise in each of the tools, and the coherence will enable stronger collaboration across teachers and in professional learning communities. As one district leader explained, “Longer term, our hope in edtech is that we are not getting so many requests for random things. We’re hoping to focus on big tools our users are using the most and help our teachers get acclimated with those, knowing those well.” Similarly, another school leader saw the value in consolidation, sharing that the process will “get rid of one trick ponies, [or instances of] teachers using a tool for one specific thing.”



*“Coherence. If more people are using the same tools, we can support each other.”*

—District Leader, DPS

Beyond focused professional learning, more coherent intention around the purpose of the tools will enable more effective use of the tools. On average, classroom educators use nearly 50 distinct edtech tools per school year ([Ng, 2024](#)). Yet, we also know from research that the only way to see real improvements in learner outcomes with edtech is through implementation fidelity, or ensuring learners use the tool as prescribed by the provider ([Holt, 2024](#)). Among the multiple priorities an educator is expected to juggle, it is unreasonable to also expect classroom educators to both know the recommended dosage for each of these 50 products—which is difficult to identify in the first place ([Pattenhouse et. al., 2025](#))—and further, ensure that each tool is being used accordingly. By narrowing the number of tools, the district is also enabling leadership and school teams to have more clarity around the purpose of each tool and how it should be used, creating opportunities to develop better systems—like data dashboards—to support educators with meeting implementation goals.

## Better Understanding of Product Impact

*Consolidated tools have led to stronger vendor partnerships and focused conversations on impact at the district, school, and classroom level.*

Through this evaluation process DPS is strategically limiting the number of edtech tools in the district, better positioning the district to understand each tool's impact on student achievement. Our discussions with the district describe the shift at DPS from a very flexible and school-based model to a more centralized approach. With this, the consolidation process supports potential for deeper, data-driven analysis and understanding of the impact of the tools. The narrowed number of options can enable districts to have focused evaluations and conversations about effectiveness.

For example, a partnership with one vendor is creating the opportunity for the district to systematically compare app usage with student data to see if the tool is truly effective. A member of the core team described that this benefit is only possible due to consolidation, explaining, **“With eight math apps, that was hard to engage in, but with a narrowed amount we can have those conversations.”** The ability to establish meaningful partnerships with providers and evaluate each tool helps ensure that the tools that are being procured and used truly support student success. Ultimately, this approach puts the district in the driver's seat, enabling leadership to be informed and empowered with data when making procurement decisions to drive results.

## Recommendations

In addition to identifying initial benefits to this approach, there were many shared learnings. From these learnings, we propose suggested strategies for districts to consider as they develop their own edtech evaluation process.

### Ensure Communication and Co-Development

*Open communication and opportunities for involvement throughout the process may result in more buy-in and trust.*

*“Start early with including every team that could have a stake and having a rep from each team. Start from that collaborative space with as many voices and stakeholders involved as possible. Easier to have everybody in the room designing from the beginning and with buy in, start with clear why, then start taking it out beyond that.”*

—Lucas Mund, Manager of Educational Technology

One clear opportunity for improvement learned through rollout and implementation is the ability to meaningfully communicate this new process across all levels and roles, especially for a large district. This process represents a significant change, especially in a district like Denver where schools had previously not needed permission to use any tool they wanted. As one school leader explained when discussing the challenges they experienced with implementation, **“The problem is that we come from a very flexible and school-based model: a lot of the old-school principals are used to getting exactly what they want.”**



*“From where we are right now, the way for improvement is to get all of the voices in the same room for the people who are struggling with it to improve efficiencies in the process—and get more ownership from the school level.”*

—School Leader, DPS

Creating space to bring school leaders into the iterative design of this process would support deeper understanding of the purpose behind the process and the elements included in the process itself, improving communications to school staff for rollout. While principals were aware of the process, they often did not have the depth of knowledge necessary to support the change management with school staff: **“They just changed the system, and [we] didn’t get the rationale behind it—all of a sudden you have to go through this process now—it’s another thing that you need to do.”** Without school leaders’ deeply embedded understanding, the communication to the teachers became less compelling. For example, one principal noted that there was **“so much lack of clarity that principals weren’t even sure if they should share with their teachers.”** Our discussions with teachers demonstrated that the majority were not necessarily cognizant of the problem that this evaluation process aims to solve, mostly assuming legal compliance was the sole or primary motivation. One teacher explained that they had not learned about the evaluation system from the district but from other teachers, sharing that they learned about the process **“through a set of panicked messages from other teachers in the district talking about the new law being passed on July 1st ... it felt like an extinction-level event. If everything used in education has to pass through a higher set of filters and companies had to actively pursue the information to be compliant with laws in addition to previous years compliance, that the software would drop off.”** This sentiment aligns with our conversations with many teachers, which highlighted their key concerns centered on losing access to the tools that they use daily and the fear of falling behind, with little understanding of the multi-faceted approach and considerations of the process or how it is designed to ultimately support intentional and effective teaching and learning.

## Include Transparency about Rationale and Process

*Staff are more likely to support the evaluation process with a better understanding of why and how the process is occurring*

To support buy-in at the school level, educators need the space to connect their needs with the goals that this process is trying to achieve. *What are the problems that educators are experiencing, and how can this process support mitigating some of these challenges?* Making these connections, as well as inviting school leaders and educators to be a part of the solutioning and gaining deeper understanding about the evaluation process, can play a key role in supporting buy-in. This broader collaboration also provides opportunities to improve process efficiencies and effectiveness for everyone affected by it. One staff member recommended that DPS leadership provide a clear timeline for their process to approve programs for the upcoming school year, including when they can expect a response after submitting a request.

To deepen buy-in and support communication across all levels, the messaging about this process needs to be focused on what the evaluation process is providing, rather than the narrow focus that most educators feel about tools being taken away. For example, through the consolidation of available tools, there is increased and shared clarity on the purpose of each approved tool. This enables the district team to also share more information about effective use of the tool, such as recommended dosage, as well as opportunities to connect with school and district leadership to access professional learning and technical support to best leverage each available tool. There are also greater opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing about challenges and successes with tools and apps, as well as best practices. One teacher suggested that the approved and alternative technology repository could serve as a place for teachers to share and learn from each other, which could also increase users' understanding of how tools can be leveraged to support their teaching context. In this way, the repository can also serve as a feedback loop for approved products, where the district can see examples of successful and unsuccessful tools, providing them with insights into which tools to invest in and where there may still be gaps.

## Offer Templates and Exemplars

*DPS' development of templates and examples for vendors alleviates the burden of staff engaging in multiple conversations with a provider to request the review of a new tool.*

This evaluation process is a substantial change to the status quo for Denver Public Schools, which calls on the need for professional learning and examples to support uptake. Interviews with school leaders and educators revealed the value in providing examples for them to reference when filling out the [intake form](#) to request the review of a new edtech tool. Examples of completed forms for a variety of requests can help streamline filling out the form for the first time or for a new type of request.

Earlier versions of this process led to the district team needing to go to the provider multiple times with different requests to evaluate the tool. Now the team is developing a vendor-facing form that school leaders are invited to share with providers directly to pull together relevant technical compatibility, accessibility, and legal compliance information and share with the evaluation team in one interaction. This new approach will ease the lift on both the district side by minimizing outreach, as well as the provider side by consolidating all requests into one form. Additionally, this form will host an overview of the evaluation process to onboard the provider and prepare them for what to expect.

## **Build Capacity and Sustainability**

*Building in opportunities for teachers and leaders to collaborate and leveraging third party validations will alleviate contextual gaps and improve the timeline when leaders submit tools for review.*

Educators frequently share that their lack of time and capacity is one of their largest challenges when doing anything at the school level. The capacity needed throughout the evaluation process is no exception, and was shared as a point of contention for many of the principals and assistant principals at DPS. The process itself was designed to take about five weeks, but could extend to months due to a combination of back-and-forths with vendors to sign legal agreements and the lack of capacity that DPS staff had to commit to the review process. DPS is working to grow the team involved in this effort, as well as continuing to integrate third-party product certifications to abbreviate internal review of tools.

Staff shared that they also found it limiting that teachers cannot submit the form and that it has to be done by a school or district leader. This causes knowledge and contextual gaps for the leaders, who do not have the full understanding of why the teacher is submitting the tool and the benefit that the teacher would have by using this tool. Needing to get that context, on top of spending additional time submitting these requests, can further stifle leader capacity. As a result, another recommendation is to expand collaboration to include school leaders and teachers to discuss what tools should be submitted and how, as well as build the capacity for these meetings to take place.

## **Conclusion**

Denver Public Schools' new edtech evaluation process has tackled the challenge of creating a more systematic and streamlined approach to edtech procurement, and started to address the oversaturated edtech marketplace, lack of clarity in procurement processes, and evolving legal landscape to regulate these tools. While school leaders and educators on the receiving side of the process are experiencing some initial challenges in early rollout, the root causes of these challenges are grounded in a lack of clarity about the process and its purpose, and can be addressed with greater collaboration and ongoing communications.

The district team is committed to ensuring each student in the district accesses tools that will drive student success in safe products that are aligned with district priorities. This process has already recognized many successes, including the cross-department collaboration that continues to expand, establishing a nimble system for evaluating tools, and significant financial savings through cohort purchasing. The process has also led to the development of a repository of approved edtech tools, significantly reducing the number of tools and providing access to higher quality, more secure products. In addition, by reducing the number of tools, DPS is better positioned to support district-wide professional learning and collaboration for effective use and to understand and track the impact of these products on student achievement, something districts rarely have the opportunity to do. The DPS core teams' openness to collecting critical feedback from staff impacted by the process, and their commitment to iteratively improve the process based on that feedback, has created space to build upon the successes and make improvements to support the entire district in creating a robust, streamlined, and meaningful process to ensure that the tools students use are capable of effectively supporting their learning and success.

As districts across the country grapple with shrinking budgets, evolving legislative landscapes, and evergrowing risks to using emerging technologies, the Denver Public Schools' edtech evaluation model serves as an approach that keeps learners' successes and safety at the center of every decision. Creating a process to evaluate each tool that includes a cross-functional collaborative review team and the development of an edtech repository call for a significant commitment of staff time and resources. Yet, this innovative approach enables leaders to be both nimble and thoughtful about the investments they make to benefit their learners, and is a strategy we hope gains traction across districts to ensure student success is at the forefront of every edtech decision.

## **Getting Started: Recommendations for an Innovative Edtech Evaluation and Procurement Process**

The report shares key assets and opportunities that other district leaders can leverage as they develop or iterate on their existing edtech evaluation and procurement processes. For those looking for immediate next steps, we recommend the following:

- Identify who in the district office should be involved (see: [Cross-Department Collaboration](#) and [Ensure Communication and Co-Development](#))
- Determine how your district can build its own repository to track tools and evaluate based on usage and standing data privacy agreements per state laws before digging into content review (see: [Repository of Approved Tools](#) and [Prioritizing Access to Secure and High Quality Edtech Products](#))
- Start with an open mind, center your why, listen to your community, and be flexible throughout the process (see: [Ensure Communication and Co-Development](#) and [Include Transparency about Rationale and Process](#))

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