As schools seek to incorporate technology into classrooms and build students’ digital literacy, choosing among the many available education technology (“edtech”) products can be overwhelming. And educators and administrators hoping to design “Powerful Learning” experiences want to make thoughtful, purposeful decisions about integrating edtech tools.

Powerful Learning is a set of principles designed to help educators create learning experiences that engage students by being personal and accessible, authentic and challenging, collaborative and connected, and inquisitive and reflective. But educators must be judicious in selecting edtech that aligns with their curriculum and values, and that provides opportunities for the full diversity of learners to thrive.

Since 2012, Digital Promise has led research on edtech purchasing, finding that choosing the best products is a time-consuming and confusing process at best. The information that exists about such tools often originates with their marketers, leading to questions about the reliability of the claims made. And because edtech products vary in quality, educators often end up relying on word-of-mouth or referrals from peers to narrow their options; those recommendations, however, rarely account for unique learning goals and learner contexts.

“We look at peer recommendations from our networks, [and] we try to find an edtech product that might help us with a current need that we have,” says Scott Miller, principal of Avonworth Primary Center in Pittsburgh.

Programming Pillars

Time and again, educators and school and district administrators have asked for a way to more easily and reliably compare edtech products based on criteria that matter to the learner. The International Society for Technology in Education and Project Unicorn recently released “Better Edtech Buying for Educators” to guide comparison of edtech tools, advising buyers to consider data interoperability, student privacy, standards alignment, research and evidence, implementation, and support.

In other words, a good edtech product would sync with existing systems, steward student data responsibly, align with existing priorities, leverage research on learning, and support its users throughout implementation. Until these principles are met universally, however, educators and administrators need a way to substantiate whether products meet these criteria.

Digital Promise focuses on research and evidence because we believe that products grounded in learning sciences research can best support Powerful Learning experiences for the full spectrum of learners. A national survey commissioned by Digital Promise in 2019 revealed widespread agreement among teachers, parents, and the general public that schools should focus on helping students reach their full potential as learners. A majority of respondents also agreed that students...
learn differently, and technology improves student learning experiences. Edtech can help meet diverse learners’ needs, but only if it is designed using research about how individuals learn.

“We want to support our teachers and students with tools that will allow them to use high-leverage strategies for teaching and learning,” says Howard E. Bissell, instructional technology director at Lexington County (South Carolina) School District One. “The edtech industry is massive, and many products are not as advertised. I’m thrilled our partners at Digital Promise are taking action—able steps to help educational leaders streamline the process of aligning digital tools with the goals and priorities of school districts.”

Certified Fresh
Conducting focus groups with 40 educators and administrators in fall 2019, Digital Promise determined that a research-based product certification would:

- Hold edtech vendors accountable to a clear set of criteria;
- Create competition among vendors to use research;
- Save time for consumers by narrowing the options when searching for learning products;
- Bring credibility to edtech selections;
- Help persuade school boards to make a purchase; and
- Offer a way to compare similar products on the same criteria.

With these findings in mind, Digital Promise developed a Research-Based Design product certification that will be awarded to edtech product teams that submit evidence verifying the links between learning research and their product’s design. Using a competency-based learning framework developed in consultation with our Learner Variability Project Advisory Board and expert researchers, the certification criteria have undergone multiple rounds of testing with product developers and consumers alike. As a result, this product certification serves as a rigorous and reliable indicator for consumers.

When searching for edtech tools to support Powerful Learning experiences, consider starting with products that display the Research-Based Design certification. While certification doesn’t replace the need to evaluate the tool’s effectiveness in your school’s context, it can help narrow the initial search for research-based tools that support learners.

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