

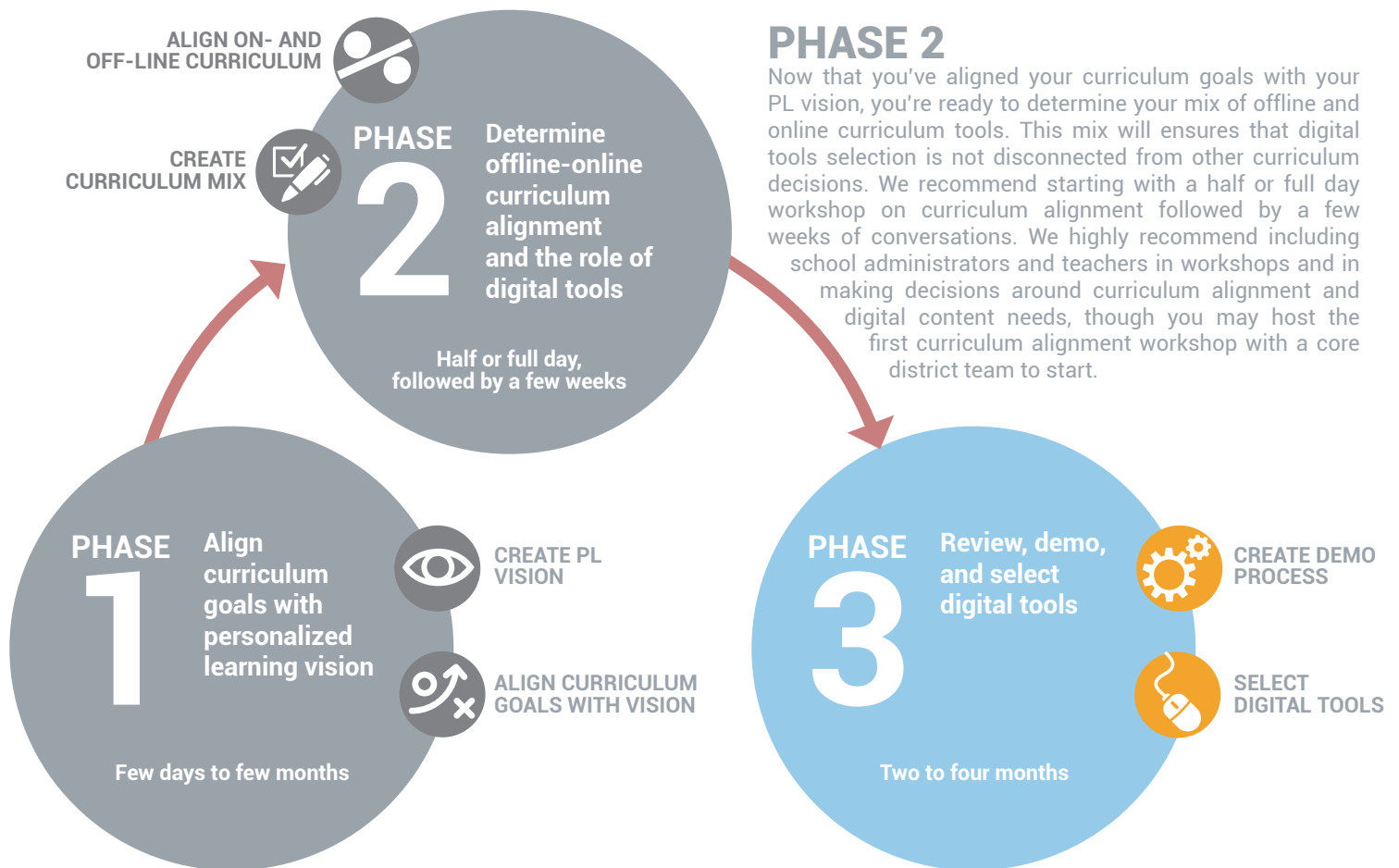
GUIDE TO SELECTING CURRICULUM TO SUPPORT PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Phase Three: Review, Demo, and Select Digital Tools



This is the third in a series of three white papers that focus on curriculum and personalized learning. Our first two white papers focus on [aligning curriculum goals with vision](#) and [offline-online curriculum alignment](#). It may be helpful to review the two preceding white papers prior to this one so that you can take the necessary first steps before making purchasing decisions.

THREE PHASES OF CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT AND SELECTION



PHASE 1

A clear vision for personalized learning is an essential first step before any decisions about curriculum, instructional models, support, or professional learning can be made. We recommend that districts identify their needs, vision, and strategy before developing a curriculum plan and digital content portfolio. Vision-setting can take anywhere from a few days to a few months. And should include the voice of teachers, students, and school and district administrators.

PHASE 2

Now that you've aligned your curriculum goals with your PL vision, you're ready to determine your mix of offline and online curriculum tools. This mix will ensure that digital tools selection is not disconnected from other curriculum decisions. We recommend starting with a half or full day workshop on curriculum alignment followed by a few weeks of conversations. We highly recommend including school administrators and teachers in workshops and in making decisions around curriculum alignment and digital content needs, though you may host the first curriculum alignment workshop with a core district team to start.

PHASE 3

At this point, you've aligned your curriculum goals with your personalized learning vision, developed an online and offline curriculum mix, and defined the role of digital tools. You're ready to review, demo, and select digital tools. This phase is key to ensuring you get the the right tools based on the specific needs of your teachers and students, and that you include key stakeholders in the process. We recommend demoing tools for at least a few weeks and including feedback from students and teachers. From start to finish the review, demo, and selection of digital tools might take 2-4 months.

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Executive Summary

The selection and procurement of digital content and tools represents a significant portion of a district's investment in a personalized learning initiative. All too often, these purchases are made:

- Without a clear vision and purpose for why the purchase is made
- Without alignment with other curriculum resources (both online and offline)
- In surplus of other curriculum resources that serve a similar purpose
- Without a thorough review of other competitive tools on the market
- Without viewing an in-depth demonstration of the product
- Without a rigorous selection process
- Without the feedback of key stakeholders

These mistakes can be costly to a district in the long run because they can create financial and organizational tensions.

In order to avoid these mistakes, many districts have chosen to solicit the support of an outside partner, such as Education Elements, to guide them through the process of curriculum selection. In our work with more than 115 districts and 500 schools over the past six years, we have created a series of three white papers to detail the key steps and essential questions necessary for each phase of curriculum selection.

In this white paper, we share steps to consider when selecting digital content and tools. It is important to note that the processes outlined in the Phase One and Phase Two white papers are crucial to follow before attempting the steps outlined here. This white paper also includes helpful insights from district leaders across the country as well as many digital copies of resources they used throughout the digital content selection process. We hope you can learn from others who have already engaged in this work.

It is our hope that this white paper will elucidate the often confusing and shadowed process of purchasing digital content and tools, while also providing helpful tips and tricks from other district leaders who have mastered the process.

I. Introduction

It's a common scenario: a principal, excited to begin personalized learning in his/her building, hears requests from teachers for a certain K-5 adaptive digital program for math and uses his/her discretionary budget to purchase a school-wide license. Meanwhile, at the district office, the curriculum director for math has just approved a new textbook-based curriculum which comes with an online version of the text. In the IT department, fears of student privacy breaches bring about a limit on which programs are permitted on the network. And in the educational technology department, if the district has had the foresight and ability to prioritize having such a position, there is someone trying to juggle it all.

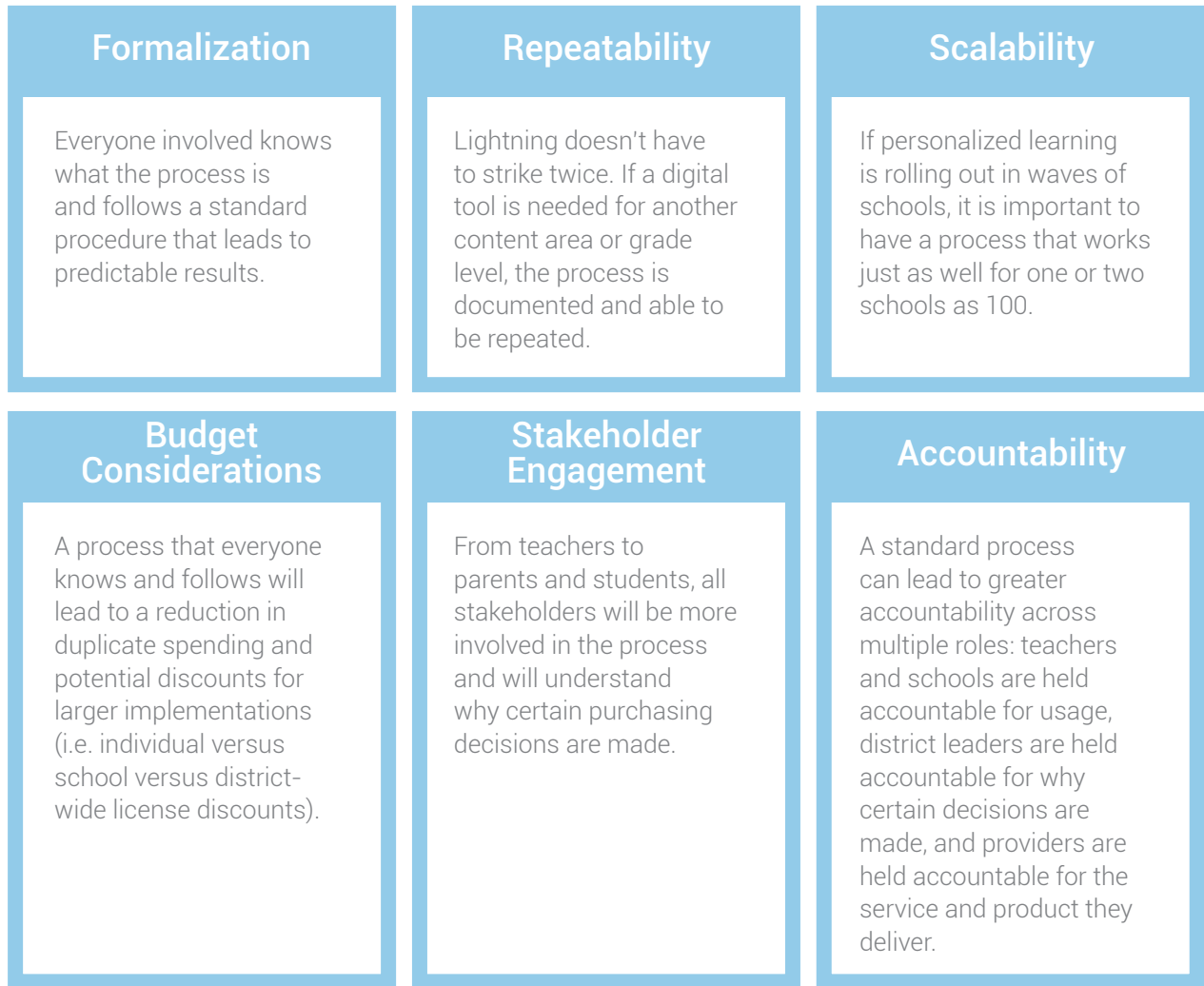
All of the parties in this scenario are well-intentioned and want what's best for students and teachers. They have prioritized personalized learning and know that integrated digital content is [one of the core four ways](#) to do it. But they lack:

- 1) A vision for how digital content and tools will support personalized learning**
- 2) An alignment between their offline and online content and the role of each tool**
- 3) An inclusive process to review, demo, and select digital content and tools**

This white paper focuses on the third component: the need for a formalized, repeatable, and scalable process for selecting digital content and tools.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING A PROCESS TO REVIEW, DEMO, AND SELECT DIGITAL TOOLS

Considering the scenario discussed above, why and how would a process for reviewing, demoing, and selecting digital content and tools be helpful?



Many districts and schools use an organic approach to digital content procurement, which can work in the short-term but can lead to redundancies, sticky questions about the budget, and a tendency towards “shiny object syndrome.” As Ryan Russell, Assistant Superintendent for Innovation and Improvement at the Metropolitan School District of Warren Township (IN) says, “Previously, the selection of digital tools was ‘person-centric’ meaning that one individual identified a tool and was in control of the budget. What we ended up purchasing varied depending on the person with the power at that time. We could get distracted by the ‘sparkle and glitter’ of the tools and we lumped them all into one category: digital tools.”

This is not to say that the process should remain rigid -- the creators of the process should keep a [design-thinking](#) mindset to constantly reflect and iterate on the needs of the users and the intended outcomes. As you will see below, we outline a recommended process broken into three parts: Part A: Review, Part B: Demo, and Part C: Select. The process that you create may include some or all of these elements based on the unique needs of your district.

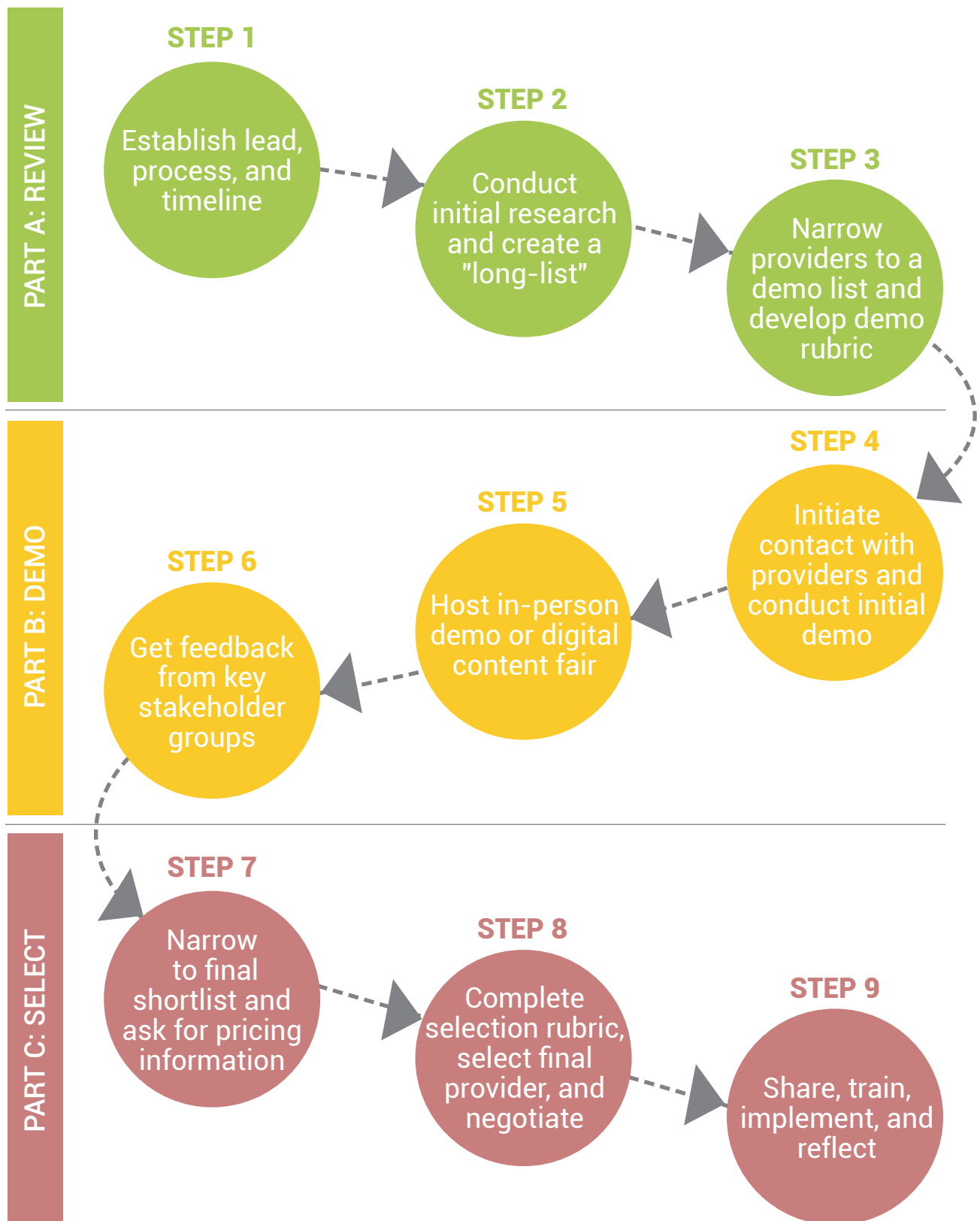
Before beginning the steps below, ensure that you have:

- A vision for personalized learning and how curriculum will support it, as described in [Phase One](#)
- A completed inventory of your online and offline curriculum to know what you have versus what you might need (may take the form of a current versus ideal curriculum mix, as described in [Phase Two, page 7](#))
- A specific, identified area of need based on both your online/offline curriculum inventory and your vision for personalized learning, also described in [Phase Two](#)

District Case Study: Marion Central School District (NY)

When Superintendent Don Bavis took the reins of Marion Central School District (MCSD), a small rural district about 30 minutes outside of Rochester, NY, he knew that personalized learning would be a key focus area. He communicated to key stakeholders about "[The One Initiative Initiative](#)" through an op-ed in a local newspaper and then combined his vision for personalized learning with his team's vision. The district's vision became: "We personalize learning today to empower every Black Knight to thrive tomorrow" (the Black Knight being the district mascot). His team then kept this vision in mind as they went through the Curriculum Mix Framework with Education Elements. They determined that while the elementary and middle school had appropriate adaptive ELA and Math programs that met the district's vision, the high school lacked foundational content across all content areas that supported teachers in their efforts to personalize. High school teachers were crafting many of their lessons independently and could benefit from a provider that could provide both instruction and practice for students with minimal teacher lift.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE RECOMMENDED PROCESS TO REVIEW, DEMO, AND SELECT DIGITAL TOOLS



II. Part A: Review

In the first part of the process, you will use your identified area of need to determine the ideal process and timeline for selection; to cast a wide net of providers and tools that could potentially address your need; and to narrow to a list of providers to invite forward to demo (Part B).

Step 1: Establish Lead, Process, and Timeline

The person who leads the digital content selection process may vary widely from district to district depending on size and staffing, but the selection of one lead is essential. Some districts may want to create a small team to support the lead in his or her work, but one and only one person should be ultimately accountable for moving the work forward.

This person might be:

- A coordinator of personalized learning
- A director of library media services
- A chief academic officer
- An assistant superintendent
- A curriculum director

If possible, this person should have the ability to ensure that decisions are not made in silos and to interact with stakeholders from the superintendent to principals, teachers, and students.

Once a lead has been established, the lead will need to take a look at the remaining steps of the process and determine which to include (depending on the needs of the district and the focus area selected).

Once the process has been solidified, the lead will establish a timeline. Establishing a timeline is essential as districts often discover hidden obstacles at the end of the process with procurement, account setup, and training which can throw a wrench into their carefully laid plans. It may be easiest to use the principle of backwards design when planning your timeline. Get feedback from school leaders as to when they would like to begin using this tool and backwards map from there, factoring in time for the selection process, procurement, account setup, and training.

It may be helpful to backwards plan and establish the following dates:



One district that has given a good deal of thought to determining a lead, process, and timeline for selection is Freehold Township Elementary School District (NJ). Pamela Nathan, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, led the selection of digital content and tools for her district last spring with the support of her superintendent Ross Kasun. One of the early decisions Nathan and Kasun made was to form a ["Digital Vetting Committee"](#) to assist with the selection process. Educators from across the district [filled out an application](#) for a position on the committee which, for teachers, provided an additional stipend because of an expectation that they would spend approximately an additional ten hours on committee work outside of the school day.

Nathan stressed that the process their team established was "consultative but not consensus-building." Even though the Digital Vetting Committee would be able to give its feedback, the ultimate timeline, process, and final decision would rest with the digital content lead.

Questions to Consider

- Who is the best person in our district to lead this process?
- Which of the steps recommended in this white paper are must-do's versus might-do's for our district?
- What is a feasible timeline given other budget priorities and our procurement process?
- When do our teachers and students need to begin using this product?

District Case Study: Syracuse City School District (NY)

One of the key decision-makers for digital content and tools for Syracuse City School District (SCSD) is Manami Tezuka, Director of Library Media Services. Tezuka works closely with Nate Franz, the Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning, to craft a [portfolio of digital content and tools](#) that provides teachers in personalized learning classrooms with the opportunity to choose among options. Teachers in SCSD know to call Tezuka if they have a question about anything related to digital content, including feedback about a vendor's product, training, or support.

Step 2: Conduct initial research and create a “long-list”

This step can be the most challenging for many district leaders. An internet search for “best ELA digital content” or “most popular learning management system” will only get you so far.

Thankfully, if you've been using the Education Elements [Phase One](#) and [Phase Two](#) white papers you will have a very specific area of need (for example: we need an adaptive ELA program for Grades K-2 that also provides the ability to assign lessons) that can help you to focus.

How do you identify a “long-list” of programs out there that might meet your need?

- One great resource is Education Elements' collection of one-pagers ([Example](#)). These documents provide you with expert opinions on the major providers in market. If you're interested, you can read in [Phase Two](#) more about the types of reviews provided in the one-pagers.
- Another approach is to skim through a website like the [Edsurge Product Index](#), [Common Sense Media](#), or [Ednak](#), which provide easy-to-navigate product reviews filterable by type of tool, subject area, grade level, and more.
- Many districts also survey teachers to find out what they've been trying or what they've heard of. They find that many teachers stay up-to-date on the newest products, and including teachers in this part of the process will increase buy-in later on. Russell of Warren says, “Teachers should have a process to submit recommendations. They are the ones in the trenches finding these resources and we have to give a voice to that.” Some districts have a survey that remains open at all times for teachers to submit requests and ideas, while others invite teachers to submit at particular times throughout the year or just before beginning a new selection process. Nathan and Kasun of Freehold encouraged their Digital Vetting Committee to submit their thoughts on which providers should be included in the initial search [using this form](#). The teacher responses informed which providers were invited forward in the selection process.

As you conduct your initial research, you'll want to begin compiling your “long-list.” Collect the name of the provider, the subject area(s) and/or grade level(s) served, links to the provider's website/any reviews and notes on your initial impression. This initial research does not yet need to be in-depth, as that step will come later.

Your “long-list” should consist of 5-7 providers that upon initial research appear to meet the needs you have identified. In the case of some very specific needs, you may only find that 3-5 providers exist to meet them, and that is ok. Start your “long-list” with as many viable options as you can find, but do not exceed 5-7.

Questions to Consider

- Who will conduct initial research?
- What does the ed tech landscape look like for our specific area of need?
- Which providers could address our specific area of need?
- Which providers are teachers in our district already using so that we can receive feedback?

Step 3: Narrow providers to a demo list and develop a demo rubric

Once you have a "long-list" of 5-7 providers, you will want to narrow it to 3-5 contenders to move along to the demo part of the process. How do you make the decision of which 3-5 providers to demo? This may vary widely depending on your district's needs and timeframe. For instance, you may have a long window to demo and want to increase knowledge on as many providers as possible. Or you may have a shorter window and already have an idea of a few providers that have caught your eye.

One easy way to "make a first cut" is to list out the "must-haves" versus "nice-to-haves" for your area of need.

Example - Focus area of need: Adaptive ELA program for K-2

MUST-HAVES

- Browser-based / platform agnostic
- Program administers initial diagnostic that places students on a personalized pathway
- Program adapts frequently based on student responses
- Program provides both instruction and practice for students

NICE-TO-HAVES





- Ability for teacher to assign lessons
- Option for instructions in Spanish
- Offline lessons provided to students

When deciding on your "must-haves" versus your "nice-to-haves," Jaraun Dennis, Chief Technology Officer at Uinta School District One (WY), recommends keeping one question at the forefront of your mind: "What are you hiring digital content to do?" He says, "So many times district staff purchase a digital tool asking it to do X, but it really does Y. You've got to make sure you know what you want to hire your digital content to do and make sure that it actually does that thing." Russell of Warren agrees: "The most helpful part of the work we've done has been the concept of categorizing tools to identify specific purposes -- digital or not. Before we lumped all online tools together when really they can do very different things."

What you're hiring your digital content provider to do (your "must-haves" and "nice-to-haves") will vary depending on your district's needs. For some providers, it may be easy to determine if they meet your "must-haves" through a quick web search of the product's website or the Edsurge Edtech Index. For others, you might not be sure yet if they do or do not meet your qualifications. That is ok -- you will learn more as you begin to talk to teachers who have used the products or receive demos on these products.

At this point, you may want to develop a more in-depth rubric to score providers before receiving demonstrations for them. This is an important step because it will ensure that you're not swayed by a new "flashy" aspect of a provider if it does not address your specific area(s) of need. This will also help you know which questions to ask providers during their demonstration as well as help providers know which aspects of their products to present on, rather than giving you an "everything but the kitchen sink" presentation.




Heather Van Looy, Program Specialist for Instructional Technology for Fulton County Schools (GA), has thought a great deal about what makes the right fit for digital content or tools. In her previous role as an instructional coach at River Trail Middle School, she was the go-to person in her school for teachers who had questions about particular providers. In her current role, she supports leaders across the district as they're making digital content decisions. She believes that the first question you need to ask yourself is: are you reviewing a digital content provider or a digital tool? By this, she means is this product going to be used primarily for instruction (i.e. digital content) or creation (i.e. digital tool)? Based on that, she thinks about different considerations. On the following pages you'll find a list of considerations compiled with input from Van Looy and other district leaders.

Consideration For All Digital Content And Tools	
 <p>Use</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the district already provide something else that serves the same purpose? • Is this program intended to be used on a particular device? • Does this program come as an app or is it browser-based? • How user friendly is this program for teachers and students? • How challenging is the login process? • Are there written instructions or tutorials? • How engaging will this program be for students?
 <p>Accounts</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there individual accounts for each child? How are accounts created?
 <p>Privacy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does this program align with COPPA and FERPA (federal legislation for student privacy)? • Does this provider sell data to outside advertisers? • Will advertisements show up during the use of this program?
 <p>Efficacy/Research</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What research can the vendor provide about the efficacy of the program? • Which other districts have been using this program or tool and to what success?

Specific Considerations for Digital Content

 <p>Alignment to district curriculum</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this program aligned to the district's standards and curriculum?
 <p>Purpose</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does this program provide primarily instruction, primarily practice, or a mix of both? • What are the recommended grade levels for this program? • Is a student required to stay only within their current grade level on the program?
 <p>Teacher input / lift</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what degree is the teacher able to assign / customize the content for students? • Does using this content take a lot of effort on the part of the teacher? • Will the student be stuck at any point if the teacher does not assign the next lesson?
 <p>Personalization for student</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what degree is the program personalized to the student? • Are there custom pathways for students? If so, how many? • What data are the pathways assigned by? How often is a student's pathway reassigned? • Does the student receive feedback from the program (both when getting answers right and wrong)? How often? • Is there sufficient scaffolding to account for students attempting content above or below their current grade level?
 <p>Data</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the program provide both formative and summative assessment? • What data and reporting functionality does the program have? • Are reports provided to various levels (teacher, principal, district administrator)?
 <p>Use</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are sound and animation complementary to content or distracting? Can you turn the sound off? • Does the program provide age-appropriate instructions? • Are accessibility features available for students who need them (i.e. translation, read-aloud, highlighting)? • What are the recommended usage times? Are they feasible for you? • What results does the provider claim will happen if recommended usage times are met?

Specific Considerations for Digital Tools

 <p>Purpose</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this tool used primarily to create? To store resources? • Will this tool assist students in achieving higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy or Webb's Depth of Knowledge?
 <p>Use</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it easy for teachers and students to create resources within this tool? • Are the resources created easy to navigate and view by teachers and students?
 <p>Data</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What type of data does the tool help the teacher collect? • Who has access to viewing the data? • Is it easy for teachers and students to collect, analyze, and view data about student performance within the tool? • Does the tool make recommendations based on what is revealed in the data (i.e. alerts, recommended supplements)?
 <p>Collaboration</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a way to collaborate in real-time with others? • Does the tool connect the teacher or school with others through built-in communities? • How does the tool support collaboration among students within or across classrooms?
 <p>Storage</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Once a student creates something with this tool, how is it stored?

With these considerations in mind, you're now ready to develop a demo rubric for your district.

Here are a few example demo rubrics from our partner districts as well as our own:

- [Fulton County Schools](#)
- [Uinta School District One](#)
- [DC Public Schools](#)
- [Education Elements](#)

Questions to Consider

- What are your “must-have” features versus those that are simply “nice-to-have”?
- How will you know if a provider has “made the first cut”?
- Who will be involved in creating the demo rubric?
- How will you train others who will be using the rubric in how to fill it out?

District Case Study: Fulton County Schools (GA)

“It’s like the wild wild west out there!” We heard this from district administrators at Fulton County Schools (FCS), referring to the plethora of digital content and tools being used across the district’s almost 100 schools. FCS wanted to find a way to vet what they called the “grey market” of tools being purchased and used by schools and teachers. The grey market was impeding the district’s effort to coalesce around a single provider for ELA and Math. In conjunction with Education Elements, FCS created a digital content evaluation tool that vetted the products in the grey market based on key qualifications outlined by the district. Products must achieve at least a certain score on this tool in order to be approved for use in the district.

“So many times district staff purchase a digital tool asking it to do X, but it really does Y. You’ve got to make sure you know what you want to hire your digital content to do and make sure it actually does that thing.”

—Jaraun Dennis, Chief Technology Officer
at Uinta School District One (WY)

III. Part B: Demo

Step 4: Initiate contact with providers and conduct initial demo

Congratulations! You are armed with both a clear focus and measures of success for meeting your area of need. You have made it to the step of contacting the providers. Again, we recommend that you not begin to contact providers before your initial research and determination of your demo rubric categories. As Van Looy of Fulton says, "Don't contact providers unless you're really serious because you might not be able to get rid of them!" You want to make sure for your sake and the sake of a provider that you don't waste each other's time.

How can you initiate contact with providers? If you happen to know the name of your regional representative for a product, that can be the easiest and most direct way. Don't know who that is? Try leveraging your network to see if anyone knows who the best person to speak to is. As Dennis of Uinta puts it, "Reaching out to other districts in your state can be very helpful. They've likely been through this process and can give you tips and tricks on working with providers."

If you're not able to get a direct line to the provider, one easy fall-back is to fill out a request for information on the product's website. You will want to describe in the comment or notes section of your request that you make purchasing decisions for your district so that it will set you apart from one-off teacher or principal requests.

If you don't get a response in a timely manner through a phone call or email, that is a "bad sign" says Russell of Warren. "How they treat the district through the demo process is how they will treat you once you've purchased the product. You may even want to give the account managers deadlines -- it will show if they prioritize your district."

What does the "initial demo" process look like? We recommend:

1. **Phone call with regional representative** - You may first want to start with a quick 15-30 minute phone call with the regional representative to get a few of your burning questions answered. Prioritize asking about your "must-have" qualifications so that you can easily know if it is worth investing more time and energy in this provider. We recommend that only the project lead attends this call.
2. **Webinar demo of the product** - Request a 30-45 minute demonstration of the product. This will be a chance to see the product in action. You may want to include a few other key team members in this webinar to get other opinions. If possible, see if you can get demo accounts of the product from the provider before the demo so that you can ask targeted questions.

3. **In-person demo** - If the provider is meeting your key requirements after the webinar, you may want to request an in-person demonstration for more stakeholders to see and interact with the product.

Questions to Consider

- How can you leverage your network to get to the right contact for your focus providers?
- Does your timeline permit time for quick introductory phone calls and/or webinars before committing to an in-person demonstration?
- If you hold a webinar, which team members would be best to involve?

Step 5: Host in-person demo or digital content fair

Easily the high point of any digital content selection process is the in-person demo or digital content fair. A well-run digital content fair serves many purposes: 1) You can learn a great deal about the prospective providers; 2) You can involve stakeholders at multiple levels; 3) You can get feedback from a variety of people at once.

As with all parts of this process, your ability to host either an intimate in-person demo with just your core team versus a full-day digital content fair with hundreds of participants will depend on your district's needs, culture, and timeline. You might even need to skip the fair altogether -- "We tried to hold a digital content fair but our district is 90 miles from an airport!" says Dennis of Uinta. In that case, a webinar or virtual demo may be more feasible.

If you're opting to host an in-person digital content fair, these can range from half to full-day events, with attendees generally being a representative sample of the school leaders and teachers who will be using the product. Bavis of Marion says, "We were very purposeful in how we selected teachers to participate in our digital content fair. We were sure to include some teachers who we thought might be 'nay-sayers.' Before our fair, I'd say 80% of our teachers did not truly understand what digital content was -- they were accustomed only to its use in credit recovery. The fair was a great way to help push their understanding as to how digital content could be helpful for more than that."

Russell of Warren agrees. "Based on the culture of your district, some teachers may feel like curricular decisions don't impact them," he said. "We wanted to make an intentional shift to include them."

Here are some of the keys to a good digital content fair:

Make sure the right providers are invited

For each focus area you're targeting, you will want to invite 3-4 providers. If you're targeting more than one focus area, this could mean that you have 10+ providers attending. You may want to stay organized with a tracker like [this one](#) from Charleston County School District.

Set expectations with the providers

Ensure providers understand who will be attending the fair -- is it mainly teachers, school leaders, or district staff? Ensure they also understand your district's context, your must-haves and nice-to-haves, and anything else you're looking for. As Russell of Warren says, "Be transparent with vendors -- if you can get teachers on board, we will make it work," meaning that if the provider impresses the most important customers (i.e. the teachers or students), then the district team is sold. Here are example letters to providers ([Fulton County Schools](#), [Charleston County School District Example 1](#), [Example 2](#)).

Create a detailed schedule

Ensure you have the time and space for all providers. Consider how long each session with a provider will be; if you're able to let providers present more than once; if you'll have individual rooms for providers to demo; or if you'll have a big open fair where participants will be able to flow through freely. Here are example schedules ([Marion Central School District](#), [Fulton County Schools](#), [Charleston County School District](#))

Invite key stakeholders

Consider if you'll invite teachers, school leaders, or district staff. Consider your focus area and who would be best to provide feedback on that focus area. Here are two examples from Fulton County Schools that show communication with participants: [Example 1](#) and [Example 2](#).

Collect feedback from stakeholders on providers

Your goal should be to collect the necessary information from the providers in order to fill out your demo rubric created in the previous step. Feedback from school leaders, teachers, and other district office staff during a digital content fair can be extremely useful to completing that rubric. Here are examples of surveys or demo guides used during or directly after digital content fairs. ([Fulton County Schools](#), [Charleston County School District](#), [Freehold Township Elementary School District](#), [Loudoun County Public Schools](#))

Stay organized

Hosting a digital content fair involves many people and moving pieces. Consider starting a project plan like [this one](#) from Charleston County School District.

Questions to Consider

- Who should attend your demo or content fair?
- Will participants attend all presentations or just a sample?
- How will you collect feedback from participants?

District Case Study: Charleston County School District (SC)

Charleston County School District's goal is to ensure that schools across their district have equitable access to digital content and tools, while still providing autonomy to personalize learning with the program that works best for their students. They found that they had a wide variety of tools being used across the district but needed some commonality to measure the correlation between digital content usage and NWEA scores. In order to meet those goals, they decided to hold a digital content fair for over 200 participants from 87 schools, with 12 vendors attending. Every principal and one to two other representatives from each school were invited to attend sessions and provide feedback.

Step 6: Get feedback from key stakeholder groups

Coming out of your in-person demos, you should have a variety of feedback from stakeholders on their initial impressions of digital content providers. If possible, during your in-person demo request a variety of demo accounts to use over the course of weeks or months. Consider requesting:

- A student account
- A teacher account
- A school leader or principal account
- A district leader account

The variety of accounts will allow you to experience the product beyond just the student level and will expose the type of data and reporting you will receive at the various levels (teacher versus school leader versus district).

Encourage teachers to go into the demo student account to see if it may meet your identified need. Sometimes spending an hour in a student account of a potential provider is an eye-opening experience.

If possible, consider inviting students to help serve as “beta testers” for the products as well. As Dennis of Uinta says, “If students aren't engaged with a program, you're going to waste your money. Earning credentials, creating an avatar, customization -- these are all ways that students enjoy engaging in programs.” He says that you should consider asking the students these questions:

- Did you feel success with this program?
- Did you ever have trouble logging in or using this program?
- How many levels or objectives did you achieve?
- What did you like best? Least?
- Is this something you would do at home outside of class?

At this point, some districts may also choose to start a small pilot of one or two providers to see which one will best meet their needs before expanding on a larger scale.

Here are a few best practices when considering a pilot:

Matt Kwiatkowski, Coordinator of Personalized Learning and Technology for Marion Central School District (NY), recommends asking providers if they have a free trial or light version of their tool to use in a pilot.

Terence Wesley, Assistant Principal at Rosa Parks Community School in Orange Public Schools (NJ), led his school through a pilot of two popular elementary adaptive programs in order to be able to compare and contrast them. He found that one of the two providers was much more expensive to pilot and required a good deal of initial training. His advice -- “You need to make sure that the provider really communicates with you what a pilot involves (how much training, when the pilot will be turned off, etc).” He also thinks that timing is very important to consider when thinking about a pilot. “I would say that a good pilot takes 3-5 months. We started our pilot around september, but I wish we had done a pilot in the spring to make decisions for the next school year.”

Dennis of Uinta offers another approach to digital content pilots. “We start with a 30 day pilot to see if the program meets the needs. Then, we will expand for another 15-30 days. At that point, we might do a building pilot. In terms of timing, a small pilot might only be a couple of months, but for a district-wide tool, we might spend 4-5 months deciding if it is what we really want.” Staff in Uinta fill out [this form](#) in order to request a pilot. They also have to track and prove at the 30- and 60- day mark if and why the pilot should continue.

You can view another pilot proposal form from Freehold Township Elementary School District [here](#).

Questions to Consider

- Will you involve students and community members in the feedback process?
- Based on your timeline, will you pilot 1-2 providers before making a final decision? For how long?
- How will teachers provide feedback on their “beta” testing?

"Before our fair, I'd say 80% of our teachers did not truly understand what digital content was -- they were accustomed only to its use in credit recovery. The fair was a great way to help push their understanding as to how digital content could be helpful for more than that."

—Don Bavis, Superintendent of
Marion Central School District (NY)

IV. Part C: Select

Step 7: Narrow to final shortlist and ask for pricing information

Based on the feedback you received from stakeholders at the digital content fair and afterward through the “beta test,” you should have your eye on the final 1-3 providers that you’d like to move to the final selection phase of the process.

Before moving forward with your finalists, you may want to reach back out to the providers who provided a demo but were not ultimately selected. Inform them of your decision to move forward with other providers, give them the reasons for your decision (if you wish), and share with them a timeline of when you may be reevaluating your digital content so that they can reach back out to you at that point.

When you’re ready to move forward, contact your finalists for additional pricing information or a pricing quote. Some providers price by the student, while others will price by the teacher or building. For most providers, there are discounts available if you purchase a site-wide or district-wide license. You may find it helpful to request information on:

- A single student or teacher license
- A site license (also called a building or school-wide license)
- A bundle (for instance, is there a discount for purchasing for 5,000 versus 10,000 student licenses or 10 versus 50 schools?)
- A district-wide license

You will also want to ask if these prices include any necessary professional development or training or if that is purchased separately and inquire about any extra fees such as an account setup fee. Sometimes pricing for digital content can be as confusing as a cell phone bill with hidden fees!

Van Looy of Fulton says, “It may be more beneficial to buy a site license even if you only need a few licenses because of the price breaks. You have to do the math. Recommendation: get quotes at many user levels and ask if they have a breakdown of where their price breaks are.”

In addition, Van Looy recommends getting a very clear picture of who actually wants to use the program in order to make the most “efficient” purchase.

Bavis of Marion encourages leveraging buying organization membership. In his region of the Wayne-Finger Lakes, there is a buying organization (BOCES) relationship that ensures the small districts in the region are able to take advantage of larger-scale pricing discounts. “Encourage providers to work with your BOCES if you’re able,” he says.

Questions to Consider

- What is your budget for purchasing digital content for this focus area of need?
- Will it be more economical to purchase site- or district-wide licenses rather than individual student licenses?
- Is professional development or initial training included in the cost or separate?
- What ongoing support is available and at what cost?

Step 8: Complete selection rubric, select final provider, and negotiate

If you are using a selection rubric, now is the time to fill it out for the final 1-3 providers. This is a step that many districts skip but leads to sticky questions later about why a final decision was made.

As you're looking over the rubric scores and thinking about making your final selection, here are a few negotiation tips:

- Dennis of Uinta shared that he often will "shop around" to ask other districts what prices they were quoted. "Often providers will match prices they've quoted to others. Another way to keep costs lower is to sign a multi-year contract because you can get a discount. Make sure you ask for a clause that renewal will be based on performance."
- Nathan and Kasun of Freehold agree. "We negotiated tremendously with our providers. We asked for a year pilot and then a discount in the following year. We make it clear to providers -- we can pass on this opportunity or you could give us a discount and this could lead to a long-term investment. We also turnkey our professional development to get the cost of PD way down or completely removed. When all else is the same, the deciding factors are the responsiveness of the provider and the quality of the PD provided."
- From Van Looy of Fulton: "We purchased a subscription towards the end of the school year. In the fall, the provider offered free Common Sense Media lessons for any new users. I called and was able to negotiate getting those free lessons. If you see a promotion, even if it doesn't directly apply to you or would be too late, reach out to them and you may get a break!"
- Dennis of Uinta also recommends asking to speak to someone besides the salesperson that you've been working with. He suggests asking to speak to an engineer to better understand the technical side of the product, the rollout plan, and how they will provide support to you. You could also ask to speak to the person who would be your account manager or professional development deliverer to see if you could work well together.

Questions to Consider

- What are other districts your size paying for a particular subscription?
- Are there any specials or discounts that you can take advantage of?
- Who will complete the final selection rubric (if you're using one)?

Step 9: Share, train, implement and reflect

Congratulations! You have purchased a new digital content program or tool. Your next steps will be to:

Share the final decision with stakeholders

Nathan and Kasun of Freehold shared the [final decisions](#) with their "Digital Vetting Committee" then with the rest of the staff. They also gave a presentation to their board on the digital content providers that were chosen.

Begin setting up accounts with the provider

This may take some time depending on the provider's ability to integrate with your district's student information system (SIS).

Schedule any trainings needed

Most digital content providers have required or recommended professional development before starting use. Many districts, including Freehold Township and Charleston County, will designate one person per building to be the point person, expert, or turn-key trainer. You'll want to consider what structures you will put in place in the long-term to be able to support the professional development of your teachers beyond the provider's initial training.

Set expectations for use

Wesley of Orange shared that after the initial pilot was completed and a provider was selected, the district wrote a usage plan that specified:

- The classrooms that would implement
- What ongoing PD would look like
- The usage requirements (i.e. based on provider recommendations, how many minutes per week should each student use the product?)
- The monitoring requirements (what data was the district interested in monitoring?)

Usage requirements in particular are important to consider. Each provider likely has a recommended usage amount similar to a doctor's prescription in order to see the results they have advertised. Similarly, you'll want to make sure your expectations are clear so that you are able to get the full value of your investment and able to make decisions later on about the effectiveness of the product.

Implement

As implementation begins, consider ways you can encourage your staff to utilize the product to its full amount. You could hold a "launch day" celebration or a usage competition like "March Math Madness." Many providers offer printable certificates or wall trackers to track progress that excite students and teachers alike. You can see other ways for students and teachers to track usage in our white paper on the [Core Four of Personalized Learning](#).

Reflect

Reflection should occur on both a short- and long-term basis. Frequently consider: Are we providing adequate training and support to our staff? Are we using the program with fidelity? What student data is this program providing and how can we target our instruction more effectively based on this data?

On a longer-term basis, your over-arching question should be: Is this tool helping us achieve our district's vision for personalized learning? Consider creating set intervals at which you will get feedback on the provider throughout the year or will reflect more formally on its usage and effectiveness at meeting the vision and focus area of need. Some districts will start this process at six month; others will wait a year, typically every spring. Consider a tool like the [Ed Tech Rapid Cycle Evaluation Coach](#) to assist you in your reflection.

Here are few other thought processes that district leaders undergo when considering whether or not to renew a program:

- Van Looy of Fulton says that one big reason not to renew is usage. If a provider isn't being used, "it's not a good purchase. You need to figure out why the usage is low. What are the barriers? PD? Devices? Resistance to technology? Lack of planning time? If [teachers] are tight on time for planning, they are going to stick with what they know -- which is the traditional. People have to see the value in a program to use it. They ask themselves: why is this better than what I'm already doing?"
- Dennis from Uinta shared that each April they survey teachers and students to get feedback on the digital content providers that are being used. There is also an annual review with the personalized learning representatives from each building to look at their usage and performance data, as well as comparison studies done with usage data and student test scores on NWEA. "We sometimes have this notion that we can't fire a digital provider. Don't be afraid to keep the mindset that they work for you, you don't work for them. It's ok to let a vendor go if they aren't meeting your needs."

- Nathan and Kasun of Freehold agree: "It's a very traditional perspective to adopt a tool and keep it for a very long time. We aren't going to be married to any one tool. It's about the job to be done. It's like an iPhone. If you're using the iPhone 7 you might switch to the Samsung 8. If you have the base knowledge, you can switch between providers." But before deciding to switch providers, you should also consider the financial costs and the impact on time and teacher morale. Ultimately, through following this process you will have the knowledge and tools necessary to find the right fit for your district.

Questions to Consider

- How will you share with your key stakeholders the final decision about which digital content providers were chosen?
- What will be your district's responsibilities during account setup?
- What trainings are needed? What ongoing structures will you put in place to make the implementation successful?
- What usage expectations will you set?
- How often will you reflect on the usage and effectiveness of a digital content provider? How will you know that you need to make a switch?

"You need to figure out why the usage is low. What are the barriers? PD? Devices? Resistance to technology? Lack of planning time? If they are tight on time for planning, they are going to stick with what they know -- which is the traditional. People have to see the value in a program to use it. They ask themselves: why is this better than what I'm already doing?"

—Heather Van Looy, Program Specialist for
Instructional Technology for Fulton County
Schools (GA)

V. Conclusion

There is no one right way to select digital content, but there are a lot of things to do to get it right. This white paper has provided an extensive list of steps to take and questions to consider as you begin the process. Even if your district has already started the process or has a suite of digital tools, it may be helpful to follow these steps to see what new has come on the market since your purchase was made. Please leave us a comment if you have any questions or ideas about how to select the right digital content provider to give your students the personalized learning experiences they deserve.

About the Author

Dana Britt is a Senior Design Principal at Education Elements. As a former high school educator and manager of educational technology at DC Public Schools, she has an interest in how districts select, purchase and adopt new digital content and tools, as well as [how they personalize learning in their absence](#).

About Education Elements

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