



ISSUES TO CONSIDER BEFORE ADOPTING A DIGITAL PLATFORM OR LEARNING PROGRAM

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has given the entire country a crash course in virtual education and digital education platforms. As school buildings closed in the spring, education technology vendors immediately offered educators free products.¹ Additionally, such vendor corporations, as well as tech industry trade associations, venture capitalists and venture philanthropists who have been promoting virtual education for over a decade, all worked quickly to position digital programs and platforms as the obvious solution for schools that had to close buildings to avoid transmitting the virus.^{2,3} These actors are promoting digital options not only as schools' go-to response to the crisis, but also as a leap forward into the new normal for the core education infrastructure in a radically altered school environment when the crisis is over.⁴

Unfortunately, state policymakers, communities, and district and school administrators have little information other than marketing materials to use in evaluating the claims technology vendors and other promoters make about virtual learning. Such claims can be extravagant and promotional materials seductive, but reality often contradicts them.

Meanwhile, teachers, students, and parents have struggled with mixed success to adjust to virtual-education technologies. Many students and parents have been sidelined altogether because they lack access to broadband, computers, and other digital necessities. Parents also often lack the time, resources, and knowledge required to meaningfully engage in the technological programming offered. In addition, students' privacy is undermined by federal laws that allow technology companies to be legally defined as school officials and by state laws that exempt personalized or adaptive learning products from privacy protections.⁵

With the pandemic creating a surge in demand for virtual education, decision-makers face an urgent need to get digital platforms and programs up and running in schools. What re-

search evidence there is, however, does not support claims that virtual education produces desired student outcomes, as compared to conventional face-to-face approaches to teaching and learning. Online schools, in particular, have yielded very poor outcomes.⁶ Moreover, the use of digital platforms and learning programs is tied to significant threats to the integrity of schools' curriculum and instruction programs, their student assessments, and their data collection and record-keeping practices.⁷ Compared to the surface transparency of traditional textbooks, tests, and record books, there is a lot “hidden under the hood” of virtual technologies.

Purpose of This Collection

In this pandemic, school leaders are forced to consider a set of very imperfect options as they struggle to reopen their schools. This three-brief collection identifies key issues for school leaders to consider before adopting a digital platform or learning program that will impact curriculum and teaching, student assessment, and privacy/data security. We do not review specific programs, nor do we provide advice about which programs to adopt.

Each brief in this collection can be used alone or in conjunction with one or both of its companion briefs. To allow for such flexible use, each includes recommendations unique to its specific focus as well as recommendations common across the set.

The framing principle underlying all three briefs is that school leaders should ensure that any digital technology adopted reflects, rather than undermines or distorts, the school's stated values and goals. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the best many school leaders can do is minimize any potential harm that may result from the need to hastily adopt digital technologies. With this in mind, we offer the following additional principles to guide decision-making.

Digital learning programs and platforms are less likely to harm students to the extent that they:

- Retain curriculum and teaching practices consistent with school goals and values;
- Have been reviewed for bias by independent experts;
- Maintain teachers' control of educational decisions rather than transfer those decisions to algorithms programmed into applications;
- Collect a minimal amount of student data; and
- Prevent the transfer of student data to vendors and other unknown parties.

These principles, in conjunction with the considerations detailed in each brief, can be used to help determine which products to choose, how to best use them in the current crisis, and which to abandon when the crisis has passed.

Notes and References Introduction

- 1 Schaffhauser, D. (2020, June). Updated: Free resources for schools during COVID-19 outbreak. *THE Journal*. Retrieved August 18, 2020, from <https://thejournal.com/articles/2020/03/13/free-resources-ed-tech-companies-step-up-during-coronavirus-outbreak.aspx>
- 2 Boninger, F., Molnar, A., & Saldaña, C.M. (2019). Personalized learning and the digital privatization of curriculum and teaching (pp. 45-48). Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved July 13, 2020, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/personalized-learning>

Boninger, F., Molnar, A., & Saldaña, C. (2020). *Big claims, little evidence, lots of money: The reality behind the Summit Learning Program and the push to adopt digital personalized learning platforms*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved July 13, 2020, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/summit-2020>

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- 3 HolonIQ, a company that researches the international education technology market, reported over \$32 billion in venture capital investment in educational technology between 2010-2019, and predicts over \$87 billion to be invested between 2020-2030.

HolonIQ (2020). EdTech started the decade with \$500m of Venture Capital investments in 2010 and finished 14x higher at \$7B in 2019. We expect over \$87bn to be invested over the next 10 years, almost triple the prior decade. Retrieved August 20, 2020, from <https://www.holoniq.com/notes/87bn-of-global-edtech-funding-predicted-to-2030/>

From June 2016 through December 2018, Audrey Watters posted a series of blogposts on the education technology industry and its connection to venture capital. Find those posts here:

Watters, A. (2018, December 26). The education technology industry network. Hack Education [blog]. Retrieved July 13, 2020, from <http://network.hackededucation.com/blog/>
- 4 Williamson, B., & Hogan, A. (2020, July). *Commercialisation and privatisation in/of education in the context of Covid-19*. Brussels, Belgium: Education International. Retrieved August 18, 2020, from https://issuu.com/educationinternational/docs/2020_eiresearch_gr_commercialisation_privatisation?fr=sZDJkYjE1ODA2MTQ
- 5 Boninger, F. and Molnar, A. (2016). *Learning to be watched: Surveillance culture at school—The eighteenth annual report on schoolhouse commercializing trends, 2014-2015* (pp. 14-16). Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved August 20, 2020, from <https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/schoolhouse-commercialism-2015>
- 6 The National Education Policy Center has produced research reports on the performance of virtual schools since 2013. They are all available at <https://nepc.colorado.edu/publications/research-briefs>. Find the 2019 NEPC report on virtual schools at:

Molnar, A., Miron, G., Elgeberi, N., Barbour, M.K., Huerta, L., Shafer, S.R., & Rice, J.K. (2019). *Virtual schools in the U.S. 2019*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved July 9, 2020, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/virtual-schools-annual-2019>
- 7 Boninger, F., Molnar, A., & Saldaña, C.M. (2019). *Personalized learning and the digital privatization of*

curriculum and teaching (pp. 45-48). Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved July 13, 2020, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/personalized-learning>

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