Before committing to a new learning management platform, K-12 schools and districts have some serious homework to do. Ensuring that a prospective platform aligns with institutional goals, technology infrastructure, and the requirements of an entire learning community—from teachers and administrators to students and parents—will increase the likelihood of a successful implementation, and ultimately, improve teaching and learning. A hastily chosen learning management platform, on the other hand, may inhibit technology adoption, fragment users, restrict further integration, and diminish the return on investment.

Drawing on the experiences of K-12 schools and districts, this buyer’s guide summarizes key considerations for choosing a platform. It provides recommendations for understanding how a platform works, and for engaging with a vendor to learn more about how the company’s products, services, and vision will translate into teaching and learning success for users. Finally, it serves as a hands-on resource for developing a comprehensive learning management platform evaluation built on consensus and organized around a timeline.

Learning management platforms provide seamless integration with the tools you need to increase student achievement, such as interactive video learning, eportfolios, insightful analytics, engaging professional development, an AMS, and of course a fully-fledged LMS. Administrators, teachers, and students need no longer suffer through the hodgepodge of disjointed teaching and learning tools. The benefits of an intuitive, consistent, and familiar learning experience can not only span stages of learning (think K-20), but individual products as well.

Just as it’s not surprising for districts and schools to think they have an LMS (believing their document management software or communication channel is a fully-fledged LMS), the prevalence of institutions thinking their disjointed set of solutions makes life easier for their learning community also persists. The right learning management platform can take the simplification of teaching and learning to a new level. Beginning with precisely the tools you need and none that you don’t, the right platform starts simple but leaves room to grow alongside your schools.
MATCH LEARNING MANAGEMENT PLATFORM GOALS TO INSTITUTIONAL GOALS

K-12 leaders who have successfully chosen, implemented, and supported a learning management platform recommend that schools and districts begin by evaluating platforms based on how well that technology supports institutional goals. For example, if a district plans to launch an ePortfolio initiative that enables students to reflect on achievements and showcase work for college admissions or employment, its platform evaluation team should determine whether ePortfolio functionality is provided, whether ePortfolios can be shared publicly and accessed beyond graduation, and whether the functionality is included as a standard feature or will cost an additional fee. Doing so will help the evaluation team focus on meaningful outcomes and avoid the common trap of creating extensive—but aimless—features checklists.

REIMAGINE TEACHING AND LEARNING, AND WHAT TECH CAN DO FOR YOUR CLASSROOM

While a learning management platform can and should be instrumental in supporting institutional goals, its primary function is to improve teaching and learning. To fully realize the possibilities of modern learning technology, an evaluation team should consider how a platform can streamline workflows, increase access and flexibility, enable more meaningful learning experiences, and prepare students for the next stage in their education. This means developing platform requirements based not only on existing processes and programs, but on reimagined methods that fully explore what technology covers in terms of its ability to improve the quality of classroom and online instruction.

CONSIDER CONSISTENCY AND FAMILIARITY, NOW AND INTO THE FUTURE

A learning management platform that provides a consistent academic experience at every grade level—from kindergarten through high school and beyond—allows students to focus on learning the material instead of learning the technology. Additionally, an intuitive platform interface and tools that leverage familiar web technologies help improve student performance by decreasing the anxiety and frustration caused by complicated or continually changing technology platforms.

As a district, we decided to look for [edtech] that could not only meet today’s needs but would grow and develop with the needs of our schools.

elementary school principal
UNDERSTAND WHAT USERS NEED AND WANT

Choosing a learning management platform that meets the needs of a diverse learning community requires knowledge of users’ experience with current or past platforms and a deeper understanding of their expectations for a new platform. The evaluation team should seek input from anyone who uses the legacy platform (or lack thereof), as well as anyone slated to use the new platform. A simple survey can help collect feedback about what has worked, what hasn’t, and what each user group hopes to accomplish with the new platform.

Generic survey questions can be drafted for the entire learning community and specific questions can be targeted to administrators, teachers, students, or other stakeholders. In addition to helping the evaluation team develop criteria for appraising a new platform, survey responses may also cover insight about why current platforms have been rejected by users or have not met institutional needs. This information will help schools and districts identify factors that may be critical in creating an environment of support and adoption of a new platform.

SCALE FOR THE FUTURE

A platform evaluation team can’t afford (literally) to overlook the potential effects of teaching and learning initiatives, changing infrastructure, or new legislation on future technology needs and usage. In addition to reviewing an institution’s existing strategic plan that accounts for known factors, the evaluation team should consider assembling school or district leaders to discuss how unforeseen circumstances, such as dramatic changes in enrollment, staffing, or funding, may shift platform priorities. Additionally, evaluators should consider how external developments, such as new apps, websites, tech initiatives, or teaching methods, will integrate with a prospective learning management platform. Does the platform provide an open application program interface, or API, which supports interactions and interconnections with third-party tools? Does the vendor do its part to remain at, and drive, the forefront of learning technology? These considerations will help schools and districts choose a platform that can adapt, scale, and stay relevant.

DEMAND RELIABILITY

Platform adoption may be negatively affected if teachers and students perceive that the platform is unreliable. If they fear outages, slow response times, or the loss of critical data, they will be less likely to trust the platform to provide a secure place to store information, deliver key exams, or to manage assignment submissions.

A platform evaluation team should focus both on a platform vendor’s hosting method, as well as the level of uptime guaranteed by the service level agreement. An uptime guarantee of 99.9 percent, with little or no exceptions for maintenance or service pack installations, is possible. This kind of guarantee can help instill confidence in a learning management platform and empower more teachers and students to engage with the technology.
Platform adoption may be negatively affected if teachers and students perceive that the platform is unreliable. If they fear outages, slow response times, or the loss of critical data, they will be less likely to trust the platform. A vendor’s “sandbox” environment provides a virtual reality where schools and districts can put a learning management platform to the test. In addition to validating functionality based on formal criteria, an evaluation team can request sandbox access for the entire learning community, enabling hands-on experience through facilitated group workshops or through individual user sessions. This allows administrators, teachers, students, or other types of users to walk through day-to-day platform activities and to simulate real-world scenarios specific to their roles.

Workshop facilitators can guide users through specific workflows and features to highlight what is unique about the platform. The evaluation team can document user experience by providing a rating sheet, asking users to rate features and usability based on what is most important to them. This allows evaluators to determine the total cost of ownership and to assess a vendor’s level of openness.

In the 21st century, the learning management platform is a vital part of the educational ecosystem, making the platform vendor a vital partner. Beyond evaluating the technology itself, schools and districts should gauge a vendor’s willingness to develop a long-term partnership that is responsive, supportive, and collaborative.

Peer institutions may provide valuable insight about how a vendor connects, collaborates, and creates community, as well as how it responds when things go wrong. Additionally, the evaluation team should focus on a vendor’s willingness and ability to provide upfront pricing. Because many platform vendors price their products and services a la carte (a key aspect behind the customizability of a platform), the evaluation team should request cost proposals that include every tool or feature described in an RFP response. This allows evaluators to determine the total cost of ownership and to assess a vendor’s level of openness.

**TEST PERFORMANCE AND CAPABILITY**

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Establishing a timeline at the beginning of a platform evaluation process can seem relatively simple; adhering to that timeline, however, can be challenging. More than half of districts that propose a date for platform implementation at the start of a platform evaluation process fail to meet their own deadlines. Minor setbacks that frequently occur near the end of the evaluation process, such as personnel changes or the need for unexpected approvals, can result in rushed implementations—or worse, project delays lasting months or even years. An evaluation team can’t expect the unexpected, but it can build a go-live platform timeline that balances internal needs and expectations with the reality of internal and external (vendor) capabilities.

**CONSIDERATIONS FOR DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE PLATFORM EVALUATION TIMELINE**

- Creating a complete project plan with date-based milestones will allow schools and districts to work backwards from the go-live date. The plan should outline each step in the evaluation process, including due dates and decision-makers responsible for overseeing each activity or providing final approval.

- Involving key administrators and platform users in the creation of a project plan helps ensure that everyone’s needs and expectations are addressed early on in the process, which decreases the potential for setbacks.

- Sharing the timeline with platform vendors helps communicate objectives and provides an opportunity to understand their implementation process and timelines.

**CONCLUSION**

What’s the cost of not jumping in with Canvas? You know, what’s the cost of not doing it? When you start weighing all of the benefits, I mean, it’s really a no-brainer in my mind.

Santa Ana Unified School District

The learning management platform is at the center of a modern educational ecosystem, but achieving meaningful, long-term results requires much more than a financial investment. The platform evaluation process provides an opportunity for schools and districts to invest in their own best interests by reflecting on how users’ needs and institutional goals intersect with platform offerings. This will help ensure that the platform chosen will meet the unique needs of an institution’s learning community today and in the future.