ADVANCING
K12

TECHNOLOGY. CULTURE. LEADERSHIP.

Great Leaders are Epic Failures

10 WAYS

TO AVOID BAD EDTECH BUYING DECISIONS

Pennsylvania District Finds Modern Technology in New SIS

STORING DATA IN THE SBO

SKYWARD®

Welcome to the Spring 2023 edition of Advancing K12.

Education is in a tough place right now. Teachers and substitutes are being stretched thin as their responsibilities keep growing, students are still trying to catch up after missing nearly two years of in-person learning, and no ready-made solutions are available to these very complex issues. While it is by no means a fix-all, the first thing that education needs at all levels and for all people is grace.

Having grace—a sense of mercy, goodwill, and kindness towards others—in the face of hardship is a gift that anyone can give, and that everyone will appreciate. In this Advancing K12, you can find inspiration for the type of workplace graces your district can extend at all levels, as seen in our articles about easing educators' mental loads, and improving behavior tracking to support students through struggle.

If these and the other articles featured in the magazine resonate with you and your district, I encourage you to explore further at www.skyward.com/blog for articles on K-12 culture, leadership, achievement and more.

I hope the rest of your year continues in the spirit of grace and kindness, and that it continues to grow into a hallmark of culture for your community.

All my best,

Scott J. Glinski

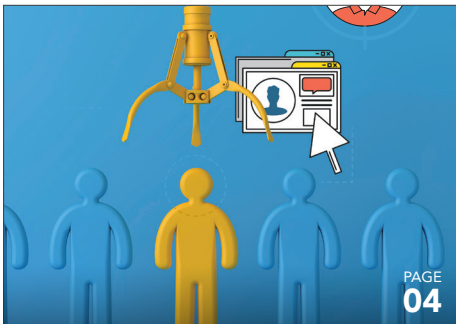Scott Glinski, Skyward CEO

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Great Leaders Are Epic Failures

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ABOUT SKYWARD

Since 1980, Skyward's SIS and ERP solutions have helped more than 2,500 school districts save time, connect with families, and empower success. By blending advanced technology guided by actual users with world-class support delivered with a personal touch, Skyward is the clear choice for K-12 leaders who want to spend less time on tasks and more time with students.

How Edtech Can Help Recruit and Retain Substitutes
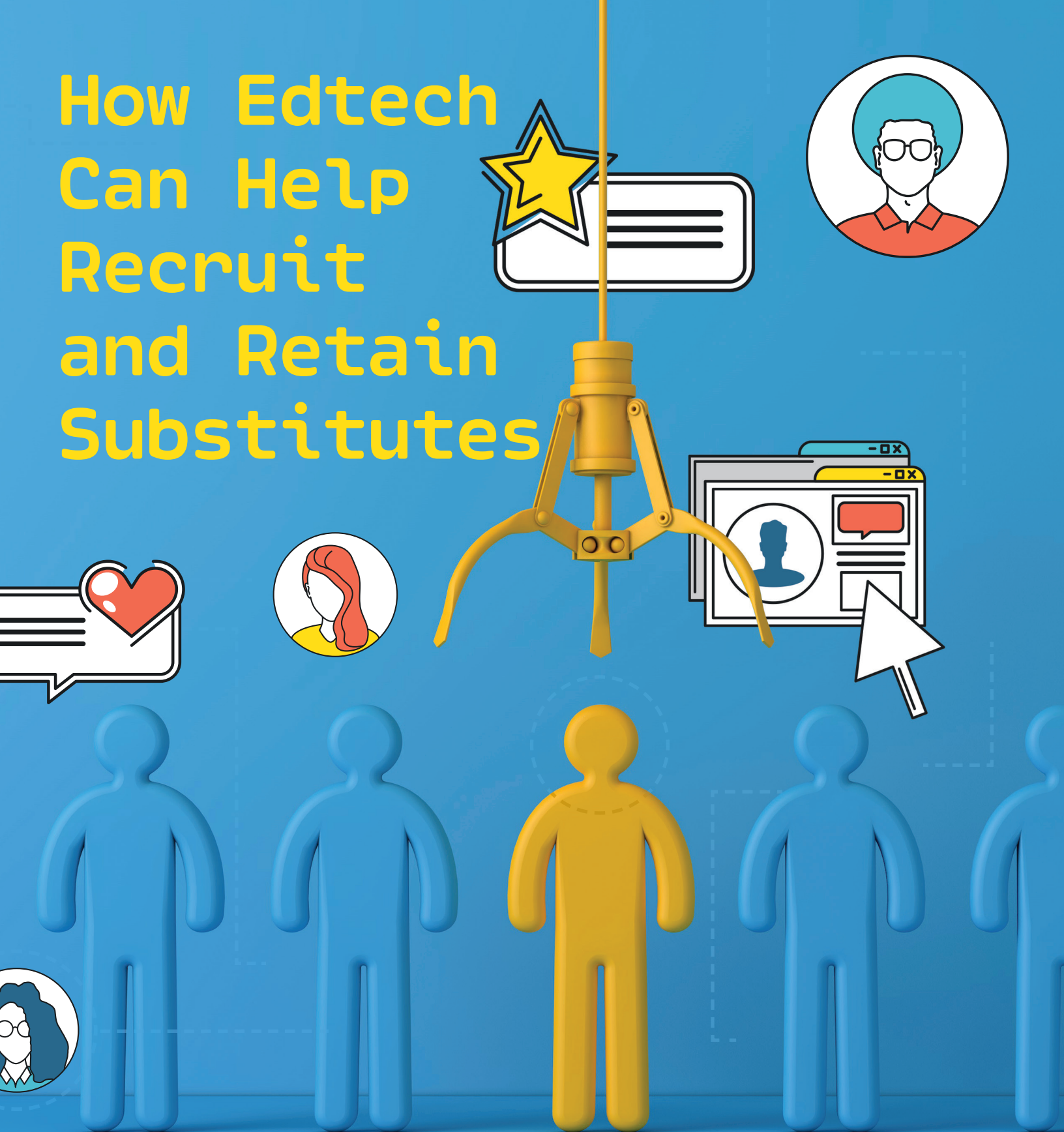
While the community may be buzzing about the upheaval in job markets, it's not news to those trying to hire substitute teachers. Currently surveys show 1 in 4 workers is looking for a new job. Of those who have decided to leave, more than a third leave due to their workplace's culture.

Technology can feel magical, but it is never the only answer to hiring challenges. Still, if you're looking to differentiate yourself from other competing districts, have you considered sharing your top-notch edtech support for substitutes? Here are three ways to do it.

1. Share what sets you apart

Number one is culture, which is built by people and not machines. However, you can use tech to get the word out that your culture is healthy, happy, and built by your team working in sync. Take a look at your school website—most likely the first place candidates will look—and social media accounts to ensure your branding is up to date.

Next, don't sleep on your student information system (SIS)! Your administrative software can ease the burden of substitutes in a few ways. First, positive attendance systems eliminate awkward roll call that eats up precious instructional time. But if positive attendance isn't yet part of your admin process, simply being able to access a visual seating chart can ease a lot of substitutes' worries. Finally, the more intuitive and easier to access the software is (think cloud-based systems accessible through any browser, secured with the substitute's own unique credentials) the more time substitutes have to spend with students.

2. Don't forget staff substitutions

Bus drivers, lunch staff, and other roles outside of teaching will need time off too. When choosing edtech designed to provide these resources,

consider the training and learning curve of each. Is it easy to learn, or will lunch lines wrap around the building if the main kitchen staff dare to take a day off?

When families can manage lunch balances online, students don't have to worry about making cash transactions. Barcode readers make purchasing lunch simple. And custom point-of-sale screens using touchscreen monitors make learning the system on the fly a little easier.

3. Support substitutes so they stay

Once a substitute has signed on, how can your district ensure the reasons to stay outweigh the temptation to go? Set up a solid foundation by helping all substitutes feel they belong and aren't simply a faceless visitor to the classroom.

Creating that feeling of belonging can leave a lot of leaders clueless at first, but with a little practice it becomes second nature. Plus, the act of building a culture on belonging can also give you valuable insight to what keeps people coming back.

Number one is creating a culture built for recognition. When substitutes feel valued and respected, they aren't likely to forget that feeling—even if they'd like to forget some of the more awkward or challenging classroom moments of a hectic day. Encourage your permanent staff to watch out for substitutes and welcome them as warmly as you do. The more friendly names on the teacher roster a substitute can pick out, the more likely they are to accept an assignment for a teacher in need.

Finally, take down your own defenses a little and invite substitutes to share valuable feedback about their experiences. Their unique perspective can tell you a lot about how your culture and branding comes across in practice. Your curiosity matters.

Now for a little edtech connection, consider: How do substitutes get notified of an assignment? Ringing phones in the wee hours? Or a tech-savvy text message or push notification on a smartphone? Top-notch systems even automatically reach out to substitutes when a teacher submits a request for time off. Imagine the time saved and the benefit to all educators involved.

The truth is, it's been hard to retain substitutes for a while now. By examining the benefits that already exist in your district, you may discover a new angle to advertise for the upcoming school year. ∎

STORY BY

Erin Werra
To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog

The Best Benefit You Can Give Educators?
Easing Their Mental Load.

There's no doubt education leaders are facing a hiring and retention crisis.

According to a recent survey from the National Education Association, more than half (55%) of members are considering leaving the profession[1] earlier than originally planned. If that's not enough, 67% report their burnout is a very serious issue (90% said it was at least a somewhat serious issue)[2]. The stress and stakes could not be higher.

The disconnect between the reality and the perception of teachers' workloads contributes to a vast misunderstanding of the profession. While this conflict has been simmering under the surface for a while, the effects of pandemic-era stressors have brought it to a head. The idea that teachers practice their trade because of the intangible benefits they get—purpose, fulfillment, passion—isn't entirely off-base, but reducing teaching to a "work of heart" and a "calling" creates a perfect breeding ground of overwork and underpay.

This brings us to the next harsh reality: school districts aren't exactly rolling in the dough. In fact, several factors including declining enrollment[3] have led to an overall loss of funding for many public schools. Without the funds to provide much-needed pay increases, benefits, and bonuses, how can school districts attract the educators and staff they need to survive—and for students to thrive?

One investment can go a long way to easing the administrative task burden. But let's back up and examine what that actually means.

Administrative tasks are not a calling

Let's for a moment continue to indulge the idea that teaching is a passion-driven art (because for many educators, it absolutely is). Let us also anchor this scene within the reality of school today.

Recordkeeping (think scheduling, grading, and reporting) and classroom management (attendance, behavior, and intervention) isn't a work of passion. It's, well, work.

Closer to drudgery than dedication. And when all that recordkeeping is manual? Passion and skill drown, wading through clunky software and exported spreadsheets. Even if the routines in place are airtight, the sheer amount of executive function needed to remember and complete the administrative tasks behind managing a classroom of 25+ students is exhausting.

That's where an oft-overlooked benefit comes in: *Automation.*

Data automation saves time and energy

How does automation shift to becoming a benefit? By streamlining crucial administrative tasks to save time, energy, and brainpower for overworked educators.

Administrative tasks are particularly good fits for automation: think of systems like positive attendance, when students check in to a class rather than waiting to be called on. Research shows automated attendance letters improve chronic absenteeism. And parent engagement soars when families have access to a portal with grades and other achievement and school info at their fingertips.

Data automation must deliver the data educators need at the time they need it. It must speed manual processes and eliminate processes that shouldn't require human intervention (like reporting and recordkeeping). It shouldn't take a degree in computer science or programming language expertise to extract data from the system. And it must preserve the privacy of students by only allowing those with a vested educational interest access to their data (FERPA guarantees this right for every student). Effortless sync between systems is no longer a dream—data standards such as Ed-Fi make it possible.

The concept of data-driven instruction differentiated by students' most recent achievement scores has become an expectation for personalized teaching and learning. Educators need access to that data to make differentiation happen—automated and FERPA-compliant delivery of the most recent data can eliminate bottlenecks and help
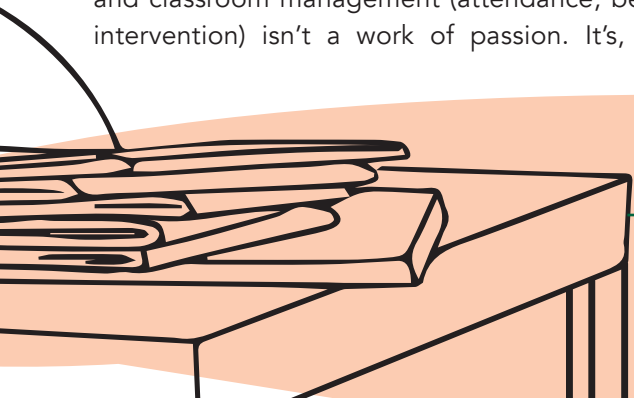
teachers pivot quickly. But automation can even take data analysis a step farther by empowering educators to manipulate the data they're working with to see real-time trends.

There is no substitute for an engaged, enthusiastic teacher in the classroom. Make room for that enthusiasm to flourish by making data manipulation a snap, not a slog.

Automation is not just for teachers

Almost every corner of student services can be improved by a little thoughtful automation. Facilities management can benefit from scheduling maintenance during low occupancy and making consumable resource replenishment automatic. Low funds reminders can help cafeteria lines zip along and ensure no one goes hungry.

The process of hiring gets way easier (and more welcoming) when the legwork is automated. In the business office, automation can even head off fraud and make payroll less of a headache.

And the time and effort saved for IT teams assigning hardware to students and classrooms is fantastic, but nothing is better than the security automatic updates and data backups offer in the event of a breach or disaster.

Automation can even help secure physical buildings by managing the flow of visitor traffic and restricting access to certain areas.

The bottom line

Automation requires thoughtful and deliberate implementation, which costs time and budget up front. It's always daunting to imagine replacing antiquated legacy systems. But the benefits to the team in the long run can add up quickly—and your team will get the message you'll do anything to support them a little better.

Retaining high-performing staff is a challenge. Why not look into creative solutions for improving the quality of life at work?

You may find the quality of your workforce improves right along with it. ∎

STORY BY

Erin Pinter

To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog

[1] Walker, T. (2022, February 1). Survey: Alarming number of educators may soon leave the profession. NEA. Retrieved January 18, 2023, from https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/survey-alarming-number-educators-may-soon-leave-profession

[2] GBAO Research + Strategy. (2022, January 31). Poll Results: Stress and Burnout Pose Threat of Educator Shortages. Washington, DC.

[3] Hubler, S. (2022, May 17). With plunging enrollment, a 'seismic hit' to public schools. The New York Times. Retrieved January 18, 2023, from https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/17/us/public-schools-falling-enrollment.html

The added benefit of a lighter emotional load

Ease your staff's mental load by also paying attention to their emotional load. Spark new joy in your district and keep school culture healthy and whole with these tips:

Give recognition

Set aside time—even one or two extra minutes a day—to recognize individual team members for their contributions or accomplishments each week.

Share the wins

Ask your team what their wins for the week are, and celebrate those wins with the entire team to amplify the good vibes.

Celebrate with social media

Use your district's social media platforms to highlight the hard work your staff puts into the day-to-day school experience so students and parents can also share their appreciation.

Facilitate emotional support

Build an individual's internal validation by asking, "What went well in the past week because of you?" Use it to spark conversations in coaching, which can lead to sharing external validation.

For the full article, visit skyward.com/blog and search "Leaders, Spark New Joy."

RED FLAGS OR GOLD STARS:

Flipping the Script on Behavior Tracking

What's the first thought that comes to your mind when you hear the phrase "behavior tracking"?

Is it "discipline"? Or more along the lines of "positive behavior management"?

We know behavior tracking doesn't have to be inherently punitive. Through systems like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) that focus on prevention

and not punishment, schools teach students positive behavior strategies just as they would teach math or science.

In PBIS schools, everyone—students, teachers, school leaders, and even custodians and lunchroom attendants—know what positive behavior looks like, and they use a common language to talk about it. It's a school-wide approach to positive behavior management.

In a school with a more traditional view of disciplinary action, behavior would be corrected through punishment—detention, suspension—with a student being expected to behave after. In a school implementing PBIS, a student's behavior is seen as a form of communication.

For example, if a student is talking loudly while others are trying to work, it might signal to their teacher that they're craving attention, and the teacher might offer the student a chance to share their opinion with the rest of the class. If the student continues to talk loudly, there might be other strategies involved—a chance to talk with a peer, or giving the student a break from the classroom. If the behavior continues, strategies continue to be tested and changed.

There's plenty of evidence to support that systems like PBIS lead to better student behavior. However, critics of these systems also say there are flaws, and the fact that PBIS provides positive support for "appropriate" behavior implies that "appropriate" and "inappropriate" behaviors are neutral concepts. Because of personal and unconscious bias, these concepts are rarely neutral, which can lead to inequities in school discipline. And, the road to a school or district becoming a PBIS school is a long one, with many implementations taking between three to five years, and a lot of trial and error.

So, what should schools do if they want to start taking a different approach to behavior tracking and move away from reactive and punitive to proactive and positive? It starts with these mindset and school culture shifts:

Changing our vocabulary around behavior tracking

Instead of behavior tracking being synonymous with discipline, start to consider how you might track positive student behavior data within your classroom, school, or district. Good examples of positive student behavior worth tracking are skills that can be used

long-term to improve a student's college and career aspirations—actions like self-care, self-motivation, time management, or working well in groups.

Tracking behavior similarly to grades

We don't scold students for struggling academically. Instead, we utilize programs like Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) to intervene and improve. Could behavior be tracked in the same way? Often behavior issues point toward academic issues (and vice versa), so tracking and providing students with adequate support in both of these areas can be a tremendous help.

Making it a habit to record behavioral data

Data about a student's behavior is just as important as their academic data, but there are still many schools who don't routinely record and analyze these insights. Collecting this kind of big-picture information can make a difference when it comes to predicting student success. Uncovering the causes and triggers of a particular behavior—and turning that data into action—could help schools not only improve behavior, but academic achievement.

And, record keeping is essential to early intervention for behavioral issues. If teachers, school staff, or administration need to address something with a particular student, it needs to be recorded somewhere.

But where, oh where can you do that?

Enter: your student information system (SIS).

Student data is housed in a student information system for a good reason—these records need to be kept for a certain amount of time, depending on the type, and carry requirements based on when students graduate or leave the school system. Additionally, FERPA (the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) also applies to SIS records, which ensures confidentiality while creating the records that are needed to identify when a student may need a behavioral intervention.

Speaking of intervention, because behavior tracking data lives in your SIS alongside other student records—attendance, grades, and demographics, to name a

few—it's easier to see a holistic view of the whole child. Housing all student data securely together makes it easier to spot trends quickly and intervene sooner. A swift action plan can make a huge difference for a child that needs just a little extra support to make it back onto a stable path forward.

A mindset shift around behavior tracking—paired with strong data records courtesy of your SIS—can help schools track behavior in a way that's both positive and helpful for students. ∎

STORY BY
Erin Werra
To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog

Intervention Needs an Abundance Mindset

The more information there is for behavior intervention, the easier it is to aim toward success. Make behavior tracking and intervention a positive experience for staff, parents, and students by using these tools to get everyone on the same page:

Documentation and planning

Use your district's SIS platform to keep intervention records in one place for the staff who need to know the implementation status, expectations, timeline, and progress. Keeping it on the SIS also keeps the data secure and FERPA compliant.

Assessment and data review

Once students are assessed, it's best to report their data in multiple ways so more people can provide insight according to their skillset, but methods of assessment can vary. Even with traditional letter grading, proficiency can be measured in a variety of tailored methods to ensure the student can succeed.

Family feedback

Understanding a student's life in both school and the home is crucial for a strong intervention. When intervention specialists can communicate home quickly through the parent portal, they have the opportunity to share progress and celebrate successes with families.

Behavior tracking

Tracking behavior shouldn't be a punishment. Positive behavior recognition and tracking offers a great way to interact with students at their best (not just on bad days,) and these can be added to the daily dashboard for a full view of how the student is progressing.

For the full article, visit skyward.com/blog and search "Intervention Needs an Abundance Mindset."

WHAT'S GOING ON WITH BIG EDTECH

"Big," when talking about an industry, raises red flags in people's minds for a reason. Look at the industries that usually get the descriptor: big tobacco, big oil, big pharma. Nobody earns "big" by being an overwhelming force for good, but isn't technology for education supposed to be a force for good? Like most industries, it can be, but it can also veer into shady territory.

With edtech initiatives attracting investment dollars, it's getting more and more difficult to see the line between using technology to facilitate education and using education as a profit generator for technology companies.

BIGGER CAN MEAN BETTER

Even though there are negative connotations to contend with, bigger can mean better in edtech when it means that underfunded districts could gain access to technology that they wouldn't be able to provide on their own. In 2021 Verizon alone pledged at least three billion dollars to ensure that vulnerable communities didn't fall behind in education in the first year after the pandemic began.

Another perk to the explosion of edtech, as seen in the Verizon initiative, is that introducing a wide variety of edtech programs into a district allows for a more future-ready education. If students can explore a rich spectrum of immersive STEM technologies, they will be more prepared to enter a market sector in five or ten years that might not even exist right now.

WHEN BIG EDTECH IS TOO BIG

When an edtech company has the money and influence to ensure that its programs and products get rolled out into schools, the trouble begins brewing.

No regulation or oversight

The first pitfall of rampant edtech rollout is that there is little to no regulation or oversight to track whether or not the technology is effective for increasing student achievement. Vincent Quan, coauthor of "Education Technology: An Evidence-Based Review", discovered that "… a lot of education technology companies don't feel like they have incentives to actually have their programs evaluated and the school administrators often feel like they have no choice. A lot of these programs are not backed by evidence, and they feel like they have to implement an education technology program."

At best this implementation attitude could just lead to having a what's-new-and-now approach to edtech. At worst, this could lead to the implementation of counterproductive technologies that were never properly reviewed, if at all.

The playing field is still not level

Access to edtech in the classroom is supposed to be great equalizer. In the classroom. An entirely new, prohibitively uneven playing field is created when that edtech is supposed to bridge into the home. According to the FCC[1], at least 19 million Americans lack access to reliable internet

service at home. The majority of that number is made up of families in rural or tribal areas—areas that already suffer from being underserviced and underfunded. When too much of education hinges on technology, these students still can wind up trailing behind peers in tech-ready homes.

So much money, too much influence
What makes the concept of "Big Edtech" so thorny is that it doesn't necessarily refer to billion-dollar companies granting out a portion of their profits to benefit education. True big edtech means companies that look at education as just a means to fill the coffers. Market data research[2] has revealed that in 2010, approximately $500 million of venture capital was invested in edtech around the world, which rose precipitously to $16.1 billion in 2020. Education technology is a cash cow, and companies are milking it.

Imagine a college professor that assigns a textbook they wrote, says you can't pass the class without it, and then charges you 200 dollars for it. It would be ethically questionable, but the students who would need the class wouldn't really have any power to complain. This is the same problem that results from all that education profiteering, except companies can push their products onto an entire district, state, or country. If some of that money finds its way to lobbying legislation toward their favor, the problem increases exponentially—there is no chance for recourse when fighting that kind of disruptive influence.

EDTECH "LITTLE GUYS" AREN'T SO LITTLE
If education is supposed to build the foundations of society, money is a pickaxe chipping away at the base. What makes this entire issue more nefarious is that education on the bottom tier—at the teacher and school level—is often touted as a "calling," "its own reward," and "for the kids," making it taboo for teachers to demand increases in pay while the rest of the industry is making bank.

Like educators themselves, good edtech calls for humanity above and beyond all else. Smaller organizations committed to a personal touch stand in contrast to these edtech giants gobbling up startups and spitting out flawed solutions.

There are still forces for good in education technology. Instead of implementing solutions based on shiny promises, bells, and whistles, edtech investment on the district level calls for thoughtful searches for straightforward, mission-rich solutions. ■

STORY BY

Lindsey Canny
To read more from Lindsey, visit www.skyward.com/blog

[1] Eighth Broadband Progress Report. https://www.fcc.gov/reports-research/reports/broad-band-progress-reports/eighth-broadband-progress-report#:~:text=Notwithstanding%20this%20progress%2C%20the%20Report,lack%20access%20to%20this%20service.

[2] $16.1B of Global EdTech Venture Capital in 2020 (January 5, 2021) https://www.holoniq.com/notes/16-1b-of-global-edtech-venture-capital-in-2020

10 WAYS TO AVOID BAD EDTECH BUYING DECISIONS

01 **Get what people want (and need).**
Ask teachers, students, and office staff (aka the people who use the technology every day) what they need to succeed.

02 **Stay ahead of what's cutting edge.**
Send a district ambassador to industry conferences for the most up-to-date information on new edtech.

03 **Don't be wowed by brand names.**
Buying cereal? Buy the brand. Buying edtech? Bigger isn't always better — don't get dazzled by a major company's brand name.

04 **Dig for data on edtech.**
Don't decide on a product until you can do a dig into the data about the effectiveness of the technology.

05 **Find out what other districts are paying.**
Use an independent consultant to find out the deals other districts have gotten on edtech purchasing, or contact another district directly about their buying experience.

06 **Work together with other districts.**
There's power in numbers when making buying decisions with big vendors. Team up with leaders from other districts to create a buying consortium for new technology.

07 **Decision-makers and purchasers should be separate.**
Keep teachers and tech staff as primary advisors, but put the business office in the buying position. This way, vendors will be less likely to upcharge on products to someone who has less purchasing experience.

08 **Not all tech or teachers are built the same.**
Brand-new edtech won't magically solve all instructional issues in a school or district. Software can amplify great teaching, but it doesn't turn mediocre teachers into great ones. Address issues on a personal level before throwing technology into the mix.

09 **See through the salesmanship.**
Investors want sales and will try to drum up hype for shoddy products. When districts buy products based on trends or glitz and glamor, districts can end up with sub-par technology.

10 **Big doesn't mean best.**
Big names in edtech might have the money to push their products to the forefront, leaving small, innovative products left in the dust. Focus on finding the product that works best for your teachers and students, and not just the first one you find.

Read the full article at https://www.edsurge.com/news/2013-10-08-why-schools-make-bad-buying-decisions

NINE DONATIONS
Schools Love but Communities Forget About

Going to school shouldn't be cost-prohibitive, but many families can't make ends meet while keeping so many activities afloat. With a little assistance, students don't have to miss out on enrichment.
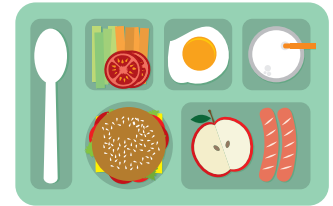
1. OUTERWEAR
Families can help their children's peers who forgot or don't own snow gear by donating outgrown boots, coats, hats, and waterproof mittens.

2. SCHOOL SUPPLIES
School supply drives make life easier for families with multiple children or who have incoming little ones just starting out who have extensive supply lists to fulfill.

3. MEAL DEBT
Free and reduced lunch helps families who qualify, but once families exceed the threshold it can be hard to cover the costs. Community members can donate to help alleviate some of that lunch debt pressure.

4. SPONSORSHIPS
Clubs, organizations, companies, and families can provide funds to school sports or causes that meet their interests, while also giving the sports or causes room to grow.

5. EQUIPMENT FOR EXTRACURRICULARS
Hand-me-downs might make the difference between a kid being able to join a sport and one who has to warm the bench out of family necessity.

6. TECHNOLOGY
While it can be harder to come up with tech resources to donate, technology expertise or sales discounts can be equally as important to give.

7. TIME
There are a million little jobs that keep a school spinning. Pitch in during or after school hours and build relationships with the staff and students.

8. TEACHERS' LOUNGE
Teachers pay for a lot of resources at school. Consider donating food and coffee on conference days, or getting gift cards for self-care.

9. FUNDRAISING SPACE
Local businesses who offer food stands can give back by giving a portion of the day's profits to their local school system. Have business students run the booth as a project and resumé booster.

For the full article, visit skyward.com/blog and search "9 Donations Schools Love but Communities Forget About."

From left to right: Belinda Page, Andrew Thumma, Heather Hall, Chris Smith.

SPOTLIGH

Pennsylvania District Finds Mo

Cumberland Valley School District | Pennsylvania, PA
Enrollment: 9,500 | Schools: 13

New solution allows Cumberland Valley School District to enjoy self-paced training, integration, and customization.

In a fast-paced world where the possibilities of technology are ever-increasing, being stuck with outdated software can hinder results.

Cumberland Valley School District in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, about two hours west of Philadelphia, was faced with an obsolete SIS that was holding their district back.

Chris Smith, the director of technology and innovation at Cumberland Valley School District, oversaw much of the district's move to a new student information system (SIS) that aligned better with their long-term district goals, such as bringing their student-related data up to date and within one centralized location. That SIS turned out to be Skyward's Qmlativ Education Management System.

HITSTORY

odern Technology in New SIS

Out with the old, in with the new

Prior to implementing Skyward, Cumberland Valley struggled with an antiquated system that had limited usability.

"The design was clunky and not very user-friendly," said Smith.

Particularly, this system's database wasn't interactive or customizable, and the district didn't have direct access to their database and couldn't use their data in any functional way. There was also no online form function, which the district desperately needed.

Additionally, training staff on the old system was very difficult.

"A lot of hand-holding had to take place," said Smith. "There was nothing self-paced."

" Our goal was to have a system serve as a one-stop-shop for all of our student-related data. "

- Director of technology and innovation, Chris Smith

When the district started looking for a new SIS, finding software that managed their district's changing needs was top of mind. District leaders knew they needed a system that was easy to learn, worked well with other systems, and was customizable. This is where Qmlativ stood out and became the system of choice for the district.

Staff involvement: key to success

The district's goal was to have their new software in use by the 2019-2020 school year. The process for implementing Qmlativ at Cumberland Valley took about two years to get everything up and running.

Along with support from Skyward, the district organized the process by creating different stakeholder groups by job role, with specific actions for each group. By breaking up groups this way, group leaders took charge to get their sections up to speed, rather than leaving one person to do everything.

"Secretaries were leading other secretaries and so forth, instead of me telling them about my expectations from the backend," said Smith. "We had detailed roll-out plans with expectations for our staff. Tasks were split into 'required' and 'recommended,' which we still continue today."

To manage stakeholder expectations further, the district weighted which needs were highest priority and which ones would need to wait for updates.

"Prioritization allowed us to set realistic expectations on where staff were in the grand scheme of the implementation process," said Smith.

The district also used tools within Skyward to train staff.

"The Professional Development Center was the most valuable resource for training our staff," said Smith. "The ability to customize training to your job description and learn on your own time was essential, especially with our large staff count and amount of staff role changes."

Additionally, staff were given early access to the Qmlativ training database, allowing them to go in and play with the system even before it was fully implemented.

"As for teaching staff, they had the opportunity to use the PDC on their own time, or attend face-to-face training held at our district," said Smith.

Once all staff were trained in Qmlativ, the district was ready to start taking advantage of some of Qmlativ's key features.

Playing nice with other systems

When Cumberland Valley was looking for a new SIS, they knew they wanted a system that integrated well with others.

"Our goal was to have a system serve as a one-stop-shop for all of our student-related data," said Smith.

Ultimately, the plan at Cumberland Valley was to implement universal applications and software that all district stakeholders could use. Since Qmlativ integrates with over 50 business partners, the district wanted to make the most of this opportunity.

"We learned that we could move more and more processes into Skyward, which improves our workflow with staff," said Smith.

When asked what the most important quality of education technology is today, Smith stated that interoperability is key.

"No one software will be able to have everything that you need, so playing nice with others is key," said Smith. "Furthermore, users need to be able to choose those other systems, rather than being given a short list of possibilities."

In the future, Cumberland Valley looks forward to integrating as many systems into Qmlativ as possible.

"We currently have 18 integrated systems, and are looking forward to adding even more," said Smith.

Your software, your way

In today's world, nearly everything from your cellphone screen to your shoelaces can be customized. So, why is edtech often a one-size-fits-all approach? According to Smith, the district's overall favorite feature of Qmlativ, which they were missing in their previous software, is the customization ability.

"The customization that we have with Qmlativ is fantastic," said Smith. "The ability to create custom fields and insert them in multiple places gives us a lot more control."

Although customization was something that the district knew they wanted when looking for a new SIS, Cumberland Valley was blown away by the options available in Qmlativ.

"We ended up customizing our system more than we originally thought, especially when gathering information from our stakeholders," said Smith. "In addition, manipulating data and not having to export everything as a report or spreadsheet to use it is substantial."

While Cumberland Valley is pleased with their Qmlativ system, some district users have requested feature upgrades to make it more user-friendly for their job duties. Although Cumberland Valley plans on continuing to update their system, they are pleased with the work-arounds available in the meantime.

"Even if Qmlativ doesn't have a specific solution to that need, we can add custom fields to make it as close as possible, which has been beneficial," said Smith. "For example, we would love to include the phonetic spelling of kids' names someday, but it can be added as a custom field for parents to fill out for now," explained Smith.

In the future, Cumberland Valley looks forward to making their Qmlativ system even more of an all-inclusive area for their student-related data.

"We look forward to more customization and third-party implementation opportunities," said Smith. "We will gather as many products as we can to work with Qmlativ."

District leaders also look forward to continuing to train staff in the PDC and creating online forms with Qmlativ to avoid multiple form types.

For other districts considering the switch to Qmlativ, Smith

recommends being strategic and making sure that district leaders leave enough time to implement the software.

"You're not going to be able to implement all of the features you want all at once, so giving yourself enough time to plan out what you really need in the beginning is important," said Smith. "Although you won't get everything you want immediately, plan and expect those additional features to come in the future. Be sure to keep stakeholders updated as well."

Once implemented, Smith suggests taking the time to explore other features that you don't have yet in your system, being sure to think about what you are missing in your district and what could be added or addressed later.

"Implementing Qmlativ is a huge lift," said Smith. "It's a big undertaking—and don't go into it thinking otherwise—but it is worth the effort to get the things you want in your software."

Additionally, Smith advises tapping Skyward's user base for support, even for areas where you thought it might not exist.

"One thing that we found to be of tremendous value about Skyward was the large user base that they have across the country," said Smith. "Between state user groups and the national user conference, there are a ton of opportunities for networking, solving problems, discovering new features, and more."

"Overall, we are very pleased with our Qmlativ system and are looking forward to additional positive experiences." ∎

STORY BY

Cassidy Downs
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READING AUTOMATICITY
IS THE HIDDEN STEM SUPERPOWER KIDS NEED

WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT, DRIVING IS COMPLICATED.

A driver is constantly interpreting road signs, scanning for obstacles, and piloting a vehicle (not to mention the distractions drivers juggle as well). But we don't actually think about driving much—not really.

A lot of the roadside sights of a typical commute become rather unremarkable, deliberately designed for drivers to process in a fraction of a second. Are we even really reading a road sign, or interpreting that a red octagon means something different than a green or white rectangle?

When drivers make driving look easy, they're using automaticity: the ability to dedicate energy which would otherwise be spent decoding to more complex tasks like problem solving.

Reading automaticity refers to the automatic recognition of vocabulary words without the need to pause and sound out individual parts of the word, then add them together to form the whole word. Fluency is automaticity's close cousin who adds a layer of personality to reading—fluent readers know that the addition of a question mark or exclamation point, as well as other punctuation, change the rate and inflection with which a sentence is read.

All this to say that these particular reading skills, when they're well established, make reading easier no matter what the content is. While we tend to draw stark boundaries around our K12 subjects, awarding them their own set of different classroom supplies and categories (I can't quite explain it, but science is green and English-Language Arts is red), educators have long realized that the great unifier of them all is reading. In fact, some have even proposed paying less attention to so-called fundamental reading skills, and instead integrating reading practice into content areas.

Now, let's establish the importance of verbal communication, but acknowledge that written communication occurs more often than we think. This isn't limited to correspondence between people.

It's also recordkeeping, documentation, creating instructions, interacting with third parties on behalf of an employer, and much more.

That written communication goes much, much faster when automaticity and fluency skills are on point.
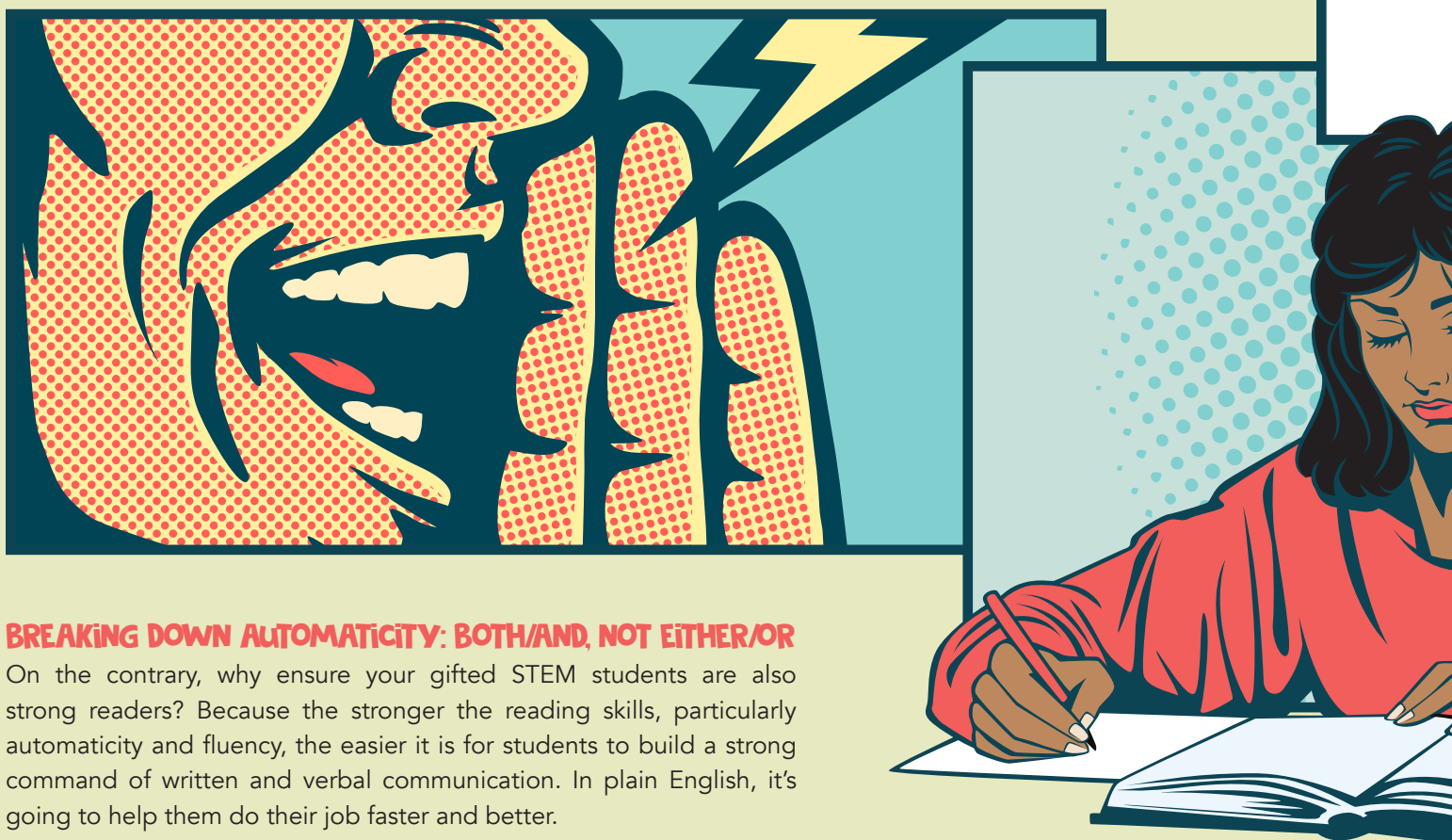
BREAKING DOWN AUTOMATICITY: BOTH/AND, NOT EITHER/OR

On the contrary, why ensure your gifted STEM students are also strong readers? Because the stronger the reading skills, particularly automaticity and fluency, the easier it is for students to build a strong command of written and verbal communication. In plain English, it's going to help them do their job faster and better.

As much as many workers in highly specialized careers would love to squirrel away into a cubicle and produce work entirely in our wheelhouse, the truth of the matter is that communication is the cornerstone of every single career—particularly if you're like most professionals and desire to grow and develop your skills. And it's not that weak communication skills can never be improved, but these so-called soft skills are some of the harder ones to train on the job. Building the foundation of strong communication is best handled in K12, to prime students for success in higher education, trade school, or career paths.

BREAKING DOWN AUTOMATICITY: CODING AND DECODING

In a classic chicken-and-egg situation, as we navigate the importance of sharpening a couple reading skills to boost STEM success, the concepts behind those skills go hand-in-hand with coding.

Coding a computer program on the back end creates a way to transfer information from one place to another according to a specific set of rules. Decoding occurs once that data arrives and needs to be decrypted into language we can understand as end users, still following that specific set of rules.

Think of the rules we use when reading in English. (Mentally substitute any language with English, especially if you'd like a language example that has better rules. Yes, that is English-major shade.) Students

blends of letters and letter sounds, we start to form more complex phonemes. And so on and so forth, we learn the sounds that letters make which eventually lead to the mastery of words.

(Now, that's obviously a gross oversimplification of the way we learn to read, the same way the space between point A and point B on a map is just a finger snap away. There are years of practice that solidify these concepts into students' minds. Along the way, some students learn they have a barrier to achieving reading mastery the way their peers do, and these disabilities can make learning to read much more difficult for those students. However, that doesn't mean those students cannot learn to read and cannot achieve automaticity—their version of mastery will require more supports and scaffolding.)

THE STRONGER THE READING SKILLS, PARTICULARLY AUTOMATICITY AND FLUENCY, THE EASIER IT IS FOR STUDENTS TO BUILD A STRONG COMMAND OF WRITTEN AND VERBAL COMMUNICATION.

BREAKING DOWN AUTOMATICITY: PHONEMES AND PATTERN RECOGNITION

Phonemic awareness (or phonological awareness) is the understanding that those sounds of the alphabet work together to form words. Phonemic awareness can even lead to pattern recognition.

For example, the word ending "-tion" is a suffix associated with action or results of an action, and it sounds like "shun." Now, we as readers can take a while, sound out the word and get tripped up in the phonetic sounds of each individual letter, or we can use phonemic awareness and automaticity to just know that "-tion" sounds like "shun" when it appears at the end of a word. We do it every day, and just don't think about it—because it's automatic.

The more opportunities students have to practice this type of phonemic recognition leads to automaticity: the immediate recognition that certain letters and letter groups make specific sounds.

Educators are always redesigning reading education strategies to help more readers become fluent. Pushing more and more reading practice into content fields helps students gain much-needed practice. These core reading skills hold unexpected importance to future career success regardless of the field—even for the most reading-averse STEM superstars in your schools. ■

learn phonics to understand that each sound in a language has a corresponding written letter. We have vowels and consonants, which are different types of letters. We use a set of letters in a particular order that each make particular sound(s) called phonemes. Adding in different

STORY BY

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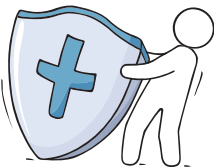To read more from Erin, visit www.skyward.com/blog

Storing Data in the SBO

Data storage and backup might not be the most exciting topic (unless you're the Marie Kondo of record retention). There's no time like the present to scrutinize your record retention practices and lean on your enterprise resource planning (ERP) system to protect and store data.

How is data stored?

Hopefully record storage is not limited to paper. Odds are, though, that some paper documents need to hang around, and that's okay. Although most of these "dinosauric" record tips are limited to student records which must be kept indefinitely, the oldest materials cannot be read by automated machines. They require manual search and organization. The technology to reproduce some of them can cost thousands of dollars!

Digital records may live in data centers onsite. If this is the case, they need to be protected from threats both physical and digital. The first line of defense against digital attacks is ensuring your team is well versed in the myriad methods hackers use to broach the human firewall (phishing drills and other security training can help). As for physical safety, natural disaster prep will depend on your region. Also worth considering: where is your onsite data center? Some locations are more secure than others, both from human interference and the elements. Hint: your best bet is not the basement!

Finally, data may also be stored offsite in a virtual server located outside of the district, commonly referred to as cloud storage. This super-secure option boosts security, takes stress and responsibility off your shoulders, and makes disaster recovery easier.

Rules, regulations, and laws?

Data stored in the business office is not student data, so FERPA isn't a concern. However, most business office data is highly confidential, and some is regulated by labor and privacy laws including HIPAA.

School business office data may include:

- Applicant documentation (applications, resumes, job descriptions and interview notes)

- Employee information

- Payroll information

- Certifications

- Medical testing for employment

- Employee evaluations

- Disciplinary documentation

- Harassment claims and investigations

- Protected health information from insurance plans

The key to keeping hard copies:

Paper records can be scanned and retained, but keep in mind a few guidelines to stay compliant.

- Records must be accurate.

- Records must be entire and exact: For example, if notes are present in colored ink, the scanned copy must be in color.

- Records must be in an unalterable file format (PDF, image, etc).

What SBOs can do to stay up to date

Follow your local, state, and federal regulations
Each state will offer guidance for recordkeeping, and it may differ slightly from place to place. The best bet is to stay in touch with local and state agencies. Your edtech provider should also support users' compliance for state and federal reporting.

Join and learn
Building your network will connect you with folks who also keep their sights on compliance. Whether this is a regional, nationwide, or international Association of School Business Officials (ASBO) organization, neighboring district business offices, or people you meet at edtech conferences, these connections will help you stay on track. Many minds fixed on compliance make it easier to stay aware when guidelines change.

If your ERP solution offers a community or a forum, join it. Sometimes the best solutions come from other users in the thick of day-to-day tasks. Subscribe to industry publications to be notified of new developments.

What edtech providers suggest
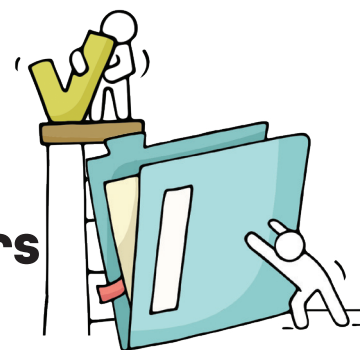
Back up your data
Work with your edtech provider to ensure you have backup and disaster recovery plans in place well before any threat occurs.

Start with the 3-2-1 data backup rule: Keep 3 copies of any important file, 1 primary and 2 backups. Keep the files on 2 different media types, and store 1 copy offsite.

This is just the tip of the iceberg of protecting invaluable and highly targeted data.

Phishing and security drills
Once you have your backup and disaster recovery all squared away, it's time to focus on the human firewall.

Phishing is one of the most common ways hackers can breach your network and snatch your data. Unfortunately, the multitudinous opportunities to be phished fill inboxes every day. Practicing the skills to spot a fake link in an unexpected, but urgently worded email from someone pretending to be your boss might just save your district millions in data ransom.

The data stored in your school business office is irreplaceable and precious. As much as we hope we'll never have to fall back on data recovery plans, it's best to prepare for the worst ahead of time. ■

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Making Data
WORK
For People

If you got a nickel for every time you read the word "data," I'm guessing you wouldn't be mad about it.

Data is discussed in just about every facet of K12 life as educators use millions of data points to craft the best possible path to success for every student.

Diving into student data can feel like a blessing and a curse. After all, not all educators go into the field to fulfill their passion for charts and spreadsheets (although some do and we see you too). However, as edtech continues to evolve, systems built to house, preserve, and sort student data can make the whole process more teacher- and family-friendly.

Make working with data easier

Data seems to multiply rapidly. The more we measure, the more we store, the more we try to comb through to gain insight. Not only should it take very little time to input data, but extracting data from a student information system (SIS) should also be as simple as possible. Consider the trifecta of making data processes easier:

Is automation available to help make processing data faster?

Cut down on manual entry (or worse, manual re-entry) and ensure systems are interoperable—the automatic flow of data between systems frees up resources and time to focus on the interpretation of data rather than its upkeep.

Do all systems flow seamlessly into the SIS?

The student information system is the cornerstone of school data, so ensure that your SIS is equipped to handle any third-party data collected in other systems. A single, central location to keep records—especially those that require long-term retention—makes managing millions of sensitive data points easier. On that note, when was your last security audit, phishing test, and data backup?

Is reporting on the data housed in the SIS quick and intuitive?

What good is a hoard of data without the ability to peruse it for quick insight? Whether this takes the form of exported files, dashboards, or some combination of the two, there's no time to lose slogging through spreadsheets.

No more walls of text

Speaking of spreadsheets, data is no longer only available in black and white. Break out of the newsprint era and graduate to data in full, living color.

This goes for all SIS screens, or at least as many as possible (some forms benefit from being as straightforward as possible). While die-hard dataheads may question this type of facelift, the clever and intentional use of color can even make scanning several pages of information easier on the eyes and help information stand out differently.

Limitless growth potential

The chief purpose of keeping detailed data is to use it to guide students to greater success. No one knows how to do that better than the educators. So how can administrative software make that task easier?

Designed by users, built in house

No more Frankensystems cobbled together from corporate acquisitions. Instead, user experience designers work directly with the data experts (that is, educators who use the software daily) to identify needs, ideate, listen, and gain priceless feedback that ensures the next features are exactly what the user base will enjoy most.

No duplicate or conflicting features

Sometimes multiple solutions can be helpful, but more choices also equal more problems. While flexibility is key for different users, everyone should enjoy features that are well designed to form a comprehensive system. Features that are bolted on after the fact can turn a flow of data to insight into a complex and confusing experience—sort of the equivalent of a poorly lit, dingy basement data center versus a secure and spotless one.

Easy, seamless, and intentional data access

An intentional and thorough design process results in a user-friendly, easy to use system. The seamless flow of data saves time and creates a more complete picture of student data: their achievements, demographics, behavior, and other attributes all housed securely according to FERPA guidelines.

There's so much more to teaching than data—an SIS cannot cheer up a sad child, ensure they receive a hot meal, or spark a passion for learning. But supporting educators with administrative software that's quick and reliable frees up their time to practice their profession and build life-changing relationships with students. ∎
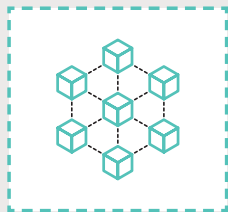
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How Project Unicorn is Helping Data Work for Schools

Data in schools is only useful when it is accessible, secure, and standardized. Project Unicorn's dedication to interoperability ensures that a district's data can be used as a powerful tool for learning progression.

WHAT IS INTEROPERABILITY?

Data interoperability is when information is accessible and transferable between many different programs and applications. This makes it easier to compile and analyze the information to inform instruction and assessment.

THE RUBRIC

Project Unicorn created a rubric schools can use in order to evaluate programs they are already using, or can apply the criteria to vendors they anticipate using in the future. The rubric can help stakeholders judge how well their tools support interoperability.

THE PLEDGE

By signing Project Unicorn's pledge, not only are you showing your commitment to student progress by interoperability, but you also join the Unicorn Community – a resource for districts to collaborate and find materials to aid in continuing interoperability.

CERTIFICATION

Once vendors have been checked over in the rubric, and once the pledge has been signed, districts can begin the process of applying for Project Unicorn certification. This certification comes with a digital badge that can be put on a district's website or social media pages to indicate their commitment to safe and secure data interoperability.

For more information about Project Unicorn and their work in data interoperability, visit their website at www.projectunicorn.org

Great Leaders are *Epic Failures*

Have you ever noticed how heroes never have bad days?

Their bad days stay tucked away inside the phone booth along with a pair of wire-rimmed glasses, waiting for the heroics to end before they get buttoned neatly out of sight.

The real-life human heroes we need aren't cut from the same spandex. Not even close. But their humanity is a sleeper cell of psychological safety. The failures we work hard to keep hidden are the key to humanizing leaders and eliciting the highest performance from the heroes in your hallways. Let's explore.

Psychological safety is the key to growth

Just as we work hard to create a welcoming and safe environment for students, staff members thrive in a similar climate, with a few important, leveled-up caveats.

When we discuss the importance of belonging, we're not talking about multicolorful or meticulously logoed décor and apparel. *Belonging happens when an individual feels safe enough to count themselves a part of a group and do their best for the good of the group.*

Time for a hot take: An individual's best for the good of the group does not always equal toeing the line, especially in turbulent times calling for creative problem solving. High performers come in multiple packages, and some of the most difficult individual contributors end up growing into fantastic leaders. That process happens when leaders can offer psychological safety to try, fail, learn, and try again (rinse and repeat).

Modeling failure leads to psychological safety

So how does sharing your huge, embarrassing failure actually contribute more than a few chuckles at your

expense to a whole schoolwide culture? So glad you asked. There are a couple reasons this goes way further than simply providing levity.

Vulnerability unites us. With the full spectrum of humanity on display (leaders included) that pesky hierarchy that paralyzes growth for some of the more cautious among us seems to flatten out quickly. When everyone on the team is held to the same standards (namely, trying and being unsuccessful is okay and expected, even applauded) then everyone feels empowered to suggest improvement, do their best, and even try something a little offbeat to make a bigger impact on student achievement.

SUCCESS

Vulnerability is scary. It's fickle, and if things go wrong, it can fizzle out immediately. It takes a strong leader to inspire vulnerability in their team, because if an individual contributor is willing to be vulnerable, you must be willing to back them up. It's truly a leap of faith that takes a lot of trust on both sides. Your team must know that you'll have their backs, and you must trust they'll uphold certain core agreements while pushing the limits of what's possible.

Failure teaches us. How can anyone expect to suddenly achieve better outcomes when nothing has changed day-to-day? When teammates are afraid to try something new for fear of failure, they make no progress. They wait around for something to change, nothing does, and frustration blooms. Even worse, burnout sparks. Stagnation fans the flames. Pretty soon there's no motivation to even phone it in. If we're not trying and failing, we're not learning and growing.

Failure moves us forward. While there's no denying those epic flat-faced failures are unnerving, it's undoubtably worse to exist in analysis paralysis. Leader or not, we know we need to move forward, but we're not sure which path will lead us to the promised land where everyone applauds, and no one gripes at the board meeting (ha).

Embracing the possibility of failure doesn't mean leaders and teams must throw caution and common sense to the wind. Take your time calculating, then take the leap. If you fall flat, at least you tried something and learned something—and that's moving forward.

Be the first to try out this psychological safety net

Which failure will you showcase first? Odds are, there's plenty to choose from if you're the type of leader who is always pushing the limits of success. Next time you're asked to share your secret to success, consider starting from the unexpected opposite extreme: what was your most epic failure?
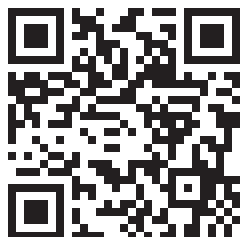
But more importantly: what did you learn? ∎

STORY BY

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