

TECH THE INITIATIVE

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School leaders can capitalise on the technological lessons learned throughout the pandemic to come up with a clear digital strategy that doesn't pile more burden on to stressed staff, writes Al Kingsley.

What does the term "edtech" mean to you? Before the Covid pandemic, it was little more than just another buzzword in many schools. But since the March 2020 lockdown prompted that first shift to wholly online learning, education technology has become an integral part of how schools operate.

Inevitably, when the first school closures happened, some were better prepared than others and pivoted to remote learning with relative ease, thanks to their existing digital strategy. But many other schools have been on a huge learning curve with technology over the past 18 months. As a result of all the upheaval that comes with teaching, learning and living through a pandemic, many edtech resources have been hastily adopted, sometimes in an ad hoc, disorganised fashion.

Individual teachers were often empowered to get creative and take risks with technology, which was an enormously positive step in the right direction. Yet, as we enter the new term, school leaders need to leave this approach behind or risk missing the opportunity to ensure that edtech is being used in an effective way across the whole school.

What leaders need here is a clear edtech strategy. For many, that phrase might conjure images of simply installing ICT suites and smartboards, but in practice, a good digital strategy can positively affect almost every aspect of school life – from parental communication through to staff retention.

So, how can school leaders capitalise on the lessons learned throughout the pandemic to devise a clear digital strategy that centres on pedagogy and student outcomes, while also benefiting staff workload, wellbeing, communication and collaboration?

1. Conduct an edtech audit

Before splashing any of the precious school budget on shiny new tools, it's always good to undertake a thorough audit of your existing assets to explore what you currently have and how it's being embedded.

You can then make a decision as to whether certain items could be enhanced, upgraded or redeployed rather than being replaced. Not only does this ensure that any future choices are properly informed, but it also provides you with a foundation to build upon by highlighting gaps in provision.

2. Evidence, evidence, evidence

Any edtech supplier worth their salt should be able to point to a robust catalogue of evidence that backs up the claims made in their marketing material.

To avoid being swayed by the latest overhyped product, look at whether the facts cut through the noise and consider whether the product's promised outcomes would be truly useful in your school's individual context.

There are a number of evidence-based, independent edtech organisations to help you here, such as Education Alliance Finland or the Educate programme from UCL Institute of Education, both of which work to evaluate the pedagogical value of products.

One key thing to look out for is whether



the evidence points to a platform that was designed in consultation with teachers. Technology should always serve teachers, not the other way around – never buy tech just for tech's sake.

3. Engage stakeholders

It is absolutely crucial to hear different views and experiences about solutions in the classroom, not only to find out what does and doesn't work and to trigger innovation, but to guarantee buy-in and ensure everyone feels they are contributing to the whole-school vision. This absolutely holds true for edtech.

Make sure you consider every one of your key audiences, including the senior leadership team, pupils with special educational needs or disabilities, data protection and safeguarding teams, IT, finance, governors and parents. Each of these stakeholders will have varying requirements for technological solutions, and they will be able to offer their unique perspective to help with strategic oversight.

4. Provide effective CPD

Continuing professional development is a fundamental part of retaining any new skill, and edtech is no exception. School staff will struggle to get to grips with new systems without sufficient planning (and budget) for training, as well as dedicated time set aside for this.



While digital literacy as a whole has generally skyrocketed in the past few years, it's important not to assume a uniform level of competence across staff, and to make sure that everyone's needs are met at their current level. In many cases, the schools that were able to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 most efficiently were the ones that had already identified CPD in digital skills as an absolute priority.

With a veritable cornucopia of online applications just a touch of a button away, it's key that staff are provided with ongoing training and support to stay up to date with the tsunami of new releases and updates.

Rather than just opting for the standard start-of-term Inset days, ensure that staff receive CPD training on key tools throughout the year, and in varied forms, including formal CPD sessions, peer sharing, solutions champions, or simply

through interacting on online forums and Twitter to share best practice with others.

5. Be realistic and balanced

Perhaps most importantly of all, recognise that it's unreasonable to put extra demands on staff who already feel under pressure, unless they are compensated for through tech initiatives that are proven to support wellbeing by cutting down on workload and streamlining processes elsewhere.

With one survey showing that more than 80 per cent of teachers have reported increased levels of work-related stress since March 2020, the last thing staff need at the moment is more complication through additional time-consuming processes.

Remember, although we're dealing with technology, it is the human factor that is key. Often, it's better to add fewer new initiatives, but to have the time to

implement those initiatives well. It's also much better to gradually embed features rather than opt for a drastic overnight overhaul.

Ultimately, when it comes to your edtech strategy, take a leaf out of your own book and think about what you tell pupils who might initially struggle with a task: failure is part of the learning journey. Success doesn't come from rushing or overloading yourself, but rather taking it step by step and building your confidence slowly along the way.

Al Kingsley is the chair of two multi-academy trusts, chief executive of NetSupport and author of My Secret #EdTech Diary

