Evolving Ed-Tech Procurement in School Districts
Digital Promise and IDEO worked together to explore ways that we can further develop the education technology market in K-12 districts, through evolving the ed-tech procurement process.
The IDEO team interviewed 34 individuals, explored existing education resources, and sought inspirational best practices to understand the barriers and potential solutions in the ed-tech space.

Twenty-five district leaders, ed-tech entrepreneurs, nonprofit leaders, and education experts gathered in San Francisco on March 28-29 for a workshop.

The workshop focused on prioritizing the key barriers, brainstorming solutions, and developing concepts to test and iterate at the district level.
IDEO (pronounced “eye-dee-oh”) is an award-winning global design firm that takes a human-centered, design-based approach to helping organizations in the public and private sectors innovate and grow.

We help organizations build creative culture and the internal systems required to sustain innovation and launch new ventures.

WWW.IDEO.COM

Digital Promise is an independent, bipartisan 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization authorized by Congress to spur innovation in education. Through its work with educators, technologists, researchers, and leading thinkers, Digital Promise supports comprehensive research and development to improve all levels of education and provide Americans with the knowledge and skills needed to compete in the global economy.

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## WORKSHEETS
EXPANDING POSSIBILITIES
At the two-day IDEO workshop, district leaders and education technology experts discussed the major barriers that emerged through IDEO’s research. We then reviewed illustrative examples of how industries outside education have successfully solved for similar hurdles. We used the inspirational examples to expand our thinking around potential solutions in the procurement process.
Prior to the workshop, the IDEO team spoke to 34 superintendents, district leaders, entrepreneurs, and education experts to identify common themes in the procurement process.

01 Public scrutiny produces fear and risk aversion.

02 School culture can make or break the uptake of a new ed-tech solution.

03 Procurement regulations are cumbersome, and navigating them is difficult, time consuming, and overwhelming.

04 There are so many choices out there and the proof points for solutions aren’t clear. It is difficult to navigate the possibilities.

05 Shifting, complex, & limited resources makes sustainment a challenge.

06 Trust amongst peers is high. Trust of outsiders is low.
“I fear making the wrong decision—I don’t want to end up on the front page.”
-Superintendent

“Sometimes the status-quo is easier and safer than innovation.”
-Superintendent

“You have to be careful about saying you’re going to ‘take risks, be experimental and innovative; when you’re talking about someone’s child, you don’t take risks.”
-Education Expert

“Innovation is a last resort. It often happens in underperforming schools where there is nothing to lose.”
-Education Expert

“Students succeed in spite of what we do, not because of what we do.”
-Superintendent

“Districts are much more evolutionary than revolutionary.”
-Entrepreneur
INDUSTRY INSPIRATION

How might my district leverage public sentiment to garner long-term support?  
How might my district leverage innovative financing to reduce risk?

EXAMPLE A: CARROTMOB

Users vote with their money to change the practices of the businesses they visit and support in their community.

EXAMPLE B: SOCIAL IMPACT BONDS

Social innovation financing allows the government to partner with service providers and private foundations to provide the up-front costs of products or services. Taxpayers do not pay for the programs unless success of the offering has been demonstrated.
THEME 02
SCHOOL CULTURE CAN MAKE OR BREAK THE UPTAKE OF A NEW ED-TECH SOLUTION.

“There’s a fatigue around programs... Districts and especially teachers have had to try many things that have failed so they have a healthy skepticism.”
-Superintendent

“[Teachers] are not the locus of information anymore. How do you become the facilitator of all unknown solutions? How does the teacher remain relevant?”
-Superintendent

“Teachers are often finding their own solutions and want the autonomy to do so. But right now, they are afraid of getting caught.”
-Education Expert

“Ensuring teachers can integrate solutions into their classrooms is one of our biggest hurdles.”
-Superintendent

“Teachers don’t have pressure to change... they aren’t in regular market conditions.”
-Superintendent

“How do I unleash creativity with the right level of accountability?”
-Superintendent
INDUSTRY INSPIRATION

How might my district meaningfully engage end users in the procurement process: establishing strategies, vetting solutions, and implementation?

How might my district create a tighter line of communication between end users and product developers?

**EXAMPLE A: MY STARBUCKS IDEA**

A social platform that allows Starbucks customers to share their product or service ideas and vote, review, and comment on those of others. The best ideas rise to the top and Starbucks selectively brings their favorites to market.

**EXAMPLE B: QUIRKY**

Individual product idea contributions are curated by the Quirky community. Quirky then evaluates, prototypes, and eventually brings the best ideas to market, leveraging the community’s feedback.
THEME 03
PROCUREMENT REGULATIONS ARE CUMBERSOME, AND NAVIGATING THEM IS DIFFICULT, TIME CONSUMING, AND OVERWHELMING.

“I worry about whether or not I’m doing everything right. I have to be sure to cross my T’s and dot my I’s.”
-District Staff

“Sometimes I get back several bids with something wrong and have to start the process again. I wish vendors would be more detail oriented.”
-District Staff

“The traditional procurement process is time intensive, bottlenecking the ability to stay current with the latest technologies and curricular offerings.”
-Superintendent

“Which is truly better? Should I lease or should I buy?”
-District Staff

“I have to ensure any technology is aligned with the existing regulations and any future demands.”
-District Staff

“RFPs have to have pages and pages of legal documentation... even our attorney struggles with it.”
-District Staff
How might my district create tools that instill confidence in taking the correct steps to navigate the complex system of regulations?

**EXAMPLE A:** *TURBO TAX*

Provides step-by-step guidance in navigating complex tax forms. Experts answer any questions you have on the spot, and the site automatically checks for errors. Users are not charged until after the service is completed.

How might my district gain access to and better leverage the procurement experiences of other districts?

**EXAMPLE B:** *SKILLSHARE*

Skillshare is a global marketplace for classes that allows users to learn real-world skills from anyone. Teachers have the option of charging for classes, and Skillshare takes a percentage of ticketed courses.
**THEME 04**

**THERE ARE SO MANY CHOICES OUT THERE AND THE PROOF POINTS FOR SOLUTIONS AREN’T CLEAR. IT IS DIFFICULT TO NAVIGATE THE POSSIBILITIES.**

“Come to me once you’re proven.”
-Superintendent

“I want to be second wave, not first wave.”
-Superintendent

“No one participating as buyers knows whether or not the product is actually going to deliver on the RFP. It’s the best argument that wins, not the best facts.”
-Ed-tech Entrepreneur

“It’s not about how to buy, it’s about figuring out what to buy... How do we find the right, good stuff?
-District Staff

“There’s a need for an objective mechanism for figuring out what’s working: which resources cover common core, which are most intriguing for students, which provide the most student gain, and which are easiest for tracking assessments.”
-District Staff
INDUSTRY INSPIRATION

How might my district easily evaluate our unique needs against the offerings of a product or service?

EXAMPLE A: **RENT THE RUNWAY**

Users share pictures and reviews of their rented runway looks. Reviews focus on body type and personal characteristics to help users get the best results.

EXAMPLE B: **FANDANGO**

The movie ticketing service integrates both user-generated reviews and expert reviews to provide a fuller picture to prospective moviegoers.

**What's the Buzz?**

- **Fans say Go**
  - 11,411 fans
  - Read fan reviews

- **Critics say No**
  - 34 out of 100
  - Read critic reviews

**Featured Stories**

- Valentine's Day Movies
  - Exclusive Cast Interview
SHIFTING, COMPLEX, AND LIMITED RESOURCES MAKES SUSTAINMENT A CHALLENGE.

“I don’t want to give my students computers that next year I’m just going to have to take away or can no longer support.”
-Superintendent

“The cost of access to well-designed programs is so high. It can be more than my entire budget for a single solution.”
-District Staff

“What does it mean for sustainability if I lease or buy? One comes out of my operations budget, the other comes out of capital expenditures.”
-District Staff

“The budget aren’t setup to procure apps or ongoing services.”
-District Staff

“There’s little volume discounting with some big technology vendors.”
-Education Expert

“Big RFPs can actually shift the market. Districts could have a lot of power.”
-Education Expert
INDUSTRY INSPIRATION

How might our districts pool resources to leverage our scale?

How might my district rethink our budget and investment strategy to match new demands?

EXAMPLE A: Groupon

Groupon entices businesses and service providers to offer lower rates by guaranteeing they receive volume. Once enough people agree to purchase, the rate is locked in.

EXAMPLE B: Google 80/20 Rule

Google invests in its employees on an “80/20” basis—employees are encouraged to spend 80% of their time on core projects and 20% on “innovation” activities that speak to their personal interests and passions.
“What do entrepreneurs want? They want money.”
- Education Expert

“When I started my business, I wanted to help improve literacy and ease assimilation choices in urban schools.”
- Entrepreneur

“This is a business about relationships. Breaking in requires a consultative sale—the sales cycle can be 2 years.”
- Entrepreneur

“During pilots, it sometimes feels like we’re developing products, not solutions.”
- Superintendents

“How do I find out about the latest? I find out from my peers.”
- Superintendents
INDUSTRY INSPIRATION

How might my district better share our needs with vendors so they develop more desirable products and implementations?

EXAMPLE A: **PROCTOR & GAMBLE’S CONNECT + DEVELOP**

P&G posts its specific innovation needs to the Connect + Develop website and allows researchers, academic institutions, and other suppliers to share their innovations directly with the company.

EXAMPLE B: **URINE COLLECTION IN HOSPITALS**

A nurse designed a solution for an observed need amongst patients. By attaching a magnet to the urine container, a patient could hide the jar safely and out of sight when being visited. The nurse worked directly with a vendor to bring the solution to market.
BUILDING SOLUTIONS
Using the themes and industry examples as inspiration, we developed five new concepts that districts can think about as they work to make technology purchasing a more efficient, informed, and empathetic process.
How might my district design a more human-centered procurement office?
CONCEPT
SIMPLIFYING PROCUREMENT

CONCEPT DESCRIPTION
Simplifying Procurement demystifies the procurement process by creating user-centered tools to spur dialogue with key stakeholders (vendors, administrators, and teachers), helping them navigate the process.

Tools include district-specific maps of the procurement process and a collection of case studies and stories that describe how a product or service successfully entered the school district.

Our procurement team will spend a day working in the classroom to gain empathy for our teachers’ needs.
IMAGINE IF YOUR PROCUREMENT OFFICE BECAME THE ULTIMATE CUSTOMER-SERVICE EXPERIENCE FOR TEACHERS AND VENDORS TO GET THE SUPPORT THEY NEEDED.

INSPIRATION
Piktochart.com, Popchartlab.com, & Service Experiences at Nordstrom, Southwest, & Ritz Carlton
TOPIC

How might my district tighten the connection between the needs of our district and the technology that startups are developing?
CONCEPT
ED-TECH INCUBATOR

CONCEPT DESCRIPTION
What if schools were more willing to participate in ed-tech product development, creating mutually beneficial relationships between educators (the end users) and entrepreneurs (the developers)?

If schools embrace entrepreneurs, startups can have more direct access to teachers, students, and administrators, enabling them to develop more relevant products. In exchange, students, teachers, and schools gain experience with the startup hacker mentality and can ultimately be provided with discounts or privileged access to products developed around their specific needs.

POSSIBLE NEXT STEP
- we’ll attend a start-up webinar
- we’ll host a “start-up” day in one of our schools!
IMAGINE IF YOUR CLASSROOMS HELPED ACCELERATE THE UNDERSTANDING OF SCHOOL NEEDS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF BETTER LONG-TERM ED-TECH SOLUTIONS.

INSPIRATION

THE HUB, Y-COMBINATOR, FLASHPOINT, MISSION*SOCIAL
CONCEPT THREE

TOPIC

How might my district help procurement officers better understand the true value (in terms of price, quality, and need) of their purchases?
OPEN PROCUREMENT

CONCEPT DESCRIPTION
If districts are more transparent about how money is spent on technology, all stakeholders can benefit. The public will know where tax dollars are going, faculty will better understand the procurement process, and the market becomes more inclusive and competitive.

In the aggregate, that unlocked information (including vendor, price, quantity, product details, and common core compliance) drastically improves what procurement officers and district leaders know about technology vendors and their product offerings, creating smarter demand.

My district will share its purchasing info with a broader group of stakeholders.
IMAGINE IF YOUR DISTRICT AND ITS CONSTITUENTS COULD EASILY ACCESS MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE ED-TECH MARKET AND IMPLEMENTATION BEST PRACTICES.

INSPIRATION
DATA.COM, GLASSDOOR.COM, KBB.COM, GAS BUDDY APP
How might my district’s finance group rethink funding sources and our budgeting practices to match new demands?
CONCEPT
7 STEPS TO CREATIVE FINANCING

CONCEPT DESCRIPTION
7 Steps to Creative Financing is a new process and set of best practices designed to help districts identify the best means to financing ed-tech solutions.

The process focuses on assembling a diverse team of district stakeholders, end users, and local experts to identify underlying needs, gather inspirational finance solutions from outside industries, and brainstorm ideas to infuse creative problem solving in financing new technologies.

1. Set Vision
2. Build Team
3. Build the Case
4. Brainstorm Solutions
5. Meet the Board
6. Build Based on Imput
7. Apply Process Elsewhere

I will build a team including a district finance officer, a board member, and a local finance expert.
Imagine if you had a book of inspiring workarounds or finance solutions that could help you rethink funding in your district.

**Inspiration**

lynda.com, instructables.com, skillsshare.com
CONCEPT FIVE

How might my procurement office connect with teachers and administrators to enable better procurement planning?
CONCEPT
BETTER PLANNING, BETTER PROCESS

CONCEPT DESCRIPTION
Better Planning, Better Process leverages a bottom-up planning approach by encouraging procurement officers to connect directly with teachers and administrators.

By proactively asking simple questions (e.g., Are you planning any pilots this year? Is there any software or equipment that you need?), procurement officers will be better equipped to plan for and meet the needs of their districts in a timely manner. Similarly, opening up communication lines between the procurement office and key stakeholders will build awareness, understanding, and empathy across these key players.

POSSIBLE NEXT STEP
we will visit schools on a quarterly basis & talk to teachers & principals to gain a better understanding of their new ed-tech & pilot needs
Imagine if your procurement office leveraged a bottom-up planning process by visiting schools regularly to meet with teachers and administrators.

**Inspiration**
Bottom-up management practices at Netflix, Zumba, Toyota, & Google
Based on the conversations and experiments developed at the workshop, three focus areas emerged for districts to explore as we evolve the procurement process.

Each focus area requires differing levels of stakeholder involvement and support, allowing experimentation to take place at varying scales.
3 FOCUS AREAS

01 Connect with entrepreneurs & vendors
Create new ways for districts and entrepreneurs to engage to increase the development of relevant products.

02 Connect within districts
Enable culture change through communication strategies that build empathy, create clarity, and infuse new thinking.

03 Connect across districts
Leverage the League’s scale to increase transparency into district purchases and increase district buying power.
With these lenses in mind, how can your district evolve your procurement processes?
01 Connect with entrepreneurs & vendors

Create new ways for districts and entrepreneurs to engage to increase the development of relevant products.

What if your district hosted a local education startup on site for a day, a week, or a month?

What if your district held an informational call with an education startup to discuss your district’s unmet product needs?

What if your district collaborated with a neighboring incubator or supported an entrepreneurial co-location experiment?
02 Connect within districts

Enable culture change through communication strategies that build empathy, create clarity, and infuse new thinking.

What if your district’s procurement officer shadowed teachers and principals to better understand ed-tech needs and which pilots are planned or underway?

What if your district connected with a local finance expert to understand creative financing alternatives in their industry?

What if your district visualized or articulated the procurement journey through a map, story, or case study to communicate the process to key stakeholders?
Connects across districts

Leverage the League’s scale to increase transparency into district purchases and increase district buying power.

What if your district aggregated and shared your purchasing data with appropriate stakeholders?

What if your district proactively shared with another district best practices for implementing an ed-tech solution?

What if your district proactively shared with another district what went wrong in implementing an ed-tech solution?
How can your district engage with these topics?

These ideas are for everyone. For guidance in putting any of these concepts in place in your district, use the accompanying ideation and planning worksheets in the Appendix. If you are already working on solutions like these in your district, Digital Promise would like to hear about it, at contact@digitalpromise.org.
APPENDIX
# Contributors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Piedmont City School District (AL)</th>
<th>Fulton County Schools (GA)</th>
<th>Meridian Joint District No. 2 (ID)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rock Hill School District (SC)</td>
<td>Horry County Schools (NC)</td>
<td>Roanoke County Public Schools (VA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>New York City Department of Education</td>
<td>Utica Community Schools (MI)</td>
<td>Howard-Suamico School District (WI)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iowa City Community School District</td>
<td>McAllen Independent School District (TX)</td>
<td>U.S. Department of Education Office of Education Technology</td>
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<td>Learning Accelerator</td>
<td>IDEO</td>
<td>Digital Promise</td>
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</table>
CONCEPT NAME:

HMW...
Who are you designing this for?
Who might use this solution?

What is it?
Write a 2-3 sentence description of this concept. What's new about this idea? What excites you about it?

What pain points does it address and why is this valuable?

A visualization of the concept. You might start with the original brainstorm post-it sketches. Add more refined drawings as the concept becomes more concrete.
EVOLVING EDTECH
PROCUREMENT WORKSHOP
#2-A Concept Refinement

Yesterday you designed the first prototype of a solution to meet one or more of your district’s needs. Since then, you may have started thinking about the challenges and stakeholders that could be associated with your solution.

Who does this idea touch? Write down each of the stakeholders connected to this idea and identify their needs.

- Stakeholder:
  Needs:

- Stakeholder:
  Needs:

- Stakeholder:
  Needs:

- Stakeholder:
  Needs:

- Stakeholder:
  Needs:

What are some of the challenges that might be associated with your idea? List the challenges your concept might face. Why do these feel like challenges for your district?

- Culture

- Regulation & Compliance

- Funding & Resources

- Stakeholder Buy-in

- Other

Circle the 1-2 challenges that feels most important to address in order to make your concept work.

Circle the 1-2 stakeholders that feel most important to address in order to make your concept work.
Brainstorm different ways in which you might workaround this challenge(s).

The biggest challenge(s) is _______________________________
The most important stakeholder(s) is _________________________

Brainstorm different ways in which you might address your stakeholder’s needs and gain his or her support.
Now that you've thought about the different constraints and possibilities, what does your idea look like now? Draw a storyboard or scenario of your concept in action.

**SKETCH**

**SUGGESTIONS:**

- Draw a timeline of your solution. Where and when does your solution come into play? Who interacts with it?
- Draw a map of procurement in your district. Where does your solution fit on this map?

**CONCEPT NAME:**
Who will you partner with to realize this idea?

What does success look like? Take a moment to imagine your idea being successful. What would the story of success look like for your idea?

List metrics that will help you gauge success of your idea.

You may have a set of related ideas and prototypes, some of which seem more futuristic or harder to implement. Share both the low-hanging fruit and your vision for the future.

Order the steps on chart, showing different key dates that you can target to best test, build, and iterate on your idea. What will you aim to do next week? Next month? Next procurement cycle?

Feedback from the group:
How Might We Worksheet
Transitioning from challenges towards building questions we can design solutions for.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>01.</th>
<th>Public scrutiny produces fear and risk aversion.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How might my district provide transparency in a way that supports my goals?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How might my district create a clear framework in which stakeholders can innovate?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How might my district better communicate to our constituents and stakeholders to garner long-term support?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How might my district build a culture of trust with our constituents that will support experimentation?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How might my district reinvent the pilot or evaluation process to reduce risk?</td>
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<th>02.</th>
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<td>How might my district create a safe space for teachers to innovate in the classroom?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How might my district provide more flexibility to teachers and principles in deciding which solutions fit them best?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How might my district formalize grassroots pilots?</td>
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<td>How might my district create a process to ensure confidence that I am taking the correct steps when navigating the complex system of regulations?</td>
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<td>How might my district work with vendors in a way that shares the burden of compliance with them?</td>
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<td>How might my district create a more streamlined approach to our procurement procedures?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How might we creatively interpret regulations in a new way?</td>
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**Instructions:**
Individually select 2-3 HMW questions that feel like an opportunity you’d like to explore for your district. (Feel free to modify or add a question as needed.)
Then, discuss your selections with your group.
As a group, write the top 3-4 HMW’s that you’d like to continue thinking about today on a post-it.
Be ready to share your HMW’s with the room.
### How Might We Worksheet

<table>
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<th>05.</th>
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<td>How might my district effectively share experiences with new technologies across districts?</td>
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<td>How might our districts create a safe space to test and validate the newest edtech?</td>
<td>How might our districts support each other in vendor negotiations?</td>
<td>How might my district design a faster feedback mechanism for piloting?</td>
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