



TLA BLENDED LEARNING SNAPSHOT

WHAT IS THIS SNAPSHOT ABOUT?

Learn how a school district in Saratoga, California is using data generated from a new tool to inform its ed tech purchasing and allocation decisions.

DATA-DRIVEN ED TECH DECISIONS: HOW SARATOGA UNION SCHOOL DISTRICT IMPROVED ITS ED TECH PURCHASING

Introduction: Understanding the use of ed tech products

The use of education technology (“ed tech”) in schools across America is growing at a rapid pace, with over \$13.2 billion invested in hardware and software in 2015.¹ As investment and usage has increased, and the market of program and device options has broadened, districts and schools face a new challenge around how to gather data about which ed tech products are actually being used

and whether they are working. Given the number of tools in use as well as varying adoption mechanisms, district and school leaders often lack the visibility to determine exactly what products are being used and by whom. These data would serve to help districts and schools better allocate ed tech and related spending.

This Snapshot highlights one example of how a school district in California is using data generated from a new tool to inform its ed tech purchasing and allocation decisions.



¹ [How School Districts Can Save \(Billions\) On Edtech](#)



SARATOGA UNION
SCHOOL DISTRICT

Need to better connect research and implementation cycles in education

Implementing data-informed ed tech practices in school systems requires coordinated action across multiple K-12 stakeholders to build a solid evidence base and advance collective understanding of effectiveness. Too often, however, educators and leaders operate in measurement silos, where implementation is effectively disconnected from research and practitioners lack the data they need to make instructional

decisions as well as mechanisms for contributing to broader sets of data to generate field learning.

External actors and stakeholders can either contribute to or help mitigate this disconnect between the research and implementation cycles in education. (For more information on this topic, see, [The Learning Accelerator \(TLA\)'s Measurement Agenda.](#))

This Snapshot features an example of how one district, in partnership with a technology developer and internal and external researchers, sought to unify these cycles.

In this instance, the Saratoga Union School District (SUSD) in Saratoga, California lacked information about how technology was being implemented and used across the district. It worked with [Lea\(R\)n](#), the company that developed LearnPlatform, a research and evidence-based system, and tools to develop solutions for how to gather these data and use them, to enable SUSD to make smarter decisions.

Introduction to district

The Saratoga Union School District (SUSD) serves students in grades K-8. It presently operates three K-5 elementary schools and one 6-8 middle school, enrolling approximately 1,900 students. In early 2014, the district did not have a technology leader in place, and ed tech was not widely used as a district-level strategy for improvement or transformation. However, there was interest from the school board, parents, and other community members to integrate technology into classrooms, as was being done in many neighboring districts. In 2014, the school board hired consultants to develop an ed tech plan for the district. However, implementation of this initial plan was limited due to challenges with the board, limited funding, and a lack of staff to implement the plan. As the board and district leadership saw an increasing need and community demand for ed tech in its classrooms, they realized they had to take action and put someone more fully in charge of directing a new ed tech initiative. They decided to hire Blanca Herrera in a new position as the Director of Instructional Technology.

One of Herrera's first priorities was to build on the earlier ed tech plan. Herrera convened a group of stakeholders including early adopter teachers, parents, school leaders, and community members to develop an improved and more actionable ed tech plan. They engaged in a two-year process to develop a plan that was responsive to the community's concerns and to the Superintendent's interest in

TLA'S MEASUREMENT AGENDA ILLUSTRATES HOW DEVELOPERS AND RESEARCHERS CAN WORK TOGETHER TO (AMONG OTHER THINGS):

Generate evidence about:

- the conditions (e.g., content areas, blended models) under which implementation is most or least likely to be effective, and
- the students and/or educators for whom implementation is most or least likely to be effective.

Share evidence that outlines:

- the various activities (student-focused, teacher-focused, data-focused, and infrastructural) that are required for implementation, and
- how to measure implementation at different stages.

Increase educators' capacity to:

- apply others' findings to their own communities, and
- allow the identification and use of relevant, existing data to measure implementation.

Conduct studies that address current gaps in knowledge.

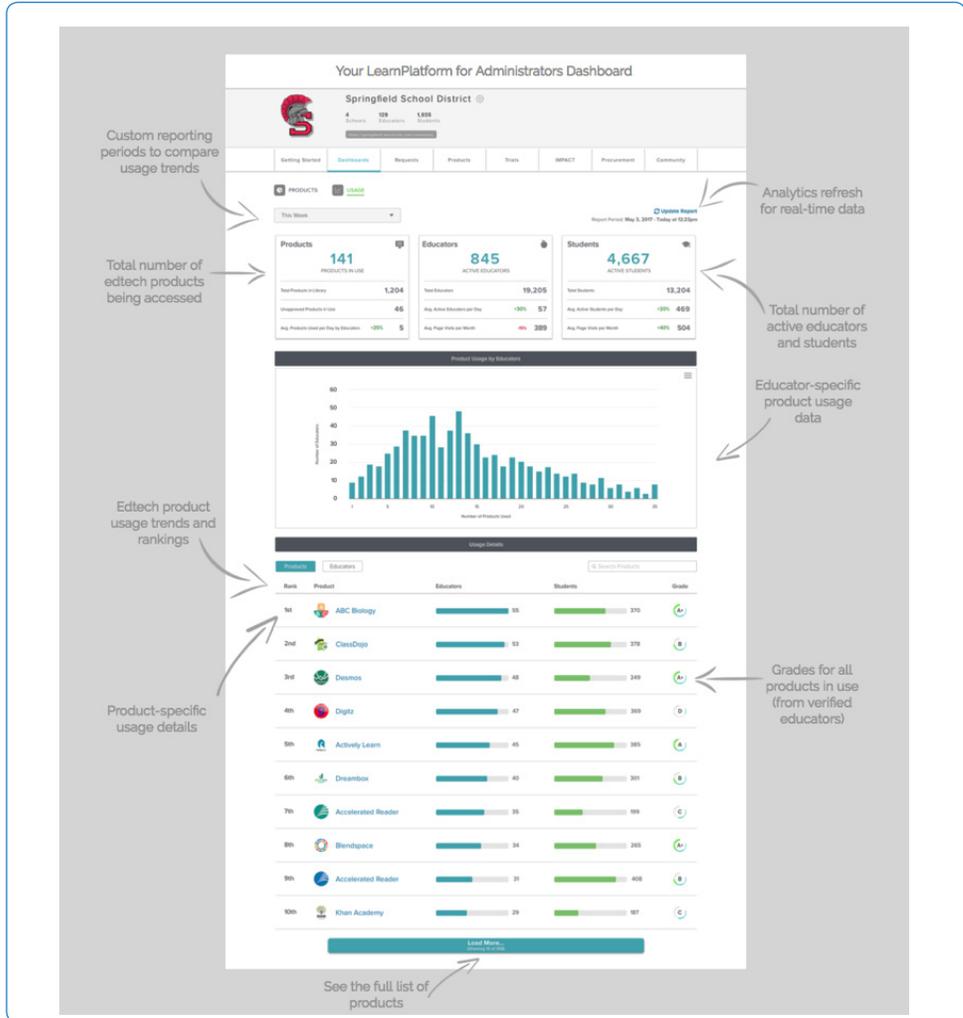
offering students a more updated classroom experience. Herrera mentioned, “When I spoke with the PTA [“parent-teacher association”], the parents were so happy about my being hired and the plan’s goals of increasing the effective use of technology in our district.” She continued, “It was imperative to have teachers involved in the plan development and create the timeline for implementation in order for it to roll-out successfully with buy-in from staff.”

Herrera and her team presented the [ed tech plan](#) to the school board in April 2017, together with a proposed budget. It was approved in May 2017, with an initial focus on the purchasing of Chromebooks

for grades 4-8, together with teacher professional development. As implementation of the ed tech plan progressed, Herrera faced a number of challenges in managing the district’s ed tech program. She found herself tracking requirements such as student data safety privacy compliance and contracts with different vendors in a piecemeal fashion, and she wanted a central tool where she could keep track of these various aspects of their program. Herrera also experienced an increase in requests from teachers to pilot new and different ed tech tools and realized she needed a better resource to track what was being used across the district.

Herrera began looking for a system to meet these needs that would also provide the district with a big-picture view of its ed tech program. After searching for systems that could meet the district’s needs, Herrera saw real potential for LearnPlatform to provide the support she needed. Lea(R)n was able to document the district’s vendors, and Herrera could have them all register on the platform to enable a central location for the district to house everything related to ed tech. The platform could also capture feedback on ed tech products from teachers and make it easily shareable among district educators and administrators.

How data supports making better ed tech purchasing decisions



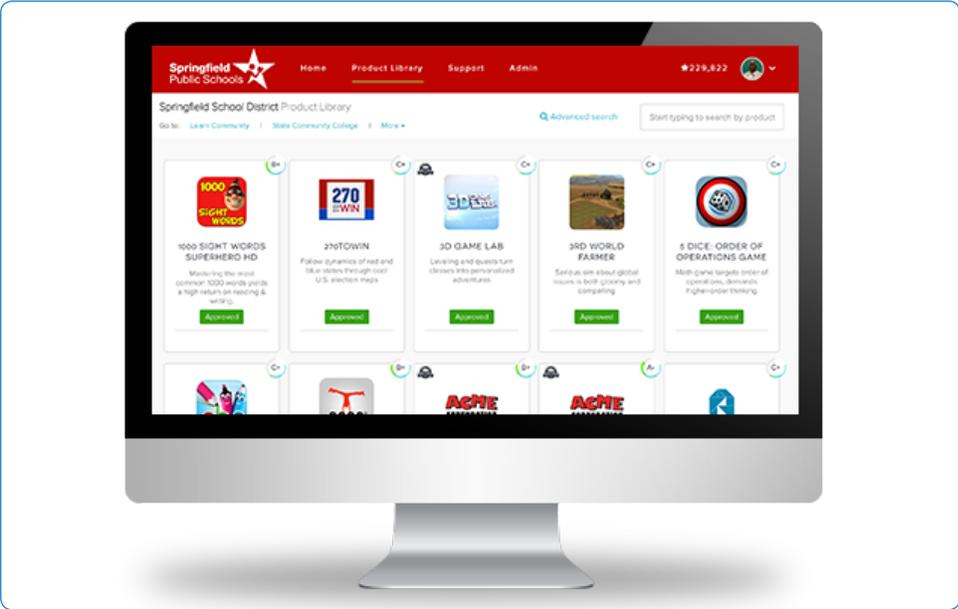
[LearnPlatform](#) is a management system that organizes, streamlines, and analyzes ed tech utilization. Its data dashboard enables schools and districts to learn from their own data around implementing educational technology. Its ultimate goal is to help districts understand what is working for students and teachers. Lea(R)n convened a group of researchers to conduct a validity and methods review of the platform to ensure the analyses, insights, and recommendations being generated for schools and districts were rigorous and accurate. This research and evidence-based approach appealed to Herrera as she worked with SUSD to investigate ed tech usage across classrooms.

SUSD worked with the LearnPlatform to help them document what ed tech they have, how much and how often they’re using it, and where there are disparities between what they’ve invested in and what’s being implemented in classrooms.

Through utilization of a pair of free Chrome Extensions, LearnPlatform allows SUSD to view which ed tech products are being used across schools on a comprehensive usage analytics dashboard called the Data Usage Dashboard. This tool provides real-time access to analytics, allowing districts to monitor and analyze which learning tools its educators utilize most and least. The data flowing from the dashboard are designed to enable districts to make better budget and policy decisions backed by analytics and insights. According to Amanda Cadran, Director of Implementation and Customer Success for Lea(R)n, “LearnPlatform was developed to help districts make smarter decisions about ed tech tools by actually providing data on what is being used by educators and students in districts.”

Better understanding of ed tech usage at SUSD

The district turned to Lea(R)n to develop a deeper understanding of how various tools were being used. Initially, SUSD wanted to specifically understand how one of their math programs (DreamBox) was being used as it was one of the district’s most expensive tools. One purpose of this investigation was to bring educators into the conversation around instructional technology purchasing and implementation decisions. According to Herrera, they were “trying to find more ways to help support teachers to implement programs with fidelity. The district knows some teachers are being successful and feels it is important to build on their experience to find out what’s working so that can be replicated.”



The district worked with the Lea(R)n team to gather its data from DreamBox and then shared the data with Lea(R)n in order to develop an impact report on usage. Herrera worked with an assistant superintendent to review the data collected from the start of the academic year through February to assess usage and evaluate its spending on the tool. As part of this reporting process, Herrera gained access to the comprehensive analytics dashboards mentioned above that offered a real-time, organization-wide view of all ed tech being used by educators and students.

- The impact report showed:
- How students are using the program.
 - The district’s cost per student for the program.
 - An opportunity for reducing overspending because the data showed 4th and 5th grades were not using the program – it was much more heavily used in K-3.

Specifically, the report showed that half of the students who had licenses were not using the program, and Herrera and the assistant

superintendent made the decision to stop the licenses for the 4th and 5th grades, allowing the district to strategically reallocate the funds. Herrera stated that the “impact analysis provided much richer information than [they] could obtain from the vendor directly and proved to be very useful in budgetary decision-making.” Tracking usage by students and teachers enabled the district to make an informed decision about whether to renew licenses as-is or on a limited basis.

This year they are gathering data for additional vendors and have expanded the review team to include several content coaches who work closely with teachers using the technology.

In addition, Herrera found access to the Product Library useful. Any educator can have access to the entire product library of more than 5,000 tools and software products. Each listing includes detailed reviews and feedback from other educators on the platform, giving teachers and district leaders deeper insight into a product’s potential impact for their class or school.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1 When developing an ed tech plan, it is critical to engage multiple stakeholders in the process in order to ensure you are listening to the community's needs and goals for its students.
- 2 The ed tech plan should include clear goals and a defined timeline developed in conjunction with district educators.
- 3 In order to successfully implement an ed tech plan, it is crucial to appoint a leader to oversee the work.
- 4 There are many facets to an ed tech district plan. It is a good idea to consider the variety of new tools available which connect the research and implementation cycles of education to help districts and schools better understand ed tech usage and efficacy.
- 5 It is useful to put a process in place for reviewing vendor and usage data regularly with a team responsible for monitoring efficiency and effectiveness. Gaining a deeper understanding of your ed tech usage helps drive better budget decisions and is a first step in determining the efficacy of tools in your district.

The TLA Blended Learning Snapshot, [EdTech Purchasing in Houston](#), is a recommendation-filled report on Houston's computer hardware purchasing program. It includes links to sample RFPs, lease vs. buy guidelines, and more.

The TLA Blended Learning Snapshot, [Lindsay Unified's Path to Community-wide WiFi](#), highlights LUSD's efforts to provide home Internet access to its 4,200 students. It includes useful strategies and artifacts for other districts to share.

The TLA Blended Learning Snapshot, [The Middletown Learning Path](#), highlights one strong example of how a district in New York is innovating around the use of OER by making it easy for its educators to adopt materials approved for both quality and copyright.



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SNAPSHOT

INTERESTED IN MORE RESOURCES?

TLA has profiled other strategies for tech decision making:

<https://practices.learningaccelerator.org/strategies/software-decision-making>

<https://practices.learningaccelerator.org/strategies/short-cycle-innovation-approach>

The [Jefferson Education Exchange](#) recently launched to help educators, leaders, and other buyers to make more informed ed tech selection decisions.

The [Ed Tech RCE Coach](#) is a tool that helps schools and districts analyze their own data to evaluate educational technology use.



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