Learning Platform and SIS Buyer's Guide

JUPITER

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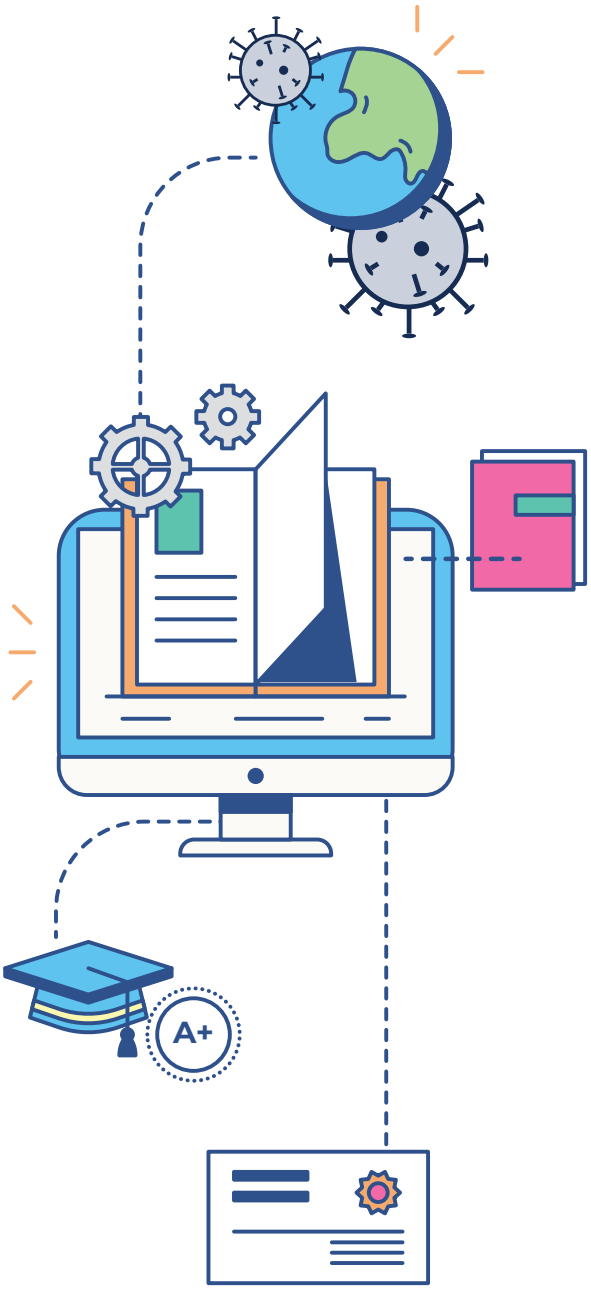
Introduction

School district leaders and administrators lack time to exhaustively research available Ed Tech products in the market. Still, education leaders are hard-pressed to configure solutions for their school's learning and student information management needs, especially as we adjust to an entirely new way of managing education due to the impact of COVID-19. This guide provides education leaders with the key considerations to keep top-of-mind when assessing education technology solutions for learning management and student data management systems.

This guide is authored by Rachel Stuart, currently a school instructional technologist and designer at a small private school in Atlanta, Georgia. As a practicing educator who works at the intersection of technology and education, Rachel has developed a strong working knowledge of best practices as the result of many years of technology evaluation, selection, and implementation. Along the way, Rachel has utilized hard-earned lessons born from the successes and failures that are part of any journey towards progressive use of technology. It is largely through this lens, together with a review of current trends in technology adoption, that readers of this guide will learn what works best when evaluating potential solutions.

Setting Context

In March 2020, the world shifted to online learning and teaching as the global shutdown in response COVID-19 pandemic took hold. While the evolution of digital-first education had been a work in progress for decades, school and district administrators quickly need to implement a complex web of new technologies to assist in virtual learning, including video conferencing solutions, learning management systems, student information systems, one or more online curricular programs for virtual instruction, as well as other technology solutions, all in a condensed timeline. School leaders learned how to use these systems while simultaneously developing professional development for faculty and staff, implementing the technologies, and training teachers, students, and parents on how to use the new technology. These technological implementations occurred at breakneck speeds, leaving little time for the kind of careful evaluation that typically goes into enterprise-level adoptions.



The EdTech sector had years to ready itself for widespread K12 learning and teaching in online settings — as can be seen in the rapid rise of online learning for Higher Education before the pandemic. However, the haphazard way that many EdTech companies onboarded the avalanche of new customers demonstrated that some EdTech companies could have done much more to prepare and ensure speedy, efficient, and efficacious implementation in partnership with schools and districts.

District and school administrators implemented EdTech products and management systems together in highly fragmented ways. For example, administrators may have decided to purchase learning management systems for disparate functions, such as their classroom features and user interface designs, but not for the native gradebook applications or the database system for storing student information.

Over the last several years, LMS and SIS providers for schools and districts have increased their market share by purchasing competitor's solutions, connecting different SIS and LMS solutions through APIs and relational databases. This approach could lead to data corruption from the two systems' mismatched data and cause lag time while waiting for data synchronization. Single-database LMS and SIS systems, on the other hand, work with more speed and reliability, as they don't have to synchronize between different databases. While market consolidation is a natural stage of growth for the economy, the consequence to schools and districts is felt in the declining number of providers from which to choose, which impacts pricing and service levels. And, as has long been the case, disparate systems brought together via acquisitions were never designed to work together in a truly unified way, leading to short-sided fixes that unnecessarily challenge educators, administrators, and technology specialists alike.

On top of these challenges, the COVID-19 crisis necessitated speed in choice and implementation, leaving out the opinions and feedback from teachers and students who depend on these systems for teaching and learning.

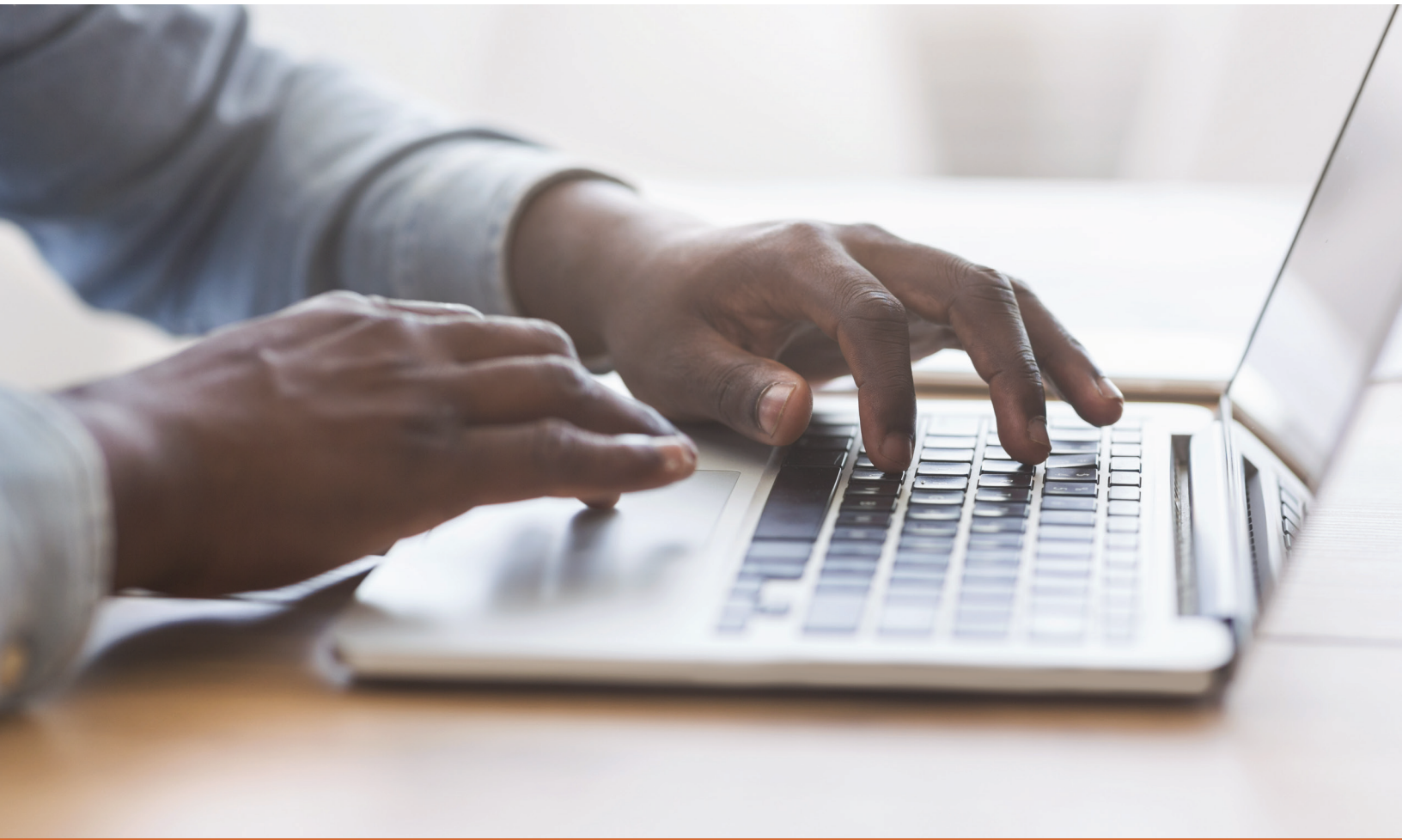
In times before the pandemic, education leaders were likely to select and roll out new EdTech systems in measured cohorts, analyzing the merits of one or the other before making a long-term commitment to a certain technology. In fact, school leaders and doctoral students regularly spend years on deciding if a system in question is effective in education settings. Due to the uncertainty of this time period, long-term study was not available to schools and districts needing to develop ways to keep their students learning through the pandemic.

Parallel with the rapid adoption of EdTech, many teachers found themselves largely on their own when it came to adjusting to the new, virtual teaching and learning paradigm. What was once an online "space" that most teacher preparation programs considered optional, quickly became (and remains) an integral element of the teaching and learning experience.

Having moved through unprecedented times to manage the many unexpected challenges in education, education leaders recognize the value of unified, single-database, education technology solutions designed to streamline workflows to promote effortless exchange of data to facilitate real-time, remote, and hybrid, learning interactions.

More than anything, though, education leaders underscore the importance of empowering teachers with technology that leads to long-lasting results in student performance. However they come to systems, school districts need to ensure they meet teachers and students where they are — whether that's in class, online, or through hybrid teaching and learning. With that, solutions have to meet teachers and students where they are in other ways, including the reality that not all teachers are equipped with the same skill set, and not all students have the same access. Having survived the gauntlet of rapid EdTech adoption, leaders must carefully consider the role of education technology solutions that are capable of scaling while also staying grounded in the practical realities of today's classroom experience.

Moreover, education leaders recognize that single-database systems avoid the potential data corruption errors and lag time of synchronizing the LMS and SIS. Education leaders deciding to use a unified approach to technology benefit from the peace of mind that the technologies will no longer inhibit productivity due to gaps in interoperability. In fact, the advantage of a single-database system is that both education leaders and teachers can focus on the main challenge ahead: helping students to thrive academically in the post-COVID-19 era.



Single-Database Platforms

What they are and why it matters

The notion of an all-in-one product is not unique to EdTech. Take for example GPS. Most people use their smartphones in their cars, but the screens are small, and it requires sticking the phone to your windshield or vent, and keeping it plugged in to keep it charged. But high-end auto-makers have built-in large touch-screens. The integrated solution makes it much simpler and more convenient for drivers. Having a separate SIS and LMS, even from the same vendor, is like sticking your phone to your windshield, while a single-database SIS/LMS is like the built-in large touch-screens.

This trend from integrating separate functional components to a single app (all-in-one) has been growing quickly. It wasn't long ago when schools had separate apps for their gradebook, email (school-to-home), online assignments, online forums, attendance, discipline, report cards, transcripts, and test scores.

Data from these systems feed into learning platforms, often referred to as learning management systems (LMS), a technology that aspires to function like a digital school building, offering virtual learning spaces for curriculum and assessment. Each teachers' use of a LMS varies, but many use it as an online bulletin board, curriculum file cabinet, daily communication hub for classroom management, and assessment delivery system. Everything that a teacher needs to run his or her traditional classroom can be augmented through the use of a learning platform.

When educators work within a single-database platform, they are not required to manage multiple systems just to navigate the teaching and learning path. And the best platforms, like the touch-screens enabled with GPS, are those that are natively built together.

Unfortunately, the availability of these platforms has diminished through consolidation, where larger players are cobbling systems together to imitate a unified system, but in reality they continue to deliver a fragmented hard-to-manage experience to schools. Since the systems were not built to intuitively work together, it becomes harder for teachers to deliver in-person, hybrid, and remote instruction, when they have to spend time on managing the data flows from one system into the next.

In the same way that other industries have advanced towards comprehensive, unified solutions, school districts need teacher-centered, single-database systems that are built expressly to relieve educators' pressure of simultaneously managing technology, students, and learning experiences.

Learning Platform

Pillars of Success

In these times, delivering instruction is now as diverse as teaching students in brick-and-mortar classrooms, in hybrid settings, and completely online. To support and empower teachers, Learning Platforms must have key features to be highly effective.

These features should include:

Seamless integration with a video conferencing solution built within the online classroom portal

Formative assessment tools, such as quizzes or tests, to gauge student understanding before the unit of instruction is delivered

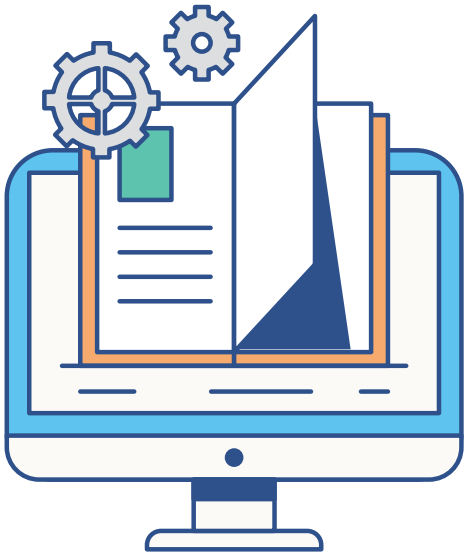
Intuitive content management modules that allow teachers to drop in text, images, videos, embedded HTML elements, and other tools to deliver instruction with ability to track when students have engaged with the content

Intuitive feedback abilities — for example, allowing teachers to review submitted student work as a document or even a picture — and to offer feedback by commenting directly on the document with a comment box or even drawing directly on the document or picture itself

Summative assessment capabilities that feed into the class gradebook

Ability to import old, paper-based tests and quizzes directly into the system, which then constructs an online quiz for use in the online classroom

- An online forum for students to engage with one another in discussion threads
- A behavior tracking module to document when students have exceeded behavior expectations and to document when students are exhibiting problem behaviors
- A fully customizable gradebook for each class section — allowing teachers to adapt to the needs of groups of unique students
- Standards-based grading options with standards customizable by school district or school level
- Ability to share assignments and lessons within the school and district and platform-wide
- Ability to see the classroom from the student point of view, in order to ensure that grades, assignments, and lessons are formatted correctly
- Integration with email system to facilitate classroom communication between teachers, students, and parents



Student Information System

Pillars of Success

Facilitating school-wide student services, student information systems are the foundation for reliable data processing from individual students' grades and enrollment schedules, to the aggregation of all student data in a centralized transcripts database. School and district administrators rely on a robust SIS to organize the school day, semester, and year.

Key features include:

Transcript database of students' grades and credits should be easily accessible with search queries

Transcript builder to customize school transcripts according to the pedagogical practices adopted by the school: from traditional grading to standards based grading, and more

Easy transcript upload processor, allowing administrators to control how transfer grades are uploaded into the database (vital for when schools and districts move between providers)

A PDF generator to output student transcripts in a large digital file capable of sharing with teachers, students, parents, and other educational institutions

A report card builder customized for school needs and adaptable to quarter, semester, and year grading terms

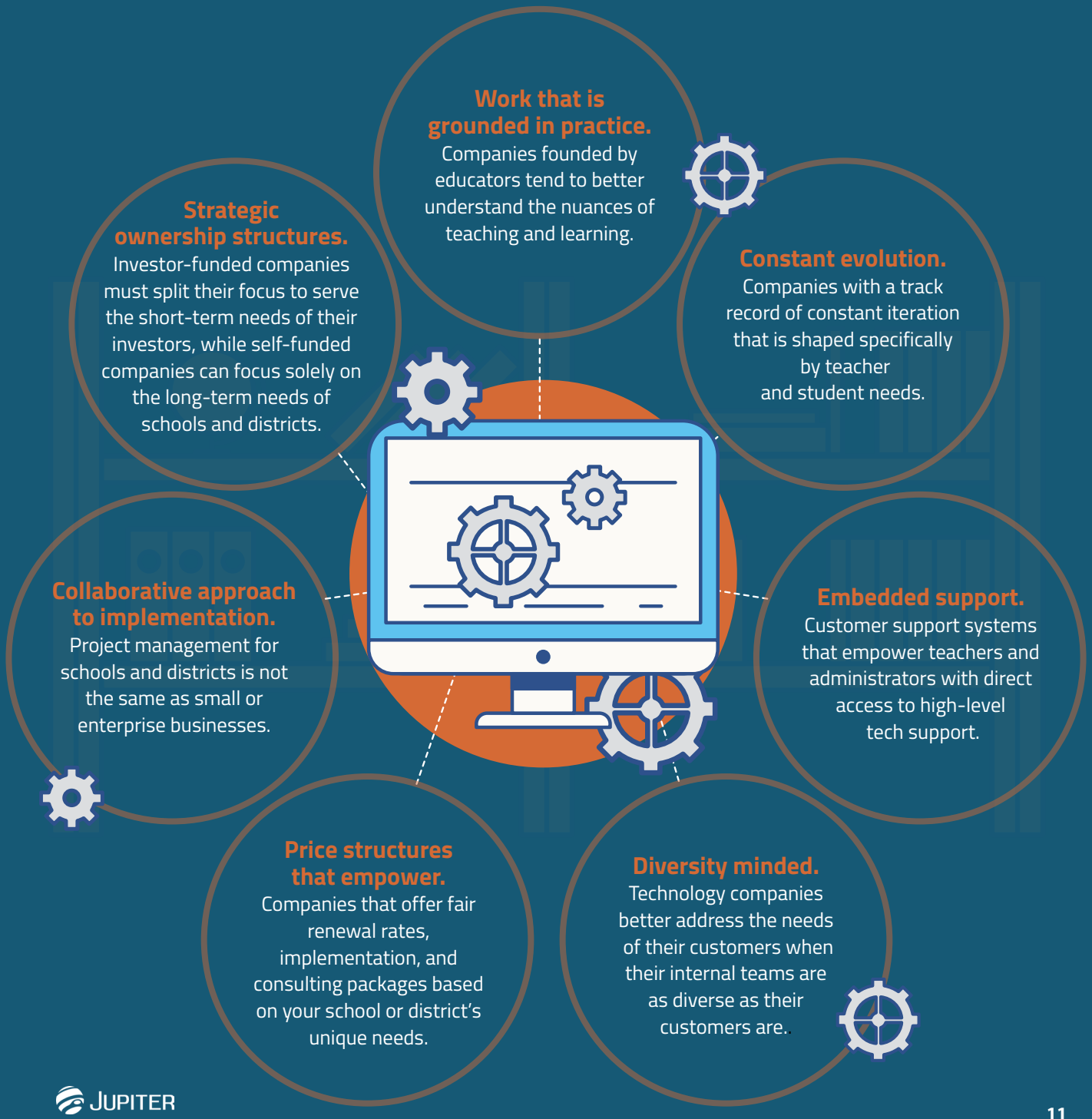
A report card PDF generator to output report cards in a large digital file capable of sharing with teachers, students, parents, and other educational institutions

Easily change student and teacher schedules by adding, removing, and switching classes

Sizing up the Organizations Behind the Platforms

Let's size up the organizations that delivered the tech. As this is education, however, it's important to consider both the platforms and, in some way, the people behind them.

As part of an evaluation process, school districts should not only consider the functionality of systems, but also look for companies that bring:



Lessons Learned

Implementing an enterprise suite of products is a challenging project in the best of times. In times of crisis, this process becomes far more difficult.

As a school technology leader, I acted as the in-house LMS and SIS implementation manager. We realized we needed to upgrade our technology suite as COVID-19 challenges dragged on through the Spring and Fall semesters of 2020.

In the discovery phase, comparing products meant dozens of synchronous, video conference, demonstration meetings with providers' sales associates and engineers. This was a time-intensive way to choose a product with a short deadline. Outside of times of crisis, I advise school and district leaders to space these meetings out to foster time for reflection, study, and testing.

Demo meetings are also an integral time to bring stakeholders into meetings, as the opinions of teachers, parents, and students should be respected when making software choices. If stakeholder attendance at demos could not be accommodated due to scheduling conflicts, platform providers could offer edited videos for any unique solutions proposed during demos so that education leaders could later share with teachers, parents, and students. It is also highly recommended to assemble a team of stakeholders to try the application hands-on to assess its ease-of-use and server response time, since these important qualities cannot be vetted from sales demos alone.

During the meetings, we explained our school's set of requirements. As you sit down to meetings with providers, think about the features that make your school unique. Write those down and have them handy during the meetings.

Here are some things to consider adding to your list of talking points with providers:

- Is the learning platform genuinely intuitive for teacher and student use? What usage patterns could the provider demonstrate regarding ease of use for teachers and students?
- How does the school design its class periods or schedules? Is this something that the platform can accommodate?
- Evaluate the ease of use of transcript and report card builders. Do consultants have to manually build reports or is the system automated?
- How does the platform handle data related IEPs or individual student learning plans?
- Does the system have the option to use Standards-based grading, personalized learning, and differentiation strategies?
- What classroom and school communication tools are built into the system? Can they connect to school email systems?
- How are alerts sent to parents and students for missing grades or class periods?
- Can schools choose credits per class and class weights for GPA?
- How do they organize extracurricular groups or sports?
- Does the LMS/SIS provider have a suite of training videos for teacher use, or will the school or district have to create their own?
- How efficient and effective is customer support for any technical issues that may arise? Will teachers have access to customer support, or does that funnel through administrative teams? (If the latter, take note, because this means an additional set of duties for administrators that may have not existed before.)
- Is there a demo environment for education leaders to utilize to facilitate training for faculty?
- Will their transcript database generate the reports we need to send to state departments of education in the right format?

One of the common threads throughout all of these questions is the need to address the concerns of different stakeholders. While the evaluation and decision is ultimately the responsibility of leadership, their decisions are centered on whether the system can deliver value to teachers, students, parents, and the school technology teams that support them.

The process of comparing products in the illuminated product gaps for smaller, progressive schools and districts looking to translate traditional, analog systems to next-level solutions. Simply put, the "big" companies could not accommodate the unique needs of our school's size...needs that are centered precisely on the teacher and student-centered approach.

Because we had little more than a month to choose a product and implement a system, we chose a "bigger" name brand. It seemed the safer choice because we had so little time for in-depth evaluation, but it also meant we had to work around the aspects of a traditional LMS/SIS environment. This also meant that we had to create training solutions for our specific ways of using the system. The provider had a set of how-to guides, but no video-based training plan. When devising a system of instruction for adults learning a software suite, we quickly determined that a video-based training plan was instrumental to implementation success.

With a teacher and student-centered approach, companies can be proactive and design training solutions with videos and screencasts that could be shared with faculty, parents, and students. Companies should develop high quality training before implementations start, in advance, and in consultation with a beta group of teachers, students, parents and administrators. This ensures that teachers could sign in and get started without the need for administration to conduct high-touch coaching.

LMS/SIS companies should make facilitation of data uploads easy to manage and a cornerstone part of implementation. In my experience, uploading historical grades to the school's new SIS is a troublesome and costly process, both in terms of dollars and in administrative time. Since the data that lives in your SIS is vital to organizing a school's operations and services to students, this process should rank highly when evaluating a new system.

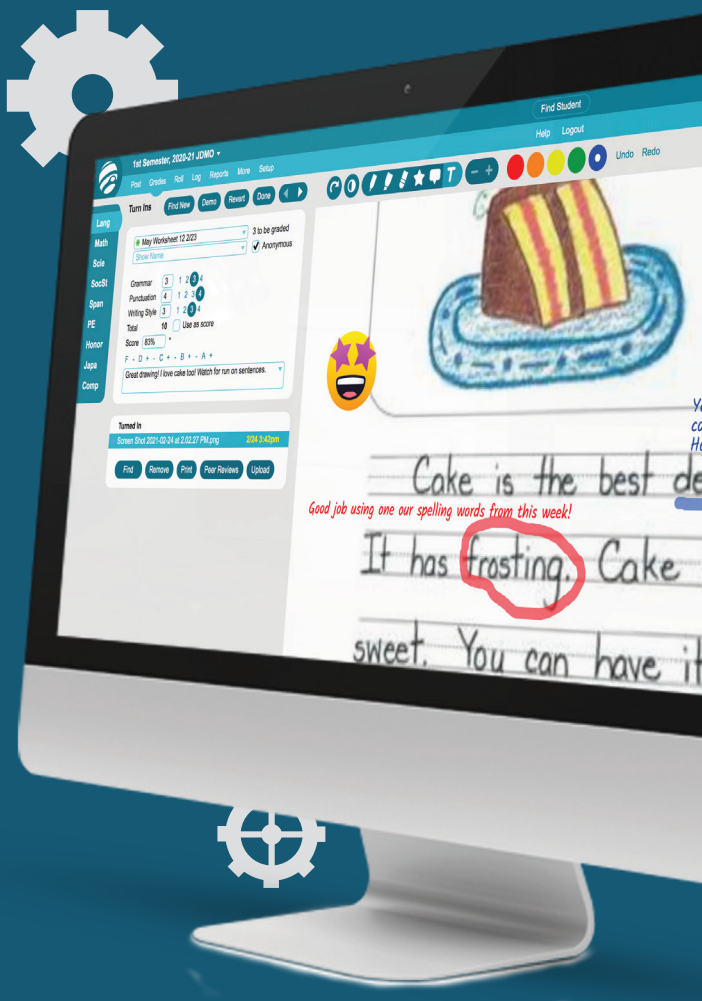
If I were to begin the evaluation process over again, I would select a single-database, unified learning and student information platform that complements the way in which our school operates and prioritizes requirements and ease of use from a teacher's perspective.

Jupiter

Jupiter's single-database, unified approach was designed from the ground up to improve the teaching and learning process. Created by Jupiter's CEO David Hundsness, a former middle and high school teacher, Jupiter started with a vision to be teacher-centered from the very beginning.

David was incredibly frustrated with analog gradebooks and early digital gradebooks that were a headache for teachers to maintain. In 2004, he began developing his own, launching an early gradebook that was met with widespread enthusiasm from teachers. As the company grew, it developed its own learning and student information system to natively interact with one another in a unified way, all in the interest of designing an intuitive tool for teacher and student use.

Jupiter continues to outperform other providers, even those with greater market share, due to its exquisite user interface design, robust functionality, and devotion to its core mission of enhancing teacher focus on the needs of their students, not the technology.

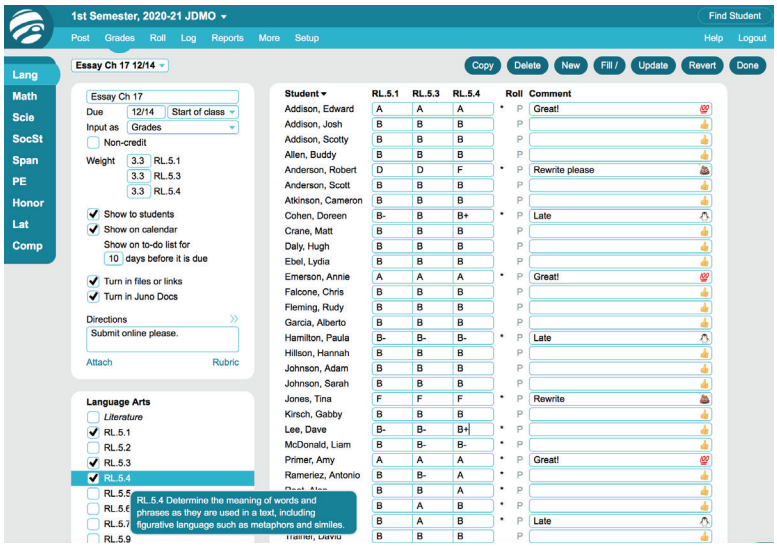


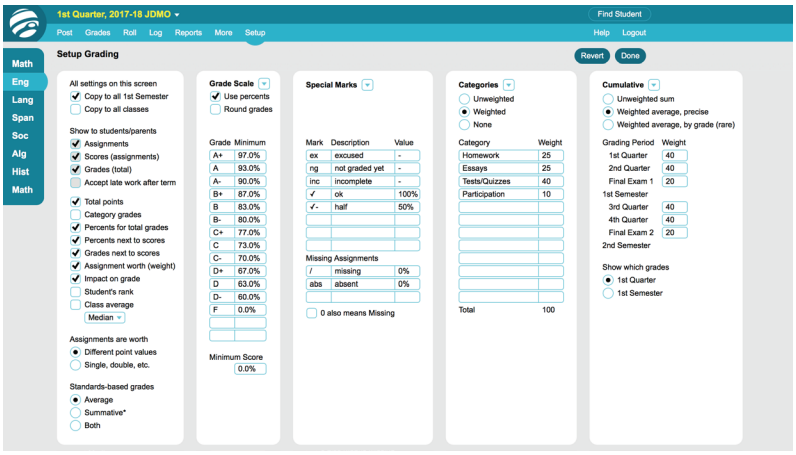
Jupiter's Top Features include:

- Pods, an assessment and lesson feature that allows teachers to design units of instruction with text content, video embedded features, images, audio, and links that can be designed to function as an online textbook. Pods have numerous ways to assess student learning with options like multiple choice, matching, and write-in which can be scored automatically or manually. Teachers can use pods for formative tests, summative tests, or ungraded exercises. Teachers can share their Pods with one another at the department, school, and district level, or can share them with anyone using Jupiter's learning platform.

- School districts and leaders can allow each teacher to have total control over each of their classes' gradebooks and gradescales, creating unique grading solutions for diverse learner needs. One teacher's gradebook can be completely different from the entire school — allowing PE or Music teachers, for instance, to offer a different grading system than core subject areas.

- Standards-based grading for competency based education, with options to average scores or select summative scores based on a window of time.





- Creating quizzes and tests from imported word documents and/or PDFs.
- Formative exercises repeat questions until students reach mastery at 100%.
- Auto grade forum participation by the number of text characters students write in the text fields.
- Remote class attendance by the amount of time that a student spends "inside" of the class's LMS.
- Easy to use templates for report cards and transcripts.
- Ability to "impersonate" students — from the teacher end — to ensure that lessons are formatted correctly.
- High level tech support accessible by teachers and administrators during standard school hours.

Education leaders facing challenges with upgrading a district or school's digital learning and information environments will be pleased with the implementation resources at their disposal when partnering with Jupiter. Visit jupitered.com to learn more.

About Jupiter

Jupiter is the innovation leader in ed tech. We were the first to develop an all-in-one Learning Platform and Student Information System, which we built from the ground up as a web-hosted service back when most competitors were retrofitting their old standalone software. We developed all our features in-house, not acquired from third parties, so all modules share the same database and have a consistent user experience.

Founded in 2004, we now serve 4 million students in 50 states. We have been profitable since 2006, and we are completely self-funded, with no investors, so our undivided focus is to develop the best solution for schools.

To learn more, visit jupitered.com

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