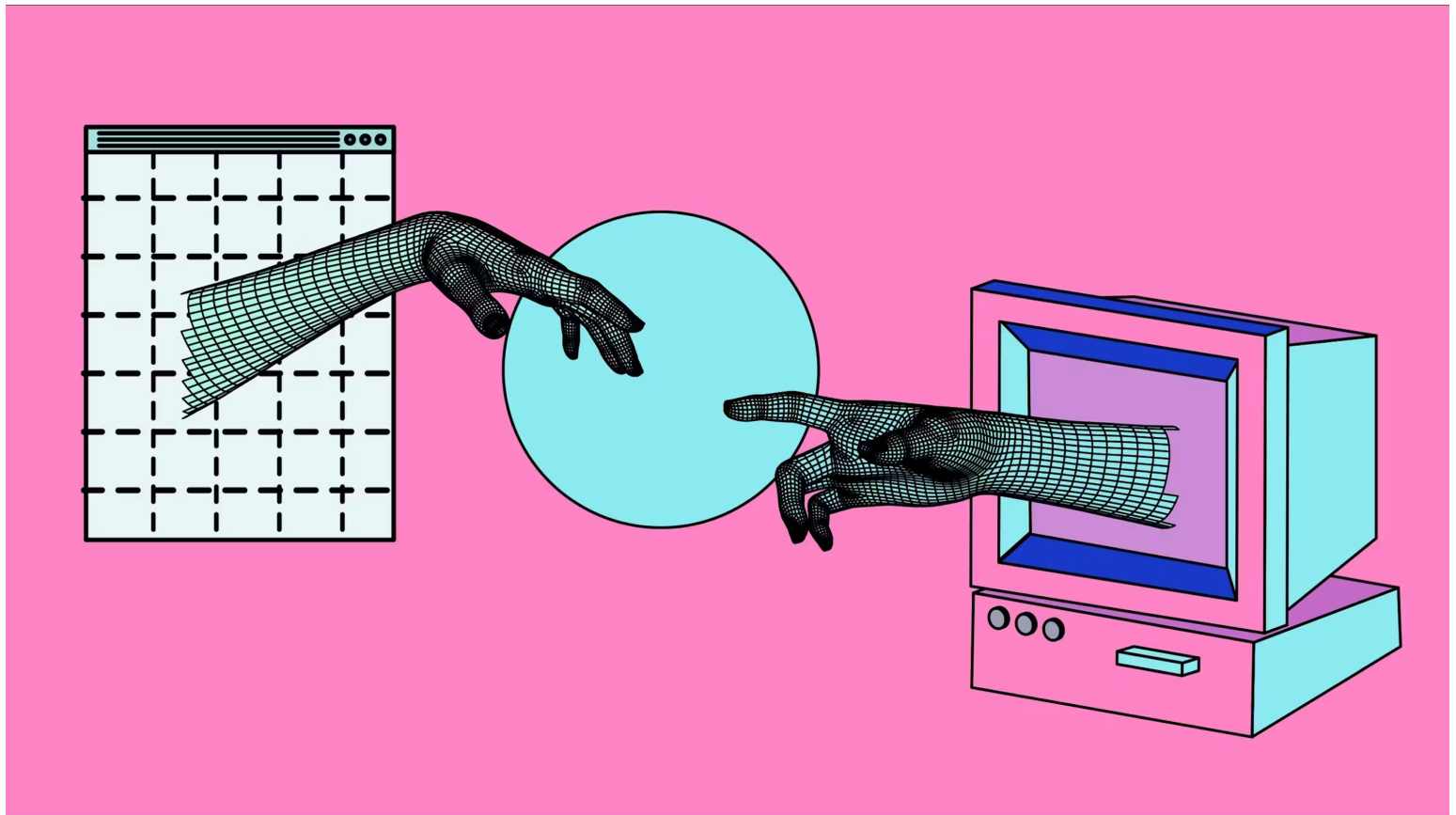


Which Edtech Companies Are Listening to Teachers?

By Nadia Tamez-Robledo Dec 15, 2022



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From time to time, Jeff Livingston gets a call from an entrepreneur looking for advice about getting into the edtech market. That's no surprise given his credentials.

As founder of the Center for Education Market Dynamics, Livingston has spent the better part of two decades thinking about how to get edtech innovations to the students who need them most. To him, that means students who are Black, Latino, poor or who speak a language other than English at home.

So when his phone rings with a would-be edtech founder on the other side, Livingston's first question isn't about their idea.



I'd much rather they build for Abbott Elementary than for Palo Alto High School.

Jeff Livingston, founder of the Center for Education Market Dynamics

“I say, ‘Have you watched Abbott Elementary?’” he says with a laugh, referring to the hit ABC sitcom about spirited teachers who make do with lean resources in a Philadelphia public school. “Obviously it’s not a real school, but the experience of the teachers and students in that comic setting is closer to the reality of the American classroom than is the lived experience of the mostly affluent men with fancy coding degrees who enter [edtech]. So I’d much rather they build for Abbott Elementary than for Palo Alto High School.”

Livingston’s outlook encapsulates something that we at EdSurge have been exploring for several months. How much voice do teachers really have when it comes to how edtech products—the ones that are put to use in their classrooms—are developed?

While looking for the answer, we’ve shared our findings in this series of articles. Earlier we talked to [educators who feel disillusioned](#) by edtech companies’ seemingly disingenuous engagement tactics or [feel invisible in the edtech choices](#) made at their schools.

Now, we’re sharing data that we gathered from 14 edtech companies (ranging in size from large to small, from household names to startups) to learn how educators play a role in their products.

We’ve sought to find out how many edtech-company leaders have had experience teaching, if and how companies seek teacher input to improve their products and who they talk to when looking for feedback.

Educators at the Helm

Before we dive into that data, it’s important to understand the broader context of our analysis. At the start of our journey to pull back some of the edtech curtain, we set out to survey roughly 30 edtech companies of varying sizes and subject areas. But after persistent pestering, we only heard back from about half of them.



The difficulty of finding out about how edtech companies operate seems notable. We spent weeks emailing and calling officials at many companies in our original sample that never ended up replying. (We even hired a journalism graduate student to help follow up with those who didn't respond.) In many of those cases, we could not get anyone at a company to even confirm that they received our request. That suggests that if, say, an educator had a suggestion or question for these companies, they may have difficulty getting that feedback to anyone who could act on it.

It also stands to reason that the companies that did agree to respond to our inquiry are the A+ students, if you will. They're the ones who don't mind sharing their teacher engagement processes because they know they're solid—that they make an earnest or even robust effort to hear from teachers. Plus, they had the communications staff who could wrangle everyone needed to gather the information. They're self-selected in that regard, is what we're trying to say.

Knowing that, what did the companies tell us about how educators are represented in the ranks of edtech leadership? And what might that, in turn, tell us about how well their products work for teachers?

Almost all of the participating companies reported at least a couple former educators in high-level leadership positions. Two of the companies said that their founder had classroom teaching experience on their resume. At 12 of the companies, former educators served in at least one high-level position (CEO, vice president or a director.)

On average, these edtech officials last worked in education about 11 years ago. On the whole, they were in the field for anywhere between 3 and 27 years. And these leaders spent time as teachers, with some also having

worked as school or district administrators.

Within our sample of edtech companies, former educators oversee pedagogy, product and sales departments. They are chief learning and chief product officers.

The furthest removed from their teaching days departed from the school halls 27 years ago. At the other end, one company reported their director is still teaching.

Of course, just because an edtech company has leaders who know schools firsthand doesn't mean those people can magically channel current teachers as they build products.

It's all about context, as Bart Epstein, CEO and founder of the EdTech Evidence Exchange, likes to say. Epstein has long pushed for opening pathways in the education sector that will make it easier to research edtech products and their true impact for students.

"Simply having some former teachers is not a magic bullet that means a product is going to be great," Epstein says. "If I had to choose between a company that had five former teachers—but that was the extent of their engagement—and a company that has one former teacher but robust authentic engagement with teachers, I would take the second company every time."

Livingston, of the Center for Education Market Dynamics, reminds us that our sample of companies and its high level of former educators in key leadership positions isn't the norm.

What's more common is for edtech companies to be founded by engineers—software or otherwise—who source

teachers' perspectives from people they personally know, he says. In Livingston's experience, that tends to be people who went to the same private schools and selective universities as the founders.

Companies that lack a leader with an education background or fail to get educators' perspectives into the product often fail, he says—or get acquired by another company that goes on to fail later.

“It’s possible today to have a tech idea, get that idea funded, get that idea built and sell that idea without doing much more than leaving the parking lot of a Whole Foods in Palo Alto, California,” Livingston says. “That seems to be changing, but I know a company where nobody on the board—nor the founding team—is related to anybody who’s been in a public school in the 21st century for more than five days in a row.”

Listening In

Our research did point us to some companies trying new ways to hear from educators.

The creators of an educational robot, for instance, recently decided that they needed to rethink its training regimen.

The small Dallas-based edtech company named RoboKind makes a 3-foot tall, spikey-haired robot named Milo, used in schools to help children with autism learn to decode nonverbal communication. But even though Milo’s use is growing—as well as three other models of robot friends—reps say the company’s founder and most of the internal staff were very aware that they don’t come from the world of K-12 education.

They’re engineers. Founder Richard Margolin’s background is in neuroscience and robotics.

That left them feeling like something was missing in their design conversations. They craved input from classroom teachers who actually put Milo into practice.

So this fall, the company started changing the process of how it sources ideas for new and improved features.

From now on, those ideas will come from the teachers who operate Milo while working with students.

Before the shift, “we were making developments based on hunches, things we thought needed to be improved from the internal team,” says Marleigh Gilyard, head of RoboKind’s new product management and strategy team. “What was missing was the teacher, our user. Our vice president said, ‘We need to change this around. For impact, we need teachers to be at the start.’”

The change is a drastic one for the company, founded 12 years ago.

So even companies that do have a strong bench of former teachers seek to find more-active ways to connect with current educators, just as RoboKind is now trying to do.

One way edtech companies in our sample tap teacher knowledge is to form advisory groups of educators or focus groups. Eight companies in our sample said they have advisory groups, though it was hard in some cases to get the specifics of just how those groups work.

At curriculum-platform BrainPOP, two advisory groups of about 50 educators are consulted about video lessons. Some of the advisors work on the front-end, helping develop and make sure the lessons are grade-appropriate. The others review the final video scripts from “different geographic, political and many other diverse perspectives.”

And at OverDrive, makers of the K-12 reading app Sora, an advisory group of 35 educators meet on an “as needed” basis to give the company feedback on its products or insight into education trends.

There are plenty of other ways edtech companies gather teacher feedback though.

Jason Ediger, chief marketing officer at curriculum platform Newsela, says the feedback loop between Newsela and educators is constant. That’s in part because of the company’s large user base—the company boasts that over 3.3 million teachers and 40 million students upload new content every day.

“I’ve never not listened to teachers—maybe I’m biased being a teacher,” says Ediger, who taught eighth grade technology classes for nine years early in his career (he left teaching in 2002). “There are products that are for back-end operations, but if it’s designed to be part of teaching and learning ... that seems kind of obvious.”

Behind the scenes at Newsela, Ediger says, teacher feedback comes in a few different ways:

- Through a “community team” that answers questions from teachers and passes on users’ suggestions or requests for tech support.
- Through formal advisory groups of teachers and administrators that meet monthly.
- And from UX designers who regularly analyze user data to identify where changes or improvements are needed.

But Ediger says the less formal “community” feedback isn’t less valuable than advisory groups.

“When you have more of a formal advisory group, it can sometimes become somewhat of an echo chamber,” he says. “[Through the community] you get more diversity of voice. Other people tend to be heard throughout the project.”



This is not Yelp, they are not filling out a one-minute [review]—‘OMG delicious sandwiches.’ We are asking them to tell us about how this product performs in a contextual environment.

Bart Epstein, CEO and founder of the EdTech Evidence Exchange

Companies were mostly mum about whether teachers are compensated for participating in advisory boards. Of the handful of companies that responded to that question, it was an even split with two saying yes, they offered payment, and two saying no. Another said it varies, but the company didn’t elaborate about what factors determine whether feedback is compensated.

The dearth of compensation data didn’t sit well with Epstein, whose organization [recently launched a program](#) that pays math teachers \$50 per hour for in-depth feedback on edtech products. When companies fail to pay teachers for their time, he says, they don’t hear from educators who need the most support.

“We need to hear from the busiest people, for whom technology is challenging, who are facing the most stress and dysfunction, and whose students need the most help,” Epstein says. “This is not Yelp, they are not filling out a one-minute [review]—‘OMG delicious sandwiches.’ We are asking them to tell us about how this product performs in a contextual environment so your peers can learn nationwide from your experience.”

Coronavirus and Culture Shifts

As with every part of the education landscape, edtech and its culture have evolved to meet schools’ shifting priorities following the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

So asking if companies are doing a good job listening to teachers isn’t a simple yes or no.

That’s the view of Kimberly Lewis, a K-8 computer science teacher in New York.

Lewis is active in the community forums and as an ambassador for the edtech products she loves. She has traveled to other schools and to conferences to train other teachers in how to use these products.

From her perspective, the amount of input sought from teachers varies from company to company, and each one has its own culture—something that can shift as a business grows or gets acquired by bigger edtech companies.

If teachers look for them, she says, plenty of companies have programs where educators can receive training, get early access to new features and feel heard when they have feedback or a suggestion.

But the coronavirus pandemic is shifting how edtech makers are engaging teachers, Lewis says, as companies have experienced an influx of cash and booming user counts.

“I think we’re losing our voice,” she says. “I think this sense of trying to meet these big district data needs is overshadowing, ‘Does it really work for individual teachers in the classroom?’”

This observation highlights how the question of whether teachers have a say in creating edtech products is linked to the question of how much input they have in edtech decisions at their own schools.



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Kimberly Lewis, K-8 computer science teacher

There’s a business reason why companies may get less responsive to teachers over time, says Livingston. For new edtech companies, initial growth often depends on word-of-mouth from teachers who like the product—especially if teachers were paying out of their own pocket or a small school-related budget.

“But then they reach a point where they realize that they’re only gonna grow financially by aggregating those sales, and that happens at the district level,” he explains. “And then they finally discover that there is a difference between what pleases the teacher in a classroom and what pleases the person at the district level writing the checks.”

Edtech companies now also face pressure from investors who expect them to compete for [the deluge of federal dollars pouring in](#) to help schools recover academically from the coronavirus pandemic.

Lewis understands the pull of the purse strings. But that doesn’t help her.

“As a classroom teacher, if I had the budget that related to my class, then I would have a voice with these companies,” Lewis says, “because these companies know I don’t get to make the selection in most districts, and generally speaking, the companies want to talk to the decision-makers.”

Teachers don’t want their districts to waste money on edtech that doesn’t have an impact for students, Lewis adds, but the technology is “just a piece of the puzzle.”

Administrators shouldn’t disregard a product that is easier for teachers to use for another that has minimally better student outcomes, she argues.

“I think a big piece missing is the teacher’s ability to make edtech choices that fit your needs in your classroom,” Lewis says. “Teachers who have been in the classroom for a while—it’s not just a job for us, it’s a life. And when you’re invested, you have a sense of what you need. We go out and find what we need, and more and more roadblocks are put up.”

Who's Signing the Checks?

So how much influence do teachers have on the edtech products that they use in their classrooms?

As Epstein likes to say, it comes down to context. How deeply does a company dive when asking teachers about their experiences? Does it have the money and staff to seek out, record and relay that feedback to their teams that can act on it?

Then there are the realities of running a business, expectations from financial backers and a laundry list of factors that influence how a company approaches the educator feedback loop.

“There’s a very big difference between what should happen and the reality of our current system of incentive and accountability,” Epstein says. “The ratio of good people to bad people in edtech is off the charts high—999 out of 1,000 people are hardworking, earnest people who want the best for kids. But they often run into the realities of the marketplace.”

All of the companies that shared their data with us will say that educators at every level—teachers, district administrators, school technology staff—are at the core of what they do.

Jamie Candee, CEO of Edmentum, spoke passionately about teachers’ role in the mission of her curriculum and distance-education company. Edmentum has a huge footprint in U.S. schools, with a presence in about half of them. And it has a whopping 82 percent of staff, by its count, who are former educators.

“We don’t build our products with the goal of bypassing or replacing the teacher,” she says. “We build them in order to help teachers be more efficient in differentiated instruction.”

But as Livingston explains, all edtech companies eventually find themselves trying to balance the desires of the users (the teachers) and customers (the school districts). Half of the companies in our analysis explicitly said that teachers, school administrators and district administrators are all part of their advisory groups.

In his experience, a district will always pick a product that is less user-friendly for teachers if it reports slightly better student outcomes than a more intuitive tool.

Whatever a company’s mission—or marketing—says about its desire to be teacher-centered, someone at a higher pay grade will be the one signing the check.

“A fundamental thing about the nature of the edtech market—and the education market more broadly—is that users and customers are almost always different people with different agendas and different priorities,” Livingston says. “Much of the reason we think the market for education products and services is broken is because we are rewarded for thinking only about customers and much less so for thinking about users.”

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Disclosure: Bart Epstein is on the board of ASCD, which is [in the process of merging](#) with the International Society for Technology in Education, EdSurge’s parent organization. EdSurge operates with [editorial independence](#).

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