

Beyond Checklists: The Human Component of Choosing K-12 Software Solutions

There are various factors to consider when choosing software solutions for your K-12 school. Many options will check the boxes of tracking enrollment, tuition payments, attendance, fundraising, and more. Since every private school operates uniquely, how do you know the best solutions for your specific purposes?

In a [recent Blackbaud webinar](#), we asked two K-12 technology professionals how they help their schools thrive in the digital world. Hiram Cuevas, Director of Information Systems and Academic Technology at St. Christopher's School in Richmond, VA, and John Yen, Director of Technology at Polytechnic School in Pasadena, CA, shared these insights about the human component of choosing K-12 software solutions.



Know Your Audience.

Education is a human-centered industry. Many families choose private schools for the sense of community they foster, which extends from faculty and staff to the families and students they serve. In addition to empowering student learning and development, K-12 schools need to be very human-centric regarding professional development for staff and faculty. When considering software solutions for a school, these are some “people” questions to consider:

- Who will be using the software?
- Who will benefit from a new system?
- What are the competencies of those people?
- How can we support them, so they feel the system is designed for them?

Successful software implementation requires thinking about the people involved. Consider not just the staff supporting the technology but also the end users—the teachers, administrators, and families. Many schools implement best-in-class software and have poor results when it is not designed or customizable for the capabilities and purposes of the people using them.



Identify the Problem You're Trying to Solve.

When COVID-19 disrupted operations, some schools had to refocus their energy on standardizing technology. Teachers were emailing students and using different online tools to communicate assignments. If a student had six classes, they sometimes had to look in six different places to find and complete their coursework. Schools quickly realized that process was inefficient and frustrating for students and families.

This realization gave schools the impetus to look more closely at their current software applications and consider how they were being used. In some cases, schools had to research and implement new software and quickly get their teams up to speed. In others, the tools within their existing systems already had the capability to streamline communications and pedagogy, but people weren't using them. Training those people how to use the software as intended allowed for the horizontal growth of the school curriculum. Some schools also accelerated vertical growth by investing in connected software systems to provide an enterprise view into what was going on across the entire K-12 school community.



Ask "What If?"

Consider what may be possible with technology. Education is constantly changing, and a growth mindset is fundamental in the industry and within our schools. For example, social-emotional learning is now an integral part of evaluating student growth and development. Our systems—both school systems and software systems—need to adapt to the moving trends of education and do it effectively.

What if every student had a learning profile (LP) and not just those who are neurodivergent? That mark of an LP can feel stigmatizing and alienating for students, yet everyone learns differently. Standardizing LPs removes that stigma and helps a school, and its students, recognize that everybody approaches learning in their own unique way. Private schools have smaller student-to-teacher ratios. Things like LPs and other digital records can equip teachers with the information they need to understand their students better every year they attend.



Listen to Your Community.

Do your rounds. Walk your campus and talk to teachers and staff about their pain points. Find out what they need and consider the seasonality of those needs. Admissions, enrollment, and financial aid teams likely need additional support during the enrollment season. Teachers may need more support during exams. Listen, and you'll discover ways technology can alleviate some tedious day-to-day tasks and free them up for more complicated strategic and human-centric work.

Relationships require effort. Listen to those who push back. People do not want to be forced to use a solution they do not understand or for which they are not ready. Decision makers need to circulate and be present in the lives of staff and faculty, gain their trust, and get feedback. When stakeholders feel they have a say in their solutions, they are more likely to embrace those solutions and adopt their usage.



Avoid Innovation Creep.

It's critical to have some guardrails in place to vet software solutions, guard against redundancies, and ensure tools are being used as intended. It is not unusual for someone to ask, "What if?" and find that the solution is already available to them. It's common for someone to hear about a new tool at a conference or through colleagues at other schools. Listen to suggestions and do the research but avoid adding software that doesn't address your school's specific needs.

Educate your senior team so they have a greater sense of how complicated and convoluted data management can be. When adding new software, you're not just talking about managing separate solutions but also how they communicate with each other. Ideally, a school's software would be fully integrated, including enrollment, tuition, financial aid, student information, learning management, and fundraising systems. While fully integrated solutions enable data to flow cleanly between systems, disparate systems silo data, leading to inaccurate and inconsistent reporting and creating a "soft cost" of maintaining information synchronization. Can your Business Manager view your enrollment management and fundraising data with one login and password? Do they have a simple way to get an enterprise report of the school's financial health? It's crucial to look at the big picture.

These are just some of the human components to consider when choosing software solutions for K-12 schools. Every organization has different students, teachers, families, and staff, and the right solutions should benefit all of them. By knowing your audience, identifying the specific problems you need to solve, asking "what if?", listening to your community, and guarding against innovation creep, you will set your people and your school up for success.

Related resources:

[Webinar: Thriving in the Digital and Physical World](#)

[On-Demand Sessions from Blackbaud's 2022 K-12 Conference](#)

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