

Your Guide to Buying Educational Technology

To be successful in preparing students, schools need technology that is easy to use, well supported and designed to improve learning outcomes through increased student engagement. But how do you know if you're buying the right products?

Educators have told us the essential features technology products must have to support classroom success. This guide outlines these features and helps you choose educational technology that will deliver a significant return on your investment.

Start with the right company

An effective technology implementation requires customer support, training, professional development, a strong user community, extensive content, high standards and a high degree of product integration. Without these elements, the chances are low that your technology purchase will deliver the return on investment you need. It's important that the company you choose understands educators and provides ongoing support to every customer – no matter how big or small the purchase.

Look for a technology company that offers you the following:

- Comprehensive support – Knowledgeable and easy-to-access support is essential to ensuring the successful use of technology in your classrooms. Make sure your purchase includes phone, e-mail, web and online support. The company's offering should also include warranties and parts programs that will help keep your classrooms running all day, every day.
- Flexible training options – The right technology company will offer free or low-cost training and learning opportunities for administrators, teachers, technology staff and students in a variety of formats. You should be able to access on-site, on-demand or online training from professional trainers, making it easy for everyone to fit training and learning into their busy schedules.
- Effective professional development – From regional conferences to recognition programs, professional development helps create skilled technology leaders. Choose a company that will support your staff as they drive innovation in your schools.
- A strong community – A company with an organic community of users will enable your staff to more easily share their ideas and experiences. Many schools report that when educators have more opportunities to connect with each other, technology use and innovation increases.
- An extensive content offering – To make lesson creation more efficient and lesson delivery more effective, ensure the company you choose offers a broad spectrum of content, including images, Adobe® Flash® files, videos and learning objects. Tools, templates and ready-made lesson activities that are searchable and aligned to international curriculum standards also help save your teachers' time and energy.

- High quality standards – The company you choose should be committed to meeting rigorous product quality standards. Ensure it is ISO 9001:2008 certified, which indicates an organization has strong customer support, motivated staff and products that are proven to be durable and easy to use.
- Product integration – To ensure you can easily build on your technology investment, look for a company that develops products that complement each other. It's also important for a company's offerings to easily integrate with your existing classroom technology.

Interactive whiteboards

An interactive whiteboard is the focal point of a technology-enabled classroom. With this product, teachers can harness the vast array of digital content now available to deliver engaging, effective and interactive lessons. The right interactive whiteboard not only engages students with different learning styles and encourages participation – it also improves learning outcomes and helps teachers streamline their lesson planning.

Look for an interactive whiteboard with the following features:

- Ease of use – For busy educators, finding time to learn how to use complicated technology products is challenging. Choose an interactive whiteboard that is easy for beginners but sophisticated enough to grow with your staff as they use it.
- Detection of touch – Teachers and students will more easily adopt a product that automatically recognizes whether they are using a pen, finger or eraser. Having to switch modes by pressing a button takes more time and is less intuitive.
- Durability – Interactive whiteboards need to stand up to the rigours of daily use in the classroom. Before you buy, ask about rates of return or repair – they should be one percent or lower.
- Simple installation – Choose a product that is easy to install and doesn't require expensive retrofitting. An interactive whiteboard should be able to be mounted directly on a wall or used with an inexpensive floor stand.
- Third-party integration – To ensure your technology dollars are well spent, make sure the product you choose works with resources and content from a variety of highly respected providers.
- Large community of users – It's important to give your educators access to a variety of resources. Select a product that is widely used so they can easily find teacher-created content online.
- Proven results – Choose an interactive whiteboard with a track record of having a proven, positive impact on student achievement and teacher productivity.

Interactive whiteboard software

Well-designed and highly effective interactive whiteboard software can have a positive impact on everyone in your schools. Teachers will save valuable time and achieve more when they are creating, delivering and managing lessons. Students benefit from high-impact, captivating lessons that turn learning into a hands-on experience. And administrators save time and money while seeing a positive return on their investment.

Look for interactive whiteboard software with the following features:

- Easy-to-use tools – Interactive whiteboard software is most effective when it has a powerful but easy-to-use interface. All tools should be accessible with just a few mouse clicks.

- Windows® operating system interface – Software that uses the standard interface of the Windows operating system will provide more familiarity and offer your teachers increased usability.
- Versatility – When teachers only need one software product to create, teach and manage their lessons, they save valuable time. You can also make the most of your training efforts by choosing a single application to serve the needs of your classrooms.
- Administration tools – Interactive whiteboard software should include tools to help administrators make the most of their time as well. Make sure they will be able to manage software installations and configuration across networks, and manage and monitor classroom assets such as projectors.
- Easy integration – Invest in software that easily integrates with a variety of other products, both hardware and software. This will save you time and money as you continue to implement new technology in your schools.

Interactive response systems

With a powerful interactive response system, teachers can instantly see how well students understand their lessons, and can report, track and analyze test results. An effective system helps teachers manage assessment, catch problems early and design lessons that cater to students' needs.

Look for an interactive response system with the following features:

- Advanced gradebook – Along with the ability to deliver tests and quizzes, a powerful response system should include an integrated gradebook at no extra cost. Look for a gradebook with advanced analysis and reporting tools to make individual and class assessment easier.
- Ready-to-use content – Additional content, including question banks and lesson plans, should be available online at no extra cost. Ensuring teachers can immediately use the product supports and increases teacher adoption.
- Intuitive software – Choose an interactive response system with software that is simple to learn and use. For example, teachers should be able to access the software's primary functions with no more than one mouse click.
- Direct integration with interactive whiteboard software – Enable your teachers to seamlessly insert questions and quizzes into their lessons. This feature helps them make the most of the system.
- Ergonomic remote – Make sure your system comes with remotes that are easy to use and hold. A student should be able to hold a remote in one hand and use the system without difficulty.

Classroom amplification systems

With a classroom amplification system, you can save teachers' voices and be sure that all students can hear, no matter where they are sitting. In fact, research shows that when students hear lesson content clearly, they experience greater success at listening tasks and learning in general.

Look for a classroom amplification system with the following features:

- Cost effective – A classroom amplification system doesn't need to be expensive. Look for an affordable product that is comparable in price to a new computer.
- Easy to install – Adding an amplification system to your classrooms shouldn't be a complicated procedure. Choose a product with minimal installation requirements.

- Distributed audio – Make sure the system includes four speakers that are designed to be mounted on either the ceiling or the wall. This type of installation will distribute sound evenly throughout the room.
- Teacher and student microphones – A system is most effective when it includes a wireless microphone the teacher can wear while moving about the classroom. To make it easier for students to participate, also look for a system with a handheld, wireless microphone that can be shared among the class.
- Classroom technology connections – Choose a classroom amplification system that can be easily connected to other products in your classrooms, such as computers, DVD players or MP3 players.
- Ability to speak over audio – Ensure the system allows teachers to play audio files and speak into the microphone at the same time. This feature enables them to add commentary that furthers students' understanding of lessons.

Wireless slates

With a wireless slate, teachers can interact with their digital content from anywhere in the classroom, giving them more mobility and flexibility during lessons. Adding a wireless slate to your classrooms will also encourage students to participate more in their learning, individually or in groups.

Look for a wireless slate with the following features:

- Integration with an interactive whiteboard – When a wireless slate and an interactive whiteboard are combined, teachers can shift seamlessly and frequently between whole-class, small-group and individual instruction. This feature makes it easier to reach each student in your classrooms.
- Simultaneous interaction – To promote group interaction, look for a wireless slate that enables multiple slate users to write notes while someone else is using the interactive whiteboard.
- Battery-free pen – By choosing a wireless slate with a battery-free pen, you can reduce your maintenance costs.

Document cameras

An easy-to-use document camera offers teachers another way to engage students and encourage classroom participation. Displaying digital images of an individual student's work, or presenting an up-close view of a demonstration, such as a science experiment, also helps to increase students' understanding of concepts.

Look for a document camera with the following features:

- Integration with interactive whiteboard software – Choose a document camera that allows teachers to capture images and videos into their interactive whiteboard software and use them in their lessons.
- Annotation capability – By directly writing over images from within interactive whiteboard software, teachers are better able to focus their students' attention and enhance learning. Choose a product that allows teachers to annotate over both live and static images.
- Ease of use – A product that is easy to use and compact enough to easily move will be used often. One that is cumbersome and confusing may gather dust in a corner.
- High-quality image display – Look for a document camera with a high degree of optical zoom, which enables teachers to quickly direct learning, zooming in on objects to clearly show even the smallest details.

- Real-time display – To be effective, a document camera should display moving objects in real time, at a minimum of 20 frames per second.
- Presentation area – A document camera that makes it simple to determine where to place an object will be easier for teachers and students to use. Look for a product that includes a presentation stage at no extra cost.

Classroom management software

Classroom management software helps teachers connect their computer quickly and easily to every other computer in a classroom or lab so they can teach, monitor and collaborate with students. This saves time for teachers and help students stay on track.

Look for classroom management software with the following features:

- Easy monitoring capabilities – To minimize disruptions and create an effective learning environment, classroom management software should allow teachers to monitor students' computer screens without leaving their desk. Look for software that also enables them to broadcast their desktop or a student's desktop to the class and to take control of students' desktops to guide them through tasks remotely.
- Tools that support communication and focus – The most effective classroom management software enables teachers to lock student desktops, conduct polls, view and respond to students' questions and disconnect students.
- Application management – Choose software that enables teachers to block all browsers and programs and then share application and Internet blocking rules with each other.
- Data encryption, protection and security – The software you select should encrypt data into a form that cannot be read, erased or intercepted by unauthorized users. These features ensure that data remains private and no one can enter, lurk or take control of a classroom without authorization.
- Administration tools – To save time spent on administrative tasks in computer labs or 1:1 classrooms, look for software that enables teachers to shut down, log off or restart all computers simultaneously.
- Collaboration tools – Look for software that allows you to easily organize students into small groups, where they can collaborate on assignments from across the room by sharing screens, chatting or participating in surveys.

Use these guidelines to help ensure that your next technology purchase results in learning success for your schools, teachers and students.