

How Educators Select Programs and Products: Lessons for Product Developers

Moving from developing an evidence-based product to getting it into schools and districts

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Many **product developers** design and test **educational products** with the hope that they can achieve widespread, equitable, and sustainable reach and impact. However, those who design evidence-based educational products might not see marketing or sales as a priority. Some may assume if a product is high-quality and “works,” it will be adopted by educators with aligned needs. But educators operate in environments of scarce resources (including time and capacity) and with competing solutions, information, and constraints. Understanding how and when to market a product is a crucial step in getting evidence-based products into the hands of the teachers and students who need them most.

The **LEARN Network** set out to understand more about the landscape of educational decision-making as it relates to **product procurement**.¹ We surveyed a nationally representative sample of school and district leaders and interviewed a broad array of education leaders and other members of the education community. In this brief, we share findings on what motivates decision-makers to procure products, who is involved in the decision-making process, and what sources of information they turn to for informed decisions. Survey respondents also differentiated their responses across core, supplemental, and professional development (PD) products.

While we present overall results of our study in this brief, we also highlight significant differences in the procurement process between the three product types and across school and district characteristics, where those differences were observed. Also, to help product developers translate these findings into actionable steps, we offer practical takeaways on how product developers can use the study findings to support scaling evidence-based educational products.

Key terms:

Core curricular products are typically the principal learning resources for all students and cover all or nearly all of the standards for a particular grade or subject.

A **curricular review cycle** is a systematic process districts use to evaluate and update the content, structure, and delivery of their curricula. This cycle typically involves periodic assessments and revisions, usually occurring every 3 to 10 years.

Educational products encompass interventions, programs, or solutions designed to meet specific needs in educational settings. Examples of educational products include curricular materials, educational technologies, and professional development.

Product developers and researchers create, design, and produce educational products aimed at facilitating learning and improving educational outcomes.

Product procurement involves discovering, evaluating, selecting, acquiring, and piloting educational products.

A **request for proposals** or RFP is distributed when a school or district identifies a need for a new product and wants to solicit bids from qualified developers.

Supplemental products are intended to complement or enhance core instructional materials by addressing specific needs.

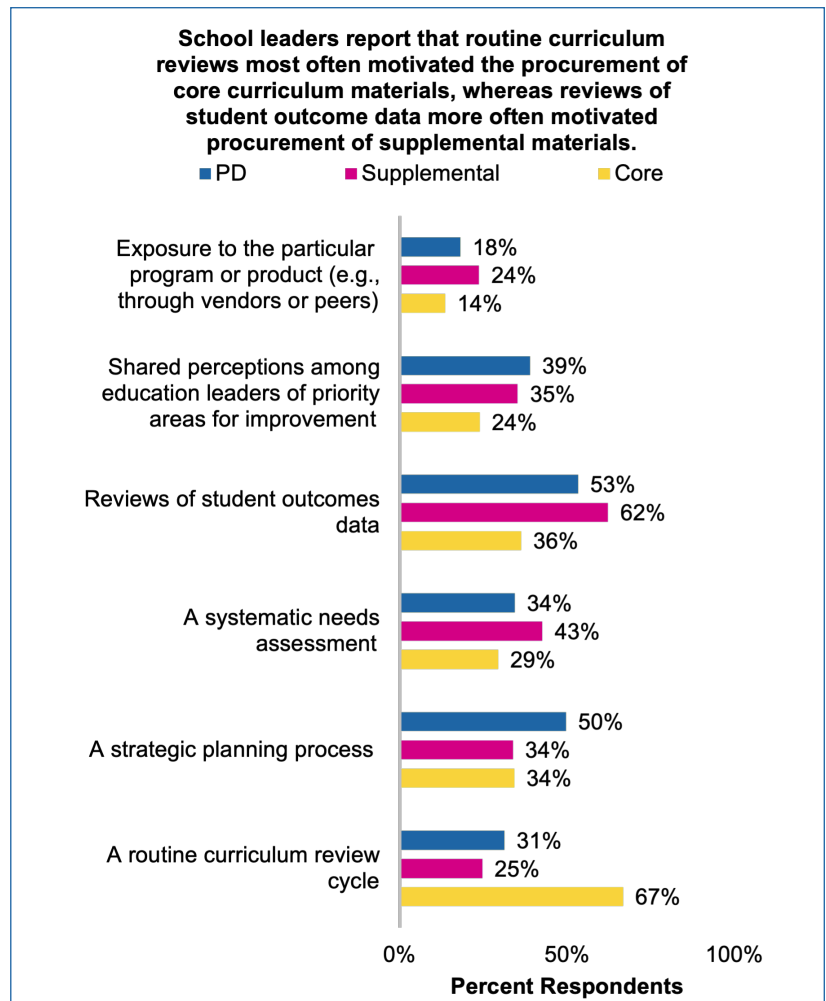
¹Read more about our research methods, sample, and analyses at the end of this brief.

What Motivates Procurement of Educational Products

Various internal and external forces motivate schools and districts to search for and procure new products. Understanding *what* policies facilitate the procurement process and *when* leaders are most motivated to select new products can help product developers be strategic in their outreach and timing.

School leader survey results indicate that when procuring **core curricular products**, 67% of school leaders said their schools or districts are prompted by **curricular review cycles**—which happen every 3 to 10 years—to evaluate existing products and put out **requests for proposals** (RFPs) for new products. By contrast, school leaders are motivated to procure **supplemental products** whenever a need arises, such as when student outcomes data show a need to bolster instruction in specific areas (62%).

Survey results also show that exposure to a particular program or product (such as through vendor outreach) was less of a motivator to procure than other catalysts. However, such exposure was more influential for supplemental materials than for core materials (24% vs. 14% of school leaders).



Note: On the American School Leader Panel survey, school leaders were randomly assigned to think about a specific core, supplemental, or PD program their school or district had procured in the last two years. They were then asked, “What motivated or prompted your school or district to procure the product or program?” Participants selected all that applied from a list of possible motivations. This exhibit displays the weighted percentage of respondents selecting each option, by product type.

Interview insights: Student data are often the catalyst for product procurement

“We look at data regularly. We have a few very specific sources of data that we use. So it’s really about looking at the data and then doing the ‘why is this the outcome we are getting?’ And if it turns out that the product that we are using, or the curriculum that we are using, aligns with what our students need, then it’s okay. Now it’s time to start to think, How do we tweak this or how do we identify a different (product) to address the need? So, it’s really all based on the student needs.” — Principal

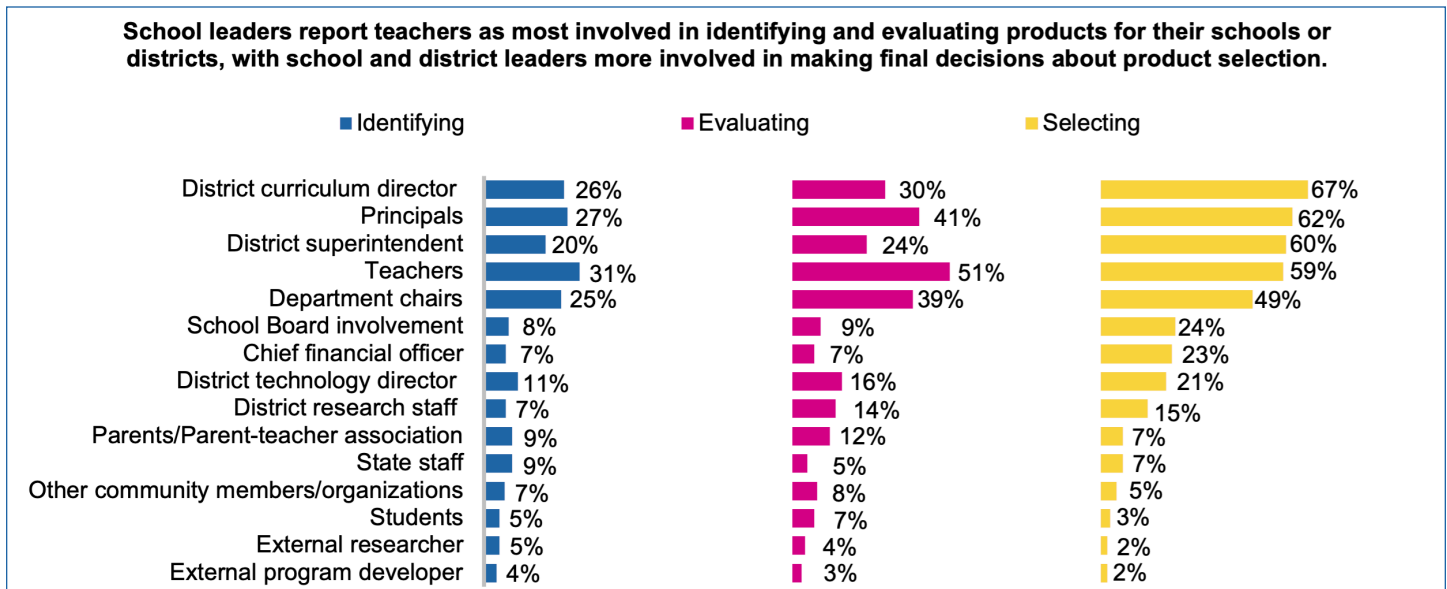
Practical Takeaways for Product Developers

The two takeaways below can help developers of both core and supplemental products scale evidence-based products.

- 1. Monitor and understand district review cycles and RFPs as points of entry to get products into schools and districts.** Developers wanting to scale core products can monitor districts' timelines for systematically reviewing their existing products. By more deeply understanding the specific processes districts use and identifying the people involved in those processes, developers may gain a higher chance of successful procurement.
- 2. Consider the student outcomes that schools or districts monitor, and seek out districts whose priorities align with product objectives.** Developers can consider and share about how their products support the metrics schools and districts care about, to increase the likelihood that leaders will be motivated to procure the products. If a product's data tracking component aligns with the framework of a school's or district's current learning management system, there is even further motivation to procure the product.

Who Is Involved in the Decision-Making Process

Throughout the procurement process, it is important to understand who is involved in identifying, evaluating, and selecting a product. Recognizing the key decision-makers at each stage and building relationships with these leaders can help developers find champions of their products.



Note: School leaders were asked on the American School Leader Panel survey to think about a core, supplemental, or PD product that their school purchased in the last two years. They were asked, "What involvement, if any, did each of the following individuals or groups have in identifying, evaluating, and/or deciding to select the products or programs?" For each individual or group listed, participants selected whether they were "not involved / not applicable," "involved in identifying the products or programs," "involved in evaluating the products or programs," "involved in the decision to select the products or programs," or "I don't know." The exhibit displays the weighted percentage of respondents who indicated each individual or group was involved in identifying, evaluating, and/or selecting the products or programs. If a respondent selected "not involved / not applicable" or "I don't know," their responses are not shown in the exhibit.

Teachers, principals, and district curriculum directors all play important roles in the procurement process. On the survey, 31% of school leaders reported that teachers were involved in *identifying* products for their districts or schools, more so than any other personnel. School leaders (51%) also indicated that teachers were highly involved in *evaluating* products.

However, when it comes to *selecting* products to procure, school leaders indicated other district and school personnel were more involved than teachers. School leaders most often reported district curriculum leaders as involved in the selection process (67%), followed by principals (62%).

District leaders were asked the same question about the roles individuals or groups had in identifying, evaluating, and/or deciding to select products. Their reports were generally consistent with those of school leaders, however, district leaders rated teachers as more involved in the decision to select than did school leaders, ranking them second to principals (data not shown in exhibit).

Interview insights: Teachers are often involved in identifying new products for their classrooms and recommending these products to school and district leaders

“We actually just did a math adoption of a new curriculum two years ago, and the way that we went about it was all the math teachers in middle school and all the different middle schools got together. We went through different curriculum choices. We rated our top choices through independent surveys and then, what they did was they looked at the highest-rated curriculum from all of us, and that was the recommendation. So, because it was a recommendation, that doesn’t necessarily mean that that’s what the district chose, but in this case, they did choose that.” —Teacher

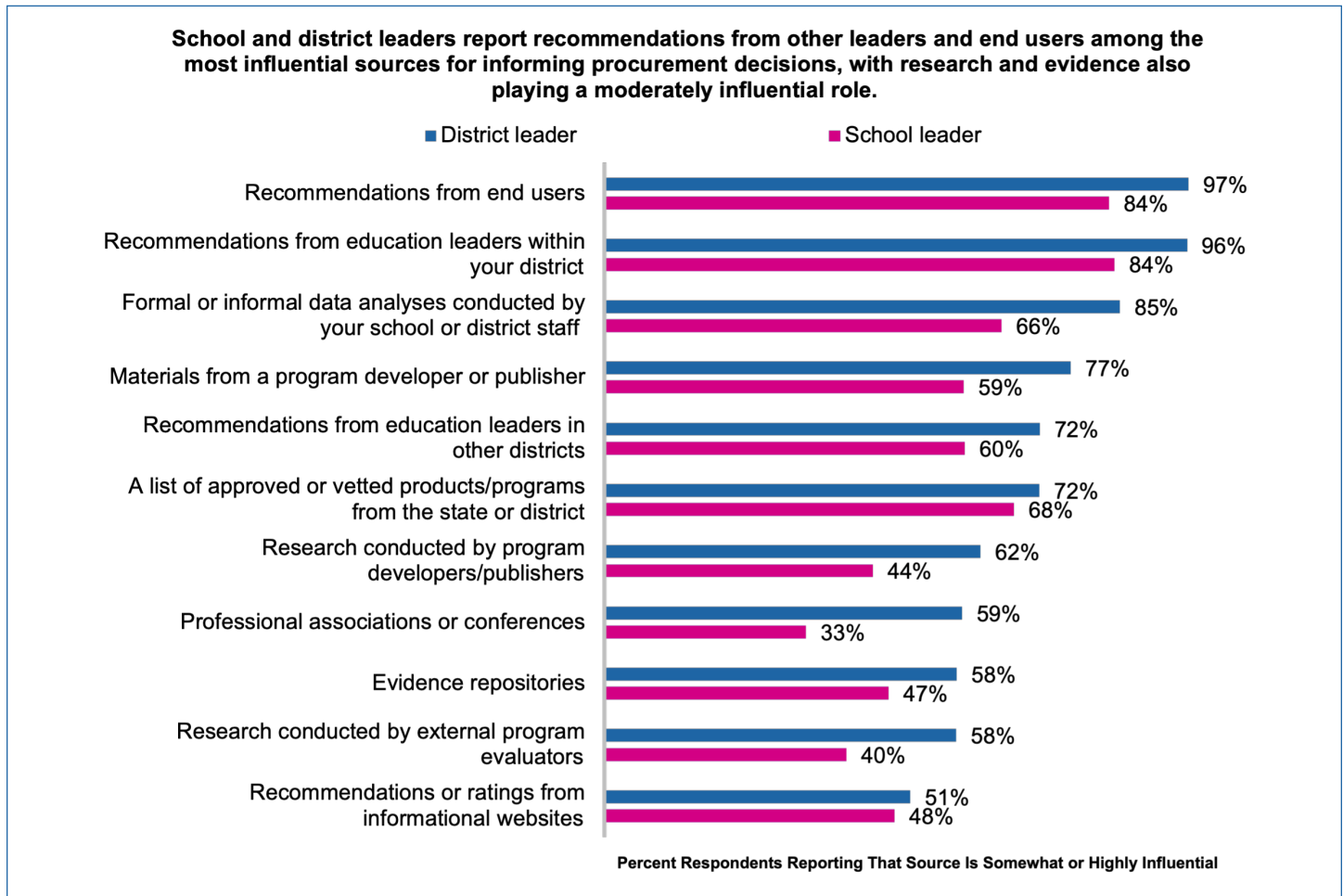
Practical Takeaways for Product Developers

The two takeaways below can help developers identify who they should be working with at different phases of the procurement process.

- 1. Teachers.** Developers should build relationships with teachers so they have a specific product in mind when they want to find new products for their classrooms. Teachers are often the ones who discover and identify products, and they can be champions of a product through the later stages of procurement.
- 2. District and school leaders.** Developers can identify and connect with district and school leaders. Developers may naturally focus on classroom-level outreach because teachers are typically the end users, but teachers are not always the people most involved in selecting the products that get widely adopted in their schools or districts. To help move products from the identification stage to selection, developers should understand district and school leaders’ priorities and how to communicate the benefits of their products relative to the criteria leaders use to evaluate and make a final selection.

What Sources of Information Do Decision-Makers Turn To

Schools and districts rely on many information sources when procuring products. Those sources can vary based on specific school, district, and personnel contexts. Understanding where leaders are most likely to gather information about products can help developers reach, connect with, and earn the trust of key decision-makers.



Note: Both school and district leaders were asked on the surveys, “Which sources of information influenced your school’s or district’s decision to procure a core, supplemental, or professional development program?” within the last two school years. Participants rated each information source on a 3-point scale where 1 = Had little or no influence; 2 = Had some influence; and 3 = Heavily influenced. There was also a fourth option for “I don’t know.” This exhibit displays the weighted percentages of school and district leaders who found an information source to be somewhat or heavily influential.

Both school and district leaders indicated they look to research and evidence when making procurement decisions. Most notably, leaders ranked informal data analyses as more influential than most other sources of information (85% of district leaders and 66% of school leaders). School and district leaders also look to research conducted by external organizations when making procurement decisions. Both school and district leaders found research conducted by program evaluators, program developers, and publishers, as well as evidence repositories, to be moderately influential in the procurement process.

Beyond research, school and district leaders found others in their network to be highly influential sources when making procurement decisions. School and district leaders ranked recommendations from leaders within and outside of their districts among their most influential sources of information when procuring products. Conversely, professional associations and conferences and recommendations or ratings from informational websites ranked among the least influential sources of information.

Survey data suggests large and small *districts* look to different sources of information when deciding to procure products, with small district leaders reporting greater influence of recommendations from other education leaders within their district (data not shown in exhibit). Small district leaders shared similar sentiments in interviews (see box).

Leaders from large and small *schools* also tend to look to different sources of information when deciding to procure products. Leaders from large schools reported being more influenced by comprehensive marketing materials and research from an external program developer or evaluator than their small school counterparts did. In contrast, leaders from schools located in a rural or town locale report less use of these information sources than their urban and suburban school counterparts. Notably, leaders from schools in which the majority of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch report data analyses conducted by local staff and external researchers as more influential than their counterparts.

Interview insights: Leaders from small districts are often influenced by recommendations from other education leaders within their districts

“When I go to principal meetings and such, we always get – we usually leave with a few ideas of some things we could use to support this or support that, and I personally use a lot of word of mouth.” —Principal from small district

The influence of sources informing school leaders’ procurement decisions varies across school contexts and the types of students served.



Report more use of source than counterparts



Report less use of source than counterpart

	Large schools	Schools located in a town or rural locale	Schools in which the majority of students are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch
Data analyses conducted by school/district staff			↑
Materials from a program developer or publisher	↑		
Research conducted by external program evaluators	↑	↓	↑
Research conducted by program developers/publishers	↑	↓	
Professional associations/conferences	↑	↓	↑

Practical Takeaways for Product Developers

The four takeaways below can help product developers understand where decision-makers get their information and how to target those sources for optimal product scale:

- 1. Consider the different sources of information that target schools and districts access most.** Product developers looking to break into larger *schools* should consider promoting research conducted by external program evaluators while also having comprehensive marketing materials for the schools to review. When looking to get products into small *districts*, developers can focus on building relationships with education leaders in the districts or neighboring districts, as small-district leaders often share information with one another on what is working in their specific contexts.
- 2. School and district leaders rely on recommendations from leaders and end users within their own districts for information on trusted products.** Having champions who are leaders and end users can help products gain visibility among decision-makers from the sources they rely on most to learn about evidence-based products.
- 3. Both school and district leaders turn to formal or informal data analyses conducted by their respective district staff when considering a product.** Developers can focus efforts on partnering with schools and districts to conduct and share data analyses of their products. Developers will garner more trust in their products by participating in or helping to generate research and evidence in contexts relevant to districts, schools, and the students they serve.
- 4. Leaders look to research conducted by external organizations when making procurement decisions.** Developers can work with outside evaluators, in addition to conducting their own research on their products, and seek placement of study findings in evidence repositories to establish product credibility.

Conclusion

By understanding what motivates school and districts to procure products, who is involved in the decision-making process, and what sources of information leaders look to when deciding to procure products, developers can understand where their products fit best and how to be strategic in scaling the products sustainably. Building relationships throughout the procurement process and developing a deep understanding of important systemic forces that influence when and why products are procured can increase the likelihood of uptake and scale.

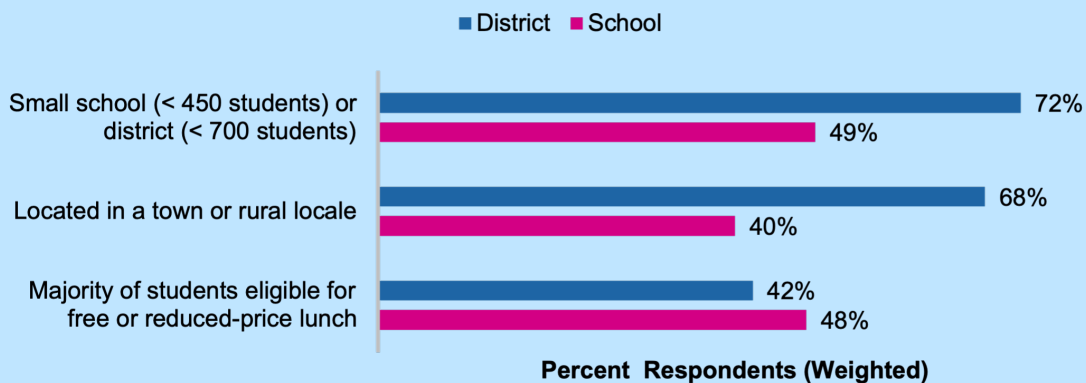
This brief focuses on educators' roles in the procurement process. There is a lot for developers to consider before they are ready to bring their products to market or prepare to scale to a broader audience. Working with teachers and education leaders in the development process is critical. Check out the [LEARN to Scale Toolkit](#) that walks through other considerations and developmental stages to help developers transition products from the development stage through wide scale usage.

About the LEARN Network and Our Research

To understand the complex landscape of education procurement decision-making, the LEARN Network conducted a mixed-methods study that included:

- **Interviews** with 19 education leaders representing key roles at schools, districts, and state agencies serving students from diverse educational contexts and populations.
- **Focus groups** with 9 teachers representing a range of grade levels and contexts and with 11 parents/caregivers.
- **Surveys** of nationally representative samples of K–12 public school principals ($N = 1,036$) and school district leaders ($N = 208$) through RAND’s American Educator Panels. The analytic survey samples were weighted to produce estimates reflecting the national population of public schools and districts in the United States.

The weighted school and district leader survey samples reflect the national population of public schools and districts.



To examine the variation between schools and districts in the survey sample with different characteristics, such as size, we ran ANOVA tests with a Benjamini-Hochberg adjustment for multiple comparisons. In this brief, we describe only those differences among school or district subgroups that are statistically significant at the 5% level, unless otherwise noted. We coded interview and focus group transcripts to identify key themes and illustrative quotes.

Learn more about our research methods [here!](#)

The [LEARN Network](#) is an Institute of Education Sciences (IES)-funded initiative to promote learning and growth among students by increasing the use of evidence-based products. To do this, the Network provides capacity-building to researchers in scaling their evidence-based products and provides decision-makers at the school, district, and state levels with information and considerations around product selection. The Network supports researchers in adapting their products while considering local contexts, decision-making processes, and usability, and in exploring options for bringing their products to market. For more information, visit the LEARN Network’s [website](#), [interactive toolkit](#), and [blog](#).



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To learn more about the LEARN Network, visit the website at <https://learntoscale.org/>