

# TECH TACTICS



## Good Call: Taking Stock of Your School Software Decisions Post-Pandemic

Now that districts are emerging from remote learning, teachers and staff may be using programs that aren't the best choices long-term. It's time to become more thoughtful about the software solutions you invest in. The results may surprise you.

**EDUCATORS AND THOSE WHO SUPPORT THEM** are coming off the roller-coaster of the last 18 months outfitted with more tools for the job than a computer repair van. But now, as schools begin returning to business-as-normal, it's time to sort through the software choices and pinpoint what's truly essential from what can be left behind. Everybody has their

favorites, but there are some technology decisions that require closer scrutiny.

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integration work, training, and costs. They choose a suite — often based on its administrative benefits — and get locked into a company's proprietary platform that may or may not serve the teachers well. Other districts may follow the best-of-breed route, to make sure users in

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different roles get the specific features they require to do their jobs. They select programs from multiple companies and hope they can get them to work together. But what if there's a third option — a set of applications that offer both depth of functionality for a variety of users and the capacity for seamless integration among modules, as they're added over time?

This is the space where **Jupiter** dominates. The software that Jupiter produces is designed as an all-in-one solution that can be licensed as best-of-breed, covering everything the district needs for classroom teaching and learning and back-office school operations: teaching, grading, attendance, scheduling, homework, discipline, messaging, classroom management, report cards, reporting, testing, remote learning, enrollment, payments, donations, and more.

Company founder David Hundsness is a former teacher who wanted a better digital gradebook. The software grew from there, to incorporate the tools needed by all five of the major roles in a school: administrators, teachers, students, parents, and staff. Now the technology serves over 4 million students in all 50 states.

Hundsness and his team think a lot about education software and how to make sure school systems get their money's worth for the tools they pick. (And that applies to the "free" programs districts use as well.) The following guidance will steer you right as you take stock of your school software decisions in a post-pandemic era.

# 5 Dos and 5 Don'ts of Software Selection

Jupiter founder David Hundsness shares key dos and don'ts for making smart school system software purchasing decisions.

# 1



**DO consider total cost of ownership when comparing free vs paid systems**

While there are plenty of occasions when “free” makes sense (sampling free tastes at a big-box store or taking advantage of free tire rotation at your local tire store), software used for running school operations isn't one of those. Because personally identifiable information and the continued safe and reliable running of schools is at stake, systems tied to learning, student information, and classroom management have become truly strategic areas for education. For those reasons, these applications are important enough to commit to and invest in at a deep level.

Besides, there are plenty of other reasons why free isn't so free, according to Hundsness. Take hidden costs, such as how much time teachers and others will consume switching between programs or learning how multiple applications work to get basic activities done. Then there's support. Too often, free software relies on the community for troubleshooting and technical help. Anything beyond that level of help has a cost attached to it. Hundsness urged district and school buyers to “look at the total cost of ownership,” including the amount of *time* to do various activities, “which people don't normally put enough value on.”

# 2



**DO invest in real hands-on testing**

When your district invests in new

technology, make sure the evaluation process is as rigorous as it could be. That encompasses more than getting a canned demo. It should also involve bringing in sample data — such as user information — and trying out the application functionality as it really would be used in the school setting, with all the workflows, reporting, customization, and other tasks that will provide a real-world taste of its functionality, interface, and operations.

Hundsness is amazed at how many school systems purchase without bothering to set up a trial account. “Schools will spend tens of thousands of dollars per year on a system that they've never taken for a test drive,” he said. “Of course, you'd want to take the car for a [spin] before you decide to purchase it. That's the only way to understand what your experience as a user will be.”

Jupiter goes way beyond the typical 14- or 30-day trial version with its software. “We time it to the school year,” Hundsness explained. “We recognize that because preparation is a big part of a trial, they need sufficient time.” Most schools will pick up the trial in May and then try out the software all through the summer and into September.

# 3



**DO ensure ease of use**

Every vendor lays claim to having software that's “easy to use,” which

means that purchasers are “wise to ignore those claims,” suggested Hundsness. He prefers to take an analytical view of the topic. As he explained, ease of use consists of two components: intuitiveness and efficiency. “Intuitiveness is entirely subjective. There is no reliable way to measure it, and observing videos and demos

gives a false sense of how intuitive someone would actually find it,” he said. “So, the only way to assess it accurately is to actually use the software. That’s why I wish more schools would do more hands-on evaluations.”

The element of efficiency needs to be gauged through proxy measurements, such as click counts, Hundsness said. His theory is that click counts can be translated to performance speed. Hundsness has done a **careful comparison of clicks** — how many clicks common activities such as grading assignments and creating quizzes would take in Jupiter’s modules compared to competitive programs. As he explained on the company’s website, “A great app helps you work more efficiently, while a clunky one takes a few extra seconds each step. What’s the big deal? Teachers do thousands of clicks per week, so thousands of extra seconds makes your work week an extra hour longer!”

generating duplicate data, which can create big problems down the road. Hundsness said that was especially true in smaller school settings with fewer resources and more pressing needs. He urged school leaders to take advantage of training on new applications and make sure their teachers and support staff do the same. Jupiter provides self-training via help guides and a library of micro-learning **videos** that last two to nine minutes. The company also offers **on-site and web-based training** for the entire staff or as a train-the-trainer model. That includes both basic and advanced teacher training, instruction for administrators, and specific sessions on online testing.

The training should also extend to parents. Oftentimes, Hundsness has found, districts that have adopted Jupiter’s programs will embed **specific video modules** on their school websites that target the specific learning needs of families.

**4**  **DO include all of your community in making technology purchase decisions**

The software that a district invests in can have multiple users — central office and site leaders, teachers, instructional aides, office staff, parents, and students. But too often, just a tiny share of those roles is represented in the buying process. And usually that’s the administrators. “While every district is going to handle it differently, I do see a trend where teachers are underrepresented in the decision-making process. The people who make most decisions are the smallest population, and the people who have little to no influence would be the largest populations, the teachers, students, parents,” said Hundsness. His advice: “Get those populations involved.”

**1**  **DON’T ignore the benefits of tight program integration for IT**

Users often think that if two programs are sold by the same company, they’ll work together seamlessly. Not so. Frequently, one company will have been acquired by another, and the applications will have been developed by separate engineers and use different databases. That means compatibility between the two systems will never be 100%. Hundsness likens it to combining two houses into one: “The floor plan’s going to be a little bit weird and there’s no way you’ll be able to connect all the plumbing and electrical between them.”

**5**  **DO take advantage of training**

All too often districts implement new education technology without a formal plan for training and expect their users to somehow get the software to work. The result is that different users set up their programs differently, often

When problems arise, the burden of making sure data transfer and other joint operations work will fall on the district’s IT organization. For that reason, IT often prefers programs built from the ground up — “all-in-one” suites — to use the same database, which equates to having fewer systems to maintain. And the only way to ensure that is to make sure the application has been built by the same team, working with the same goals, from the ground up. As Hundsness noted, “From a technical perspective, that avoids a lot of latency and potential errors, which means there’s less troubleshooting.”

At the same time, Hundsness acknowledged, districts and



schools “may already be committed to certain software.” In that case, the all-in-one approach may not work. Likewise, there is no all-in-one that is the market leader in every single feature. “For example, the system that is best for the school nurse is not necessarily best for the teachers,” he said. “During the evaluation and purchasing process you may decide it’s better to choose two different systems.” In the case of Jupiter, pricing and features are flexible to serve as all-in-one or “best-of-breed” solutions.

## 2 **DON'T underestimate the benefits of all-in-one programs for teachers, families and students**

While tight integration in software choices means IT will have less work to do on its end in maintaining the systems the district uses for teaching, learning, and operations, it also means users won’t have multiple interfaces to maneuver. That makes for faster training. While that’s a benefit for every teacher and staffer using the program, it’s also a big benefit for families and their students.

Think about the immediate shift to online instruction that took place in 2020. “When elementary schools had to suddenly go with remote learning, it was a big burden to get students to figure out all these things,” said Hundsness. “As adults, we’re used to using Gmail for this, Word for that and hopping around all these different apps. But when you try that with a third-grader, you realize, this is a big deal.”

This also makes another case for selecting paid solutions over free ones, he added. “Free things tend to be small in scope, which means that you’re making students and teachers log into one free thing to do one thing and then log into a different free thing to do another. There’s more of a learning curve and more time wasted just to switch among apps.”

## 3 **DON'T force teachers to choose between digital and paper**

Early in the shift to remote teaching and learning, it

appeared to education tech experts that digital formats would rule. Teachers and students alike would adopt digital interactions for their class activities and never look back. That hasn’t turned out to be the case. “A lot of teachers who were not eager to get on board with new technology and still used a lot of paper assignments were forced to make that learning curve,” said Hundsness. “And teachers don’t like spending a whole lot of time rewriting their curriculum to work in an online format.” It’s a lot quicker, he noted, for them to convert what they already have into digital versions of worksheets and assignments instead of converting material into entirely online and interactive versions.

To address that need, Jupiter developed a feature that would allow teachers to convert their existing PDF worksheets into a format that can be worked on online, within Jupiter’s platform, enabling them to make homework assignments available online and in print. “Students can write on it digitally using a mouse, touchscreen, or the keyboard, and teachers can grade it digitally doing the same. They don’t need to download it or open it in a separate window,” he said. “And we added a fun feature that lets teachers put digital stickers — animated emojis — on student work.”

## 4 **DON'T underrate the importance of a fully featured gradebook**

Picking the right gradebook can become a real differentiator for districts and schools in ways that will give teachers back time in their days. Many LMSs have long considered the gradebook an add-on and afterthought. For example, one popular classroom management program provides very few options. According to Hundsness, “It doesn’t do letter grades at all; it only does percents. You can add up the points for each assignment, but teachers want a lot more control — the ability to do weighted categories and weighted grading periods; a way to drop the lowest homework grades but none of the quiz grades; and the option of using custom marks that have special meanings such as ‘excused’ or ‘missing,’ when the teacher is entering them in the gradebook.”

The gradebook feature set in Jupiter offers those

capabilities and more. After all, the program began as a gradebook designed by a teacher for teachers and grew from there:

- Tests, quizzes, and assessments can include nine question types, with automatic grading for all of them, including write-ins; along with randomization; objectives mapping; item analysis; anonymization of student names; and re-keying for corrections, even as students are still working.
- Students can upload files online and teachers can grade them online, with no downloading required.
- Adding comments can be done in two clicks, making the grading of essays faster.
- A “what-if” option shows students what their grades would look like if they turned in missing work.
- Reporting of grades — real-time data and trends for intervention — can be viewed not just by the educators, but by administrators and parents.

# 5



## **DON'T overlook the value of customization**

As you make software decisions for your district, keep in mind that configuration for your specific environment will have a big impact on user satisfaction. As an example, discipline is an area where schools prefer to be able to customize their set-up. That includes use of school-specific discipline codes and codes for positive behavior, both tied to specific consequences and rewards (which should also allow for being overridden); merit and demerit points; addition of unique and timely items such as health and hygiene incidents; and how parent contact is logged. Jupiter accommodates all of that. The company's support team will “spend a lot of time answering questions and walking customers through exactly how to accomplish a certain customization, without charge, or, in some cases, do it for them,” noted Hundsness. “A lot of larger companies will charge for customization or support. That's never been our business model. We'll help you however we can at no extra charge.”



## **Shifting to a New Mindset Going Forward**

The concept of “free” software gained a lot of ground in 2020. Without access to some of the free services we all came to rely on, schools wouldn't have been able to deliver education of any sort. But that was an emergency that is now subsiding, and a different mindset is required going forward.

As we emerge from the experiences of remote learning, teachers and staff, families and school leaders may be using programs that aren't the optimal choices long-term. It's time to become more thoughtful about the software solutions you invest in. The best results will surprise you.

**Learn more about  
Jupiter's all-in-one Learning  
Platform and Student  
Information System for K-12:  
[www.jupitered.com](http://www.jupitered.com)**