The Essential Guide to K-12 LMS Evaluation: Choosing the Optimal Digital Learning Environment For Your District

Choosing the right learning management system (LMS) isn't always an easy task. There are many vendors to consider and big changes happening in the world of learning technology. Making the right choice, when selecting a digital learning environment that will work for your district, now and in the future, can be a challenge.

This is especially true, as K-12 needs for learning management have moved well beyond course management. Today, schools need to provide a true digital learning environment to power digital transformation whether your focus is blended, bring your own device (BYOD), 1:1, or online learning.

This guide is designed to help you get past the competing claims and the long lists of feature-by-feature comparisons so you can focus on the most essential factors to keep in mind.

With nearly two decades experience providing K-12 schools, districts, colleges and universities around the globe, we've learned a lot about what matters most in an LMS. We're proud to serve more than 50% of Future Ready districts with an LMS that:

- Provides a true digital learning environment that grows with you as your digital learning needs evolve
- Enables professional development to prime teachers for digital transformation
- Places students at the center
- Is accessible to all students
- Holds a proven track record of learning innovation
- Expands its portfolio with innovative partnerships
- And we are dedicated to your ongoing success

Whether you're evaluating an LMS for the first time, or re-evaluating your current approach, this guide is for you.

To learn more visit: blackboard.com/personalized-learning
Beyond LMS, a True Digital Learning Environment That Grows With You

The definition of LMS has expanded, going well beyond digital classroom management. A single solution to access all of your digital content and tools from anywhere is still important. However, today’s LMS has to work harder. It needs to offer a more holistic approach with solutions that cover a broad spectrum of learning requirements.

This new, digital learning environment combines traditional learning management with a foundation for competency-based authentic assessment, personalized learning, and collaboration.

For teachers, this means they can:

» Engage in synchronous professional learning, which increases comfort using the technology in the classroom
» Use student and class competency performance data to drive instruction
» Differentiate instruction based on individual student needs
» Create more time in class for working with small groups and providing individual attention

For students, this means they can:

» Collaborate with classmates fostering 21st century skills and college and career readiness
» Stay on top of assignments, tests, and grades
» Access class resources and on demand flipped lessons any time, any where to take control of their learning

To realize the vision of digital transformation, you need a solution that can grow with you as your digital learning needs evolve. Whether you’re focused on achieving state, national (such as the Next Generation Science), or Common Core standards, look for a solution that provides a powerful foundation for personalized, competency based learning. You will be empowered to take teaching, learning, and professional development even further with the complement of synchronous learning, including web conferencing.

Your LMS must also be able to meet the needs of teachers and students over time, as pedagogy in the classroom changes, not just when you are getting started and are simply focused on digitizing learning. Teachers need an LMS that is easy to begin with but will continue to meet their growing appetite as they become more comfortable with a digital environment.

It was clear to us from the beginning that Blackboard knows K-12 education. We had an immediate connection with their team as they understood our needs and desire for flexibility. This market insight was clearly used to design their product. We can easily see ourselves using it in our classrooms and by parents to access academic information. Blackboard Learn was the only option we looked at that was drive-off-the-lot ready. We needed a platform that fully supports the goals of our blended learning initiative now and in the future.

Angelique Kobler, Assistant Superintendent for Teaching & Learning, Lawrence Public Schools, KS

K-12 teachers have an incredibly challenging job. From kindergarten through high school, every student at every level must master required competencies. Your LMS should open the door for your teachers to differentiate instruction at scale and provide equality of opportunity for every student. To transform teaching and learning, and differentiate instruction to meet the needs of every student, your LMS must be able to support the full spectrum of learning. To ensure a district’s ever-evolving needs are met when implementing blended or online learning, districts need a simple yet powerful teaching and learning platform that can meet their needs over time.
Students at the Center

Ultimately, your LMS needs to transform learning to be more desirable, engaging, accessible, and meaningful for your students. This will enable you to improve student achievement and college and career readiness for all learners. This is the purpose that your LMS provider should share with along with K-12 teachers and academic leaders within your district.

But what does this shared mission really mean? It means that your LMS should be designed with today’s student in mind. students who are:

» Digital natives
» Tech-savvy
» Mobile
» Always on

Today’s students expect:

» Real-time connection in their classes and to each other
» Apps that are easy to navigate
» Personalized learning
» Digital collaboration with classmates and teachers
» Access from anywhere, on any device, to learning materials, class information, research, support
» Preparedness for lifelong digital learning in college and career

Of course, students at the center also means making sure that the teachers, administrators, and technical staff who provide and support the digital learning environment have an LMS that meets their needs too.

If an LMS solution isn’t putting students at the center, you have to wonder who they believe the learning is for.

What are students saying?

GRADES 9-12
» 71% use technology to check grades or upload homework
» 58% use their own cell phone or smartphone to help with schoolwork
» 61% think that blended learning is a good way to learn
» 59% feel they can use technology to learn at their own pace
» 54% feel technology gives them more control over their learning

GRADES 3-5
» 60% would like to go online from any place at school
» 65% would like to use their own mobile device in class
» 61% would like mobile apps for learning
» 64% would like a mobile device for each student to use at school

As a result of using technology to help with learning:

» 61% feel they are able to be more creative
» 57% will spend more time trying to get better at something rather than giving up
» 55% feel they have more control over what they are learning

Source: Project Tomorrow Speak Up Survey, 2014

MGSD’s digital conversion is about ‘rethinking school’ from the ground up, enabled by today’s technologies and guided by the demands of the 21st-century workplace. Blackboard is one of a very few, very important educational partners for us. They provide the glue that holds our digital conversion together. The folks at Blackboard, like our other partners, understand that what we’re after is measurable academic improvement, not just a technology system. That’s what makes the partnership work for the district, our students, their parents, and our staff.

Dr. Mark Edwards, Superintendent Mooresville Graded School District, NC, 2013 AASA National Superintendent of the Year

Ready to see how Blackboard’s Personalized Learning Solution puts students first? Talk with a K-12 expert >
Accessible to All Students

An LMS should ideally measure and evaluate accessibility levels using two sets of standards: Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act issued from the United States federal government and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.0) issued by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). A third party should conduct audits of the LMS partner’s software releases to ensure the accessibility of the products.

Accessibility isn’t a “nice to have” for K-12 schools and districts. It’s essential. For years, K-12 districts have demonstrated their commitment to educating every student by removing barriers that can hold back students with disabilities. Your LMS partner should demonstrate the same commitment. They should be able to provide you with a platform to help you deliver on the exciting promise of equal educational opportunity for all.

Technology offers many accessibility breakthroughs:

» Closed-captioning for those with hearing impairment
» Screen reader support, enabling text-to-speech output for those with vision-related disabilities
» Improved keyboard navigation and accelerator keys for those with limited mobility
» Class recordings for those with learning differences
» Class broadcast for those who are home-bound

When you look for an LMS partner who shares your commitment to accessibility, keep in mind that “commitment” means more than satisfying a set of checklist requirements, such as the VPAT to meet Section 508 compliance.

Look for an LMS partner that goes beyond specific product features to show you how they design their LMS in partnership with members of the community who are disabled, and the educators who support them. A true LMS solution incorporates the wisdom and experience of those who encounter accessibility issues in “real life.” Such an LMS is likely to offer the level of accessibility your district is committed to providing.

I am totally convinced that accessibility across the product line is a priority at Blackboard. They are already spending quality time and extensive resources working with a number of schools to make significant improvements. I have no doubts about Blackboard’s commitment to accessibility.”

Ed Garay, Assistant Director for Academic Computing, University of Illinois at Chicago

To learn more visit: www.blackboard.com/accessibility
A Proven Track Record of Innovation in Learning

Over the last several decades, technology has changed at a rapid pace. These changes have had a profound impact on how learning is delivered and how students expect to learn.

An important consideration in an LMS partner is that they are nimble and can respond rapidly to the new opportunities that technology opens up, such as:

» The rise of blended learning
» The transition to digital and interactive content
» Collaboration
» Mobile access
» Use of new devices
» Real-time engagement
» A focus on competency based and personalized learning
» Growing importance of professional development

All the innovation in the world won’t matter if the LMS is unable to point to a proven track record of success. Whether you’re a large public district, urban, suburban or rural school or district, 90% free and reduced lunch or affluent, or even a small private school or a small public district, look for an LMS partner that has achieved success with schools and districts like yours. If your goal is digital transformation, you need to ask whether the LMS can support a growing digital learning initiative. How well do they handle a student population with access to varying connection quality? How well can their solution work with multiple devices?

While your LMS partner must understand and be committed to K-12 education, their company should also employ a significant number of professionals that have a background in K-12 education, as well as experience in educational technology. Schools and districts investing in an LMS recognize that a learning solution designed for students, with guidance from educators, will best meet their needs.

“We want to completely re-imagine the educational experience into one that is connected to learners and what they need to be successful, both personally and professionally. We want to work with schools to redesign the way education is delivered and supported.”

Jay Bhatt, CEO, Blackboard

[Our LMS helps] teachers teach better and to help students to learn in a different way. With the impetus of Common Core, we’re really looking at changing teaching and learning and we feel that this tool is going to be something that is easy for teachers. We want our teachers to use technology resources and rich dynamic content. We want them to expose our students to some of the online tools that will enrich their classes.

Todd Alexander, Manager of School Support Services – Information Technology, Sarasota County Public Schools, FL

Request a demo to see what Blackboard can do for your district today >
Innovation Through Partnerships

When choosing an LMS partner, look for one with a philosophy focused on expanding their portfolio. By partnering with a broad range of content and technology providers, they will be in a position to integrate partner digital content and tools into the core LMS.

Some vendors are uninterested in capabilities that they did not develop. However, because the learning technology landscape continues to change rapidly, new content, tools, and applications are being made available on an almost daily basis. These are technologies that bring value and innovation to your schools and district. This is why your LMS partner should offer a rich ecosystem of digital content and technology partners that offer products that can easily integrate with your core LMS.

Rich and interesting content is critical to the learning process, so one of the most critical areas to look for is the content that the LMS partner has available. They should offer a variety of compelling, interactive digital content easily integrated within the blended or online class experience, and content that heightens student engagement while expediting class creation for teachers.

In order to get the full digital learning environment you need, look for a partner with an open technology approach that:

» Directly supports publishers & open educational resources that offer high quality digital content
» Enables teachers to easily integrate digital content in their class
» Supports Learning Tools Interoperability integrations
» Enables them to connect to existing district authentication systems
» Offers pre-built tools and APIs for easy connection to your SIS

When students are using digital resources, building multi-media projects, collaborating and connecting online, and conducting online research, they are more interested in schoolwork today and feel more connected to what their future holds tomorrow.

Dr. Mark Edwards, Superintendent Mooresville Graded School District, NC, 2013 AASA National Superintendent of the Year

For more on how MGSD successfully transformed their district, watch this video >
Dedicated to Your Ongoing Success

Success may start with designing and implementing a system that will help achieve your strategic goals, but it doesn’t end there. Techniques and practices for solution adoption are essential. So is providing vibrant forums in which LMS customers can exchange ideas for ongoing success.

The right LMS can make a real difference to your district, enabling you to provide a digital learning environment that can help you:

» Prepare teachers for digital transformation with online or blended professional development
» Increase student engagement and achievement
» Expand your reach.

A strong LMS partner should offer services staffed by experts who understand both K-12 education and learning technology. These are professionals that will work with you to articulate your districts’ strategic goals, including improving student engagement, student achievement, graduation rates, and college and career readiness. Whether your focus is blended learning, BYO.D, 1:1, online learning, or digital professional development, a services team will help you determine how digital transformation will help you achieve those goals.

Once the solution has been defined, and implementation is underway, your district must determine how your LMS will be launched. Widespread adoption is essential to ensure your LMS can help achieve your strategic goals and achieve a return on your investment. Look for an LMS partner who can provide expert services focused on helping you implement and create adoption for your solution.

While students are at the center of your LMS, they will only be using that LMS for the duration of their academic careers. Your teachers and administrative staff, on the other hand, will be working with it for years to come. With collaboration on the increase throughout society, your LMS partner should offer a range of vibrant forums in which teachers and administrators can find peer communities and meet to exchange ideas, share best practices, and discuss their challenges.

What customers are saying:

81% of K-12 customers are satisfied with Blackboard.

82% of K-12 customers would recommend Blackboard.

CSAT Survey, 2014

To ensure your LMS provider is committed to your ongoing success, consider asking the following questions:

» What customer programs do you provide to support success? >

» What options for complimentary professional development do you provide? >

» Do you offer complimentary on-demand professional development? >

» Where can I find research, tips and ideas to ignite creativity in the classroom to support your LMS (including its synchronous learning capabilities)? >

To learn more visit: blackboard.com/personalized-learning
Ready To Move Beyond Yesterday’s LMS Into a True Digital Learning Environment?

To meet the demands of their digital native students and realize the vision of digital transformation to meet the needs of all students, K-12 schools and districts need to look beyond an LMS that offers little more than course management and a few add-ons. Today’s students need a true digital learning environment. Shouldn’t your school be offering one?

If you’re ready to learn more about how Blackboard’s K-12 solutions can help your district, we’re ready to help you get started.

» Get in touch with a K-12 Solution Specialist at 1.800.424.9299 ext. 3.
» Learn more about our teaching and learning solutions for K-12.
» Contact us to reach a K-12 expert.

About Blackboard

Blackboard is a global leader in education technology that transforms the experience of millions of students and teachers every day. Blackboard works with states, K-12 districts, and virtual to expand educational opportunities, create collaborative learning communities, and increase engagement for students, teachers, parents, and administrators. With Blackboard’s website, online learning, mobile, and mass communication solutions, educators are closing the gap between the way students live and the way they learn through personalized, connected learning experiences that meet the needs of the K-12 classroom and the 21st century.