Vendors need to answer these questions when establishing trust with administrators

[1]The educational technology procurement market is enormous: $13 billion is spent annually [2]. Just last year a historic $2 billion of investment capital was pumped into ed tech startups. As an educator, how do you know who to trust when it comes to meeting your district's technology needs? Do you trust the established companies fighting ever harder to keep their market share? Can you trust their overpowering marketing machines? Should you trust the new, innovative, and exciting start-ups? Do they have bandwidth and capacity to keep us "online?"

These are the questions I ask as superintendent of Howard-Winneshiek Community School District [3] in northeastern Iowa. To help answer them, I have developed three baseline questions that have been essential in building trust with vendors we work with. They have served my district well through myriad procurement cycles, including a recently launched one-to-one Apple device initiative.

Does the vendor understand our core business?Our core business in schools is learning. You may be thinking, "Well, that's really obvious John. And next you'll tell me, 'Iowa has corn, too!'" But it's surprising how many educators and vendors forget this. Profits, commissions, and shiny features can be placed squarely ahead of learning. Does this sound harsh? Maybe, but considering it happens more frequently than anyone wants to admit, it is essential this question is asked first and not overlooked.

Whether it is an LMS, professional development provider, hardware or software, we listen to whether vendors truly focus on learning. We establish this early on in our conversations with vendors. "How will this solution positively impact my students and the teachers that support them?" we ask.

Trust is built with those that do.

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Trust is also built with those that don't toss out a stream of buzzwords hoping something sticks. This is especially true if one of the buzzwords is "change." Knowing education *really* means knowing change. Students need 21st century schooling to succeed in our 21st century world. Systemic change—known as Second Order Change (SOC) —is the only way we will get there. Does the vendor know and understand things like: flipped classrooms, differentiated instruction, STEM, and competence-based education? Lastly, can they articulate how their solution/product enhances/supports these modalities? If you are unable to answer that question about a particular vendor, it might be time to cast a wider net.

Do you have a laser sharp focus of your district's direction?We schools need to define our educational direction and priorities first. Then vendors can be engaged. Exclusively relying on vendors to identify our local needs is not productive.
Once defined, trust points are earned with vendors who work laterally to implement change along with us. If you do not know where you are going, valuable resources—money and time—could be wasted relying on a vendor to chart this path for you.
How does this trust look and to whom do we apply it? This trust can be developed from the initial sales call through the final proposal stage from vendors of all stripes and disciplines. From this and our other two questions (core business and pedagogy), we can determine whether we can mesh the vendor's technical solution with our journey of learning transformation.
We are delighted to work with vendors who approach change as a journey, being our technical sherpas when necessary. But as with any journey, creativity can be a necessity to arrive at the destination. We look for this creativity in vendors.

Does the vendor put technology *before* pedagogy?Our mantra in Howard-Winn is: technology should not determine learning; pedagogy should determine learning. After all, pedagogy's Grecian roots mean to "lead a child." Technology is a great delivery vehicle but a terrible leader. Teaching and learning should be driving, while the technology is simply along for the ride. This is our basis for being technology agnostic. No matter what the tool is, learning is defined by the pedagogy. When evaluating vendors we listen closely to the emphasis placed on pedagogy over features. Does the vendor inquire about our district's learning approach and how we teach?

The vendor's solution must compliment our approach to learning. We don't need to be told-and-sold how we need to change our pedagogy to use their production/solution. That is why having a laser sharp focus is so crucial. Our focus on pedagogy has made us realize that we can't take a 21st century tool and place it into a 20th Century structure and expect our students to be Future Ready. We need to have a forward-thinking environment ready, and in place, to best use these tools. Vendors who willingly partner with us on this pedagogy-first journey earn our trust.

Trust runs through our veins in schools. It is something we take seriously. Every day parents and guardians trust us with their children. They want to know their children are safe, nurtured, and that we are doing everything possible to prepare them for the world. This preparation, in part, hinges on the trust we place in vendors. The technical nuances and procurement of hardware, software, cloud services, and data may seem esoteric and far removed. But asking these three questions fosters trust where it really counts—with the students.

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