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# Edtech decision-making and inclusive practice: Insights from Multi-Academy Trusts

**Joni Kelly**

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## Acknowledgements

This report has been produced in partnership with Sync. We are grateful to Sync for their support and to all participants for their contributions.

It should be noted that this report reflects a range of discussions and views, and not necessarily the views of the author.

## About the author

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# Contents

# Introduction

Education technology (edtech) is rising on the political agenda with Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson setting out plans to modernise the education system and transform teaching.[1] This includes the launch of the 'Edtech Evidence Board' to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of edtech products.[2] The board will take an evidence-based approach to evaluate research produced by companies supplying these products, to increase the pace of evaluation and connect teachers with high-quality research.

A new 'Plan technology for your school' tool has also been launched to support leaders in prioritising where to invest in tech, based on an assessment of their needs.[3] The service will focus on essential technology and support schools in complying with digital standards, providing guidance to navigate this often complex and expensive market. Alongside these plans, policies and guidance that relate to artificial intelligence (AI) are being developed to improve initial teacher training and safety standards.[4]

Particular interest is being paid to the role of edtech and AI in supporting early identification and adapting resources for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).[5] Emerging research shows that assistive technologies and accessibility tools can increase both attendance and outcomes for pupils, as well as staff satisfaction.[6] Therefore, edtech and AI are being considered for their potential to address wider challenges, such as staffing, inclusion and persistent absence.

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[1] Department for Education, 'Education Secretary Outlines Plans to Modernise Education Sector', GOV.UK, 22 January 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/education-secretary-outlines-plans-to-modernise-education-sector.

[2] Chartered College of Teaching, 'Edtech Evidence Board Project', Chartered.College, 26 February 2025, https://chartered.college/edtech-evidence-board-project/.

[3] Department for Education, 'Plan Technology for Your School', GOV.UK, 11 September 2024, https://www.gov.uk/guidance/plan-technology-for-your-school.

[4] Department for Education, 'Using AI in Education Settings: Support Materials', GOV.UK, 10 June 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/using-ai-in-education-settings-support-materials.

[5] Department for Education, 'Thousands of Children with SEND to Benefit from Assistive Tech', GOV.UK, 27 June 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/thousands-of-children-with-send-to-benefit-from-assistive-tech.

[6] Fiona Aubrey-Smith, *Changing Learning Changing Lives* (LEO Academy Trust, 2023), https://www.leoacademytrust.co.uk/2801/pedtech-impact-report.

Despite these promising developments, there is currently no single framework or standard in England that facilitates the evidence-based judgment of what constitutes a high-quality, effective edtech product. Teachers and leaders are having to make immediate decisions for their schools, and it can be challenging to decide which edtech to invest in that is safe and high-quality, particularly without a policy that sets out minimum standards for devices and products.[7]

Moreover, some schools have greater capacity to engage than those without the resources, expertise or access to technology. Recent EPI analysis of teachers' edtech usage finds disparities between schools in the consistent integration of technology into teaching practices and in derived benefits, highlighting a risk that greater investment in edtech by the government will increase inequalities in access and benefits.[8]

With the education sector struggling to keep pace with rapid developments, teachers and leaders need continued guidance and support with investing in the technologies that are right for them and navigating the complexities of safety and standards.

In the summer of 2025, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) partnered with Sync to bring together expert stakeholders in two roundtables to examine these issues. This paper draws together reflections from those discussions, which included sector representatives, policymakers, parliamentarians, academics and Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). Participants considered how MATs are making choices around edtech and where information is drawn from to make these decisions. They further considered the strategies that are being used to increase inclusion and support pupils with SEND, how these strategies are integrated consistently across the trust and the extent to which announced government policy is tackling the well-known barriers to uptake.

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[7] Education Policy Institute, *How Can Technology Support Pupils and Educators to Catch up, Keep up and Get Ahead?* (Education Policy Institute, 2022), https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/EPI-Microsoft-Roundtable-Summary-paper_April-2022-1.pdf.
[8] Joana Cardim-Dias and Helen McGlade, 'What Do We Know about Teachers' Use of Edtech?', *What Do We Know about Teachers' Use of Edtech?*, 15 November 2024, https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/what-do-we-know-about-the-teachers-use-of-edtech/.

We are grateful to Sync for supporting this work and to all participants for their contributions.

This report, including recommendations, reflects a range of discussions and views. It does not necessarily represent the views of any particular participant, the author of this report, Sync or the Education Policy Institute.

# How are edtech decisions made in MATs?

# How are edtech decisions made in MATs?

During the first roundtable, the discussion focused on how MATs are approaching decision-making, asking how perceptions of risk, efficacy and financial impact inform their decisions. Participants also focused on where information is drawn from to make these decisions, and at what level decisions are taken and by whom. Here we synthesise the key points made by participants, in the framework of their decision-making processes.

Overall, a key theme that emerged was that participants felt technology should respond to existing pressures and priorities within the system, rather than being driven by the products that are currently available. Decision-making should be driven by the broader, complex challenges facing the sector, such as inclusion, persistent absence and teacher supply. When making these decisions, participants highlighted three key criteria: value for money, given that schools have limited budgets; the strength of available evidence; and contextual experience, given that what works in one context may not translate to another.

Participants highlighted that MATs tend to have greater back-office capacity to inform their decisions, primarily because of their centralised services. Instead of each school managing its own functions, a central team is established to oversee business and administrative services for the entire trust. Where individual schools might need to outsource or rely on a single leader for a wide range of tasks, a MAT central team can have more specialised roles and expertise for specific functions such as finance, human resources (HR), estates, and IT.

Participants felt that these expert central teams, which often make decisions within MATs, could potentially provide high-quality support and guidance to help schools keep up with the fast pace of technological change. While this is not yet commonplace in the sector, participants agreed that MATs are in a prime position to take advantage of edtech products and share best practice. This is in part because they can produce better evidence of impact as these technologies become increasingly integrated into their portfolio. Whereas a single, maintained school can only produce evidence that applies to its own

school context, MATs can collect evidence from all schools across the trust, offering greater opportunities for analysis.

With regard to larger MATs, participants felt this advantage of scale could enable them to play a significant role in producing better evidence of impact and developing appropriate policies to support smaller institutions in integrating AI into their educational practices. By increasing knowledge sharing and collaboration, they suggested MATs could enable schools with fewer resources or expertise to benefit from these advances while mitigating the risks.

Yet participants recognised that there are many barriers to this kind of collaboration, including the competitive nature of the sector. In line with wider research, it was felt that individual schools often fear losing their autonomy.[9] One participant shared that they often hold open days, which are well attended by other MATs, to encourage collaboration and share best practice with others in the sector. Despite being surrounded by standalone schools, those settings usually do not attend, even when directly contacted. Participants felt that this culture of distrust must be addressed to achieve effective collaboration.

## Budgets and financial decisions: how do perceptions of risk, efficacy and financial impact inform decisions?

Participants confirmed that financial security significantly affects decision-making and can often limit school and MAT innovation. They agreed that the lack of certainty each year around changes to their budgets can stifle improvement, as technological developments usually require significant investment. Recent changes to teachers' pensions and national insurance, for example, have made it difficult to plan for long-term investment in adaptive technologies, which can often require a multi-year budget cycle to

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[9] Department for Education, *Schools' Views on the Perceived Benefits and Obstacles to Joining a Multi-Academy Trust* (IFF, 2021), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6194d1078fa8f5037d67b666/Academisation_research_report_FINAL_NOV_21.pdf.

implement.[10] Conversely, participants felt that DfE would discourage multi-year deals as products may become obsolete, given that the technology is evolving at such a rapid pace.

Participants considered the role of government, with one participant suggesting that investment is unlikely to succeed if it relies on a separate budget line called "technology", as this will rarely be treated as a priority within school or departmental spending. Instead, they felt that technology should be integrated into existing areas of expenditure, replacing or enhancing spending that is already happening elsewhere, when it can clearly offer value.

For example, a significant portion of the education budget is reserved for assessment, including baseline and formative assessments, which technology companies will be involved in delivering. If new technologies can offer alternative approaches that are more compelling, it would be possible to justify drawing on this existing funding rather than requiring additional investment. Equally, if a school is overspending on supply teachers because they are unable to recruit enough staff, technology that helps address workforce challenges could unlock funding that is already available. This approach was described as part of good product design, supporting schools to solve persistent challenges and helping them to reallocate existing funds effectively.

Although this approach requires upfront investment, providers highlighted that MATs are seeing significant financial benefits because of their centralised services. MATs tend to centrally procure the services they run in schools, such as IT, offering economies of scale and efficiency savings. The participant shared that MATs are now spending three times less per pupil than local authorities as a direct result,[11] which is an important consideration amid real-terms drops in per-pupil funding. As a caveat, the participant

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[10] Department for Education, 'Teachers' Pension Scheme: Reasons for Changes to the Member Contribution Rates 2025', GOV.UK, 1 April 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-teachers-pension-scheme-member-contribution-rate-changes-2025/teachers-pension-scheme-reasons-for-changes-to-the-member-contribution-rates-2025.

[11] BESA, *The MAT Report 2025: A Detailed Analysis of the Multi-Academy Trust Landscape* (2025).

cautioned that there is a lack of understanding about whether this approach has had a pedagogical difference.

## Research evidence

Participants made clear that MAT leaders are currently using evidence to inform their decisions about edtech where possible. They also stressed however that research-informed decision-making is a growing challenge, as there is a lack of robust evidence evaluating effectiveness and identifying best practice. They felt this challenge is becoming even more acute as technological developments are now outpacing that of research and evaluation, although many organisations, including those outlined below, are now coming together to address these evidence gaps. By connecting teachers to the evidence, these projects and organisations are supporting schools to invest in products that meet their needs. However, some participants questioned whether the evidence will be accessible in practice, as some schools simply don't have time to engage.

Earlier approaches to oversight and evaluation between 1998 to 2011 were undertaken by the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA), whose role was to work with schools, Ofsted and academic researchers to 'lead the effective and innovative use of technology'.[12] Since it was abolished for financial reasons, the landscape has become fragmented, leaving a vacuum in high-quality evaluation of the uses and impact of technology in schools.

Among those who are coming together to address evidence gaps are a group of 23 MATs who contributed to the 'Shape of the Future' report, along with international experts.[13] Reflecting on the framework and recommendations in this report, one participant felt that AI will offer more significant benefits when integrated into the systems and processes constituted within schools, which MATs can achieve more easily because they have the

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[12] Renate Samson and Kruakae Pothong, *A Learning Curve? A landscape Review of AI and Education in the UK* (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2025), https://www.adalovelaceinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Ada-Lovelace-Institute-Nuffield-Foundation-A-learning-curve.pdf.
[13] Rose Luckin, *Shape of the Future: How Education System Leaders Can Respond to the Provocations of Artificial Intelligence* (Educate Ventures, 2024), https://www.educateventures.com/_files/ugd/c43582_9dcd2efba64c44ad84341cacd6df30d2.pdf.

advantage of scale. By embedding AI, it was suggested that trusts can move beyond individual school effectiveness towards a coherent, system-wide model of support. This approach, they argued, offers more significant opportunities to strengthen the consistency, inclusivity, and impact of education.

The EdTech Evidence Board (EEB) was also cited as a promising programme that teachers and leaders will soon be able to refer to when making implementation and governance decisions.[14] Although the EEB is still in the pilot stages, several participants felt that it is an excellent opportunity to build on the body of evidence around the impact of different edtech tools, using a collaborative approach involving teachers, school and college leaders, edtech providers and others within the education and edtech sectors.[15]

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) was also cited as a common source for information. They have produced guidance to support the effective use of ChatGPT, finding that those who have used the platform alongside their resource can reduce their lesson planning time by over 30 per cent.[16]

MATs that have invested in digital transformation and are sharing best practice were also highlighted as trusted sources of information. The LEO Academy Trust is an example that has been highly influential for some participants.[17] Led by Dr Fiona Aubery-Smith, the 'Changing Learning Changing Lives' report shared findings on the impact of using one-to-one devices across the trust with 4,500 children and 600 staff across nine schools. This found that children's attainment significantly outperformed national norms, attendance figures were higher than the national average and the number of children on the SEN

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[14] Chartered College of Teaching, 'EdTech Evidence Board Project: Insights from Phase One', *EdTech Evidence Board Project: Insights from Phase One*, 20 June 2025, https://chartered.college/news-blogs/edtech-evidence-board-project-insights-from-phase-one/.
[15] Chartered College of Teaching, 'Supporting Effective Education through Education Technology', *Supporting Effective Education through Education Technology*, 22 January 2025, https://chartered.college/news-blogs/supporting-effective-education-through-education-technology/.
[16] Dawn Baxter, 'Teachers Using ChatGPT – alongside a Guide to Support Them to Use It Effectively – Can Cut Lesson Planning Time by over 30 per Cent', Education Endowment Foundation, 12 December 2024, https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/teachers-using-chatgpt-alongside-a-guide-to-support-them-to-use-it-effectively-can-cut-lesson-planning-time-by-over-30-per-cent.
[17] Aubrey-Smith, *Changing Learning Changing Lives*.

register reduced by a third. Staff satisfaction was also consistently above national benchmarks, and classroom efficiency improved by 23 per cent.

Finally, participants highlighted that teachers and MAT leaders are also basing their decisions on the experiences of others in their network. Recommendations from other teaching staff are often the most valued sources of information.[18] Participants observed that educators are communicating via online communities, such as WhatsApp groups, to plug evidence gaps. These online communities are supporting the sector to engage with developments in the absence of robust research, but participants agreed there is also a risk of confirmation bias and a siloed effect if teachers rely heavily on their own networks for trusted information.

## School context

Contextual experience was highlighted as another significant factor that can have an impact on decision-making. Participants recognised that in schools with less experience with AI, adopting a model that has been observed in another context might not be effective in practice, and teachers may lack the knowledge and expertise to implement the strategy effectively. They recommended that ongoing CPD should accompany any digital strategy and that it should begin with the least experienced teachers to build confidence and increase the chances of effective implementation.

There is also a large proportion (64 per cent) of teachers who have not engaged with AI for various reasons,[19] including fears about students cheating and the impact on pedagogy, being unfamiliar with the technology, concerns about risks and ethics, and lack of guidance and policy.[20] Emerging trends show that teachers in independent schools are

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[18] Department for Education, *2022-23 Technology in Schools Survey* (IFF, 2023), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/655f8b823d7741000d420114/Technology_in_schools_survey__2022_to_2023.pdf.

[19] BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT, *Secondary School Teachers and AI* (BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT, n.d.), https://www.bcs.org/media/11kcvxvn/bcs-ai-paper-december-2024.pdf.

[20] The Open Innovation Team and Department for Education, *Generative AI in Education* (2024), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65b8cd41b5cb6e000d8bb74e/DfE_GenAI_in_education_-_Educator_and_expert_views_report.pdf.

more likely to use AI than their state school counterparts, and teachers in the Northwest, Yorkshire, and Northeast are slightly less likely than other regions.[21]

Moreover, participants agreed that the digital divide and device poverty must be resolved to realise the benefits of AI. Families who have limited access to devices or connectivity at home need support to avoid an increase in the disadvantage gap, and given that disparities are already appearing, they felt that the independent sector has a key role to play alongside MATs in facilitating access. Schools across the country experience different forms of connectivity and access to technology, and to aid in the implementation of AI, DfE has invested £45 million to enhance digital connectivity in schools and trusts across England.[22] However, participants highlighted that connectivity and hardware still significantly limit schools' capacity to embed AI.

### At what level are decisions taken and by whom?

Participants agreed that edtech decisions are currently made at various levels of seniority. Top-down approaches involving decisions made by the MAT central team are used to ensure central oversight and provide guidance for schools across the MAT. Alternatively, edtech decisions can be made from the bottom-up based on usage by teachers, particularly at the curriculum level, which drives policies at the trust level.

Participants felt that purchases with high cost and resource implications, and that aim to have a whole-school impact, should be made by the most senior leaders, including the MAT central team and trustees.[23] One participant stressed that this is not the case across the sector, and too often, the responsibility is passed to an 'enthusiastic middle leader'. Consequently, they felt that edtech is often viewed as an "add-on" rather than as intrinsic to school operations. They attributed this to a lack of expertise in many senior leaders

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[21] BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT, *Secondary School Teachers and AI*.
[22] Department for Education, *AI in Schools and Colleges: What You Need to Know – The Education Hub*, 10 June 2025, https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2025/06/artificial-intelligence-in-schools-everything-you-need-to-know/.
[23] Jane Aston et al., *The Education Technology Market in England* (Department for Education, 2024), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/636e7717e90e07186280f7cf/Edtech_market_in_England_Nov_2022.pdf.

who need in-depth knowledge of both the education and technology sectors to be able to understand and verbalise what they need from providers.

Participants stressed the importance of leadership capacity and expertise in navigating this fast-moving space, noting that only a small number of large MATs currently employ senior leaders, such as Chief Technology Officers (CTOs), who have the expertise to work with the rest of the central team to make effective decisions about digital strategy. This raises questions about the remaining majority of schools in the country and whether they are at risk of being excluded from the benefits of technology due to limited leadership capacity, digital literacy or access to expertise. Participants agreed that addressing this expertise gap will be essential if technology is to be embedded equitably and sustainably across the sector.

Participants also recognised that it is important for individual teachers to gain confidence and understanding in how they can use AI to solve their everyday challenges. They gave an example where teachers learnt to use translation technologies to support schools in communicating with parents. This includes adapting resources, such as newsletters, to parental literacy levels or having them translated into home languages. One participant highlighted that it has been useful to engage educators in thinking about the small ways outside of adaptive classroom teaching that AI can mitigate against certain stressors, including communicating with parents.

Participants acknowledged that teachers and leaders have many priorities to balance, and a digital strategy can therefore feel beyond their scope. However, participants felt that integrating edtech into leadership processes could be highly effective for decision-making and addressing broader, complex challenges such as outcomes, inclusion, persistent absence and teacher supply. By developing knowledge and expertise from both the education and technology sectors, senior leaders can navigate this space and embed technologies that will have longevity as edtech evolves. Alongside this, participants recommended once again that high-quality CPD for teachers is required.

# How is edtech supporting inclusion in MATs?

# How is edtech supporting inclusion in MATs?

Our discussions with participants during the second roundtable focused on whether and how trusts use edtech to support their pupils with SEND, and if so, what these strategies look like and how they are integrated consistently across trusts. Participants also discussed the extent to which government policy is tackling the well-known barriers to uptake, including connectivity, hardware availability, access to CPD and the impact of different strategies on teachers' workloads. To promote inclusivity and support pupils with SEND in MATs, participants highlighted two key areas for edtech uptake: school management and administration, and teaching and learning.

## School management and administration

Participants highlighted software being used by a growing number of MATs to consolidate and manage administrative and academic data. MIS (Management Information System) edtech systems are an example that can help to streamline operations by centralising data such as student information, attendance, behaviour, curriculum data and staff details so that the information can be more accessible through visualisation. By integrating pupil information across schools, participants highlighted that predictive analytics could help to identify students with emerging needs earlier, allowing for timely, evidence-based interventions to be delivered effectively. This could be significant for supporting pupils with SEND without the delay of waiting for an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

In our summary paper 'Building Towards the Curriculum & Assessment Review's Final Report', we highlighted experts' views that an inclusive offer in a mainstream school would need to ensure that early support is available to meet the needs of children and counter issues with waiting times within the stretched SEND system, whether or not a diagnosis is later deemed appropriate.[24] Participants agreed that this is an example of

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[24] Helen McGlade and Joni Kelly, *Building Towards the Curriculum & Assessment Review's Final Report* (Education Policy Institute, 2025), https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/CAR-Report-FINAL-VERSION.pdf.

where AI could help with early identification. However, careful consideration around data privacy, bias, transparency and accountability is required.

MIS systems are used widely by individual schools alongside other technologies and tools such as pupil progress tracking, curriculum planning and plagiarism detection to support school staff in their day-to-day administrative and pastoral activities.[25] However, one participant highlighted that only 10 per cent of MATs centrally procured their MIS systems in 2022. They attributed this to two things: firstly, there is a great deal of "legacy tech" that needs to be upgraded, and secondly, the complexity of centrally procured MIS systems can be a challenge to manage, posing risks to privacy and safeguarding. To centrally procure MIS systems responsibly, MATs therefore need to dedicate significant investment in hardware and develop clear policies covering data protection, bias mitigation, and ethical use.

### Classroom practices and support for teaching and learning

There is a broad array of products that can be used by teachers and pupils to support classroom instruction. For teachers, this includes digital tools and resources that aim to create a more engaging learning experience, continue their professional development, plan lessons, and track student activities in the classroom through virtual learning environments (VLE). There are also digital learning products that support pedagogical objectives such as video, games, apps, multimedia and textbooks, as well as hardware and devices to facilitate and enhance learning, such as interactive displays or whiteboards, virtual reality/augmented reality (VR/AR) and robotics.[26]

Digital tools and resources can also be provided for pupils to enhance their learning experience, either at home or at school, including digital devices, learning platforms and online tutoring. Tools and resources that aim to improve learning experiences for pupils with SEND "support pupils across their cognition and learning, communication and interaction, sensory and physical, social, emotional and mental health needs covering the

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[25] Aston et al., *The Education Technology Market in England*.
[26] Aston et al., *The Education Technology Market in England*.

entire spectrum of special educational needs and disabilities".[27] Emerging research shows that teachers who are using AI to support their classroom instruction are most commonly using it to create quizzes and test materials.[28] However, multiple leaders who attended the roundtables discussed their use of one-to-one devices, such as iPads, to enhance learning instruction and support inclusion.

One-to-one devices can help teachers personalise resources and apply diverse media formats like videos, animations, and interactive simulations to enhance pupil learning.[29] Reflecting on the impact of one-to-one devices on the experience of their learners, one participant found that their pupils are more confident and experience a greater sense of belonging to the school. This is evidenced by their internal data on "pupil voice" and other metrics such as persistent absence, which decreased, and attendance, which increased. The children reported that they want to attend school because they can now "access their learning", and the participant attributed these positive effects to their pedagogical approach.

Roundtable participants further recommended that, in addition to research on effective implementation, large-scale studies on pupil voice should also be conducted to understand the effects on learning experience and to avoid bias. This should include looking at the potential disparity between those who do and do not have access to one-to-one devices and other accessibility tools.

Participants recognised that use of a device is not automatically effective, and there was some disagreement about whether effective instruction starts with pedagogy or high-quality teaching. While the two are interconnected, starting with pedagogy focuses on the underlying philosophy and research-based strategies for how learning happens, whereas starting with high-quality teaching emphasises the concrete, in-classroom practices of

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[27] Aston et al., *The Education Technology Market in England*.
[28] BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT, *Secondary School Teachers and AI*.
[29] Björn Haßler et al., *Understanding Quality Characteristics of EdTech Interventions and Implementation for Disadvantaged Pupils* (Education Endowment Foundation, 2025), https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/documents/pages/quality_characteristics_of_edtech_-_systematic_review_with_meta_analysis_v.1.0.0.pdf?v=1762333009.

effective teachers. Regardless of the approach, participants agreed that CPD is once again key to the success of implementing one-to-one device provision.

## How are decisions implemented and integrated consistently?

One participant highlighted the importance of establishing a clear and collective vision for any digital strategy. This includes establishing clear goals and planning for how objectives will be achieved, whether the intention is to improve administrative efficiency, improve outcomes or reduce teachers' workload. This is consistent with a recent Ofsted report, which found that in many schools that are "early adopters" of AI, most teachers and leaders are still learning about the technology itself and how it could align with existing practices.[30] These "early adopters" tend to have a clear vision for how they want to use AI in the short term to address specific challenges. However, very few had ventured into long-term planning about the impact they wanted to have on different areas of education, primarily because the sector is developing rapidly and plans quickly become obsolete.

Participants agreed that the success of a strategy also depends on the vision being effectively communicated to staff across the trust. They highlighted that MATs often pass decision-making to AI champions or digital leads to build expertise in schools. This approach has brought some immediate success however there are limitations to only having one specialist within an organisation. If they choose to leave, there will be a significant gap in expertise, highlighting long-term challenges.

Although they acknowledged that time and resources will be required, participants once again suggested moving towards system-wide integration with dedicated training for all staff members.

One participant highlighted that Sandwell College in the West Midlands has effectively implemented adaptive technologies. Instead of adopting 'off-the-shelf' IT solutions, the

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[30] Ofsted, '"The Biggest Risk Is Doing Nothing": Insights from Early Adopters of Artificial Intelligence in Schools and Further Education Colleges', GOV.UK, 27 June 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ai-in-schools-and-further-education-findings-from-early-adopters/the-biggest-risk-is-doing-nothing-insights-from-early-adopters-of-artificial-intelligence-in-schools-and-further-education-colleges.

College has created bespoke product designs, leveraging open-source technology to build personalised solutions. Being one of the largest further education colleges in the country, with around 6000 students, Sandwell College have the advantage of scale, which they utilise to train their own staff and use their own data. This approach has reduced the amount of time spent on admin tasks by up to one hour per day for each member of staff at the College. Using an open-source model has also meant the institution can host the system on their own servers, fully isolated from the internet. This approach can therefore address some key safeguarding risks posed by sending data across company servers.

MIS systems can also produce data to inform and refine centralised curriculum resources, freeing up capacity for other tasks, such as classroom instruction, behaviour, assessment and differentiation. However, implementation must be assessed to ensure that workload is reduced in practice rather than being replaced by different work. Participants also recognised that teachers tend to prefer having greater autonomy over lesson planning and resource design. Curriculum centralisation can therefore negatively impact retention while simultaneously improving educational quality, pupil outcomes and workload challenges.[31] They suggested that effective systems therefore need to balance teacher professionalism with attempts to improve efficiency.

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[31] Jack Worth and Jens Van den Brande, *Teacher Autonomy: How Does It Relate to Job Satisfaction and Retention?* (NFER, 2020), https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/r1ubcb4s/teacher_autonomy_how_does_it_relate_to_job_satisfaction_and_retention.pdf.

# Conclusion and recommendations

# Conclusion

As the government proceeds with developing guidance and support, it is clear that effective implementation will require greater and long-term investment to develop the infrastructure needed to embed edtech into school and MAT operations. The government also has a role to play in regulating AI, and participants called for greater development of cognitive security so that the education sector is not vulnerable to external threats and misinformation.

MATs and the independent sector also have a role to play, alongside LA-maintained schools, in facilitating collaboration between schools, and some are already leading the way in developing policies covering data protection, bias mitigation, and ethical use, as well as sharing best practice. For the sector to collaborate effectively, government reforms should focus on reducing competition between schools and building a culture of trust so that different institutions can work together to overcome the complex challenges posed by edtech and AI.

Teachers and leaders who are making effective edtech decisions are focusing on broader challenges in the education sector, such as inclusion, persistent absence and teacher supply, harnessing technology to respond to existing pressures and priorities within the system. However, greater expertise in both the education and technology sectors is needed, particularly at the senior leadership level, to navigate this evolving space and embed technologies that will have longevity.

While early findings are mixed, some studies indicate that edtech devices can have a positive impact on inclusion, outcomes, confidence, belonging and attendance. Early examples are emerging where institutions are using open-source models to address key safeguarding risks posed by sending data across company servers, ensuring that children's privacy remains intact.

To increase effective implementation, the government and providers will need to enhance access to CPD for digital and data literacy among teachers. To understand the true effects

and avoid bias, robust evaluation on effective implementation and pupil experience is also required.

Currently, most teachers and leaders are still learning about the technology itself and how it could align with existing practices, and participants agreed that edtech and AI may have greater advantages if they are integrated into the systems and processes constituted within schools. For inclusion, this may include system-wide integration of pupil information across schools to help identify students with emerging needs so that teachers can respond with timely, evidence-based interventions. However, serious consideration for data protection, bias mitigation, and ethical use and significant investment in hardware will be required.

# Recommendations

## For government making edtech decisions:

- Reform policies to prioritise trust and collaboration between educational institutions rather than fostering competition, enabling schools to share expertise and resources more effectively
- Address foundational digital inequalities such as connectivity gaps, infrastructure deficits, and device poverty, as these remain some of the most critical barriers to implementation
- Integrate technology into existing education budgets, replacing or enhancing current expenditure only where evidence clearly demonstrates added value, rather than treating edtech as additional spending that will stretch already limited resources

## For providers distributing products and services:

- Technology should respond to existing pressures and priorities within the education system, rather than to the products that are currently available
- Invest in comprehensive, ongoing professional development for teachers to maximise the effective use of products
- Provide tailored support for senior leaders to develop their technological expertise, enabling more productive partnerships and better implementation outcomes

## For teachers and leaders making edtech decisions:

- Decision-making should be driven by broader, complex challenges such as inclusion, persistent absence and teacher supply
- Identify small, practical ways edtech and AI can reduce day-to-day stressors so these tools can be implemented in meaningful and manageable ways
- Develop confidence and understanding of edtech and AI uses beyond classroom teaching, such as using translation technologies to communicate with parents in their home languages, adapting newsletters to different literacy levels, or streamlining other administrative tasks

## For MATs implementing edtech decisions:

- Develop a clear, collective vision for digital strategy across the trust and invest in high-quality, ongoing professional development to promote consistent, effective and sustainable implementation in all schools
- Rigorously assess whether the strategy is achieving intended outcomes (such as genuine workload reduction rather than task displacement)
- Move towards integrated, trust-wide systems and consider open-source solutions to address the safeguarding risks that are associated with sharing sensitive data across third-party company servers
- While appointing AI champions or digital leads can bring immediate success, avoid over-reliance on single specialists, whose departure would create significant knowledge gaps
- Integrate technology strategically into leadership decision-making processes and involve teachers in decision-making to enhance, rather than undermine, teacher professionalism

## For promoting inclusion for pupils with SEND:

- Consider using Management Information Systems and predictive analytics to identify students with emerging SEND needs earlier, enabling timely, evidence-based interventions without waiting for a formal Education, Health and Care Plan
- Consider providing one-to-one devices such as iPads to personalise resources and support diverse learning needs through varied media formats
- Ensure robust data privacy, bias mitigation, and ethical use policies are in place before implementing these systems

## For researchers addressing evidence gaps:

- Conduct large-scale studies examining whether centralising services, for example IT, has measurable effects on teaching and learning outcomes
- Conduct large-scale studies that centre pupil voice to understand how edtech affects learning experiences and to minimise adult bias when evaluating effectiveness
- Design studies that explore the disparities that may exist based on access to devices and assistive technologies, ensuring research captures the full range of pupil experiences with edtech

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