

WHY DIGITAL SUPPLEMENTS?

For district leaders looking to accelerate student progress following the pandemic, digital supplements represent an opportunity to engage learners and personalize instruction.

In our study of education leaders, most identified student learning loss as a topmost concern to address post-COVID; and among districts citing learning recovery as a top concern, 71% agreed that their districts should prioritize the students who struggled most.

In this post, we'll look at why district leaders should consider digital supplements that personalize the learning experience as one of their spending priorities for ESSER funds — and what they need to know in order to implement them effectively.

Digital supplements: An overview

Digital supplements are products that schools and teachers can access digitally to help personalize instruction and drive student improvement. As suggested by their name, digital supplements are additive in the classroom; they're not intended to replace or stand alone as a core curriculum.

The category includes a range of products that are generally used for one or more of the following purposes:

- **Complementing core curriculum** — or serving in its place for a specific unit, lesson, or activity
- **Supporting student learning** with activities and exercises
- **Targeting improvement** for students with significant learning gaps or challenges

The rising popularity of digital supplements

Teachers and district leaders alike prize solutions that promote student engagement. In fact, student engagement has become teachers' and leaders' biggest priority when choosing instructional products — recently replacing standards alignment, long a top concern.¹

To personalize the learning experience and engage students, supplements often employ one or more of the following features:

- **Gamification**
- **Adaptivity** — either driven by algorithms or by design

¹ Kiddom State of Curriculum 2020-21: "The K-12 Transition to Digital Curriculum; Reach Capital 2021 ReimaginED Report"



- **Assessments** – most often in the form of formative or micro assessments
- **Tutoring functionality**

Digital supplements' association with student engagement is one of the main reasons why they've become so popular and dominant in the market. **Pre-pandemic projections estimated that digital supplements would account for 57% of the market for instructional materials – up from just 25% in 2010.**²

Of course, digital supplements promise more than just engagement. A 2020 meta-analysis that investigated the effects of digital tools for students with mathematical learning difficulties found that digital supplements significantly improved learning outcomes in math.³ However, the market for digital supplements is so large and varied that it is difficult to reach unifying conclusions about their impact.

Implementing digital supplements using ESSER funds

In our study, districts reported moderate interest in using ESSER funds for digital instructional materials, with nearly a third of the leaders we surveyed identifying digital instructional materials as a spending priority. Not surprisingly, digital supplements were outranked by COVID-related safety efforts, hiring additional instructional staff, and purchasing devices and securing internet access for students. However, of those leaders who identified digital supplements as a spending priority, 58% viewed their digital strategy as something they're committed to in the long term.

Digital supplements that engage students are where the market for instructional materials is headed. While ESSER funds provide district leaders with an opportunity to stay in-step with this trend, they should also consider using ESSER funds to follow best practices for the implementation of digital supplements, such as:

- **Hiring interventionists to administer implementation** alongside or in the place of teachers to improve effectiveness, lower ongoing costs, and reduce understaffing. By hiring interventionists on a contracted or part-time basis, districts can scale interventionist time up or down, potentially increasing sustainability.
- **Supporting long-range budgeting** by contracting with technical assistance providers who can help districts consider budgetary tradeoffs to maintain their intervention investments.
- **Investing in evaluation programs** that enable districts to focus resources toward supplements that are particularly effective – and to make the case for future funding.

The Center for Education Market Dynamics aims to help district leaders make smarter choices about which products and services are most likely to help them achieve their goals. Contact us to learn more about this research or to explore how your district can more effectively navigate the education market.

² BMO Capital Markets: "The Education Industry 2019," and "Education and Training 2013"

³ Benavides-Varela, Silvia, et al. "[Effectiveness of digital-based interventions for children with mathematical learning difficulties: a Meta-Analysis.](#)"