

Report

Transforming education

April 2022



Introduction

Digital transformation can often feel daunting. It can be deprioritised, despite the opportunities it presents, including achieving better people and place-based outcomes. Instead, it can feel safer to stick to the age-old mantra of ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.’

This report from our partner Arbor, presents a clear case for the potential opportunities and positive impact committing resources into this area has, set in a context of education.

Common misconceptions about technology can slow down development across all sectors. This especially rings true in education where, in schools and councils, budgets are overstretched, time is short and resources are limited. Keeping track of the changing landscape is a full-time job and many challenges just feel too big to tackle.

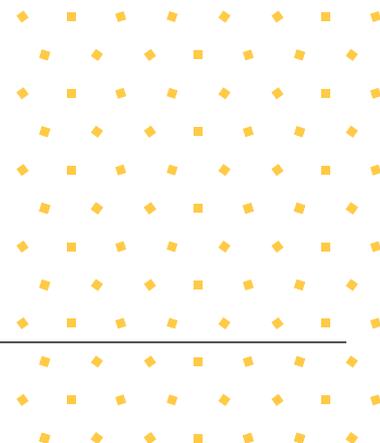
The paper will guide you through these issues within the education sector and provide responses with actionable outputs you can use within your own organisation.

I’m therefore delighted that Socitm is able to bring the knowledge and experience from Arbor to you through this excellent and thought provoking content.



Martin Fergusson

Director of policy and research, Socitm



Challenges and misconceptions

One of the biggest questions asked by councils is how to meet the current and future needs of school children, parents, teachers and school leaders when tech continues to change and update exponentially. This comes with a concern that you can update your tech, only to immediately fall behind again. There is a misconception that tech is a process of continual investment to make sure that any gains are not lost. Over the last five years or so, the pace of change in EdTech has continued to accelerate, with new players in the market and more options than ever to help provide what is needed.

The challenge here is to change the mindset that accompanies such rapid change and instead show that accelerated growth in the industry gives educators and their schools greater choice and access to what they need. Of course, too much choice can feel overwhelming. Even the number of ways to buy new technology is confusing. But what's important to highlight is that this choice is there to work with, rather than work against, individual organisations.

This challenge holds true for software just as much as hardware and networks. Continuing to rely on legacy software, often with a one size fits all approach, does not provide organisations with the agility needed, and represents a stand-still approach as the sector grows.

Much of this growth in choice (and the need for it) came to light during the pandemic, which increased pressures on services across the country. The headline change in technology came about when schools suddenly relied on a blended learning approach. It became clear that agility of tech was crucial for schools and councils alike. Despite this, many school systems remain server-based, with limited integration, functionality and accessibility. Whilst teachers, parents and students rapidly adapted to this new way of learning and educating, the technology used for day to day management in many schools didn't and couldn't adapt with them.

Another challenge is the ability, or lack thereof, to share student analytics – attainment, behaviour, assessment – across multiple stakeholders. Without these analytics, it is increasingly difficult for policy and decision makers to undertake a proactive approach

to school improvement. Systems are old, slow and expensive, with knowledge of these systems often confined to specific individuals. The ability to have a holistic view of school performance is a challenge, and the means to drilldown to specific children's performance is often non-existent. When the means do exist outside of the cloud, information is not timely, meaning by the time gaps in performance are forming, they become too late to proactively counter. This begs the question, how can students' education be improved if you can only be reactive to the data in front of you?

A third challenge commonly faced by the public sector is providing an integrated and interoperable estate of hardware and software. In this modern age of tech, it should be a given that all your mission critical systems talk to each other, so that information is timely, comparable and robust. And yet, the prospect of change continues to feel more daunting and widespread than the prospect of using outdated technology to support a whole community of schools. There are valid concerns, for instance, that existing data flows will not be maintained, rather than excitement that these data flows would be improved. Existing systems can also be so ingrained into current working life, it can feel natural to hold onto something known, rather than evaluating how something new could help you to work better. And this applies to all stakeholders, of which there are many. Getting everybody on the same side is another hurdle of change. With such a task and so many options available on the market, it can be hard to know where to begin and even what you're looking for, once again meaning that it is deprioritised.

However, what Covid-19 made increasingly clear is the widespread need for technology in the education sector to be agile and up-to-date. Of course, we hope that a pandemic won't happen again, but multiple lockdowns acted as a catalyst for realisation that legacy software was simply not good enough in supporting schools. The need for overnight change cornered many schools into rethinking their tech. Rapid change became the norm and showed schools and councils alike that many of their concerns surrounding digital transformation were, and continue to be, unfounded.

How can tech work with you, not against you?

What many institutions have now discovered is that their tech is no longer an obstacle to their strategy. Instead, by moving to cloud-based software, tech becomes an enabler, giving access to systems that are instantly integral to ongoing improvement.

If your systems don't give you real time access to pupil data, or you're spending more time collating data than analysing and acting, then it's time to look at how tech should be working with you, not against you.

Again, it comes down to change being a vehicle for improvement, rather than causing concern about how existing systems will be maintained. We've put together a guide on how modern tech is helping organisations to rethink and improve, in order to tackle the myths and concerns that surround new software and hardware.

1. Cost

Old, server-based software is cheap to purchase but incredibly expensive to support. With patches, add-ons and servers themselves difficult to service, contractors are expensive and costs soon add up, particularly when servers need replacing when they come to end of life. Meanwhile, modern, cloud-based tech is fairly priced with package options to suit all budgets. Excellent, expert support is often included for free too, meaning that your costs throughout the year are low with no unexpected, nasty surprises. This means organisations can budget and plan ahead across multiple years, without the worry that there will be sudden need for an increase in investment when server tech needs refreshing. Resources can be reallocated from maintaining the tech to making the best use of new systems. On top of this, frameworks make it even simpler to procure off-the-shelf software, which often provide favourable Terms & Conditions and take out the expense that comes with bespoke procurement.

2. Future proof

With technology changing every day, you need software that will adapt and grow as your needs change. The pandemic highlighted how important being able to 'pivot' is, and that we have to be ready for all instances that

we may face. The teams behind modern technology are passionate and work tirelessly to predict the needs and wants in the market, but also have the skillset to react quickly when things don't go to plan. For example, all of the codes requested by the Department for Education in England in regards to Covid-related attendance could be added to Arbor MIS within 24 hours, so that reporting was accurate and easy for school teams to manage.

3. Student insights

- › In a new report published by the children's commissioner,¹ Dame Rachel de Souza has found only around half of councils know how many children in their area are persistently or severely absent from school. She claimed it hinders their ability to provide support for these children to get back into education, because they don't know who the children are. However, with the right technology, organisations will be able to surface the data they need quickly and easily. The wider team will be empowered with siloes and blockers a thing of the past. Reports will generate in seconds, and informative dashboards will help to bring your data to life, so that you can spot patterns and take action fast. This new way of working will help you offer the best possible support to children, as you'll be able to see exactly where all of the children in your care are on a day-to-day basis.
- › With more actionable data at your fingertips, you'll have insight into how schools within your control are performing in regards to assessment, behaviour and attainment. When using cloud-based software, support services can drilldown to student level and take action to offer extra help, for example to looked-after or SEND students. You can also compare the performance of students across demographics from a range of key areas. You'll have the insights you need to have a joined up picture of what's going on in schools across your area, so that you can make the best decisions for the students in your care. With limited resources and tight budgets, the impact of your support will be tracked. You'll be able to prove it's making a positive difference.

4. Efficiency

- › Modern tech is cloud-based, meaning that you have access to what you need anytime, from anywhere. You no longer need to rely on out-of-date servers that are slow, clunky, and prone to outages. Your entire team can work together and stay connected on the cloud, helping you to save hours of time and encourage collaboration.
- › Moving to the cloud also liberates your budget because of the aforementioned lack of server costs and maintenance. It doesn't mean that you're choosing the cheapest option available, because you need to ensure that you're investing in the transition to make the tech work for you in the long run.
- › Modern tech is intuitive. We know it's been difficult for technology providers to integrate with server-based tech systems in the past. However, as more and more schools have been switching to new technology over the last few years, providers have built integrations much more easily. For example, APIs make connecting systems and building a new enterprise stack easier, quicker and inexpensive compared to custom development work. This means schools have the freedom to use the tools and systems they love, and by staying connected to central systems, can also avoid the need for double data entry - saving hours of time and money so that school staff can concentrate on their students.

How can you get started?

The time is now to make a change to help you offer the best support to the students in your care. To help get you started, we've suggested some next steps below.

1. Talk with your team

Change can often feel overwhelming. Talk with your team across the organisation to share the load and get their views on what could be improved. Including your team from the beginning will help them to feel involved and get them onboard with the move to modern tech.

Compile all of their thoughts, questions and concerns into one list to keep things organised and transparent. You can then start to audit the systems you currently use, including pros, cons and price, to help you make an informed decision once you look into your options.

2. Consult with other councils who have made the switch to modern technology

Moving to modern tech is becoming the norm, with many councils already embracing new systems to help them work better. In Hertfordshire, the leading provider of school improvement and business support products and services, Herts for Learning, recently underwent a bold evolution and established their own MIS Framework.² We highly recommend reaching out to other councils to share knowledge and garner insights into different ways of working.

3. Do your research

Once you've spoken to your team and other councils, you should have enough information to know what you're looking for and begin your research. Organisations are more than happy to set-up introductions, with no obligation to commit. These introductions are the perfect way to assess whether you think working together could be a good fit, and establish if you'd want to learn more.



Get in touch

If you'd like to talk through any of the above, contact us! We've worked with councils across the country, and over 3,000 schools and MATs with their move to modern tech.

We'd be happy to chat through any concerns or questions you may have – just email Phillippa De'Ath, Chief Revenue Officer at Arbor: phillippa.de-ath@arbor-education.com or connect with her on LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/phillippa-de-ath](https://www.linkedin.com/in/phillippa-de-ath)

References

- ¹ 'Rationalise' school data systems to cut absence, says commissioner (Tes magazine): bit.ly/3tJnvT3
- ² Evolution and revolution; our leap of faith into a new MIS era (Herts for Learning): bit.ly/3JRBR9t

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