PATHWAY 2 CAREERS

Recentering EdTech: Raising the Bar for Classroom Technology

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Re-centering EdTech: Raising the Bar for Classroom Technology

Recent analysis in Education Week points to a real backlash against edtech, and it is not irrational. Families and policymakers are reacting to a K–12 landscape where screens, platforms, and now AI have expanded faster than the public case for learning value—and where privacy, transparency, and developmental concerns feel under addressed. (Klein, 2026). [1]

From my perspective as CEO of Pathway2Careers (P2C), the backlash is a signal—not to abandon technology—but to raise the bar. The central miss in the race to "get tech into schools" was too often effectiveness: we digitized instructional routines (or moved them into platforms) without reliably improving outcomes.

This critique is consistent with major syntheses: the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that heavy classroom technology use is associated with mixed or negative outcomes, and that countries with heavy information and communication technology (ICT) investment saw "no appreciable improvements" in core achievement; UNESCO's GEM Report summary argues that robust evidence is scarce and warns against focusing on digital inputs instead of learning outcomes. (OECD, 2015; UNESCO, 2023). [2]

The policy direction is therefor clear: Digital Teaching—not "worksheet-on-a-screen"—should be the model we adopt and the standard we procure against. Digital Teaching is a teacher-led, student-centered instructional approach in which technology functions as an environment for planning, orchestrating, differentiating, and assessing learning in real classrooms—not merely assigning content, capturing clicks, and exporting grades. This aligns closely with John Richards's concept of a "Digital Teaching Platform" designed for teacher-led classrooms as the primary carrier of curriculum content. (Richards, 2023; Dede & Richards, 2012). [3]

Finally, I argue that engagement must be treated as essential but defined correctly. "Cartoonish" or purely extrinsic engagement (badges, points, shallow gamification, time-on-device) is not the goal and may be counterproductive; authentic engagement is grounded in meaning, relevance, and agency. The engagement literature emphasizes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions; motivation research also cautions that certain contingent rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation. Career-connected learning models, when implemented with fidelity, show evidence of stronger persistence and outcomes, supporting our belief that *relevance is not a "nice to have"; it is a learning mechanism*. (Fredricks et al., 2004; Deci et al., 1999; Kemple, 2008; Warner et al., 2015). [4]

The edtech backlash is real and rational

Education Week's question— "What's worse for students: a boring worksheet or ineffective ed-tech?"—captures a core truth: low-quality learning is harmful whether it is analog or digital, but digital tools add new categories of risk (privacy, distraction, and opaque platform behavior). (Klein, 2026). [1]

In that reporting, Richard Culatta (CEO of ISTE+ASCD[5]) argues that schools frequently have not explained "the why" of technology choices—either because the rationale is not communicated or because it is missing. (Klein, 2026). [1] This aligns with what I hear from district leaders and families: operational convenience and procurement momentum can substitute for instructional justification.

The backlash is also being accelerated by concerns about governance and child development. In the same Education Week article, a panelist from Georgetown University[6] emphasizes that boredom on a networked device is distinct from boredom on paper because a device is a portal to broader internet content and data practices that parents

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may not have consented to or even understood. (Klein, 2026). [1]

This sentiment is visible in public opinion data. In the 2025 PDK Poll, 68% of parent respondents did not support providing AI software access to student data such as grades, assessment data, or other personal information, and the poll documents its methodology (national sample of 1,005 adults; telephone; June 21–30, 2025). (PDK International, 2025). [7]

Policy responses are increasingly moving from "local debate" to "state guardrails." Education Week highlights legislative activity aiming to restrict or condition edtech use. (Klein, 2026). [1] One example is Utah's "Balance Act" approach (H.B. 273), which defines "screen time" as time spent on a screen not involving instruction/guidance/interaction with educational personnel and requires instructional technology to be safe, effective, intentionally integrated for learning outcomes, and not used as a substitute for instruction. (Utah Legislature, 2026). [8]

At the federal level, the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation publicly framed youth screen time concerns as connected to a system where schools provide personal devices to children "fueled by federal subsidies and incentives" and convened a hearing to examine potential harms. (U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, 2026). [9]

I believe these signals all point to the same problem definition: edtech has not consistently earned trust because it has not consistently demonstrated effectiveness, transparency, and governance maturity at scale.

The Effectiveness Gap: What Research Says About Outcomes Versus Inputs

Across major international syntheses, a recurring conclusion is that the promise of technology is not automatically realized by purchasing devices or deploying platforms.

The OECD's *Students, Computers and Learning* report draws on PISA and concludes that classroom computer use is associated with mixed results: moderate use sometimes correlates with better outcomes, but very frequent use correlates with worse outcomes in many measures—even after controlling for social background and demographics. It also states that countries investing heavily in ICT saw no appreciable improvements in reading, mathematics, or science achievement. (OECD, 2015). [10]

The same OECD foreword offers a principle that I believe should be treated as a procurement axiom: technology can amplify great teaching, but great technology cannot replace poor teaching. (OECD, 2015). [10] This is not anti-technology; it is an effectiveness claim about what actually changes learning outcomes.

UNESCO's GEM Report summary is similarly explicit; evidence is limited and fast-moving products are hard to evaluate. It notes that education technology products change every 36 months on average, that robust evidence is scarce, and that adoption too often proceeds without peer-reviewed evidence. It also argues that policy should focus on learning outcomes, not digital inputs, citing cases where large deployments did not improve learning when not incorporated into pedagogy. (UNESCO, 2023). [11]

At the same time, evidence does not support a blanket conclusion that "technology doesn't work." Some categories show measurable effects under the right design and implementation conditions. For example, the Institute for Defense Analyses meta-analytic review of intelligent tutoring systems reports a median effect size of 0.66, and also

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emphasizes a key lesson for evaluation: effects depend on alignment between the tool's instructional objectives and how outcomes are measured, and on implementation adequacy. (Kulik & Fletcher, 2016). [12]

Similarly, RAND's study of personalized learning schools (with matched comparisons) reports statistically significant positive impacts overall. But the study also shows heterogeneity and modest average effect sizes (e.g., about 0.27 in math and 0.19 in reading in one cohort), reinforcing that outcomes depend on model design and implementation, not the mere presence of software. (Pane et al., 2015). [13]

This is the key conclusion I draw as a CEO: the core failure mode is not "technology," it is "technology without an instructional model that is measurably better." Putting yesterday's pedagogy onto a new interface is not innovation. It is digitization.

A practical comparison: worksheet-on-a-screen versus Digital Teaching

Dimension	"Worksheet-on-a-screen" edtech pattern	Digital Teaching pattern
Instructional intent	Digitize practice/seat time; convenience-driven	Improve learning through better orchestration, feedback loops, and relevance
Role of the teacher	Implementer/monitor; tool often drives pacing	Designer and leader; tool strengthens teacher planning and real-time decisions
Role of the student	Click-through completion; passive compliance risk	Active problem solving, discussion, reflection, and applied reasoning
Engagement	Often superficial (points, streaks, "fun skins") or mere time-on-task	Authentic: relevance, agency, cognitive challenge, collaboration
Evidence expectations	Frequently weak; marketing claims; limited causal evaluation	Explicit outcome targets; continuous improvement; evaluation-ready instrumentation
Data and privacy risk	Often high relative to instructional value (more data than needed)	Data minimization tied to instructional purpose; transparency to families
Implementation dependence	High, but frequently ignored; "plug and play" myth	Implementation is part of product: PD, coaching, and fidelity supports
Accountability	"Usage" as success metric	Learning outcomes and classroom practice as success metrics

This table summarizes the distinction at the heart of my policy position, and it matches UNESCO's warning against prioritizing digital inputs over outcomes. (UNESCO, 2023). [11]

Digital Teaching as the Standard

Defining Digital Teaching using John Richards' Digital Teaching Platform concept

The best research-grounded framing I have found for what schools actually need is John Richards' concept of a Digital Teaching Platform (DTP): a new category of educational product providing the primary instructional

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environment in technology-rich classrooms, designed for the teacher-led classroom as the primary carrier of curriculum content. (Richards, 2023). [14]

The DTP framing matters because it shifts the center of gravity away from "delivery systems" and toward instructional environments. In the description of Digital Teaching Platforms: Customizing Classroom Learning for Each Student, the editors emphasize DTPs as platforms that support teachers with functions such as creating lessons and assignments, managing discussions and activities, and generating progress reports. (Dede & Richards, 2012). [15]

In plain terms, Digital Teaching is not an LMS feature set. It is an instructional model in which:

- Teachers retain locus of control over pacing, grouping, and sense-making.
- Students experience interactive learning as part of classroom instruction (not as isolated "platform time").
- Assessment and data are used primarily for instructional decisions, not merely for compliance reporting.
- Technology is deployed where it produces a real instructional advantage (e.g., visualization, adaptive practice, rapid formative checks, access to authentic contexts), and *not* where it merely replaces paper.

This definition is also consistent with the OECD's conclusion that pedagogy and teacher-student interaction are critical and that technology layered onto old practices can dilute teaching effectiveness. (OECD, 2015). [10]

Visual Contrast: Traditional LMS loop Versus Digital Teaching Loop

Below is an excerpted internal diagram that illustrates a common "traditional LMS instructional loop," where the mechanical flow is content → assessment → gradebook → SIS. This loop is administratively legible, but it does not necessarily represent *instructional improvement* (NS4ed, 2021, slide 8).

Traditional LMS instructional loop (internal model diagram)

A second internal diagram captures the design intent of Digital Teaching platforms: classroom use, real-time classroom management, teacher-centric scaffolds, open/teacher-modifiable curriculum, lesson planning tools, support for individual/group/whole-class instruction, collaborative/project-centered work, and adaptive assessment loops for personalization (NS4ed, 2021, slide 16).

Digital Teaching platform instructional loops (see diagram on the next page)

These diagrams align with the DTP concept described by Richards and Dede: the platform is not just a distribution layer; it is the instructional environment supporting teacher-led learning. (Richards, 2023; Dede & Richards, 2012). [3]

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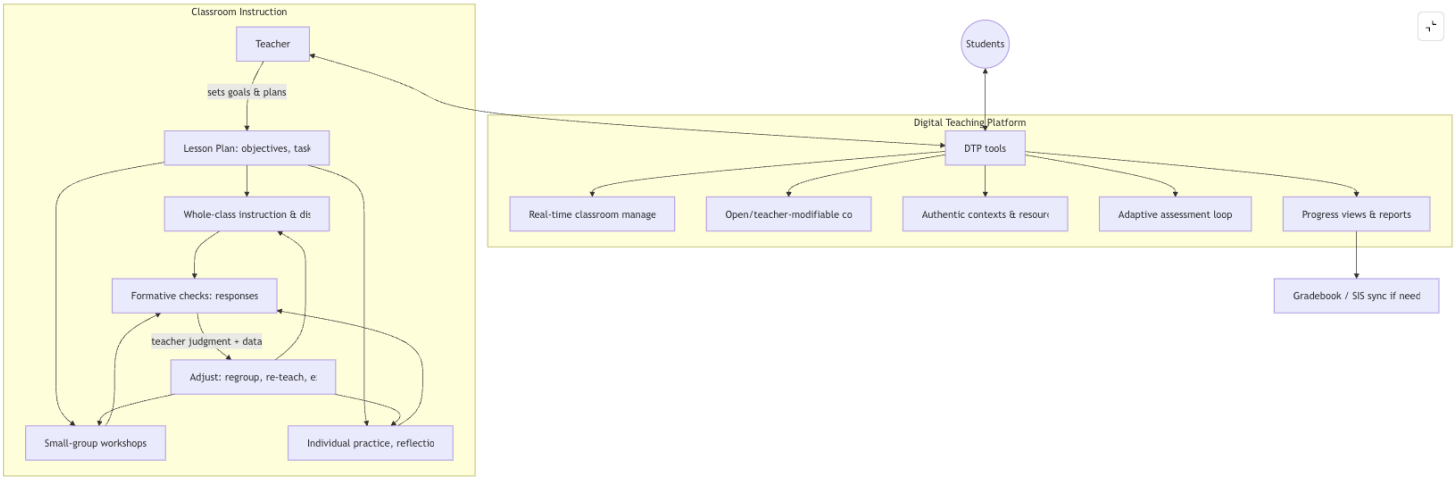
A classroom schematic for how Digital Teaching operates

The following schematic shows how I believe Digital Teaching should function in daily classroom practice: the teacher leads, technology supports, and formative feedback loops drive improvement.

Digital Teaching Platform Instructional Loops: Internal Model Diagram



This model makes one non-negotiable point: the gradebook/SIS is not the instructional center. Instructional center is the teacher-student learning loop—exactly what OECD argues is essential for deep conceptual understanding. (OECD, 2015). [10]

Illustrative image concepts for Digital Teaching in action

To visually communicate Digital Teaching (in board decks, district proposals, or policy briefs), the most honest image concepts are *classroom scenes where technology is present but not dominant*. Suggested stock/photo concepts:

- Teacher facilitating a whole-class discussion with an interactive display showing student solution strategies (not a game)
- Small-group collaboration around a real-world project with mixed materials: printed task sheets, calculators, devices used for research/visualization
- Students analyzing labor-market charts (such as median wages and workforce demand) and connecting them to math reasoning
- Teacher using a dashboard during instruction to regroup students for targeted support (visible teacher control)
- Student presenting a career-connected math solution to peers (discussion-based engagement)

Engagement that matters: authentic career-connected engagement versus “cartoonish” engagement

If there is one concept, I would insist districts to operationalize more precisely, it is engagement. Engagement is not clicks. It is not time-on-device. It is not “students didn’t complain.” The engagement literature describes engagement as multifaceted—commonly including behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions—and calls for richer characterization of how students behave, feel, and think. (Fredricks et al., 2004). [16]

That framing is crucial because it helps distinguish two very different “engagement” strategies:

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Superficial or "cartoonish" engagement tends to rely on extrinsic reward structures (streaks, badges, dopamine loops) or entertainment skins that keep students busy but do not necessarily deepen thinking. Motivation research cautions that certain reward structures, especially contingent rewards, can undermine intrinsic motivation in many contexts, particularly for children. (Deci et al., 1999). [17]

Authentic engagement is grounded in meaning, relevance, and agency—students exert effort because the work connects to valued goals and because thinking is required. A strong research bridge here is "utility value": interventions that help students connect content to their own lives can increase interest and (in some contexts) performance, with especially strong effects for lower-performing students. (Hulleman et al., 2010). [18]

Career-connected learning models provide applied evidence that relevance can be a mechanism for persistence and outcomes. MDRC's randomized evaluation of Career Academies found sustained earnings gains (about 11% annually on average over eight years) and concluded that career-related experiences can improve labor market preparation without compromising academic outcomes—while also warning that fidelity at scale is difficult. (Kemple, 2008). [19]

Similarly, SRI's evaluation of certified Linked Learning pathways reports that certified pathway students were more likely to graduate, less likely to drop out, and earned more credits than comparable peers; importantly, these effects did not accrue to non-certified pathways, underscoring that program structures and fidelity matter. (Warner et al., 2015). [20]

This distinction matters for edtech policy because much of the backlash is reacting to what families interpret as "screen time for its own sake." Digital Teaching should be the alternative: an approach where technology is deployed to support authentic engagement and deeper learning, not to substitute for instruction or to chase superficial "engagement metrics." This is consistent with Utah's emerging legislative language that instructional technology should be effective, intentionally integrated, and not used as a substitute for instruction. (Utah Legislature, 2026). [8]

Policy Recommendations and Research Agenda

My policy recommendations are intentionally short. The backlash will not be resolved by better messaging alone; it will be resolved by standards that change what gets built, bought, and used.

1. Adopt an "effectiveness-first" procurement standard. Require vendors to present credible evidence aligned to intended outcomes and grade bands and require districts to define the instructional "why" for each tool (not just the operational "how"). This recommendation is directly consistent with UNESCO's finding that robust evidence is scarce and that adoption often proceeds without peer-reviewed evidence, as well as with the public demand implied by Education Week's reporting. (UNESCO, 2023; Klein, 2026). [21]

2. Procure for Digital Teaching capacity, not for platform features. Tools should be evaluated against Digital Teaching criteria: teacher-led classroom usability, real-time classroom management supports, open/modifiable curriculum, multi-modal grouping support (whole/small/individual), and formative assessment loops that strengthen instructional decision-making. This aligns with John Richards' DTP framing and with the design intent described by Teachers College Press. (Richards, 2023; Dede & Richards, 2012). [3]

3. Treat professional learning and coaching as part of the product, not an optional add-on. Evidence-based professional development features include content focus, active learning, collaboration, modeling, coaching,

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feedback/reflection, and sustained duration. District contracts should require implementation support consistent with that evidence. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). [22]

4. Strengthen privacy governance and family transparency. Parents' skepticism about AI and student data is not a communications failure; it is an accountability gap. Districts should require plain-language disclosures, data minimization, transparent vendor policies, and clear consent practices—especially when AI is involved. (PDK International, 2025; Klein, 2026). [23]

5. Build age-appropriate screen-time and instructional-use guardrails. The goal is not "no technology," but "technology on learning's terms." Emerging state policy language (e.g., Utah's definition of screen-time and requirements that technology not substitute for instruction) suggests one path: protect foundational skill development in early grades while still allowing teacher-led and instructionally necessary uses. (Utah Legislature, 2026). [8]

Research Agenda: What P2C Believes the Field Needs Next

As a sector, we should be honest: we have asked schools to make large instructional bets with uneven causal evidence. If we want legitimacy, we should lead with research transparency rather than resist it.

Run multi-site randomized controlled trials (RCTs) where feasible, with implementation measurement baked in. UNESCO notes that only a small share of companies run RCTs in some contexts and that evidence availability is limited; meanwhile, the IDA meta-analysis shows that implementation adequacy affects effect size—meaning RCTs without fidelity measurement can mislead. (UNESCO, 2023; Kulik & Fletcher, 2016). [24]

Pre-register efficacy studies and publish deviations transparently. The Registry of Efficacy and Effectiveness Studies (REES) exists specifically to increase transparency and access for causal inference studies; IES explicitly links study registration to replicability and encourages pre-registration. (IES, 2019; REES, n.d.). [25]

Commit to open methods and open data where legally and ethically possible. IES's Standards for Excellence in Education Research (SEER) emphasize executing analyses as registered and making methods and data open, consistent with public access policies. (IES, n.d.). [26]

Study not only "does it work?" but "under what implementation conditions does it work best?" Career-connected learning evaluations show exactly why: some models produce positive outcomes at high fidelity, while weaker implementation produces weaker or null results. (Warner et al., 2015; Caspary et al., 2025). [27]

Include engagement measures that reflect cognitive work, not just usage. Engagement research calls for richer characterization; opt for measures such as discourse participation, persistence in problem solving, and student explanations—not only logins and completion count. (Fredricks et al., 2004). [16]

Notes on assumptions and constraints

I am making two explicit assumptions to keep this paper rigorous and transparent:

- P2C outcome figures cited here are drawn from an internal 2025 research brief summarizing multiple evaluations and survey-based findings, including subgroup usage patterns and reported outcomes. Some findings appear to reference statewide analyses and reporting in New Mexico. I treat these as promising but

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not definitive because our own internal review notes that many studies are short-term and not typically randomized. (Pathway2Careers, 2025, pp. 20–21).

- John Richards' citations focus on his Digital Teaching Platform framing as described on CS4Ed and in the edited volume Digital Teaching Platforms; I did not attempt to catalog all of his publications beyond what was necessary to substantiate the Digital Teaching model definition. (Richards, 2023; Dede & Richards, 2012). [3]

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About Dr. Goins

Dr. Joseph Goins is the Founder and CEO of Pathway2Careers (P2C), a national education company dedicated to advancing Career-Connected Learning (CCL) across K–12 systems. Under his leadership, P2C has developed a comprehensive model that integrates academic instruction—particularly mathematics—with real-world career applications, helping students see the relevance of their learning and better prepare for postsecondary success.

Dr. Goins has led the expansion of P2C's solutions across multiple states, partnering with state education agencies, districts, and workforce organizations to align education with labor market demand. His work focuses on bridging the gap between classroom instruction and career pathways through innovative curriculum, real-time labor market data tools, and professional development for educators.

A recognized thought leader in career-connected education, Dr. Goins frequently writes and speaks on topics related to workforce readiness, education reform, and the role of relevance in student engagement. His work emphasizes a simple but powerful belief: when education becomes relevant, learners fully engage.

About P2C Research

At Pathway2Careers, we believe that when education becomes relevant, learners fully engage. Our mission is straightforward: revolutionize education by challenging the current approach and motivating student learning through career-connected relevance. This mission drives our vision of improving students' prospects by connecting the time and energy they spend in the classroom with meaningful career paths. In doing so, we aim to transform not just the future prosperity of individual students, but the economies of entire communities.

What sets P2C apart is our commitment to evidence-based solutions. Every product, resource, and strategy we design is grounded in rigorous research. By uncovering, exploring, and sharing the most timely and relevant findings—and through the insights generated by our in-house research team—we tackle the biggest challenges facing education today. Our approach ensures that the career-connected learning experiences we create are not only innovative but also effective.

Learn more at p2c.org

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