

How to make the right choice when selecting your school's digital learning tool

Teacher opinion, usability and simplicity are all vital when choosing a VLE or LMS



Introduction

The right digital learning tool can have huge implications for any school. Choosing a simple and feature-rich tool can be the perfect complement alongside excellent teaching, but how do you make that right choice?

To find out, we conducted a survey of 127 British international schools around the world to gauge their opinions on learning tools. The results can help you come to a decision for your school compared to how others made theirs. Making the right choice can be a difficult process, but taking time to carry out due diligence and involving the staff who will be using the tool pays off.

The right virtual learning environment (VLE) or learning management system (LMS) can help teachers and senior leadership keep track of notes, plan lessons, manage timetables and correlate reports. They give class teachers a way to keep on top of their work, and share their notes and methods with others. As such, these tools are crucial to the overall learning experience.

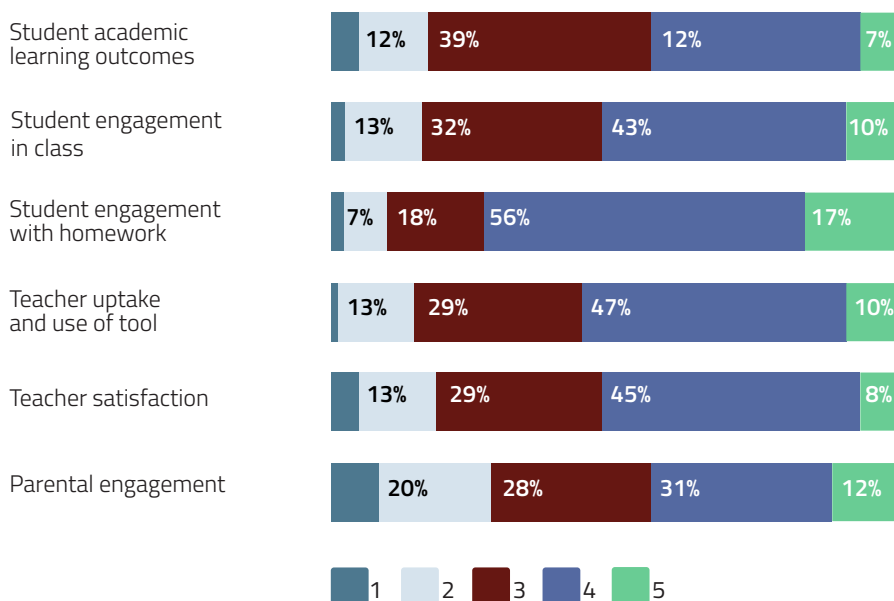
What's most important is deciding if a switch from an inadequate service, or a fresh start, is a good idea. And that all starts with a thorough understanding of what is required from a digital learning platform. Here at Firefly, we aim for our service to address the most relevant needs from teachers, senior leadership, students and parents alike.

Implementing a digital learning platform

In our survey results, we saw the widespread usage of VLEs or LMSs, with 90 percent of schools saying they used them. This highlights how these tools are now the staple of a well-sized school, providing positive outcomes for students, saving teachers admin time and engaging parents.

Across the board, schools said learning platforms benefited student learning and engagement, teacher satisfaction and parental engagement.

Has your teaching and learning platform contributed to improvement in any of the following areas? On a scale of 1 - 5, with 1 for no improvement and 5 for significant improvement.



However, while many schools have seen benefits, some remain reluctant to state there has been an impactful change. For example, a quarter of our respondents ranked the impact of their school's current learning platform as five out of ten or less in our survey.

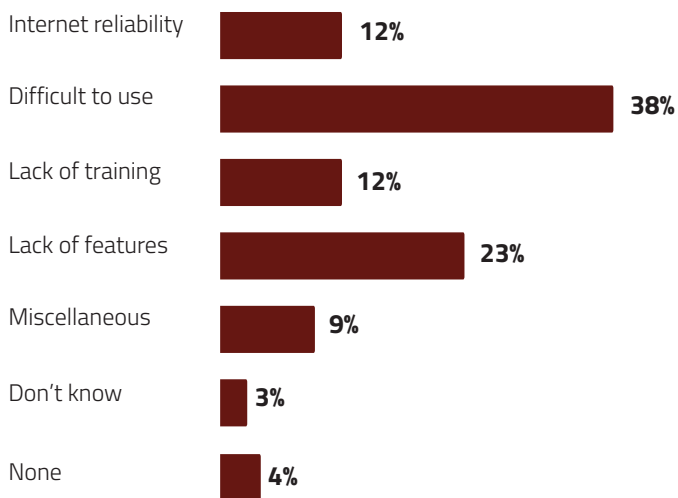
But that may in part be due to the inadequacy of their current systems. As we'll see, schools had numerous complaints with the systems they were using, with issues such as a lack of key features or an overly complicated user interface.

However, one key thing generally agreed upon is that any VLE or LMS used by a school must be intuitive. And for that, usability is hugely important.

Usability is key

There's little doubt that usability is one of the most important factors when it comes to a digital learning tool. More than a third of schools in our survey said their teachers found the platforms too difficult to use, while many also complained about inadequate features and training.

What is the most common complaint from teachers about their current learning platform?



Some of the issues cited were that systems were too clunky and failed to get students to engage. Others said their current VLE or LMS was slow and hard to use, difficult to edit, time-consuming and just not intuitive.

Elsewhere others spoke about a lack of training, or too many features to keep up with. The speed of their school's internet was flagged as a common issue, while others bemoaned a lack of features. "It doesn't do everything I want it to do," said one respondent.

Some also complained about a lack of flexibility, particularly when grading students or providing feedback. And they said their VLE or LMS was poor at setting up new courses or collating existing resources.

These are all issues that we aim to address with Firefly. We provide a wrap-around service, with training and support so that everyone can use it with ease. There's additional CPD accredited top-up training available online through The Lab, something teachers have asked for.



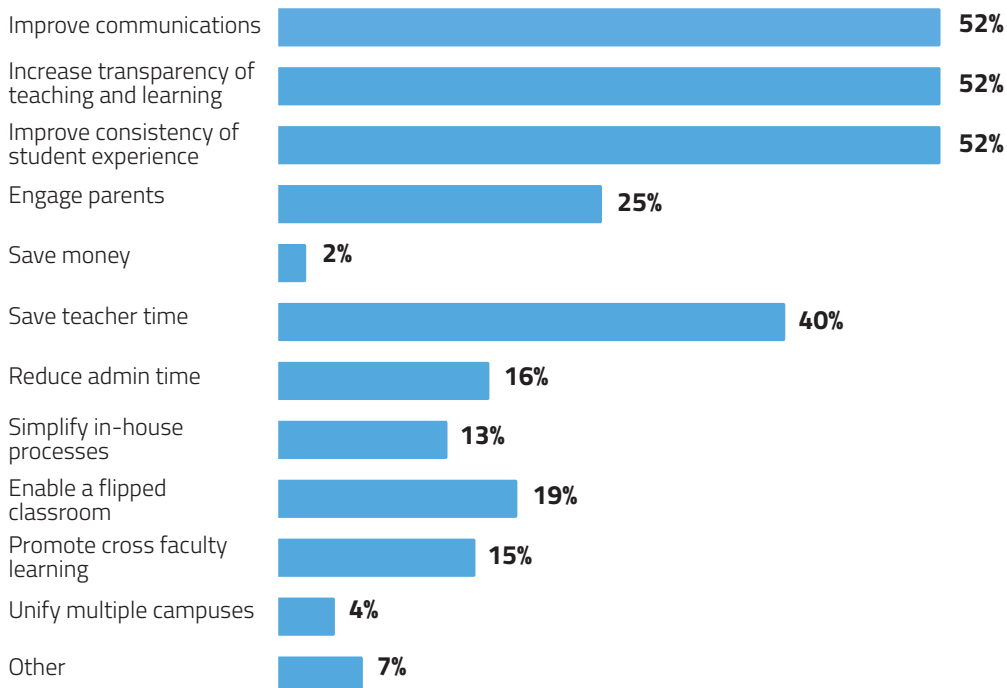
Firefly VLE survey, November 2018

- 71% of respondents agreed the learning platform selected by their school is critical to achieving the school's goals.
- Usability by students (89%) and teachers (87%) are the most important factors when selecting a learning platform.
- However, teachers' most common complaint was their existing platform is difficult to use (38%).

What teachers want

What we have learnt so far is that when designing a VLE or LMS the best thing to do is listen to the teachers themselves. They require a learning platform to achieve a number of key outcomes in order to be effective.

What are the most important outcomes a learning platform needs to achieve?



More than half said they would like their digital learning platform to improve communications, increase transparency of teaching and learning, and provide students with a consistent experience.

Therefore one of the key challenges in picking a VLE or LMS is to find a tool that can be implemented and used by the entire school, with the range of features requested by teachers.

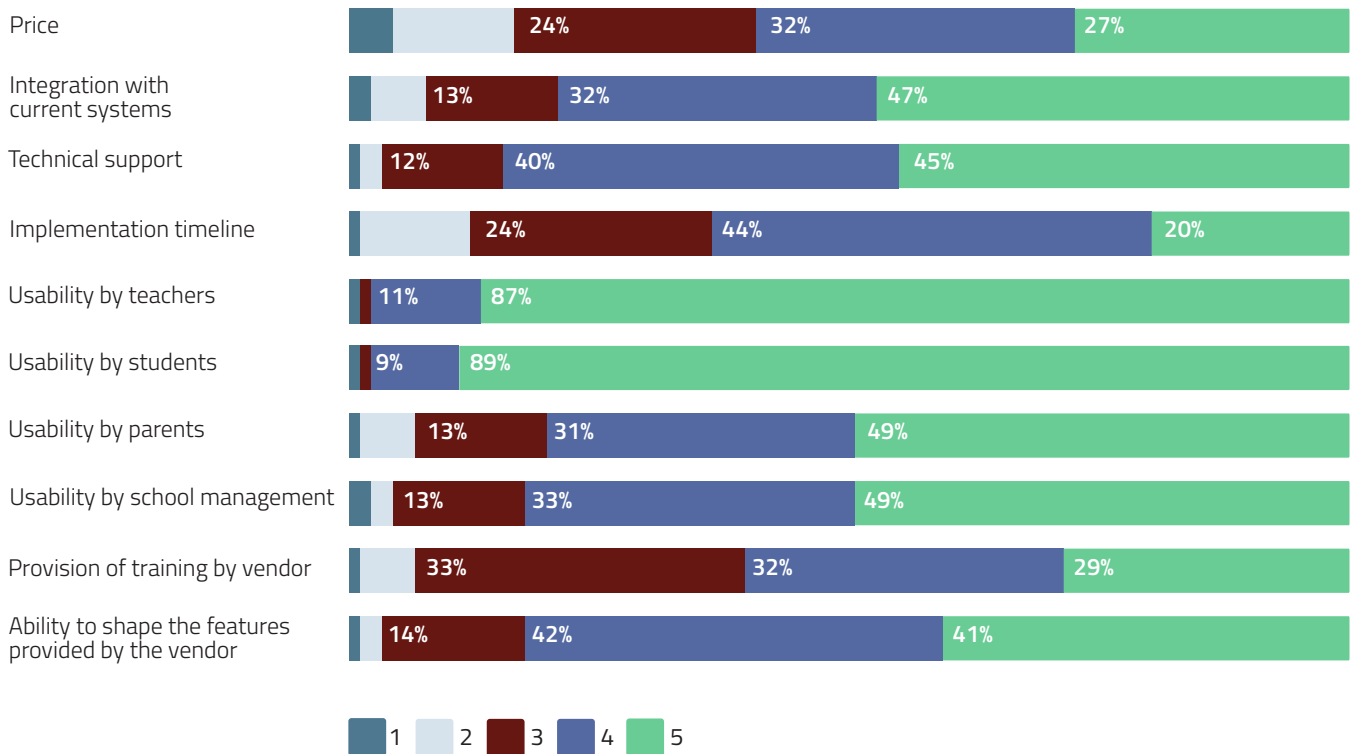
Our survey shows that all schools who have a VLE or LMS agree it's a great tool to have. But the most common complaint is that it's difficult to use, so choosing wisely is vital as more than 50% of our respondents said selecting the right tool was critical to achieving their school's goals.

What teachers want

(continued...)

Schools are at different levels of adoption and sophistication, either because they're still implementing digital learning tools or their chosen tool didn't deliver against expectations. Even when a learning tool is selected, it's important for it to be adopted by teachers across the board, which is why only 2% of respondents said they didn't involve teachers at all in the selection process – teacher opinion is vital.

When selecting a learning platform, how important are the following factors? On a scale of 1 - 5, with 1 for no importance and 5 for significant importance.

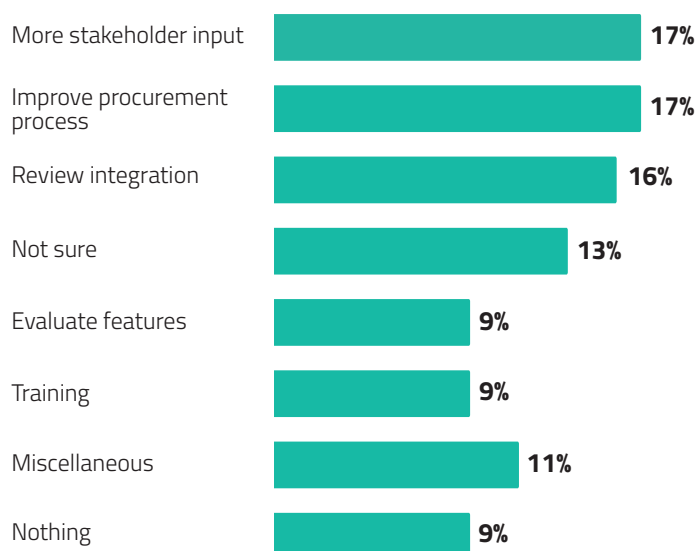


What teachers want

(continued...)

If schools were to rethink their adoption process, they generally had a range of opinions on how that would be done. Some cited the availability of an app as being important, while others said involving representatives from all school stakeholders would be wise. Others said they would focus more on training teachers to use the software, and generally involve more people in the overall decision.

If you were to rethink your edtech strategy, what part of the process would you change?



Conclusion

Our survey results show not only what factors are rated as important in learning platforms, but also how important the selection process can be.

The right VLE or LMS can make teaching easier, more streamlined and more rewarding for students. But switching from an inadequate system can be difficult. So it's important to do as much research as possible when picking your learning platform, whether it's a fresh start or a switch from an inferior tool. Of our respondents, 97% said they found word of mouth recommendations were the most useful for this purpose.

Time Saving Tip:

To shortcut lengthy research periods, senior leadership should look to leading schools to see what they have selected and why.

Connect with colleagues in E-Learning departments in particular, as they can provide insight into how well their tool of choice has supported teaching and learning objectives.



We at Firefly know how difficult it can be to start again. We began as a small company, and needed tools to scale. Sometimes we got it right, and sometimes we didn't – and the effort to replace a tool could cause more pain than savings in the short-term.

So when picking a learning platform for your school, choose well now. Match your strategy, ensure there are no disparate systems and streamline the processes for all.

Most of all, involve teachers in your decision and gauge their opinions. They will be the ones using it day-to-day, so ensure they'll be happy with whatever tool you pick. And if you can make that right choice, then the benefits to your school can be tremendous.

"I would involve staff at all points of the process"



Key findings by numbers



90%

of schools currently use a VLE or LMS



9 out of 10

respondents found word of mouth recommendations the most useful method of finding out about learning platforms



Top 3

challenges teachers face when using a learning platform



Number 1

complaint from teachers about their current learning platform is usability



6 out of 10

schools have a procurement strategy for learning tools



52%

said improving communications, student experience and teaching and learning transparency were the most important outcomes for a learning platform



71%

agreed their chosen learning platform will be critical to achieving school goals



44%

of schools involve students and teachers in the evaluation process



90%

felt their learning tool had contributed to improvements in student engagement with homework

