

Project #2

Title: Buying blind: Understanding the signals districts use to procure AI-enabled edtech and the gap between current practice and evidence of efficacy.

Organization: Gates Foundation

Description: The edtech market has expanded rapidly in recent years, with AI-enabled tools increasingly marketed to K-12 districts as solutions for personalized learning, early warning systems, and instructional support. Yet procurement processes have not kept pace: most districts lack standardized frameworks for evaluating AI tools prior to purchase, and the signals that drive buying decisions — vendor demonstrations, peer referrals, cost, and brand recognition — are rarely anchored to independent evidence of student outcomes. Emerging efforts such as the EDSAFE AI Alliance, the CoSN AI procurement toolkit, and ISTE's AI standards represent early attempts to establish common evaluation criteria, but adoption remains uneven and their relationship to actual district procurement behavior is largely uncharted. Given the absence of transparent, comparable pre-market evaluation infrastructure for AI edtech, and the risk that poorly aligned procurement signals may entrench inequitable or ineffective tools at scale, we seek a SREE fellow to examine how procurement signals currently function in practice and what the existing literature suggests about closing the gap between common practice and evidence of efficacy. The fellow will conduct a structured literature review drawing on procurement research, edtech efficacy studies, and market accountability frameworks, supplemented by a small number of interviews with district procurement leads to validate and contextualize findings. Key questions include: - What signals do U.S. K-12 district leaders most commonly rely on when procuring AI-enabled edtech tools, and what does the literature reveal about which institutional or capacity-related factors shape which signals carry the most weight? - How do the most commonly used procurement signals compare to available evidence on what actually predicts meaningful learning outcomes, and where are the most consequential gaps? - What does the literature suggest about conditions under which procurement practices have successfully shifted toward more evidence-aligned approaches, and what are the implications for how standards-setting bodies and funders might accelerate that shift?