

Executive Summary

Teacher Demand for Digital Courseware A Report on the Teacher Wallets Program

October, 2014

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During the 2013-14 academic year, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, DonorsChoose and Digital Promise provided over 300 K–8 teachers nationwide with up to \$6,000 each for the purchase of digital courseware in core content areas. Participating teachers were from four districts within the League of Innovative Schools. The Teacher Wallets pilot program allowed teachers to make their own budget and purchasing decisions about instructional technologies.

SRI was the research partner on the project, studying participation to better understand teacher decision-making, the effectiveness of a direct-to-teacher approach to courseware procurement, and factors that influence choices under the direct-to-teacher approach. Throughout the program, SRI analyzed courseware selections made by participating teachers as well as information and feedback from teachers and administrators to better understand how teachers find, evaluate, and implement digital courseware in their classrooms.

Key Findings

Findings and analysis approaches in this study were developed using principles from the field of behavioral economics, which provides models for consumer choice beyond strict rational calculations of cost and benefit. Behavioral economics outlines a set of additional factors such as biases, social influences from peers, and market inefficiencies such as information imbalances that influence the choices people make.

Teacher Decision-Making

The study revealed several common patterns in teacher decision-making across the participating districts:

- The majority of teachers who made purchases (61%) reported that they did not already have courseware in mind at the start of the project and they made their courseware selections after being awarded a wallet. It took teachers a long time (71 days on average) to make their first courseware requests.
- Many teachers were not accustomed to having control over budgets and regarded the opportunity as an important responsibility. Specifically, many teachers voiced a sense of responsibility related to factors such as equity and fairness, seeking the best product for meeting the needs of all students.
- Considerations that were important to teachers as they made their selections included student engagement, personalizing experiences for different students, addressing specific content (specifically the Common Core state standards), and integration with other aspects of instruction. Teachers sought courseware to enrich instruction for higher-achieving students and provide remediation for lower-achieving students.
- Across all four districts, teachers agreed that peers were their most important information source for learning about courseware options and materials in general. Teachers also named other personal connections, personal experience (e.g. prior use of courseware), school and district administrators, web sites, trial software, and courseware vendors as common information sources.
- Several teachers found ways to involve their K-8 students in their choice. Some teachers used trial software with students. Some requested direct input from students.
- Though the Teacher Wallet budgets were under teacher control, administrators played a role in shaping teacher selections. In many cases teachers turned to administrators for advice. In some schools and districts, administrators also made formal recommendations or set guidelines for selections.

Effectiveness of the direct-to-teacher approach

Overall, teachers made 1291 purchases of 198 unique products. One third of the purchases (425 purchases) were of the 15 most popular products.

- Two thirds of the products purchased (134 products) were purchased by only one or two teachers revealing the wide range of choices available in the K-8 courseware marketplace.
- Teachers who made purchases in the program spent an average of \$3,423 of their average wallet award of \$5,325. Teachers in the districts we studied were in many cases adding to digital courseware that the district had already provided, but addressing needs specific to their classrooms and students.
- Teachers reported a wide range of uses for courseware in their classrooms and benefits of using courseware. Some made purchases thinking of the needs of particular groups of students, other courseware was meant to fill a particular instructional need such as providing practice, introducing new content, or increasing engagement of learners.
- Regular access to hardware was a barrier for some teachers further complicated by the fact that teachers did not always know their level of hardware access at the start of the school year. This made it difficult for some teachers to identify courseware that they could use.
- Using digital courseware fully takes time and training. Teachers cannot use the all relevant features of complex courseware and plan lessons incorporating courseware without committing time to the process. This includes looking at student's data from the courseware and adapting instruction.
- Though teachers gave mixed feedback concerning their level of access to information, teacher interviewees (responding later in the year) and researchers reviewing the web sites of courseware vendors found that comparative information about features, quality, and cost was sometimes difficult to find.

Factors that influence choices

Some aspects of teacher choice were correlated with circumstances related to the teaching assignment and collaborations within the school sites.

- Individual teachers made purchases using their wallet funds at a higher rate than their peers making selections with a group. Nine in 10 teachers who applied as individuals spent their wallet, as opposed to 7 in 10 teachers who applied in groups. Teachers purchasing in groups bought more core courseware while teachers making choices on their own bought more supplemental material.

- In addition to differences in purchasing behavior between individual and group teachers, there were some differences correlated with other teacher characteristics including grade level, subject, experience and access to technology.

Our findings overall suggest that there is a unique role for teacher-purchased courseware to meet specialized needs of students and supplement district-provided curriculum, to experiment in ways that districts may not be able to, and to explore preferred or recommended courseware. However, teachers need quality, succinct information to make purchasing choices as well as time to learn to use all of the features of the courseware they purchase.

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