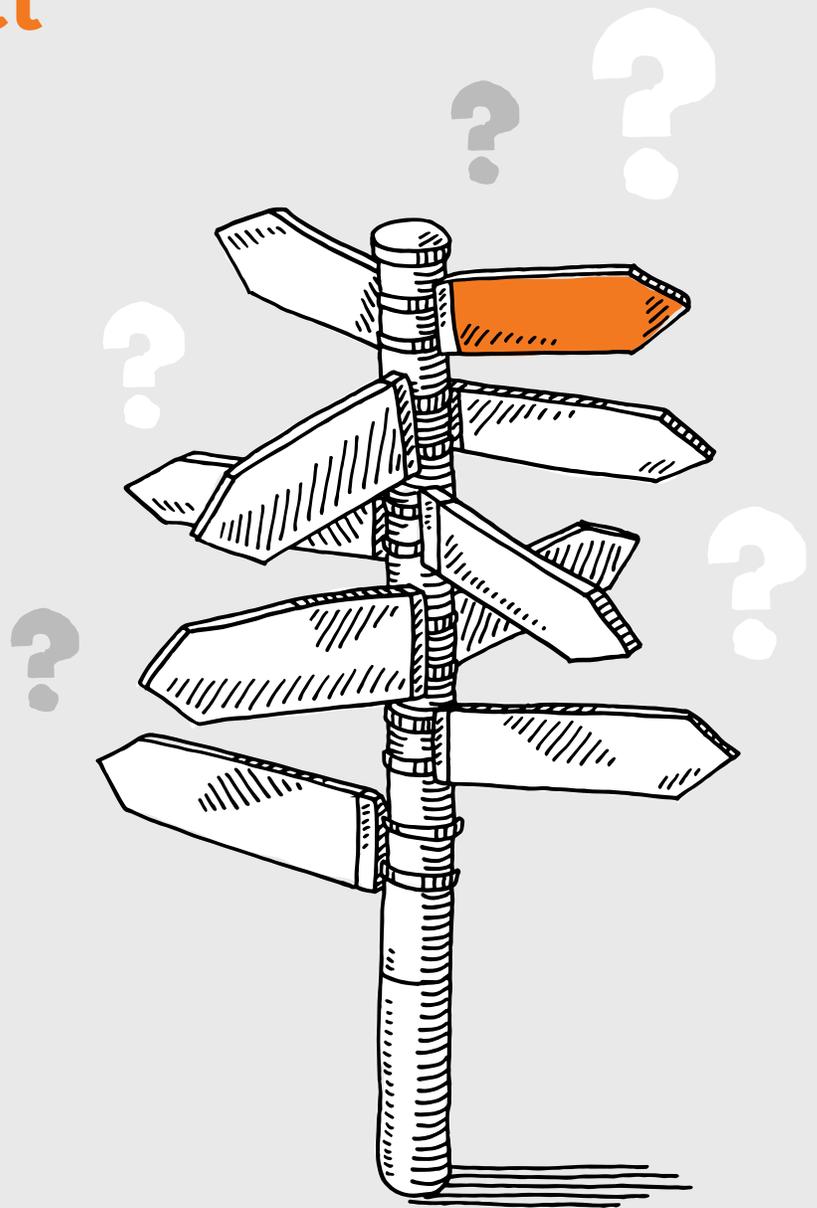


How to Choose the Best LMS for Your District

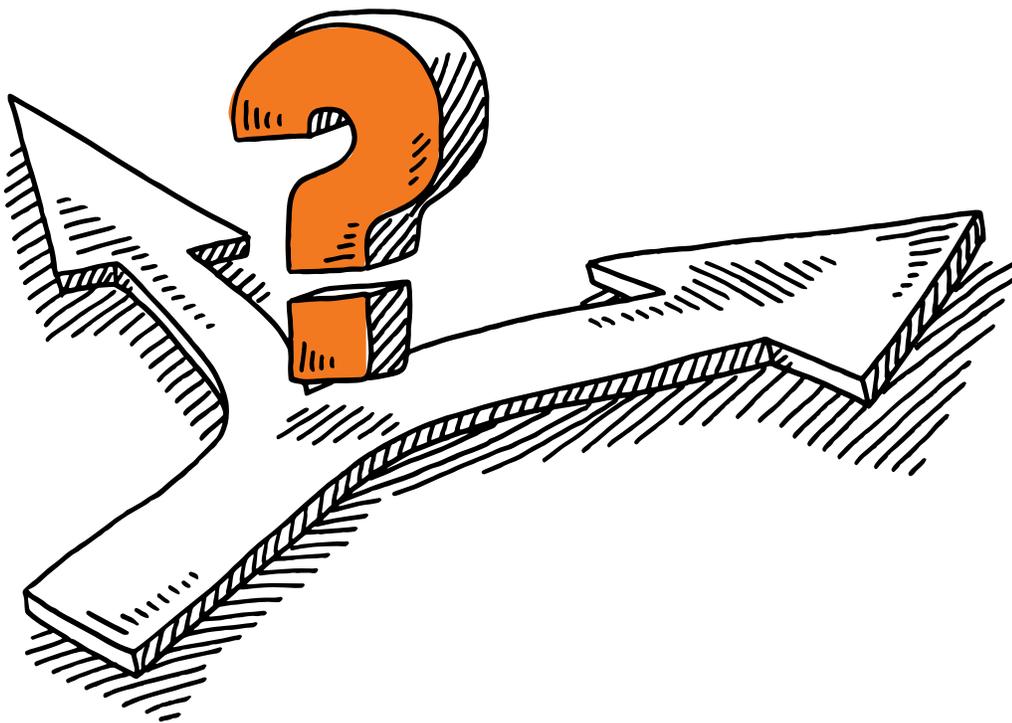


How to Choose the Best LMS for Your District

As the core instructional platform for a school or district, a learning management system (LMS) is fundamental to supporting high-quality teaching and learning. Therefore, it's critical that K-12 leaders choose the right solution for their schools.

An LMS that fully supports a district's instructional goals allows teachers and administrators to prepare their students, classrooms, and schools for future success—but the wrong LMS can set back a school system's digital transformation for years.

With so many learning management systems available, how can K-12 leaders choose the best solution for their institution? This decision support guide will offer sound advice and proven best practices for how to choose an LMS effectively.





K-12 Leaders Must Think Strategically

When instructional technology programs fail to gain traction, often it's because leaders haven't thought strategically about the initiative and its goals.

For instance, maybe they chose an LMS simply because it was free. They didn't take the time to consider how well it would meet their long-term needs. Perhaps they chose a system based on a recommendation from another district, but that district's needs were very different from their own. Maybe they chose an LMS that was already being used by a large number of individual teachers in their district, but the system wasn't designed for full-scale enterprise use.

K-12 leaders must make sure that there is close alignment between the district's instructional goals and the capabilities of the LMS they choose. If this alignment exists, then the LMS can become a powerful tool to support personalized, standards-based, and data-driven instruction throughout the district. But if this alignment doesn't exist, the LMS will not be used—and the school district's digital transformation will fail.

"We continue to encounter districts with furtive, incomplete LMS migration projects where the product was purchased and deployed, yet two to three years later, only 10-15% of the population is using it. This common scenario results from projects that are highly centrally driven and are flung out across the district without strategic planning or focused purpose. The 'if you build it, they will come' philosophy almost universally fails in K-12."

Kelly J. Calhoun
Research Director for Gartner's K-12 Education Division

Successfully choosing an LMS involves many steps. Ideally, the process should begin up to two years before full implementation for most districts. This timetable will give K-12 leaders enough time to implement the system properly. Smaller districts and individual schools may be able to achieve full implementation in less time.

Here are five key steps in choosing the right LMS for your schools



Assemble a Team

Your learning management system will be used by a wide range of stakeholder groups, including curriculum specialists, IT personnel, principals, teachers, parents, and students. Your selection team should include representatives from all of these stakeholder groups. Creating a comprehensive team will ensure that each group's interests and perspectives are reflected in the selection process. A solid team will help accomplish two things— (1) choosing the selected product as a team will meet the needs of all stakeholders and (2) including the team in the selection process will earn their buy-in and support.

When stakeholders agree with the choice you have made, they're more apt to adopt the system right away—and that's more likely to happen when you have more than one person or a small group of people making the decision.



Define Your Goals

What do you want instruction to look like in your district? What do you want teachers and students to be able to do? Your choice of LMS should be driven by the instructional goals you have for your district. Therefore it's critical that you define these goals at the outset of the process.

“ When defining your goals and planning your needs, it's important to think not just strategically but also systemically. The need to aggregate, analyze, report, secure, manage, and leverage the data generated in today's far more digital classroom has driven the need to invest in solutions that will benefit the whole organization.”

Kelly J. Calhoun
Research Director for Gartner's K-12 Education Division



Conduct a Needs Assessment

Once you have defined your goals, you can begin to describe what you're looking for in a learning management system.

- How can an LMS help you reach these goals?
- What features are critical in supporting your vision for instruction?
- What features aren't critical but would be nice to have?

For instance, if one of your goals is to modernize your curriculum and pedagogy, you will want to choose an LMS that can align your curriculum across the district and help you personalize instruction. If data-driven instruction is a goal, you will want an LMS that includes learning analytics to help teachers group students appropriately and plan their instruction. If you want teachers to learn from each other across your district, then you should choose an LMS that makes it easy for teachers to share lessons and collaborate online.



Evaluate Products

Once you have outlined your needs, it's time to evaluate solutions that can meet these needs. This might involve drafting a Request for Proposals (RFP), inviting LMS providers to your district to give presentations, and visiting reference sites to talk with other districts using the solutions.



Choose a Solution

If you have taken the time to define your goals and your needs, included representatives from all stakeholder groups in your selection process, and have done your due diligence in evaluating all of your possible solutions, you have laid the foundation for successfully choosing an LMS to support your digital transformation. But the process doesn't end here—throughout the implementation phase and beyond, continue to evaluate the system you have chosen to make sure it meets your needs.

Beyond Costs and Features: *Five Key Factors to Consider*

As you evaluate learning management systems that can help you meet your instructional goals, you'll find a wide range of options available. These options include free systems with basic functionality, hybrid systems where you can pay more for additional features, open-source systems without licensing fees, and enterprise-level systems that include full service and support. While free and open-source systems might seem attractive to school systems with limited budgets, it's important to understand the total cost of ownership involved in adopting an LMS.

K-12 leaders should consider not only the up-front cost of the software, but also the costs involved in rolling it out for an entire district. These costs could include training staff to use the LMS, making sure it works well with other district software programs, building courses and integrating content from publishers, and supporting users. When these expenses are taken into account, you might find there is little difference in cost between a "free" LMS and an enterprise system.

As you consider what features you want in an LMS, pay attention to how the system supports the pedagogical strategies you want to employ in your district. You should also consider whether the LMS will enable teachers to create, deliver, and score standards-based assessments. You also have to take into account if the system will support your district's professional learning goals by giving teachers easy access to professional development resources from a single, central location. Your system should also give teachers the ability to collaborate, share lessons with each other, and engage in other forms of collegial learning. While feature sets are important, they aren't the only significant factors involved in choosing the right LMS for your institution. Here are five other factors to consider.



Usability

K-12 schools won't see widespread adoption of their LMS unless the system is easy to use. How easily can stakeholders accomplish the tasks they will be looking to do? Is it intuitive to create and post assignments, share feedback with students, launch discussions, collaborate with colleagues, and use the system? How much training will these tasks require? One of the key factors to consider is whether the system supports a single sign-on. Can students, teachers, parents, and administrators access all of the tools and content they need from a single login? Will the LMS provide course curriculum and content that is already organized and ready to use?



Reliability

Implementing an LMS requires a significant investment in time and resources. To protect this investment, K-12 leaders should make sure they choose a stable, experienced, and well-respected provider that has been around for a long time and can support their needs well into the future.

"It is important that [the LMS] functions reliably, both in the sense that it does not go down for any length of time and that the provider does not suddenly decide to change business models or cease offering it altogether," Morgan said. *"For both of these reasons, many CIOs are unwilling to trust 'freemium' providers."* Another issue to consider is the longevity of the provider. You should know how long the provider has been in the marketplace. Some LMS companies are start-ups that might not be around for the long run.



Integration

The LMS you choose must be able to integrate with your student information system, instructional software, and other third-party software. To ensure seamless integration with these systems, look for an LMS that supports the Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI) Framework, Common Cartridge, and other industry standards published and maintained by the IMS Global Learning Consortium. You should also consider whether the provider offers content integration services as part of its solution.



Privacy and Security

Learning management systems *"contain a lot of sensitive personal data that is protected in many jurisdictions,"* said Glenda Morgan, another education analyst for Gartner. She also notes, *"Chief information officers at educational institutions want to have the certainty that this data is not being compromised, and is being kept in locations and under conditions allowed by applicable laws and regulations. Most CIOs do not feel that this kind of certainty is provided by free providers."*



Training and Support

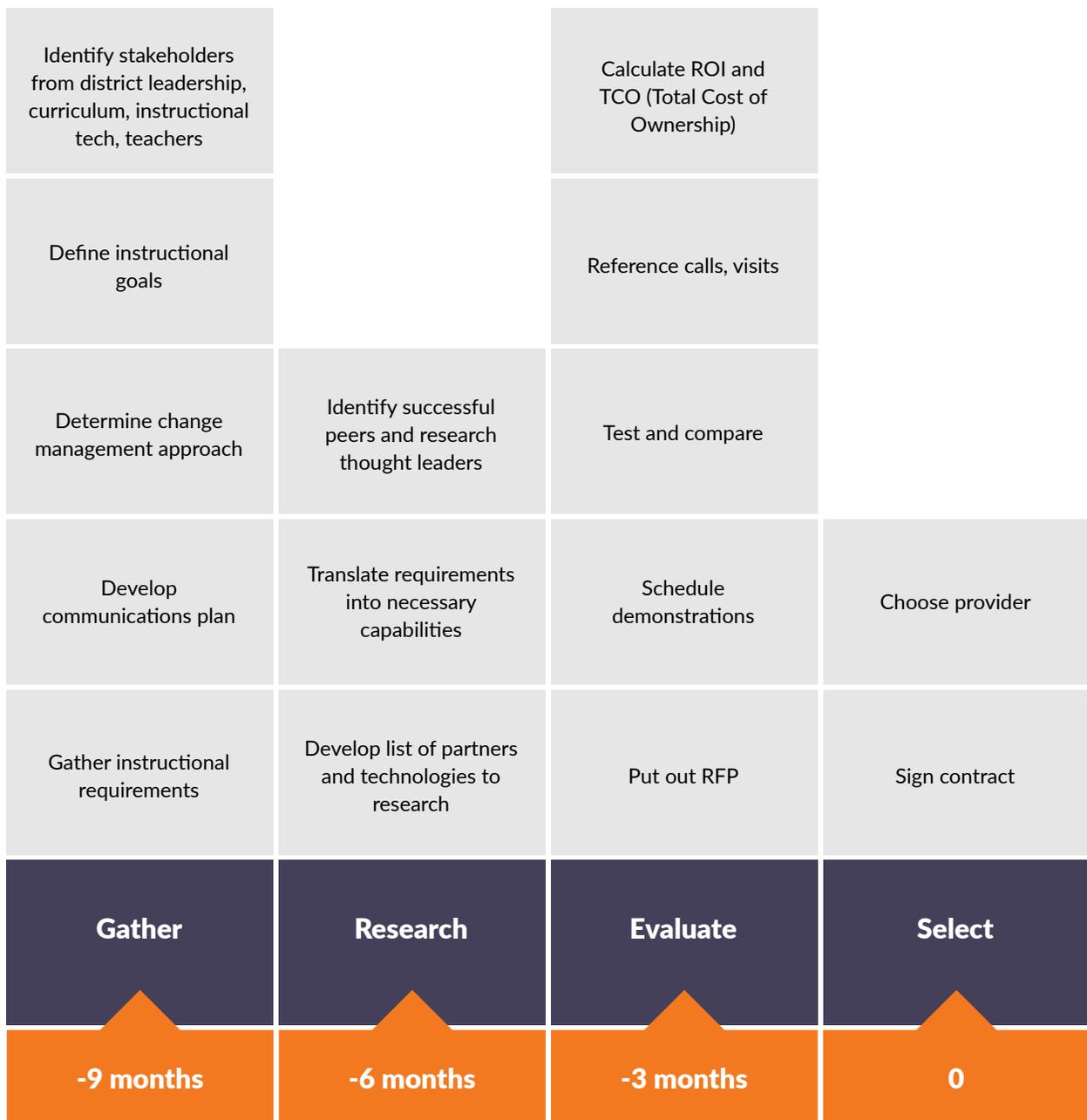
The level of support you receive is integral to the success of your LMS initiative—and it should be a key factor in your decision. Does the provider include support for both end users and system administrators as part of its solution? Is staff training available? Are these services included in the cost of the system? Can the provider help with setting up the system, tailor it to a school district's needs, import course material, and create a digital content repository?

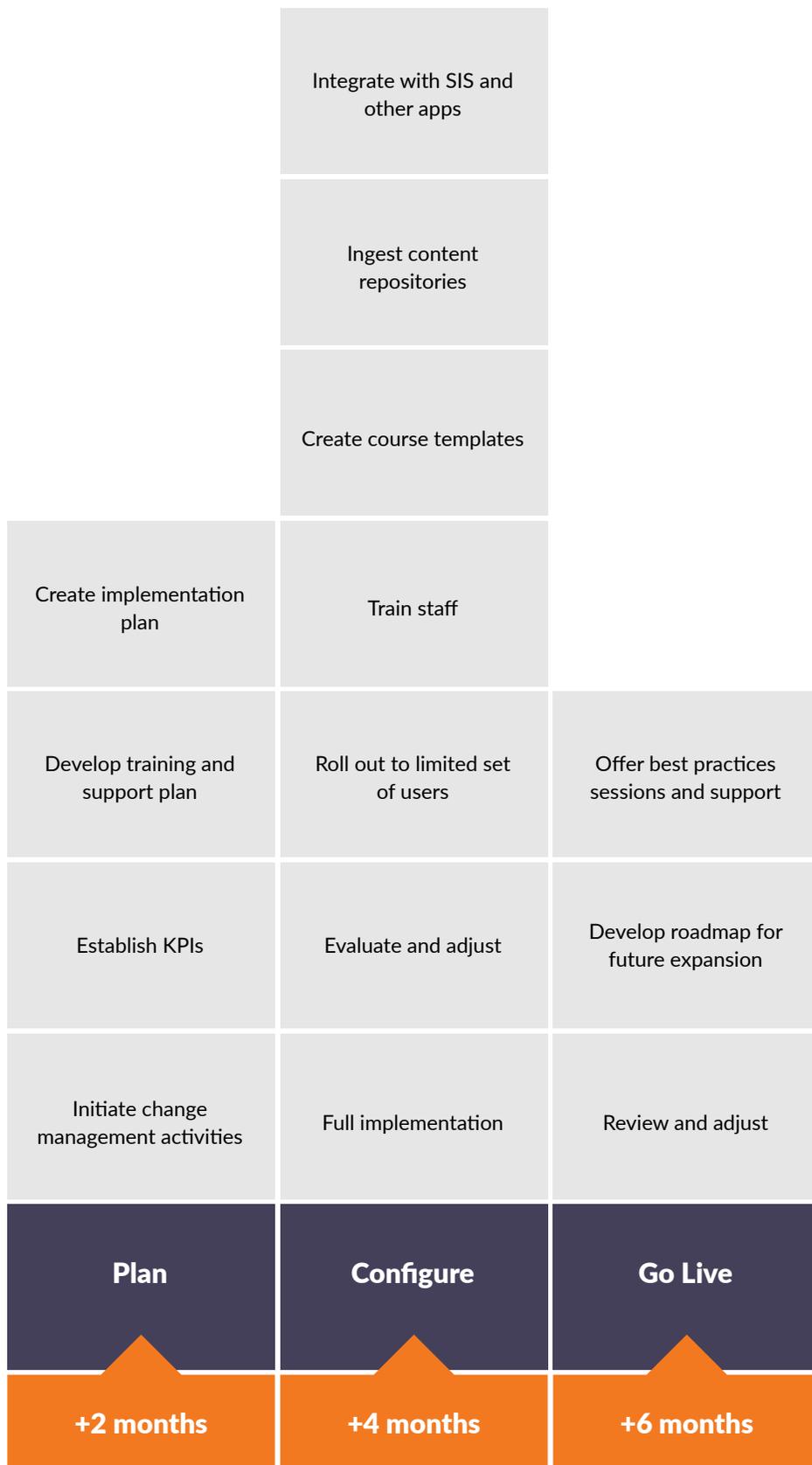
The Bottom Line

Implementing an LMS can be challenging. There is a lot of work involved in setting it up, importing course material, and making sure stakeholders know how to use the system. To ensure the success of your initiative, you might find it beneficial to choose a provider who is a full partner in the initiative, not just a purveyor of software. You should choose someone who can guide you every step of the way toward meeting your instructional goals.

itslearning is such a partner. Trusted by over 7 million teachers and students, itslearning has a single focus: to improve education. Our customer success approach combines leading technology, tailored services, and deep educational expertise.

A timeline for Choosing and Implementing an LMS Successfully





How we can help you...

With itslearning as your partner in digital curriculum management, school districts can extend their investment in existing curriculum resources by streamlining resource management and providing more meaningful and consistent access to instructional materials across the district. To learn more about itslearning for digital curriculum management, visit itslearning.com



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