EdWeek Market Brief

COVID-19 Fueling New B2B Relationships Across K-12 Education Industry

Partnerships and Collaborations Are Opening Doors to Better Meet the Needs of Schools

Brian Bradley
Staff Writer

The recent surge in demand for remote learning, which continues despite some school

returning to in-person lessons, has stoked a desire among K-12 districts for more innovative product delivery.

To address this need and provide a higher level of service for their K-12 clients, companies are turning to business-to-business opportunities to a much greater degree than before COVID struck.

From application programming interface integrations to collaborations between learning management systems and content providers to philanthropic corporate engagement programs, education companies have found that the pandemic has created new opportunities for collaboration with other businesses over the past nine months.

EdWeek Market Brief spoke with several companies about how they have expanded and deepened their work with other businesses during the pandemic.

Many organizations in the education market have formed new B2B relationships for a simple reason: their customers — school districts — are demanding it

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The specific dynamics of B2B relationships differ among companies, but all the companies share at least one thing in common: These growing relationships aim to help K-12 districts and students more competently navigate the unprecedented and uncertain COVID-19 era.

Curriculum, Video, and Students With Disabilities

Bridge Multimedia, which specializes in producing video content for people with disabilities and cognitive differences, has expanded its number of B2B relationships from the pre-COVID number of four, to 14 currently.

The New York City-based company works with curriculum providers in three general ways, depending on client needs.

It produces video content; works with curriculum providers' content development teams to ensure compliance with the latest version of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines — an international standard that strives to make web content accessible to people with disabilities; and implements inclusive curricular and event-based streaming content that meets the "cognitive and sensory needs of all participants," said CEO Matt Kaplowitz.

Kaplowitz said his company is seeing a lot more interest lately, largely from curriculum developers looking for answers as to how to provide their content in more remote environments and for people with special needs and disabilities such as hearing loss and vision loss.

Companies seek out Bridge Multimedia because the switch to remote learning has driven curriculum providers to seek out engaging and effective remote content, and because it is an established player in the video education market, especially for students with special needs, Kaplowitz said.

Educators with backgrounds in neuroscience, accessible math, accessible science, and other STEM fields are advising Bridge Multimedia how to craft effective content for a more digital environment, as Bridge looks to help partners build out more engaging learning products, Kaplowitz said.

Digital curriculum providers commonly use text-to-speech and speech-to-text platforms, which generally carry a relatively high inaccuracy rate, Kaplowitz said. Bridge Multimedia is working to develop app extensions to raise the accuracy of these platforms through artificial intelligence and machine learning, he added.

In addition, Bridge Multimedia is trying to create innovative ways to present textbooks for clients like Amnet, an India-based publisher.

Parent Communication Platform

Remind is one of several companies that has been working more closely than ever with Big Tech companies–such as Microsoft, Google, and Zoom–to find better ways to serve students and families in remote environments.

"When distance learning became the new norm back in April, May, June, a lot of the educators were coming to us and asking for integrations with either Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Google Meet," said Brian Grey, CEO of Remind, a parent-school communication platform. "So, we very quickly built out those integrations."

Remind significantly accelerated its video integrations with Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom since COVID started, because those platforms are core to how students and teachers interact, Grey said.

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Brian Grey, CEO, Remind

"They found it really beneficial to have access to those services inside of Remind and through Remind," he said.

One recent ed-tech trend that Remind is taking advantage of is that major video platforms are allowing other software platforms to embed their services for free, he said.

Remind has no paid commercial relationship with the videoconferencing platforms it works with; it has integrated their publicly available APIs (Application Programming Interface) into its own platform.

Remind has also integrated Canvas and Schoology learning management systems into its app. School districts must pay for the version of Remind that incorporates these systems, but Remind has no business relationship with Instructure or PowerSchool, the respective parent companies for the LMS providers.

Basic integrations for Remind are relatively lightweight, Grey said. If content providers have already enabled "share on Facebook" or "share on Google Classroom" functionality, it's simple for them to add "share on Remind" functionality, he said.

But "composer integrations," which involve integrations of Remind's and other companies' APIs, are a little more complex, Grey said.

Remind's API engineers have been working with other companies to ensure comprehensive and seamless composer integrations. That's part of an effort to allow Remind users to browse and select content from other accounts and share this content when they compose messages to send to other Remind users, including students, parents, and classes, he said.

The composer integrations allow educators to use videoconferencing services like Zoom inside of Remind, if they're already using Remind as their communication channel, Grey said.

Since COVID started, Remind has seen the combined number of its basic and composer integrations rise from six to 30, he said.

Integration Within a Learning Management System

Instructure, a large education company that operates the Canvas learning

management system, has struck 90 new collaborative relationships with other businesses since March, bringing the company's total number of B2B relationships to over 600, according to spokesperson Cory Edwards.

Since COVID-19 started, Edwards said there's been new demand from school districts and companies for more variety embedded in Canvas LMS in terms of tech tools that students, educators, and families can use.

"More students online means more need for these smaller companies to partner with the LMS," Edwards said.

Smaller content providers usually integrate with Canvas LMS via IMS Global's Learning Tools Interoperability interface, a standards framework for integrating learning management systems with learning applications, he said.`

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Cory Edwards, spokesman, Instructure

Microsoft Teams' integration with Canvas has paved a way for that LMS to provide students with better services in a remote environment, said Trenton Goble, vice president of K-12 strategy for the Canvas business line.

"During COVID, one of the big efficiencies has really been around that ability not to have students have to go 12 different places to sign into different applications," said Goble. The goal is to allow them "do all of that through one system."

Canvas LMS is an open platform, meaning that there is no charge for ed-tech vendors who want to integrate with the system.

Diversifying a B2B Portfolio

PowerSchool says it has maintained around 100 strategic collaborations with other companies since the pandemic started. COVID-19 has also prompted the company to forge new agreements with other vendors focused on new needs, one of which is social and emotional learning, or SEL.

PowerSchool sought the expertise of Kickboard, a behavior management software product, to identify students' SEL needs through assessments and surveys, said PowerSchool Chief Product Officer Marcy Daniel.

COVID-19 has also driven PowerSchool to develop assessments of learning gaps, working alongside other K-12 vendors, as well as to embed more professional learning content for educators—such as Learning Tree—into PowerSchool's Performance Matters Assessment and Unified Talent Professional Learning products, Daniel said.

The Folsom, Calif.-based company is also responding to social and emotional health needs wrought by the pandemic to screen students and faculty for the coronavirus, working alongside Rave Public Safety, with which PowerSchool already had an existing integration on a messaging product, said Alan Taylor, senior vice president for corporate development.

As part of that arrangement, PowerSchool is repurposing contact information from its student information system to enable the ability to reach out to students and faculty to ask questions about whether they may have been exposed to the virus, Taylor said.

PowerSchool is working with Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and WebEx to allow students and teachers to easily access the videoconferencing platforms from its Schoology learning management system, Daniel said.

In most cases that involve integration of videoconferencing platforms, there is no financial relationship, as most of these platforms have been providing free K-12 educational solutions during this time, including API integrations, Taylor said.

These relationships can take many forms, including strategic reseller engagements where PowerSchool account managers sell products incorporating integrated content on behalf of the companies they collaborate with, and technology relationships where PowerSchool works with the other company to build integrations between their respective solutions, according to Taylor.

PowerSchool also has some referral agreements with other companies, through which it refers K-12 districts to explore the products of the companies it collaborates with.

New Partnerships for Virtual Mentoring

Strive for College, which provides a virtual mentoring platform for underserved high school students aspiring to attend college, is in the process of sealing five more corporate partnerships, which would bring its total to 17.

The company enters into B2B relationships with corporations that offer people the ability to serve as a Strive for College virtual mentor, primarily through employee engagement programs, said Strive for College President and CEO Michael Carter.

The partners include the consulting company Deloitte, which since the pandemic started, has had more of its employees participate in its virtual mentoring program than ever before, and expects more employees to sign up in the future, Carter said.

Strive for College also offers virtual mentoring via corporate employee engagement programs with companies including UPS, UBS Bank, Deutsche Bank, EY, Molis and Company, and American Express, through which it offers consumer mentoring as a cardmember benefit, he said.

Corporate partners, including the above-named companies, pay Strive for College for the opportunity to enlist their employees as mentors for underserved aspiring college students, Carter said. In return, Strive for College provides these companies with robust training, data reporting, and user support for the virtual mentoring.

The Milpitas, Calif.-based company aims to have 100 corporate partnerships within the

next few years, said Carter, who acknowledged that figure is ambitious.

"But my hope beyond just those hundred corporate partners as a big audacious goal, is what that represents," he said. "If you had 100 of the biggest companies in the world having their people and their customers mentor, think about how much social capital you could unlock for underserved students to access."

New Digital Whiteboard Integrations

Much like Instructure and PowerSchool, SMART Technologies has tightened its software integrations with Google and Microsoft during the pandemic, said SMART CEO Nicholas Svensson.

SMART makes collaborative learning software, including its SMART Learning Suite, a digital whiteboard.

One of the newest functionalities that SMART has developed is an ability for teachers to access their SMART Learning Suites within Teams, and share the SMART whiteboard and content with others in the Teams meeting, Svensson said.

Based in Calgary, Alberta, SMART recently also entered into strategic collaborations with education single sign-on platforms Classlink and Clever, as well as IMS Global OneRoster, an open standard for sharing class rosters and related data between a student information system and other applications, according to Svensson.

"What happened during COVID was that we [noticed] the teachers needed help," he said. The pandemic "actually validated and accelerated our efforts to get the integrations out more quickly."

Overall, the company has increased its number of business-to-business collaborations by about 30 percent since COVID-19 started, and now has over 30 partners, Svensson said.

This year, SMART has initiated new content collaborations with math gaming providers

Arcademics and Zapzapmath; kidsplainer video products It's AumSum Time, Dr. Binocs, and Crash Course Kids; as well as science video brands SciShow Kids, Chem Teacher Phil, and That's Amazing!, according to the company.

Some of these brands are integrated into the SMART Learning Suite, and others are being integrated within Fronterra, a product created with families in mind that is still under development, the company said.

SMART asked its end-users what systems and platforms they use online, and that information has informed the integrations that SMART has pursued, Svensson said.

"They're now in a situation where they need to use [new technologies], and they're very receptive to hearing and very receptive to providing good feedback on what they need," Svensson said. "It's a very positive time to be in this space for the wrong reasons, of course. But we're getting a lot of very good feedback from our user base."

See also:

- How Three Different Education Companies Have Pivoted During COVID
- How to Move from a K-12 'Vendor' to Trusted School District Partner
- How to Turn Short-Term Business Opportunities Into Long-Term Partnerships

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Tags: Business Strategy, Coronavirus, Educational Technology/Ed-Tech, Innovation, Learning Management / Student Information Systems, Online / Virtual Learning, Software / Hardware

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