SETDA

LEADERSHIP • TECHNOLOGY • INNOVATION • LEARNING

Easing the Burden on Schools

Integrating the Five EdTech Quality Indicators Into State Procurement Processes

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Introduction

The rapid increase in the availability of educational technology (edtech) tools, especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, has created both opportunities and challenges. Data from Instructure shows that the average number of edtech tools that each district accessed skyrocketed from 841 in 2018–2019 to 2,739 in 2023–2024. This trend is even more pronounced in states like Connecticut, which noted a rise from approximately 3,300 tools pre-pandemic to 6,300.

While this surge in edtech has enabled more innovative approaches to teaching and learning, it has also presented districts—especially smaller or rural ones—with the daunting task of vetting and selecting tools that are both effective and necessary. The Bipartisan House Task Force on Artificial Intelligence recognizes that "[s]tate education agencies and school districts often go through time- and energy intensive efforts to choose products for their school systems." Smaller districts, in particular, often struggle to find the capacity to internally evaluate the usefulness of new tools, leading to potential purchases of redundant or unused products and further straining already tight budgets.

In response, SETDA has partnered with leading edtech nonprofit organizations to address these concerns and ease the burden of evaluating and vetting edtech applications and products. Seven key organizations—1EdTech, CAST, Consortium for School Networking (CoSN), Digital Promise, InnovateEDU, ISTE+ASCD, and SETDA—formed the EdTech Quality Collaborative and have jointly developed five Edtech Quality Indicators. These indicators serve as a framework for evaluating and procuring effective edtech tools. As part of this collaboration, SETDA committed to developing sample request for proposal (RFP) language, enabling state procurement processes to align with these indicators.

How to Use This Resource

This resource is designed to guide state K–12 education leaders in selecting high-quality edtech products. Recognizing that procurement practices and policies vary widely across states—and that in many states, the ultimate decision-making authority falls onto districts and/or various purchasing consortia—this does not provide a one-size-fits-all model RFP. Instead, it offers adaptable questions that state leaders, industry partners, and affiliate organizations in the SETDA State Action Committee have co-designed, which procurement leaders can incorporate into different policies, processes, RFPs, or state-level guidance and support tools (see "Examples of Leadership").

These questions are aimed to support leaders during their interactions with edtech providers —whether for assessment tools, curriculum management, instructional support, special needs education, or wellness resources. School leaders are encouraged to select the indicators and questions that best suit their unique contexts and the specific provider they are working with. This approach can foster cross-agency collaboration, inviting input from experts outside the procurement office, such as specialists in special education, to ensure that products are inclusive and accessible.

Throughout this resource, third-party validators and pledges provided by various organizations are highlighted as potential resources to help make informed decisions. While SETDA does not endorse any specific validator or pledge, these tools can provide valuable "look-fors" when evaluating potential products. However, SETDA cautions users that while signing a pledge signals a provider's commitment to an edtech quality indicator, a demonstrated track record or third-party validation is a stronger signal of product quality.

This resource concludes with several stories of states that have taken steps to develop specific initiatives to support better edtech procurement. These examples may serve as models for other state leaders as they envision how to best guide district conversations with providers.

Indicator 1: Safe

Edtech products must follow robust data privacy and security measures to protect student and educator data and safeguard against unauthorized access or data breaches. This includes adhering to industry standards and laws to create a secure learning environment and adopting principles of data minimization (only collecting necessary data) and data transparency (users understand which data are collected for what purpose). It is important to note that many states have specific privacy and security laws for the use of edtech and data.

The rise in cyber incidents over recent years has raised concerns among states, districts, and parents. The increased use of edtech, including those powered by artificial intelligence (AI) systems that processes large volumes of data, has only heightened these concerns. Although the federal government and many states have enacted K–12 data privacy laws to address these risks, there remains an ongoing need for careful scrutiny of how data is collected, stored, and used.

Model Questions

- Describe your product's data security measures, consistent with industry standards and best practices, to protect data from unauthorized disclosure, use, acquisition, destruction, and modification—including unauthorized access and use by third-party contractors, service providers, and researchers.

- Describe your product's user authentication mechanisms to prevent unauthorized access (e.g., multifactor authentication).

- Describe how you are ensuring compliance with applicable federal laws and regulations, including the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA), and the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA).

- Describe how you are ensuring compliance with applicable [INSERT STATE AND/OR LOCALITY] laws and regulations, including [INSERT INFORMATION ABOUT STATE AND/OR LOCAL LAWS AND REGULATIONS RELEVANT TO YOUR CONTEXT].

- Describe whether users have the choice for opting out of data transfers to third parties.

- Describe your organization's protocol for elevating and addressing data breach or misuse concerns. Provide at least one example for a response to a data breach incident.

- List any relevant third-party alignments, badges, or certifications.

- List any relevant pledges that your organization has signed, such as the CISA Secure by Design Pledge or the Future of Privacy Forum Student Data Privacy Pledge.

- Describe whether your organization has signed A4L's National Data Privacy Agreement.

Example Third-Party Validators

- The 1EdTech Seal of Data Privacy is awarded once an application's privacy policy and terms of service successfully meet the criteria outlined on the 1EdTech TrustEd Apps Data Privacy Rubric and demonstrate compliance with applicable privacy laws like COPPA, FERPA, and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

- The Common Sense Privacy Rating evaluates solution providers' privacy policies so that parents and teachers can make smart choices about the learning tools they use with their children and students and so that schools and districts can participate in improving the technology used in K–12 classrooms.

- The COPPA Safe Harbor Certification program demonstrates that practices surrounding collection, use, maintenance, and disclosure of personal information from children under age 13 are consistent with principles and requirements of the COPPA.

- The FERPA Certification program demonstrates compliance with FERPA, a federal law that applies to all schools that receive funds from the U.S. Department of Education. It protects the privacy of student education records and allows parents and eligible students certain rights related to review, control, and privacy of those records.

- FEDRAMP (the Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program) is a U.S. government program that standardizes security assessments, authorizations, and monitoring for cloud services and products.

Indicator 2: Evidence-Based

Edtech product design, implementation, and claims of effectiveness need to be grounded in rigorous research and evidence-based practices as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) Tiers of Evidence specifies. Providers should engage in research-driven design, empirical validation, demonstrated effectiveness, and alignment with established educational standards.

Despite the importance of evidence, educators often make decisions based on price or product popularity rather than proven effectiveness for their particular student population. There also may be a lack of internal capacity in some smaller districts to effectively evaluate and implement these tools. While ESSA has placed a strong emphasis on research-based interventions, future changes in legislation could affect these requirements.

Model Questions

- Attach and describe independent research that has been produced about the effectiveness of your product, including any longitudinal impact data, in contexts similar to [INSERT STATE AND/OR LOCALITY].
- Attach and describe any randomized controlled trials, peer-reviewed studies, or quasi-experimental studies your product has undergone. Reference the ESSA Tiers of Evidence in your response.
- Describe the logic model for the outcomes of your product.
- Describe your experience working with specific student populations and contexts that the product aims to address.
- Explain how you will continuously monitor product effectiveness and student growth while balancing this priority with the need for secure access and use of data (see “Safe” indicator listed above).
- Explain how you will go about ensuring mutual accountability for product effectiveness and student growth as well as continuous learning cycles between you and [INSERT STATE AND/OR LOCALITY].
- List any relevant third-party alignments, badges, or certifications.

Example Third-Party Validators[1]

- Organizations that have earned the Digital Promise Research-Based Product (ESSA Tier 4) Certification demonstrate an understanding of and commitment to building upon the foundation of rigorous research on how people learn. The certification also indicates that the solution provider has shared the research that informed its product design and development.

- Organizations that have earned the Digital Promise Evidence-Based Edtech (ESSA Tier 3) Product Certification demonstrate through a well-designed correlational, quasi-experimental, or randomized research study with at least 50 participants that the product has a statistically significant and positive effect on learning.

- Any solution can earn Instructure's ESSA Evidence Badges and equip educators to quickly understand a solution's existing evidence base. The badges are awarded through a rigorous rubric-based process that researchers certified by What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) carry out.

- For more than a decade, the WWC has been a central and trusted source of scientific evidence on education programs, products, practices, and policies. WWC reviews the research, determines which studies meet rigorous standards, and summarizes the findings.

- Organizations that have earned Leanlab's Building Evidence Certification have completed a logic model or theory of change that is based on rigorous research and have a plan or research already underway to study the effects of the edtech product.

- Developed by the Center for Research and Reform in Education at Johns Hopkins University School of Education, Evidence for ESSA identifies programs and practices that meet the ESSA evidence standards.

[1] Some third-party validators evaluate whether the product is developed with an evidence base, while others evaluate its outcomes and impact.

Indicator 3: Inclusive

Edtech products must prioritize accessibility, inclusivity, and equitable design to ensure they are acceptable to learners from diverse backgrounds and with a broad range of learner variability. This includes ensuring edtech products are accessible for all learners, do not promote existing stereotypes, do not create new stereotypes, and do not prevent students from acquiring accurate information because of biased algorithms.

The 2024 National Educational Technology Plan, the U.S. Department of Education's flagship edtech policy document, calls on leaders to both "develop processes and structures that ensure the inclusion of accessibility as a component of procurement processes" and "evaluate edtech tools against the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework as part of the procurement process." UDL is a research-based framework that aims to make learning accessible and effective for all students by reducing barriers and supporting learner variability.

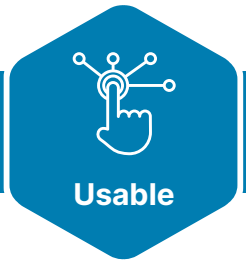
Model Questions

- Describe the specific student population(s) that your product intends to serve.
- Describe the specific size and demographics of student populations you have served, and include information about your work in supporting historically underserved student populations—which may include but are not limited to students of color, Indigenous students, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, English language learners, students with disabilities, students experiencing homelessness, or students from military families.
- If you use AI-powered systems to support your tool, describe what safeguards are in place to mitigate bias and promote ethical uses of AI-generated responses.
- On April 24, 2024, the Federal Register published the U.S. Department of Justice's final rule updating its regulations for Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The rules require, with limited exceptions, for web and mobile applications and content to meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1, Level AA. Describe how you ensure that your product is accessible to students, educators, and/or family members with disabilities.
- Describe features and support available to ensure that the product meets the needs of students with individualized education programs and 504 plans in accordance with their plans and specified accommodations.

- Describe how your product is designed to work with various assistive technologies.
- Provide evidence for the product's alignment to the UDL Guidelines. How does the product demonstrate that its design elements (e.g., user experience (UX) design, instructional design, learning experience design, content, curriculum) align with the UDL Guidelines?
- Describe how your product scaffolds instructional materials to provide all students with full access to the rigorous content without barriers.
- List any relevant third-party alignments, badges, or certifications.

Example Third-Party Validators

- WCAG 2.1 AA standards certification is a way to demonstrate that a website or software is compliant with the WCAG, an international standard for digital accessibility. WCAG certification can help protect against litigation and open access to a website or software to more than 51 million people with disabilities in the U.S.
- Products that have earned the CAST UDL Certification demonstrate that accessibility is prioritized in the product design; that the product has clearly, transparently, and publicly shared its commitment and conformance with WCAG v2.x; and that the product provides transparent communication about accessibility practices and conformance to customers.
- Organizations that have earned a Digital Promise Learner Variability Certification demonstrate an understanding of and commitment to building product features that can meet learners' varying needs. The solution provider can publicly share how the product's design supports variation among learners.
- The Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT) helps determine how well the products meet Section 508 accessibility standards. Many organizations now require the submission of a VPAT in their procurement process, especially if they receive federal funding.
- Products that have earned the ISTE Seal have demonstrated their product helps teachers provide learning experiences relevant to students of many cultures, backgrounds, and abilities, and support learner motivation and agency in the learning process.



Indicator 4: Usable

Edtech products must be designed for educators and students to easily use them to ensure a seamless digital experience. If the product is not easy to use, it creates an unnecessary barrier, and educators and students will struggle to use the tool.

Products that are not intuitive or easy to use can place additional pressure on teachers, particularly in districts where educators already face significant demands on their time or where staff shortages exist. A well-designed product should reduce the need for extensive training and help streamline tasks such as grading, lesson planning, and communication with students.

Model Questions

- Describe how your product helps teachers seamlessly tailor instruction, provide feedback, and assign grades.
- Describe how your product allows students, families, and caregivers to easily and securely access instructional materials and teacher feedback.
- Describe how your product helps multiple teachers collaborate (e.g., co-design instructional activities, view and manage shared students, etc.).
- Describe how the product reinforces development of critical digital skills, such as those outlined in the ISTE Standards for Students.
- Describe how your product helps teachers provide experiences that are responsive to learner variability, thereby building students' motivation and agency.
- Describe how your product uses formative and summative assessments to generate usable and actionable data.
- Describe how your product responds to user feedback (e.g., mechanism for communicating issues and suggestions about the UX/user interface).
- Describe how your product can support learning in different environments, including in-person, hybrid, or virtual settings.

- Describe considerations of an evaluative trial account (e.g., How long are those accounts available, and can a trial account fully test in live user environments? What security and data privacy concerns should users consider during a trial period?).

- List any relevant third-party alignments, badges, or certifications.

Example Third-Party Validators

- The ISTE Seal reviews and recognizes products for their methods and implementation of pedagogical and technological usability with the ISTE Standards. A panel of education and UX experts conduct a rigorous review of products submitted to the program. Resources and products designed with digital pedagogy, technological usability, and the ISTE Standards in mind support critical digital-age learning skills and knowledge.

- Organizations that have earned a Digital Promise Learner Variability Certification demonstrate an understanding of and commitment to building product features that can meet learners' varying needs. The solution provider can publicly share how the product's design supports variation among learners.

- Organizations that have earned Leanlab's Codesign Product Certification have demonstrated an ongoing commitment to the values of codesign, with the product incorporating more than 75% of the recommendations that teachers and students made for product improvements during a codesign research study.

Indicator 5: Interoperable

Edtech products must seamlessly and securely connect to other technologies within a school's digital ecosystem. This is accomplished by adhering to established interoperability standards that ensure secure data exchange and allow for the beneficial aggregation of data to inform instruction and personalize learning.

Project Unicorn defines edtech interoperability as "the seamless, secure, and controlled exchange of data between applications." With both increased demands on teacher time and some districts experiencing staffing and resource shortages in some subject areas, edtech tools must be able to readily aggregate student data in an interoperable manner, allowing teachers to identify gaps and personalize learning experiences. Leaders examining this indicator must make sure to also reference the closely related "Safe" indicator, which discusses considerations for secure data collection and use.

Model Questions

- Describe how your product uniquely identifies individual students.
- Describe how your product transmits data, including export/import formats, application program interface (API) configuration, and the applicable industry standards applied for a safe and secure transfer.
- Describe any limitations on data transmission and reception, including initial import/export.
- Describe your product's ability to safely utilize single sign-on, multifactor authentication and rostering tools or interfaces.
- Describe your product's user-paid costs over the utilization lifespan of the product, including one-time and annual costs (e.g., startup costs, import/export, APIs, customization/development).
- Describe how you assist development of APIs necessary to be interoperable with other products.
- Provide information on learning management systems and student information systems compatible with your product.

- Describe how your organization provides technical support regarding interoperability questions.
- Describe how your organization's products align to applicable K–12 educational data standards.
- List any relevant third-party alignments, badges, or certifications.

Example Third-Party Validators

- 1EdTech Certification indicates that a product has passed rigorous interoperability testing that 1EdTech open standards power. 1EdTech Certification ensures that edtech tools, content, and platforms reliably work together, resulting in time savings, better user experiences, and the widest possible choice of innovative products now and in the future.
- Ed-Fi Validations showcase adherence to standardized use of core elements in the Ed-Fi Data Standard. Certifications are granted to data providers passing rigorous tests for compliance with Ed-Fi data standards and APIs for data exchange in their products. Ed-Fi Badges require vendors to deliver products and services using Ed-Fi best practices.
- The Project Unicorn Interoperability Certification signals that an edtech product prioritizes data interoperability. There are four tiered badges available representing levels of interoperability, with tier 4 equaling the highest adherence to interoperability and security principles.

Examples of Leadership

In recent years, many state-level education leaders have stepped up to ensure that districts consider edtech products that meet many of the quality indicators listed above, especially the "Safe" indicator. Below, SETDA provides examples of those that have developed solutions to support districts in their decision-making. These stories may serve as models for other state leaders that design initiatives to support better edtech procurement.

Connecticut Offers Central Platform to Aggregate Information on Edtech Products

Finding that students and educators were accessing thousands of edtech products in school and at home, Connecticut's Commission for Educational Technology set out to help schools select the most effective ones. The passage of a student data privacy law in 2016, which required providers to meet specific privacy requirements to serve K–12 customers, accelerated the need for action. Therefore, Connecticut developed a state-specific solution in partnership with LearnPlatform, where providers can demonstrate compliance with the law and local leaders can find products that meet this requirement. In addition, the Connecticut Educational Software Hub[2] allows local leaders to easily search products with third-party validations in areas like research and evidence, privacy, digital pedagogy, and interoperability. Furthermore, the Hub provides access to an edtech dashboard for real-time insights on actual product usage. Connecticut found that this Hub is helping local leaders save both time and financial resources that would otherwise be required to vet individual products, saving $1M+ in indirect costs (i.e., staff time) annually. The dashboard enables districts to drop products that they are paying for but not using. Finally, by selecting compliant products from the Hub, districts do not have to create separate agreements with vendors.

Illinois Opens Up Learning Technology Purchasing Program

The Illinois Learning Technology Purchase Program (ILTPP) is a statewide cooperative dedicated to providing schools with access to high-quality, affordable technology and digital learning resources. By leveraging the collective purchasing power of 600+ districts, ILTPP enables schools to procure essential products and services at significantly reduced costs. When Illinois enacted the Student Online Personal Protection Act (SOPPA) in 2021, state policymakers introduced specific measures to safeguard student data and empower parents with greater rights.

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[2] New users will need to create a free account.

Among its requirements, SOPPA mandates that districts ensure providers collecting student information guarantee robust data protection. In response, the Learning Technology Center of Illinois, which oversees ILTPP, required all participating providers who collect student data to adhere to SOPPA standards as a condition of their contracts with ILTPP. ILTPP has positioned itself as a trusted ecosystem for acquiring technology and digital resources. The program has alleviated compliance burdens for districts, ensuring they can focus on teaching and learning while safeguarding student data.

Oregon Publishes Guidance to Support Better-Informed Edtech Procurement

When Congress authorized the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) grant program during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) realized that districts were rapidly adopting digital tools and platforms to accommodate the transition to remote learning. ODE launched a statewide initiative to help local leaders carefully vet claims made by providers. The work resulting from this commitment, including intra-agency dialogue and interviews with dozens of experts, resulted in the "Digital Instructional Materials Toolkit." The resource guides districts through key topics—such as accessibility, cultural responsiveness, interoperability, linguistic diversity, modularity, and student data privacy—ensuring that selected products are not only compliant with relevant federal and state laws, but also are most likely to positively impact student outcomes. By providing rubrics with structured criteria and a glossary of key terms, the toolkit aims to empower local leaders in navigating their options and meet the diverse needs of Oregon students. Through an in-person state tour to disseminate the toolkit, ODE received positive feedback from leaders in smaller, more rural districts who are looking to use the resource to guide their decisions.

Tennessee Educator Organization Provides Student Data Privacy Support

The Tennessee Educational Technology Association (TETA) is a nonprofit organization comprised of educators around the Volunteer State who are committed to supporting the effective edtech implementation in K-12 classrooms. To help Tennessee districts comply with FERPA and applicable state laws, TETA recently joined the Student Data Privacy Consortium (SDPC), supporting members in establishing and maintaining data privacy agreements and safeguarding students' personal information. At no cost to member districts, SDPC provides tools such as standardized agreements, best practices in communicating with providers, and access to an expert community network.

This effort has helped many local leaders, especially those in smaller and more rural districts, save time and financial resources by streamlining the process of identifying and partnering with providers committed to student data privacy. In addition, TETA provides members who want to participate in the consortium with low-cost administrative and legal services necessary to negotiate privacy terms with vendors and secure accurate and complete signed data privacy agreements.

Conclusion

As revealed by SETDA's State EdTech Trends Survey and Report, the accelerated integration of technology in K–12 education—which pandemic-era needs in part drove—has brought unprecedented opportunities and challenges. With the expiration of one-time ESSER funds, many states are increasingly concerned about their edtech initiatives' sustainability. This financial uncertainty highlights the critical importance of making thoughtful and well-informed procurement decisions, particularly as districts face tighter budgets. Ensuring that procured products deliver measurable returns on investment in terms of student outcomes remains a top priority.

Although local education agencies and various purchasing consortia often have the final say in procurement decisions, states play a vital role in providing guidance and resources to support these efforts. States can use this resource as a foundation to aid school districts by developing state libraries of vetted digital tools, template procurement resources, and technical assistance initiatives, helping schools make informed choices about the edtech they adopt. States can furthermore leverage their evaluation authority to collect data on tools that schools deploy and help identify the most impactful products.

Finally, SETDA encourages education leaders to explore additional resources below for a deeper understanding of each of the Edtech Quality Indicators we discussed in this resource. By doing so, decision-makers can be better equipped to select tools that are safe, evidence-based, inclusive, usable, and interoperable—ensuring a positive impact on teaching and learning for all students.

Additional Resources

SETDA encourages education leaders to explore these additional links for a deeper understanding of each of the Edtech Quality Indicators discussed in this resource.

Indicator	Resources
Safe	• 1EdTech: Data Privacy • Future of Privacy Forum: Privacy Pledge • CoSN: K-12 Community Vendor Assessment Tool
Evidence-Based	• U.S. Department of Education: Supporting Schools' Use of Evidence to Guide EdTech Adoption • Southern Education Foundation: Continuous Improvement Guide
Inclusive	• U.S. Department of Justice: New Rule on the Accessibility of Web Content and Mobile Apps Provided by State and Local Governments • Meeting the ADA Title II Web and Mobile Accessibility Requirements: A Roadmap for State and Local Educational Agencies • CAST: The UDL Guidelines
Usable	• ISTE: Teacher Ready Evaluation Tool • Digital Promise: Learner Variability Navigator
Interoperable	• Ed-Fi: Data Interoperability 101 and Why it Matters for Education • Project Unicorn: Interoperability Rubric
Multiple	• Southern Education Foundation: EdTech RFP Template • World Economic Forum: AI Procurement in a Box

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SETDA State Action Committee

- **Dorann Avey**, Nebraska Department of Education
- **Brian Baker**, Oregon Department of Education
- **Andrea Bennett**, California IT in Education
- **Doug Casey**, Connecticut Commission for Educational Technology
- **Jeff Carlson**, Clever
- **John Chadwick**, New Mexico Public Education Department
- **Melinda Fiscus**, Learning Technology Center of Illinois
- **Michael Flood**, ActZero
- **Sue Ellen Gilliland**, Alabama State Department of Education
- **Kevin Ghantous**, Learn21
- **Erich Grauke**, Illinois State Board of Education (State Action Committee Chair)
- **Brad Hagg**, Indiana Department of Education
- **Stacy Hawthorne**, Learn21
- **Andy King**, MOREnet
- **Aaron Marsters**, Department of Defense Education Activity
- **Janice Mertes**, CDW
- **Donna Murray**, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
- **Jill Pierce**, Tennessee Educational Technology Association
- **Steven Priest**, Wyoming Department of Education
- **April Reid**, Identity Automation
- **Diana Smith**, Indiana Department of Education
- **Shannon Terry**, SAFARI Montage
- **Rachel Van Aken**, ClassLink
- **Stephanie Waring**, Five Star Technology Solutions

External Reviewers

- **Erin Dowd,** ISTE+ASCD
- **Tal Havivi,** ISTE+ASCD
- **Brittany Miller,** Center for Outcomes Based Contracting, Southern Education Foundation
- **Erin Mote,** InnovateEDU
- **Sierra Noakes,** Digital Promise
- **Carla Wade,** CoSN

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