Research Brief

Just Stop It!

Superintendents Tell Tech Marketers to Cool It.

NSR

NATIONAL SUPERINTENDENTS ROUNDTABLE

National Superintendents Roundtable

Steering Committee

Susan Enfield, Superintendent, Highline Public Schools, Washington

James Harvey, National Superintendents Roundtable

Gregory C. Hutchings, Jr., Superintendent, Alexandria City Public Schools, Virginia

Gerald Kohn, Former Superintendent, Harrisburg Public Schools, Pennsylvania

Daniel Moirao, Former Superintendent, South Monterey County, California

Matthew L. Montgomery, Superintendent, Revere Local Schools, Ohio

Janet Robinson, Superintendent, Stratford Public Schools, Connecticut

Theresa Rouse, Superintendent, Joliet School. District 86, Illinois

Carla Santorno, Superintendent, Tacoma Public Schools, Washington

National Superintendents Roundtable
9425 35th Avenue, NE, Suite E
Seattle, WA. 98115
206-526-5336
jamesharvey@superintendentsforum.org
www.superintendentsforum.org

Contents

Introduction

Susan Enfield, superintendent of the Highline School District near Seattle, made national news in mid-March by telling education companies aggressively marketing their services to leave educators alone. In a Twitter post she wrote:

It's 9:00 pm & I finally have time to send this message: to every vendor, solution partner, researcher, education advocate, etc. please stop. Just stop. My WA superintendent colleagues and I confronting school closure need to focus on our communities. Let us do our jobs.

Reactions to the statement seemed to indicate Enfield had touched a nerve within the community of school leaders. The Roundtable decided to mount a brief, ten-item online survey from April 20 to May 5, 2020 to probe the issue.

Response Rate

The survey was distributed to 180 current and former superintendents affiliated with the Roundtable and 77 responses were received. When non-superintendents who returned the survey and retired superintendents were eliminated from the respondents, 67 superintendents provided responses from a Roundtable pool of 96 active superintendents (69%). School superintendents who are members of the Roundtable are typically from the East, Midwest, and West coasts; districts in the Plains States, the South and Southwest are probably not represented in these findings.

In terms of district size, the respondents represent a broad cross-section of school districts in the United States (See Table 1), but the respondents are not an ideal sample of the universe of school districts. Mid-sized districts (5,000-9,999 students) are over-represented among respondents as are districts enrolling 1,000-2,499 students. On the other hand, small districts (those enrolling 999 students or fewer) are under-represented.

Table 1
Percentage of School Districts by Student Enrollment, Nationally and Among Respondents to Survey*

Enrollment	25,000 +	10,000-24,999	5,000-9,999	2,500-4,999	1,000-2,499	999 or less
National	2.1%	4.5%	7.7%	13.9%	23.7%	46.7%
Survey	1.4%	4.5%	17.9%	14.9%	35.8%	25.4%

With those consideration in mind, we turn to the findings.

* Figures on enrollment by district size nationally are found in the *Digest of Education Statistics, 2017* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics), Table 214.20. The data represent school enrollment in 2015-16.

Overview

Responses from superintendents reveal a deep vein of irritation and discontent with marketing campaigns aimed at them and their districts amidst the national COVID-19 pandemic. This irritation is accompanied by questions about vendors' motives and intentions.

Superintendents report that they are not the appropriate contact for marketing campaigns, and they have very mixed feelings about their dealings with vendors. What they most want, they report, is to be left alone in the middle of this crisis. They worry that unvalidated products are being marketed, even if free, to parents and teachers—and that offers of free products will distract from the district's mission and turn out, ultimately, to be expensive. They report that the most critical solutions they require from vendors lie in professional development, followed by intervention tools and supplemental curriculum. Some of the comments backing up the data from superintendents are scathing:

"I delete everything I receive."

"Too many emails from every Tom, Dick, and Harry who has the silver bullet to help!"

"Ridiculous amounts of email saying they are here to help when they are really just trying to sell."

"Vendors are trying to sell regardless of quality and giving away freebees only to set the hook later."

One superintendent expressed delight on receiving the survey. "I thought I was the only one annoyed by this."

In an ideal world, digital tools put the globe and its knowledge at students' fingertips; in reality, many students lack access to essential digital tools

Findings

Appropriate Contact

While a substantial minority of superintendents report they are the correct contact person for vendors, more than half (54%) disagree (Figure 1).

Comments around this question almost invariably pointed to a district technology officer who better understands available products, services, and network complications.
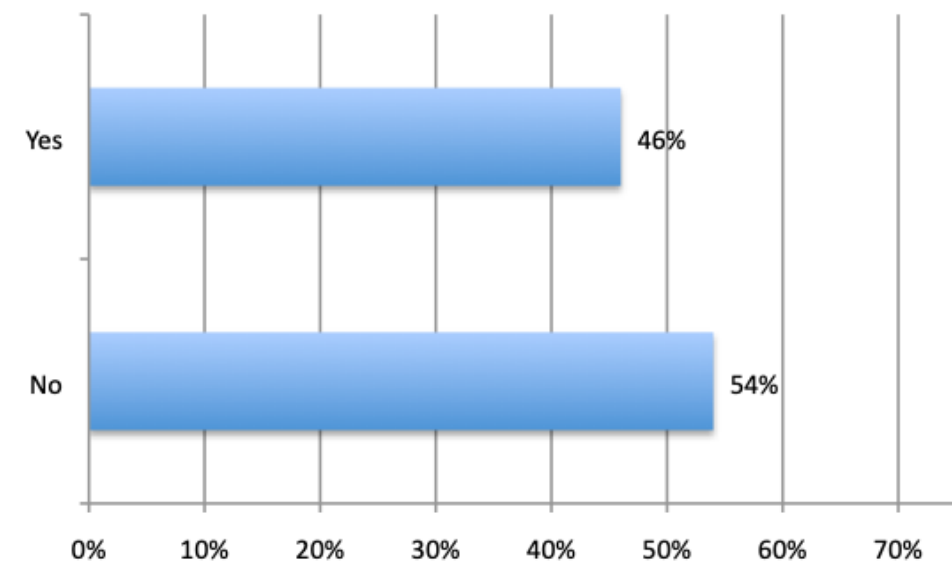

Figure 1: Are You the Correct Person to Contact Regarding District Technology Needs?

Experience with Vendors

Superintendents' experience with vendors is mixed (Figure 2). Asked to comment on their experiences with vendors, about one-third report they have had negative experiences, with a similar proportion reporting they have not had contact with vendors in recent months. Just 20% report positive experiences. Among "other" responses offered by 16% of respondents, a mixture of comments was added, most complaining of too many emails with two reporting both positive and negative experiences.

The overarching sense in the "other" category is that superintendents feel overwhelmed and disappointed at how aggressive vendor marketing has been.
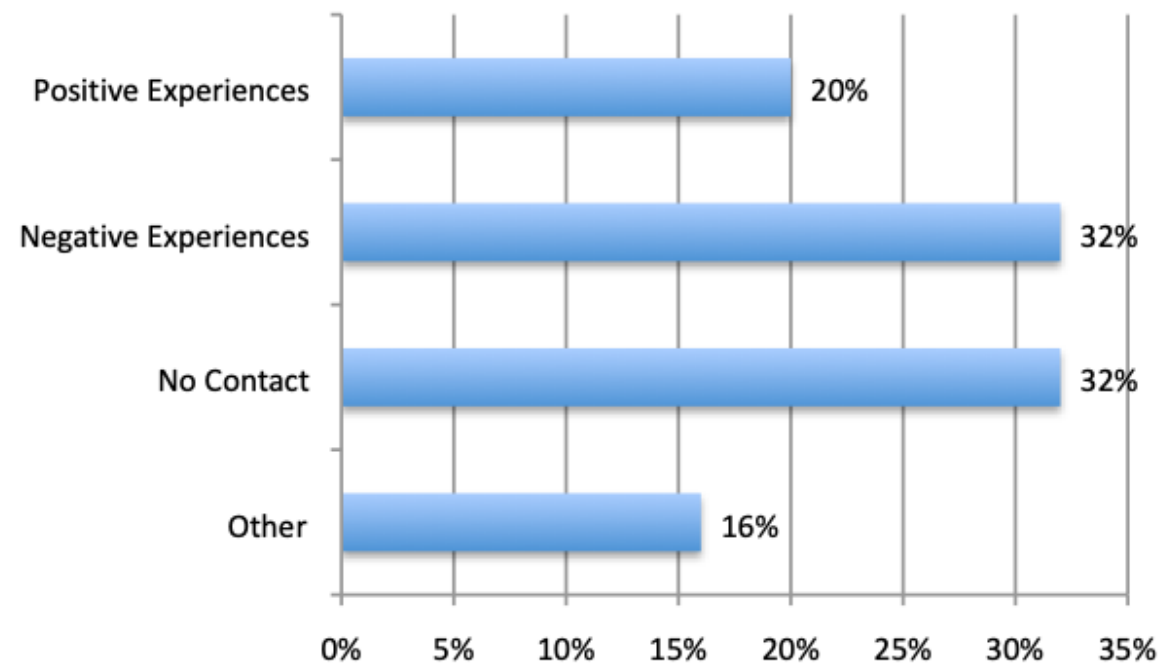

Figure 2: How Would You Characterize Your Experience with Vendors in the Last Month or Two?

Most of the comments on this question were negative in the extreme—some can only be characterized as scathing.

> *"I have not responded to anyone who has sent me anything."*
>
> *"We are now creating a list of which companies we are going to blacklist because of this unethical sales behavior."*
>
> *"Our normal vendors I don't mind visiting with about our needs. The cold calls and sales tactics are frustrating."*
>
> *"Honestly, there are some vendors I will never do business with in the future because of the crazy amount of emails."*

Are Free Offers Helpful?

Two-thirds of respondents find free offers of technological products to districts to be a distraction from district mission (Figure 3). About one-fifth have no objections, while 5% report they are unaware of free offers. Nearly one-tenth offer other comments, mostly expressing mixed feelings about complimentary offers or hopes that such offers will be aligned with district vision.
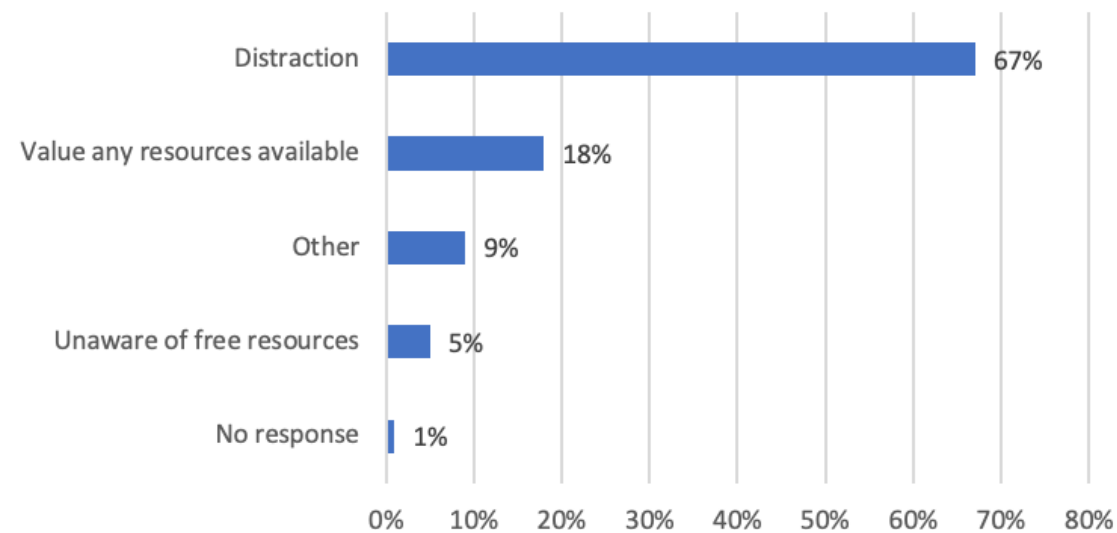
Figure 3: Do Free Offers Distract From Or Assist District Mission?

Comments around offers of complimentary products reveal a range of concerns revolving around security, curricular coherence, and the need to vet and validate new products.

> *"Free offers undermine our ability to create a solid curricular foundation."*

> *"Free offers are helpful, but we need a plan to evaluate what we are using and time to study implementation."*

> *"Who doesn't like free? However, it does distract from our focus if the products aren't vetted first."*

> *"Concerned about security and we are looking to purchase upgrades to provide more secure links."*

Free Offers to Parents & Teachers

The overwhelming concern about free offers to parents and teachers of almost half of responding superintendents is that so many products and services marketed to teachers and parents have not been validated (Figure 4). Almost half of superintendents worry about that potential problem. Nearly one-quarter also worry about products and services that are not aligned with current district programs.
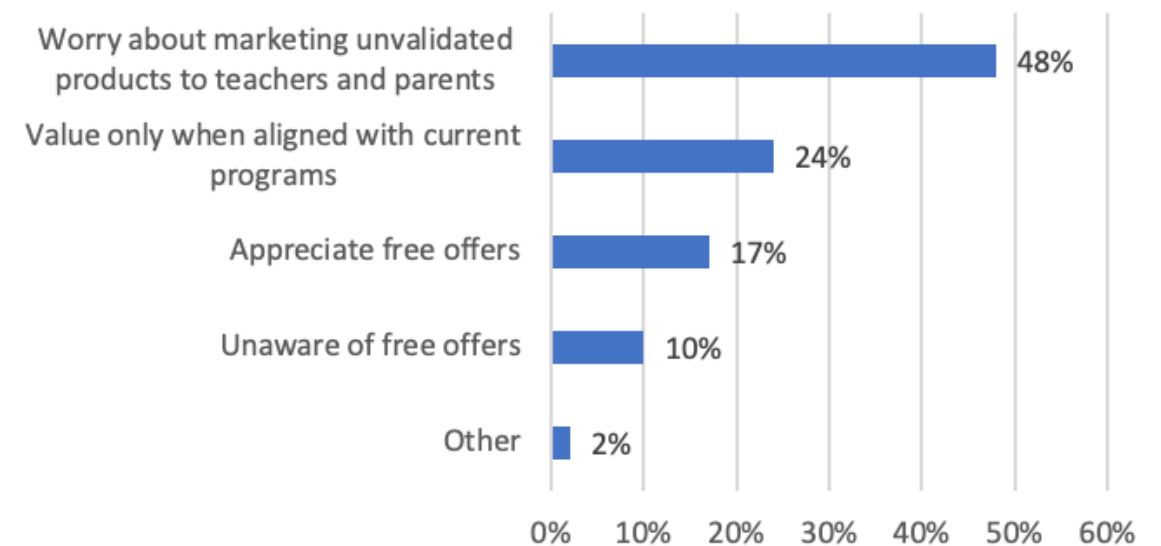

Figure 4: Attitude Toward Free Offers to Parents and Teachers

Comments around the availability of free technology products and services revolve around integration with existing platforms and applications, lack of validation, and the marketing reality that today's "free" product or service turns into tomorrow's fee-based reality.

> *"There are too many platforms and apps. These need to be streamlined to limit confusion."*

"We need to be able to vet these products before they are provided."

" 'Free' is not always free. These contracts offering free services [come]with a commitment to a year-long contract and many parents will be stuck paying for services long after they no longer need them."

"It sometimes feels like, 'Give it to them for free now, and they have to buy later.' "

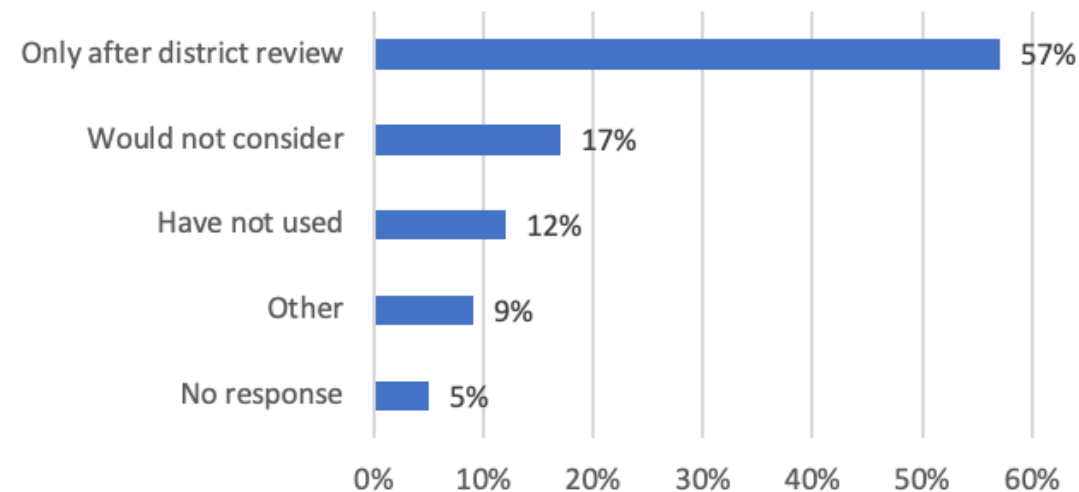# Use of Free Resources Downstream

Figure 5: Would You Consider Purchasing Free Offers Once Current Crisis Passes?

Responses make it very clear that fully three-quarters of superintendents look at the possibility of adopting and purchasing free products and services downstream with a skeptical eye (Figure 5). That is to say, 57% would consider purchasing such products only after district review, while 17% would not consider purchasing them at all. About 12% have not used free offers and 9% offer "other comments," primarily expressing uncertainty ("not sure") about whether to purchase or not.

The comments around this question range from highly critical to a broad set of concerns about on-going budget challenges.

"[These vendors] will likely be blacklisted."

"Budgets are going to be an issue, so that may limit what we can purchase."

"To be honest, I can't be sure. There's a chance some of the products will be good and will need to be considered."

"The hard part is we will most likely be cut in revenue and that would mean no new purchases."

"Given the nature of where we will be with district budgets, I don't believe we will be purchasing anything new when this is over."

What Superintendents Most Need At This Time

It may be unfair and a function of the way the question was posed but, asked to select a preference among a list of conventional vendor offerings on one hand and being left alone on the other, close to half of superintendents opted for being left alone (Figure 6). This question was offered as a forced choice: respondents could select only one response.

Validated products seemed valuable to about a quarter of respondents with 15% also hoping for free products or services, about the same proportion as approved free products under Figure 4. "Other" options emphasized the need for vetting by school staff.
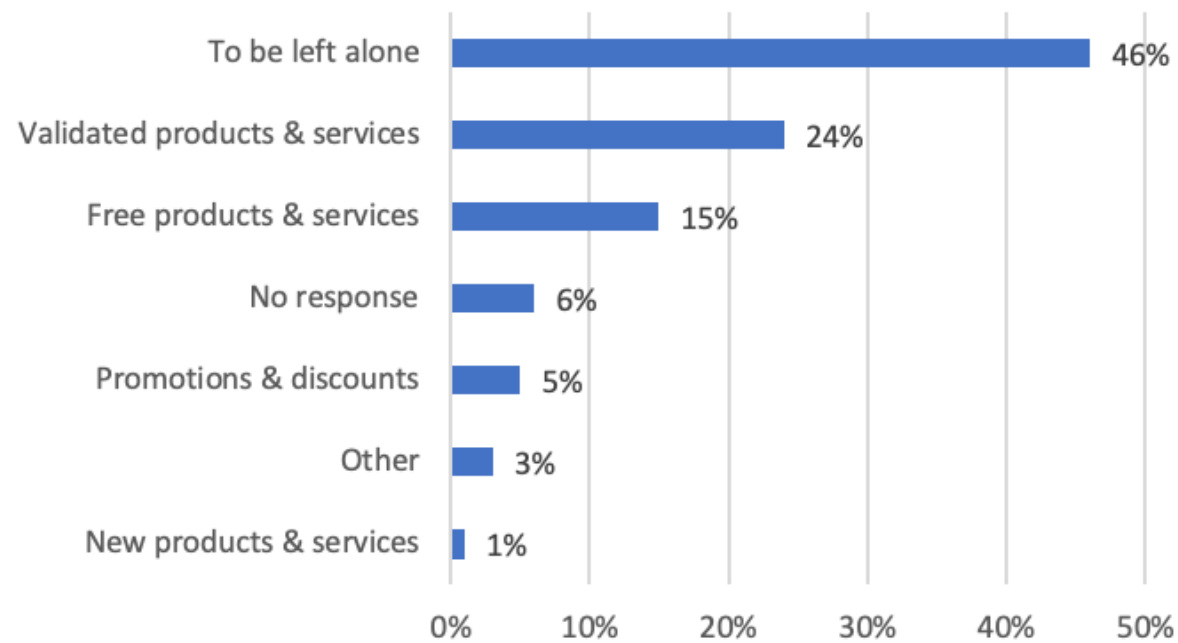
Figure 6: What Do Superintendents Most Need from Educational Technology Firms At This Time?

The extended comments revealed superintendents' confidence that their districts understand what they need and can find it through their own experience, networks, and resources. Anxiety about changing horses in midstream and integration with legacy platforms were also mentioned as concerns.

> *"We will find you if there is a need."*

> *"We know what we need right now—we can reach out to colleagues/current vendors/associations."*

> *"We will find you if and when we need you!"*

> *"A vetted source of available educational technology would be helpful."*

> *"We can't change platform or programs in the middle of all of this. By and large, we have to use what we have available and what staff are familiar with."*

Solutions Needed From Vendors

This question produces "Rating Scores," not percentage responses.* The question required respondents to rank-order their responses to a question about which potential technology solutions from vendors were most critical from the district's point of view. Solutions that promise to address professional development stand head and shoulders over other possibilities. This is, perhaps, unsurprising given an analysis last year suggesting that up to $5.6 billion in school technology purchases sits idle, in part because teachers lack the training to use them.**
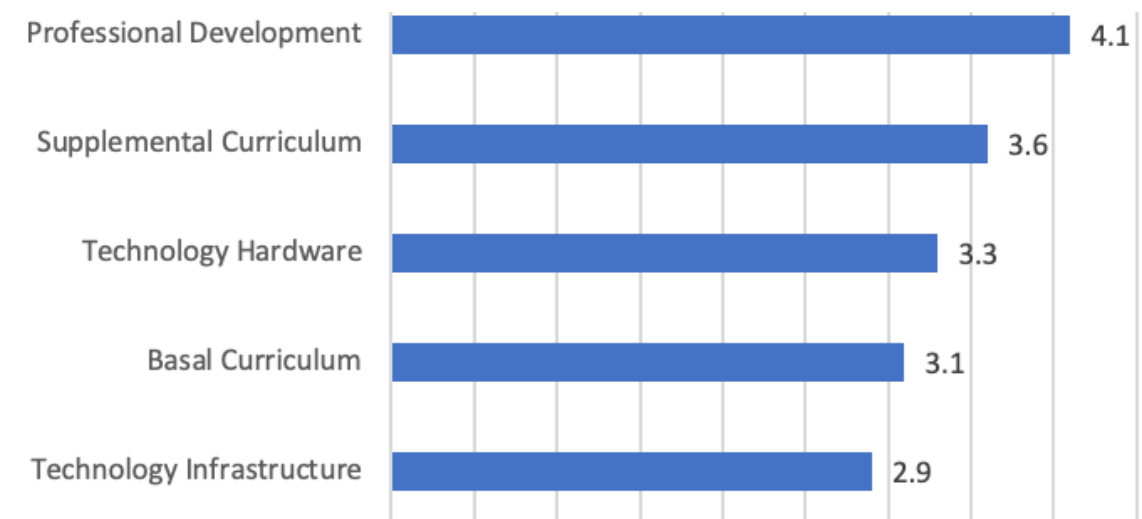

Figure 7: What Solutions Do You Most Need from Vendors?

*The ratings ranged from "1" (least critical) to "6" (most critical). The Rating Score in Figure 7 is the weighted average calculated by dividing the sum of all weighted ratings by the number of responses.

**See: Michelle R. Davis, "K-12 Districts Wasting Millions by Not Using Purchased Software," *Education Week Market Brief*. May 14, 2020. (Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yb663xoe)

Preferences for Vendor Outreach

As with Figure 7, this question also produced "Rating Scores," not percentage responses. The question required respondents to rank-order their responses to a question about how districts preferred to be contacted by vendors.* Contacts via text and telephone are clearly the least desirable, followed by social media, which is in the barely acceptable category.

Surprisingly, given the consistent complaints about a deluge of emails, emails seem to be, on balance, the most desirable way for vendors to approach school districts. Even emails, however, do not begin to approach the "most desirable" category. They seem, like marketing campaigns, to be barely tolerable.
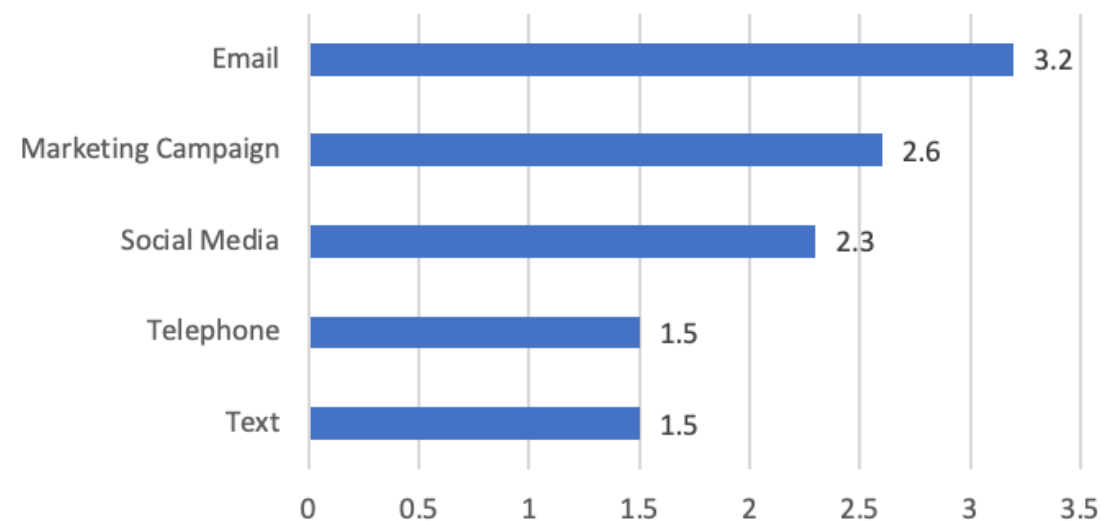
The comments reflect this mixed bag of responses, pretty consistently confirming what was seen earlier in Figure 6 (superintendents know how to seek technology solutions and will look for these solutions as they need them) and Figure 2 (irritation bordering on fury about too many emails).

"The only place I will speak to a vendor is at a conference."

"If we want something to solve a problem, we look for that solution as we need it."

"We will find you if and when we need you!"

"Email is preferred so that I can delete at will."

"Getting my inbox flooded with emails has been a distraction and a nuisance."

"We should contact them as we need them. I don't remember when I made a purchase from an email or call."

Figure 8: In What Ways Would You Prefer to Be Contacted by Vendors?

*The ratings ranged from "1" (least desirable) to "6" (most desirable). The Rating Score in Figure 8 is the weighted average calculated by dividing the sum of all weighted ratings by the number of responses.

Final Thoughts

Summary

It is unfortunate that it took a pandemic and the closing of schools across the country to bring everything that goes on in American schools to the public's attention. Aggressive marketing to superintendents while schools have been struggling with the fallout of the COVID-19 crisis has irked school leaders. They have, after all, been struggling to offer distance learning for 50 million students, while providing tens of millions of meals and hundreds of thousands of tablets and hot spots for families suddenly without access to the internet at public libraries.

So, we find what was described above, as "a deep vein of irritation and discontent with marketing campaigns … accompanied by . . . questions about vendors' motives and intentions." Annoyance at being distracted from the public health crisis in front of them seems widespread among school leaders, as is fear that unvalidated products will distract from district mission and that even products offered on a complimentary basis are offered with the catch that they will become cost items downstream.

Conclusions

In the privacy of their own gatherings, there has long been a tendency on the part of superintendents to roll their eyes when discussing inflated claims from vendors. As one quipped some years ago: "I keep on getting offers that will close the achievement gap, cure the common cold, and fix my dandruff too." But a sense of civility has made it easy to keep this skepticism under wraps. As the pressure of the coronavirus crisis ratcheted up, superintendents ran out of patience.

That is not to say that technology companies and their vendors have not made significant contributions to American education over the years. As the pictures throughout this report document, while everything is not perfect and many students and communities lack digital access, district success in providing distance learning to tens of millions of students has been feasible because of the digital highway provided by the Federally-funded e-rate program and the hardware, software, and ingenuity of technology giants and entrepreneurs.

One consequence of this history is that a genuine sense of the value of established vendor relationships is easy to discern in the survey responses. School leaders argue that they know what they need, that they have experience with vendors whom they trust, and that they know where to go to find the kind of help that will serve them well as they face new and emerging challenges of distance learning.

This would suggest that vendors would be well served to step lightly in the current highly charged and difficult environment. Staying out of the hair of superintendents who are consumed with the task of providing services amidst the pandemic—while staying in touch with district curriculum directors and information technology specialists—is likely to serve vendors well. Explore what these specialists need as opposed to peddling products off the shelf to the front office. In the short run, such an approach may cost a sale or two, but over the long haul, it is likely to pay big dividends in building trust, respect, and reliable long-term markets with school leaders.

****