B2B Education Marketing Trends & Insights for 2026

New Norms, New Strategies: The Business of Education in 2026

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For the seventh consecutive year, FINN Partners' Global Education Practice has produced a survey-based report that provides the strategic trends and insights most relevant to education product and service providers planning for growth in 2026.

For this year's report, in addition to surveying your peers in B2B education marketing, we surveyed education buyers—K-12 senior administrators and educators in U.S. districts and schools. This gives B2B marketers visibility into your potential customers' current mindset, particularly important in this rapidly shifting education landscape.

This year's report shows that K-12 buyers are increasingly cautious, AI-savvy, and locally focused. Budget pressures and staff capacity drive every purchase, while trusted sources and state-level specificity shape how and where they look for solutions.

For marketers, success in 2026 means:

- Providing credible and measurable evidence of effectiveness,
- Highlighting ease of use and implementation fidelity,
- Optimizing for AI discovery, and
- Investing in earning positive coverage in trusted media.

Read on to learn what your education marketer peers are planning for 2026, and how your prospective customers are approaching upcoming purchasing decisions.

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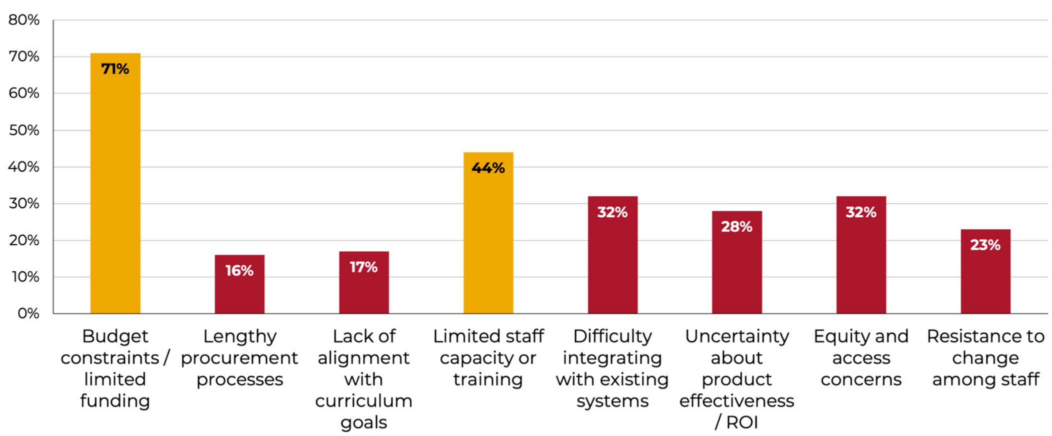
A Budget-Conscious Landscape on Both Sides of the Table

Financial and staffing realities drive decisions and strategies

The data shows K-12 education buyers are entering 2026 focused on two key challenges when considering new purchases. Budget constraints and funding limitations are top of mind for 71% of education buyers. Their next most significant challenge was limited staff capacity or training.

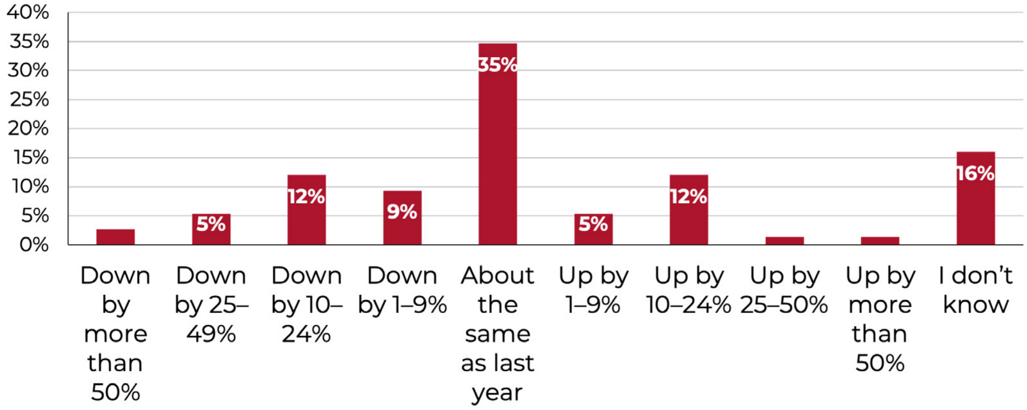
K-12 Buyers: What are the top 2-3 most significant challenges your district currently faces related to purchasing and implementing new products and services?



Simultaneously, education marketers are also reporting financial cautiousness. Only 41% of B2B education companies expect marketing budgets to increase or remain unchanged next year, the lowest figure our survey has reflected since COVID-19. Perhaps it's not surprising that 12% of respondents were uncertain about what changes they'd see in next year's budget, since 2025 has included many twists and turns.

As 2026 approaches, tight budgets are shaping the decisions of both education buyers and marketers. Buyers are prioritizing cost and staffing constraints, while marketers face shrinking or uncertain budgets of their own. Understanding these financial pressures is essential for creating strategies that resonate—and that are realistic—in the year ahead.

B2B Companies: Compared to 2025, the company's 2026 marketing budget is projected to be:



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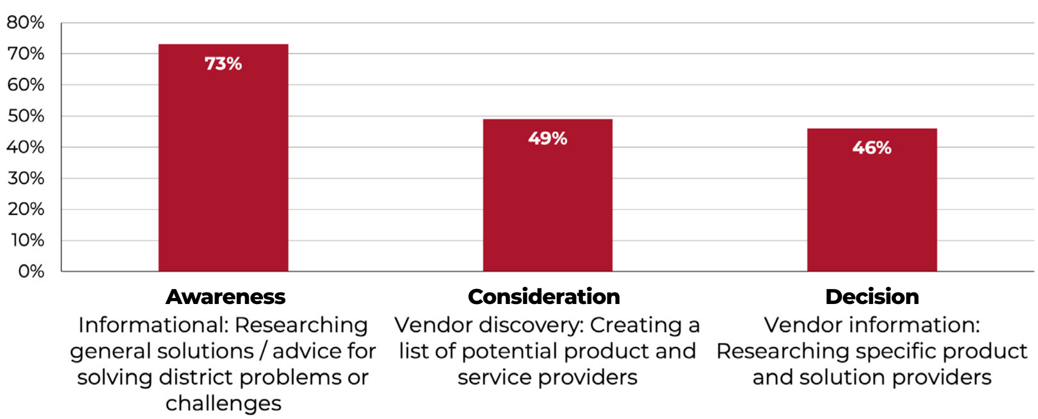
Trend 1
AI Drives Discovery and Decisions

Buyers are ahead of marketers when it comes to AI

The most profound shift we've seen is how K-12 buyers are using AI search platforms for their daily research—an approach that was in its infancy a year ago. Education buyers were more than twice as likely (35% vs 14%) to turn to AI search platforms—like ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, and Claude—than they were to rely on traditional search engines. A significant majority (71%) of buyers found generative AI search to be highly useful for researching solutions in general and getting advice regarding district problems and challenges.

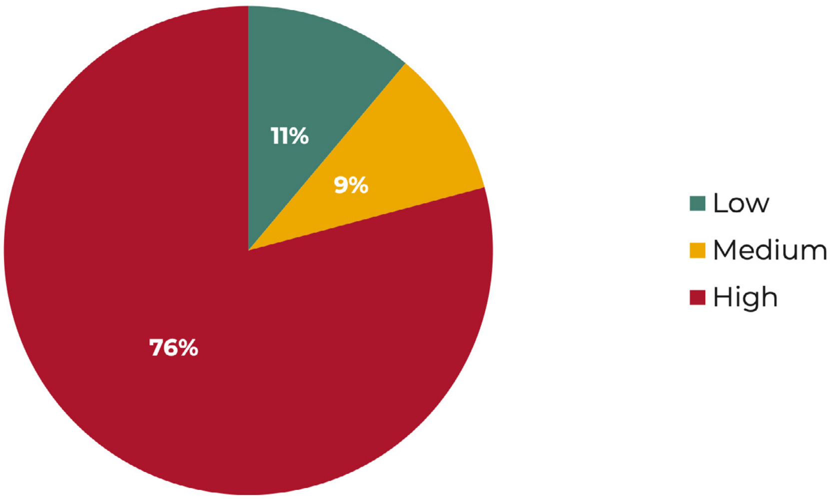
But it's even more notable that AI isn't just a tool for early research. Buyers are using it across the entire marketing funnel—awareness, consideration, and decision.

K-12 Buyers: Which of the following ways have you used AI search platforms / generative AI like ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity and Claude?

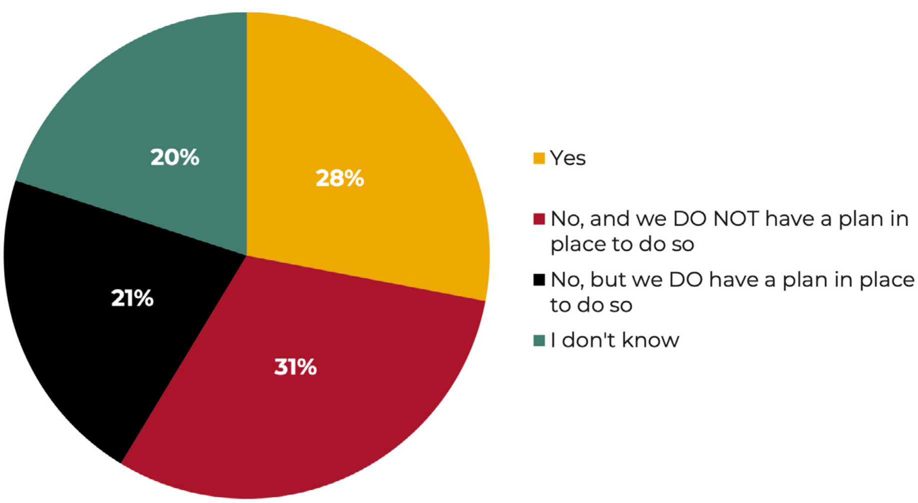


This huge leap in buyer behavior stands in stark contrast to how prepared marketers are to show up in AI search. While 79% of B2B respondents know Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) is going to change things significantly, a full 50% either don't have a clear plan for AI search optimization, or don't know if their organization has one.

B2B Companies: Expected impact of AI search on B2B education marketing in the next six months.



B2B Companies: Our marketing team is taking steps to address AI search engine optimization.



Key Insight:
This gap is a major risk. Buyers are using AI for vendor comparison and vetting, yet half of education marketers aren't actively trying or prepared to influence those results.

You can start to bridge that gap by **downloading our guide** on AI search optimization in education marketing. Just as companies who acted early to achieve search engine optimization (SEO) built a durable advantage, early movers on GEO will have a strong foundation as the AI landscape matures.

Trend 2

Buyers Want Proof of Outcomes and Streamlined Implementation

Efficacy and ease matter

District leaders aren't focused on features, they're focused on making smart, reliable investments. Every purchase must align with financial and educational priorities. With more than 70% citing budget constraints as a top challenge, decision-makers need transparent pricing information; they want assurance that they're spending wisely. Their question isn't just, "What does it do?" but, "Will this investment deliver real value?"

Equally important is ease of implementation. Limited staff capacity can make even a promising product feel like an added burden. Buyers want solutions that simplify their teams' work, not complicate it. The key consideration is: Will this help staff and students succeed, or just add more hurdles?

Decision-makers want clear proof of efficacy and ease of use with:

- Case studies and success stories that provide verifiable evidence that your solution improves student outcomes.
- Product demos and materials that include clear visuals showing not just what the product does, but how seamlessly it fits into existing workflows.

Key Insight:

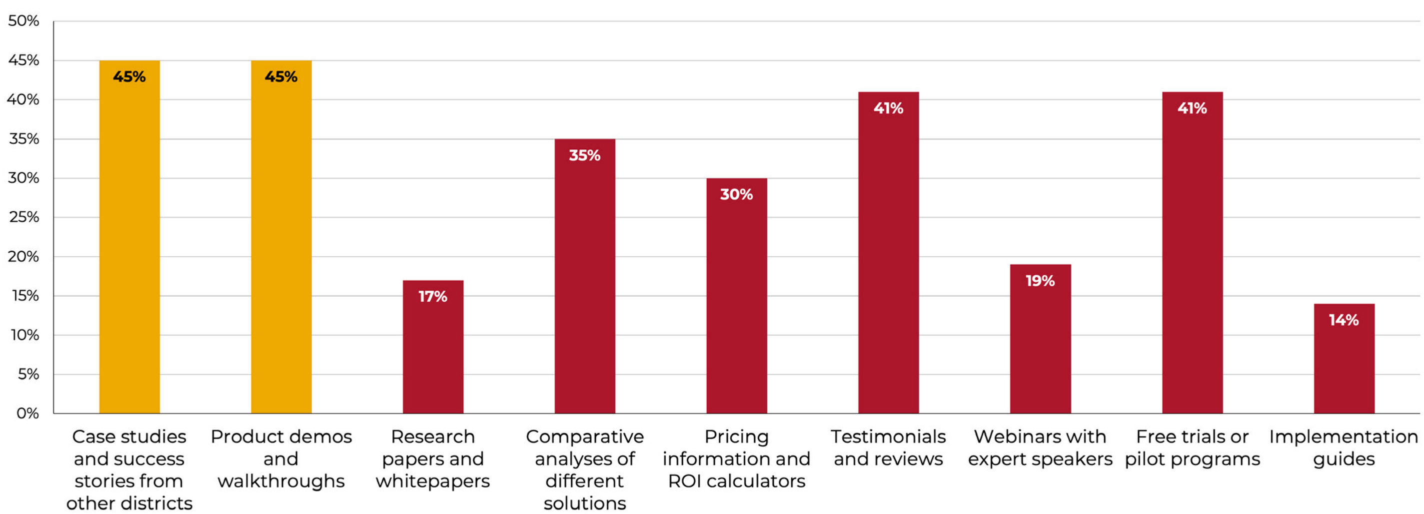
Every piece of content needs to be anchored in these two facts:

1) Student outcomes—the why of the purchase.

2) Capacity/ implementation—the how of success.

If marketers don't directly address the implementation burden, purchases will be stalled, even with impressive student outcome data.

K-12 Buyers: What type of content related to new products and services do you find most valuable during your research phase?



Trend 3

There's a Disconnect Between the Channels Buyers Trust vs. the Channels Marketers Prioritize

District leaders select trusted sources over owned marketing channels

Our data highlights a clear misalignment: while buyers seek professional validation and credible sources, marketers often invest in channels that don't carry the same influence in the decision-making process.

When researching new products, district leaders overwhelmingly turn to trusted, professionally curated spaces. Nearly 60% of buyers rely on education news websites and publications, and more than 40% look to conferences and exhibitions. And as we mentioned before, AI has become a powerful new discovery tool. In contrast, social media and online review sites rank near the bottom of the list, with fewer than 15% of buyers finding them useful.

As the chart below shows, efficiency and measurability dominate marketing strategy. Email and content marketing continue to lead, rated highly effective by more than 80% of marketers, as both channels support consistent, targeted communication. There's also growing investment in relationship-driven strategies such as account-based marketing and thought leadership, which signals a shift toward lead quality over volume. But here's the disconnect: while events and conferences are buyers' second most valued research channels, marketers rate them only moderately impactful and often prioritize social media instead, despite its low influence on purchasing decisions.

When researching new products or services for their district

- **55%** use education news websites/ publications, such as *EdSurge, Education Week, District Administration*
- **43%** use conferences and expos
- **35%** use AI search platforms
- **12%** use social media
- **10%** use online review sites

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B2B Companies: How important will the following tactics be in your 2026 marketing plan?
(Please rate each goal on a 1-5 scale, with 1 having the least impact and 5 having the most impact.)

Marketing Strategy	2023 Survey	2024 Survey	2025 Survey	YoY Change
Content Marketing	4.23	4.18	4.31	3.11%
Email Marketing	4.18	4.04	4.11	1.73%
Events / Conferences	3.59	3.8	3.67	-3.42%
Thought Leadership	3.74	3.74	3.93	5.08%
Account-based Marketing (ABM)	n/a	3.25	3.51	8.00%
Social Media	3.33	3.24	3.35	3.40%
Media Relations	3	2.91	3.15	8.25%
Influencer Marketing	2.5	2.57	2.77	7.78%

Key Insight: Buyers continue to value professional journalism, respected voices, and authentic expertise, and they're increasingly discovering these reliable resources in AI search results. To stay visible and relevant, marketers must align their content and distribution with these proven channels.

It's important to note that the data and measurement that email marketing and social media provide help track results, and are still important elements of the marketing mix. While it may be harder to track sales results from channels like PR and event marketing, they are extremely important for awareness, discovery, and building trust—particularly in the evolving AI-powered GEO landscape.

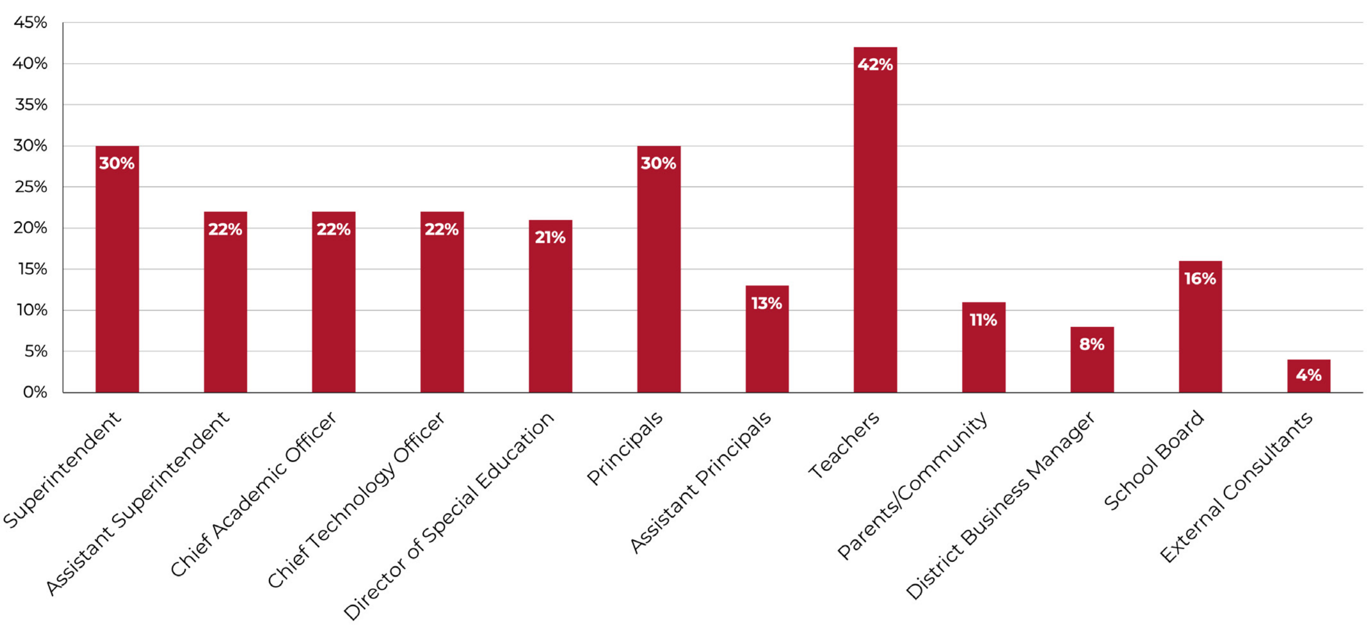
That means developing thought leadership that demonstrates measurable impact on student outcomes and optimizing for AI discovery. It also means reimagining events as opportunities for authentic connection rather than transactional exposure. Sustainable growth will depend less on broad outreach and more on meeting buyers where their trust already lies. **Explore *How to Get the Most out of Event Marketing in Education* for our tried and true recommendations.**

Trend 4
Winning in a Decentralized Market with State-Based Acumen

Local context and community shape buying decisions

B2B marketers identified federal and state budgets and policy changes as top concerns as they plan for 2026. This growth in uncertainty is mirrored in responses from K-12 decision-makers, who notice the growth in the influence and decision-making authority at the school and classroom levels. Teachers increasingly weigh in on what products and services educators ultimately adopt. Of note, educator responses moderately reflect the impact of the Parents' Rights Movement, which *EdWeek* reports has created "contentious and chaotic" school board meetings and community conversations as families weigh in on how schools and districts are managed.

K-12 Buyers: Which of the following individuals or groups in your district typically hold influence in the final purchasing decision for a new product or service?



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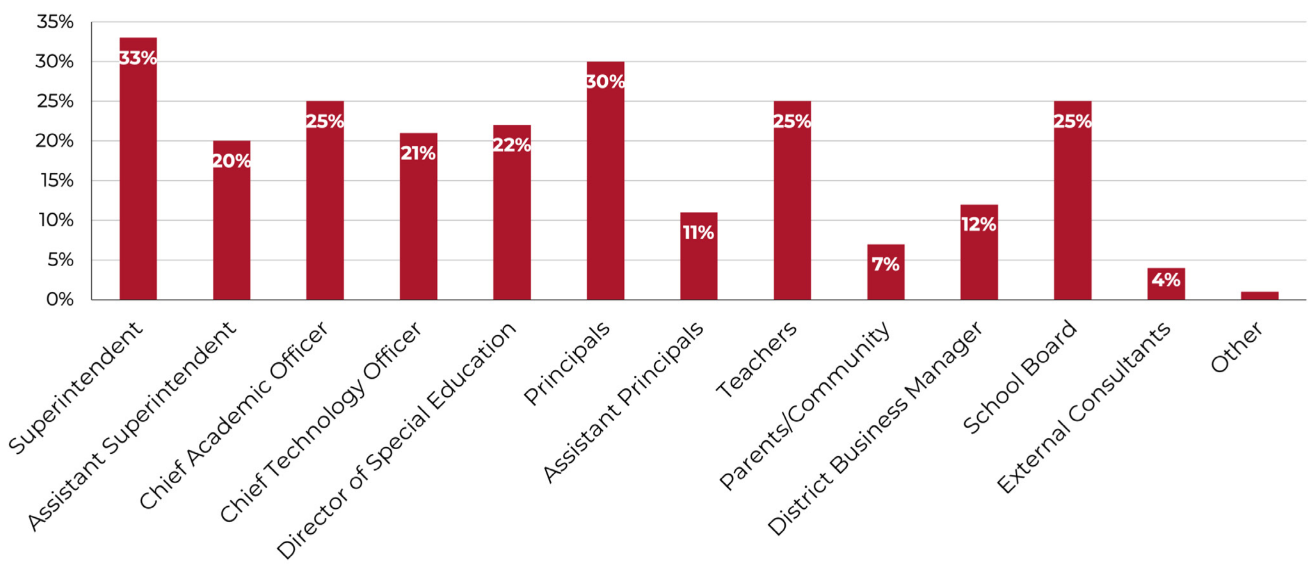
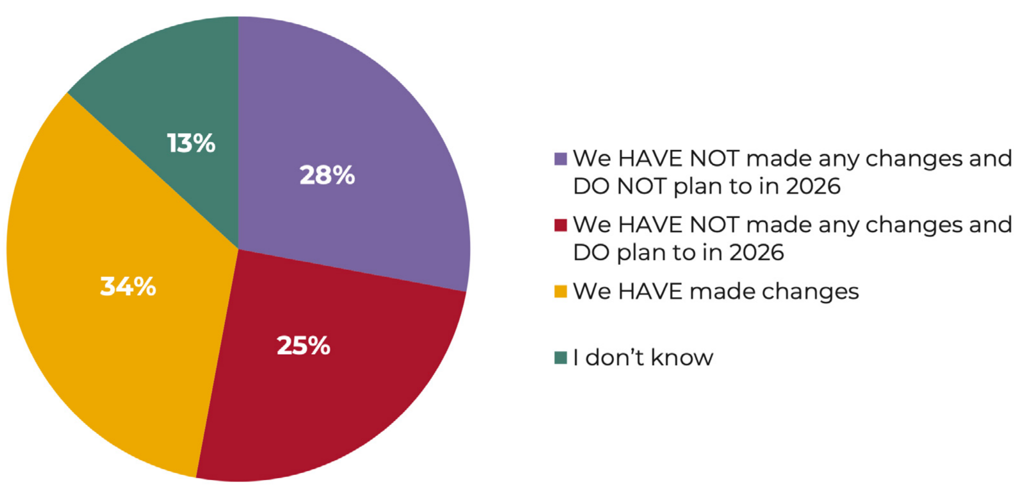
While our public education system has always been decentralized, as federal funding structures, influence, and guardrails change seemingly daily, decision-making authority is further empowering state and local players. K-12 leaders increasingly see purchasing power move down to the school and classroom level, with teachers playing a bigger role in adoption influence and decisions. The impact of the Parents' Rights movement, while moderate, is clear in educator responses and highlights the growing influence of community and family on school management.

K-12 Buyers: Which of the following individuals or groups in your district HAVE MORE INFLUENCE today in the final purchasing decision for a new product or service than they did 3 years ago?



B2B Companies: How, if at all are you planning to adapt your marketing and sales approach in response to the growing School Choice movement?



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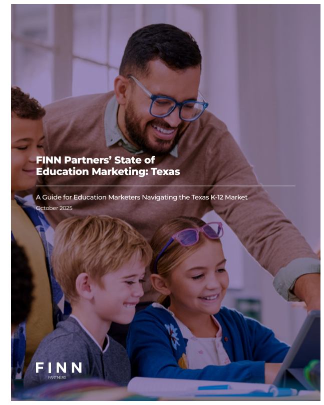
This decentralization makes the K-12 market more complex with:

- **State-Level Variation:** Funding structures, policy mandates, and priorities vary widely. This requires a thoughtful and well-researched local strategy. Though the heavy hitters like California, Texas, Florida, and New York are perennial targets, our survey showed that companies are correctly prioritizing growth in midsize markets like Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio.
- **Focus on Local Alignment:** The School Choice movement continues to gain momentum and 59% of B2B education marketers are adjusting their sales and marketing strategies accordingly or plan to do so in 2026. This confirms a necessary focus on local market dynamics and positioning solutions within the context of varied school models (e.g., traditional public, charter, private, virtual, home). This is especially important in states like Texas, where recent legislation will create a $1B education savings account influx.

B2B marketers have long known they need state-based strategies—in our 2024 survey, 60% of respondents admitted, *"We would like to do more regional or state-level marketing, but don't have the resources or experience."* Based on changes that have happened since then, it's clear that delivering well-informed, authentic state-level messaging and context is now a necessity.

Key Insights: A generic, national approach is an increasing liability. Marketers must invest in targeted, state-specific strategies that account for local policies and strategic priorities. This is why in 2025 we released ***The Complete Guide to Creating a State-Specific Education Marketing Strategy***, which provides that guidance.



With more than 5.6 million students across more than 1,200 districts and charter schools, Texas is one of the largest, most influential education markets in the nation. Explore our ***Guide for Education Marketers Navigating the Texas K-12 Market*** to help grow your business in the Lone Star state.

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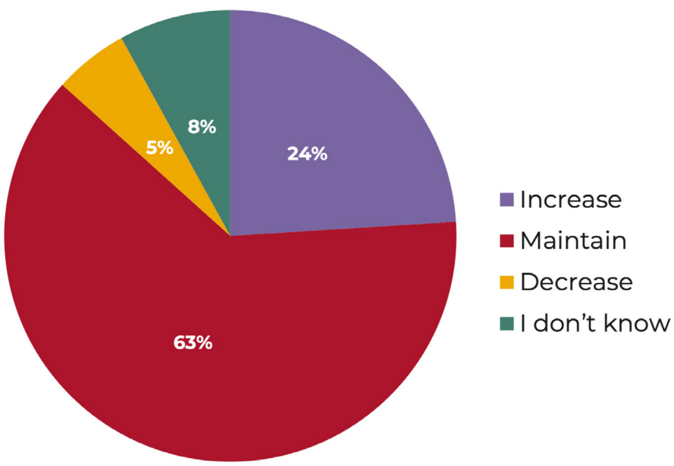
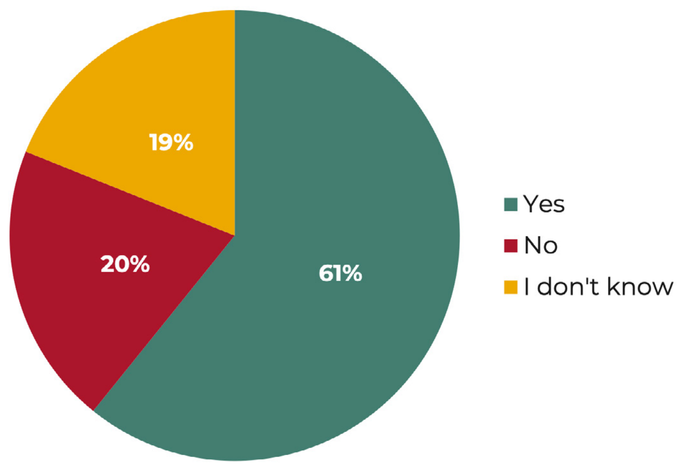
Seeking Trusted Education Marketing Partners in a Shifting World

Education companies are facing a tough challenge: navigating a fiscally constrained, increasingly decentralized environment while simultaneously adapting to an AI-driven marketing landscape. With our survey showing that 68% of education companies plan to maintain or decrease the headcount of their marketing team in 2026, we know you can't do it all alone. This combination of limited internal capacity and the need for specialized expertise is why nearly two-thirds of B2B education marketers plan to work with external marketing support in 2026.

B2B Companies: Fill in the blank: In 2026 my company plans to ___________ the size of our marketing team.



B2B Companies: Do you plan to work with external marketing support (e.g., an agency, freelancer, contractor) in 2026?



In a market defined by change, you need a strategic, education-focused marketing partner that:

- Drives Generative Engine Optimization (GEO)
- Develops high-quality, strategic content
- Knows what channels work and when... and why
- Understands the importance of state-based nuance

Main Takeaways

As K–12 leaders and marketers head into 2026, one message is clear: the education market is evolving faster than most strategies can keep up with. Fiscal pressures, decentralized decision-making, and the rise of AI-driven research are reshaping how and where buyers seek solutions.

1. Money and capacity drive every decision.

Districts remain under heavy financial scrutiny, with limited staff bandwidth making them even more cautious in committing to new products or services. Buyers are prioritizing solutions that clearly demonstrate outcomes and easy implementation. Marketing that doesn't directly address these concerns will fail to move past the consideration stage.

2. The buyer journey now runs through AI.

Generative AI platforms are no longer a side tool; they're the new discovery engine. With more than one-third of K–12 buyers relying on AI search, marketers must invest in Generative Engine Optimization (GEO) to ensure their content is discoverable and credible.

3. Trust beats reach.

Buyers rely on education media—including local coverage—and live events for building trust and relationships. Yet many marketers continue to rely too much on social channels with limited influence. Real impact will come from thought leadership, reputable media coverage, and presence in spaces where professional trust already exists.

4. State-focused strategies are essential.

The rapid and unpredictable policy and funding changes of 2025 have accelerated existing trends. Decision-making is shifting closer to classrooms, and diverging state-level policies are driving distinct market conditions. Growth will come from localized, state-specific marketing strategies that account for varied cultural nuances and audience needs.

5. Expertise matters more than ever.

In a complex, resource-constrained environment, education companies can't afford guesswork. Strategic partners who understand GEO, content strategy, channel alignment, and state-based marketing, as well as cultural and policy norms, will be critical to sustaining visibility, credibility, and growth in 2026 and beyond.

Partner with an expert education marketing and PR agency to prepare your team for 2026

Education Powers the World.

We are the most experienced marketing and communications practice dedicated to all forms of teaching and learning. Our experts have been trusted advisors at the forefront of transformation in education for nearly four decades.

Growing your education company means overcoming challenges like funding fluctuations, policy uncertainty, shifting priorities, and system bureaucracy. We're confident we can help you meet those challenges head-on and emerge in a stronger business position.

Curious how we can take your education marketing to the next level? Talk to us.

Survey Methodology

This report is based on two separate surveys:

B2B Education Companies
A September 2025 survey of 75 marketing professionals and other relevant representatives of companies selling to the K-12 education market. The majority, 41%, have an annual marketing budget of under $250,000, 40% exceed $250,000, and 19% don't know.

Education Buyers
A September 2025 survey of 105 K-12 education decision-makers, 54% at the district level and 46% at the school level. Most respondents, 82%, are in districts serving fewer than 10K students; 50% served suburban communities, 32% urban, 15% rural, and 3% a mix.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