

Subscription Services in Brookline Schools

A Briefing for School Committee and Senior Staff

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March 13, 2025

About This Document

In light of the current budget deficit, Jodi Fortuna asked if I could prepare a briefing for the school committee and senior staff to provide insight about the current use of subscription services in the Public Schools of Brookline.

Although I am not the budgetary manager of all subscription services in Brookline, my almost 19 years as the Director of Educational Technology and Libraries in Brookline, does make me one the few people with the broadest understanding and knowledge of most of the subscription services.

Though this briefing is more heavily focused on items within my own budgetary management, I've tried to include other items that would fall into these similar categories. This document does not focus on the many free tools and services we leverage to provide great service to our learning community. Tools like Google Workspace for Education, Canva for Education, and Clever additionally support our community for no cost at this time.

I have also taken this opportunity to provide some insight from my perspective related to budgetary considerations I think may be helpful to the committee when assessing whether there is substantive savings in this area.

The timeline on producing this briefing was extremely tight. As a result, I'd be happy to provide additional detail and answer any additional questions.

Scott Moore
Director of Educational Technology and Libraries

The Role of Subscription Services In Brookline

Subscription-based models have become increasingly prevalent across various industries, and K-12 education is no exception. Much like the rise of software as a service (SaaS) for business needs, educational institutions have been turning to subscription services to access a wide range of tools and content resources.

In Brookline Schools, technology helps streamline school operations and support learning. Various tools support teachers, students, and administrators in different areas, from managing information to enhancing learning experiences and meeting diverse needs. Below are some key categories of tools we pay for that play a crucial role in Brookline's educational environment.

- **System-wide Platforms:** Tools that manage communication, learning, and administration across schools to streamline operations.
- **Curriculum and Assessment Resources:** Tools that support curriculum planning, assessment creation, and tracking student progress to enhance learning outcomes.
- **Ed Tech Management Tools:** Tools for securing and managing technology infrastructure, accounts, and devices in schools.
- **Ed Tech Learning Tools:** Interactive tools that enhance student learning through creative, personalized, and engaging resources.
- **Library Database Resources:** Digital access to content resources that support student research, literacy, and access to academic content.
- **Assistive Tech Team Tools:** Specialized tools supporting students with disabilities, ensuring inclusive and accessible learning.

The use of subscription services in our schools comes with both benefits and challenges. On the positive side, cloud-based subscriptions provide easy access to the most up-to-date textbooks, resources, and tools, which are accessible from any device with an internet connection, offering flexible and equitable access for all users. Our subscriptions can often be scaled up or down as needed and more easily support the integration of services, ensuring that different tools work together effectively across a wide variety of devices, often between home and school.

However, there are challenges as well. The recurring nature of subscriptions can lead to higher long-term costs, and limited budgets can make subscription fees quickly add up, particularly when subscribing to multiple services for different subjects or grade levels. Furthermore, schools may face vendor lock-in, becoming dependent on a single provider, which can make switching services difficult both financially and logistically.

Managing and Optimizing Subscription Services

Much of the budgetary support for our current portfolio of subscriptions services came out of the PSB 2014-2019 Technology plan and subsequent town override. At the time, the School Committee issued a mandate that we establish a plan to “leapfrog” us into the 21st Century. Prior to the plan and override the District was struggling to adequately fund what it was trying to do, let alone take full advantage of the use of technology to increase administrative efficiency and support teaching and learning. The plan established the overall goal: “By 2019, we will create the infrastructure, build instructional capacity, and support innovation for the full integration of technology into teaching, learning, and administration in the Public Schools of Brookline.”

With this goal came investments in hardware, data systems, professional learning, and a portfolio of subscription content and tools.

A Portfolio Strategy

Effectively managing subscription services is crucial for schools to maximize value while controlling costs. To help manage subscriptions effectively, it was established that, where possible, the district would take a centralized approach to ensure the tools align with our goals and provide ongoing evaluation of our subscriptions to meet evolving educational needs.

Managing a portfolio of subscription tools in K-12 education is much like managing a portfolio of financial investments. Just as an investor regularly evaluates their portfolio to ensure it aligns with their financial goals, a school or district must assess its collection of subscriptions to ensure they meet evolving educational needs. Tools are added, dropped, or modified to optimize results, whether addressing new priorities or eliminating underperforming tools in order to invest elsewhere.

Over time, the portfolio of subscriptions are modified—adjusting the scope of certain tools, renegotiating prices, or shifting to more scalable solutions to better fit the school's evolving objectives. Just as an investor diversifies their assets to balance risk and maximize return, the district tries to carefully curate a mix of ed-tech tools to ensure a balanced, cost-effective approach.

When evaluating subscription services, we investigate various pricing models, negotiate with the vendor, explore volume discounts to help manage costs. Regular evaluation of our subscriptions ensures they continue to meet educational objectives and provide value. A centrally managed portfolio of subscription services offers several benefits for the district:

- **Better Budget Management and Vendor Negotiations:** The district can track spending, avoid duplication, and negotiate better pricing and discounts with vendors.
- **Consistent Evaluation and Alignment with Educational Goals:** Regular assessments ensure tools meet district priorities, replacing underperforming ones with more effective solutions.
- **Streamlined Support, Training, and Collaboration:** Consistent professional development and sharing of best practices ensure tools are used effectively across the district.
- **Data Privacy, Security, and Integration:** Managing subscriptions ensures compliance with privacy laws, protects student data, and enables better integration of tools.
- **Scalability and Flexibility:** The district can adjust subscriptions as needs change, adding or removing tools to maintain cost-efficiency.

The management of our portfolio of subscriptions helps PSB optimize costs, align tools with educational goals, improve collaboration, ensure data security, and create a more effective learning environment.

Key Categories of Subscription Services in Brookline Schools

The following pages provide elaboration about the tools in the key categories mentioned at the beginning of this briefing. Each section includes many of the tools in each key category and the amount of money the subscriptions in those categories cost to support during FY25.

Please note, when it came to costs I only mentioned the costs under my budget management.

System-wide Platforms

These tools provide essential infrastructure for managing administrative, learning, and communication needs across entire school systems. They centralize resources and streamline day-to-day operations.

- **Canvas Learning Management System:** A platform for managing course content, assignments, grading, and communication in middle and high school classrooms.
- **Seesaw Learning and Communication Platform:** A platform for younger students (PK-2) that enables teachers, students, and families to share learning and communicate.
- **Destiny Library Management System:** Manages library resources, helping students and staff access digital and physical library materials.
- **Teachpoint Evaluation and PD Management System:** A tool for managing teacher evaluations and professional development records.
- **Zoom Communication Platform:** A widely used tool for virtual meetings, classes, and collaborative communication across the school community.

Total Costs for the Above based on FY25 Costs: \$134,283.52

- Additional Tools in this category include
 - Aspen Student Information System (SIS)
 - Blackboard (Finalsite) Website and Communication System
 - ArxEd Mandatory Training Platform
 - TalentEd- Job postings and application management
 - Naviance - College Application Support System

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Budgetary Note about System-wide Platforms

Tools in this category provide essential management services for the district. Without these tools, the district often does not have the ability to support these functions. For example, without Destiny Library Manager, we would not have a system for managing the circulation and inventory of books across all our libraries. Without Aspen, we would not have an essential data system for managing student information (contacts, attendance, schedules, grades, transcripts, etc.).

It would be difficult to cut these tools and/or quickly replace them to achieve much cost savings. Managing costs related to these tools is best handled through re-negotiation at contract renewal and close ongoing examination of the subscription model.


I am currently looking closely at both Seesaw and Zoom and working with both vendors to try to produce some savings here. Our pricing with Zoom is extremely competitive and any changes to our current subscription will likely trigger a per license cost increase under a new agreement. For example, it was cheaper to continue with our subscription this year, as is, verses dropping some features we could do without.

Curriculum and Assessment Resources:

Tools that support curriculum planning, assessment creation, and tracking student progress to enhance learning outcomes. As new curriculums are adopted, they are often licensed through subscription and/or online delivery models that provide updated, anytime access to the curriculum and resources.

- Fishtank Learning: The new K-5 literacy Curriculum
- Investigations: K-5 Math Curriculum
- Desmos Learning: 6-8 Math Curriculum
- InquireED: K-2 Social Studies Curriculum
- Investigating History: Grade 3-5 Social Studies Curriculum

Total Costs for the Above based on FY25 Costs: I do not manage these, so I am not aware of the total cost.

	<p>Budgetary Note about Curriculum and Assessment Resources</p> <p>Paid tools in this category are part of a curriculum adoption process. Cutting these tools would essentially be cutting the curriculum. Some of these adoptions may also be open sourced and/or grant funded and therefore are provided free or would not represent a savings.</p> <p>I do not manage the portfolio of resources above; however, I don't believe there are savings to be had here unless any of them are up for renegotiation or are being dropped because of curriculum changes. Likely a drop would mean a reinvestment elsewhere.</p>
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Tech Management Tools

These tools focus on streamlining administrative functions and efficient management of technology in schools. They assist with data privacy, account management, device distribution, and IT operations, ensuring schools can maintain a secure and organized digital environment.

- **TEC Student Data Privacy Alliance:** A tool for ensuring that student data privacy is maintained in compliance with regulations.
- **Amplified IT Tools:** A collection of tools that support the administrative management of the Google Workspace for Education.
- **Clever IDM:** Automated account provisioning, simplifying access to various educational tools and systems.
- **TDT Asset Manager:** Manages the distribution and repair of Chromebooks and other school devices.
- **Weebly:** A website-building platform used to create and maintain school websites for specific departments and libraries.
- **Smart Learning Suite Online:** A platform supporting interactive whiteboards and digital classroom engagement with **Smart Boards**.
- **SurveyMonkey:** An online survey tool for collecting feedback and data from students, staff, and parents.

Total Costs for the Above based on FY25 Costs: \$31,412.57

- Additional Tools in this category include
 - The IT department also uses a collection of tools to support the technology infrastructure that serves the schools. This includes tools and annual licensing costs.

	<p>Budgetary Note about Technology Management Tools</p> <p>Tools in this category provide essential functions, management and interoperability in and between our various systems. They support the Ed Tech and IT teams by extending their ability to support the work without the need to hire more staff.</p> <p>I do not believe there are savings to be had here. Reductions here often result in less efficiency and would require more personnel resources to meet the same need.</p>
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Ed Tech Learning Tools

These tools enhance the learning experience by providing interactive, creative, and engaging tools for students. They support various subjects and foster skill development across many grades and subjects, while also allowing students to explore, deepen, and showcase their knowledge.

- **Book Creator:** A digital tool that allows students and teachers to create multimedia books and projects. Projects at Runkle were recently honored at the School Committee as a “Spotlight on Excellence.”
- **Keyboarding Without Tears:** A typing program designed to teach elementary students proper keyboarding skills.
- **Adobe Creative Cloud:** A suite of professional tools for digital design, video editing, and creative projects. Used by multiple BHS departments and programs.
- **TurnItIn:** An originality checking tool for students' writing and research assignments. Used at BHS.
- **Voicethread:** A platform for multimedia discussions where users can comment on images, videos, and documents.
- **WeVideo:** A cloud-based video editing tool that allows students to create and edit videos on Chromebooks.
- **Screencastify:** A tool for screen recording, enabling students and teachers to create instructional videos.
- **EdPuzzle:** A tool that allows educators to create interactive video lessons for middle and high school students.
- **Noodletools:** An academic research platform that helps students organize citations, take notes, and create bibliographies.
- **Padlet:** A collaborative tool that allows students and teachers to create digital boards for sharing ideas, images, and resources.
- **Peardeck:** An interactive presentation tool that helps engage students during lessons.
- **Soundtrap:** A platform for creating digital music, supporting students in music production classes.

Total Costs for the Above based on FY25 Costs: \$86,548.04

- Additional Tools in this category include: Some depart have items that support their specific curriculum.

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Budgetary Note about EdTech Learning Resources

This portfolio covers a series of tools typically serve two purposes:

1. Content creation and multimedia tools with wide application across many grades and curriculum areas.
2. Some specific tools targeted at specialty needs either by grade level and/or purpose.

These tools are part of the centrally managed portfolio since most of them reach across grade levels, curriculum areas, and/or multiple departments. The Ed Tech department monitors, supports, and promotes these tools. In doing so, we assess new developments and features and compare these against other options. Recently Jamboard, a much loved free product was sunsetted while Padlet added similar functionality for no new cost. The EdTech team helped users migrate content from Jamboard to Padlet. This year the consolidation and reduction of some positions in this portfolio should save about 10%. Not a huge savings for the budget situation, but it does help control costs.

Overall, the costs within this portfolio remain near the original Tech Plan allotment.

Library Database Resources

These tools provide access to a range of high-quality digital content, including eBooks, academic articles, research databases, and more, supporting students in their research and inquiry-based learning.

- **Pebble-Go:** A digital resource for younger students that offers access to articles and information on a variety of subjects.
- **Flipster Digital Magazines:** A collection of digital magazines for K-8 students, available for shared access.
- **Teachingbooks.net:** A resource offering book recommendations, author interviews, and lesson plans, aimed at enhancing literacy.
- **World Book:** A comprehensive online encyclopedia for students to explore a wide range of topics.
- **MA State Ebook Shared Collection via Sora:** A collection of digital books available through the **Sora** platform, accessible to Massachusetts students.
- **Flipster Digital Magazines (BHS specific titles):** A selection of digital magazines specifically tailored for **BHS** students.
- **Wall Street Journal:** Provides access to business news and current events for staff and students.
- **New York Times Access:** Grants access to The New York Times for staff and BHS students to support research and learning.
- **Academic Collection (EBSCO):** A digital library offering academic articles and journals for research.
- **Bloomsbury (ABC-CLIO):** Provides access to educational resources and research materials focused on history and culture.
- **African American Studies (Oxford University Press):** A resource for in-depth research on African American history and culture.
- **CQ Researcher/Global Researcher (SAGE):** Provides comprehensive reports on current events and global issues for research.
- **JSTOR (Ithaka Harbors):** A digital library offering access to academic journals, books, and primary sources.
- **SIRS Issues Researcher (Proquest):** A research tool that offers access to information on global issues, current events, and more.
- **Historical Newspapers (Proquest):** A database that provides access to historical newspapers for research.
- **Academic Video (Proquest):** A platform offering a vast library of academic videos for educational use.

Total Costs for the Above based on FY25 Costs: \$49,069.17

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Budgetary Note about Library Database Resources

The Tech Plan originally established funds to support access to high-quality content in a variety of formats. This portfolio of subscription tools is a combination of those funds with some subsidies from the high school library book budgets when the librarians determine that a subscription is a better alternative than a non-fiction book resource.

Tools in this category provide unlimited access to the content database and the databases are chosen to support research and inquiry areas within the curriculum. Due to changes in curriculum projects some of these items are being reconsidered. With most of these costs being under \$2000 each, it again is not a huge cost savings, especially where investment elsewhere may be needed to align with new projects.

Assistive Tech Team Tools

These tools focus on providing specialized support for students with disabilities. They support an inclusive learning environment, ensuring all students can engage with educational content.

- **Boardmaker Online:** Augmented communication tool for clinical use in K-8.
- **LessonPix:** Communication tool for general use in PK-K.
- **Text Help - DJ Coalition:** A set of tools designed to support writing and reading for students with learning disabilities, including Co:writer and Snap and Read.
- **Learning Ally:** A platform providing audiobooks and other resources to help students with learning disabilities access textbooks and other reading materials.

Total Costs for the Above based on FY25 Costs: \$35,778.70

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Budgetary Note about Assistive Technology Team Tools

The tools in this portfolio represent the ongoing collaboration between the Ed Tech and Library Department and the Assistive Technology Team.

Adjustments made this year to our communication tools subscriptions allowed us to save about \$1000. By directing non-clinical users to Lessonpix, we were able to shrink our number of licenses in Boardmaker while improving satisfaction and saving money.

Our strategy with both the Coalition Toolkit and Learning Ally has been an Universal Design Strategy. This means licensing is often extended beyond the special population to general education use as well. However, the cost related to the use of these tools has increased significantly over recent years and may force us to rethink our current strategy as a way of managing costs.

The recent merger of Don Jonston Inc. and Read-Write Inc, is resulting in the merger of their assistive technology tools into one enhanced product that is integrating the best of both vendors. We are currently in talks with the vendor about costs and strategy related to their new toolkit. We are also in similar talks with Learning Ally about their recently proposed cost increases.

I am not sure if we will see significant savings in this portfolio, but I do believe we will be able to limit significant cost increases.