IMPACT CASE STUDY

Integrating Product Best Practices into Education

[The Aspen Institute's Policy Academy](#) helps community leaders and experts across the political spectrum elevate their voices, influence key decisions, and strengthen democracy from the ground up. We believe that the people closest to problems are best positioned to come up with solutions, so we work to empower citizens to have a say in the decisions that affect them. Our innovative training programs and resources equip people across sectors – from tech to the environment, science to civic engagement – with the skills to shape critical policy efforts. We're building an America where everyone is engaged in our democratic process—and has the power to make a difference.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Aspen Tech Policy Hub Fellows, led by [Nidhi Hebbar](#) and [Madison Jacobs](#), used their Fellowship outputs to found the [EdTech Equity Project](#) in 2020. During the Fellowship, the team developed a racial equity toolkit for artificial intelligence (AI) in edtech, to enable edtech companies to more easily uncover and mitigate bias against systematically marginalized students at each stage of product design and development. The toolkit also provides procurement guidelines for school districts to better assess the impact of edtech products before purchasing. The Fellows then utilized the Hub's lessons in scaling and stakeholder collaboration to launch the EdTech Equity Project nonprofit to help tech companies and K-12 school districts prevent and address bias in edtech products that use AI and machine learning.

BACKGROUND

Nidhi's experience in school organizations and the edtech industry drove her awareness of the need and interest in developing a tangible framework to combat racial bias in edtech products. At the time of this project's creation, there were an increasing number of AI powered tools being used in schools but little work being done to ensure that these tools did not further exacerbate discrimination against Black and Brown K12 students in American schools.

To learn more about this project, please visit aspenpolicyacademy.org.

This problem initially seemed too overwhelming to begin to address, but Nidhi credits the Fellowship with helping her scope the policy challenge and map out meaningful steps to progress the industry forward.

Nidhi and Madison narrowed in on a gap in understanding and conversation between edtech companies, school districts, and students and families. In many cases, schools were not aware which of the tools they were using did or did not utilize AI, let alone whether their algorithms were designed with product equity in mind. Edtech companies leveraging AI and machine learning technology were not aware of the places where bias could come into play in the development and implementation of their products. The Fellows saw a need to better facilitate conversations between these stakeholders in order to ensure that edtech tools could live up to their potential.

> *"The Fellowship continues to influence how I think about complex problems, what kind of work I want to do in my life, and the breadth of opportunities to influence policy."*
>
> *Nidhi Hebbar*

IMPACT

As their final project with the Aspen Policy Academy, Nidhi and Madison published the [AI in Education Toolkit for Racial Equity](#) which guides edtech companies on how to uncover and mitigate bias against systemically marginalized people in each stage of product design and development. They also created the [School Procurement Guide](#) to help school districts and educators ask questions during the procurement process to better understand if an edtech tool they are purchasing was built with equity in mind. Throughout the process, Academy staff assisted the Fellows in identifying gaps in the edtech conversation and devising the tangible outputs to bridge those gaps. Nidhi specifically remembers the Fellowship helping her look beyond traditional white papers to craft uniquely effective outputs that would move the industry forward.

[Digital Promise](#), a national nonprofit working across research and tech to make learning better, approached the Fellows about these cutting-edge tools and invited them to collaborate on developing a [product certification](#). Nidhi and Madison created the product certification based on their project's criteria, standardizing a signal to school districts that an edtech product was designed with equity in mind. To date, many companies have applied for the certification and received guidance and feedback on how to improve — even if they don't yet meet the certification's standards.

The EdTech Equity Project continues to consult with edtech companies and grantmaking organizations to shape how they approach the development of new products. They also received a grant from the Institute of Educational Services to advise a 5-year research study on the impacts of adaptive learning and AI in reading. They will provide consultation on how to assess the impact of their work and expect that the results of this study will be used for future policy changes for schools.