

# Direction Before Devices

*How a Community of Global Educators Built a New Kind of EdTech Tool*



Photos: Guadalajara and Kenya N50 project images

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Somewhere right now, a school leader is staring at a blank purchase order for devices she isn't sure her teachers are ready to use. A community organization is applying for a technology grant before it has articulated what problem it's trying to solve. A district administrator is fielding a donation of hardware for classrooms that don't yet have reliable power.

These are not stories of failure. They are stories of what happens when technology arrives before readiness or when the 'what' comes long before the 'why'.

For the past year and a half, a group of educators, technologists, nonprofit leaders,

for profit companies, and community practitioners convened inside the N50 EdTech for All Initiative, powered by SMART Technologies, with a shared question at the center of their work: What does it take for a school or community to integrate technology meaningfully? They want to go beyond simple procurement of devices and use it in ways that reflect their deepest values and serve their students well.

What emerged from that collaboration is the N50 EdTech Compass, a free, accessible tool designed to help schools and communities understand where they are, affirm what they already have, and find a path forward that is their own.

## The Initiative that Made it Possible

The EdTech for All Initiative grew from a simple but urgent conviction: the global conversation about educational technology has largely left behind the communities that need it most. An estimated 800 million students attend schools not yet meaningfully participating in the digital world. Across 2.7 million schools, in low-resource neighborhoods, rural regions, and underserved communities on every continent, the gap is more than access to devices. It's about the conditions that make technology actually work.

In partnership with SMART Technologies, the N50 Project launched the EdTech for All Initiative to bring together a cross-sector working group of educators, content providers, infrastructure experts, researchers, and implementation specialists.

The goal was to go beyond any single product or approach and collectively name the barriers and build tools that could help communities navigate them.

“From the beginning, this work was never about introducing more technology. It was about creating the conditions for technology to truly make a difference. By focusing on amplifying and evolving existing teaching practices, the initiative helped shift the conversation from what tools are available to how technology can drive meaningful, lasting change in classrooms.”

— Kris Astle, SMART Technologies



Over five working group sessions and dozens of subcommittee meetings spanning more than a year, participants from organizations including SMART Technologies, Learning Upgrade, Little Bridge, Rede Brasileira de Aprendizagem Criativa (the Brazilian Creative Learning Network), and dozens of other global partners engaged in structured inquiry. They named the challenges, from limited infrastructure and power instability, to cultural and language barriers, to the difficulty of sustaining change after a launch moment had passed. They examined active projects on four continents. And they kept returning to a central insight that would shape everything that followed.

## Direction Before Devices

In conversation after conversation, a pattern emerged. When communities received technology before they had clarity about why they were integrating it, things broke down, not always immediately, but eventually. Teachers felt unsupported. Devices sat unused. Well-intentioned tools ended up misaligned with local culture, language, or learning goals. Sustainability challenges were shaky at best.

But when communities started with their values, when they could articulate what

learning should look like, who should be at the center of it, and what success would feel like to them, the tools they chose worked better, lasted longer, and meant more.

This insight has a simple formulation: direction before devices. Or put another way: why before WiFi.

It isn't a dismissal of technology. Quite the opposite. It's an argument that technology, at its best, is an amplifier of human intention. And amplifying intention requires knowing what that intention is.

"We have seen a huge difference in outcomes in our deployments when schools and communities have a clear purpose and goals. For example, in Ghana schools determined that moving students up to grade level in foundational literacy and numeracy were key goals of the EdTech effort. As a result, when our collaborative team deployed Starlink, devices, teacher training, and our online curriculum, students achieved an average of over 30% growth in English and 40% in math in one year."

— Vinod Lobo, Learning Upgrade

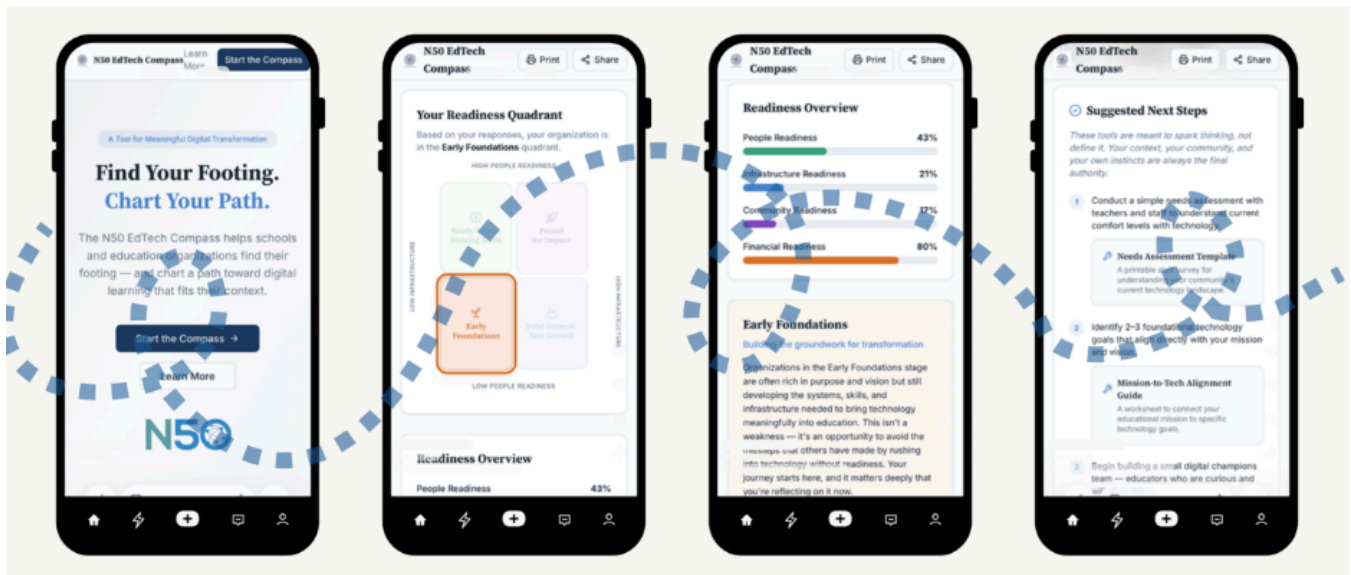
## Building the Compass: A Collaborative Process

The EdTech for All working group formed a dedicated subcommittee to translate this insight into a practical tool. For months, partners dug into four domains of inquiry: teachers and community, infrastructure, digital education, and sustainability, and kept surfacing a foundational question beneath all of them: before any of it could work, a community needed to know its north star.

The mandate was clear: this tool could not feel like an audit. It could not make a school feel like it had failed. It had to be hopeful, empowering, and directional, like a compass, not a checklist.

The result was a framework organized around two intersecting dimensions: people readiness and technology and infrastructure readiness. Together, these dimensions create four quadrants that describe where a school or community might find itself at the start of its EdTech journey.

“Understanding and articulating a variety of local needs and demands for any edtech project is a fundamental step. Yet it can feel overwhelmingly complex, full of contradictions and competing interests. Identifying a top level outcome for the project is a positive way to combine these different elements and turn them into an executable plan.”  
— Emma Rogers, Little Bridge



The N50 EdTech Compass is available free at [n50edtechcompass.lovable.app](https://n50edtechcompass.lovable.app)

## The Four Readiness Quadrants

**Early Foundations** At this stage, users are still building a common vision and the team to champion the work; technology may not be the immediate next step.

**Solid Ground, New Growth** Here, infrastructure is in place, and access to hardware may even be in place, but the people haven't addressed or agreed upon the need to change and they need deeper investment and a clear vision to engage confidently.

**Ready Minds, Missing Tools** Schools at this stage have strong vision and collective capacity, but the tools and infrastructure aren't yet there to match.

**Poised for Impact** In this stage, people and technology are aligned; they are committed to the vision and they have the tools to enact the changes, the work now is to deepen, refine, and sustain.

No quadrant is a judgment. Every quadrant is a starting point.

## What the Compass Does, and Doesn't Do

The EdTech Compass is designed to begin a conversation, not end one. Schools and organizations access the tool, respond to a set of thoughtful questions about their context, and receive placement in one of the four readiness quadrants. From there, the Compass offers reflection prompts, suggested next steps, and crucially, real stories from communities around the world that started in similar places.

These stories are not meant as prescriptions, but inspirations. A school in Nairobi navigating unreliable power has a different path than a community organization in Indianapolis building a digital lab for the first time, which has a different path than an Indigenous school in Canada integrating technology in service of language and cultural revitalization. The Compass doesn't pretend otherwise.

What it does offer is this: the recognition that wherever you are is a legitimate place to begin.

That the assets a community already holds, its teachers, its relationships, its traditions, its values, are the foundation any technology strategy should be built on. The tool is assets-based, not deficit-based. It is directional, not prescriptive. And it is built, by design, to keep the local community at the center.

## An Invitation to Begin

The EdTech Compass is now available, free of charge, to users. We invite school leaders, community educators, nonprofit practitioners, and anyone supporting learning communities in their digital journeys to use the Compass, not to be evaluated, but to be oriented. To find their starting point. To discover that others have stood where they stand and found a way forward that was true to who they are.

And if you want to explore what that path looks like in practice, in collaboration with a network of partners who have spent more than a year thinking about exactly these questions, we invite you to connect with N50.

Technology can be a powerful lever. Let's start with what matters.

**Explore the N50 EdTech Compass:** [n50edtechcompass.lovable.app](https://n50edtechcompass.lovable.app)  
**Connect with N50:** [erin@n50project.org](mailto:erin@n50project.org)

The EdTech for All Initiative is powered by SMART Technologies in partnership with the N50 Project. Contributing partners include Learning Upgrade, Little Bridge, Rede Brasileira de Aprendizagem Criativa, and a global working group of cross-sector collaborators committed to meaningful digital participation for all learners.