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Curriculum Reform in the Nation's Largest School Districts

By Lisette Partelow and Sarah Shapiro August 2018

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Introduction and summary

Curricula and instructional materials are central to academic success. A 2017 literature review of relevant research[1] provided strong evidence that choosing these materials wisely can be a cost-effective lever for states and districts seeking to improve academic achievement.[2] One study of textbook adoption in five states found that use of the most effective textbook—based on achievement results—in fourth- and fifth-grade math correlated with increased student achievement of 0.1 standard deviations. This is as large as the gain from having an experienced rather than a novice teacher.[3] And researchers who analyzed the impacts on student achievement of the most commonly used math textbooks in California found that use of a certain textbook was associated with a similar boost in student performance.[4] Similar research is currently underway for California's English language arts (ELA) and science instructional materials.[5]

While these findings were only correlational, curriculum effects have also been found in studies in which school curriculum was randomly assigned. This makes it more likely that the curriculum itself, rather than other district characteristics, was responsible for the increased student achievement.[6] In fact, when the effect sizes—a measure of magnitude that is comparable across interventions—of various educational interventions are stacked against one another, the effect size of a strong curriculum is larger than that of many other common education reform efforts.[7]

This report first presents existing research on curriculum and instructional materials. It then examines the curricula and instructional materials used by the 30 largest districts in the United States. This analysis employs two publicly available rating systems—EdReports and the Louisiana Department of Education's annotated reviews—to arrive at a snapshot of the current status of the adoption of curriculum reform and instructional materials in the districts.

Analysis from the Center for American Progress finds that 10 of the 25 school districts that responded to the authors' inquiries and are using rated curricula are not using any instructional materials rated highly by either rating system. But a few districts stand out as having adopted highly rated instructional materials: Shelby County Schools in Tennessee, Duval County Public Schools in Florida, Wake

County Public School System in North Carolina, and Jefferson County Public Schools in Kentucky, have adopted or are recommending instructional materials that are highly rated by EdReports and Louisiana's rating tools nearly across the board. The next section of this report highlights the adoption and implementation processes of some exemplar districts.

This analysis also uncovered the difficulty of determining which instructional materials districts are adopting or recommending. Only 18 of the 30 districts provided such information on their websites. Eighteen districts provided information on their websites on the process they undertake when adopting instructional materials. CAP's findings demonstrate that there is more to be done to remove barriers to adoption and implementation of high-quality instructional materials. The final section of this report provides policy recommendations for districts implementing curriculum changes.

For example, districts should make information on curricula and instructional materials publicly available for parents and other stakeholders to access, similar to the way student test scores and other school information are currently available. Districts should also take steps to improve their processes to ensure that their focus is on adopting high-quality materials that are aligned to college-ready standards, such as the Common Core State Standards or other similarly rigorous state standards, and that advance student learning. Finally, adoption is only one of many steps necessary for implementing high-quality instructional materials. In addition to adoption, districts need to provide teachers with content-embedded professional development that gives them the opportunity to delve deeply into the materials and deliver effective instruction based on their curriculum.

Research on curriculum and instructional materials

Buying a higher-quality curriculum can be cost-neutral for districts, as higher-quality options often cost the same as lower-quality ones.[8] And the recent development of high-quality open educational resources (OERs) has made some of the best curricular materials freely available for any district. OERs are materials published using an open content license that allows anyone to use them for free. Importantly, however, printing and other implementation costs can still be substantial.[9]

As mentioned above, research indicates that textbooks and other instructional materials can influence student achievement. And when districts ensure that teachers understand and are comfortable with new instructional materials during implementation, the materials also have the potential to improve teachers' pedagogical skills. In one recent study, teachers who were given lessons designed to encourage problem-solving in real-world situations, as well as support in how to implement these lessons, increased their students' math achievement. Notably, teachers whose ability to raise students' test scores had been lower than that of their peers saw the greatest achievement gains in their students: Using high-quality lessons was associated with a bigger boost in outcomes for their students, likely due to improved teacher performance.[10] High-quality instructional materials can also help boost teachers' content knowledge. This allows teachers to more effectively convey understanding, knowledge, and skills to their students, boosting student achievement.[11]

What's more, adopting high-quality curricula has the potential to lessen the need for teachers to search for or develop their own supplementary materials. According to a K-12 Market Advisors report, teachers in the United States spend an average of 12 hours a week searching for or creating their own materials.[12] In theory, having a high-quality curriculum on which to rely allows teachers to devote their time to the many other important aspects of teaching, such as deepening their content and pedagogical knowledge; developing relationships with students and parents; and analyzing student data in order to adjust instruction. In practice, there are many reasons why teachers with a high-quality curriculum may still choose to supplement it with or use their own materials. Researchers are currently investigating the factors that influence why

teachers may make this choice. This is one reason why curriculum implementation is a much more important and difficult step than the adoption of instructional materials.

One of the promises of broad state adoption of higher, college-ready state standards was that it would be easier for districts to find curricula, textbooks, and other instructional materials that were truly aligned to the standards. Previously, the political predilections of large states such as Texas drove much of what was included in textbooks due to the state's disproportionate market share.[13]

After most states moved to adopt higher standards such as the Common Core State Standards or other similarly rigorous state standards,[14] researchers found that some publishers inaccurately advertised their materials as being aligned. Instead, the researchers found that most textbooks had extraneous material not related to the standards, failed to cover as much as one-fifth of the standards, and did not provide students with opportunities to reach the higher levels of cognitive demand the standards required.[15] The reviews on EdReports.org, a website that aims to function as a "'Consumer Reports' for school materials,"[16] show that while there are options available that meet the expectations for standards alignment, many options still do not—including several popular titles from large publishers.[17]

All told, however, many barriers to adopting high-quality instructional materials have been eliminated. Research indicates that choosing a high-quality curriculum is an important lever with the potential to increase student achievement and improve teaching practice. The cost of better instructional materials is often no higher than the cost of less effective materials, and many available resources can be accessed for free online—though printing and professional development can still be costly.[18] And publicly available ratings of instructional materials can give districts a sense of the quality of various materials that are widely available. There are even several rubrics, such as Achieve's Educators Evaluating the Quality of Instructional Products (EQuIP) rubric,[19] that school districts can use to make their own quality determinations.

Methods and analysis

The information available to districts about the quality and importance of instructional materials has expanded significantly in recent years. Given this, CAP sought to answer the question of what materials districts are currently using and whether those materials are highly rated on publicly available rating systems. This is an important first step in determining what barriers still exist to adopting and implementing high-quality curricula and how they can be overcome.

Analysis design

CAP analyzed the fourth- and eighth-grade math and ELA instructional materials used by the 30 largest districts in the country—those with enrollments of nearly 100,000 or more students. CAP chose large districts as a starting point because they enroll more than 6 million[20] of the nation's 50.7 million[21] public school children. What's more, larger districts tend to have more detailed websites, increasing the likelihood that they would provide information on instructional materials to the public. CAP chose to sample fourth- and eighth-grade materials in order to have both elementary and secondary examples. Because many textbook series have varying ratings across grades, however, had the authors chosen slightly different grades, they would have seen slightly different results.

CAP collected information about which instructional materials these 30 largest districts used—first by looking at websites and then following up by email to confirm or request information that was unavailable. CAP then looked at these materials' ratings on two instructional materials rating systems: EdReports and Louisiana's annotated reviews of curricular resources. While there are a few tools available from other organizations that perform similar functions—such as the Evidence for ESSA ratings produced by researchers at Johns Hopkins University—these two rating systems provide the only publicly available ratings of a wide breadth of curricular materials.

EdReports uses review tools that expert educators develop and requires reviewers to complete a competitive application process and training. EdReports reviews instructional materials in a sequential process—first determining alignment with college-ready standards and then, if criteria for alignment are met, evaluating materials on usability.[22] Instructional materials that do not meet expectations for the former are not reviewed for the latter. One of the ways EdReports displays the results of its reviews online is through a simple graphic of a stoplight to represent alignment ratings, with highly rated instructional materials displayed in green to indicate that they meet expectations; less highly rated shown in yellow to indicate that they partially meets expectations; and those rated least favorably displayed in red, indicating that they do not meet expectations.

The Louisiana Department of Education has created an online review of instructional materials to determine their alignment with the Louisiana Student Standards.[23] This is the only state of which CAP is aware that has created such a comprehensive system to aid its districts in selecting high-quality instructional materials, but its curriculum reform efforts go far beyond just rating materials. After completing its review process and identifying high-quality instructional materials, the Louisiana Department of Education facilitated statewide contracts and state-authorized professional development for implementation. Together, these choices provided a strong incentive for local districts in the state to adopt and implement highly rated materials.[24]

Under Louisiana's rating system, materials rated as Tier 1 met all nonnegotiable criteria and received the highest possible score on all indicators of superior quality; materials rated as Tier 2 met all nonnegotiable criteria and some indicators of superior quality; and materials rated as Tier 3 did not meet one or more nonnegotiable criteria.

Both Louisiana's tier system and EdReports' stoplight graphic group instructional materials into three categories. However, while the criteria each system uses to rate instructional materials are similar, EdReports gives its alignment rating based on a point scale, while Louisiana has a set of so-called nonnegotiable criteria that, if not met, automatically bump instructional materials to Tier 3. For this reason, while the two rating systems are in close alignment with one another, more instructional materials are rated Tier 3 on Louisiana's ratings than are rated as "does not meet expectations" by EdReports.

Limitations and obstacles

In seeking information about district curriculum adoption, CAP encountered several obstacles. First, many districts do not make the curricula or instructional materials they use available on their website; if that information is publicly available, it is

often very difficult to find. CAP contacted by phone or email those districts that did not post the information online, in order to confirm their adopted curricula. Even with repeated attempts, the authors were unable to reach some districts to confirm the information; these districts are included in Table 1 as "not available." Relatedly, even if CAP did obtain information on instructional materials, it often did not know the publication year, specific edition used, or—for OER products—the date the version used was last updated. In these cases, CAP used the ratings of the most recently reviewed editions on EdReports and Louisiana's websites. Sometimes, however, different versions or editions had different ratings.

Second, even if CAP determined which instructional materials a district had adopted, it could not necessarily confirm that teachers are actively using them. Teachers report that they often use district-adopted curricula as one resource among many.[25] Therefore, the district-adopted curriculum can differ significantly from the taught curriculum. This analysis does not provide any insight into the latter.

Third, "high-quality" may be defined differently, depending on local context. There are only a few publicly available ratings of instructional materials, and they have not been without detractors.[26] Louisiana's system is included here, because Louisiana is one of the only states to have undertaken this work at such an extensive level—not because CAP believes that what is best in Louisiana is best for every state. A state such as California, for example, where a much larger share of students are English language learners,[27] has its own standards and requirements for English learners.[28] These would not be reflected in Louisiana's ratings. The authors are not curriculum experts and do not want to wade into debates about the merits of one rating system versus another, but this analysis does use the tools available to get the best possible snapshot of current adoption practices.

Lastly, the current measures of instructional material quality used in this analysis focus more on alignment with existing college-ready standards such as Common Core than on results. There is not yet research on how adoption of materials that are truly aligned to higher standards affects student achievement, because these materials have only recently become available. However, if instructional materials are highly rated on more than one rating system, they are likely aligned to relevant college-ready standards, currently the best proxy for quality.

Results

Table 1 displays instructional materials transparency and ratings for the 30 largest districts in the country.

Adopted and recommended curriculum in the nation's 30 largest school districts

Instructional materials' transparency and ratings, by school district

KEY:

EdReports ratings		Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) Curricular Resources Annotated Reviews ratings		Other	
○ Light green	Does not meet expectations of alignment	○ Light blue	Tier 3	**DC**	District created
● Medium green	Partially meets expectations of alignment	● Medium blue	Tier 2	**NR**	Not rated
● Dark green	Meets expectations of alignment	● Dark blue	Tier 1	**NA**	Not available; district did not respond to request

TABLE 1A

School district	Information available online	Shows textbook adoption process	Fourth-grade math: Meets criteria on EdReports	Fourth-grade math: Meets criteria on LDOE Curricular Resources Annotated reviews	Eighth-grade math: Meets criteria on EdReports	Eighth-grade math: Meets criteria on LDOE Curricular Resources Annotated reviews
New York City Department of Education	✔		**●	**○	**●	**NR
Los Angeles Unified School District	✔	✔	**●	**○	**○ ● ● NR	**○ NR ○ NR
Chicago Public Schools			**● ● ○ ○	**○ ○ ○ NR	**● ●	**○ NR ○ NR
Miami-Dade County Public Schools		✔	●	○	●	○
Clark County School District	✔	✔	○ ○	○ NR	● ●	○ ○
Broward County Public Schools	✔	✔	●	○	●	○
Houston Independent School District	✔		**●	**○	**●	**○
Hillsborough County Public Schools		✔	●	●	●	○
Orange County Public Schools	✔	✔	**●	**○	**●	**○
Palm Beach County School District	✔	✔	●	○	●	○
Fairfax County Public Schools		✔	**●	**○	**●	**○
Gwinnett County Public Schools	✔	✔	●	○	●	○
Dallas Independent School District		✔	●	○	●	○
Wake County Public School System	✔		DC	DC	●	●
Montgomery County Public Schools		✔	DC	DC	DC	DC
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools			NA	NA	NA	NA
School District of Philadelphia	✔	✔	○ ●	○ ●	NR ●	NR ○
San Diego Unified School District	✔		○	○	●	○
Duval County Public Schools	✔		●	●	●	●
Prince George's County Public Schools	✔	✔	○	○	●	○
Shelby County Schools	✔		●	●	●	●
Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District	✔		DC	DC	DC	DC

continues

School district	Information available online	Shows textbook adoption process	Fourth-grade math: Meets criteria on EdReports	Fourth-grade math: Meets criteria on LDOE Curricular Resources Annotated reviews	Eighth-grade math: Meets criteria on EdReports	Eighth-grade math: Meets criteria on LDOE Curricular Resources Annotated reviews
Cobb County School District	✔	✔	● NR	○ NR	●	○
Baltimore County Public Schools		✔	DC	DC	DC	DC
Northside Independent School District			NA	NA	NA	NA
Pinellas County Schools	✔	✔	●	○	●	○
Dekalb County Schools		✔	●	○	NR	NR
Jefferson County Public Schools			**●●●	**●●●	**●●●	**●○ NR
Polk County Public Schools			●	○	●	○
Fulton County Schools	✔	✔	●	○	●	○

TABLE 1B School district	Fourth-grade English language arts: Meets criteria on EdReports	Fourth-grade English language arts: Meets criteria on LDOE Curricular Resources Annotated reviews	Eighth-grade English language arts: Meets criteria on EdReports	Eighth-grade English language arts: Meets criteria on LDOE Curricular Resources Annotated reviews
New York City Department of Education	**NR ●	**●○	**● NR	**● NR
Los Angeles Unified School District	**●●	**NR ○	**●●●	**NR ●●
Chicago Public Schools	**○	**○	**●	**●
Miami-Dade County Public Schools	●	○	●	●
Clark County School District	● NR	○ NR	●●●	● NR ●
Broward County Public Schools	○	○	●	●
Houston Independent School District	**○	**○	**○●	**○●
Hillsborough County Public Schools	○ NR	○ NR	●	●
Orange County Public Schools	**○	**○	**●	**●
Palm Beach County School District	NR; NR	NR; NR	●	●
Fairfax County Public Schools	**DC	**DC	**NR; NR; NR	**NR; NR; NR
Gwinnett County Public Schools	NR; NR	NR; NR	NR; NR	NR; NR
Dallas Independent School District	○	○	●	●
Wake County Public School System	●	NR	●	NR
Montgomery County Public Schools	DC	DC	DC	DC
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools	NA	NA	NA	NA
School District of Philadelphia	●●	○●	●●	● NR
San Diego Unified School District	NR	NR	NR	NR

continues

School district	Fourth-grade English language arts		Eighth-grade English language arts	
	Meets criteria on EdReports	Meets criteria on LDOE Curricular Resources Annotated reviews	Meets criteria on EdReports	Meets criteria on LDOE Curricular Resources Annotated reviews
Duval County Public Schools	NR	NR	●	●
Prince George's County Public Schools	○	○	●	●
Shelby County Schools	NR ○	NR ○	●	NR
Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District	DC	DC	DC	DC
Cobb County School District	NR	NR	○ NR	○ NR
Baltimore County Public Schools	DC	DC	DC	DC
Northside Independent School District	NA	NA	NA	NA
Pinellas County Schools	○	○	●	●
Dekalb County Schools	●	○	○	○
Jefferson County Public Schools	**● NR ● ●	**● ○ NR; NR	NA	NA
Polk County Public Schools	●	○	NR	NR
Fulton County Schools	○ NR	○ NR	NR	NR

Sources: Ed Reports, "Math Reports," available at https://www.edreports.org/math/reports/compare-k8.html (last accessed July 2018); Ed Reports, "ELA Reports," available at https://www.edreports.org/ela/reports/compare-k8.html (last accessed July 2018); Louisiana Department of Education, "Curricular Resources Annotated Reviews," available at https://www.louisianabelieves.com/academics/ONLINE-INSTRUCTIONAL-MATERIALS-REVIEWS/curricular-resources-annotated-reviews (last accessed July 2018). See Appendix for district material sources.

Notes: **Instructional materials listed are recommended by the district, instead of adopted or required. In these districts, principals have discretion on whether to use these recommended materials or other resources. Some boxes have multiple ratings because the district recommends or has adopted multiple curricula for that grade and subject.

The following are some key findings:

- Only 18 of the nation's 30 largest districts post information about their adopted or recommended instructional materials online.
- Twelve of the nation's largest districts do not provide any information about their curriculum adoption process online.
- Ten of the 25 districts whose curricula are known and rated are not using any curricula that are rated highly.
- Twenty-three of the 25 districts whose curricula are known and rated are using or recommending at least one curriculum with a low rating. Wake County Public School System and Duval County Public Schools are the two districts that are not.
- Approximately one-third—30 percent to 36 percent, depending on the grade and subject—of the materials that districts reported adopting or recommending were highly rated by EdReports, meaning that they met expectations for alignment.

There are 37 instances of districts adopting or recommending materials that met expectations for alignment; 51 instances of districts' materials partially meeting expectations for alignment; and 21 instances of districts' materials not meeting expectations for alignment.

- Only 9 percent to 21 percent—depending on grade and subject—of the materials that districts reported adopting or recommending were rated highly—or Tier 1—by Louisiana's annotated reviews. There were 15 instances of districts adopting or recommending Tier 1 materials; 30 instances of districts adopting or recommending Tier 2 materials; and 66 instances of districts adopting or recommending Tier 3 materials.

- Shelby County Schools in Tennessee, Duval County Public Schools in Florida, Wake County Public School System in North Carolina, and Jefferson County Public Schools in Kentucky, stand out as districts that have adopted or are recommending instructional materials that are highly rated nearly across the board.

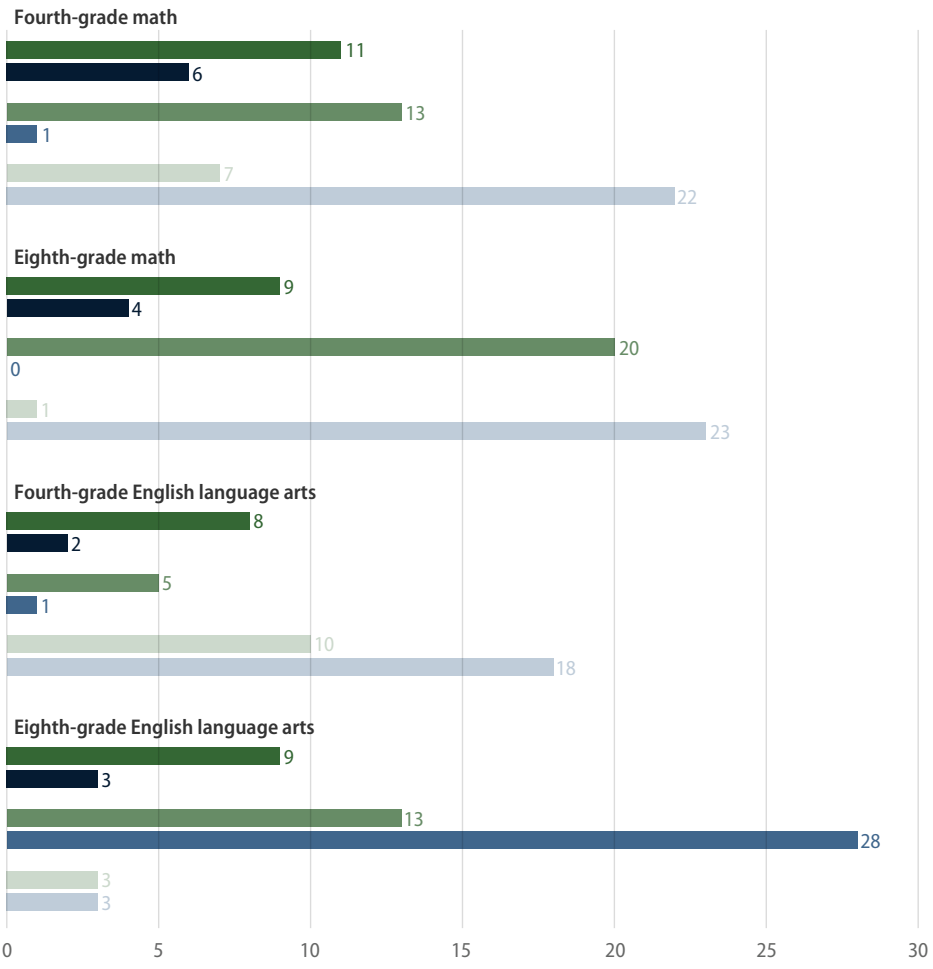
- CAP does not have information about the instructional materials used in several districts. A few districts did not make this information available or respond to requests for instructional material information. Other districts, including Montgomery County Public Schools and Baltimore County Public Schools in Maryland and Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District in Texas, use a district-created curriculum that is not rated by EdReports or Louisiana's review system—although some of these districts have had their curricula rated by external reviewers.[29] Other districts use instructional materials that have not been rated by either rating system. Table 1 marks curricula that have not been reviewed by EdReports or Louisiana as "not rated."

A summary of the results across districts can be found in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1

Instructional materials adopted or recommended by the nation's largest districts vary in quality

Frequency of ratings on EdReports and Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) Annotated Reviews, by grade and subject



KEY:

	EdReports ratings	Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) Curricular Resources Annotated Reviews ratings	
Light green	Does not meet expectations of alignment	Light blue	Tier 3
Medium green	Partially meets expectations of alignment	Medium blue	Tier 2
Dark green	Meets expectations of alignment	Dark blue	Tier 1

Sources: Ed Reports, "Math Reports," available at https://www.edreports.org/math/reports/compare-k8.html (last accessed July 2018); Ed Reports, "ELA Reports," available at https://www.edreports.org/ela/reports/compare-k8.html (last accessed July 2018); Louisiana Department of Education, "Curricular Resources Annotated Reviews," available at https://www.louisianabelieves.com/academics/ONLINE-INSTRUCTIONAL-MATERIALS-REVIEWS/curricular-resources-annotated-reviews (last accessed July 2018). See Appendix for district material sources.

As these results show, most large school districts still have a long way to go in terms of adopting aligned instructional materials. Nearly all of the districts with information available are using at least some instructional materials that are not aligned to the standards that set expectations for what students are expected to know and be able to do. Forty percent of all districts with information available are not using any instructional materials that are highly aligned to these same standards.

Exemplar districts for the adoption of high-quality instructional materials

Despite the challenges highlighted in this analysis, there are many districts that have found ways to adopt high-quality curricula and instructional materials. The following sections describe districts that have worked to do so, including by establishing a transparent adoption process and working with teachers and other stakeholders to support both adoption and implementation. The authors contacted district personnel and technical assistance providers that had worked with these districts to learn about the adoption and implementation processes of the districts featured in this section. In some cases, including the Newport-Mesa Unified School District, there were already written case studies that the authors used to gather information about districts doing good work."

Newport-Mesa Unified School District, California

In 2016, the Newport-Mesa Unified School District in Costa Mesa, California, created an educator-led steering committee appointed by the district, to ensure that the district adopted a high-quality math curriculum for kindergarten through fifth grade (K-5) that had buy-in from the district's teachers. In 2016, the district convened a teacher committee to shorten the list of potential curricula to two options that were piloted by more than 100 teachers in the district.

Using the EdReports rating system, the teachers worked in teams for five to 10 hours a week to analyze and rank curricula. The steering committee prioritized two curricula that were aligned or closely aligned to the California Common Core State Standards and partnered with the Orange County Department of Education to provide a multiday professional development program for 123 teachers who piloted both curricula for seven weeks each. The program also provided the teachers opportunities to assess each program according to alignment, usability, assessment, and technology. Allowing teachers to test curricula in the classroom after undergoing content-embedded professional development provided the district with robust feedback on what worked and what did not work. After eight months of research and piloting, the teachers convened to review evidence,

recommend which curriculum to adopt, and came to a consensus with the district. The district decided to adopt a new K-5 math curriculum that had teacher support and made a commitment to student achievement.[30]

Wake County Public School System, North Carolina

In the Wake County Public School System, which includes the Raleigh area, state funding for textbooks was cut by almost half after the Great Recession in 2009. This made it difficult for the district to implement an adoption process, because it could not afford to buy textbooks for its schools.[31] Other districts faced with these budget difficulties may have stuck with outdated curricula and textbooks, but this district made the best of the situation by adopting two free OER curricula: EL Education, an ELA curriculum published by Open Up Resources and that EdReports rates highly, and the Mathematics Vision Project, a high school math curriculum that is also relatively highly rated on EdReports.

The process started during the 2015-16 school year with a quality review of existing resources to analyze what teachers had access to and where they encountered resource gaps. With the help of a technical-assistance provider, district leadership visited 25 schools, met with teachers, spoke with students and school leaders, and analyzed student work samples. The district discovered that due to budget difficulties after the recession, students did not have access to a rigorous curriculum, and teachers did not have sufficient resources to implement the new state standards. This had led many teachers to spend significant time creating their own materials.[32]

This led the Wake County Public School System to prioritize curriculum adoption. It used rating systems such as EdReports to determine which OERs were high-quality. The district began a communication campaign behind the quality review, so that community members and educators would understand why this change was necessary. It sent out a request for proposals for materials that were standards-aligned, culturally responsive, compatible with existing systems, and low-cost.[33] The district then rated the curricula using the Student Achievement Partners' Instructional Materials Evaluation Tool[34] and EdReports' reviews to prioritize high-quality curricula. Once teachers and district leadership narrowed the list down to two or three recommendations, the district held a series of community input sessions, where parents and students could explore curriculum samples and ask the textbook companies questions.

Ultimately, Wake County Public School System adopted only OER curricula—EL Education and the Mathematics Vision Project. This allowed the district to reinvest the dollars previously spent on textbooks into professional development. It also gave parents, students, and community partners open access to curricular materials; for classrooms that lacked sufficient digital access, the resources were provided in print.

The district also provided five to six days of professional development to any teacher implementing or supporting the new curriculum. District leadership built online communities where teachers could share ideas to continue professional development, as well as designed school and district instructional leadership structures so that administrators could gain a deep understanding of the curriculum content.[35]

Before the 2017 adoption of the OER curricula, some schools in the Wake County Public School System were using textbooks that rated significantly lower than the OERs on EdReports and in Louisiana's tiered system. The hope is that the new curriculum is higher-quality and that teachers feel supported in transitioning to the new instructional materials.[36]

Duval County Public Schools and Pasco County Schools, Florida

In Florida, districts work in a five-year rolling cycle to adopt new curricula. While Duval County Public Schools, which includes the city of Jacksonville, had already adopted a math curriculum for 2015, the district used Achieve's EQuIP rubric[37] to evaluate curriculum quality and determined that its curriculum was not aligned to the state standards. Duval then decided to purchase instructional materials in an earlier year than the state-specified adoption cycle in order to procure Eureka Math materials—also known as EngageNY.[38]

But procurement was just the beginning. Duval dedicated significant time to ensuring that teachers understood and felt comfortable with what was in the materials. District leadership credited obtaining teacher buy-in before procurement, training teachers in the curriculum, and providing curriculum-embedded professional development with increasing teachers' comfort with the materials and reducing deviation from the adopted curriculum.[39] They also said they believe that teacher buy-in to curriculum reforms has contributed to improved student achievement in the district. In two years, grades in third-grade math increased by 6 percentage points, and grades in fourth-grade math increased by 9 percentage points, though there was not an immediate impact on language arts scores.[40]

Duval County Public Schools is now one of five school districts in Florida—the others are Pasco County Schools, Brevard County Schools, School Board of Highlands County, and Broward County Public Schools—working to create professional learning communities (PLCs) built around four-week cycles of content-embedded professional development.[41] This common planning time helps teachers identify opportunities for success and possible challenges in the core text and to dig deeply into the content. Teachers then try this training in practice, while coaches observe to see whether the lesson was successful. Coaches and teachers then use observation data and teacher reflections to determine what went well and what should happen differently next time.

This repeating cycle of team-based, content-embedded professional development has assisted other districts, such as Pasco County, in procuring and implementing high-quality materials. Through this work, Pasco County determined that Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's GO Math! curriculum was not sufficiently standards-aligned and instead rolled out Eureka Math in its six lowest-performing schools. According to Vanessa Hilton, assistant superintendent for student achievement at Pasco County Schools, more than 50 percent of the teacher workforce was alternatively certified, which meant that she believed teachers would need additional support in implementing the new curriculum.[42] Each teacher had two days of professional development in the summer to familiarize them with the materials and the fluency standards. In addition, Pasco County created a module study with two teachers from every school who worked within the PLC to understand the content and train other teachers. As an additional source of support, district leadership also explained the math modules through weekly podcasts.

After implementation, the district surveyed teachers and principals to see if they had experienced any barriers. Pasco also gained community support by making parent resources available for the new math curriculum and providing parent training nights to explain the implementation process. In the 2017-18 school year, Pasco expanded the implementation of Eureka Math districtwide.[43]

Policy recommendations

This analysis is a preliminary dip into which curricula and instructional materials districts are currently using. While the analysis illustrates the current status of these choices, it does little to explain why districts are making these choices. The following policy recommendations are aimed at education stakeholders—such as district leaders—who want to encourage greater adoption and implementation of high-quality instructional materials.

Create systems and policies that facilitate and incentivize good choices

Textbook publishing for K-12 instructional materials brings in $2.8 billion in revenue annually.[44] Like any business, textbook manufacturers' incentive is to continue earning money, and they employ a large sales fleet to help them do so.[45] Districts' needs are different than those of textbook manufacturers; they require high-quality instructional materials that facilitate students' learning, and the less expensive these materials are, the better.

Rather than purchasing materials from the company with the most intriguing sales pitch, districts need to create systems that align their decision-making with their needs. Such a process should be transparent; include opportunities for expert input, including teachers; and heavily weight measures of quality, such as publicly available ratings or a district's own rating created using one of many existing rubrics for determining the quality of instructional materials. Many of the districts featured as exemplars in this report in the above section worked with a technical-assistance provider to help them develop such a process. While the adoption process may look different in each district, every district should have a transparent, explicit process for selection and adoption of instructional materials that incorporates these elements.

State departments of education can also be helpful in this process by providing publicly available rating systems or narrowing the list of choices for districts based on quality. A winnowed list of options or a state-developed rating system can be particularly helpful for smaller districts, which might not have the capacity to do in-depth reviews of the

quality of instructional materials on their own. State departments of education can also create incentives for good decision-making by providing expedited procurement processes, free professional development, and other supports if districts select high-quality instructional materials. As discussed above, Louisiana is a leader in this work, but other states are in the process of developing similar resources.[46]

Problem-solve barriers to adoption

There are several reasons why high-quality instructional materials have not been adopted as frequently as might be expected. First, districts only purchase new curricula every few years, so some may still be using instructional materials adopted under an old process. In textbook adoption states—where the state determines the list of textbooks that districts will be allowed to purchase—there is often a preset adoption cycle. For example, states choose new science textbooks in 2018, new ELA books in 2019, and new math books in 2020.[47] This cycle is often accompanied by corresponding state funds, making it difficult for districts to purchase instructional materials off cycle. Regardless of state funds, switching curricula on an earlier timeline can be unaffordable, as curriculum purchases are costly.

Second, though there are ratings of curricula available for districts to use, it is also important for districts to assess whether a particular textbook or set of materials will work for them. While there are many rubrics to assist with this task, it can be an expensive and time-consuming process even for larger districts and likely prohibitive for smaller ones. There are likely other such barriers as well.

A curriculum audit can be a useful tool for districts to determine if the curriculum is aligned to state standards and if teachers are implementing the adopted curriculum in the classroom. A curriculum audit includes examining documents, conducting interviews, and placing site visits to schools to determine the alignment and quality of teaching, curriculum and learning.[48] This work is often done in partnership with technical-assistance providers, who provide the additional capacity needed to collect and analyze information about the adopted and taught curriculum.

Other districts have looked to tackle some of these quality and cost concerns by adopting high-quality OERs. OERs allow educators to freely download and share instructional materials. According to a study by New America and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), 12 states and Washington, D.C., have developed OERs,

and 14 states have used OERs to connect curricula with professional development.[49] EdReports and Louisiana's annotated curriculum reviews reveal that many of the top-rated instructional materials—including EL Education, Eureka Math, and Illustrative Mathematics—are OERs. In addition to providing high-quality, standards-aligned curricula, OER adoption could potentially reduce district expenditures on purchased instructional materials. As stated above, though, printing costs can still be significant. OER adoption would allow districts to reallocate any remaining savings for other needs, such as professional development related to materials implementation.

Do not stop at adoption

Adoption is just one small part of taking advantage of the promise of high-quality instructional materials. Teachers and other key stakeholders should be engaged from the very beginning of this process, starting with selection and vetting and continuing through the roll-out plan for the new curriculum.

Curricula aligned to higher standards are more demanding for both students and teachers, so teachers need training on how to use the new materials. This includes how to adapt them to their classroom's needs without reducing their rigor or watering down the content, as well as incorporating time to collaborate in content-based professional learning that helps teachers understand the materials deeply and feel comfortable delivering lessons based on them. The training should also help teachers understand the content itself and the reasoning behind how the materials align to college- and career-ready standards. This type of professional development should be a multiyear effort in order to increase the likelihood that teachers will see curriculum changes as a useful tool and an improvement on what was being used previously—and hopefully, help them be excited about using the materials in their classroom.

In addition, since schools and districts more often hold teachers accountable for their interim or summative assessment results than for their adherence to the assigned curriculum, districts must ensure that their assessments are aligned to the curriculum and standards to which teachers are expected to teach.

Increase transparency

Curriculum is central to the education children receive, determining what they are taught and when. What's more, high-quality curricula can potentially increase student

achievement, which means it is important for parents to have access to information about the adopted curriculum at their child's school. Information about the process by which districts select curricula and the adopted curriculum by grade level and subject should be publicly available on district websites, similar to student test scores and other school statistics.

Evaluate effectiveness, not just alignment

Thus far, the existing comprehensive rating systems judge instructional materials on their alignment to high standards rather than their effectiveness. This proxy is useful, particularly since aligned materials were very rare until the past several years.[50] But it is now time for researchers to test these materials more rigorously and determine whether new, aligned materials are in fact driving student learning and achievement gains.

Conclusion

While high-quality instructional materials can be an important policy tool for improving academic achievement, many districts in the country have yet to adopt materials that meet the promise of higher, college-ready standards. Rating systems, including EdReports and the Louisiana Department of Education's annotated reviews, are an important resource to help districts evaluate quality. The prevalence of low-quality materials suggests that many districts face financial, process, or capacity barriers to adopting high-quality curricula and instructional materials.

Increasing transparency around what is taught in school and why and adjusting curriculum adoption processes so that they encourage selection of high-quality options can help incentivize districts to make well-informed choices. In addition, an ongoing process of engaging teachers, supporting them in implementing new curricula, and providing them with the tools to collaborate meaningfully with one another as they familiarize themselves with the associated pedagogical shifts that new materials require should begin at the same time as the adoption process.

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Correction, September 28, 2018: *This report originally provided incorrect information and data about Baltimore County Public Schools' instructional materials. That information has been updated, based on a request from district staff.*

Appendix A: District instructional materials adoption information

APPENDIX TABLE 1

Recommended and adopted instructional materials in the 30 largest school districts

School district	Fourth-grade math curriculum	Fourth-grade English language arts curriculum	Eighth-grade math curriculum	Eighth-grade English language arts curriculum
Baltimore County Public Schools	District created	District created	District created	District created
Broward County Public Schools	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Journeys (supplemented with additional text resources)	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Collections
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Chicago Public Schools	McGraw Hill: My Math; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!; Pearson: enVisionmath 2.0; McGraw Hill: Everyday Mathematics	Pearson: Reading Street Common Core	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!; Pearson: Connected Mathematics Project 3	Pearson: myPerspectives
Clark County School District	Pearson: enVisionmath 2.0; McGraw Hill: Everyday Mathematics	Pearson: ReadyGEN; National Geographic Learning: Reach for Reading	McGraw Hill: Glencoe Math; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Collections; McGraw Hill: Study Sync; Pearson Education: myPerspectives
Cobb County School District	McGraw-Hill: My Math; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Think Math!	Pearson: Good Habits, Great Readers	McGraw Hill: Glencoe Math	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Holt McDougal Literature; Pearson: The Reader's Journey
Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District	District created	District created	District created	District created
Dallas Independent School District	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Journeys; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Write Source	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Collections Student Edition Grade 8
Dekalb County School District	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	McGraw Hill: Wonders	McGraw Hill: Math Connects 3	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Holt McDougal Literature
Duval County Public Schools	Great Minds: Eureka Math	Expeditionary Learning	Great Minds: Eureka Math	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Collections Student Edition Grade 8
Fairfax County Public Schools	ORIGO Education: Stepping Stones	District created	Discovery Education: Math Techbook	Prentice Hall Literature: Timeless Voices, Timeless Themes; Holt-Rinehart: Elements of Literature Second Course; Holt-Rinehart: Elements of Writing Second Course
Fulton County Schools	McGraw Hill: My Math	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Journeys; Pearson: Good Habits, Great Readers	McGraw Hill: Glencoe Math	Pearson: Prentice Hall

continues

School district	Fourth-grade math curriculum	Fourth-grade English language arts curriculum	Eighth-grade math curriculum	Eighth-grade English language arts curriculum
Gwinnett County Public Schools	McGraw-Hill: My Math	Scott Foresman Reading Curriculum Press: Write Direction	McGraw Hill: Glencoe Math	Holt McDougal Littell: The Language of Literature Holt McDougal Littell: The Language Network
Hillsborough County Public Schools	Curriculum Associates: Ready	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Journeys; Heinemann: Explorations in Nonfiction Writing	Mcgraw Hill: Glencoe Math (Pre-Algebra)	College Board: SpringBoard
Houston Independent School District	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	Pearson: Reading Street Common Core	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	Holt McDougal Littell: Literature; College Board: Spring Board
Jefferson County Public Schools	Curriculum Associates: Ready; The Math Learning Center: Bridges in Mathematics; Great Minds: Eureka Math	Pearson: ReadyGEN; Amplify: Core Knowledge Language Arts; American Reading Company: ARC Core; Open Up Resources: EL Education K-5 Language Arts	Illustrative Mathematics: Open Up Resources; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!; CPM: Core Connections	N/A
Los Angeles Unified School District	McGraw Hill: My Math	Benchmark Education: Company Benchmark Advance; McGraw Hill: Wonders	College Board: SpringBoard Middle; CPM: Core Connections; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: California Math	McGraw Hill: StudySync Reading & Writing Companion; College Board: SpringBoard English Language Arts; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: California Collections
Miami-Dade County Public Schools	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	McGraw Hill: Wonders	McGraw-Hill: Glencoe Math	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Collections
Montgomery County Public Schools	District created	District created	District created	District created
New York City Department of Education	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	Expeditionary Learning Education: Expeditionary Learning (as EngageNY); Pearson: ReadyGEN	Pearson: Connected Mathematics Project 3	Expeditionary Learning Education: Expeditionary Learning (as EngageNY); Scholastic SAM Connect: Codex
Northside Independent School District	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Orange County Public Schools	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Journeys	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	College Board: Spring Board
Palm Beach County School District	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	Scholastic: various products; Heinemann: Units of Study for Writing; Schoolwide: various products	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Collections
School District of Philadelphia	Pearson: enVisionmath 2.0; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Math Expressions	Pearson: ReadyGEN; Great Minds: Wit & Wisdom	Pearson: enVisionmath; Big Ideas Learning: Big Ideas Math	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Collections; Mcgraw Hill: StudySync
Pinellas County Schools	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Journeys	McGraw Hill: Florida Math (Glencoe Math)	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Florida Collections
Polk County Public Schools	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	McGraw-Hill: Wonders	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Go Math!	Pearson: FL English Language Arts
Prince George's County Public Schools	Pearson: enVisionmath 2.0	Pearson: Reading Street Common Core	Big Ideas Learning: Big Ideas Math	Pearson Education: myPerspectives
San Diego Unified School District	Pearson: enVisionmath 2.0	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: A Legacy of Literacy	Big Ideas Learning: Big Ideas Math	Prentice Hall Literature: Timeless Voices, Timeless Themes

continues

School district	Fourth-grade math curriculum	Fourth-grade English language arts curriculum	Eighth-grade math curriculum	Eighth-grade English language arts curriculum
Shelby County Schools	Great Minds: Eureka Math	Expeditionary Learning Education: Expeditionary Learning; Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Journeys	Great Minds: Eureka Math	Expeditionary Learning Education: Expeditionary Learning
Wake County Public School System	District created	Open Up Resources: EL Education	Open Up Resources: Illustrative Mathematics	Public Consulting Group: EL Education

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Endnotes

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