



Choosing Wisely:

How States Can Help Districts Adopt High-Quality Instructional Materials

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Curriculum matters. A compelling body of research suggests that content-rich, standards-aligned, and high-quality-curricula-can-have-a-powerful influence-on student-achievement. Education leaders and curriculum vendors have taken notice: more districts and systems leaders are focusing on high-quality instructional materials, and the curriculum market is expanding to include new content developers and a wider variety of options.

But not all curricula are created equal, and school districts often find it difficult to identify and implement high-quality instructional materials, depriving schools, educators, and students of an important resource.

There are many reasons why schools still use low-quality curricula, but we wondered whether state policies play a role. To find out, Chiefs for Change engaged the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy to conduct a nationwide scan of state laws, policies, and approaches to curriculum decision making. The Institute's study finds that most states have no explicit control over curriculum, but rather leave decisions about instructional materials to schools and districts. Within states that *do* exercise some level of formal authority over curricular decisions, adoption policies and practices vary widely. The landscape analysis reveals specific factors that contribute to the persistence of low-quality curricular options including:

→ Outdated state laws governing the adoption of instructional materials. Some laws have gone unexamined for 40 years. This can mean extended procurement cycles, antiquated requirements for

- requests for proposals, unnecessarily restrictive categorical funding, and bid processes that disadvantage innovative vendors.
- → A move toward local control. Many states have begun ceding control over instructional materials to school districts, citing a need for greater local autonomy.
- → Missed opportunities. The level of control that a state has over curriculum decisions matters less than a state's willingness to play an active role. Even among states that do retain some control over curricular choices, the overwhelming majority do not incentivize the use of high-quality options or, even more troubling, include many low-quality options on their lists of approved or recommended curricula. While local oversight offers important advantages, particularly in generating sustained support for new curricula, identifying and implementing high-quality instructional materials is difficult and resource intensive.

Change is possible. Based on research that connects the careful implementation of high-quality instructional materials to positive academic outcomes, Chiefs for Change believes states have a responsibility to create a policy environment that supports and incentivizes the use of high-quality curricula. To be clear, states need not mandate the use of a common curriculum; rather, states should provide the knowledge and expertise necessary to help districts and schools select high-quality options without sacrificing the flexibility and autonomy needed to cater to the uniquely local needs of their communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For All States:

→ Define what "high quality" means for instructional materials and professional development.

- States should set "non-negotiables" that guide the review of materials and vendors. "High quality" means more than merely "aligned to state standards"; materials should be rigorous, relevant, engaging, and coherent, and in the case of English Language Arts curricula, should build content knowledge for students. States should leverage nationally recognized criteria or peer resources to norm reviews.
- State review and vetting processes should be rigorous and clear enough to exclude unaligned and lowquality curricula. States can capitalize on a significant opportunity for improvement by systematically excluding low-quality curricular options.

Create objective rubrics and tools to evaluate instructional materials.

- States should leverage existing curriculum review materials like <u>EdReports</u> and the <u>Louisiana</u> <u>Department of Education's tiered-review system</u>, among others.
- States with formal authority should use these resources in review processes. States without formal authority should encourage districts to use them.

→ Collect, study, and publish data on district curricular choices.

• States can use transparency and evidence to promote and support informed decision making and to nudge districts to adopt high-quality options.

→ Incentivize smart choices.

- States can encourage districts to use high-quality options, through tools such as procurement processes and policies, even without formal authority over district choices. States may, for example, add bonus points to districts' applications for discretionary state funds if the districts have adopted high-quality instructional materials.
- States that incentivize, rather than mandate, the use of high-quality curriculum are likely to see increased buy-in as schools and districts make own their choices. The flexibility to opt-in can increase the personal investment in high-quality curriculum and the desire to see it succeed.

For States with Statutory Control over Curriculum:

→ Use objective criteria and highly trained stakeholders in the review process.

- States must weed out low-quality curricular choices more effectively. They should standardize feedback structures to ensure that the reviews provide an objective assessment of the curricula. This means using explicit and differentiating language in rubrics or scorecards and calibrating the feedback structures to eliminate, to the extent possible, reviewer bias.
- States must conduct holistic reviews using insights from the field. At a minimum, curriculum reviews should include the participation of teachers, principals, content experts, district representatives, and community members. The specific reviewers may change from cycle to cycle depending on the subject or grade levels.

→ Ensure frequent curriculum review cycles.

- States should increase competition as new developers enter the field or vendors improve and review their products.
- States should consider more frequent cycles, especially when new standards are adopted.

→ Provide professional development to support teachers as they implement state-approved materials.

- States that provide aligned professional development or that support districts to provide it can further increase the fidelity of implementation and positive impact of high-quality curriculum on students' learning. Without such instructional support, teachers tend to return to earlier pedagogical habits and thus lose the impact of new, higher-quality materials.
- States should consider developing or using existing teacher leadership networks to help customize professional learning to specific curriculum, provide better insight into the needs of the local student populations, embed opportunities for ongoing professional learning directly in the classroom, and create leadership opportunities for teachers.
- States can create marketplaces for supplemental materials and resources and leverage vetted and reviewed exemplars.
- States can support districts by negotiating professional development contracts with curriculum vendors.

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ABOUT CHIEFS FOR CHANGE

Chiefs for Change is a bipartisan network of diverse state and district education chiefs dedicated to preparing all students for today's world and tomorrow's through deeply committed leadership. Chiefs for Change advocates for policies and practices that are making a difference today for students, and builds a pipeline of talented, diverse Future Chiefs ready to lead major school systems.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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THE VALUE OF HIGH-QUALITY CURRICULUM

A POWERFUL TOOL TO BOOST STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

<u>Curriculum matters</u>. While a <u>recent study</u> suggests that changes to curriculum alone, without adequate implementation support or professional development, may not yield significant gains in student achievement, ample research shows that content-rich, standardsaligned, and high-quality curricula positively impact student achievement. A 2017 report from StandardsWork, for example, showed that curriculum is a critical factor in student academic success. Likewise, studies reviewed and deemed rigorous by the What Works Clearinghouse show the positive impact of high-quality curricula on academic achievement, with increases of as much as 10 percentile points in reading and 23 percentile points in math. Still other studies have shown that high-quality instructional materials, especially when paired with appropriate professional development, can even mitigate ineffective teaching, such that the "effect [of using high-quality curricula] on learning was about the same as moving from an averageperforming teacher to one at the 80th percentile." Professional learning is crucial: one study found that, on average, teachers receive little more than a single day of support per year to implement curriculum, and as a result of such scant professional development, large numbers of these teachers either did not implement the curriculum or watered it down.

HIGH IMPACT, LOW COST

High-quality, research-backed curricula can improve student outcomes with very little added cost to districts because, as noted by a <u>Brookings Institution report</u>, there is little difference in cost between "more vs. less effective curricula." <u>Another report</u> notes that the "marginal cost of choosing a more effective textbook over a less effective alternative is essentially zero" and that "non-trivial gains in student achievement are attainable simply by choosing more effective curriculum materials." Still another <u>report</u> explains that "the average cost-effectiveness ratio of switching curriculum was almost 40 times that of class-size reduction." In other words, high-quality instructional materials are a high-impact, low-cost intervention.

"[T]here are minimal differences between the costs of purchase and implementation of more vs. less effective curricula. In contrast, the other policy levers reviewed here [charters, reconstituting the teacher workforce, and preschool programs] range from very to extremely expensive and often carry with them significant political challenges."

> - <u>Don't Forget Curriculum,</u> Grover J. "Russ" Whitehurst Brookings Institution

TIME IS MONEY

A hidden expense of low-quality curricula is opportunity cost: without access to high-quality instructional materials, teachers dedicate significant time to searching for curricular resources, time that could be better spent in other ways. A 2017 survey found that teachers spend approximately 12 hours a week looking for, or creating, their own instructional materials. If given access to high-quality materials, teachers could instead use this time to deepen their own content knowledge and to differentiate materials to meet students' diverse needs.



THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE: MANY STATES DO LITTLE TO ENSURE QUALITY

Given the importance of high-quality curricula, it should follow that schools, districts, and states are making every effort to ensure that students have access only to proven, effective instructional materials. But the prevalence of low-quality curricula is well known and documented. With the widespread adoption of rigorous, college- and career-ready standards, why have states failed to ensure a commensurate move toward high-quality curriculum?

To better understand how states approach curriculum decisions, Chiefs for Change engaged the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy to conduct a nationwide scan of state laws, policies, and approaches to curriculum decision making. As a baseline, we knew, according to information from 2015, that states were increasingly ceding power to districts to make their own curricular decisions. At that time, 19 states were classified by the Association of American Publishers as "adoption states"—or states with the authority to review instructional materials and produce an official list of "approved" textbooks and curricula. In addition, several "adoption states" had instituted new policies that weakened state-level adoption authority.



The landscape analysis of the most recent curriculum adoption cycles confirmed these trends and revealed additional insights. First, it showed that many states have little or no control over curriculum, and those that do often defer entirely to districts or have cumbersome, outdated approaches to state adoption and approval. Second, the scan indicated that the degree to which a state has formal, legal authority over curriculum is not correlated with the use of high-quality instructional materials. Finally, the analysis highlighted the fact that most states, regardless of whether they have legal authority over curriculum, have missed opportunities to promote the use of effective curricula and safeguard against the use of low-quality options.

OUTDATED LAWS, DELEGATED AUTHORITY

The scan revealed that a majority of states have no specific policy addressing instructional materials. Of the 21 states that do have formal processes for the approval, adoption, or procurement of instructional materials, 17 exercise formal control, and the remaining four delegate decision making to districts with no state oversight.

Of the 17 states with formal authority over curricular decisions, the level of control varies significantly.

Six states maintain a high level of control over curricular decisions in two ways:

- → They mandate that districts choose specific materials and provide very limited exemption/waiver policies.
- → They restrict spending allotments, meaning that they require a specified percentage of state funds be allocated for state-approved options only.

Of these six, Nevada¹, South Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia² maintain approval rights for all instructional materials used in the state and require districts to secure a waiver or submit non-approved texts for state review. Oklahoma and New Mexico require that 80 percent and 50 percent, respectively, of state funds be used on state-approved instructional materials.

Seven states offer more flexibility for districts to select instructional materials. California, Florida, Virginia, Alabama, and Utah also allow districts to make curricular

¹ Nevada's policies do not apply to the estimated 39 charter schools (as of SY 2016-2017 data from the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools) that are operating in the state.

² Effective July 1, 2019, West Virginia state law will devolve adoption authority to counties.

choices, as long as their adoption processes meet certain state-defined criteria for stakeholder engagement or curricular quality. Louisiana, without any state mandates, has developed a tiered-review system and incentivizes districts to use the highest-rated materials. In 2018, under the leadership of Chiefs for Change member and then-State Superintendent of Public Instruction Steve Canavero, Nevada followed suit and adopted a policy to categorize instructional materials according to quality.³

Often, states with low control over district curricular choices neither restrict district choice nor provide incentives to select the best materials. North Carolina and Texas, for example, offer only loose guidance that districts can choose to heed or ignore, with no statutory consequences.

Mississippi, on the other hand, has begun to take a more active role in ensuring the use of high-quality instructional materials, despite the state having limited authority over local curriculum decisions. Last year, under the leadership of State Superintendent Carey Wright, a member of Chiefs for Change, Mississippi began to overhaul its approach to curriculum adoption. Recognizing the importance of curriculum as a tool to better reach underserved students and improve instruction, Dr. Wright sought to take a deeper look into the quality of the instructional materials used in Mississippi. She and her team have not focused merely on surface-level alignment to state standards, but also have begun to examine aspects like the richness

of the content, the complexity of the texts used in English Language Arts (ELA), and the sequencing of concepts in math. Mississippi developed a series of high-quality instructional materials "review rubrics" to assess curricula, and has realized the value of state-level incentives, such as procurement policies, in encouraging districts to choose wisely when adopting curricula.

STATE-LEVEL AUTHORITY IS NOT CORRELATED WITH CURRICULAR QUALITY

Assessing the quality of instructional materials is a science, not an art, and one that is often best left to experts. One such expert, EdReports, a nationally recognized independent reviewer, offers the public a growing list of vetted instructional materials with high to low ratings on several important metrics. The scan revealed that, across the board, the degree of state control fails to drive the adoption of highly rated instructional materials or to disqualify low-rated ones. Among the 17 states with some degree of control, four approved only low-rated curricula in their latest adoption cycle. Just one state, Louisiana, approved only high-quality K-8 curricula.

Among the 17 states with formal authority over curricular decisions, the scan found that states with high levels of control were not consistently adopting high-quality materials and protecting against lower-quality materials.

³ See memorandum on "New Adoption Process for Instructional Materials for Educators," available online at: http://www.doe.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/ndedoenvgov/content/News_Media/Guidance_Memos/2018/GuidanceMemo18-11NewAdoptionProcessforInstructionalMaterialsforEducatorsPhaseI.pdf.

CURRICULA APPROVED IN THE MOST RECENT ADOPTION CYCLE

Of the 17 states that maintain a list of approved or recommended curricula, some do better than others in identifying high-quality materials, regardless of their level of control over districts' decisions.

State	Degree of State Control	# Highly Rated K-8 Curricula Approved by State in Last Curriculum Review Cycle	# Weak K-8 Curricula Approved by State in Last Curriculum Review Cycle	Most Recent Curriculum Review Cycle
Louisiana ⁴	Medium	11	0	Annual, ongoing
Nevada ⁴	High	5	5	Annual, ongoing
Alabama	Medium	0	12	2014
California	Medium	3	8	2015
Florida	Medium	0	2	2014
Idaho	Medium	4	10	2016
Mississippi	Low	3	14	2016
New Mexico	High	1	14	2015
North Carolina	Low	0	5	2018
Oklahoma	High	3	10	2017
Oregon	Medium	3	10	2016
South Carolina	High	0	9	2018
Tennessee ⁵	High	3	8	2016
Texas ⁶	Low	2	10	2018
Utah	Medium	9	8	Annual, ongoing
Virginia	Medium	3	6	2017
West Virginia	High	3	5	2017

Source: American Association of Publishers; state websites.

⁴ Louisiana and Nevada maintain lists of recommended instructional materials and provide incentives for districts to choose from among the materials included on the state's list.

 $^{5\ \} Tennessee's \underline{most\ recently\ published\ information}\ on\ textbook\ adoption\ indicates\ that\ the\ state\ will\ conduct\ a\ review\ cycle\ for\ ELA\ in\ 2019.$

⁶ Texas conducted an ELA review in 2018. According to <u>Proclamation 2019</u>, however, the state's previously reviewed materials will remain in use through 2020.

MOST STATES MISS OPPORTUNITIES

STATES WITH FORMAL AUTHORITY OVER CURRICULUM STILL STRUGGLE

Even when states retain explicit statutory control over curricular choices, many do not prevent the use of poor instructional materials. There are several reasons for this:

- → Unclear and subjective review processes. The rubrics governing selection and approval are not specific enough to differentiate between varying levels of quality or to identify clear alignment to state standards. A rubric, for example, may state that a curriculum "meets expectations" if it provides a specified component "most of the time," while it "does not meet expectations" if it provides the component "some of the time." Such a subjective measure is susceptible to reviewer bias or fatigue. Curriculum review processes should provide clearer, more objective measures of quality that can reduce reviewer error or bias.
- → Improperly trained or unqualified reviewers. Adoption cycles are time- and resource-intensive, requiring states to invest a great deal in the human capital needed to review and select materials. In an ideal world, states would have unlimited access to content experts to do this work. Too often, however, the reviewers involved in curriculum vetting have not received adequate training; selection committees may be composed entirely of well-meaning members who have no content, teaching, or even education expertise. Instead, the vetting processes should involve content experts, instructional coaches, and teachers, as well as community members. This will increase the likelihood that low-quality curricula will be excluded and help fuel stronger implementation of the curricular materials that are approved.
- → A bias in favor of larger publishers. As the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy found in a 2018 report, large publishing companies have more resources and entire departments dedicated to submitting requests for proposals (RFPs) and to lobbying to maintain their competitive advantages. Smaller developers, on the other hand, have limited resources with which to respond to overly bureaucratic RFPs or to support widespread implementation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CURRICULUM REVIEW CYCLE

States should ensure frequent curriculum review cycles, especially when new standards are adopted, new developers enter the field, or vendors review and improve their products. Since 2017, eight states have conducted and implemented the results of curriculum reviews. These states adopted 34 highly rated curricula, approximately 4.2 per state. By contrast, the eight states whose curricula were updated in 2016 or before only approved 17 highly rated curricula—two per state. Two states have recently conducted or are in the process of conducting curriculum reviews, but implementation has not yet occurred.



THE PATH FORWARD

States are uniquely positioned to ensure that students have access to the best possible instructional materials. Whether or not a state possesses direct control over curriculum decisions, its policies and influence can make better choices more likely.

Louisiana is a case in point. Under the leadership of State Superintendent of Education John White, board chair of Chiefs for Change, the state has approved the largest number of highly rated curricula and has consistently weeded out low-rated curricula. Louisiana's initial two-year pilots for its review process led ultimately to the state legislature's elimination of the bureaucratic textbook selection and approval process.

QUALITY AS A FIRST STEP

Louisiana's groundbreaking approach to reviewing and rating curricula is the backbone of the state's success in transitioning to the widespread adoption of high-quality instructional materials. The state's tiered system ranks curricula from Tier 1-3, with Tier 1 being the highest quality and Tier 3 meaning curricula do not meet all review non-negotiables. School districts have the final say on which instructional materials to use. The state's tiered list is only guidance to support local school districts in making their own local, high-quality decisions.

DILIGENT AND METHODICAL

Louisiana has invested heavily in designing a rolling review process in which vendors, small and large, can submit materials for review by committees made up of Louisiana Department of Education grade and content experts and teacher leaders. The state's reviews have led to high adoption rates of materials from the recommended list; the reviews are also used as a national benchmark and cited by experts and <u>thought leaders</u>.

PROVIDING INCENTIVES

The Louisiana Department of Education couples its tiered system with several levers that incentivize districts and teachers to adopt Tier 1 materials. One such lever is procurement: the state only enters into procurement contracts for Tier 1 materials and with vendors who provide Tier 1 professional development. These materials and related training programs are then available to districts at a relative discount, since the districts save time and money not running their own procurement processes. Under this approach, districts are free to choose and purchase their own materials-including those from Tier 2 or Tier 3. However, if they choose resources other than those on the Tier 1 list, they must do so through a local procurement process. There is no financial incentive, therefore, for districts to choose lowquality materials.

Louisiana mobilizes educators through incentives as well. The state has leveraged teachers by including them on the review committees. Louisiana trains a group of approximately 75 Teacher Leader Advisors from across the state who liaise between districts and the Department of Education and lead professional learning aligned to the Tier 1 materials. These efforts quadrupled the number of districts using exclusively Tier 1 materials from 20 percent to more than 80 percent between 2012 and 2017.



RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR ALL STATES:

- → Define what "high quality" means for instructional materials and professional development.
 - States should set "non-negotiables" that guide the review of materials and vendors. "High quality" means more than merely "aligned to state standards"; materials should be rigorous, relevant, engaging, and coherent, and in the case of ELA curricula, should build content knowledge for students. States should leverage nationally recognized criteria or peer resources to norm reviews.
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 buy-in as schools and districts make own their
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 personal investment in high-quality curriculum and
 the desire to see it succeed.

States and districts that employ incentives for the adoption of high-quality curriculum provide:

- → Financial Supports: Adjust procurement policies to favor high-quality choices (more details below); develop state-level pricing contracts with vendors; establish common depositories to lower transportation and year-over-year costs; leverage Title I and Title II funds tied to high-quality instructional materials; add high-quality curriculum as priority criteria in competitive grant programs; and market the reduced resource burden of curriculum review processes.
 - Procurement Policies: Require a percentage of state funds to go toward high-quality, approved options. Oklahoma, for example, requires districts to use at least 80 percent of instructional materials funds on state-approved materials.
 - This step requires that a state has already created the capacity and mechanisms by which to identify and approve high-quality materials. Otherwise, restricting procurement becomes a detriment, especially for small or rural districts that do not have access to other funds, such as local bonds or philanthropy.
- → Supports for Districts: Provide professional learning for district teams on how to choose an appropriate curriculum; ensure district participation in state-level reviews; publish the review resources on approved instructional materials; develop parent resources for districts to disseminate; and create networks for those using the same vendors.
- → **Teacher Supports:** Develop aligned professional learning structures for high-quality choices; create learning guides aligned to approved instructional materials; negotiate state-level professional learning contracts with vendors; and set up teacher leadership networks to support professional learning aligned to the high-quality curricula.

FOR STATES WITH STATUTORY CONTROL OVER CURRICULUM:

- Use objective criteria and highly trained stakeholders in the review process.
 - States must weed out low-quality curricular choices more effectively. They should standardize feedback structures to ensure that the reviews provide an objective assessment of the curricula. This means using explicit and differentiating language in rubrics or scorecards and calibrating the feedback structures to eliminate, to the extent possible, reviewer bias.
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APPENDIX

SELECTED HIGHLY RATED CURRICULA BY STATE IN RECENT REVIEW CYCLE

State	ELA	Mathematics
Louisiana	 American Reading Company, "ARC Core, ELA" (K-2) Amplify "Amplify Core Knowledge, Language Arts" (K-5) Great Minds, "Wit and Wisdom," (K-2) Learn Zillion Guidebooks, ELA (6-8) 	 Learn Zillion, Illustrative Mathematics, (6-8) Zearn Inc., Zearn Math (1-5) The Math Learning Center, Bridges in Mathematics (K-5) The College Board, Springboard Math (9-11)
Utah	 Pearson, "My Perspectives," (6-8) Odell Education "Developing Core Literacy Proficiencies" (6-8) McGraw Hill, "Study Synch" (6-8) 	 Great Minds, "Eureka Math" (K-8) University of Utah, Utah Middle School Math Project, (7-8)
Nevada	Pearson, "My Perspectives" (6-8)Pearson, "Ready Gen" (3-6)	 The Math Learning Center. "Bridges in Mathematics" (K-5) Great Minds, "Eureka Math" (K-8)
West Virginia	Great Minds "Wit and Wisdom," ELA (K-2)	Open Up Resources, "6-8 Math"Discovery Education, "Math Techbook," (6-8)
Idaho	• Pearson, "Ready Gen" (3-6) Pearson, "My Perspectives" (6-12)	
Mississippi	Amplify, "Amplify ELA" (6-8)McGraw Hill, "Study Synch," (6-8)Pearson, "My Perspectives" (6-12)	
Oklahoma		• Great Minds, "Eureka Math" (K-8)
Oregon	 College Board "Springboard English Language Arts" (9-12) 	Agile Minds "Agile Minds Mathematics" (K-12)
Tennessee		 Agile Minds "Agile Minds Mathematics" (K-6) Great Minds "Eureka Math" (K-8) The College Board, "Springboard Math" (9-11)
California	 Amplify "Amplify, Core Knowledge Language Arts" (K-5) McGraw Hill, "Study Synch" (6-8) 	
New Mexico	• Great Minds, "Wit and Wisdom" ELA (K-2)	
Texas	Pearson, "Ready Gen" (3-6)Pearson, "My Perspectives" (6-12)	
Virginia	Pearson, "My Perspectives" (6-8)McGraw Hill, "Study Synch" (6-8)	

Sources on ratings: Louisiana Department of Education; EdReports Sources on materials: State websites