



Content coach Tracy Smith, far right, works with teachers in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, as they unpack 2nd-grade math, numbers, and operations in base 10 at Instruction Partners' standards boot camp.

# STEP BY STEP

PREPARATION AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SUPPORT  
IMPLEMENTATION OF QUALITY MATERIALS

BY EMILY FREITAG

**P**icture a school district where the majority of students read below grade level. The district adopted a new English language arts curriculum anchored in complex texts and analytical writing tasks, chose a curriculum, ordered the materials, and hosted a half-day training for teachers.

As they began to teach with the new

curriculum, teachers adapted materials in an effort to meet their students at their current reading level. Teachers often read sections aloud or switched out texts for versions that students could read on their own more easily.

If students struggled to answer questions, teachers frequently stepped in with a response or made up new questions, many of which asked students to recall information from the text rather than analyze it.

At the end of the year, students' test scores showed no increase, and teachers felt frustrated that they'd worked through the curriculum change without results. The principals and community knew how hard teachers were working and blamed the curriculum as the problem.

## **A FAMILIAR STORY**

The hypothetical case above is all too familiar to scores of school and

system leaders who have attempted to improve student learning by adopting a new curriculum.

Through our work consulting and supporting teachers in hundreds of schools and more than 3,000 classrooms, we know that the situation we've described is not an anomaly. Everywhere we work, leaders and educators struggle to implement new curriculum effectively.

As this illustration demonstrates, the implementation of quality curricular tools isn't as easy as completing a purchase order. As we have learned from the educators we work with, teachers need frequent and ongoing professional development to understand, internalize, and effectively use curriculum.

Implementing new curriculum will likely result in shifting time and focus for both teachers and leaders. Teachers move from writing their own plans to preparing, internalizing, and adjusting materials. Leaders change what they monitor and where they focus.

Knowing that these shifts are often challenging, my colleagues and I launched an action research project to study the curriculum implementation stories of districts across the United States. (See below.) We wanted to understand the common stumbling blocks to effective curriculum implementation so we could create tools for schools to anticipate and overcome them.

Through this research project, we found that when curriculum implementation fails to live up to expectations, there are four common culprits:

- Teachers and principals have different ideas about what good instruction looks like, which leads to mixed messages about the curriculum.
- Leaders are engaged in curriculum adoption, but teachers are left out.
- Leaders and teachers are so strict in their fidelity to the curriculum that they fail to



**“Spending time during professional development to look at professional materials is crucial. This practice allows teachers to become critical consumers of the curriculum. Being a critical consumer empowers you to tailor lessons so that they fit the needs of all scholars.”**

— *Katina Allen, Aspire Public Schools*

meet students' needs; students struggle; and, ultimately, everyone rejects the materials.

- Teachers' well-intended adaptations get out of hand and dilute the rigor of the materials.

The good news is that there are replicable actions districts can take to avoid these common hazards.

## CURRICULUM SUPPORT

In an effort to support our partner districts in navigating around curriculum stumbling blocks, we have codified the best practices we have seen and developed a set of tools to help

## ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

**A**fter interviewing more than 50 school and system leaders (representing 70 schools across 16 states) who had recently switched to high-quality curriculum materials, we gathered input about what worked, what was hard, and what they wished they had done differently. We also reviewed existing research on curriculum implementation.

Then, we connected with a group of leaders in the middle of selection and/or implementation and pooled their collective learning. This helped us craft a road map of key decisions and hot spots, which we tested with districts. Finally, we shared our work with peer organizations and education policy leaders with a broader view of the curriculum landscape to get their input.

schools intentionally use those best practices. The compilation of these tools is a curriculum support guide, which provides a collection of key actions and decision points.

The curriculum support guide is organized in three key phases, each of which has a specific set of steps.

#### **Phase 1: Select great materials.**

Not surprisingly, schools need to have high-quality materials if they are to benefit from curricula. To make good choices, school leaders need to build knowledge of state standards to ensure alignment, determine specific curriculum needs, manage the selection process in an organized and effective way, and procure the materials.

#### **Phase 2: Prepare to launch.**

Successful schools don't simply jump into new curricula. Effective implementation requires taking the time to plan. More specifically, schools should set clear goals for teachers and students; determine key roles and responsibilities in the roll-out process; plan for the scheduling, pacing, and use of materials; plan for assessment and grading; establish systems for supporting leaders; and establish systems for supporting teachers.

**Phase 3: Teach and learn.** The goal of this phase is to reflect on the support teachers and leaders need in using the curriculum to inspire great instruction and increase student learning. It focuses on using a deliberate approach to getting feedback from teachers and leaders as well as looking at student performance data to identify what's working and what's not. This phase continues over time as teams review daily and quarterly indicators as well as planning for the summer and next school year.

### **SPECIFIC STEPS**

Within each phase, there are a number of different steps for leaders to consider. To support school systems in taking those steps and using the

framework, we are building a set of tool kits that match each of the steps.

The Instruction Partners' Curriculum Support Guide, an online repository of these tool kits, will launch in January. It will include:

- Key actions to plan for each step;
- Guiding questions to help drive decision-making;
- Critical advice from districts who have done this;
- Indicators of success and common pitfalls at each step; and
- Resources to support the work of each step, including sample meeting agendas, written communications, professional development materials, and checklists.

We shared one of these tool kits in our recent white paper about the importance of curriculum implementation and the development of our framework (see <https://instructionpartners.org/resources/curriculum-white-paper>). This first tool kit focuses on the step in Phase 2 called Determining Key Roles and Responsibilities.

During our interviews, district leaders frequently discussed the challenges of discerning the most important work to be done and who is best positioned to do it. For example, if the district doesn't identify who can approve requests for curriculum modifications, then either no one will approve requests or everyone will approve requests — neither of which is ideal when trying to ensure consistency across a system. The tool kit helps schools make these decisions so that such circumstances do not occur.

### **ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS**

The most successful districts we interviewed described some common themes about their work.

**These districts use data to find, celebrate, learn from, and replicate successful practices across classrooms and schools.** They also use data to identify curriculum goals that are not being met. Throughout the curriculum implementation process, districts refine their goals, their approaches to supporting teachers and leaders, and their policies and systems (e.g. grading and assessment).

**To be successful, teachers must have practice doing the math and reading the texts themselves.** Although it may be overwhelming to get through that sheer volume of content, to internalize and execute it effectively, educators must invest the time.

**Frequent and ongoing professional learning is essential for strong implementation,** as is having an experienced teacher-leader collaborating with and supporting staff on the content and pedagogy. Interviewees also prioritized consistent support from the school and district administration that reflects a vision of success.

**Having strong materials allows educators to invest their time on relevant content work** and analyzing student data to inform intervention approaches, as opposed to searching the internet for unvetted resources.

### **REALIZING BEST INTENTIONS**

High-quality instruction doesn't happen without intense commitment and thoughtful deliberation from educators. Districts can support teachers by showing that same commitment and thoughtfulness as they implement a new curriculum. When they do, great things can happen for teachers and students.

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