



# PUT LEARNING IN HIGH GEAR

COHERENCE  
ACCELERATES  
LITERACY  
CURRICULUM  
GOALS

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In 2016, the Wake County Public School System in North Carolina, the nation's 15th-largest school district, confronted two dilemmas common in U.S. education.

First, a quality review had revealed weaknesses in its literacy curriculum. Although curriculum can have profound effects on student learning, not all curricula are rigorous and engaging (Steiner, 2017).

Second, Wake struggled with professional learning for new literacy standards and practice shifts. Research has found that teaching expertise is the most important factor in school effectiveness, but few teachers believe their professional learning is effective

(Wiener & Pimentel, 2017; TNTTP, 2015).

To address these difficulties, Wake adopted EL Education's open-source 3-8 language arts instructional model. This model integrates a standards-aligned curriculum aimed at challenging, engaging, and empowering students with paced assessments, detailed teacher resources, and an embedded professional learning approach.

The result — if implemented well — is a coherent approach to instruction that Kathy Toma, Wake's senior administrator for middle school English language arts, calls "a paradigm shift in pedagogy."

Given the transition's scope, Wake

planned to phase it in over three years, adding two grade levels each year. Yet after several months, eight in 10 teachers believed the materials advanced the district's instructional vision effectively (Brown, 2019). Things were going so well for students that district leaders knew they couldn't wait to expand implementation, says EL Education's Wendy Hodgson.

Educators in the district were excited by students' engagement in English language arts classes. Building on this excitement and lessons learned, Wake expanded EL Education's model from 3rd and 6th grade to all grades 3-8 in 2018-19 — a year ahead of schedule.

Wake's experiences — and

their similarities with those of four other districts whose approaches we examined — blaze a trail for other districts seeking to accelerate teacher development and student success. This trail can lead to powerful results but requires a thoughtful approach to material adoption, implementation, and teacher professional learning.

### AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

EL Education’s model, like others that embody college- and career-ready standards such as Illustrative Mathematics and Core Knowledge, reflects an ongoing evolution in the field.

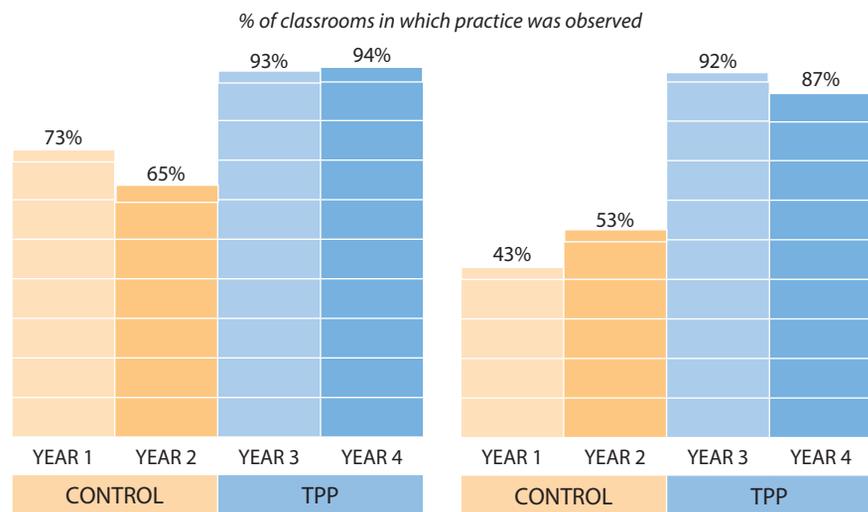
Curricula, assessments, and professional learning have long been important. But despite decades of research urging alignment, they have generally been pursued independently. Now, there’s a growing push to integrate them as a coherent approach that involves and empowers teachers from the start.

The materials reflect this shift. In many curricula, most content is student-facing. In these models, estimates EL Education’s CEO Scott Hartl, up to 80% of materials are teacher-facing and aim to support teacher learning. The idea is that teachers develop knowledge that improves pedagogy as they use the materials, sometimes called educative materials.

For example, EL Education’s phonetics lesson guides explain how reading and spelling tasks are designed to mutually reinforce students’ development of each skill. Yet according to a 2017 review, “Educative curriculum features can support change in teacher practice, but if the educative features are part of a professional

### TEACHER USE OF BEST PRACTICES

Teachers in EL’s Teacher Potential Project made more use of best practices than teachers in a control group.



Teachers regularly had students write citing evidence or information from a text they had read.

Students sometimes or often engaged in higher-order thinking.

Source: Choi, Richman, & Dolfin, 2018.

learning system in which the parts work synergistically, the impact can be greater” (Krajcik & Delen, 2017).

The results of coherence can be impressive. A randomized trial found that EL Education’s Teacher Potential Project, which matches materials with materials-aligned professional learning, significantly improved teaching practices within one year, with sustained gains compared to a control group that did not participate in the program (see chart above) (Choi, Richman, & Dolfin, 2018).

Of course, impact also depends on execution. The nonprofit Instruction Partners surveyed curriculum implementations and found that implementation is easy to do poorly — especially if there is insufficient

attention to planning — and often leads to great frustration.

Districts are finding that success with aligned materials and professional learning requires rethinking standard procedures. With support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, a team from Redstone Strategy Group investigated the experiences of several districts that are early adopters of coherent models like EL Education (a Kellogg grantee).

These districts’ experience with coherence remains nascent and continues to evolve. Nonetheless, structured interviews with district leaders, providers of materials and instructional supports, and on-the-ground implementers — alongside a review of district outcomes and available research — helped illuminate

the benefits, challenges, and key ingredients of crafting coherence.

As two districts' efforts from early literacy through 8th grade show, the transformation begins even before deciding which materials to adopt.

## WAKE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM, NORTH CAROLINA

Brian Kingsley faced a quandary. Soon after he arrived in Wake as assistant superintendent of academics in 2015, the district discovered what he called a glaring gap between “what teachers were using, what they had access to, and what was truly standards-aligned and rigorous” (Brown, 2019).

Change would require strenuous effort. Wake has over 110,000 K-8 students in 144 schools. Encompassing Raleigh and spreading nearly to Durham, this district is socioeconomically and racially diverse. It includes some of the state's wealthiest neighborhoods, but more than 30% of students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch (Wake County Public School System, 2018).

Traditionally, in curriculum adoption years, Wake's leadership released a standard request for proposals for new curricula and invited 10 vendors to give 30-minute presentations. Reviewers scored the vendors on a simple rubric and voted.

In 2015, Wake upended that status quo. Before drafting a request for proposals for grades 3-8 language arts materials, a team of district staff developed an evidence-based instructional vision — achieving 95% college and career readiness by emphasizing creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication — and adapted Student Achievement Partners' standards-aligned Instructional Materials Evaluation Tool to that vision.

After spending over 100 hours assessing materials that claimed standards alignment — including open educational resources — Wake hosted community input sessions for three finalists while teaching teams field-

tested them for three to four weeks.

Finally, in May 2016, the team recommended adoption of EL Education's materials, whose approach to student engagement and teacher practice fit Wake's vision nicely. Even then, though, the district's pace was measured. Despite the sense of urgency, Wake paced implementation to allow time to identify successes and barriers and build district-level capacity to lead training.

## EAST RAMAPO CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT, NEW YORK

Also in 2015, in New York's East Ramapo Central School District, Deborah Wortham began as superintendent in another complex setting. Sixty-eight percent of her district's students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, and 29% are English learners (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

When Wortham arrived, only 15% of students achieved reading proficiency and the community had been rocked by funding conflicts that cut 445 positions and led to state intervention (Taylor, 2015).

Wortham arrived with plenty to do — “everything is first,” she told reporters — but she viewed a coherent vision and mission as crucial. A mission “helps you decide how you act,” she says (Kramer, 2015). The district's leadership spent much of 2016 gathering input from stakeholders to craft the mission statement — “educating the whole child by providing a healthy, safe, supportive, engaging, and challenging learning environment” — and develop a strategic plan for academic success.

As Wortham explains, East Ramapo's leadership “begins and ends with, *Is it good for kids?* Our approach to education is holistic. ... We educate the whole child.” Consequently, the plan centers on five goals, beginning with social, emotional, and academic readiness in K-2 and building toward college and career readiness by high school graduation.

Like Wake, East Ramapo

chose EL Education for its match with the district's vision. Natasha McVea, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, explains that the integrated curriculum aligned seamlessly to the district's vision of proficiency and coherent approach to academic achievement. Christina Lesh, EL Education's regional director, was struck by East Ramapo's approach. “They had a very solid strategic plan and had brought together teachers and leaders to cultivate it with the board and community,” she says. “They ensured that that vision was embedded in the materials.”

## ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

The districts applied several shared elements that appear to have been crucial in their successful transition to the new materials.

### *A high-capacity implementation team*

A dedicated, high-capacity team including diverse content leaders can provide prompt, targeted support when schools encounter challenges with new materials and provide continuity through any leadership changes.

At Wake, teams representing both elementary and middle schools across eight areas, from general education English language arts to special education to Title I, meet weekly to discuss questions and needs related to implementing the EL Education curriculum.

Their broad representation is the district's biggest leverage point, says former literacy lead Shanta Lightfoot. “It was really helpful in building buy-in and strengthening implementation,” she says. Shawn Johnson, senior administrator for elementary English language arts, adds, “The team is essential to moving this work forward. If not for them, we'd be in a different place.”

A team approach also is vital in East Ramapo. Superintendent Wortham says, “A significant component of our practice is the collective effort of district-level administrators in

our school improvement process.” Her cabinet accompanies coaches on learning walks to provide actionable feedback to teachers and school building leaders, reinforcing coherence in implementation from the classroom to district central office.

*Collaborative planning with partners*

Meanwhile, both districts built collaborative relationships with EL Education to support high-quality professional learning. The Wake team describes the approach as shifting from a vendor to partner relationship. East Ramapo and EL Education staff developed several implementation options together and provided intensive, classroom-level support — especially for early literacy teachers whose work sets the foundation for students’ ongoing success.

Likewise, EL Education and Wake collaborate to monitor progress in both implementation and student outcomes and adjust as needed. As one administrator told us, “We share with EL what we need based on teacher and administrator feedback. It isn’t just canned trainings. To me, that’s a real partnership.”

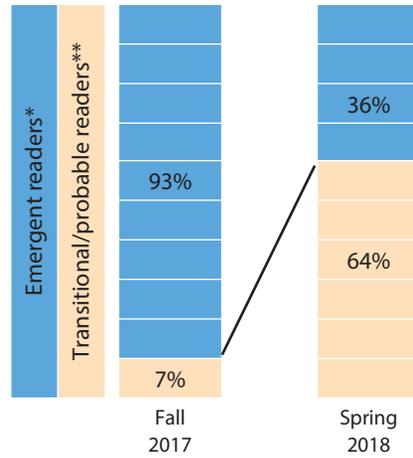
*Frequent and aligned professional learning*

Professional learning should not be a one-time event, but an ongoing process through which teachers deepen their understanding of the materials. As one professional learning expert with whom we spoke explained, teachers should not apply a curriculum like EL Education’s robotically. Instead, they must internalize a curriculum’s meaning to make decisions with agility.

Chong-Hao Fu, CEO of Leading Educators (a curriculum-specific professional learning design organization), explains that just as doctors aren’t expected to invent a new procedure to do open heart surgery, teachers shouldn’t have to design lessons from scratch. Instead, they can apply professional judgment to differentiate instruction, drawing

**LITERACY GAINS IN EAST RAMAPO**

Percent of 2nd graders at each reading proficiency level at the beginning and end of the first year implementing EL Education’s K-2 skills block.



\*STAR assessment score = 300-674

\*\* Score = 675-900

Source: Wortham, D. (2018). *East Ramapo Central School District: 2017-2018 review of the district academic strategic plan*. Oakland, CA: Performance Fact.

from evidence-based practices to meet students’ needs.

“There isn’t a Platonic ideal lesson that exists outside of the relationship between teachers and students,” says Fu. “Teachers inevitably must make decisions to respond to their students. The question is, how do we help them do so skillfully?”

The answer, these districts have found, is to provide materials-aligned, interactive professional learning early and often. In Wake and East Ramapo, EL Education provides professional learning linked to the curriculum, steadily building teacher leaders’ capacity so that over time, the district can provide all implementation supports internally. Job-embedded coaching in East Ramapo uses a collaborative, data-driven planning process to implement the curriculum, says McVea.

Ogechi Iwuoha, East Ramapo’s assistant superintendent for professional learning, says teachers have protected time to plan and practice collaboratively and use the curriculum to strengthen

pedagogical content knowledge. Iwuoha says the professional learning that EL Education and district staff provide together uses the materials to connect professional practices described in the strategic plan to the classroom experience of students and teachers. It also is paced to coincide with module assessments.

*Professional learning for leaders*

Both districts emphasize professional learning for school leaders, too. When principals in Wake requested extra support, the district implementation team created forums for principals to problem-solve collaboratively. East Ramapo combines classroom walk-throughs with learning sessions rooted in content and pedagogy. “Leadership professional learning removed from what teachers are teaching isn’t helpful,” says Lesh, noting that it must be consistent with teachers’ experience.

In other words, ongoing professional learning is essential to the instructional vision that led the districts to select coherent models.

*Persistence*

Wake’s internal data show increased growth among the lowest-performing students, giving the district hope that disparities between subgroups will narrow. “It doesn’t happen overnight,” says Johnson. “As we begin to see students feeling successful and being successful [with the curriculum], it has changed our teachers’ mindsets.”

Preliminary results from East Ramapo’s district tests at the end of the first year using EL Education also are heartening, especially in the early literacy-focused K-2 skills block (see chart above). Still, everyone involved in East Ramapo cautions that districtwide improvements may require two to three years.

For now, other indicators provide ample encouragement. As one teacher commented after a recent professional learning session, “You may feel like [this model] is out of reach for your kids, but give it a chance.” Why?

# IDEAS

Because, as the teacher put it, “This curriculum is teaching me just as much as it’s teaching my kids.”

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## The 4 B's

*Continued from p. 57*

visions, teachers knew they had to do the hard work of creating engaging, relevant learning opportunities, and that they had to view their rural environments and cultures as opportunities and assets, not only or mainly as deficits.

If anyone looked at a snapshot of the network and missed all that happened to bring it to this point or all the things going on behind the scenes, they might have tried to adopt the model in another setting with little success. For example, if school leaders set up the operations for a new network, failing to understand that teachers in our network had co-constructed it, they might have failed to build professional investment and incurred teachers’ disapproval later on.

Organizations shouldn’t have to reinvent the wheel. But most will have to invent or adapt their own kinds of wheels that best fit their own terrain, mindful of the other kinds of wheels that are already around.

## BE ALERT

Being alert to the four B’s may

make all the difference when you are working to adopt a new practice in your own school. If you look at lesson study in East Asia, as we did in Hong Kong, expect that interactions will be much more formal, structured, and even strict than in the U.S. or Canada, for instance.

And if you watch teachers collaborate in rural Colombia, you need to see that animated political, professional, and social conversations are all intertwined with each other, in ways that may not mesh so easily with cultures elsewhere.

As you engage with and then reflect on new practices and how they might work for you, consider the guiding questions in the figure on p. 55. Engage with these four B’s of professional learning and you will understand and implement everything you try to adopt and adapt with greater depth and more success because it will fit your own culture and community.

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