



DO YOUR MATERIALS MEASURE UP?

REMOTE LEARNING UNDERSCORES THE NEED FOR QUALITY CURRICULUM

BY ERIC HIRSCH AND COURTNEY ALLISON

Districts and states have worked around the clock for the past several months to put new structures in place for students to learn safely during an unprecedented crisis. We now know that the challenges of the pandemic are unlikely to vanish anytime soon, and schools will need to stay nimble about how and where they educate students.

This moment highlights the importance of curriculum adoptions supported by strong professional learning — a long-term investment that will have an impact in the fall and for many years to come.

Instructional materials matter for student success. They mattered before

the COVID-19 crisis, and they will matter even more as schools transition into new teaching formats this fall.

As educators prepare for an uncertain return to school, many may feel pressure to throw out what they know about curriculum and rush toward buying materials that are high-tech and digital. We believe this approach circumvents the real challenge at hand: ensuring students have the *content* they need to become college- and career-ready.

Since 2015, EdReports has worked with educator reviewers from across the country to publish reports for more than 700 math, English language arts, and science grade-level materials.

Our reports not only provide

educators with independent information to conduct a smart adoption process but also professional learning around the standards and instructional shifts. The end goal of our reports is to empower educators to better analyze what's quality and what's not so they can select materials that are standards-aligned and meet local needs.

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, EdReports has held conversations with dozens of state and district leaders, classroom teachers, and instructional coaches to identify how best to support immediate and long-term needs to accelerate learning.

Based on what we heard, we offer five recommendations to educators on how to identify, build capacity for,



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and leverage high-quality instructional materials to support students, whether they are learning in the classroom, at home, or in a hybrid setting this fall.

1. When it comes to curriculum, make content the top priority.

Conversations about technology tend to get at the *how* and *where* of instruction, but *what* is taught remains paramount. Research shows that quality curriculum influences classroom practice and ultimately student outcomes.

For example, a 2018 study illustrated that teachers using standards-aligned materials engaged students in mathematical practices at a significantly higher rate than teachers who did not use an aligned curriculum (Opfer et al., 2018).

Another study showed using a top-ranked program in 4th- or 5th-grade math would translate to student achievement gains of 3.6 percentile points — larger than the improvement of a typical teacher’s effectiveness in his or her first three years on the job (Kane et al., 2016).

Educators know how much materials matter, but they do not always have access to the quality content that their students deserve. The good news is that more high-quality curricula are available than was the case five years ago.

When EdReports first began evaluating curricula in 2015, we only found one math program that met expectations for standards alignment. Fast-forward five years, and today nearly half of English language arts materials and a third of math materials are standards-aligned (LaVenía, 2020). More than 30 publishers have updated

and improved their products using our reviews.

Although districts now have dozens of quality options to consider, we know that aligned materials are not being widely used. Only 16% of English language arts materials and 26% of math materials used in classrooms are aligned to the standards, according to our latest *State of the Instructional Materials Market* report (LaVenía, 2020).

A lack of professional learning and commitment to smart adoption practices likely contribute to these low rates of aligned materials use. This is a problem in the best of times, but it is even more troubling these days, when students must overcome a multitude of challenges to schooling, including remote learning.

2. Leverage quality curriculum to accelerate learning.

Preliminary estimates of the “COVID-19 slide” from the Northwest Evaluation Association (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020) suggest students will return in fall 2020 with roughly 70% of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year. In math, students are likely to lose even more ground, returning with less than 50% of typical learning gains.

In some grades, students may be nearly a full year behind what we would observe in normal conditions. This data becomes less surprising when you learn that just 1 in 3 districts (Gross et al., 2020) required teachers to deliver instruction in the final 12 weeks of school.

Making sure all students and families have access to grade-level,

appropriate, engaging materials, instruction, and support is one important way we can prevent opportunity gaps from growing. When students have a foundation of quality content, teachers can then focus on accelerating learning instead of falling back on remediation tactics (Steiner & Weisberg, 2020) that research clearly shows do not work.

Addressing unfinished learning begins with understanding the demands of grade-level materials and content. Districts should begin by investing in professional learning in which educators study the standards alongside year-long scopes and sequences.

This approach allows educators to better understand what standards and topics will be covered and when, how students will apply their knowledge of the standards, and how they will show that knowledge. This will require looking closely at the standards, the topics, and the tasks within a unit and across the year.

Focusing on getting students to grade level does not mean ignoring social and emotional or other nonacademic needs. Addressing those is critical to setting students up for success. Educators should prioritize accelerating students’ learning by ensuring their exposure to grade-appropriate content — so that every student can get back to grade level. Results may not be evident in a single year, but without the goal and a strategy for it, it will not happen at all.

3. Take time to analyze your remote learning options.

Giving all students access to high-quality instructional materials is more

important than ever, and technology plays an essential role in that access. Understandably, districts are seeking more precise guidance about the extent to which instructional materials align to remote learning needs.

To support the field, EdReports has requested information from publishers to help consumers better understand the digital design and capabilities of their instructional materials. On our website, we have posted enhanced reports with key technology information (see edreports.org/resources/enhanced-reports-with-key-technology-information) for more than 200 existing grade-level materials that meet expectations for alignment to the grade-level standards.

The collection of questions sent to publishers are based on an audit of our current technology indicators and interviews with educators and district leaders who told us what additional information would be the most helpful. The final technology reports are composed of self-reported information from publishers. The enhanced reviews will help address usability questions such as:

- Are the materials designed so that students are able to access and complete work online?
- In what ways do the materials support learning in hybrid settings (both in-person and remote learning) concurrently?

And technical questions such as:

- Are the materials designed to be used with both digital and print components?
- Are the materials configured to work with one or more learning management systems such as Blackboard and Google Classroom?
- Can students who move between teachers or schools using the same materials be reassigned without losing their work or progress?
- Do districts receive technical support during initial set-up and ongoing?

RESOURCES TO SUPPORT THE SELECTION OF HIGH-QUALITY MATERIALS

This fall and beyond, student access to standards-aligned, coherent, grade-level curricula will be a key component to accelerating learning and supporting teachers, students, and parents to know what will be taught two, four, and even eight months down the line.

To support educators in their planning during the COVID-19 pandemic, EdReports has created a collection of resources to advocate for and guide decision-making around the use of high-quality instructional materials.

Visit [EdReports.org](https://edreports.org) to explore free COVID-19 resources (edreports.org/resources/covid-19) and educator-created reviews for more than 700 grade-level reports of English language arts, math, and science materials (edreports.org/reports).

Districts can start now by unpacking their definition of digital — a common word when discussing remote learning. Digital, however, can apply to many different types of materials. For example, materials could be lessons available for free online, commercial supplemental programs, or year-long comprehensive core materials.

For year-long comprehensive materials, the term encompasses a broad range of products, ranging from online PDFs or e-book versions of textbooks to materials designed for full-time remote teaching and learning.

In addition, we encourage school districts to align their remote learning plans with their technological capabilities and provide teachers with training and professional learning to support the transition.

Districts with a high student-to-device ratio will have much different priorities, approaches, and needs compared to districts where every student has an internet-enabled device.

4. Beware of marketing hype and sales spin.

School closures across the country, and an uncertain return to school, have sent educators and parents scrambling to find online resources that will keep kids learning. We are already seeing instances of companies exaggerating the effectiveness of their ed tech products (Butrymowicz & Garcia Mathewson, 2020) with little quality evidence.

The creation of EdReports was in response to similar practices from publishers soon after the adoption of the Common Core State Standards in 2012. Back then, there was almost no independent information about the quality of K-12 instructional materials that educators could easily access. When districts chose new programs, educators often had to rely on sales pitches from publishers or standards-alignment claims from stickers on the covers of textbooks to make decisions.

Alas, most digital resources used this spring fell far short of what students need. For example, a RAND survey (Kaufman & Tosh, 2020) found: Most digital materials are not curricula. They typically do not include lessons that build on one another over time and are not necessarily clearly tied to academic content standards for particular grades and subject areas. Many materials were no more than practice worksheets.

Technology is an important factor in supporting teachers and students during and after the pandemic. And it can be tempting to consider a product based on all the things it can do online.

But if those attributes don't reflect the specific needs of your students or exceed the technological capabilities of your school or district, then what's the point? Ultimately, the quality of the content is what will make a difference for student outcomes.

5. High-quality professional learning will be key.

Digital curriculum does not teach itself. As with any type of curriculum, teachers deserve professional learning and opportunities to collaborate and learn from peers as they use the new materials.

That doesn't mean turning professional development staff into IT troubleshooters so they can show teachers how to master Zoom or log in to student information systems from home. It does mean creating and protecting time — online or in person — for professional learning rooted in content and curricular materials for every teacher.

While we know both quality curriculum and professional learning can contribute to teacher and student success, numerous studies show that they have a greater effect together than alone (Jackson & Makarin, 2016).

A recent meta-analysis (Lynch et al., 2019) by Heather Hill and her colleagues looking at 95 research studies on STEM programs found that implementing curriculum with professional development — specifically with support for learning how to use materials and improving teachers' content knowledge and knowledge of student learning — led to stronger student outcomes.

These findings echo research and promising practices documented by the Aspen Institute that call for fully integrating chosen curriculum into ongoing, job-embedded professional learning and development (Wiener & Pimintel, 2017).

Implementation can be complicated under normal circumstances, but the ambiguity of what school will be like in the fall compounds the challenge. That's why it's imperative that districts tailor professional learning to the curriculum, so teachers are prepared to deliver the content regardless of the learning environment.

LOOKING AHEAD

This crisis has already exposed gaps

in the instructional materials many districts are using. Conversely, we have also seen the benefits of having an aligned, quality curriculum in place that clearly articulates what students should be learning all year long.

As the fall approaches, let's ensure that every student has access to high-quality materials and that all teachers can engage in the professional learning they need.

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