Quick Reference Guide: Assessing Your Curriculum Landscape

Every teacher strives for learning experiences that support and challenge every student in every class every day. Developing curricular materials from scratch should not be the burden of individual teachers. Providing every teacher with high-quality curricular materials is a system-level condition for success that depends on administrators and teachers playing their parts. School and district administrators set up the structures to make decisions about curricular materials and support teachers to evaluate and use them effectively. Teachers collaborate to ensure that student experiences are comparable across classrooms (*horizontally aligned*) and coherent across grades (*vertically aligned*).

This Quick Reference Guide will help you assess your district's curriculum landscape by asking three key questions.

Definitions

Curricular materials: Resources teachers use to facilitate sequences of learning experiences (e.g., lesson and unit plans, texts); also called adopted or written curriculum.

Curriculum: Sequence of student learning experiences teachers facilitate using curricular materials as a foundation (not a script!); also called enacted or taught curriculum.

Do teachers have ready access to high-quality, standards-aligned curricular materials?

Ready access can mean many things: textbooks in classrooms, software on computers, unit plans on a shared drive, a login to a publisher's website, even a file cabinet in a corner. Regardless of the type of materials, teachers need them at their fingertips, not at the end of a long Internet or library search.

High-quality materials exhibit a coherent sequence of target skills and knowledge, empirical evidence of efficacy, and other characteristics such as engaging content and inclusive design. Some factors in quality are non-negotiable, while others vary by context: for example, compatibility with a school's technology infrastructure or cultural relevance to its student population.

Standards-aligned materials reflect both the content and the cognitive demand of Massachusetts learning standards for the appropriate grade level and subject area. They also align with the guiding principles and supplemental materials that accompany the standards in each curriculum framework.

Did you know?

- Switching to higher-quality, more standards-aligned curricular materials can boost student achievement more than an extra half-year of learning time.[1]
- High-quality curricular materials do not tend to cost more than low-quality ones, and some of the best materials now available are free to access online.[2]

[1] Kane, T. J., Owens, A. M., Marinell, W. H., Thal, D. R. C., & Staiger, D. O. (2016). Teaching higher: Educators' perspectives on Common Core implementation. Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University.
[2] Koedel, C., & Polikoff, M. (2017). Big bang for just a few bucks: The impact of math textbooks in California. Evidence Speaks report from the Brookings Institution.

Do sustained and collaborative professional learning structures empower teachers to use those materials in ways responsive to their students' needs?

Professional learning includes job-embedded opportunities for growth (e.g., coaching, observation, feedback) as well as the more formal offerings commonly referred to as professional development. Professional learning is most powerful when it is sustained over time and when it centers on the actual curricular materials teachers use with their students every day.

Professional learning supporting curriculum should be *collaborative*, to ensure consistency and facilitate problem-solving; *structured*, with dedicated time that teachers can count on devoting to curriculum; *empowering*, with teachers working to adapt and supplement system-provided materials as needed; and *responsive*, considering student work and other evidence of the curriculum's impact on learning.

Did you know?

- Curriculum-centered professional learning is ongoing and iterative, not just an introduction to new materials.[3]
- Less than a third of teachers nationwide report having sufficient time to collaborate with their colleagues.[4]

Are curriculum review processes regular, rigorous, and responsive to stakeholder input and needs?

Curriculum reviews may not always occur on a fixed schedule (e.g., every five years), but they should be *regular* enough to stay current with trends in education research, state and local priorities, and developments in science, current events, and other fields of study. Whatever structures or criteria are used to trigger curriculum reviews, they should be clearly communicated and consistent.

Rigorous and responsive curriculum reviews involve credible and transparent decision-making processes and a wide variety of stakeholder voices. They analyze multiple forms of evidence on the quality of materials under development or consideration, such as independent evaluations, research findings, and in-district pilots, as well as information on student and teacher needs in the district.

In Focus: Tri-Town School Union

The Tri-Town School Union takes an innovative approach to piloting curriculum. Instead of some teachers trying one curriculum and others trying another, every teacher involved in a pilot tries out at least one or two units from each curriculum under consideration. This tactic requires careful planning to preserve coherent learning progressions for students, but it allows teachers to evaluate each option with fuller knowledge of the alternatives. The bonus: no matter what gets adopted, all pilot teachers can serve as in-house experts supporting their colleagues in the first few years of implementation.

[3] Wiener, R., & Pimentel, S. (2017). Practice what you teach: Connecting curriculum and professional learning in schools. Aspen Institute.
[4] Johnston, W. R., & Tsai, T. (2018). The prevalence of collaboration among American teachers: National findings from the American Teacher Panel. RAND Corporation.