

## SELECTING INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS: BRIEF 3 — ADOPTION

# Teachers' Perceptions and Practices Related to the Adoption of Instructional Materials

by Min Chen-Gaddini, Elizabeth Burr, Stacy Marple, Daniel Bugler, and Neal Finkelstein

*Historically, state education agencies have had a strong role in determining what instructional materials (usually textbooks) are used in classrooms, but in recent years, decisions about adoption of instructional materials have shifted to school districts and schools. A recent Education Week article indicates that a declining number of states conduct textbook reviews to identify materials that the state approves, and that districts are not necessarily bound to select from the approved materials.<sup>1</sup> Current state adoption processes yield inconsistent results and provide limited guidance to support districts in selecting materials, and developing or adopting instructional materials has become more of a district-level effort than a state-level effort.<sup>2</sup> Confirming this shift, a recent study found that most teachers indicated that school districts were their primary source for curricula for English language arts (ELA) and mathematics.<sup>3</sup> Somewhat in contrast to those studies, teachers in WestEd's focus groups did not seem to rely on either the district or resources such as EdReports, an effort launched in 2015 to systematically review curricular materials, as their main sources of authority for determining the quality of materials.*

<sup>1</sup> Gewertz, C. (2015). States shedding power to adopt class materials. *Education Week*, 34(21), 1, 10. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/02/18/states-ceding-power-over-classroom-materials.html>

<sup>2</sup> Chingos, M., & Whitehurst, G. (2012). *Choosing blindly: Instructional materials, teacher effectiveness, and the Common Core*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/choosing-blindly-instructional-materials-teacher-effectiveness-and-the-common-core/>

<sup>3</sup> Rentner, D. S., Kober, N., Fizzell, M., & Ferguson, M. (2016). *Listening to and learning from teachers: A summary of focus groups on the Common Core and assessments*. Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy. <http://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=1461>

## Background

With funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, WestEd is studying how teachers make decisions about which instructional materials to use in their classrooms. WestEd's work is designed to support a portfolio of Hewlett-funded grantees working to improve the quality and consistency of instructional materials in classrooms across the United States. In 2016, WestEd researchers conducted focus groups with teachers in six cities to develop a baseline understanding of how they obtain, judge the quality of, and select instructional materials. Specifically, WestEd researchers explored three areas of interest: (1) teachers' judgments of what constitutes quality materials, (2) why and how teachers choose to supplement the adopted materials, and (3) teachers' descriptions of processes for adopting instructional materials in their districts and schools. This brief focuses on the third area of interest: teachers' perceptions and practices related to adoption of instructional materials in their districts and schools. All three briefs are available online at <http://WestEd.org/bookstore>.

This brief focuses on the roles that teachers play in the district-led processes for selection and adoption of instructional materials. To develop this brief, focus-group interviews were conducted with teachers to ascertain districts' procedures for adopting new texts and to understand teachers' roles in those procedures. (See Appendix 1 for details of the sample and methods.)

The majority of the teachers' comments about adopting and using instructional materials fell into three categories: teachers' knowledge of and involvement in adoption processes; teachers' practices related to using the adopted materials, including making adjustments to and supplementing the materials; and teachers' sentiments and wish lists related to adopted materials.

### Teachers' Knowledge of and Involvement in Adoption Processes

All of the focus-group participants had been involved in an ELA or mathematics materials adoption process for their district, most within two years of the focus group. Teachers' participation in the process varied: just over half had been part of a group that made a final recommendation to the district; another 20 percent participated in structures that collected their opinions on potential materials; and five percent participated in pilots. Most of the focus-group teachers expressed familiarity with, and had at some point participated in voting on, materials selection for their district. Some also discussed their direct communications with publishers or curriculum providers regarding specific products.

#### District-level activities

Teachers who had been involved in adoption processes at the district level universally agreed that choosing which materials to adopt is ultimately an administrative decision made by the district, but exactly how this decision was made and who made

the decision were not clear to any of the teachers in the focus groups.

According to focus-group participants, some districts assigned specific coordinators for each subject, to facilitate communication between the district and the school. These coordinators took note of the requests made by schools and teachers and presented those requests to the district leadership team. Once the leadership team made a decision about what materials it recommended adopting, the team passed on its recommendation to the school board, for the board to make a final decision on adoption. A teacher from the Denver metro area shared additional information about the adoption process there:

*We are a slightly smaller district, and the way that we adopt in our district, no matter what curriculum it is, is there is always a committee. It is usually a yearlong process. People are chosen by their principals to be on the committee. They ask [vendor] reps to come in. [The reps] do their spiel. Somebody usually pilots it for [a] certain amount of time. [The committee] votes on it, and then they have board meetings, present it to the board, present it to the parents, and then . . . [provide] training.*

— Teacher, Denver Area<sup>4</sup>

As this quote exemplifies, teachers in some districts were well aware of the entire procedures, which usually included forming a committee, proposing a selection of materials, narrowing the options down to two or three candidates, and piloting the selected materials. In a Seattle metro district, teachers used rubrics that were specifically developed for the adoption process, and these rubrics were shared publicly with the teachers via

<sup>4</sup> Teachers' statements throughout this brief are not necessarily representative of their school, district, or state.

the district's webpage and via social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

Some districts also selected teachers, primarily on a volunteer basis with little compensation, to be representatives of their adoption committees. Following is a typical example of a teacher describing being a representative on the adoption committee:

*Usually there was an email sent out from the department head asking for volunteers to be on a district curriculum committee. We usually got together once a month throughout the entire school year. . . . [We] met with other teachers from around the district, looking through materials. Then once we narrowed it . . . usually it was narrowed down by that committee, then those [selected options] were brought to the schools. It was more just like taking it to your school and getting feedback on each one and then coming back to the committee, with the committee making the decision and then the district making the final [decision]. . . . Usually what the committee suggested was adopted.*

— Teacher, Seattle Area

Other districts had the department heads go to a meeting held by the district, where they were given the choice of two sets of materials to adopt. The heads then went back to their schools to hold a meeting in their department, in which the teachers discussed the pros and cons for each set of materials and decided which one to adopt.

### School-level activities

Teachers showed more knowledge and involvement in school-level activities for district- and school-level curriculum adoption than in district-level activities. They shared their experiences of going to open nights, hosted by their schools, for parents and teachers to acquire information about candidate materials; of voting for different choices of

materials; and of piloting the materials that were under consideration by their districts. The extents to which teachers in the focus groups had been involved in decision-making processes varied. For instance, in some schools, teachers were asked to vote among several choices provided by schools, but they were not told how the voting results were processed or what the criteria were when the school or district made decisions. In other schools, the principals and department heads worked closely with teachers and took their input in deciding whether or not to adopt materials.

*The head of the math department came to all of us with a bag with the Go Math, the Big Ideas Math, the CMP II, and the Singapore Math [materials] . . . and said try this in your classroom. . . . We had a meeting all together. We eliminated one of them, and there were three that we still liked. We did another unit. We eliminated another one. Then, there were two that we still liked. Then, she had a parent committee. . . . Down to just two choices. . . . So, after doing that, she came back with what the ideas of the parents were, and we all caved and said okay. We all sat there on professional development day, asked questions, and we tried problems and things like that. And then we said what we wanted and made the decision.*

— Teacher, Boston Area

*My principal [at a community charter school] and I [went] to NCTM conventions and we shopped. We talked to the representative. They delivered kits for each level for Envision [and] Go Math. . . . And so [we got together our ELA and math departments]. They looked through the materials. And then after they looked through the materials, they voted, and the school [adopted the materials].*

— Teacher, New Orleans Area

### Teachers' direct communications with curriculum providers

Some teachers also mentioned communicating directly with publishers and curriculum providers, mostly in the form of piloting or in receiving training on how to use their products.

Many teachers mentioned that one of the major reasons they have agreed to pilot some materials is to receive the materials for free or at a discounted price. Through piloting, teachers were able to give feedback to the publishers and curriculum providers. According to teachers from the Tampa area, the publishers had made changes to the instructional materials as a result of their input. As one teacher recalled:

*We've shared with textbook companies, over the years, things that we prefer, that teachers have requested. And a lot of textbook companies have, during this process, been willing to make changes if we would adopt their books, so that kind of talk has happened.*

— Teacher, Tampa Area

Curriculum providers also offer product trainings for teachers. Some teachers raised an issue that the trainings can be prescribed, rather than being tailored to the specific needs of each district/school. As one teacher explained:

*The [curriculum providers] have a lot of information, they have lots of resources, but they [are] very scripted. . . . So literally my training was this lady reading off of her slides, and sometimes she wouldn't even know what the slide meant. She'd be like, "I don't even know what that's supposed to be, so let's just skip that," and I'd be like, "I'm supposed to be learning from you and you don't even know what you're talking about?" Not that she doesn't know what she's talking about, because she knows the program, but*

*she didn't know what it is that [our district's] objective was for her to teach us. So yes, the people who came back were sparsely trained and then were supposed to train all of our teachers at our site.*

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

### Teachers' Practices Related to Using the Adopted Materials

Across districts, teachers reported using various mandated materials, such as Bridges, Café, Connected Math III, Discovery Ed, EngageNY, Journeys, and the Readers & Writers Workshop. (See Appendix 2 for the complete list of adopted materials that were mentioned by focus-group participants.) Regarding whether or how they used lesson plans to guide their teaching, all teachers agreed that they were required to follow certain types of guidelines (e.g., pacing guides, mapping, or other requirements) that are given by their districts or schools. But teachers also described having varying levels of flexibility and autonomy in deciding what to use in their classrooms on a daily basis. Such variations may be due to the varied management styles of principals (e.g., "my principal is very flexible") or to the nature of the materials themselves.

*Some schools are stricter on it than others. In some schools, every class in the grade level has got to be on the exact same day, and they will check. And others are more laid back. We were just told that you no longer have to follow [the guidelines]. You have to be more where your kids are at.*

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

### Following the guidelines

Most teachers mentioned that they had to follow certain guidelines in teaching the adopted

materials. One reason that teachers mentioned for emphasizing the importance of the pacing guides is related to assessment of students' academic performance. Some teachers explained that strictly following the guides to plan their daily classroom activities meant that students learn the same content within the same period of time across the district; thus, students' academic performance can be assessed at the same time as other students are assessed. However, in day-to-day practice, teachers make adjustments and sometimes supplement the adopted materials. As one teacher explained:

*[Students] are taking an assessment that the district created based on the mapping and standards. So, all the students are getting the same assessment . . . [but] you can't really tell if [the curriculum materials are] working if you don't know what people are supplementing [or] whether there [are] consistent [materials].*

— Teacher, Boston Area

Teachers in the Denver area brought up an interesting comparison between curriculum and resources. The term “curriculum” suggests materials that need to be followed systematically, but the term “resources” allows for greater flexibility. The teachers reported that, in their districts, they were encouraged to differentiate their instructional materials accordingly. As one teacher shared:

*When I think about the secondary level, I think one of the reasons they really defined curriculum versus resources [was] because many secondary ELA teachers are stuck, I guess, in resource-land. They have units where they teach Hamlet and then they teach Romeo and Juliet. And they're teaching that text rather than the thinking and the skills, and using that really as a vehicle. So I think that's been some of the push in our district, at least at the secondary level.*

— Teacher, Denver Area

### Making adjustments and supplementing

Although all teachers said that they had to follow certain types of guidelines in using the adopted materials, none of them reported that they used these materials or implemented the curricular programs with complete fidelity, even when they described the materials as being high-quality and standards-aligned. Across all focus groups, teachers predominantly mentioned the following as being the three primary issues that led them to seek supplemental materials:

1. The adopted instructional materials did not adequately support student achievement of the standards and success on assessments;
2. The adopted materials had insufficient differentiation; and/or
3. The adopted materials were not engaging for students or teachers.

*Give me some good ideas on the ways to deliver [standards] because I'm not going to have the same set of kids every year, I mean, even with three sections of science, I can't teach all three of those classes the same way. I can't do the exact same activities, because there's no way . . . one of my SPED classes on Tuesday, the other two are dissecting chicken wings, and I'm putting a surgical blade in their hand . . . it's just not going to happen. And you can put it in the curriculum all you want to that I got to dissect a chicken wing; those 27 kids aren't doing it. And so there has to be that kind of decision-making freedom going on in what we do.*

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

For related reading, another brief in this series, *Teachers' Perceptions and Practices Related to the Adoption of Instructional Materials*, provides more detail on the reasons for teachers' seeking out materials to supplement the adopted texts, and on

the sources that they use to find or create supplemental materials.

## Teachers' Sentiments and Wish Lists Related to Adopted Materials

Across focus groups, teachers expressed a variety of sentiments about the materials adoption process. Whereas some teachers were well aware of the procedures and felt involved in the entire process (particularly in the Seattle and New Orleans area focus groups), others expressed dissatisfaction toward their districts or schools for not providing transparency (particularly in the Tampa and Raleigh area focus groups).

Nonetheless, there were some commonalities in the sentiments expressed across all of the focus groups. First, at least one teacher from each focus group (including the Seattle area and New Orleans area, where teachers reported being closely involved in the adoption process) expressed his or her frustration in not knowing exactly how the districts or schools made their choices in adopting materials. Second, teachers expressed wishes to receive economical and high-quality instructional materials, as well as well-designed professional training, to support their work.

*I feel like [the purpose of] teacher input is [for the administrators] to say that they did it [i.e., sought teacher input]. But at the end of the day it's going to be somebody high up there who is going to ultimately choose. I don't really feel like our voice is truly heard. I felt a lot of times it's just to say, "Hey, [did you] ask your teachers if they wanted this? Yes, sure, here are some teacher responses." But our responses are not matching what you're getting; we didn't ask for this. We asked for this over here, but, and they'll say [no]. It's usually [because of] the price: "We don't have money for it. We have money for these*

*traditional ones, and you work around it, because this is what we're giving you." I don't really feel like they really, truly hear our voice.*

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

In the Seattle area focus group, teachers reported that, even though they knew the rubrics for curriculum adoption and had been told that the decision-making process is consensus-based, they did not know exactly how final decisions were made about adopting materials. In another focus group in the Tampa area, teachers were even more frustrated by the fact that no rubrics or criteria were provided by the districts.

*I think we did vote, but I never saw the official results from the vote. So I wonder if it's just because of contract reasons that they vote. But do they actually [select] what we voted [for]? We never see a result.*

— Teacher, Tampa Area

### Teachers' wish lists

Teachers in all focus groups were eager to have high-quality materials. Many teachers suggested that curriculum providers/publishers should customize the products to reflect the specific characteristics and needs of their districts and schools.

All of the teachers, especially those who were new to the profession, emphasized the importance of having well-developed professional training to highlight the major features of new resources and products and how to use them. Whereas veteran teachers are able to use the adopted texts right away, knowing exactly what to use and what to skip, new teachers may experience difficulties in making these decisions. In addition, even veteran teachers may find it challenging to master the materials for digital versions of curriculum.

*It seems like there are a lot of resources available to us that are provided via our*

*district, but they take too much time to understand; we don't understand how to use them. They're not necessarily teacher-friendly or student-friendly, and we haven't received training on them. So I think that one thing that would be beneficial is to get that training, because it's one thing to have a resource, but if you don't know how to use it, it's just going to sit there and collect dust or be in a closet somewhere.*

— Teacher, Raleigh Area

## Summary

Overall, regardless of whether focus-group participants were in a state that had an approved list of materials for teachers to use, most teachers, across focus groups, agreed that materials adoption is a district process, consistent with recent studies,<sup>5</sup> contending that the process of developing or adopting instructional materials has become more of a district-level effort than a state-level effort. The adoption process usually includes, but is not limited to, forming an adoption committee, reviewing curriculum providers' presentations, narrowing down the choices of candidate materials, and organizing a pilot process at the school level. According to teachers' descriptions of their districts' adoption activities, most districts evaluated candidate materials in somewhat disjointed ways, and little outside information about evidence of the effectiveness of those materials was utilized in the adoption process.

Teachers' involvement in materials adoption processes differed across sites. Regardless of whether they were or were not closely involved, most teachers expressed some level of frustration about not knowing the rationale behind their districts' or

<sup>5</sup> Chingos & Whitehurst (2012); Rentner, Kober, Fizzell, & Ferguson (2016).

schools' choices for the materials. A large number of teachers made statements such as "We are told [that materials are selected] based on our vote. But sometimes when we reconvene and we all talk, [we realize] we didn't vote for that, so we're not sure how we got it."

Most teachers in the focus groups agreed that they were required to follow a certain type of pacing guide given by the school or district, although some reported more freedom and flexibility than others. At the same time, teachers emphasized the necessity of being creative about making adjustments and supplementing their given materials.

Many teachers, especially those who were new in their professions, emphasized the importance of having well-developed professional training on how to use the adopted materials. Some teachers reported that the training they had attended was generic, focused on the product itself, without any tailoring to the teachers' own districts or schools.

## Discussion

As evidenced in the focus groups, even teachers who were involved in district-level adoption processes were unsure of how the ultimate decisions to adopt a text were made, and what impact their involvement had in those decisions; subsequently, teachers wondered how they ended up with certain texts. Greater transparency on the part of districts (collecting and taking into account teachers' points of view) about the rationales for choosing texts could help alleviate this concern of teachers.

Although the adoption processes are mostly carried out at the district level, focus-group findings suggest that teachers would still find it helpful if states collect a list of high-quality materials that have been vetted by teachers and that are standards-aligned and easy to adopt.

Teachers' comments indicate that curriculum providers could improve their trainings by explaining how the texts can be used with specific student populations. Responsiveness to teachers' needs to differentiate according to students' needs would better support teachers in using the products.

The teachers in the focus groups conveyed a strong sense of caring about the materials in their classrooms and indicated that they were aware of the proliferation of online resources for materials, but they did not seem to be aware of many external tools available to help them ascertain the relative benefits and quality of instructional materials. Teachers generally judge materials by how those materials work in their classrooms, regardless of the source of the materials — i.e., whether the materials were provided by the district or sourced from colleagues, online platforms, or older textbooks. Although teachers' professional judgment remains important, it is clear that teachers crave more support and more transparency from administrators regarding the selection of instructional materials.

## Appendix 1: Sample and Methods

The data for this project were collected through group interviews with teachers in varied metropolitan areas across the country. A total of 14 focus groups were held in six metro locations: Boston, Denver, New Orleans, Raleigh, Seattle, and Tampa. In each of these locations, the project team hired a local firm to recruit participants. In addition, the project team used Craigslist advertisements to recruit teachers for two focus groups, in the Raleigh and Tampa metro areas. Prospective participants were screened using a short survey, to ensure that they were currently credentialed teachers working in public schools and that they had participated in either an English language arts (ELA) or a mathematics materials adoption process within five years of the focus group. The project team also required prospective participants to respond to a short-answer questionnaire regarding quality of materials. This process yielded a total of 65 ELA and/or mathematics teachers, from elementary schools (62%) and middle schools (38%). A total of 31 districts were represented, with an average total enrollment of 85,608 per district, and an average non-White student population of 56 percent across the districts.

About three quarters of participants (48) had been involved in materials adoption activities within the prior two years; the rest of the participants (17) had been involved in adoption activities within five years of the focus groups. In both the Seattle and Denver metro areas, the number of participants who had experience in the adoption of ELA materials was roughly equivalent to the number of participants who had experience in the adoption of mathematics materials. In the other four locations, slightly more participants had experience in the adoption of ELA materials than mathematics materials. In most locations, participants were about as likely to have been involved in both ELA and mathematics materials adoptions as they were



to have participated in the adoption of materials in only one subject. In the Boston area, most participants had been involved in only one subject's adoption process.

The focus-group interviews were intended to collect information about how teachers make judgments about the quality of instructional materials. Another interest of the study was to learn about why and how teachers sought additional instructional materials to supplement those adopted by their schools and districts. And a third interest was to collect information about school and district processes for adopting new instructional materials under the Common Core State Standards or other new standards, as well as information about teachers' roles in those processes.

Focus groups were facilitated by WestEd senior research staff and were limited to a maximum of eight participants per focus group. Questions were open-ended and structured by a protocol. However, the facilitator was also able to follow the participants' interests. Participants were regularly asked to support their statements by describing the materials adoption committees in which they had participated and by describing experiences in their classrooms.

The focus-group responses were transcribed, and the transcripts were coded in a two-part process. First, teacher statements that would inform the three primary interests of the project (materials adoption processes, teachers' judgments about materials quality, and supplementing adopted materials) were identified. Coding was

non-exclusive, in that any statement or set of statements by teachers could be coded multiple ways. Codes were applied broadly, including as much information as needed to provide context for each statement. The first round of coding produced collections of quotations from across research sites. These collections were then read closely as a set, in order to develop a more refined and emergent coding scheme for each of the three areas. The collection of quotations was then recoded using these thematic codes.

The exploratory nature of these focus groups, as well as the open-ended protocol, prevents strict quantifying of the findings. However, the themes described in this brief, as well as their subthemes, represent topics that were discussed substantially, often across multiple focus groups and by various groups of teachers. This brief and the other two briefs in this series explain these themes and use quotations as examples of teachers' statements to illustrate the themes.

Nonetheless, the themes that are discussed in these briefs should be interpreted with caution, as these focus groups capture the views of only a small number of teachers, and the statements made by these teachers are not necessarily representative of the teachers' schools, districts, or states. In addition, not every teacher in the focus groups remarked on every discussed topic, so the statements in these briefs should not be interpreted as the consensus of any focus group, except in instances that are explicitly noted as representing views expressed by all teachers.

## Appendix 2: Adopted Materials Named by Focus-Group Participants (Ordered Alphabetically)

Note: This list includes textbooks, web subscriptions, and other materials provided to teachers through their schools or districts. City names below correspond to the area of the country where the focus group was held, not to a specific school district in that metro area.

- » Bridges (Denver)
- » CAFE (Raleigh)
- » Connected Math III by Pearson (Seattle)
- » Daily 5 (Raleigh)
- » Direction Instruction Reading (New Orleans)
- » Discovery Ed (Raleigh)
- » Dream Box (Denver)
- » EngageNY (All sites)
- » Envision (New Orleans; Boston)
- » Eureka (New Orleans)
- » Expeditionary Learning (Seattle)
- » Go Math (Boston)
- » Harcourt Trophies (Boston)
- » i-Ready (Raleigh)
- » Journeys (Boston; Tampa; Seattle)
- » Khan Academy (Raleigh; Denver)
- » Letterland (Raleigh)
- » Math Expressions (Denver)
- » Math in Focus (Boston; Seattle)
- » National Geographic Reach for Reading (Boston)
- » Next Mile (Seattle)
- » Readers & Writers Workshop (Seattle)
- » Reading A–Z (Raleigh; Seattle)
- » Reading on BrainPop (Raleigh)
- » Read to Achieve (Raleigh)
- » Saxon Math (Denver)
- » Scholastic Read 180 (Seattle)
- » Scott Foresman Reading & Math (Raleigh)
- » Singapore Math (Denver)
- » Springboard (Tampa)
- » Study Island (Raleigh)
- » Wordly Wise 3000 (Raleigh)

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