

# POWER OF THE QUESTION

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## ? Seven Questions State Boards Should Ask about High-Quality Instructional Materials

By David Steiner

A review of top-ranked countries on the Program for International Student Assessment reveals a key element they have in common: In every case, they adopted a national or a state- or province-level curriculum.

That curriculum—in reading, math, history, and science—lays out materials that every publicly funded school student will study. A shared curriculum holds the entire educational enterprise together: Teachers can be prepared to teach the content of the curriculum, both in their preparation programs and through professional learning. Teachers can share experiences and tips because they are teaching the same material. If students move from one school to another, they will not miss a step. When countries abandon their national curricula, as France did in 1989, the results were years of decline in student learning across every income group, but especially for the most disadvantaged.

In the United States, by contrast, 13,000 or so public school districts each decide what their teachers should teach, or, in many cases, they leave that decision to individual schools and teachers. Consequently, there is next to no quality control over the caliber of instructional materials and no capacity to prepare teachers to teach those individually selected materials effectively.

The answer is state action, prompted and supported by state boards of education. I do not advocate for a compulsory curriculum but instead for a curated, supported selection of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) in math, English language arts (ELA), and science.

### 1 WHAT ARE HQIM, AND WHY SHOULD THEY BE THE FOCUS OF STATE BOARD ACTION?

HQIM are published curricula in ELA, math, and, more recently, science aligned with state standards, grounded in evidence-based instructional practices, and accompanied by lesson plans and instructional strategies that enable students to meet high academic stan-

dards. Several organizations evaluate curricula for HQIM status. One of the best known is the nonprofit EdReports, which also works with states to help develop lists of HQIM tailored to their needs, thereby avoiding the burden of each state having to fund and manage HQIM selection from scratch.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, researchers have raised the bar for evaluating HQIM—for example, by seeking sequential, knowledge-rich content in ELA offerings that go beyond “ticking the box” for each learning standard.<sup>2</sup> In math, strong curricula enable teachers and students to understand the conceptual foundations of a math procedure rather than simply practice a rote skill.<sup>3</sup>

State education chiefs inevitably view HQIM from a wide variety of perspectives. For some, “local control” suggests that any effort to motivate and incentivize district to adopt HQIM is beyond their purview or not worth the effort. But as I discuss below, that is not the experience in many other states.

State board members equipped with the knowledge that high-quality curricula are important and that multiple states have already done transformative work in this domain can prompt critically important board discussions and press state chiefs to take appropriate action. That action does not stop after the initial efforts to prioritize district adoption of HQIM; it continues through a state board’s requests to see data on levels of adoption across the state and state support for training teachers to use the materials effectively.

### 2 BEFORE I ADVOCATE FOR STATE ACTION AROUND HQIM, I NEED TO KNOW THE EVIDENCE FOR HQIM’S EFFECTIVENESS. WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

When strong curricula are implemented effectively, student outcomes improve. Studies cited by the What Works Clearinghouse, which is managed by the US Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences, point to multiple curricula that are associated with positive effects on students’ reading, math, and science.<sup>4</sup>

But rigorous research by David Blazar of the University of Maryland, Harvard’s Thomas Kane, and their colleagues shows that simply supplying districts and teachers with HQIM and hoping for the best usually produces no measurable improvements.<sup>5</sup> Most important, they found that, on average, teachers received just over one day of professional learning support to master the new curricula their school districts had adopted. State boards should be asking their state education agencies for information on what their state is doing to help teachers get the training they need.

### **3 SHOULD STATES BE WEIGHING IN ON CURRICULUM CHOICES AT ALL? ISN'T THIS APPROPRIATELY THE PURVIEW OF TEACHERS AND LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS?**

If teachers are free to choose their own content, the quality of a child's education becomes a matter of luck—how skilled each of their teachers is at creating a unique playlist of materials. Most often, they mix a wide array of online materials with their district's chosen curriculum, creating an ever-changing set of offerings. In addition to random materials pulled from online sources, the average public school teacher regularly uses two full curricula and five supplemental sets of materials.<sup>6</sup>

Much of the material teachers select from the internet is below grade level. According to survey research by the nonprofit TNTP, "Students spent more than 500 hours per school year on assignments that weren't appropriate for their grade and with instruction that didn't ask enough of them—the equivalent of six months of wasted class time in each core subject."<sup>7</sup>

Three further concerns: There can be no sustained professional learning to support teachers' mastery of a curriculum if there is no shared curriculum. Second, in a highly mobile society, children often end up learning the same material multiple times and missing key knowledge and skills. Finally, all the efforts that state boards devote to adopting learning standards are for naught if the curriculum is not aligned to those standards, and even if it is aligned, if teachers choose to teach something else.

Two counterarguments should be considered. The first is that teachers know their own students best and should thus be in charge of choosing the materials used to teach them. The problem here is that teachers are trained to teach—not to be curriculum designers. Experienced teachers can and should adjust excellent curricula so as to ensure effective implementation.

Second, while one might think that teachers have a strong desire to create their own curriculum, there is no empirical evidence that teachers in schools and districts that have adopted HQIM have lower job satisfaction or a greater likelihood to leave their positions. In fact, the data from the Rand panel on America's teachers shows that teachers find the many hours they need to spend finding or creating materials to be burdensome.<sup>8</sup>

### **4 DOESN'T LOCAL CONTROL MEAN THAT STATES CAN'T INTERVENE IN CURRICULA SELECTION, EVEN IF THEY WOULD LIKE TO?**

While nearly all states do need to adhere to the varying degrees of local control baked into their statutory and regulatory environments,<sup>9</sup> they can still heavily influence district behavior regarding curricular choices. Since 2017, some 15 states, including many with long traditions of local control, have worked with the Council of Chief State School Officers to coordinate state action on curricular selection and implementation at the district level.<sup>10</sup> Across the participating states, 4.8 million students have access to HQIM in ELA, and 5.8 million in math.<sup>11</sup> In Tennessee, for example, 100 percent of students attend public schools whose districts have adopted HQIM in math.<sup>12</sup>

### **5 WHAT CAN STATE LEADERS DO TO ENSURE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION?**

They can partner with teachers to curate a short list of high-quality, ELA- and math-specific HQIM. Several states have done just that. Massachusetts, for example, convenes panels of Massachusetts teachers to review and rate evidence of alignment and quality of comprehensive core curricular materials and then publishes their findings in user-friendly reports for their educators. Partnership with teachers is a key strategy for ensuring that HQIM is not judged as a top-down state intrusion into local education authority.

State leaders can then publish a list of state-approved curricula—based on that teacher input—and incentivize district adoption of curricula from that list.

Incentives may include the following:

- **Provide training to districts** on selecting materials and on effective implementation. Arkansas, for example, released a guide and a toolkit to assist districts.<sup>13</sup> Washington, DC, provides a detailed observation guide to help school leaders support effective implementation of HQIM.<sup>14</sup>
- **Support teachers' professional learning** by sharing costs with the district—so long as that learning focuses on mastering HQIM. Kentucky, for example, started with a pilot in 12 school districts.<sup>15</sup>
- **Curate a list** of state-approved professional learning providers. Louisiana's Professional Learning Partner Guide assists districts with quality control when enlisting professional learning support.<sup>16</sup>
- **Give credit on state grants** to districts using HQIM. Through House Bill 1605, Texas directly incentivizes the adoption of HQIM by providing additional funding for school districts and open-enrollment charter schools that choose materials from the state-approved, high-quality list.<sup>17</sup>
- **Provide approved lists of supplemental materials.** Nevada requires that districts also select supplemental or intervention materials from an approved, state-vetted list. An additional 11 states provide a recommended list of such materials.<sup>18</sup>
- **Require schools that need improvement to adopt HQIM.** Texas includes such requirements in its Targeted Improvement Plans for all Comprehensive Support and Improvement schools, a designation states are required to make to their lowest performing schools under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act.<sup>19</sup>

### **6 HOW CAN OUR BOARD TRACK DISTRICTS' ADOPTION AND USE OF HQIM? WHAT DATA SHOULD OUR EDUCATION AGENCY BE COLLECTING?**

Your state education agency (SEA) should collect data each year on the degree and quality of HQIM adoption in ELA and math. Such data can be collected through surveys. If your state currently lacks good data, a place to start is the Center for Education Market Dynamics, which tracks curriculum adoptions in thousands of school districts across the United States.<sup>20</sup>

## 7 HOW CAN STATES LEVERAGE REGIONAL EDUCATION SERVICE ENTITIES AND EDUCATOR PREPARATION PROGRAMS?

Board members can ask their state chiefs for data on the provision of professional learning to teachers and school leaders across their state. The sources of such training vary considerably. Sometimes, they are university based: In Maryland, the State University of New York provides online professional learning in the science of reading, but Maryland also uses nonprofit AIMS as a technical support provider for additional training.<sup>21</sup> In Arkansas, the SEA has built an entire support infrastructure, including education preparation programs and multiple technical support providers, to strengthen its HQIM implementation.<sup>22</sup>

Regional and cooperative educational service agencies can provide localized training, technical assistance, and curriculum-based professional learning. These centers, in turn, can collaborate with third-party experts to provide on-site training. In Texas, for example, 20 education service centers offer school districts such professional development.<sup>23</sup>

States have not yet made much progress in enlisting their educator preparation programs to introduce future teachers to HQIM and how to use them—despite the fact that many SEAs can require them to do so and pull state accreditation if they do not. State board members should be pressing their agencies to work with prep programs on this critical issue.

A few states have moved in this direction. Texas, through House Bill 1605, incentivizes the programs to train future teachers to recognize and use HQIM. Starting in fall 2024, lower-level undergraduate courses in Louisiana must embed at least one assignment that integrates HQIM in a meaningful way (e.g., comparing and contrasting two curricula on math or comparing two lessons on the same topic from different curricula).<sup>24</sup> The Tennessee Literacy Success Act of 2021 requires prep programs to train candidates in literacy instruction using HQIM. Programs must embed this instruction in coursework, indicate where it is taught, and undergo state reviews.<sup>25</sup> In Louisiana, the state aligns educator preparation programs with K-12 curriculum adoption, ensuring that candidates are trained to select and use HQIM.

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### NOTES

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