NAVIGATING NEW Curriculum Choices

CHANGING WORLD
Curricular options are multiplying PAGE 5

TEACHER-MADE LESSONS
Teachers built Louisiana’s open-content curriculum PAGE 15

'PLAYLISTS' IN CLASS
One way to personalize learning PAGE 19
The Evolving World of Curriculum

By Michele Molnar & Liana Loewus

Educators tasked with finding instructional materials for their districts and classrooms face a dizzying array of options these days.

Classroom resources are available in print, digital textbook formats, and online. They can be paid for, subscribed to, or downloaded for free. They're available as comprehensive, yearlong curricula; individual thematic units; and single activities and games.

Several forces have collided to bring the market to this confusing, yet ultimately academically promising point: The majority of states are now using the Common Core State Standards, meaning there are more opportunities to share materials across state lines. States are increasingly letting districts choose their own instructional materials, rather than forcing them to select from an approved list. There's been a recent push, including from the federal government, to make online instructional materials free and open to the public—known as open educational resources.

And advances in digital technology have made it...
Teachers’ Go-To Sources

Teachers often turn to the internet to find classroom materials aligned to the Common Core State Standards, according to a survey by the Education Week Research Center. Of the 328 teachers who responded to a survey question last October, one-quarter said they used Teachers Pay Teachers, an online marketplace for teachers peddling their lessons. State-curated websites were also popular.

Where do you go to look for common-core-aligned materials?

25% Teachers Pay Teachers

9 State departments of education and state-specific resources

9 EngageNY

8 ReadWorks

7 Self- or colleague-created materials and teacher blogs

6 CCSS website and official common-core resources

5 Pinterest

easier to personalize learning materials for individual students’ needs.

The trick is choosing well. In selecting instructional materials, teachers and administrators have to ask: Do the resources I’m considering align with my state’s standards? Do they have enough supports for English-learners? Can they be modified to fit a classroom’s unique needs? And, perhaps most importantly, will they really lead to student learning?

As it turns out, that last question is an incredibly thorny one—there’s as little agreement on what makes a curriculum “good” as there is on what makes a teacher so.

And yet, with the varied influx of curricular materials, districts are scrambling to deduce what will work in classrooms.

“Teachers across the country are trying to figure out how to find materials that are standards-aligned for increasingly diverse populations, that are culturally relevant and responsive,” said Brian Kingsley, the assistant superintendent for academics of the Wake County, NC., schools. “There’s a lot of sorting through the forest” for the right materials.

Nationwide Curriculum Review

Certain states have long had curriculum-review panels—but some of the most influential ones, including California, have in recent years ceded their power over materials to the districts.

Now, a growing number of national efforts are underway to help teachers and administrators wade through the curricular muck.

The nonprofit EdReports.org, launched two years ago, reviews K-12 math and English/language arts curricula for alignment to the common core, which sets expectations for those subjects and, despite some pushback, is being used in nearly 40 states. EdReports.org has come under some criticism from publishers and a math teachers’ group for its methodology.

Even so, the ongoing reviews may be proving influential: In Palo Alto, Calif., the school board initially rejected a pilot for one of three educator-recommended math curricula because that particular curriculum hadn’t yet been reviewed by EdReports.org. (It subsequently was deemed “partially” meet academic standards, and approved in February for a trial run.)

“If we’re not explicit about what we’re looking for in terms of curriculum alignment, what we’re left with is trusting people’s gut feeling about whether or not they like something,” said Daniel Gohl, the chief academic officer of the Broward County, Fla., schools. “That ‘like’ needs to be defined and articulated.”

Learning List, a for-profit company based in Austin, Texas, analyzes digital and print educational resources for alignment with states’ standards as well, though it is a paid-subscription service.

The State Educational Technology Directors Association has become a resource for state officials with a web-based “print to digital” guide to high-quality instructional materials. Johns Hopkins University researchers have created a website for school administrators that rates instructional programs for K-12 reading and math based on the criteria for judging their effectiveness that is laid out in the Every Student Succeeds Act, the new federal education law.

Individual researchers are taking on curriculum effectiveness as well, though on a smaller scale: A recent study by Corey Koedel, an associate professor of economics and public policy at the University of Missouri, and Morgan Polikoff, an assistant education professor at the University of Southern California, looked at the impact that textbooks have on student achievement—something very few studies have attempted to do.

Koedel and Polikoff found that one of the four most popular math textbooks used in California from 2008 to 2013 consistently outperformed the other three and led to “nontrivial” gains in student performance at a very low cost.

Some districts have tried to assess curriculum effectiveness on their own. The Wake County district used a “backwards mapping” approach to determine what instructional resources have led to the best student outcomes.

Starting with students’ work products in a particular classroom, and comparing them to available resources, the question was asked: “Did these resources naturally lead to teaching to the mastery of our standards?”

“This helped us build some systemwide priorities of areas we need to enhance our curriculum … and in some cases, procure new curriculum,” said Kingsley of the Wake County district.

Now in the market for English/language arts and math curricula, Wake County also held “print and digital playground” sessions for educators, students, and parents so they could give feedback about their impressions of the instructional-material finalists in each category. “These are the people who are going to be using them every day,” Kingsley said.

Creating In-House

In light of the bewildering number of resources available and few agreed-on measures of quality, some districts have, in a sense, gone off the grid.

In Louisiana, the state education department decided to have teachers craft a curriculum of their own. The resulting program, which is voluntary, was released across the state last year, and about 80 percent of districts there are using it so far.

Recent state test results show signs it may be helping improve student outcomes, though some teachers say they need more help differentiating the units for students of all needs. The curriculum, hosted on the
Measuring the Common-Core Fit

How are teachers assessing whether classroom materials are aligned with the Common Core State Standards? The Education Week Research Center survey suggests that teachers are turning to a variety of sources, including colleagues and materials archives, and they are using evaluation tools developed by experts.

- I get materials from repositories which provide resources that experts have deemed to be aligned (51%)
- I use rubrics provided by experts to gauge alignment (34%)
- I ask curriculum coordinators, instructional coaches, or content specialists at my school (31%)
- I ask other teachers at my school (27%)
- I have not tried to determine whether curricular materials are aligned to the common core (15%)
- I ask administrators at my school (9%)
- Other (I use my own judgment, district-provided materials, and blogs) (30%)

Note: Individual items do not add up to 100 percent. This table shows the top responses from the more than 200 sources identified.

LearnZillion cloud-based platform, is free and open for any school across the country to use.

The District of Columbia public schools are doing something similar.

In the Middletown, N.Y., district, educator-created open educational resources are being organized in a scope and sequence onto a Learning Path platform that Superintendent Ken Eastwood plans to make available to districts nationwide as well.

On the other end of the curricular spectrum, some schools have turned to curriculum “playlists,” some of which use computer-based algorithms, rather than teachers, to gather online lessons tailored to individual students’ learning gaps.

Enlisting Tech Views

Despite the proliferation of digital and online materials, print curricular resources continue to be in demand in schools.

“We’ve coined a phrase internally: ‘purposeful technology’ and ‘purposeful print,’” said Christine Willig, the president of McGraw-Hill Education’s K-12 Group, which is focusing on why educators prefer their materials in one format versus another.

But having material in digital format offers the advantage of using the program’s embedded assessments and obtaining instant results, said Linda Ruiz Davenport, the Boston district’s director of K-12 mathematics. She also likes how digital formats provide “text-to-speech” options that help the districts’ English-language learners.

For many educators, a key ingredient sought in an instructional program is flexibility.

“We’re telling vendors we do not want a basal textbook,” said Gohl, the Broward chief academic officer.

His school system is working on a social studies adoption now. “What we want is the opportunity to procure materials that are aligned with standards that, in traditional language, would be called supplementary materials,” he said.

Gohl is looking for modularity, the ability to easily manipulate components of the curriculum in a digital environment.

Publishers say they’re hearing this kind of request more and more.

The evolving needs and demands of the print-to-digital transition have “proven to be more complex and expensive” than first envisioned, said Jay Disley, the executive director of the Association of American Publishers PreK-12 Learning Group.

“Moving to digital personalized learning is something quite different from what schools had been doing,” he said. “It really is a sea change in learning.”

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