



Incentivizing Smart Choices:

How State Procurement Policies Can
Promote the Use of High-Quality
Instructional Materials

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

[Research](#) has shown one of the best ways to dramatically improve student learning and engagement is to give teachers high-quality instructional materials and intentional and ongoing support in using those resources well.

Today—amid a pandemic that has shuttered school facilities, demanded we reimagine how we educate our children, and widened existing learning gaps between vulnerable children and their peers—the need for such materials and support has never been greater.

All children deserve a culturally relevant instructional program that prepares them for college, meaningful careers, and life in general. And states, now more than ever, have a responsibility to create a policy environment that supports and incentivizes the use of high-quality instructional materials.

While states need not mandate the use of a common curriculum, they should provide the knowledge and expertise to help school systems select high-quality options while still giving districts flexibility and autonomy to meet the unique needs of their local communities.

In our 2019 report, [Choosing Wisely: How States Can Help Districts Adopt High-Quality Instructional Materials](#), Chiefs for Change recommended all states, even those that do not have formal authority over curricular choices:

- Define what “high quality” means for instructional materials and professional development.
- Work with experts to create objective rubrics and tools to evaluate instructional materials.
- Collect, study, and publish data on school system curricular options.
- Incentivize smart choices through financial, operational, and teacher supports.

This latest report focuses specifically on one aspect of the 2019 recommendations. It outlines the ways that states can use procurement processes and policies to incentivize the selection and use of high-quality instructional materials and highlights states that have done so successfully.

To promote high-quality choices, Chiefs for Change recommends state education agencies:

- **Encourage school systems to procure instructional materials from a state-vetted list.**
- **Modernize requests for proposals.**
- **Use shared platforms to showcase excellent resources.**
- **Braid funding to support the procurement and implementation of high-quality instructional materials.**

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ABOUT CHIEFS FOR CHANGE

Chiefs for Change is a bipartisan network of diverse state and district education chiefs dedicated to preparing all students for today’s world and tomorrow’s through deeply committed leadership. Chiefs for Change advocates for policies and practices that are making a difference today for students, and builds a pipeline of talented, diverse Future Chiefs ready to lead major school systems.

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INTRODUCTION

A growing body of [research](#), advocacy organizations such as Chiefs for Change, and education thought leaders have in recent years popularized what classroom teachers have long known to be true: High-quality instructional materials matter.

“Instructional materials” refer to the curriculum and supports used in the classroom to guide an entire course of study and to scaffold and build the learning experience across grade levels. And “high quality” means more than merely aligned to state academic standards. While alignment to a state’s academic standards is key, high-quality instructional materials are built on high expectations for students’ mastery of content. High-quality materials are rigorous, relevant, engaging, and coherent. They build content knowledge for students.

Children who have access to high-quality instructional materials and great teachers are better positioned for lifelong success. Furthermore, school systems that implement high-quality instructional materials successfully do so by offering teachers the tools they

need to use those resources, rather than expecting teachers to create their own. And, according to the [Center for American Progress](#), improving the quality of curriculum can be 40 times more cost-effective at increasing achievement than reducing class size.

It is for these reasons a growing number of school systems and states have trumpeted the selection, adoption, and scaled implementation of excellent materials as a top priority.

Now more than ever—amid a pandemic that has shuttered school buildings for nearly a year, demanded we reimagine the day-to-day teaching of our children, and widened existing learning gaps between vulnerable children and their peers—it is critical to maintain this momentum.



THE IMPACT OF PROCUREMENT BARRIERS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

School systems procure instructional materials through various mechanisms, including through local consortia, sole source suppliers, and requests for proposals (RFPs), which require the purchaser to collect and evaluate bids from vendors to inform decision making. In making these purchases, school systems often face barriers that negatively affect teaching and learning.

→ **State academic standards review timelines and subsequent procurement cycles don't match the modern needs of school systems.** In today's constant stream of news and information, and as technology rapidly evolves, instructional materials can quickly become outdated, and new products can be released and adjusted. But school systems may have to wait years to tap funding for new materials because of long procurement cycles set by state policymakers. Sometimes systems are forced to purchase software agreements that don't fit into the current process. This was especially troublesome in 2020 when school systems scrambled to adapt to remote learning amid COVID-19, and had neither the access to innovative, quality products, nor the time to adopt them.

Additionally, there are set timelines for when states adopt new academic standards and when new materials become available for school systems. If such timelines do not allow publishers to make meaningful changes to their products, students and teachers suffer.

→ **Antiquated RFP processes and language often do not position school systems to request and select the best products and can disadvantage some providers.** The way an RFP is crafted guides the selection of instructional materials. When issuing RFPs, states and school systems commonly consider such characteristics as pedagogy and alignment to academic standards, but seldom consider how the instructional materials will be supported by curriculum-aligned professional development, assessment, and technology. Though some states ensure RFPs are thoughtfully and comprehensively developed, not all states do. Without careful attention to these critical supports in the RFP, the ultimate success of even high-quality instructional materials may be diminished.

These barriers largely exist because, while the curriculum landscape has evolved, the laws and policies that guide when and how instructional materials are adopted have not.

No school system wants to adopt poor-quality materials or provide meaningless professional development to its teachers. States have the opportunity to incentivize the adoption and implementation of high-quality instructional materials and to lessen the burden of procurement processes for school systems, while still preserving the autonomy and decision-making authority of those school systems.



THE NEED FOR STATE INVOLVEMENT IN THE PROCUREMENT OF HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

Ask state education agency leaders about their role in procuring high-quality instructional materials and, more likely than not, they will say the state doesn't have one. After all, in all but 17 states nationwide, local school systems exercise complete control over selecting and purchasing instructional materials.

And while school systems are rightly in the driver's seat when it comes to choosing the instructional materials that best meet the needs of their community, states should play an active and supporting role in ensuring those materials are of high quality, implemented at scale and with fidelity to the publishers' specifications.

As detailed in the 2019 report, [*Choosing Wisely: How States Can Help Districts Adopt High-Quality Instructional Materials*](#), Chiefs for Change encouraged all states to define what "high quality" means for instructional materials and professional development; to work with experts to create objective rubrics and tools to evaluate instructional materials; and to collect, study, and publish data on school system curricular options.

Chiefs for Change also recommended all states explore how they can incentivize smart choices through financial,

operational, intentional, and ongoing instructional supports. States could, for example, support local decision makers by updating procurement processes and policies as specified above. States have the power to insist publishers update materials regularly; to loosen overly restrictive timelines; to level the playing field for vendors who have struggled to break into a market dominated by textbook giants; and to provide creative funding support for the implementation of high-quality instructional materials.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES

Any state, regardless of its level of control over curriculum decisions, can review procurement processes and policies and update them to ensure greater access to, and use of, excellent instructional resources. More specifically, state education agencies can:

→ **Encourage school systems to procure instructional materials from a state-vetted list.** To guide school systems in the procurement of high-quality materials, states can create and regularly update lists of materials that meet the state's defined characteristics of quality. States can then encourage or require school systems to purchase materials from that list by offering them expanded professional development or other opportunities.

States can also create master contracts with the providers on the procurement list to help school systems purchase quality materials quickly and easily. Mississippi, for example, vets high-quality instructional materials for a board-approved statewide adoption list. Once a resource is on the list, the state creates a zero-cost contract with the publisher. The cost is fixed for a five-year period and includes both digital and hard copies. If school systems buy from the zero-cost contract, they can do so without competitive bidding. Moreover, the materials are available at a state warehouse to ensure low-cost, expedited shipping and provide pick-up options. This facilitates easier access to higher-quality materials, but still leaves ultimate decision making completely to local control.

→ **Modernize RFPs.** RFPs can promote or discourage high-quality instructional materials based on the way that implementation support, including but not limited to professional development, is defined in the RFP. In order to better understand the landscape of current RFPs, the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy [reviewed RFPs](#) from all 50 states against its best-practices checklist. Based on this review, the Institute recommended states:

- Improve RFPs by providing more explicit guidelines for what is expected from the curriculum and from aligned, curriculum-specific professional development.
- Increase transparency by making RFPs easier to locate, providing a total budget and/or anticipated award amounts, and explaining how the RFP will be evaluated.

- Ensure RFPs are evaluated in alignment with the stated goals of the RFP. This may include weighting the substantive aspects of the RFP higher, and the reputation of and prior relationships with vendors lower. In addition, experts recommend a two-phase RFP evaluation in which RFPs are first reviewed for substantive merits, and only those that meet a minimum substantive threshold are then reviewed for cost. This system ensures a minimum standard of quality while including cost as an important factor.

State education agencies may have to partner with other state systems, such as departments of administration or state procurement offices, to affect change. But on their own, education departments can consider using the aforementioned recommendations to create sample RFPs or RFP rubrics to guide local school systems.

→ **Use shared platforms to showcase excellent resources.**

State education agencies that oversee statewide learning management systems or depositories of materials, for example, can make sure only high-quality products are included. See page 7 for a case study of how the Tennessee Department of Education accomplished this and more.

→ **Braid funding to support the procurement and implementation of high-quality instructional materials.**

States can braid funding streams to support the procurement and implementation of high-quality instructional materials, professional development, and aligned curriculum-embedded assessments. Under the leadership of Chiefs for Change board member and former State Superintendent John White, Louisiana, for example, deployed federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Every Student Succeeds Act, and Title II dollars to ensure the state's most vulnerable students had access to high-quality instructional materials and to give teachers the support to use those resources well.

States can also issue guidance and/or requirements to help school systems understand how to use funding to procure high-quality instructional materials and supports off cycle.

Curriculum-Based Professional Learning

Evidence shows that high-quality instructional materials accelerate student learning, and that the impact of high-quality instructional materials grows even greater when teachers are provided robust training in how to use the resources well.

This requires a shift from traditional teacher professional development—which often presents teachers with static information they can incorporate into their existing practice—to curriculum-based professional learning, which is rooted in ongoing, active experiences that prompt teachers to change their instructional practices, expand their content knowledge, and challenge their beliefs.

In *The Elements: Transforming Teaching through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning*, Carnegie Corporation of New York outlines how the field can initiate these shifts in professional learning models to better support all students. The report also provides recommendations for what multiple stakeholder groups can do to support this shift.

Among the recommendations for system and school leaders, the following directly support and reinforce the role of state procurement:

- Ensure multi-year support for the implementation of high-quality instructional materials.
- Adopt policies and practices that promote—and eliminate those that inhibit—coherent systems of support for curriculum implementation.
- Combine the selection and purchase of high-quality instructional materials with support for implementation.



CASE STUDIES – RHODE ISLAND AND TENNESSEE

Rhode Island and Tennessee are among the states making progress in supporting the adoption and implementation of high-quality instructional materials. The state education departments are led by Angélica Infante-Green and Penny Schwinn, respectively, both members of Chiefs for Change and alumni of the Future Chiefs leadership development program.

Tennessee is a textbook adoption state, meaning it chooses at the state level what textbooks can be used by school systems, while Rhode Island is not. This signals that even in different policy environments, states can play a critical role.



Rhode Island

Over the last several years, as momentum around the effectiveness of quality materials and professional learning began to grow nationwide, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) consciously shifted its role from compliance to support in the selection, adoption, and implementation of high-quality instructional materials.

It started by defining quality and identifying examples of materials that met the state's expectations. It also began supporting a handful of school systems that were interested in procuring new, high-quality materials, with the goal of eventually implementing high-quality materials in every K-12 classroom across the state.

In 2019, the State of Rhode Island General Assembly solidified this goal in law and assigned it a timeline. The legislation requires 100 percent of local education agencies statewide to adopt high-quality instructional materials in K-12 schools that are aligned with academic standards, with curriculum frameworks, and with statewide standardized tests, where applicable, no later than June 2023, for English language arts (ELA) and math, and by June 2025 for science.

RIDE has made significant and steady progress toward this goal. As of March 2020, almost all school systems had adopted high-quality instructional materials in at least one grade and subject.

To date, the state agency has:

- **Published updated procurement lists.** Referencing EdReports, a nationally recognized independent curriculum reviewer, RIDE annually [publishes lists](#) of high-quality instructional materials by subject to help guide each school system's procurement process. RIDE has also published corresponding toolkits to support school systems as they review products that specifically support multilingual learners, foundational literacy skills, and culturally responsive and sustaining education.
- **Negotiated a master price agreement with high-quality curriculum providers.** The master price agreement signals quality and removes red tape from local procurement processes. Moreover, vendors included in the agreement are required to offer tiers of professional learning opportunities aligned to the curriculum.
- **Launched an online professional development vendor guide.** In February 2021, RIDE launched a new-and-improved online [Educator Course Network \(ECN\)](#) to ensure it included vendors that can offer professional learning aligned to high-quality instructional materials. The upgraded ECN is more comprehensive and interactive, while remaining user friendly for both educators and professional learning providers.
- **Drew upon various federal funding streams to support the implementation of high-quality instructional materials.** RIDE is prioritizing \$20 million in Comprehensive Literacy State Development funding to support the adoption and implementation of high-quality instructional materials and curriculum-based professional learning.

Moving forward, RIDE has earmarked a portion of its Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund award to support school systems in not only adopting high-quality instructional materials but in partnering with third-party experts who can help them fully implement materials at scale. It plans to provide this support through a competitive subgrant process.



Tennessee

In the 2017-2018 school year, Tennessee began a statewide listening and learning tour with the goal of ensuring, by its end, school system leaders developed a deeper understanding of the role and value of utilizing high-quality instructional materials in daily classroom instruction. This included the characteristics of quality; the national research and state pilot data that supported the use of high-quality materials; what it would take to ensure proper implementation; and the importance of utilizing these materials for all students.

The tour marked the first step in a multi-year effort to support school systems in the adoption and implementation of high-quality instructional materials. The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) has since:

→ **Developed a rubric to determine quality.** Drawing on national research and state priorities, Tennessee developed a rubric by which it determines if a product is high quality. The rubric is aligned to four key areas:

- Sequencing of complex literary and informational texts that increase in rigor, develop vocabulary, and build knowledge centered on a concept;
- Teacher supports to ensure students are engaged in standards-aligned tasks;
- Series of tasks that develop students' use of language and writing skills to express their new understandings using text-based evidence; and
- Consistent scaffolds and access points to help ensure all learners have access to rigorous opportunities.

→ **Added high-quality materials to a state-approved list.** Tennessee state law requires school systems to adopt instructional materials from a list developed through and approved by the Tennessee Textbook and Instructional Materials Quality Commission. The list of materials is approved by the Tennessee State Board of Education, and TDOE supports this process by bringing together state educators to review the materials based on the quality rubric it developed.

→ **Negotiated fair prices for high-quality instructional materials.** State-level pricing agreements with high-quality curriculum providers help to streamline districts' vetting and selection for curriculum to suit their local communities and context. As part of the

process to create the state-approved list of materials, TDOE creates standardized low pricing using a bid and statewide pricing agreement. This transparent negotiation helps school systems, no matter their size, secure a fair price for the best products.

→ **Offered expanded professional learning opportunities to support school systems that adopt high-quality instructional materials.** School systems that adopt and purchase off the state-approved list unlock the opportunity to participate in grant-funded, curriculum-based professional development and implementation support. This is a critical component to ensuring successful implementation.

→ **Established regional offices to support the field.** TDOE established eight Centers of Regional Excellence across the state. The centers are staffed with ELA and math consultants who support school systems in their adoption and implementation processes. Implementation support is provided through partnership agreements.

→ **Launched an online hub for free, best-in-class instructional and professional development materials.** The searchable hub, called "[Best for All Central](#)," provides school leaders, educators, and families with a collection of high-quality, optional resources to support teaching and learning, as well as features for locating specific resources quickly and easily. It was launched to support Tennessee's districts, educators, and families during the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue to evolve over time.

An increasing number of school systems have joined the movement as a result. During the 2019-2020 school year, 97 percent of school districts reported they would be adopting high-quality curricular materials in core subjects within the academic year. That was up from 51 percent in the previous year, and the highest percentage reported since the state education agency began tracking the metric.

Moving forward, TDOE plans to build on its efforts by utilizing federal funding—from existing streams like the federal Connected Literacy State Development grant and from new streams like federal COVID-19 relief and stimulus funding—to ensure school systems can not only adopt high-quality instructional materials but partner with third-party experts who can help them fully implement at scale.