



REDEFINING ENGAGEMENT:

How Baltimore City Public Schools
Transformed its Approach to Adopting
Instructional Materials

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When Samantha Ashby began her career in 2013 as a first grade teacher in Baltimore City Public Schools (City Schools), she never imagined that she would one day help choose curriculum for approximately 54,000 students. Like many other educators, she assumed that the curricula provided to her were high-quality, and it was part of her job to make the most of it. However, the more she worked with the materials she had, the more challenges she saw. “As a new teacher, I had a lot to learn. However, it became apparent that the materials I had were incomplete and did not meet the demands of the standards,” said Ashby. “I found myself rewriting things, supplementing lessons, and trying to find outside support.”

When teachers don’t have access to quality materials [they hunt for options on unvetted websites](#) such as Teachers Pay Teachers or Pinterest—this is exactly what Ashby did. “It wasn’t until a veteran teacher observed where I was going for supplemental resources and informed me of a better process that I began to think more deeply about my choices,” Ashby said. “My mentor stated I had to let the standards guide my search, but at that time I had no idea where to start.”

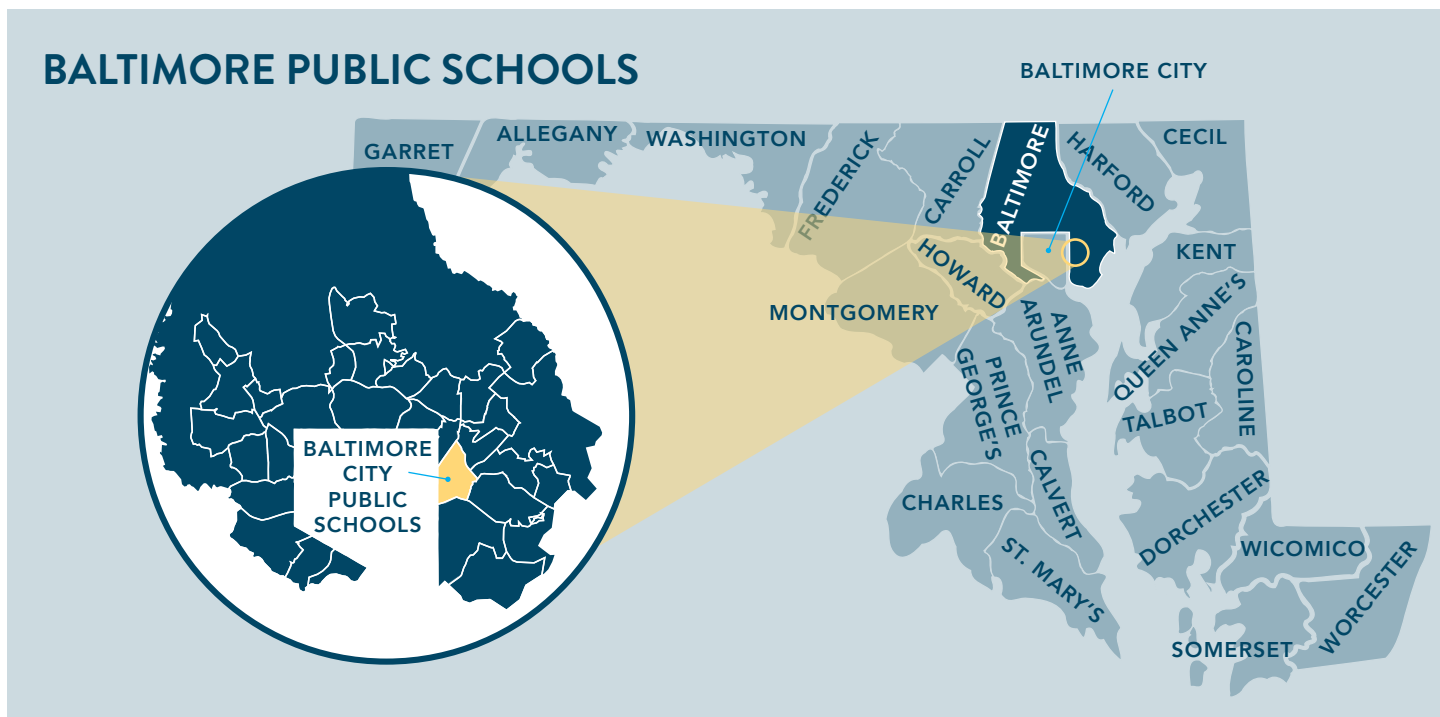
Ashby was not alone. Many educators believed their materials were not meeting student needs in a variety of areas: weak assignments related to the anchor texts, weak secondary sources, disorganized resources and lack of coherence and, more broadly, a lack of supports to reach *all* students.

“I really cared about having a complete curriculum, and I had to devote hours trying to strengthen the current resources we had.”

–Bree-L Ukoha
LITERACY COACH AND FORMER THIRD GRADE TEACHER

Bree-L Ukoha, now a literacy coach, also spent a lot of time looking for and creating her own materials as a third grade teacher. “I really cared about having a complete curriculum, and I had to devote hours trying to strengthen the current resources we had,” she said.

The struggles with instructional materials were reflected in the students’ reading and writing scores. According to the [2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), only 13 percent of fourth grade and eighth grade students in City Schools were considered proficient or advanced. As [research](#) continued to illustrate the connection between instructional materials and student learning outcomes, and as teachers voiced the challenges they faced, district leadership decided it was time to take a hard look at the English language arts content being used in classrooms.



Conducting the Audit

Before the district could make any decisions about new curricula it might select, it was critical to first understand more about the materials already being used in the classrooms: the strengths, the gaps, and most importantly how teachers and students were experiencing them every day. Investigating and documenting information about the current materials was also important because the choice to adopt new materials meant significant investment with limited funds that might be used to address other challenges. Baltimore City Schools had to build a case for the school board and the community about why new materials were needed at all and why the investment would make a real difference for teachers and students.

In 2016, in partnership with [Johns Hopkins University](#) and [TNTF](#), City Schools designed and conducted a curriculum audit. A foundational component of the audit was a district-wide teacher survey created to provide the district a vehicle to formally catalog educator concerns and priorities. The survey received more than 700 responses.

City Schools Executive Director of Teaching and Learning Janise Lane said, "Teachers are the first to tell you when the curriculum isn't meeting the needs of their students. The feedback we received in the audit was invaluable, and the responses became a rich source of data that was used to inform our work and decision-making process. The focus was not 'I hate the curriculum,' or 'We need to replace it.' Instead, teachers seized the opportunity to share where they saw holes, where students struggled, and how the challenges might be addressed."

The results of the audit confirmed what most educators already knew: the ELA materials in use were not supporting teachers to truly prepare students for college and career.

The necessity to take action was clear. Dr. Sonja Santelises, Chief Executive Officer of Baltimore City Schools, wrote in [The Washington Post](#), "This deep dive into our curriculum is not just a helpful exercise; it's a moral imperative if we truly are working on behalf of every student."

Another important takeaway from the audit results was how powerful teacher voice could be on the topic of instructional materials and curriculum. With the information they had collected, and the audit recommendations presented, the district made the decision to lean in and develop a new kind of materials-



Audit Recommendations

Articulate a vision for excellent ELA instruction.



In partnership with teachers and principals, initiate a transition to high-quality, standards-aligned ELA curriculum.



When considering the many factors that go into selecting new materials City Schools should pay particular attention to: standards alignment, usability, cultural relevance, teacher supports, meeting the needs of all learners, writing skills, and building background knowledge.



Develop professional learning specifically designed to support teachers to use the new materials effectively.

adoption culture. The process would be grounded in evidence and data around standards alignment, aimed to build trust and engage all stakeholders, and ultimately address a multitude of student needs.

Diving into the Materials Adoption Process

Instructional materials adoption is never a simple, easy process, but having to select a program that speaks to the needs of 54,000 students and their teachers is a particular challenge. In addition, the program had to be aligned to high standards and the process for selection thorough, inclusive, and unprecedented. Baltimore City Public Schools had a mountain to climb.

Because standards-alignment was central to City Schools' vision for quality ELA instruction, the district turned to several strategies and tools to ensure that materials chosen would in fact be aligned to college and career-ready standards. The first step was to inscribe alignment into the curriculum request for proposals. In the RFP, the district specifically noted that programs were required to be reviewed and highly rated by EdReports.org, an organization which develops reviews of instructional materials focused on a program's alignment to college and career-ready standards, to be considered as a viable option.

Writing EdReports into the RFP was an important quality-control measure, but it was just the starting point. The district also brought together an instructional materials review committee made up of a variety of roles including teachers, principals, district staff, and educators focused on special education and differentiated learning.

To prepare the committee for the work ahead, City Schools partnered with experts in the field to provide professional learning grounded in college and career ELA standards, in addition to indicators of alignment in materials, why materials matter for student learning, and the resources that can help support smart adoption practices.

Principal Mary Donnelly spoke about how the preparation impacted the approach the committee was able to take with the selection: "We didn't look at any actual materials until we had done deep learning, discussed the review rubric the district had developed, and had a full understanding of EdReports reviews. Having the opportunity to learn the research behind why materials matter and the standards and shifts gave us the tools to evaluate programs more deeply. To understand that materials are not always what they claim and that there was a way to investigate alignment was transformative."

First grade teacher Samantha Ashby was also impressed with the level of preparation the committee was given. "I was able to sit down and unpack the research behind why materials are designed a certain way and how they

Materials Adoption Timeline - Baltimore City Public Schools

December 2017 – January 2018

- Johns Hopkins University/ TNTP Curriculum Audit

January 2018 – February 2018

- Formal literacy curriculum review and selection began.
- Stakeholder engagement sessions took place on February 5-15.
- Teacher engagement session took place before and after literacy professional development sessions on February 16.
- Request for proposals review team began weekly meetings to develop capacity in standards alignment, literacy research, and cultural relevance.

March 2018 – April 2018

- Request for Proposals for a comprehensive literacy program was released on March 6
- Presentation of stakeholder engagement session on March 15.
- RFP proposals due on March 27.
- Review committee began review process on April 3.
- Facebook Live session on literacy curriculum on April 16.

May – August 2018

- Teacher and community feedback sessions for top-scoring curriculum options on May 3-12.
- Additional opportunities to review materials in person and virtually between May 8-15.
- Presentations to the Board on May 22, June 5, and June 12.
- Staff, teacher, and school leader training and development will take place June – August
- District purchase of curriculum materials, with all materials in schools by mid-August.

are related to the standards. This examination was a first for me. The experience helped me understand the importance of not just using materials someone gives you, but in understanding those materials on a deep level.”

The committee’s focus on standards alignment was foundational, but it was only one piece of the complete instructional vision the district had for the new ELA program. In order to choose a program that would truly speak to the needs of Baltimore students, the district believed that the expertise of teachers, parents, the community, and students themselves had to be considered and incorporated into the selection process.

Committed to True Stakeholder Engagement

When educators hear the term “stakeholder engagement,” it’s often received with a degree of skepticism. Stakeholder engagement can be conducted in a variety of ways, and it’s not uncommon to experience it superficially—a “checking of the box” along the path to a predetermined outcome.

Baltimore was sensitive to this perception and knew building trust and providing a degree of transparency was key to success. If educators and the community were to participate, City Schools needed to illustrate how that participation would actually make a difference. They needed to emphasize that no decision would be reached without genuine consideration of stakeholders’ points of view.

“Trust doesn’t happen overnight. It has to be earned,” said Janise Lane. “This was the first time we had conducted an adoption like this, so it’s understandable that there was some reluctance on the part of educators and the community. It’s understandable that teachers weren’t sure if their expertise was being solicited to actually inform the decision. Our job was to show it truly was, to commit to transparency, offer genuine, effective avenues for feedback and engagement, and to communicate openly about what we were doing and why.”

EDUCATOR ENGAGEMENT

The instructional materials review committee—made up of nine educators armed with the professional learning they had received—dug into a variety of potential ELA programs and applied a district-created review rubric. The development of the review rubric was a key example of the educator engagement built into the process.

Baltimore City Public Schools:

Students:

79,297

Low Income:

52.7%*

Students who identify as:

- African American: **78.6%**
- Hispanic/Latino: **11.3%**
- White: **7.8%**

English Learners:

7.2%

Source: <https://www.baltimorecityschools.org/district-overview>

*All students in Baltimore City Public Schools qualify for free lunch under the Community Eligibility Provision. As a result, City Schools no longer collect FARMs forms. Following guidance from the Department of Education, City Schools now multiplies the percentage of “directly certified” children by 1.6 to determine an estimated FARMs percentage. The estimated FARMs percentage is 84%.

“When looking for new materials, we’re looking for vendors willing to present more than a ‘dog and pony show.’ Our educators know the content and we want vendors who can speak to our needs.”

—Dr. Sonja Santelises

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF CITY SCHOOLS

To develop the rubric, the district infused the results from the teacher audit survey as well as information they learned from teacher and principal meetings and focus groups. The rubric prioritized standards alignment, usability, cultural relevance, scaffolds and supports for universal access, English learner and special needs supports, as well as a strong integrated writing component. All of these elements were directly informed from more than 700 teacher voices across the district.

The rubric was just the starting point for teacher engagement. The City Schools process also included teachers and principals on the selection committee to ensure that those previously in the position of accepting district decisions without a say became the decision-makers—a departure from materials adoptions of the past.

Middle school ELA Teacher Julie Karre said, “This was my 10th year in the district, and it was the first time I’ve seen an adoption process conducted this way. As a teacher, it’s not something I’ve ever been a part of before.”

While the teachers and principals on the committee embraced the opportunity to have a deciding voice about the materials used in classrooms, the responsibility came with a number of risks and challenges as well. Educators were understandably hesitant to trust a new process. On top of that, teachers on the committee were nervous because they would ultimately be the face of the decision for their colleagues.

“I’ve been a part of the district for 45 years, and the city has never done an adoption in quite this way before. In the past, educators would simply receive materials that had already been decided on. I’ve never known the district to put so much effort into looking at the research and bringing so many stakeholders together to make this decision.”

– **Mary Donnelly**
PRINCIPAL

“As teachers on the committee, we wanted to protect our anonymity while we were reviewing potential programs,” said first grade teacher Samantha Ashby. “We were worried our colleagues might see us as solely responsible for any choice that was made.”

The district never intended for just a few teachers to represent the views of hundreds in the district. “As soon as the process began, we wanted to make sure we were listening to and actively engaging those in the field,” said Janise Lane. “We put together a series of stakeholder meetings and focus groups so that we could talk to educators about what they wanted to see in the curriculum and what they wanted in a process. We made all of this feedback available to the adoption committee.”

There were a number of supports that helped teachers on the committee feel less alone, including data from the audit survey, the listening and learning focus groups to inform the rubric, and the reviews of curriculum created by educators across the country. These supports did not make all the nerves vanish, but they certainly provided a salve.



“We were able to look at teacher responses and feedback from our own district to see how it was included in the rubric,” said Ashby. “We were also able to invest the time in looking at EdReports reviews, and I could understand the thinking of other educators and see this evidence to support my own conclusions. All these things made a huge difference.”

Once the committee had narrowed the large list of potential programs to two choices, it was time to take those options out into the world and share them widely. The district set up a series of feedback sessions for teachers and principals across the city. Educators had the opportunity to examine actual materials and leave feedback in person or fill out a digital form. The committee also sent another survey to teachers with questions about the final two options.

SETBACKS ALONG THE WAY

Participation in the feedback sessions was initially low. There were a number of possible reasons, including times and dates of the sessions, the amount of responsibilities teachers and principals already have, a lack of trust in the process, or some combination of all of these.

“We held a series of engagement sessions, but once they were over, we had heard from less than 50 people,” said Lane. “In conversations with the school board, we realized we couldn’t make any decisions without more voices weighing in.”

This realization had big implications. In the middle of the adoption process, the district had to go back to the drawing board and consider how to broaden its approach and think about innovative ways to get more educators involved. Lane said, “Even though it was difficult and time-consuming, it mattered to us because we knew the quality of the decision was at stake and so was buy-in for implementation.”

Of course, teachers and principals were not the only stakeholders the district was committed to engaging. City Schools pursued an inclusive process and wanted to ensure that parents, the community, and students had a voice in the selection. “Not only were we taking stock of how to involve educators, we had other stakeholder groups to include as well,” said Lane.

The district reflected on the poor turnout for the teacher and principal feedback sessions and considered the challenges they would face when reaching out to



Baltimore City Public Schools Stakeholder Engagement

Educators	Parents / Students / Community
<p><i>Before the materials adoption:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District conducted curriculum audit focus groups and classroom visits with outside partners and organizations • Survey #1 - District wide teacher survey conducted to learn more about the materials being used in classrooms for the curriculum audit • Educators (teachers, principals, and instructional coaches) included on the materials adoption committee 	<p><i>Before the materials adoption:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public feedback sessions were held to gather feedback to inform the curriculum adoption process.
<p><i>During the materials adoption:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder meetings and focus groups conducted with educators to learn more about what educators wanted to see in new materials and in the adoption process • Survey #2 - District wide teacher survey sent once the materials were narrowed down to two options • Engagement sessions with digital forms offered for teachers to have the opportunity to examine materials and give feedback about the program • District office hours • Materials were presented to principals by the district at the annual City Schools principal convening • Publishers presented to principals on the two options City Schools is considering • Public board meeting presentations from the district about the materials and the selection process: teachers and the community were encouraged to attend and offer comments about the process and the programs being considered 	<p><i>During the materials adoption:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facebook Live session: A student interviewed district leadership with a series of questions ranging from why materials matter and how the process was being conducted to what the change would look like for students and how students could have a say in the decision. Questions and comments from the session were answered by district teams and the session was available to the entire community. • Public board meeting presentations from the district about the materials and the selection process: teachers and the community were encouraged to attend and offer comments about the process and the programs being considered • Parent and community engagement sessions were held where parents could interact with materials being considered and offer feedback about each program
<p><i>After the program was selected:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District reached out to teachers about what professional learning supports were needed to implement the new program. Responses from educators informed professional learning for 2019-2020 • Three day learning institute for the summer and designed professional learning sessions for the 2019-2020 school year • Extensive training from the publisher and educators who had used the program selected for literacy and instructional coaches across the district 	<p><i>After the program was selected:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The district communicated the final curriculum decision to families and the community during a public school board meeting • Information on the final decision was placed on the district website including an overview of the entire process and recordings from videotaped engagement sessions. Throughout the 2019-2020 school year students, families and the community have an opportunity to provide feedback on their experience with the new curriculum through a survey on the district website

parents and the larger community. District leaders asked themselves: What can we do differently to not only bring in diverse perspectives but to communicate back to our stakeholders why their expertise is so integral to student and district-wide success?

They decided to not reinvent the wheel but to innovate instead. The feedback sessions would continue, but there would be more of them at a variety of dates, times, and locations to accommodate as many schedules as possible. The district also committed to developing new methods of engagement by tapping into social media.

THE FACEBOOK LIVE SESSION

One of the ideas that emerged from the reevaluation of the process was to [host a Facebook Live session](#). This platform provided a space for the community to ask questions as well as for the district to communicate more about the adoption process including who was involved, how choices were being made, and the instructional vision, research, and evidence guiding decision-making.

The session was designed to be a “question-and-answer” format with a student conducting the interview with Chief Academic Officer Sean Conley and Executive Director of Teaching and Learning Janise Lane. The student asked them a series of questions ranging from why materials matter and how the process was being conducted to what the change would look like for students and how students could have a say in the decision. Throughout the session, feedback and questions from those watching peppered the comment section of the Facebook Live platform. City Schools strived to address as many questions and concerns as possible in the moment. Staff then collected the remaining feedback and responded to each and every inquiry after the session had ended.

The session was not a silver bullet for two-way engagement, but it illustrated one tactic that could be effective for a large, urban district, where schools are spread out over a wide area. It was an additional opportunity for stakeholders to participate and actively shape the materials that would impact thousands of students for many years to come.

The Facebook Live session was considered a success and viewed nearly 2,000 times. But the district did not rest on a single accomplishment. Parents, students, and the community were invited to view and leave feedback about materials during open hours at the central office. There was also a workshop series that presented a deep dive into the final two programs being considered for adoption. The series allowed for parents and community members to peruse the materials, view videos, and interact virtually via digital resources and a feedback survey for parents who could not attend.

Parent and community feedback proved invaluable to the process and revealed that parents were as concerned with many of the same programmatic aspects as teachers. Common threads from parent and community feedback included concerns about text quality and variety, writing components in the program, rigor, pacing, and ensuring kids could see themselves in the materials.

The City Schools’ engagement efforts ran throughout the spring of 2018 while the adoption committee and district staff continued to present and speak at public school board meetings. Educators and community members were also invited to give feedback at these meetings, and the district team took the opportunity to update the community on the status of the adoption process. In May 2018, City Schools made a formal recommendation to the school board for a new K-8 English language arts adoption. The board unanimously approved this recommendation in June 2018.



Focusing on Implementation and Beyond

City Schools is now in year two of implementation of its new English language arts curriculum, and there have been a few bumps along the way. Implementing a new program well is difficult for most districts, and Baltimore faced challenges specific to a large district where teachers have previously developed many of their own materials.

“Selecting this program came from a well-intentioned place. We recognized that the previous curriculum couldn’t

meet student needs and solicited broad feedback, but that doesn’t make implementation challenges disappear,” said teacher Julie Karre. “The program we adopted is jam packed, and it assumes that students have had the program in previous grades, which isn’t the case in our situation. It’s a significant improvement from the materials we were using, but we still have work to do.”

ADDRESSING IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

City Schools dedicated time to learn lessons from other districts as well as from the audit they had conducted. Because of that, they understood that without extensive professional learning to support teachers in mastering the new program, the work that went into selecting new materials would matter very little. Effective professional

Lessons Learned

Baltimore City Public Schools understands that no adoption process is perfect, particularly when conducted in a new way for the first time. Many leaders and participants on the committee shared lessons the district had learned that could be applied in the next adoption and provide a blueprint for districts undertaking this work for the first time.

Provide more time for engagement and feedback.

The adoption process took place over eight months. Given teachers’ busy schedules, additional time for feedback could have resulted in more voices being heard.

Prioritize communication of the adoption process during and after selection.

The district sent emails, conducted workshops, communicated at public board meetings, and presented a Facebook Live session to illustrate a transparent, comprehensive adoption process. However, reaching educators with this information did not always go according to plan and is still an area the district hopes to build on. One educator suggested that more feedback sessions should be conducted in schools to meet teachers where they already are.

Increased participation requires building trust.

This was a first-of-its-kind adoption process for City Schools, and the district had to earn the trust of educators and the community it was hoping to engage. Building trust is a continuous process that happens over time. In future adoption processes, it is hoped that the 2018 ELA adoption can act as a foundation for that trust to encourage more participation.

Include more teachers and principals on the adoption committee.

Given the size of the district, some educators felt that the adoption committee could have included more educators to bring in more perspectives and expertise.

Implementation will always be challenging; the key is to provide effective ongoing supports.

There is no way to completely eliminate the challenges educators face during implementation. However, professional learning, ongoing engagement, and resources can make a huge difference in how materials are both received and used in the classroom.

learning was directly connected to ongoing stakeholder engagement.

The district solicited feedback from teachers and put together a three-day learning institute for the summer of 2018 as well as professional learning sessions for the 2018-2019 school year. Literacy coaches, whose roles focus on working closely with teachers and principals, received extensive training in the new program to prepare for implementation. This training did not fall on the district's shoulders alone. For much of the professional learning and implementation supports, City Schools partnered with the publisher to provide training to district staff, school leaders, and teachers.

Amber Clemmons, a literacy academic content liaison, dedicates her time primarily to supporting teachers and schools with implementation of the new curriculum. "Anything that is meaningful, rigorous, and new takes time to learn. We're seeing that with the materials," said Clemmons. "You can't grasp everything at once, and it's a slow process to build expertise. But that's what it means to be an educator: You have to continually grow based on student needs, new research, and changing society. Good professional learning supports this growth and ultimately empowers teachers to be at their best to serve kids."

Literacy coach Bree-L Ukoha also spends large portions of her day offering real-time coaching around the new curriculum and capturing what she is seeing in classrooms in a database to inform future professional learning. "Implementation is a work in progress, even with the best of intentions," said Ukoha. "We are working on shifting mindsets and offering resources that address the real needs of teachers who are adapting to a new curriculum. It hasn't been easy, but as we see increases in student engagement and student learning, teachers are buying in."

IMPACTING THE CLASSROOM

Even with the real challenges literacy coaches Clemmons, Ukoha, and teachers Karre and Ashby describe, there is much to be hopeful about. While the long-term impact of the curriculum is yet to be determined, educators who are in classrooms every day tell inspiring stories about the changes they've already witnessed.

"Even with the obstacles we encounter, we're seeing increased collaboration between teachers regarding the new curriculum," Clemmons said. "There's a sense of 'We're all in this boat together, let's figure it out.' I believe that's because teachers were engaged throughout the process and because they are seeing how quality materials make a difference for their students."

Clemmons has been in the district for 15 years and has witnessed previous materials adoptions in that time. She noted a real shift since the selection of the new program:



Learn More

Learn more about adoption and implementation in Baltimore City Public Schools and why instructional materials matter for student success:

The Washington Post: [The importance of asking hard questions about what students learn in school](#)

Johns Hopkins University: [Using the RFP to Drive High Quality Curriculum](#)

Chiefs for Change: [Statement on the Need for High Quality Curricula](#)

TNTP: [The Opportunity Myth](#)

EdReports.org: [Why Materials Matter](#)

"Every day, I have students coming up to me with excitement to tell me about something they are reading or writing about. I have parents stopping me in the hallway because they can't stop talking about how engaged their kid is—how at the dinner table their kid is talking about the power of language in *Animal Farm* and how you can't use it to hurt people, you have to use it to help. Students are passionate and armed with knowledge and skills and ready to go out in the world and share their opinion."

Clemmons has been especially impressed with the improvement in students' writing skills. "I've worked with the same second grade class since the beginning of the year, and their writing is the best I've ever seen," she said. "We have kindergarteners writing in complete sentences and conducting Socratic seminars. We're seeing students meet the challenge of a rigorous curriculum. We're seeing students exceed high expectations and light up when they realize they can understand, explain, and write about anything."

Literacy coach Bree-L Ukoha is also witnessing the same hopeful developments in her classrooms: “Students are so interested in what they are learning, and that motivates them to try new things. Great materials allow teachers to meet the needs of different learners. It’s not about lowering the standards or expectations. It’s about offering materials and instruction that support them to meet high expectations.”

Samantha Ashby, now in her seventh year of teaching, also talked about the value of teacher-to-teacher trust and communication. “I’m a literacy rep at my school which means I get to work with other teachers to master this curriculum,” she said. “The district was intentional about this because they know there’s a lot more power in me saying ‘I struggle with pacing too, but look how aligned this question is to the standard’ versus a directive coming down from the top. My colleagues and I are figuring this out together—we’re going through it together. That’s where the power is and how we can build and sustain buy-in.”

LASTING CHANGE IN THE DISTRICT

The examples of positive changes cited by teachers and coaches did not happen by chance. Just like selecting quality materials that speak to the needs of Baltimore’s students did not happen by chance. If City Schools did not authentically engage and respect the expertise and unique

“There is no limit to what my students are capable of, and I’m working every day to show them all that’s possible.”

—Samantha Ashby

1ST GRADE TEACHER, BALTIMORE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

needs of educators, parents, and students, it is clear that the selected curriculum would have been less likely to support kids and address the challenges of the school communities.

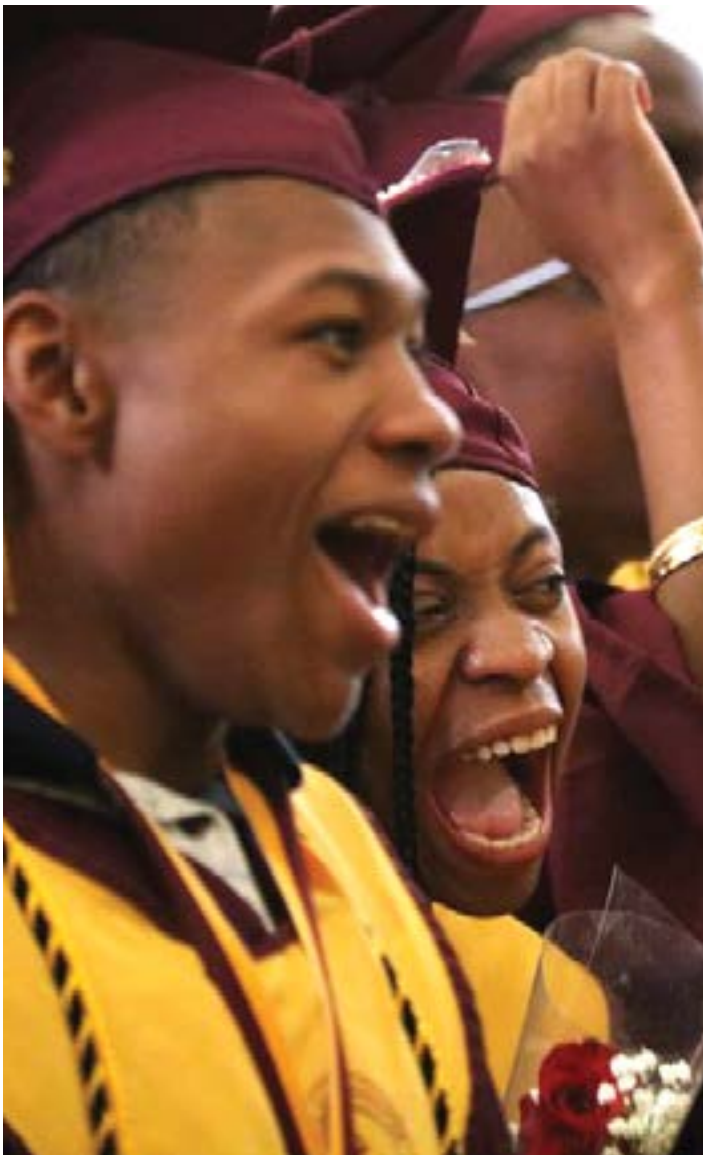
“We are changing how we do things in the district,” Ukoha said. “Throughout the adoption, we valued teachers as professionals and invested in thinking about the resources they needed. I know because I was a teacher during the process, and I participated in providing feedback. I saw how my voice became a part of ensuring we had a quality curriculum. Now, I’m seeing what that means for real students in real classrooms.”

Clemmons pointed out that she’s seen other adoptions in the past and that many of those did not yield the best



materials for City Schools students. “The difference with this selection process is that the district was strategic and creative about how to get feedback from all stakeholders,” she said. “We’re now seeing the results in the quality of the program, the buy-in from educators, and the way students are engaging with the content in the classroom.”

The impact of a purposeful, comprehensive selection process lasts beyond adoption, rollout, and implementation—especially for those that were most engaged. Samantha Ashby talked about how her experience continues to shape her practice as a teacher. “This has made me a more intentional teacher,” she said. “What I’ve learned has given me a ‘why’ and a level of discernment in what I’m exposing students to. And that matters, because when I have materials that aren’t vetted, it often leads to lower expectations, and nothing could be worse than that. There is no limit to what my students are capable of, and I’m working every day to show them all that’s possible.”



A Model for Other Districts

Baltimore City Public Schools pursued an ambitious instructional materials adoption process that prioritized continuous learning and innovation. While the district recognizes that stakeholder engagement can improve and that not everyone was satisfied with the choices made, the effort can still be seen as a model for other districts both large and small. Baltimore’s adoption showcases three critical components of effective stakeholder engagement:

Engagement offering both breadth and depth:

The district reached out to a variety of stakeholders—not a single group or role within the community. Anyone with a real interest in the materials students have access to was given the opportunity to have a voice in the decision, including parents and other community members.

The engagement opportunities varied in depth and structure—from participation on the adoption committee and in-person feedback to surveys and outreach via social media channels. The combination of both broad and deep interaction helped ensure that not only were different perspectives heard but that stakeholders could contribute where they felt most comfortable and lead on specific areas of the process.

Engagement at every step of the adoption process:

Stakeholders were engaged at every step of the adoption process. They were engaged during the audit, as the review was being conducted and options were being narrowed, and once a final choice was made.

Engagement has also continued during rollout and implementation. It can be easy to assume that engagement ends when the decision is made; however, the most effective engagement is continuous and woven into each step of selection and implementation so that communication lines remain open. Ongoing engagement is key to allow for a nimble and flexible process that can authentically address stakeholder feedback in real time.

Engagement that’s a two-way street:

Engagement works best when both parties are exchanging views, information, and expertise. City Schools invested in ways for educators, parents, and the community to offer their viewpoints and to experience the materials under consideration. The district also actively communicated the adoption process back to stakeholders in an effort to be open about why and how materials were being selected as well as how feedback was being incorporated.