BIG CHANGES in RURAL WISCONSIN

Improving the Instructional Materials Selection Process

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Billie Finco and Laura Veglahn knew things had to change. As directors in the Wisconsin Cooperative Educational Service Association 4 (CESA #4), a regional office working with 26 mostly rural school districts, they had a bird's-eye view of the challenges school communities face when searching for and adopting new instructional materials.

Educators in districts that often consist of a single school, or a small group of schools with high percentages of students eligible for free and reduced lunch, frequently expressed severe capacity shortages and a lack of resources to support them in making curricular choices. "The reality is many schools are experiencing high staff turnover, high rates of student poverty, and tight budgets," said Finco. "All of this plays a role in how and when districts adopt new materials."

Wisconsin is a local-control state, and many schools and districts adopt their own curricular materials. Finco and Veglahn had seen the culture that had developed around the challenges districts endure. "There haven't been clear, comprehensive adoption processes in place," Finco said. "Schools often look at what neighboring districts are using, as opposed to engaging in a formal vetting process."

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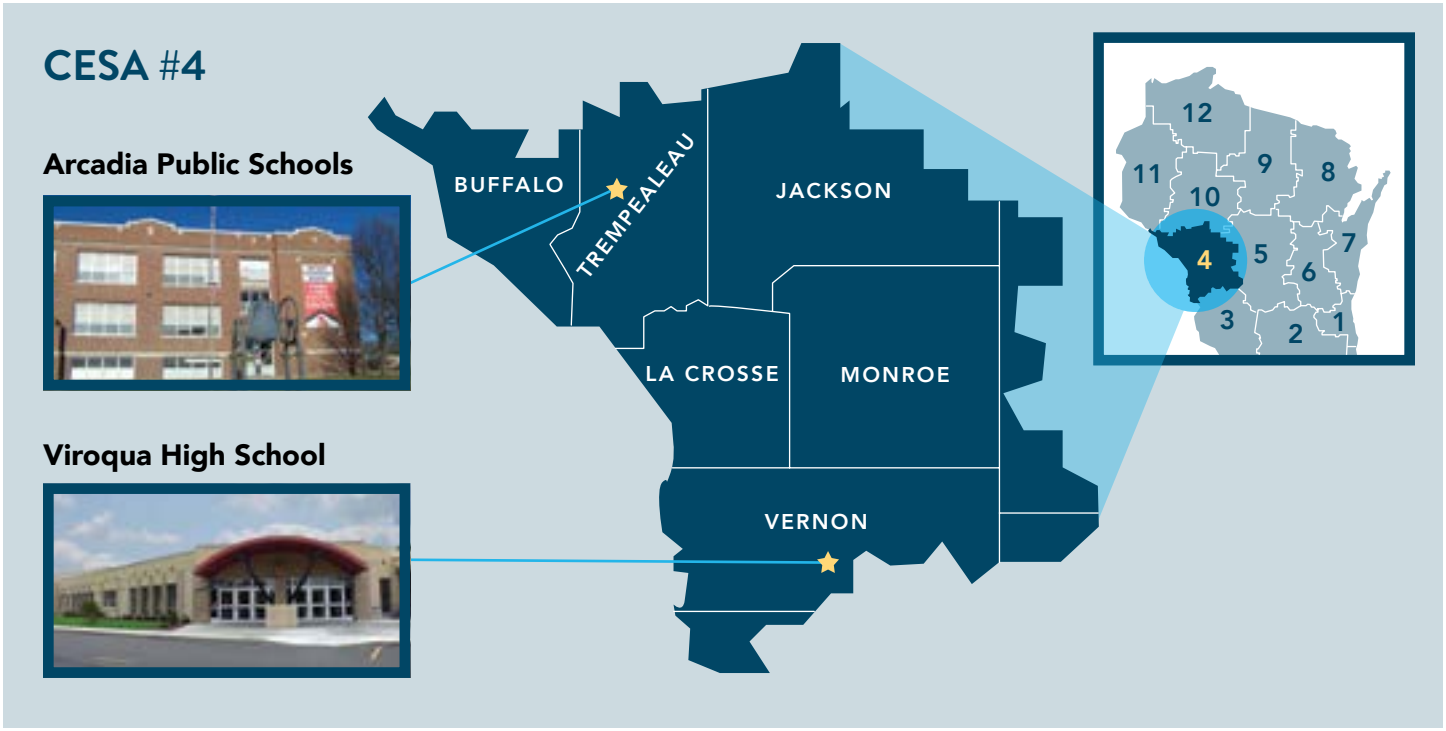
> SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SERVICES

Laura Veglahn agreed and highlighted additional challenges shaping the materials adoption culture. "Until recently, there was no real way to identify quality materials or to put local student needs front and center," she said, "Most of our materials were made for giant markets such as Texas or Florida, and principals, teachers, and, in some cases, a single curriculum director were expected to have expertise beyond the scope of their role."

Uneven vetting processes and a lack of supportive tools meant that publishers presenting their materials to CESA #4 districts were usually in the driver's seat. "The vendors who showed up with the prettiest materials or who showed up at all were most often chosen," Finco said.

All of these circumstances—adopting materials based simply on use by neighboring districts, lack of awareness or access to independent information about the quality of materials, and the inability to engage publishers in a meaningful way—created an environment that made it nearly impossible to ensure new materials were aligned to high standards and met student and teacher needs.

Unfortunately, this meant that the quality of materials was often left up to chance. This was not because educators didn't care—nothing could be further from the truth—but because the systems and supports



necessary to develop comprehensive approaches to materials selection were unavailable. The specific obstacles many rural districts deal with (capacity and budget primarily) make creating these systems more difficult—especially for districts tackling selection on their own.

But what if there was a way to build a coalition of districts to co-create a new instructional materials adoption culture and offer resources that could make a difference? In the fall of 2018, Finco and Veglahn saw a chance to make this a reality and applied to a grant offered by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI).

Searching for a New Way to Select Materials

Carmen Lee knew things had to change. Like Billie Finco and Laura Veglahn, she had been reading the emerging research about the impact instructional materials have on student learning and had been examining her district's student data that indicated new mathematics materials were a glaring need.

As the sole curriculum director of Arcadia Public Schools, she was in charge of the upcoming K-5 math materials adoption even though her background was as a reading specialist. Lee understood the weight and importance of the choice in front of her, but she was also aware that she was a single person with multiple responsibilities. "I was looking for a way to increase the mathematics standards expertise I knew we would need to make a good choice," said Lee. "This was not a job for a team of one."

When Lee heard about the possibility of participating in the CESA #4 cohort with three other districts adopting instructional materials, she didn't hesitate to sign on. She brought together a team that included teachers from each grade level and an instructional coach.

One of those teachers was English learner teacher Erin Moreno. Moreno had come to teaching later in her career after working as a Spanish translator for the farming and furniture industries in Arcadia for eight years. Now, she taught many of her former colleagues' children at Arcadia Elementary School—a school where 70% of students are Spanish speaking. In her classroom, she supported students who often enrolled in Arcadia Elementary School with a wide range of educational backgrounds and varying levels of English fluency and math proficiency.

Having heard about materials adoptions conducted in the past, Moreno was anxious to try a new approach. From her time in the classroom, she knew that any curriculum chosen not only had to be aligned to high standards but

Arcadia Public Schools: District Stats

Schools:

3

Students:

1,305

Economically disadvantaged:

67.2%

Students who identify as:

- Hispanic/Latino: **62.2%**
- White: **36.%**
- African American: **0.8%**

English learners:

36.7%

Source: https://apps2.dpi.wi.gov/reportcards/home

had to offer English learner supports. "Our students are bright and engaged," said Moreno. "We want to ensure that we're taking into consideration any language challenges they may have so they can access all the knowledge and skills we're hoping to build."

As Lee sought out teachers willing to participate in a different kind of adoption process—one that promised resources, supports, professional development, and a cohort of other districts to learn with—Moreno raised her hand.

Building a Strong Foundation for Materials Adoption

The kickoff for the instructional materials adoption work with CESA #4 came in November 2018. Wisconsin DPI sponsored a day of learning that included in-depth talks from UnBoundED and EdReports, two nonprofits with deep expertise in curricular materials and standards. The sessions focused on the importance of college and career-ready standards and the role instructional materials play in student learning and meeting those standards.

In many ways, the day of learning set the context for all the work the CESA #4 group would do moving forward. Attendees were introduced to big questions to consider before an adoption, what an adoption process could look like, and the research establishing why materials matter.

"The November session was the perfect way to start our process," Lee said. "We had a real foundation to build off of and clearer understanding about the 'why.' Why an adoption process can make a difference, why we should invest in systems and structures to support selection, and data to illustrate what we were witnessing in our classrooms: why materials matter for student growth."

After the day of learning, the four districts met throughout the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019. CESA #4 introduced the group to a variety of resources and supports to begin evaluating potential materials including curriculum reviews on EdReports.org and the Louisiana Department of Education website, as well as case studies of how other districts and states conducted adoptions.

The case studies were helpful in highlighting the totality of a process, including stakeholder engagement, data analysis, narrowing down potential options, and determining professional learning needed for implementation.

"I can't say enough about the resources CESA #4

CESA #4 Materials Adoption Timeline

Nov. 18, 2018
DPI Sponsored Day of Learning with EdReports and UnboundEd

Nov. 29, 2018 Session
Preparing to Select High Quality Instructional Materials

Feb. 19, 2019 Session
Reviewing High Quality Instructional Materials (Mathematics K-5)

Mar. 6, 2019 Session
Reviewing High Quality Instructional Materials (ELA 6-12)

Apr. 2, 2019 Session
Planning for Implementation of High Quality Instructional Materials (ELA and Math)

provided," Erin Moreno said. "We received district-supported days away from the classroom which allowed us to dive deep into our adoption committee work. They posed poignant questions to us so that we could really reflect on the kinds of materials we were looking for. They also provided practice profiles and frameworks we could apply in our decision-making."

Each team used EdReports reviews with a particular focus on standards alignment to narrow down the large list of available materials to three math choices and three English language arts choices. The plan was to invite the publishers of those programs to present to the full group.

For districts often strapped for capacity, the wealth of information in EdReports reviews about key indicators the committees cared about was a game changer. "When we were shown what EdReports did in terms of the depth of reviewing the curriculum, I was blown away," Moreno said. "I kept thinking 'who could ever do this on their own?' And then I realized: we don't have to because we have these resources that were created by hundreds of educators."

Curriculum director Carmen Lee had a similar reaction about the reviews and how the evidence provided builds capacity and lends expertise. "I have a reading background, but given my role and the resources in our district, I am responsible for the math materials adoption," Lee said. "The beauty of EdReports was that I had an independent, trustworthy resource to have as a guide and it was put together by educators who do have a deep understanding of mathematics and the mathematics standards."

Jason Cress, a principal from Viroqua High School who was leading his school's English language arts adoption as part of the CESA #4 cohort, came from a school where teachers had traditionally created their own materials due in large part to budget constraints. The school, which educated 365 students from a town with a population of 4,500, did not have the budget to pilot a new program and had not adopted formal materials in many years.

Cress worried that his team of teachers might be resistant to a different approach after so much time fending for themselves, but that was not the case. "The teachers on the team were open to exploring a new way and were amazed at how comprehensive the rubrics and resources were to help us make the choice," Cress said. "They wanted the support to make a decision, especially once they knew other educators had created the reviews. The trust was there."

In the initial narrowing of programs, alignment to college and career-ready standards was a top priority, but districts also considered local needs as well. For Arcadia, that meant English language supports, cultural relevance, and assessments that were connected to the material being taught, for Viroqua: strong vocabulary components and scope and sequence.

The individual work each district or school did to identify quality materials was notable but equally significant was the move to a strategic, systematic approach in selecting programs. "The planning side of the adoption was a huge shift in culture for us and the planning paid off," said Erin Moreno, the English learner teacher from Arcadia. "Because we were able to evaluate the programs with

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Through the deep dives into EdReports reviews and professional learning sessions that CESA #4 supported, teams chose five vendors (three for K-5 mathematics and two for grades 6-12 ELA) to reach out to and invite to Wisconsin so they could learn more about the programs and take a look at the materials. In the past, it was often difficult for individual rural districts to get the attention of publishers, especially for a site visit. Publishers had refused to come due to the small market size, and the few that showed up could easily persuade districts to purchase materials through beautiful samples and impressive presentations.

CESA #4 directors Billie Finco and Laura Veglahn knew it would take more than an invitation from one or two districts to sway vendors to visit their rural community, so they invited 12 additional districts along with their group of four to meet with the publishers. After establishing this critical mass, the districts had more leverage to engage vendors in a way they would not on their own. Eventually, all invited publishers agreed to participate, but the educators of CESA #4 were only getting started. The approach the group developed to engaging vendors was innovative, collaborative, and a model for other districts, large and small, to look to.

Empowering Educators to Strategically Engage Publishers

CESA #4 was acutely aware of how publisher visits had traditionally been conducted, where vendors would arrive with materials and lead the presentation from start to finish. They decided to rethink the structure of the meeting. Directors Finco and Veglahn hoped to create a more collaborative experience where educators could learn from one another, and where the needs of the teachers and students were the driving force of the conversation. It was also vitally important that educators were empowered to ask the questions they needed answers to in order to make a final decision.

The regional office worked closely with publishers and set conditions around what the visit would include. Each publisher had one hour to present. Presentations were required to focus on the materials in relation to the EdReports rubric–for math: focus and coherence, rigor and mathematical practices, for ELA: text quality and complexity and alignment to standards with tasks grounded in evidence along with instructional supports. Both content areas could also speak to usability criteria, as well as the professional development required to move from initial selection to full implementation.

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This choice was especially significant because it set parameters around the conversation in an attempt to sidestep the "bells and whistles" that are often highlighted in curriculum presentations. Instead, the alignment and quality of materials would be the roadmap everyone was using, and the engagement would be less about selling and more about listening and responding.

In advance of the publishers' visit, districts came up with questions to ask them about the specific materials. The cohorts were also able to examine the materials and share direct feedback with the vendors about the programs. The design of the day included a whole group share out at the end of the day that allowed participants the opportunity to learn with and from each other.

Finally, there was no guaranteed or required purchase of any of the materials: The purpose of the engagement was information gathering and not to complete a transaction. Ultimately, the districts were free to walk away entirely if programs did not meet their expectations.

This setup was just as new for publishers as it was for the districts involved. One vendor considered not attending because of the conditions, but as the visit unfolded, the experience was a positive one for both groups.

The adoption committees, especially the four that had been part of the CESA #4 grant process from the beginning, were able to engage publishers on program-specific questions as they related to individual community needs rather than a surface-level discussion of how the materials looked and how easy they were to use.

"The way the vendors were organized and presented to us made a big difference in the kind of information we were able to get," teacher Erin Moreno said. "We had to do a lot of our own thinking and discussing, but the blueprint was there for us."

Questions varied depending on the district, but many focused on potential professional learning required for strong implementation, assessments and data collection, English language learner supports, and opportunities for differentiation.

The fact that the process was a collaborative one, where districts could listen to other districts' questions, was also powerful. "We really benefited from hearing what other teams were asking," Moreno said. "They focused on aspects I wouldn't have even thought of, and we were able to take their reflections and look at it from our own lens."

Billie Finco agreed with Moreno. "What we saw at the end of the day was that educators' participation was enhanced because they got to hear from each other about each curricular resource from a different perspective," Finco said. "They felt empowered because they knew they were leaders in their own experience."

And publishers listened. The vendor representatives took notes as districts provided feedback in a whole group format at the conclusion of the event. CESA #4 shared additional exit tickets with the vendors so that they could get a more detailed picture of educators' positive thoughts about the programs as well as their concerns. Despite nervousness about the initial terms of the visit, CESA #4 shared that publishers ultimately saw the collaborative process as a constructive one. "It was just as much of a culture shift for them as it was to us," said CESA #4's Laura Veglahn. "But by the end of the day, we saw the vendors taking copious notes as they listened to educators and collected feedback to take home with them."

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PROGRAM DIRECTOR, CESA #4

The success with publisher engagement did not happen in a vacuum. It was possible because of the thoughtful planning by CESA #4 and because of the learning the teams did before the vendors arrived. Each team analyzed student data and cross-walked that data with the reviews on EdReports to examine the materials across multiple grades. "Districts were able to engage with publishers in a much better way and focus on academic content because they had built their own knowledge of the programs through professional learning sessions and resources like EdReports reviews," Veglahn said.

Viroqua principal Jason Cress confirmed what Veglahn observed. "We developed sharper and more strategic questions about the materials because of the preparation we had."

CESA #4's publisher engagement model illustrates how it is possible for small rural districts, even within budget and capacity constraints, to change the dynamic of the vendor-customer relationship so that it better serves teacher and student needs.

Preparation and professional learning are key elements to success. Through collaboration and supporting resources educators can become leaders in their district's or school's adoption process and build a sense of community and empowerment along the way.

Changing Forever the Way Materials are Selected

There is a difference between knowing things need to change and making that change happen.

The educators of CESA #4, with critical support from their regional office, planted seeds as they put in the difficult work to establish a new culture of materials selection and implementation in each of their districts. Because the adoption committees included a variety of participants—administrators, coaches, and teacher leaders—Billie Finco is hopeful that what the teams accomplished can take root across the region.

"By bringing teacher leaders into the process to learn alongside school leaders and coaches, we're hoping to ensure the knowledge and skills gained don't simply disappear once the adoption process is complete," said Finco.

Erin Moreno is an example of why Billie is so hopeful. Moreno began as a teacher representative on the adoption committee in 2018. In the 2019-2020 school year, she will take another step in leadership development as the mathematics coach for the new math materials implementation.

She knows that in order for the new materials to have their impact, there must be key supports and professional development around the program. Not only will Moreno be bringing back what she learned about adoption processes to her district, she will be extending that learning throughout implementation.

And while she's clear about the size of the task that lies ahead, because of the comprehensive process she went through with the committee, Moreno feels ready. "We're going into next year prepared, having engaged stakeholders, and confident in the quality of the program that we chose," said Moreno.

Principal Jason Cress has also seen the ripple effects of how his school undertook the high school ELA adoption. "The school board was impressed with the systematic approach we took and commented that it was the most thorough process they had seen," said Cress. "We didn't just repeat our neighbor's actions and hope for the best. Instead we came together with fellow districts and dug into data, developed protocols, and chose a program based on indicators of quality and alignment. We won't go back to the old ways now that we've seen what's possible."

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> SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SERVICES DIRECTOR CESA #4

Curriculum director Carmen Lee agreed, "The days of being dependent on a single publisher's sales pitch are over because now we know the resources that are available and have a framework we can apply."

The voices of these educators are why Billie Finco and Laura Veglahn are energized to work with more districts and spread the new culture the cohort developed together throughout CESA #4 and the state of Wisconsin. They know it can have a lasting positive impact on teachers and students in the region. "We saw the power of the teams learning together and the collective wisdom that they can bring back to their schools," said Finco.

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