



BUILDING BUY-IN: Rhode Island's Comprehensive Approach to Selecting High-Quality Curricula



About EdReports.org

EdReports is an independent nonprofit designed to improve K-12 education. EdReports increases the capacity of teachers, administrators, and leaders to seek, identify, and demand the highest-quality instructional materials. Drawing upon expert educators, our reviews of instructional materials and support of smart adoption processes equip teachers with excellent materials nationwide.

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In 2010, Rhode Island was one of the first states in the nation to adopt college and career-ready standards. State officials recognized the role these standards play in helping to truly prepare students for success in higher education and beyond, but quickly found out that there simply weren't sufficient materials and support to implement them well. Getting standards into practice was far more of a challenge than getting the standards in place.

The assistant superintendent from Bristol Warren Regional School District, Diane Sanna, recalled the early days after the adoption of the standards. "We developed a homegrown curriculum because we couldn't find anything that was aligned," she said. "This meant we created a patchwork quilt of practices, approaches, and texts. There was little vertical continuity, and this could be tough for teachers who didn't have all the resources needed to support instruction. They were constantly scrambling to fill in the gaps."

Veteran third grade teacher Suzanne Machinski, agreed. "We were using different programs to pull together a comprehensive curriculum, and it was very frustrating," she said.

"We didn't have any comprehensive programs," added Michelle Diaz, English language arts department chair at Westerly Middle School. "We were creating it all based on units where we could lump standards together."

As time passed and more and more materials were published with claims of alignment to college and career-ready standards, districts still struggled with finding quality programs. "At the time, there was no real independent data on whether or not programs were aligned," said Phyllis Lynch, Director of Instruction, Assessment, and Curriculum at the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE). "That meant a lot of our decisions were weighted on the interactions with the vendors versus actual information about the quality of the curriculum."

As a result, districts were selecting new materials to go along with the homegrown curriculum teachers had developed with few resources and little outside support or guidance from the state. This meant that publishers often had more influence in the decision making. When it came to instructional materials, even as more aligned options became available, Rhode Island educators remained on their own.

A Note on Materials Adoption During COVID-19

Given the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, districts across the country had to adapt the way they selected new instructional materials. In Rhode Island, the 2020-2021 cohort could not take place in person and had to be modified so that districts could participate remotely. Despite the strains on capacity brought on by transitions to remote and hybrid learning, 15 districts signed up to participate in the monthslong virtual training.

Districts that adopted new materials before the pandemic faced the challenge of implementing a new program while simultaneously adapting to COVID-19 school closures and changes. Smithfield school district Assistant Superintendent Sara Monaco recalled how difficult it was for students to continue learning before the implementation of quality materials: "This was magnified when we transitioned to remote learning in the spring of 2020. We had no common platform for materials, and we didn't have enough in-house materials to use with all of our students."

Yet, none of these challenges has dimmed the dedication and commitment of the state or local districts to ensure all students have access to the high-quality materials they need now more than ever.

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While the in-person format offers a lot of benefits, doing this work virtually removed logistical barriers and offered flexibility on how to apportion time in a way that best suits where each team is in the process.

Shannah Estep

EdReports Senior Outreach Specialist

A New Approach to Selecting Instructional Materials:

RHODE ISLAND TIMELINE

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- SUMMER 2017**
Rhode Island releases the [Unified Approach to Statewide Education Report](#)¹ articulating how the state will support all learners in achieving a well-rounded education and holds districts and schools accountable for students' success.
 - FALL 2017**
Rhode Island joins the Council of Chief State School Officers' (CCSSO) High-Quality Instructional Materials and Professional Development (IMPD) Network.
 - 2017-18 SCHOOL YEAR**
Rhode Island hosts the "Honors Colloquia" series, daylong gatherings for district leaders focusing on why materials matter and the importance of selecting high-quality, aligned instructional materials.
 - MAY 2018**
The first of four in-person cohort trainings is co-facilitated by EdReports to train district teams on how to select standards-aligned materials.
 - SUMMER 2018**
RIDE launches a comprehensive Curriculum Survey to better understand what math, science, and ELA materials are being used by every district in the state. The data led to better coordination efforts to support specific district needs.
 - JANUARY 2019**
Rhode Island [passes legislation](#)² to improve access to high-quality instructional materials.
 - JUNE 2020**
RIDE launches [state adoption list](#)³ of approved instructional materials and [curriculum visualization tool](#)⁴ of all materials in use by districts.
 - JUNE 2020**
RIDE releases instructional materials [review tools](#)⁵ for multilingual learners and culturally responsive and sustaining education.
 - SEPTEMBER 2020-MARCH 2021**
The final EdReports cohort training in the initial four-part series is conducted virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic with additional trainings planned for the future.

Curriculum Challenges Persist

Even though the state led the nation in being early adopters of rigorous college and career-ready standards, the support needed to implement the standards never became widely available. As a result, due to the scattered approach of how most districts were selecting curriculum, materials varied in content and quality from school to school and even classroom to classroom.

“Even with just four elementary schools, we saw a wide variety of texts and materials being used in our classrooms,” said Sara Monaco, Assistant Superintendent from Smithfield School District.

The lack of coherent materials even within a single school was a big challenge for Westerly English language arts coordinator Carmela Sammataro, as well. “In my role, I realized how much the materials varied from building to building and classroom to classroom,” said Sammataro. “I couldn’t articulate what was happening from class to class. I couldn’t tell you ‘These are the standards they are working on,’ or ‘This is the topic they are studying.’ But more than that, it was difficult to bring everyone together to have a common conversation, to talk about data, to plan collaboratively, or even share resources.”

Teacher Suzanne Machinski worked closely with Sammataro and observed the same challenges that arose because of the curriculum disparities. “There was a lack of consistency across the district,” said Machinski. “I was teaching third grade on one side of town. A colleague was teaching third grade on the other side of town. We might be teaching the same standard, but we’d be using completely different materials, and our kids all funnel into the same middle school. We weren’t building background knowledge. We didn’t have common topics. That was a major concern.”

Ensuring students met the standards without key resources and supports was nearly an impossible task. Teachers could see the status quo was not



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Suzanne Machinski
Third Grade Teacher

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We shouldn't be talking about curriculum without thinking about the diverse needs of our students or the professional learning to support implementation.

Phyllis Lynch

Director of Instruction, Assessment, and Curriculum,
Rhode Island Department of Education



working. ELA department chair Michelle Diaz said: “I was concerned about how true to grade level the teaching and learning in each classroom really was. We were also overwhelmed by the time it took to find and develop everything. That was just exhausting.”

Third grade teacher Felicia Connelly worried constantly about the inherent equity issues that came from instructing students with incoherent, unvetted instructional materials. “Equity in the district was important to us,” said Connelly. “And that was a big reason for getting involved in a new process. We believed every third grader in Westerly should have access to the same instructional materials and rigorous content.”

As teachers across the state dealt with the tough challenges of creating their own curriculum and school and district leaders were faced with the consequences of inequitable access to quality materials, the seeds of change began to take root in Rhode Island.

Laying the Foundation for a New Approach

The idea to change district selection practices and evolve the culture around instructional materials did not happen overnight or in a vacuum.

The idea was initiated in 2017 when RIDE was selected for participation in the Council of Chief State School Officers’ (CCSSO) High-Quality Instructional Materials and Professional Development (IMPD) Network.

It Begins with Strong Leadership

In 2017, then Rhode Island Deputy Commissioner of Education Mary Ann Snider saw how leading states, such as Louisiana, were shifting their approach to selecting materials based on [growing research](#)⁶. State surveys had previously found that teachers spent an average of eight to 10 hours a week finding materials for their classes, so better resources meant teachers “don’t have to be the author of all of these curricular materials... It’s changing everyone’s thinking about what does it mean to be a teacher,” said Snider in an interview with [The 74 Million](#).

Although the charge to shift adoption practices came from RIDE’s highest offices, a number of key decisions helped to make sure that district stakeholders embraced the plan and saw it as their own. First, RIDE explicitly included the selection of high-quality instructional materials into the [Unified Approach to Statewide Education Report](#)⁷ which highlighted its commitment to change. Furthermore, a grant from CCSSO was secured to bolster the commitments in the report, which meant the state also had the resources to support districts to implement the plan.

Listening, Learning, and Bringing Stakeholders Onboard

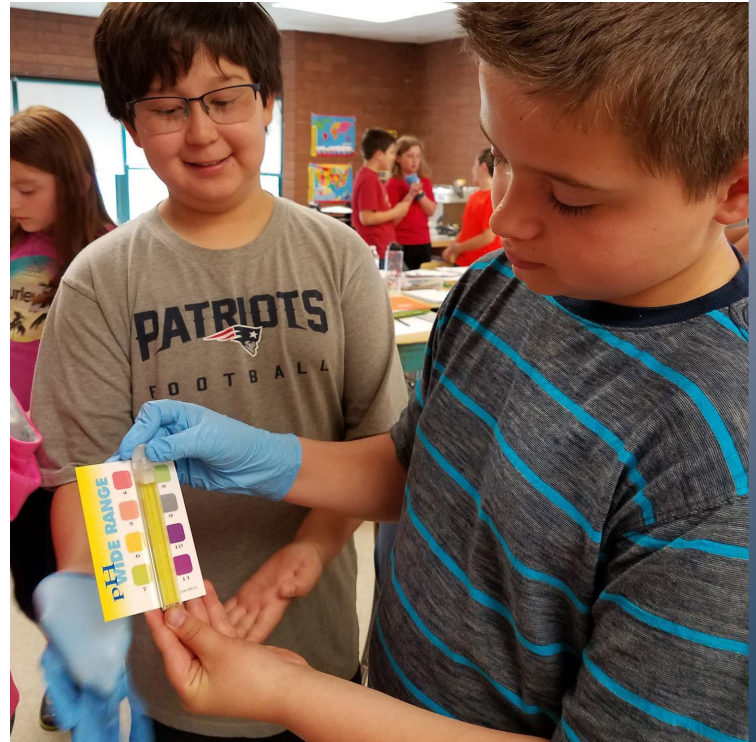
Having strong leadership at the top is essential, but transformational change requires building trust and soliciting broad buy-in across the state. Up until 2017, districts had been struggling with writing their own materials and securing appropriate supports from the state. Educators could not be expected to completely change their approach to instructional materials overnight. With this history in mind, RIDE took a continuous learning approach to this new body of work rooted in humility and transparency.

A central aspect to building trust was to engage a variety of stakeholders in the work. State leaders Phyllis Lynch and Chief of Teaching and Learning Lisa Foehr believed that for a new approach to instructional materials to be successful, any proposed changes could not stay confined to a single office. To become truly integrated into every school system would mean investment across the entire department.

“We shouldn’t be talking about curriculum without thinking about the diverse needs of our students or the professional learning to support implementation,” said Lynch. “And we should be considering teacher preparation programs that train new teachers for the classroom and how to scaffold content for different students. All of these elements have to work together if we want the materials to have a real impact and if we want our changes to last.”

Under the leadership of Deputy Commissioner of Education Mary Ann Snider, Lynch, Foehr, and other leaders worked across the department to build buy-in at the state level through sharing consistent messaging about upcoming instructional materials initiatives and why materials matter. State leaders also made a point of involving multiple offices and RIDE stakeholders in the planning, goal setting, and content for all the district activities that would come next.

Even though the initial change management efforts at the state level were difficult and involved unprecedented coordination, Foehr insists they were worth it. “The challenge was to keep everyone together as we moved through the phases of the work, but bringing in multiple offices from the beginning proved invaluable,”



The three primary offices within the Rhode Island Department of Education that play a role in supporting schools:

- Instruction, Assessment, and Curriculum
- Educator Excellence
- Student, Community, and Academic Supports

she said. “The early work set the stage for supportive pieces of action and key policies that would keep the work going even through leadership changes. And it meant we were ultimately always focused on what this would mean for the students and how materials would support teachers at the classroom level.”

Setting the Stage for the Work Ahead

With promising practices gleaned from CCSSO and a state plan, the Rhode Island Department of Education moved forward to host a series of events to bolster their efforts to change selection practices

and bring in external curriculum experts to support the work ahead.

In the 2017-18 school year, RIDE held the “Honors Colloquia” series that convened district leadership for a series of workshops that focused on why materials matter and how to determine what is quality and what is not, as well as a focus on the importance of materials in addressing issues of equity. Instructional materials had changed tremendously since 2010. There were more [studies illustrating the impact of instructional materials](#) on student learning as well as the availability of independent information about alignment and usability for dozens of comprehensive mathematics and English language arts programs.

Central to RIDE’s new approach was a commitment to bring in external perspectives to support new learning for districts. A goal was to focus not simply on the final curriculum decision but to emphasize the materials selection process as a whole. National experts, such as UnboundEd and the Johns Hopkins University School of Education, helped highlight different aspects of how materials impact student learning. One of the primary organizations brought by the state was EdReports. EdReports not only offered educator-created, independent reviews of instructional materials, but they also had in-depth experience in partnering with districts to support comprehensive adoption processes.

“We really valued the adoption process and wanted to roll that into our work,” said state leader Phyllis Lynch. “That’s why it was so important to bring in external groups to not only talk about why materials matter, but why the adoption process itself matters. Focusing on a district’s instructional vision and stakeholder engagement as well as implementation and professional learning has really helped shift the way districts are thinking about materials adoption.”

The colloquia of district leaders set the stage for the voluntary district cohort trainings to come. The state hoped that with superintendents’ support for high-quality instructional materials, more districts would be willing to devote time and capacity to learning a new way to select curriculum.

Rhode Island Public School Enrollment and Demographics



143,557
STUDENTS



66
DISTRICTS

Students who identify as:

WHITE
55%

MULTIRACIAL
5%

HISPANIC
27%

NATIVE AMERICAN
1%

BLACK
9%

LOW-INCOME
48%

ASIAN/PACIFIC
ISLANDER
3%

ENGLISH LANGUAGE
LEARNERS
10%

Source: [2020 Rhode Island Kids Count Factbook](#)⁸

Training Rhode Island Districts Together

In order to reach as many districts as possible, as well as provide in-depth content, RIDE invested in an entirely new model to support the adoption of high-quality instructional materials. Starting in the 2018-2019 school year, the state

brought together small district teams of five to seven educators as a cohort, providing a series of six formal workshops co-facilitated by EdReports over the course of six months that included one-on-one virtual coaching and support.

Chief of Teaching and Learning Lisa Foehr noted the model was key to ensuring all interested districts had access to the training and resources the state and EdReports had designed. “Working in a cohort model allowed us to spread our reach to many districts and provides an important convergence: level of depth in our support and scalability over time in the number of districts that participated,” she said.

Sessions covered a wide range of content from [instructional vision setting](#)⁹ and establishing district priorities at the beginning of the process all the way through materials [rollout and implementation](#)¹⁰. The purpose of the activities was to offer knowledge, resources, and tools to reset how districts think about and approach selecting instructional materials.

Participation in the training was voluntary, and the time commitment was significant. Districts had to commit to three two-day sessions with work between

sessions. But nearly half of Rhode Island’s school districts jumped at the initial opportunity.

Assistant Superintendent Diane Sanna explained why Bristol Warren was interested. “We have great students, great families, and great teachers, but we weren’t getting the results that we wanted,” she said. “We were also hearing from teachers that they wanted a comprehensive program rather than continue to piecemeal materials together. This was an opportunity to see what else was out there and to learn from other high-performing districts.”

Just like with the January 2018 superintendent colloquium, the fact that the state brought in outside perspectives was also appealing. “The chance to hear from those with expertise in the field was very important to us,” said Assistant Superintendent Sara Monaco.

The choice to partner with groups such as EdReports was a deliberate one, said Foehr. “We brought in experts who were actually conducting the reviews of the instructional materials to demonstrate the depth at which the reviews were happening and why these changes make sense for us in terms of a direction. We also hoped to help teachers understand how a good set of materials could support them and allow them to spend their time thinking about how to in-



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Lisa Foehr

Chief of Teaching and Learning,
Rhode Island Department of Education

struct rather than writing curriculum every summer.” Rhode Island Deputy Commissioner of Education Mary Ann Snider noted, “EdReports has had a significant impact on our system.”

How the Cohort Model Transformed the Way Materials are Chosen

No approach is perfect, but participating districts highlighted four key benefits to the cohort model RIDE organized:

1) The formal, structured support the state provided. “We hoped to offer the structures and resources districts needed to conduct a real process,” said Phyllis Lynch, director of the Office of Instruction Assessment and Curriculum. “The cohort model is dedicated time that educators can focus on this work while they are all together.”

District leaders and teachers concurred, citing the support and formal sessions as a departure from the

days when schools were making tough decisions on their own with little capacity and few resources. “What RIDE has offered us is a mechanism to make our adoption process easier and base our decisions on research,” said Alicia Storey, Assistant Superintendent for Westerly Public Schools. “The cohort training sessions and the resources provided have taken the capacity issues we deal with and filled that space with meetings already set up, time set aside, and tools from organizations like EdReports. We appreciate that support. Having the structures in place makes a big difference.”

What Storey also appreciated was that while the state did provide the framework, districts still had the freedom to choose the best program for their local community. “They weren’t telling us what to choose,” she said. “In fact, initially RIDE preferred that we select a K-12 program, but we decided to go with a K-8, given our current needs and capacity. They listened to our rationale and were respectful of our choice.”

2) The ability to learn from other districts going through the same process. The cohort model offered opportunities for districts to engage with each

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Assistant Superintendent,
Westerly Public Schools





Having coaches and teacher leaders on our team made a difference not only during selection but as we began to implement the new materials.

Carmela Sammataro
ELA Coordinator

other, to exchange resources, to ask questions, and to share successes and failures in real time. “Districts got to talk to one another about what they were going through. Teachers could talk to other teachers. Administrators could talk to other administrators,” said Assistant Superintendent Sara Monaco.

Teacher Suzanne Machinski agreed. “It was meaningful when we would listen to other districts talking and could hear from those having the same struggles as we were,” she said. “We took comfort in knowing we were all working on [selecting for quality materials] and the Department of Education recognized this need and formed these cohorts. It was validating that the state could see we needed help and took the time to show us we weren’t alone.”

Diane Sanna also noted the collaboration and collegiality: “We were constantly visiting each other’s tables to get insight into the process.”

For Carmela Sammataro, ELA Coordinator, networking and sharing was similarly meaningful, but Sammataro also pointed out how the collective work of districts also helped the state. “All of the learning that came out of the districts participating in the process, I think helped RIDE to winnow down their own list of high-quality instructional materials.”

3) The deep learning within district teams for a variety of educator roles. The cohort model was especially powerful not only because of districts

learning from other districts but because of the learning that happened within each individual district team and the range of voices that were included in the process.

Participants specifically pointed out that the design of each district team (a mix of district leadership, principals, instructional coaches and teachers) contributed to the depth of learning and ultimately the success of their adoption processes.

According to multiple participants, this variety of roles was critical throughout the sessions. “The teacher perspective really mattered in shaping our decisions and in ensuring that the learning we did as a group spread across the district,” said Assistant Superintendent Sara Monaco. “The teachers on our team could speak to the shifts in instructional practices and how things were changing at the state level. They could also speak to colleagues about the new selection process and the importance of aligned high-quality curriculum materials. It was important to have those messages coming from multiple stakeholders.”

ELA Coordinator Carmela Sammataro’s team leaned heavily on teachers for many of the same reasons. The Westerly team included more than the average number of teachers as part of their team because they wanted teachers from a range of grade levels. “It was important to us to have diverse representation with teachers who were open to a new way but would also give pushback and share real feedback,” said Sammataro. “Having coaches and teacher leaders on our team made a difference not only during selection but as we began to implement the new materials.”

Suzanne Machinski was a teacher on the Westerly adoption team, and she spoke to the value she and her colleagues contributed to the process and how they were able to share what they were learning with other teachers back home: “We all brought our own perspective from different grade levels. I could also come back and talk to my colleagues about what we were looking at, the adoption process itself, and work to get everybody invested.”

“It’s great to be respected and have a voice,” agreed teacher Felicia Connelly. “To actually have teachers

help make the decision was more well-received. We were able to share our enthusiasm with our colleagues.”

4) The content of the training focused on an adoption process rather than simply the choice of program. The workshops led by EdReports focused on a comprehensive selection process to determine local communities’ needs rather than a “we’re going to tell you what to pick” model. The state made this deliberate choice early on. “We hoped to use this as an opportunity for districts to learn a different and better way to go about adopting instructional materials,” said Chief of Teaching and Learning Lisa Foehr. “If we only pointed them to a website on their own, we didn’t think there would be a lasting, wide-spread impact. We wanted to support educators as they learned a new skill set, explored a new way to go about looking at materials, engaged stakeholders, and ultimately decided what was best.”

Before districts looked at instructional materials or even reviews of instructional materials, the workshops illustrated the importance for districts to establish an instructional vision and understand their own local priorities. “We wanted to make sure districts thought about what they valued in materials beyond alignment to the standards,” said Phyllis Lynch. “Establishing those guiding priorities in advance of a vendor’s pitch or exploring possibilities was an important shift.”

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EdReports gave examples of what great programs look like. We know the reports were created by people who have spent extensive hours going through all the elements of a program.

Diane Sanna

Assistant Superintendent,
Bristol Warren Regional School District

Selecting for Quality: AN INVESTMENT THAT PAYS DIVIDENDS

Participants in Rhode Island’s adoption trainings were able to bring learnings back to their schools including:

- Concrete examples of aligned instructional materials available in the marketplace.
- Best practices for a comprehensive adoption process including how to develop an instructional vision (a general description of instructional aspirations that articulates the way districts see teaching and learning as it relates to content), engaging stakeholders, and narrowing potential options based on alignment and local priorities.
- Presentation decks ready for local adaptation.
- Survey templates to engage district and community stakeholders in the process.

Middle school teacher Michelle Diaz discussed how the goals and priorities her team identified early guided the district throughout the process: “Really thinking about what our priorities were for the curriculum in advance was huge. It helped us narrow it down the best choice for our students.”

Considering and planning for what would happen after a program was chosen was a purposeful part of the training as well. “We really wanted to see a shift on the implementation side,” said Foehr. “Districts did not always adopt with a lens for what it would take to implement. EdReports built this into the sessions, and we’ve seen the change over the last few years.”

Substantive Changes Across the State

The impact of the district cohort training sessions (which began in the fall of 2018 and continue to this day) has been wide spread. To date, almost every regional district in the state has selected at least



one aligned English language arts or math program for a specific grade band. What's more, a quarter of districts have participated in more than one round of training as they adopted materials in new content areas and grade bands.

Amplifying Learning at the District Level

One reason for the widespread impact has to do with the fact that educators who participated in the training sessions with RIDE brought their learning back to their schools.

"I learned a lot about what a good curriculum needs to have. I can now look at other programs we're using with a new perspective," said teacher Suzanne Machinski.

Assistant Superintendent Diane Sanna said: "EdReports gave examples of what great programs look like. We know the reports were created by people who have spent extensive hours going through all the elements of a program. Now, rather than just bringing in publishers randomly because materials are colorful and look nice, we have learned a process and have access to programs that have been nationally vetted. But more than that, we have the right lens to approach selection and can share with others."

Sanna continued, "We were able to recreate some of the slide decks [from the training] and adapt them for our local context. We also created our own ELA

“It's great to be respected and have a voice. We were able to share our enthusiasm with our colleagues.”

Felicia Connelly
Third Grade Teacher

advisory group, bringing in stakeholders from all district schools. Each time we'd participate in an EdReports–RIDE session, we'd come home and present the content and activities to the advisory group. This helped us build a cadre of people who understood what we were looking for in a program and why."

Not only did Sanna's district present new knowledge and resources, they were careful to also convey the importance of the entire process and to incorporate feedback from those who could not attend the training. Sanna said, "We really focused on our vision and sent out a districtwide survey to include other voices into the process."

In Westerly Public Schools, Alicia Storey and Carmela Sammataro were deliberate about involving educators who could not attend the training and sharing their learning as well. "We encouraged people to learn with us and have a voice in the work we were doing," said Storey. "Carmela came to administrative meetings to give briefs on what was happening in the training so that school leaders were in the loop about the process."

Sara Monaco in Smithfield also replicated the cohort training sessions to benefit educators in her district. She said, "We have internalized the selection process and continue to use EdReports as a tool when making instructional decisions. The reviews are a result of a thorough vetting process conducted by experts in the field that districts do not have the capacity to conduct on their own."

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A comprehensive selection process allows us to keep equity front and center.

Lisa Foehr

Chief of Teaching and Learning,
Rhode Island Department of Education

Because many districts have been diligent about amplifying the learnings from EdReports and RIDE, a lot of progress has been made to change hearts and minds about why materials matter. Specifically, training participants have emphasized that the process for what is chosen makes a difference in the classroom. Emphasizing the process means educators have the time, space and method to truly investigate and explore if materials provide what students need, and it is also a way to build buy-in by showing multiple stakeholders had a voice in the decision.

Diane Sanna said: “We are seeing buy-in around the importance of an aligned core curriculum that’s implemented well. We’ve been able to share the knowledge we learned about why materials matter across the district with our larger teams.”

Phyllis Lynch has observed the developments across the state with each passing district cohort training over the course of two and half years. “There’s excitement around this body of work, and it’s amazing how far we’ve come, to see the shift from writing our own curriculum to adopting standards aligned materials in a few short years,” said Lynch. “I can really see how people are thinking differently about curriculum. Educators are using evidence about materials on alignment and usability and how it meets the needs of students to make decisions.”

Impact in the Classroom for All Students

All of these changes are beginning to be felt at the

classroom level. The focus on a comprehensive process has meant that implementation of materials is not an afterthought. “Districts are taking a strong selection process and looking ahead to what it will take to support teachers in order for implementation to go well,” said Lisa Foehr. “Districts are paying attention to professional learning and implementation from the beginning. Before these trainings, educators often talked to a vendor, and, if they liked what they saw, they bought it. These materials were then just handed to teachers who were left on their own to figure out what to do next.”

When teachers are able to inform the selection process and receive professional learning to support strong implementation, instructional materials have the potential to make a difference. Felicia Connelly detailed what her district offered and why it was important for her: “We had lots of professional development opportunities before we implemented, and continuous learning was available throughout the year. This was so helpful, especially as we began to use the new curriculum.”

Districts are seeing the difference high-quality materials coupled with supports and a clear process can make. Carmela Sammartaro noted that having a comprehensive set of instructional materials has transformed how teachers can collaborate. “We now have the true meaning of common planning time. We now have assessment data to drive our conversations, and the new materials have allowed that,” she said.

Teacher Suzanne Machinski pointed out that the materials are already changing how she teaches: “Because this curriculum is comprehensive and standards aligned, I can spend my energy preparing the lesson and knowing it’s high quality. And I can think about what kind of feedback my students are going to need during the lesson.”

Felicia Connelly has also seen changes in her practice now that she is not spending hours per week developing her own curriculum. She said, “I can focus on analyzing what the students are doing and using that time to plan for their success rather than focus on creating what I am teaching them next.”

Impacting only some students is not enough. In

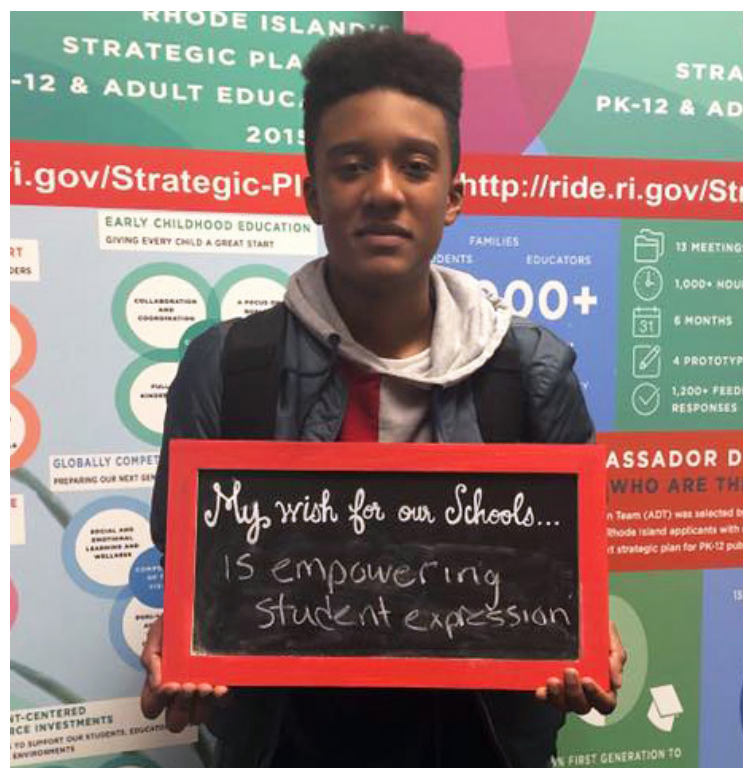
training districts for a new kind of selection process, Rhode Island has placed the emphasis on serving all students with attention to specific populations who may need additional supports, such as special needs students and English language learners.

“A comprehensive selection process allows us to keep equity front and center,” said Lisa Foehr. “Not only does EdReports emphasize the importance of standards-aligned materials for all, but the selection process itself pushes districts to identify local challenges and needs that must be met to ensure that all students are able to benefit from the program that’s chosen.”

Phyllis Lynch was careful to point out that no district is relying on materials to solve all equity issues, only that materials have a clear role to play. “No one set of materials can do everything for every kid,” said Lynch. “However, having a clear idea of what a specific program does or does not offer allows districts to match with a program that best speaks to their specific needs. The data also gives teachers the understanding about where they can scaffold and differentiate to individually support their students.”

Carmela Sammataro noted that access to high-quality, aligned materials to close learning gaps is a constant conversation in her district as new curricula is being implemented. “Many teachers had to acknowledge that even if we think we’re reaching all kids as we create our own materials, the data is showing us we’re not,” she said. “And how can we? How can teachers and students achieve what they need to achieve without adequate support and collaboration? How successful can teachers and students be when we leave them completely on their own without a vision or quality resources? They need a curriculum that will give them a strong foundation.”

Third grade teacher Suzanne Machinski said that she values the equity her district’s new ELA program offers more than any other component. “These materials give every student access to the same high-quality content,” she said. “I know that if one of my students moves to another class, she’ll still receive the same texts and tasks. If teachers are creating their own materials, we don’t have a measure for how aligned they are.”



High-Quality also Means Culturally Responsive

Rhode Island’s 2019 instructional materials legislation blazed a trail not only for ensuring standards alignment but by redefining what high-quality materials mean. Moving forward, all instructional materials under consideration must also account for the needs of multilingual students or provide support for culturally responsive and sustaining education.

Rhode Island has taken bold steps toward addressing the pressing needs of its diverse student body, and districts have embraced this transformative approach. In 2020, local communities began reviewing for these components [utilizing state developed resources](#)¹¹ to guide educators in this work.

While school districts are in the very early stages of implementing this new lens to select instructional materials, and challenges will surely arise, the signal from the state is clear: Equity in education matters as does meeting the needs of all students. EdReports is excited to learn alongside the state and incorporate best practices in our own approach.

The Future of Materials Adoptions in Rhode Island

In 2019, the Rhode Island state legislature passed a [bill that focused directly on access to high-quality instructional materials](#), reflecting the yearslong efforts of the Rhode Island Department of Education and districts across the state. What began as volunteer endeavors of committed educators is now state law. The legislation also codifies much of the philosophy and content that the cohort trainings championed.

The legislation calls for all Rhode Island districts to adopt materials that are aligned with academic standards and state-developed curriculum frameworks. In addition, the legislation requires the state to continue its support of districts, calling on the commissioner of elementary and secondary education and RIDE to accomplish the following by 2023:

- Develop statewide academic standards and curriculum frameworks.
- Identify at least five examples of high-quality curriculum and materials for each of the core subject areas (English language arts, mathematics, and science).
- Support districts in the selection and implementation of curriculum material.

This legislation is significant because of how it will contribute to the selection and implementation of high-quality, aligned instructional materials across the state. Additionally, the state will be required to continue to provide resources, such as recommendation lists with potential programs for adoption. The list focuses on aligned mathematics and English language arts materials that are considered high quality based on EdReports reviews and a RIDE-developed rubric.

District cohort trainings continue, even as the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the sessions to go virtual, meaning that a focus on a comprehensive process is still central and supported. Even in the midst of a difficult year and with more work to be

done, there is still much to celebrate and an exciting future to look forward to. As Education Commissioner [Angélica Infante-Green said](#):¹² “These students can and do excel in the right environment and with the right resources and instruction. We must ensure that their education is accessible and effective during this time.” Together, Rhode Island educators continue to answer the charge.

Selecting High-Quality Instructional Materials: Recommendations for State Departments of Education

- 1 Set the stage and make the case for why materials matter.** Before moving forward with any action steps, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) brought together state leadership and district superintendents to learn from instructional materials experts in the field (EdReports, UnboundED, Johns Hopkins, Student Achievement Partners). The state sponsored a superintendents' colloquium series that made the case for why curriculum matters and how the process of selecting and implementing new materials can make a difference for teachers and students. Building buy-in at the leadership level was critical to the success that followed. Too often, states jump straight into action without building the case for change.
- 2 Involve multiple offices and departments at the state level.** RIDE did not confine the work around instructional materials to the Instruction, Assessment, and Curriculum office alone. State leaders understood that a variety of offices were integral to successfully adopting and implementing instructional materials. RIDE made it a point to engage offices across the department to ensure everyone understood how the proposed changes could affect their work. Multiple departments were involved in establishing the project goals that impacted how the training was developed. Coordination and collaboration were also key reasons that the training spread across the entire system. Leaders from multiple teams attended training and shared the connections between professional learning and materials as well as teacher preparation and materials.
- 3 Focus on a comprehensive selection process rather than mandating specific choices.** RIDE decided early on that the state would use its resources to support districts in learning an entirely new approach to curriculum adoption rather than simply providing a list of programs for districts to use on their own. Focusing on the entire process—which included instructional vision setting, professional learning, and implementation—gave districts knowledge and tools to be able to replicate the process for subsequent adoptions and share these learnings with educators in schools across the state.
- 4 Maintain and highlight state leadership support for the comprehensive selection process at each stage.** As each training of district cohorts kicked off, RIDE was purposeful about illustrating the ways in which top state leadership endorsed this new approach of adopting quality instructional materials. State leadership attended meetings to frame the work ahead, the importance of aligned curricula, and express the mandate that districts had to provide students and teachers with materials needed for success.
- 5 Launch materials adoption work with a coalition of educators who are open and excited about the process.** Rhode Island's first cohort was made up with volunteer districts. Multiple state stakeholders also attended. What bound the stakeholders together was a commitment to learning and the understanding that the state was venturing into providing support for instructional materials for the first time. Educators were willing to learn from each other for the greater good of students.
- 6 Identify and invite district leaders and educators to share their successes, challenges and lessons learned.** Buy-in at the school level matters. Even with district representatives attending trainings, it's important not to take for granted that the messages and knowledge gained will simply translate to all educators. Celebrating the learnings of each team, particularly from districts who have volunteered time and capacity for this opportunity, can shape future cohorts from the beginning. As ELA Coordinator Carmela Sammataro pointed out: "The state is learning from us, too."

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