

# High-Quality Instructional Materials

A Policy Brief by A+ Education Partnership



## The Big Idea:



High-quality instructional materials make a big difference for kids. What is chosen matters.

Every educator uses instructional materials to teach their students the content that they need to learn in order to be successful in the next grade level and beyond. Textbooks, reading materials, assessments, and other materials make up the instructional core of teaching and learning for every class. Because instructional materials play such an important role in student learning, district leaders should pay special attention to what instructional materials they select for their school district, making sure that they are high-quality and that teachers fully understand how to use them effectively in the classroom.

## What are Instructional Materials?

Instructional materials are what educators use to facilitate student learning, including but not limited to textbooks and curriculum. Not all instructional materials are high-quality. Instructional materials may not be on grade-level, focused on the right content for the right amount of time, or culturally relevant.

## What makes Instructional Materials High-Quality?

High-Quality Instructional Materials are aligned to Alabama's courses of study (i.e. the standards students must learn) and provide rich learning experiences that ensure that students have the knowledge and skills necessary for success in K-12, college, and beyond.

High-quality instructional materials:

- **Cover the right standards in the right dosage at the right time.**  
In high-quality instructional materials, not only are the standards present, they are covered in the appropriate depth to support student learning necessary for that grade level. While remediation of lower grade content knowledge may be necessary for student success, high-quality instructional materials focus on providing students opportunities to become proficient in grade level content knowledge.
- **They are engaging.**  
Instructional materials should be engaging to capture the interest of students as they learn. This includes being culturally relevant by featuring diverse perspectives.
- **They are usable for educators.**  
High-quality instructional materials help teachers to facilitate research-based instructional practices, provide opportunities for differentiation and assessment, and are integrated into ongoing curriculum-based professional development, so that teachers learn how to use them effectively.

## High-quality instructional materials influence student learning in two ways:

1. **Through the content students experience and**
2. **The instructional choices & behavior of their teachers.**

Researchers have found that students learn primarily through their interactions with content and their teachers.<sup>1</sup> High-quality instructional materials expose students to the right content in the right amount at the right time. When teachers are using high-quality instructional materials, they make better instructional decisions and grow in their own content knowledge.

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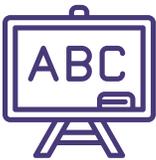
<sup>1</sup>EdReports.org. Why Materials Matter. [LINK](#)

## How do Standards, Instructional Materials, and Assessments Fit Together?



**Standards**, otherwise known as the Alabama Courses of Study, are a list of what students are expected to know at the end of each grade level throughout their K-12 experience, so that they are prepared for college, career, and life.

- Standards, or the Course of Study, give teachers guidance on what to teach, but not how to teach it.
- Federal law requires states to set standards for reading/language arts, math, and science, but states are allowed to create and set standards for whatever other courses they choose.



**Instructional materials** are the detailed plans for how teachers will teach the standards.

- Some examples are lesson plans, unit plans, books, projects, and other plans for educational activities.
- High-quality instructional materials are aligned to standards, or the course of study, meaning that the instructional materials teach exactly what students need to learn by the end of their grade level, not anything less rigorous.
- Without alignment to the course of study, the instructional materials being used in the classroom cannot teach what students are supposed to learn, leading to lower student achievement.
- Researchers have found that teachers may use instructional materials from a wide variety of sources, like Teachers Pay Teachers, Google, and Pinterest, and the instructional materials from these sources are at a range of levels of quality.<sup>2</sup>



**Assessments** are how educators measure student learning. Specifically, assessments measure if students have learned what the state standards, or course of study, say that they should have mastered by that point in time. There are different types of assessments, including:

- *Diagnostic*, which are given before instruction to find out what students already know,
- *Formative*, which are used to assess what students are learning throughout instruction,
- *Summative*, which are given at the end of instruction to find out what students have learned.

**It is critical that the instructional materials and assessments that educators use are aligned to the standards for each grade level and subject. Otherwise, students won't be exposed to grade-level content and have an opportunity to learn the material that they are supposed to learn to be on track for college, career, and life.**

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<sup>2</sup>Standards Work (2017). Curriculum Research: What We Know and Where We Need to Go. [LINK](#)

## Why are High-Quality Instructional Materials so important?

1

### **High-quality instructional materials make a significant impact on student learning.**

A study found that four years of using a high-quality math curriculum led to a 23% increase in student achievement over students using a lower-quality curriculum. This is equal to about 4 extra years of learning.<sup>3</sup>

2

### **High-quality instructional materials are also cost-effective.**

Research found that improving the quality of curriculum is 40 times more cost-effective than reducing class size.<sup>4</sup> In addition, instructional materials that are higher quality aren't necessarily more expensive. In fact, there are many high-quality instructional materials that are open-source and free.

3

### **Not only are high-quality instructional materials proven to have a positive impact on student achievement, but using them has a larger impact than other policy interventions.**

A study from 2017 showed that, at the middle school level, an average teacher using high-quality instructional materials has the same effect as coaching an average teacher to becoming a great teacher who is highly effective in facilitating student achievement.<sup>5</sup> The use of a top-tier textbook increases student achievement by 3.6 percentile points, which is bigger than the increase students show when being in an experienced teacher's classroom as compared to a new teacher's classroom.<sup>6</sup>

4

### **Providing high-quality instructional materials to teachers will allow them to dedicate more time to activities that make a difference for students.**

Only 18 percent of teachers believe that the instructional materials provided by their school or district are aligned to standards.<sup>7</sup> This can lead to teachers spending many hours sourcing and paying for their own materials through Google, Teachers Pay Teachers, or Pinterest:

- 95% of elementary teachers and 97% of secondary teachers report using Google to find instructional materials.<sup>8</sup>
- On average, teachers spend \$381 of their own money each year on instructional materials and school supplies.<sup>9</sup>
- For teachers choosing their own instructional materials, only 40% of English language arts teachers and 25% of math teachers said that the quality of the instructional material influenced whether or not they chose it for their students.

If school districts select high-quality instructional materials, teachers have a strong starting place for their curriculum and can spend more time adjusting units and lessons to meet the needs of their students.

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<sup>3</sup>The Learning Professional (2018). Materials Matter: Instructional Materials + Professional Learning = Student Achievement. [LINK](#)

<sup>4</sup>EdReports.org. Why Materials Matter. [LINK](#)

<sup>5</sup>EdReports.org. Why Materials Matter. [LINK](#)

<sup>6</sup>Chiefs for Change (2017). Hiding in Plain Sight: Leveraging Curriculum to Improve Student Learning. [LINK](#)

<sup>7</sup>EdReports.org. Why Materials Matter. [LINK](#)

<sup>8</sup>RAND Corporation (2017). Implementation of K-12 State Standards for Mathematics and English Language Arts and Literacy: Findings from the American Teacher Panel. [LINK](#)

<sup>9</sup>MDR Education (2016). Classroom Trends: Teachers as Buyers of Instructional Materials and Users of Technology. [LINK](#)

## Implementing High-Quality Instructional Materials

### The Big Idea:



It's not enough to select high-quality instructional materials. Teachers & school leaders must learn how to implement them through curriculum-based professional development.

Professional development for teachers that is based on and aligned to the curriculum used in the classroom is critically important to student learning. A teacher that knows how to implement high-quality instructional materials effectively has a bigger impact on student achievement. One study found that math teachers participating in ongoing professional development based on the curriculum they were using were much more likely to adopt effective teaching practices than those who participated in other kinds of professional development.<sup>10</sup>

Another report dives deeper into what effective, curriculum-based professional development looks like: professional development should be content-focused, meaning teachers are learning more about the subject they are teaching. Professional development opportunities should also feature instructional materials as a “cornerstone” of their programs, as it improves instruction for student learning and teacher learning.<sup>11</sup>

Similar to instructional materials themselves, teachers spend an average of \$250 per year of their own money on professional development.<sup>12</sup> Professional development can come from a variety of sources, so there is no way of knowing how much of the professional development teachers participate in on their own is high-quality and aligned to curriculum and instructional materials.



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<sup>10</sup> Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness (2013). The Effects of Research-Based Curriculum Materials and Curriculum-Based Professional Development on High School Science Achievement: Results of a Cluster-Randomized Trial. [LINK](#)

<sup>11</sup> SRI Education (2016). Professional Development to Support Instructional Improvement: Lessons from Research. [LINK](#)

<sup>12</sup> MDR Education (2016). Classroom Trends: Teachers as Buyers of Instructional Materials and Users of Technology. [LINK](#)

## How are Instructional Materials chosen in Alabama?

The Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) sets a schedule for updating each course of study (English, math, etc.) and reviewing textbooks for each subject every 7-10 years. [Click here](#) to find the most current adoption cycle, or schedule.

1

Following the State Board’s approval of a subject’s course of study, a textbook committee, composed mainly of Alabama educators, is nominated to review new textbooks to ensure they are aligned to the new course of study. Each textbook is reviewed and scored by committee members using ALSDE-created rubrics.

2

Once each textbook has been scored, the final list of approved textbooks is presented to the Alabama State Board of Education, who then have an opportunity to review and approve the final textbook list.

3

At this point, local textbook committees take over the selection process for their school district. It’s important to note that in order for school districts to use state funding for textbooks, they are not required to buy off of the final state textbook list. School districts are only required to buy textbooks that were not rejected by the State Board of Education. Therefore, some publishers do not submit their instructional materials to be reviewed by the textbooks committee and local districts are still able to spend state funding to purchase them.

4

Once the local textbook committee makes a textbook selection for their school district, school districts purchase these instructional materials and provide them to teachers who then use them to teach their students.

## What is the Current Status of Instructional Materials in Alabama?

In January 2021, the ALSDE released the math textbook list which was vetted by the Math Textbook Committee and approved by the State Board of Education. [EdReports](#), an independent instructional materials review non-profit, trains educators to review the most commonly utilized instructional materials nationally and publishes their review findings and ratings on their website. Read more about their rigorous rating process [here](#).

### **A+ cross-checked Alabama’s math textbook list with EdReports’ reviews and we found:**

- **Six K-8 math curricula that “met all expectations,” which is their highest rating,**
- **Two K-8 math curricula that “partially met expectations,”**
- **Three K-8 math curricula that had “not met their expectations,” which is their lowest rating, and**
- **Four K-8 math curricula had not been reviewed by EdReports.**

In December 2021, the English language arts (ELA) and Career Tech Education (CTE) Textbook Committees presented their findings and recommendations to the State Board of Education. In early 2022, the State Board of Education will vote to adopt these recommendations and will publish the ELA & CTE textbooks lists.

## How can we infuse more quality into Alabama's instructional materials selection process?



### **Textbook Committees should be led by excellent classroom teachers who are compensated for their work.**

Currently, it is difficult to recruit teachers to serve on textbook committees given the time commitment and difficulty of the work.

- In Mississippi, the ELA committee is led by the English Language Arts Ambassadors, 25 teachers selected and intensively trained by Mississippi's Department of Education and EdReports on how to review instructional materials.
- In Louisiana, teacher leaders, who are nominated by school principals and selected by state leaders, lead the curriculum review process. Teacher leaders participating in the curriculum review process receive a stipend for their work.



### **The rubrics and rating system should clearly signal quality, reflect a high bar, and ensure that instructional materials cover the right standards in the right dosage at the right time.**

- In Mississippi, teacher-led committees review curricula using quality rubrics to determine if materials are aligned and should be approved or added to the list of State-Adopted Materials. Not all materials are approved and there is a clear and high bar that the reviewers uphold.
- Louisiana's teacher-led curriculum review process uses a tiered rating system and the educators that are leading the process are trained to ensure that instructional materials cover the correct standards for the grade-appropriate amount of time.
  - Tier 1 - Exemplifies Quality: Meets all non-negotiable criteria and scores the best possible on all indicators of superior quality.
  - Tier 2 - Approaching Quality: Meets all non-negotiable criteria and some indicators of superior quality.
  - Tier 3 - Not Representing Quality: Does not meet non-negotiable criteria.



### **Set local school districts up for success by transparently and clearly communicating which instructional materials are high quality.**

- The Mississippi Department of Education developed an intuitive and accessible website, Mississippi Instructional Materials Matter, to transparently communicate about their textbook selection process to school districts and other stakeholders, like families. Anyone is able to access their textbook reviews online.
- Louisiana's Department of Education publishes all of its textbook & instructional material reviews online so that all stakeholders can easily access them.

## A+ Policy Recommendations

1

### **Hold a high bar for selecting high-quality instructional materials**

Working with a respected expert, like EdReports, would increase the rigor and quality of the textbook rubrics and the quality of training for textbook committee members. Eleven state departments, like Mississippi Department of Education, have partnered with EdReports to increase quality in their instructional materials selection process.

2

### **Communicate about instructional materials effectively & transparently**

Communicate what instructional materials are high-quality clearly and transparently to all stakeholder groups by releasing textbook reviews online in an accessible format.

3

### **Revise Alabama's Textbook Law**

Revise the AL Textbook law to add language to build out and fund a curricula and assessments review process to rate quality, with incentives to procure the highest quality materials.

- Include stipends for teacher leaders to lead the review process.
- Mandate that all textbook reviews are published online to increase transparency.
- Ensure that textbook committee members have the time necessary to review instructional materials effectively.

4

### **Provide Curriculum-Based Professional Development**

Increase the amount of available professional development that teaches teachers how to use high-quality instructional materials.

- Train teacher leaders to become content leaders who then train other teachers.
- Provide funding for the professional development and stipend for content leaders. This will provide both opportunities for teacher leadership and will strengthen teacher retention.





A+ drives improvements in public education for every Alabama student. We set and deliver high expectations by advocating for policies, practices, and investments that advance learning and by partnering with schools to build the capacity of teachers and leaders.

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