Supporting Principals to Lead on the Selection and Use of Instructional Materials in Classrooms

Policymakers and practitioners alike have increasingly positioned instructional materials as essential for achieving high-quality, standards-aligned instruction. State education agencies, school districts, and schools have looked to instructional materials to signal what to teach and to what depth for students to be on track to meet college- and career-readiness standards.

As instructional leaders, principals play a critical mediation role in communicating district curriculum policies to teachers and supporting teachers’ enactment of curriculum. However, very little work has explored how principals take on this role and what school leaders need most to engage effectively with issues and decisions regarding instructional materials.

This brief brings together key findings from several RAND Corporation reports on principals’ roles with respect to instructional materials. The findings point to several recommendations for how various stakeholders—federal and state policymakers, principal preparation programs, districts, and curriculum and professional learning developers—can better prepare and support principals to lead on the selection and use of instructional materials.

Key Findings
The Role of Principals in the Material-Selection Process

Principals valued and desired involvement—as well as the involvement of their teachers—in their districts’ material-selection process. In inter-

Research Methods

This brief brings together three reports from the American Instructional Resources Survey (AIRS) project. Data from these studies were collected from participants in the RAND American Educator Panels (AEP), a nationally representative sample of educators who regularly provide feedback on important issues of educational policy and practice. Specifically, data were collected from two of the AEP panels—the American Teacher Panel (ATP) and the American School Leader Panel (ASLP). The differences among the three studies are as follows:

- The first study drew on data from the AIRS that was focused on the choice and use of instructional materials. The survey was administered via the ATP in spring 2019.
- The second study was based on a similar ATP survey administered in spring 2020 and on interviews with 61 middle or high school English language arts or math teachers who had participated in the ATP.
- The third study was based on interviews with 39 leaders of public elementary, middle, or high schools. These leaders were identified through the spring 2020 ASLP.
views, most principals (62 percent) characterized their districts’ material-selection process as a collaboration among district staff, school leaders, and teachers or teacher representatives. Importantly, most principals reported being satisfied with the material-selection process and decisions when they or their teachers were involved. Principals valued teachers’ voices in this process and asked teachers to pilot and provide feedback on materials being considered for adoption. They recognized that teacher involvement can support teacher buy-in and implementation of new materials. Besides these strategies, principals also generated teacher buy-in for new instructional materials by showing that those materials are standards-aligned, high-quality, effective at improving student performance, and/or research-based.

Principals’ Perceptions of the Dimensions of Quality Instructional Materials

**Principals prioritized standards alignment and usability in material selection.** Principals were asked to consider the following seven dimensions by which instructional materials can be assessed: (1) alignment with state and/or college- and career-ready standards; (2) appropriateness of challenge for students; (3) engagement for students; (4) usability for teachers; (5) cultural relevance, particularly to Black and Latino students; (6) language acquisition supports for English learners; and (7) supports for social and emotional learning.

Of these dimensions, more than three-quarters of the principals prioritized usability and standards alignment. Specifically, principals thought that teachers were more likely to implement a material that was easy to use and comprehensive—i.e., that featured most of the components that they desired (e.g., differentiated materials for student subgroups, assessment options, a digital version of materials that facilitates online or home use). They regarded good materials as those that address all of the key grade-level knowledge and skills that students should master and that unpack complex standards. Principals believed that these two dimensions could facilitate teachers’ implementation of materials and reduce teacher burden by limiting their need to supplement (bring in additional resources to fill gaps in) and modify (make adjustments to) their main instructional materials.

**Principals’ high regard for standards-aligned materials diverged from teachers’ perceptions of such materials.** Some interviewed teachers regarded standards alignment as an important dimension of instructional materials; however, results from the ATP survey suggest that standards alignment might be perceived by teachers as less important than other dimensions of materials. Specifically, teachers using at least one standards-aligned material were less likely than teachers who did not use any standards-aligned materials to indicate that their materials were engaging, appropriately challenging, and usable.

**Principals less frequently identified cultural relevance, social-emotional learning supports, and language-acquisition supports as essential dimensions of quality materials.** Slightly less than half of interviewed principals identified cultural relevance in relation to dimensions or qualities that they believe makes an instructional material good. These principals
gave varying definitions of cultural relevance; some attended to surface-level features, such as visual representations of diversity in pictures and illustrations, while others focused more on content, such as historical accuracy and positive representations of cultures and backgrounds. Even fewer principals—about one-quarter of those interviewed—identified social-emotional learning supports or language-acquisition supports as essential dimensions of quality materials. These findings do not imply that cultural relevance and social-emotional learning supports are less critical to the quality of materials than other dimensions. Instead, they suggest that these dimensions are not top of mind for principals compared with other dimensions.

Principals and teachers considered the students they served when thinking about materials. In general, principals’ perceptions of which dimensions of materials were important did not differ across contextual factors; similar dimensions were important to principals, regardless of differences in the student populations that their schools served. In nuanced ways, however, both their and teachers’ thinking about the materials differed according to the needs of the students they served. For example, principals of elementary schools appeared to prioritize appropriateness of challenge and language-acquisition supports more than their middle and high school counterparts did, and more principals leading schools with a larger proportion of Hispanic and Black students valued cultural relevance and language-acquisition supports. Similarly, teachers’ interview responses reflected the view that usability, engagement, and appropriateness of challenge were not static aspects of the materials; rather, teachers assessed these dimensions in the context of the students in front of them each year.

**Principals’ Guidance and Support for Teachers’ Use of Materials**

Principals played a critical role in providing guidance to teachers on their implementation of district-required or recommended materials. Principals described sending messages to teachers about using their instructional materials, which likely had an impact on how teachers implemented those materials in the classroom. About 11 percent of the interviewed principals strictly monitored teachers to ensure that they implemented materials with fidelity and prohibited the use of supplemental materials. Meanwhile, about 15 percent of the principals encouraged teachers to supplement or modify materials as needed to meet students’ needs. The majority of interviewed principals (73 percent) described trying to find a balance between prescribing the use of instructional materials with fidelity and supporting teacher autonomy. This approach seems most compatible with ATP survey findings and related interviews suggesting that teachers typically do not regard themselves as implementers of curricula, but rather as creators, curators, and modifiers of instructional materials. Profiles of teachers’ use of curriculum generated from ATP survey results revealed that only about one-quarter of teachers implemented a single curriculum mostly as written. More than one-third of teachers primarily used self-created materials. About 20 percent of teachers combined or curated multiple
Principals attended more to the digital availability of materials. During the COVID-19 pandemic, few interviewed principals reported adopting new materials. Those who did reported doing so because existing materials were not available in an online format or did not provide opportunities for online assessment. Overall, principals realized that it was important to have materials that were easily accessible or adaptable for online learning because these characteristics promoted continuity of instruction and learning. Principals, however, were also concerned with equitable access to the devices and resources necessary to access these online materials. Some principals voiced the possibility that online instruction, or at least the use of online materials, might become more common after the pandemic.

Principals attended more to particular dimensions of materials in light of online use. Principals reported attending more to the implications of such dimensions as usability, engagement, and appropriateness of challenge in light of online instruction and learning. For example, they were concerned with whether materials were easy for students to navigate on their own and not too challenging for students to tackle without just-in-time teacher support.

Principals focused on providing supports for remote instruction. Many principals reported paring back professional development for teachers during an already burdensome year. Much of the professional learning and other guidance and resources that principals offered focused on helping teachers adapt to remote instruction. This included training teachers to use online components of instructional materials and online learning platforms, such as Blackboard and Google Classroom.

Principals grew more aware of the importance of social-emotional learning supports. Principals noted that the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for instructional materials that attended to students’ social-emotional learning needs. They recognized that the emotional impact of sickness or isolation brought about by the pandemic needed to be formally addressed.

There is always “healthy pushback,” and I encourage teachers to let me know if something isn’t working. We [value] teacher autonomy to say something isn’t working and then we can problem-solve and decide to implement something different.

— Middle school principal

Teachers surveyed through the ATP indicated that principals took teachers’ use of curriculum materials into account when conducting instructional observations and evaluations. More than half of the surveyed teachers reported receiving feedback from their principals about their use of curricula. Elementary teachers were more likely to indicate receiving curriculum feedback than high school teachers. Similarly, English language arts and math teachers were more likely to indicate receiving feedback than science teachers. Furthermore, teachers who received feedback on curriculum use from their principals were more likely to report using their curriculum as written and less likely to use self-created materials, even after accounting for various school demographic factors.
Implications of Key Findings

Altogether, the findings demonstrate that principals can and do support the selection and use of instructional materials. However, principals themselves require support to be effective in their role as instructional leaders. The findings suggest the following three areas in which principals likely need support:

1. **Support principals to be full participants in district material-selection processes.** In interviews, most principals described their districts involving them to some degree in the material-selection process. Despite this, there were varying levels of satisfaction with the process. In particular, there was variation in the extent to which principals’ and teachers’ voices were considered in the decision, with more satisfaction related to the degree of district collaboration with principals and teachers in the selection process. Designing the material-selection process to be truly collaborative and participatory can be an effective path forward. In addition, districts can improve principals’ understanding of how to effectively participate in such a process, and leader-preparation programs can do the same with aspiring principals.

2. **Ensure that principals are knowledgeable on critical dimensions of quality instructional materials.** The findings suggest that principals are thoughtful about many dimensions that matter for quality instructional materials, but might not fully consider certain dimensions. Principals can likely benefit from information and tools that support them in understanding all key dimensions by which instructional materials can be evaluated. Such tools include rubrics, checklists, and academic standards. Because different tools might focus on different dimensions, districts and leader-preparation programs should make principals aware of and encourage them to consult multiple tools and frameworks. Particular emphasis should be placed on dimensions that target special populations, including cultural relevance, social-emotional learning supports, and language-acquisition supports. Research in these areas is emerging; districts might support principals by, for example, articulating a system-wide vision of cultural relevance, adopting a rubric that operationalizes what culturally relevant materials look like, or engaging with expert consultants in these areas. Overall, professional learning opportunities that focus on instructional materials, which are often offered only to teachers, should include principals when possible.

3. **Provide training to principals on strategies to support teachers’ use of instructional materials.** Interviewed principals indicated playing several important roles after the formal adoption of new materials. Their actions and messaging are consequential to generating buy-in and guiding teachers’ use of materials. Developing principals’ strategies and skills around these topics should be a priority. For example, districts and leader-preparation programs could provide training on how to identify and work with teacher leaders in the curriculum-adoption process, how to make an evidence-based argument for the use of materials, and how to provide productive feedback on curriculum use as part of teacher observations. Furthermore, if districts have a vision for how teachers should use such materials, principals should be privy to that vision and be given ideas for how to support it within their own schools. Finally, districts can strengthen principal knowledge of curriculum and standards so that they are better prepared to support teachers to supplement and modify materials without weakening the intended design of standards-aligned materials.
The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country.

This brief describes research done in RAND Education and Labor and documented in three reports that are part of the AIRS study. The reports are How Instructional Materials Are Used and Supported in U.S. K–12 Classrooms: Findings from the 2019 American Instructional Resources Survey, by Julia H. Kaufman, Sy Doan, Andrea Prado Tuma, Ashley Woo, Daniella Henry, and Rebecca Ann Lawrence, RR-A134-1, 2020 (available at www.rand.org/t/RRA134-1); Teachers’ Perceptions of What Makes Instructional Materials Engaging, Appropriately Challenging, and Usable, by Elaine Lin Wang, Andrea Prado Tuma, Sy Doan, Daniella Henry, Rebecca Ann Lawrence, Ashley Woo, and Julia H. Kaufman, RR-A134-2, 2021 (available at www.rand.org/t/RRA134-2); and School Leaders’ Role in Selecting and Supporting Teachers’ Use of Instructional Materials, by Elaine Lin Wang, Andrea Prado Tuma, Rebecca Ann Lawrence, Julia H. Kaufman, Ashley Woo, and Daniella Henry, RR-A134-9, 2021 (available at www.rand.org/t/RRA134-9). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RBA134-1. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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