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# School Leaders' Role in Selecting and Supporting Teachers' Use of Instructional Materials

## An Interview Study

**A**lthough researchers and practitioners have acknowledged that school leaders (i.e., principals) play an important role in supporting teachers' use of instructional materials, very little research has explored what that role is in any detail. Research also has not provided insights about what school leaders must consider and prioritize when supporting teach-

### KEY FINDINGS

- School leaders prioritized two critical dimensions of quality instructional materials that facilitated teachers' use—usability and standards alignment. Fewer school leaders identified cultural relevance, language-acquisition supports, and social-emotional learning supports as essential dimensions of quality instructional materials. School leaders' perceptions of the essential features of good instructional materials largely did not vary across contextual factors, although there appeared to be differences by grade levels served by their school (i.e., elementary, middle, high).
- School leaders reported that their districts and schools used one of three primary processes for selecting instructional materials: district-led, school-level, and district-school collaborative processes. Those involved in the selection process drew on a variety of information and tools to inform that process. School leaders were more satisfied with the selection process when they or their teachers were involved.
- School leaders used multiple strategies to support teacher buy-in for newly adopted instructional materials; they often indicated providing guidance that attempted to balance teacher autonomy and the fidelity of curriculum implementation.
- During the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, school leaders grew more concerned about the engagement and social-emotional learning supports that materials offered. School leaders realized the importance of having materials that are available, accessible, or adaptable for online instruction, and they considered opportunities for reshaping instruction.

ers' use of instructional materials. In this study, we expanded on past research on the role of school leaders in guiding and supporting the implementation of instructional materials (e.g., Bryk et al., 2009; Pak et al., 2020) to examine their involvement in the selection process and their perceptions of quality instructional materials.

## The Role of School Leaders

### School Leaders Play an Important Role in Shaping Teachers' Use of Instructional Materials

School leaders play a de facto role as intermediaries between district policy and guidance and teachers' instructional practice (Spillane et al., 2002). Therefore, although school districts typically select the instructional materials that are required and recommended for use in the classroom (e.g., Kaufman and

Berglund, 2018), school leaders' responsibilities in the material-selection processes and their insights into what makes good instructional materials matter. In their role as instructional leaders and supervisors, principals make decisions that are consequential to teachers' use of materials. Their actions can signal their support for or indifference about materials that teachers use in instruction, or how or to what extent teachers should use the materials (Spillane and Anderson, 2019; Supovitz and Spillane, 2015; Ylimaki, 2012).

### School Leaders' Guidance Is Critical Given the Varied Ways in Which Teachers Implement Instructional Materials

School leaders' role with respect to supporting instructional materials selection and use is particularly important given that policymakers and practitioners alike have increasingly positioned such materials as essential for achieving instruction that is aligned with Common Core or state standards. Prior research has established that the instructional materials that teachers use in the classroom can significantly shape both the topics that teachers address and how they teach those topics (Rowan, Camburn, and Correnti, 2004; Rowan and Correnti, 2009; Stein and Kaufman, 2010; Tarr et al., 2008). State education agencies, school districts, and schools are therefore looking to instructional materials to convey what needs to be taught and to what depth for students to be on track to meet college- and career-readiness standards.

However, adopting high-quality instructional materials is no guarantee of their use. Researchers and educators acknowledge that instructional materials are rarely implemented in classrooms exactly as they are written (Kaufman and Berglund, 2018; Kaufman et al., 2020; Stein and Kaufman, 2010; Wang et al., 2021). In Wang et al.'s 2021 study on teachers' perceptions of materials, the authors found that teachers regarded themselves as curators, modifiers, or creators of instructional materials rather than implementers of curricula. In particular, the authors found that teachers' perceptions about

#### Key Terms Used in This Report

**Instructional materials** are any materials that are intended to provide learning opportunities for students. Instructional materials include curricula and supplemental materials. They include materials required, recommended, or provided by districts or schools; materials that teachers locate themselves; and materials that they create themselves.

**Curricula** are instructional materials (e.g., specific textbooks or instructional programs) on record as formally adopted for use by teachers and/or their school or district. Curricula are intended to constitute a full, comprehensive course of study for a particular subject and grade level.

**Supplemental materials** are instructional materials that teachers use in addition to curricula. They could be developed and/or provided by various entities, including curriculum developers, districts, schools, or teachers themselves.

**Supplementing** entails bringing in additional resources that complement or fill gaps in teachers' main instructional materials.

**Modifying** refers to teachers editing or making adjustments to their main instructional materials.

which materials to use and how to use them revolved around whether those teachers thought that the materials were engaging, appropriately challenging, and usable for the particular students in their class. Wang et al., 2021, also notes that teachers using at least one standards-aligned instructional material had less favorable perceptions of the engagement, appropriateness of challenge (i.e., the degree to which materials address the academic and learning needs of students), and usability of their materials compared with those of teachers who did not report using a standards-aligned material. Findings from this body of prior research suggest the importance of examining key influences on how instructional materials are selected and how teachers use materials.

### **School Leaders' Actions Around the Selection and Adoption of Materials— and Their Perceptions of Materials— Likely Influence Teachers' Use of Materials; These Aspects Bear Further Examination**

School leaders profoundly influence teachers' work. Their role in shaping classroom instruction has been well documented (see, e.g., Henry and Harbatkin, 2019; Sebastian, Allensworth, and Huang, 2016). Less studied is school leaders' role, specifically with respect to the use of instructional materials.

Recently, Kaufman et al., 2020, found that principal feedback was related to how frequently teachers used curriculum materials in their classrooms and the extent to which they modified and adapted those materials in their lessons, even when multiple school demographic factors were taken into account. Other research has noted that principals exert influence—through evaluation, observation, and/or walkthrough rubrics or feedback—over how teachers are to use their materials to provide quality instruction (Bryk et al., 2009; Pak and Desimone, 2019).

School leaders likely affect teachers' use of materials in other ways, beyond the feedback that they give. For instance, principals typically are responsible for rolling out or phasing in district-selected materials; their approach for doing so could affect teachers' buy-in and perceptions of the materials (Pak

et al., 2020; Spillane and Anderson, 2019). School leaders also make decisions about resource allocation, including spending on supports for curriculum implementation. They are often responsible for the professional development agenda and focus for their staff (Clune, 2001; Coburn and Russell, 2008; Penuel et al., 2007). In this respect, their messaging around what teacher collaboration time should emphasize (e.g., supplementing and modifying materials) can suggest how much teachers should use the chosen curriculum.

Just as teachers' perceptions of instructional materials influence what they do with those materials, school leaders' perceptions of instructional materials influence their decisions about how and how strongly to support teachers' material use. School leaders likely are inclined to support materials that they regard as high quality and that will meet the needs of their teachers and students. In this report, we address a gap in existing literature by identifying what school leaders regard as key dimensions of quality instructional materials and describing the role that school leaders play in guiding the selection and use of instructional materials.

### **The Present Study**

Our qualitative study is based on semistructured interviews with 39 school leaders across the United States. The respondents were randomly drawn from a nationally representative sample of school leaders who are part of the RAND Corporation's American School Leader Panel. In addition to asking about their role in the material-selection process and in supporting teachers' use of instructional materials, given the timing of our interviews, we asked school leaders about their perceptions of how the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic affected the instructional materials that teachers use or how decisions about material selection and use are made. In a prior study involving teacher interviews, we learned that the COVID-19 pandemic and the remote teaching that it necessitated did not change what teachers considered to be the characteristics of engaging, appropriately challenging, and usable materials. However, teachers did find it necessary—although

## Research Questions

- What characteristics do school leaders think “good” instructional materials include? What dimensions or qualities do school leaders consider in thinking about what is “good”?
- What does the selection process for instructional materials look like? What role—if any—do school leaders play?
- How and to what extent do school leaders provide guidance and support to teachers regarding the use of instructional materials?
- How, if at all, have pandemic-related changes to instruction affected the instructional materials that teachers use or how decisions are made about what materials to use? How are school leaders supporting teachers’ use of instructional materials during the COVID-19 pandemic?

difficult—to modify materials more often to accommodate student needs in this different learning mode (Wang et al., 2021). Some teachers we interviewed were resourceful and experimented with new materials and pedagogical strategies, but it was unclear how much school-level guidance and support teachers were receiving around the use of instructional materials during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aimed to generate some insights about those topics from the perspective of school leaders.

## Methods

### Sample

For this qualitative study, we set out to interview a diverse sample of elementary, middle, and high school leaders who worked in various school contexts. Our sampling frame consisted of K–12 school leaders who were part of the American School Leader Panel and who had completed the American Instructional Resources Survey (AIRS) in spring 2020.<sup>1</sup> Of the 1,420 leaders who completed the AIRS, a total of 1,312 school leaders were eligible.<sup>2</sup>

To ensure that our final sample was diverse in terms of school grade levels and student demographic characteristics, we stratified the eligible participants

by the grade band of the school they led (i.e., elementary, middle, or high) and the proportion of Hispanic and Black students (combined) that were enrolled in the school.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, schools serving more than 75 percent Hispanic and Black students were designated as having a high proportion of these students; schools serving 75 percent or fewer of these students were designated as having a low proportion. Thereafter, we randomly sampled within each of the six strata.

In late January 2021, we invited a total of 90 school leaders to participate in interviews (15 from each stratum). We offered a gift card incentive to each participant upon completion of the interview. We aimed to interview 40 school leaders. In the end, 39 completed interviews, for a response rate of 43 percent. Twenty-two of the school leaders were female; 17 were male. They ranged between five and 45 years of experience as school leaders; the average was 11 to 15 years. Figures 1 and 2 show the characteristics of the schools led by the sample of school leaders we interviewed.

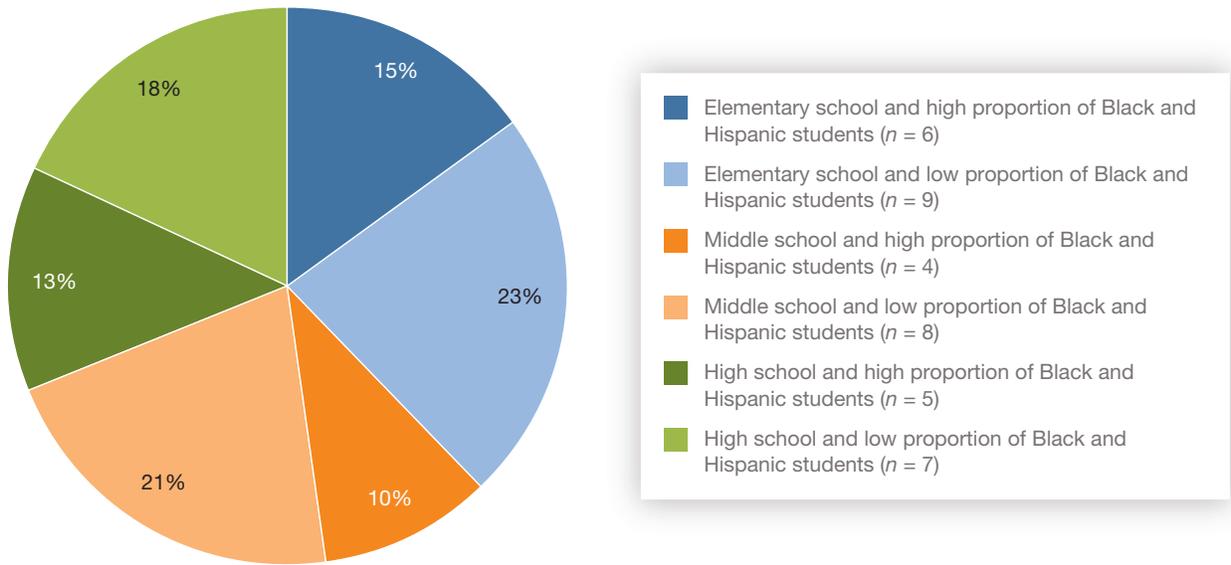
### Data Collection

Four experienced data collectors scheduled and conducted the 45- to 60-minute phone interviews in late January and early February 2021. In addition to brief background questions, the semistructured interview protocol consisted of the following four substantive subsections reflecting the research questions: (1) school leaders’ perceptions of “good” instructional materials, (2) school leaders’ role in selecting instructional materials and the general processes involved in material selection, (3) the guidance and support that school leaders provide teachers around materials use, and (4) the use of instructional materials during the COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures.

For research question 1, we first asked open-ended questions to elicit school leaders’ thoughts on what “good” instructional materials include; we asked separately about English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Then, we probed on certain dimensions (e.g., engagement, appropriateness of challenge, and usability). In line with the semistructured nature of the interview, interviewers posed relevant follow-up questions based on school leaders’

FIGURE 1

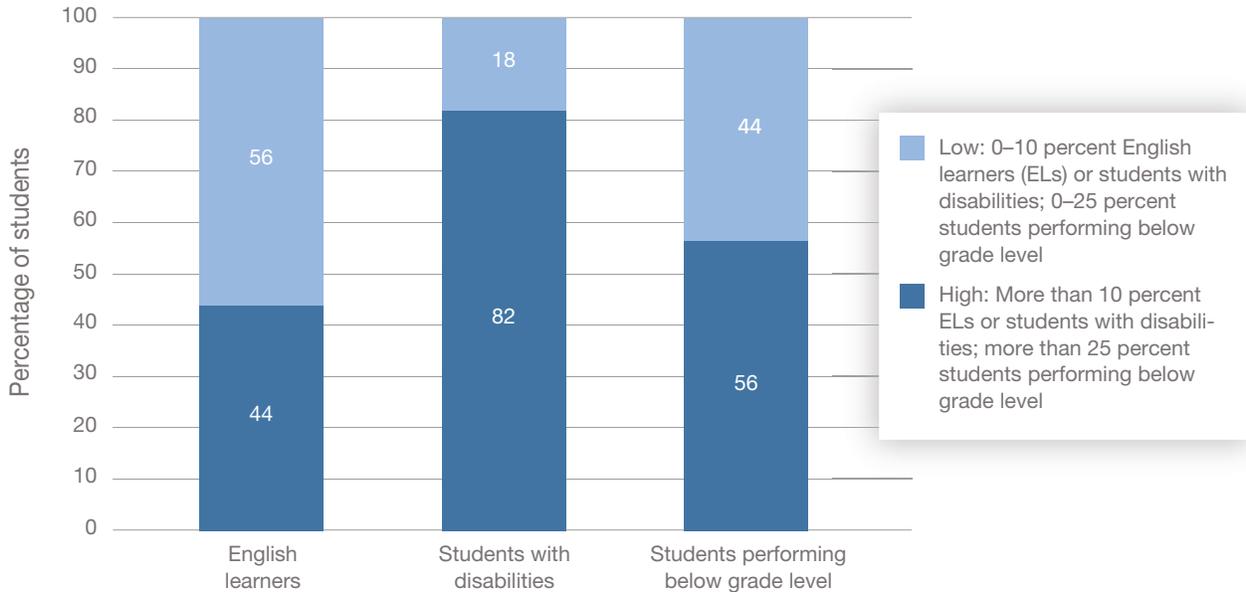
Characteristics of Schools Led by School Leaders in Our Interview Sample, by Grade Band and Proportion of Hispanic and Black Students



NOTES: *N* = 39. The strata to which school leaders belonged are based on the contextual conditions they self-reported during the interview. Some of these conditions, which were based on self-reports from the spring 2020 AIRS, may have changed from the information we used during sampling.

FIGURE 2

Schools Represented in Interview Sample, with High Versus Low Proportions of Special Populations of Students



NOTES: *N* = 39. The strata to which school leaders belonged are based on the contextual conditions they self-reported during the interview. Some of these conditions may have changed from the information we used during sampling, which was based on self-reports from the spring 2020 AIRS.

initial responses to elicit further details and elaboration. See the appendix for the full interview protocol.

## Data Analysis

We uploaded transcripts for analysis in Dedoose 8.3.43, a mixed-methods data analysis application (Dedoose, 2021). Two expert qualitative researchers iteratively developed an initial coding scheme that reflected our research questions, and emergent themes surfaced through team debriefs. Three analysts, who also conducted interviews, were trained on

### The Seven Dimensions of Instructional Materials on Which This Study Focused

- **Standards alignment** considers the degree to which materials are aligned with state and/or college- and career-readiness standards; for example, as reviewed by EdReports.
- **Appropriateness of challenge** concerns the degree to which materials address the academic and learning needs of students, including the extent to which materials are differentiated and accessible for learners with different needs.
- **Engagement** addresses the degree to which materials are likely to be engaging or compelling for students.
- **Usability** concerns the degree to which materials are comprehensive (e.g., feature components that teachers desire) and easy for educators to enact or adapt (e.g., materials integrate well with school technology, fit into classroom time).
- **Cultural relevance** considers the degree to which materials include content and approaches that are culturally relevant, particularly to Hispanic and Black students. We realize that cultural relevance is likely a part—but not all—of the engagement category above.
- **Language acquisition supports** addresses the degree to which materials include supports for English learners (ELs).
- **Social-emotional learning supports** concerns the degree to which materials include content and approaches that promote social and emotional learning.

the coding scheme with the aid of a codebook. The analysts each coded a subset of interviews that they had not conducted. We allowed for emergent coding and met to debrief, discuss, and resolve ambiguities.

In coding what school leaders considered to be important dimensions of instructional materials, we attended to seven key dimensions, which are defined in the text box. They are (1) standards alignment, (2) appropriateness of challenge, (3) engagement, (4) usability, (5) cultural relevance, (6) language acquisition supports, and (7) social-emotional learning supports.

We focused on alignment with college- and career-readiness standards because this has been a priority of recent national- and state-level initiatives. Reviews of curricula conducted by EdReports.org,<sup>4</sup> for instance, prioritize standards alignment. We focused on appropriateness of challenge, engagement, and usability because literature and our own recent research suggest that these dimensions—or the interaction between these dimensions and student characteristics or class makeup—could influence teachers' implementation of the intended curriculum (Datnow and Castellano, 2000; Remillard, 2005; Sosniak and Stodolsky, 1993; Stein, Remillard, and Smith, 2007; Wang et al., 2021). Finally, we attended to cultural relevance, language acquisition supports, and social-emotional learning supports, given renewed and urgent calls to ensure that equity is at the front and center of instruction and learning decisions and to address the needs of the whole child (e.g., Council of Chief State School Officers, 2019; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019).

In our analysis, we explored differences between principals leading schools with different characteristics. These characteristics are school level (i.e., elementary, middle, or high school); percentage of students who are Hispanic or Black that the school reportedly served (75 percent or more versus fewer than 75 percent); percentage of students who are ELs (11 percent or more, or 0–10 percent); percentage of students with disabilities (11 percent or more, or 0–10 percent); and percentage of students who are performing below grade level (26 percent or more, or 0–25 percent).

One of the primary goals of our qualitative analysis was to identify the variety of perceptions and

experiences that school leaders had of instructional materials rather than the prevalence of different response types, which would be difficult to interpret given the nonrepresentativeness of our sample and the structure of our semistructured interview protocol, which tailored follow-up questions to school leaders' initial responses. In the Findings section, where appropriate, we present frequency counts or describe the prevalence of some findings by indicating whether responses were present in more than three-quarters, about half, or fewer than one-quarter of the interviews.<sup>5</sup> When referring to *a couple of school leaders*, we mean that a theme or response was mentioned by two to six (5 to 15 percent of) school leaders. In addition, we provide selected quotations from the interviews to illustrate key themes.

## Limitations

We note several methodological limitations of our study. First, our interview sample is of a modest size ( $N = 39$ ) and is not necessarily representative. Also, school leaders self-selected into our sample by agreeing to the interview. As a result, our findings are limited in generalizability. Any findings by subgroup (e.g., school or interviewee characteristics) must be interpreted with additional caution. Second, interview responses are prone to self-report bias; interviewees might have presented socially desirable responses. Third, although for most of the interview, we asked school leaders to focus on a typical school year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible that the pandemic influenced respondents' recollections or views.

To counter these limitations, our sample includes school leaders across the country who work in schools of all grade levels, serve different populations of students (e.g., with high and low proportions of Hispanic students, Black students, ELs, students performing below grade level), and have a wide range of years of experience as principals. This helps provide confidence that our findings are informed by a diversity of opinions, experiences, and contexts.

Overall, the qualitative interviews that we conducted add to researchers' limited understanding of school leaders' roles in selecting materials, their roles in supporting teachers' use of materials, and their

perceptions of high-quality instructional materials. Our findings can help identify promising practices that other school and district leaders can adopt. The findings also can provoke districts to reflect on how school leaders are positioned with respect to supporting teachers' use of materials and how their knowledge, expertise, and relationships with school staff can be better leveraged to accomplish this goal. Finally, the insights we provide can lead to recommendations for district-level policies and practices that better support school leaders to take on the important role of curriculum leaders.

## Findings

In this section, we present findings based on our interviews with 39 school leaders. We address each research question in turn. First, we report on what school leaders considered to be key dimensions or qualities of "good" instructional materials. Then, we examine the materials-selection process and school leaders' role in that process. Third, we document the guidance and support that school leaders provided to teachers regarding the choice and use of instructional materials. Finally, we report on how—if at all—changes to instruction related to the COVID-19 pandemic affected the instructional materials that teachers used or how decisions were made about what was used.

### School Leaders' Perceptions of Quality Instructional Materials

School leaders' perceptions of instructional materials matter because they are likely to support materials that they regard as high-quality. Their views of what makes materials high-quality are likely to take into account factors that matter for both instruction and learning. We found that, although school leaders appeared to consider instructional materials from the perspective of students—valuing materials that are engaging and appropriately challenging—their top responses to our open-ended questions about what they regarded as dimensions of good instructional materials suggested a primary focus on supporting

### Usability Features of Instructional Materials That School Leaders Valued

- Ease of use
- Comprehensiveness of materials, particularly differentiated options and assessments
- Built-in professional development
- Digital availability of materials

teachers’ use of materials. We summarize our findings in Table 1.

### School Leaders Valued Characteristics of Instructional Materials That Supported Usability, Thereby Facilitating Implementation

In describing good instructional materials, more than three-quarters of the school leaders we interviewed emphasized characteristics that facilitated implementation. These characteristics related directly to the dimension of usability. Usability concerns both the extent to which materials are easy for students and teachers to digest, navigate, and manipulate, and the comprehensiveness of the material.

School leaders who discussed usability believed that teachers were more likely to implement a material (with or without further modifications) that was easy to use. One high school principal said,

We don’t want teachers getting frustrated and reverting back to a particular way that they were teaching that just doesn’t fit the needs of kids, such as rote learning, because they got frustrated with a curriculum. . . . So keep in

mind the ease of use. . . . If it’s too complicated for the teacher . . . , if it’s too complicated for a student to use it and feel successful, it’s just going to fall away.

This school leader acknowledged that teachers are more likely to resist implementing a material that is complicated to navigate or difficult to use for either themselves or their students. Moreover, the principal articulated why this mattered. The risk is not only that teachers and students will feel frustrated but also that, as a result, the quality of instruction might suffer. If teachers shelve an otherwise strong material because it is difficult to use, they will miss out on potentially effective teaching strategies and return to approaches that do not propel student learning.

Another common opinion among the three-quarters of school leaders that prioritized usability was that comprehensive materials, which feature key components that teachers desire, supported implementation. For example, materials were easier to use if they provided differentiated options, such as leveled materials and lesson plans that included suggestions for various student subgroups (e.g., struggling learners, ELs), because teachers could pick up and use the material as it was. In comparison, when materials lacked built-in differentiated options, teachers had to spend additional time searching for supplemental materials to provide enrichment, scaffolding, or the like. One high school principal described the advantages of differentiated options as follows:

Every curriculum or every lesson should cater to at least three levels of students . . . the low,

TABLE 1  
Responses to What School Leaders Regarded as Dimensions of “Good” Instructional Materials

Prevalence	Dimension	Subgroup with More Respondents by More Than 20 Percent
More than 75%	Usability	} facilitate teacher implementation
	Standards alignment	
	Engagement	
	Appropriateness of challenge	
About 50%	Cultural relevance	Elementary school; high percentage of students with below-grade-level performance Middle and high schools; high percentage of HBs
Less than 25%	Language acquisition supports	Elementary school; high percentage of HBs
	Social-emotional learning supports	

NOTES: *N* = 39. HB = Hispanic or Black students. Subgroup differences are based on a 20-percent differential between subgroups. — indicates no subgroup difference.

mid, and the high. . . . We want to make sure all students are constantly challenged. Every lesson within the unit has a section for EL[s], a section for [students with disabilities], a section for advanced students. The curriculum that we're using now actually offers that already, so that makes it easier on the teachers for planning because the lesson is already catering to three levels of learners.

This principal, like many others, saw materials that provided entry points for different levels of students as being both responsive to students' needs and helpful for reducing the planning burden on teachers.

Similarly, school leaders identified the availability of various assessment options and built-in tools or processes for data collection and progress monitoring as characteristics that support usability. That is, they perceived that incorporating assessment tools into an instructional material helps meet teachers' needs. Principals valued having a variety of assessment options, including preassessments or diagnostic assessments; mid-unit or formative assessments; benchmark assessments; end-of-unit, summative assessments; and peer assessments or self-assessments. They felt that having easy access to curriculum-aligned assessments provided several benefits. For example, such assessments supported teachers in collecting student data, measuring student progress and achievement, identifying students' areas of need, and driving future instruction. Having test or item banks built within curricula further supports the usability of a material, as school leaders do not have to be concerned with the validity or reliability of the assessments. When principals talked about the importance of assessment tools, they also emphasized that these tools should themselves be user-friendly and provide interpretable data on student progress.

A third component that school leaders regarded as important is the provision of professional development. School leaders indicated that these opportunities, particularly when they are provided by the publisher of materials, can support teachers in using and implementing a new instructional material as intended and, thus, can support overall implementation.

Finally, school leaders positioned the digital availability of materials as critical to their usability. This means that students can access and interact with the same materials online when they are away from school or not receiving face-to-face instruction; teachers did not need to create or locate different materials for students who were learning online. One school leader described this as the "portability" of the curriculum. Portability also supported fluidity in instruction by bridging potential gaps when students transitioned from learning with their teachers to learning independently from home. At the same time, school leaders emphasized that the technology component of instructional materials must be user-friendly and easy to navigate for both teachers and students; otherwise, teachers and students will be less likely to benefit from it. One middle school principal articulated these key ideas associated with digital availability, saying,

[Being e]asy to use is definitely huge, especially now when we're talking about the digital aspect. . . . Teachers do not have time to be digging for materials on the publisher's website. We need to make sure that it's easy. And the same with the students. If it's not user-friendly, students are not gonna click on it, and if it's not right there, they're out.

Additionally, technology components are more useful when they are compatible with the school's learning management system (e.g., Google Classroom) or when the online program has ways of collecting and monitoring student data.

#### **Standards Alignment Features of Instructional Materials That School Leaders Valued**

- Comprehensive: all grade-level knowledge and skills are addressed
- Unpacking of complex standards
- Alignment with state-specific standards
- Alignment with state summative assessment

## School Leaders Preferred Standards-Aligned Instructional Materials

More than three-quarters of school leaders indicated that standards alignment was an important dimension of quality instructional materials. Included in this dimension is the idea that a material should address all of the grade-level knowledge and skills that students are expected to master (e.g., for ELA, speaking and listening skills are addressed in addition to reading and writing). Beyond coverage of standards, school leaders greatly preferred materials that adequately unpacked standards. This means that the material takes what might be a vague or complex standard and analyzes or decomposes it into what students are required to understand or do, and it makes explicit how teachers are to teach and assess the particular standard. Fewer than one-quarter of school leaders specifically indicated wanting materials to align not only generally to the Common Core State Standards but also to the specific disciplinary standards for their state.

School leaders prioritized standards alignment because, echoing sentiments described above about including options for differentiation or assessments, they felt that, if instructional materials did not address standards, it would add to teachers' burden. One elementary school principal encapsulated this idea, saying, "I would like to see [the material] aligned to our state standards as much as possible because when there's a deficit, that's when teachers have to go look elsewhere and that takes time."

School leaders believed that standards alignment was especially important because standards are assessed on the state summative assessment. For this reason, some principals valued instructional materials that are similar to the assessment—for example, in terms of an emphasis on a certain topic or type of

text (e.g., informational or fictional)—or materials that are designed to reflect or mimic the state exam.

## School Leaders Less Frequently Identified Cultural Relevance as a Key Dimension of Quality Materials, and Those Who Did Held Differing Conceptualizations of Cultural Relevance

Slightly less than half of the principals we interviewed discussed cultural relevance in response to our open-ended question about what dimensions or qualities they believe makes an instructional material good. Not all of these principals defined cultural relevance or described how to assess materials on this dimension. Those who did characterized cultural relevance by a variety of features. Some attended to surface-level features; for example, they looked for visual representations of diversity in textbooks (e.g., in photos and illustrations, names of authors or characters). Others considered whether different cultures, ethnicities, family structures, or gender roles were depicted in the text. Meanwhile, others were concerned with the content and message of the representation. For example, they wanted to ensure that texts, and particularly nonfiction texts, presented historically accurate and unbiased information in a way that "builds up"—i.e., honors and recognizes, rather than disparages or diminishes—students and their background.

Similarly, some school leaders focused on the importance of students seeing themselves—their cultural identity and experiences—represented in curricula. They tended to believe that culturally relevant materials help students make sense of the material presented and see its relevance to their lives and the world around them; therefore, culturally relevant materials also were considered naturally engaging

### Features That School Leaders Associated with Culturally Relevant Instructional Materials

Surface-Level Features	Content-Focused Features
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Visual representations of diversity (e.g., photos and illustrations)</li><li>• Presence or depiction of different cultures, ethnicities, family structures, or gender roles</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Historical accuracy and objectivity of information</li><li>• Positive representation of cultures and backgrounds</li></ul>

materials. Other school leaders regarded this dimension as critical to addressing issues of cross-cultural and cross-group ignorance, bias, and misunderstanding. They thought that culturally diverse materials could provide students with exposure to and foster understanding of cultures other than their own.

### Even Fewer School Leaders Identified Social-Emotional Learning Supports and Language-Acquisition Supports as Essential Dimensions of Quality Instructional Materials

Fewer than one-quarter of school leaders mentioned specific language-acquisition supports, although many other principals tended to include supports for ELs under the broader category of differentiation. Among the school leaders who prioritized language-acquisition supports, some appreciated having instructional materials that could be easily translated or were already available in other languages. Others emphasized the importance of materials that provide scaffolding for ELs and that are supportive, yet rigorous. One elementary principal said that she was “disappointed,” for example, that some Spanish-language resources at her school used vocabulary that is well below grade level, while the corresponding English text featured grade-level language.

As with language-acquisition supports, fewer than one-quarter of school leaders mentioned that they looked for materials that touched on topics related to students’ social-emotional development. Some noted constraints on teachers’ ability to emphasize social-emotional learning—such as not having enough time and needing to emphasize content and skills addressed on state assessments—as reasons for its low priority. Other leaders explained that social-emotional learning support is starting to become more of a focus at their schools, especially given student needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, but that materials providing such supports have not yet been embedded into core instruction.

### School Leaders’ Perceptions of the Dimensions of Materials That Are Important Largely Remained the Same Across Contextual Factors, Although School Grade Level Might Matter

We asked school leaders whether good instructional materials differed by the grade level of students, students’ academic performance level, or other variables (see Question 12 in the appendix). Overall, more than three-quarters of respondents indicated that contextual factors did not play a significant role in what they perceived that high-quality instructional materials should include. Instead, school leaders tended to believe that the dimensions of materials that are important are equally important for all students. With respect to usability and engagement, for example, one elementary principal articulated that

Certainly, the content needs to be appropriate to the kid, but what makes materials good and effective, I think are pretty universal. . . . You want something engaging at every level. You want something that is easy to implement, or it doesn’t get implemented with fidelity. What makes something engaging to a kindergarten kid is different than what’s engaging to a senior, but the fact that it needs to be engaging is the same.

Another principal explained that schools cannot “trade” one characteristic for another depending on students’ performance level; instead, both higher-achieving and struggling learners need to have materials that are engaging *and* appropriately challenging. These interview excerpts capture the general sentiment of schools leaders in our sample: that broad characteristics of “good” materials are “universal.” That is, *how* these characteristics manifest might be different for different subgroups of students in order to be appropriate, but the importance of the characteristics themselves does not meaningfully change.

To understand the potential influence of contextual factors, we also examined responses to what school leaders regarded as dimensions of good instructional materials by characteristics of the schools that they led. For each of the seven dimensions of interest, we examined five contrasts: by grade band and by high or low percentage of Hispanic and

Black students, ELs, students with disabilities, and students performing below grade level. Only six contrasts indicated a difference of 20 percent or more in the responses (see Table 1).<sup>6</sup> In general, this confirms school leaders' claims that dimensions of good instructional materials remained essentially the same for different groups of students.

Three of the six contrasts we identified concerned grade levels. Specifically, a larger percentage of elementary school leaders, compared with middle or high school leaders, regarded appropriateness of challenge and language-acquisition supports as key dimensions of quality instructional materials. Also, a larger percentage of middle and high school principals mentioned cultural relevance than did elementary school leaders. Two of the contrasts concerned the percentage of Hispanic and Black students the school served. A larger percentage of principals leading schools where more than 75 percent of the student population is Hispanic or Black prioritized cultural relevance and language-acquisition supports compared with their counterparts in schools serving fewer than 75 percent of these students. Finally, one contrast concerned students performing below grade level. Predictably, principals who reported leading schools with a higher percentage of these students were more inclined to consider appropriateness of challenge as a dimension of quality instructional materials.

## The Instructional Materials Selection Process and School Leaders' Role

Principals indicated that the process for selecting instructional materials could be a district-driven process, a school-level process, or a collaborative process between district and school personnel, and school leaders' role in these processes varied accordingly. As we describe in the following sections, principals were most satisfied with the selection process when they or their teachers were involved. Collectively, school leaders identified key activities that they engaged in as part of the process to assess the quality of materials. These activities included piloting the materials, eliciting teacher feedback, consulting with other schools that used the material, referencing state

standards and research, and developing and using rubrics. These insights suggest ways in which school districts can design a productive material selection process that leverages the experience of principals.

### School Leaders Described Three Primary Processes That Districts and Schools Used for Selecting Instructional Materials, and the Majority of Interviewees Played an Active Role in the Process

According to our interviewees, districts and schools used one of three primary processes for selecting instructional materials. In Table 2, we characterize these processes and provide the number of interviewees that described each process.

School leaders' involvement in the selection of materials appeared to differ by the process. Where the selection process took place at the district level, school leaders reported minimal involvement. They were typically asked to provide general feedback about curriculum options being considered and/or to select teacher leaders to participate on the selection committee. School leaders reported prioritizing teachers with multiple years of experience or expertise in specific instructional subjects. They also nominated teachers who were interested in gaining leadership experience and were eager to participate, regardless of their years of experience.

When the district was not involved or was less involved in the selection process, school leaders played a more-active and -prominent role. For a school-level selection process, school leaders typically created committees with a diverse group of teachers who represented the different grade levels at their school, school demographics with respect to racial and ethnic backgrounds, and/or varying degrees of teaching experience. Some school leaders reported that they led material-selection committees and made the final decision about which instructional materials to adopt, while others stepped back and allowed teachers to lead conversations about material selection. More than half of interviewed school leaders facilitated discussions about instructional materials and brought in outside experts and information to guide the process. For example, one elementary principal said,

TABLE 2

## Primary Processes for Selecting Instructional Materials and Their Prevalence

Process	Description	School Leader Role	<i>n</i> (%)	Subgroup with More Respondents by More than 20 Percent
District-level	Superintendents, curriculum coordinators, and other district administrators meet to choose instructional materials. They use such information as student data, state standards, and district academic goals to make these decisions. In some cases, they ask for minimal teacher or school leader input.	Minimal: provide general feedback, nominate teacher representative	3 (8%)	High percentage of ELs; high percentage of students with disabilities
School-level	A committee of teachers and school leaders are part of the selection process. In most cases, the school leaders facilitate the process, and teachers provide input on instructional material options according to their students' needs and their experiences.	Active: create and lead or facilitate committee	12 (31%)	High school (compared with elementary school)
District and school collaboration	District staff, school leaders, and teachers collaborate to make decisions about the selection of instructional materials. They discuss both district- and school-level needs and make a decision based on both considerations.	Active: participate in committee; provide feedback; coordinate pilot	24 (62%)	Elementary school (compared with high school); high percentage of students performing below grade level

NOTES: *N* = 39. Subgroup differences are based on a 20-percent differential between paired subgroups.

My role is to listen to teachers and then experts in the content area. The teachers that teach math may not be “math experts.” They may not have a master’s or a degree in math, but they’re teaching math, so you also want to have people who have those degrees [and] are well-read within the research. . . . So, my role is to allow teachers to get access to the best research, the best people in the field to help them vet the best resources and then implement the best program.

This principal exemplified the role of a facilitator. The principal was actively involved in coordinating resources to inform the process but allowed teachers to be the primary decisionmakers.

The most common process for selecting instructional materials, as reported by our interviewees, was a district and school collaborative process. Two school leaders described the collaborative process as follows:

We have a committee. At least one teacher from every grade level is represented, as well as at least one person from every building, . . . as well as a building administrator and a district administrator or curriculum director. They are [the] district committee. . . . They determine our curriculum, and they are the driving pri-

mary decisionmaking team for the new series.  
—Elementary school principal

The district will listen to a [publisher’s] representative who comes out and pitches the product, and then we always require that those representatives provide us a pilot of that digital platform for at least two or three weeks so teachers can get in and use that and see the differences between the companies for . . . ease of use, and availability of materials, and how does that relate to kids, and is it easily transferrable to them. After that pilot period, they come back and collectively choose, and then the superintendent reviews the choice and makes a final decision. — Middle school principal

As both excerpts illustrate, this process is a joint effort among teachers, school leaders, and district staff. The process typically started and ended with the district; district officials researched materials and selected a few options to consider, and they made the final decision. However, teachers and school leaders were called on to pilot materials and/or provide critical feedback to the district to aid in their evaluation of the materials. About one-third of school leaders reported that their school—and not the district—initiated the material-selection process and led the initial effort to research curriculum options. They

then sent these options to the district to make a final decision.

### School Leaders Were More Satisfied with the Material-Selection Process When They or Their Teachers Were Actively Involved

School leaders reported that they were satisfied with the process of selecting instructional materials when they were involved. If it was a school-level process or a collaborative process between districts and schools, leaders felt more confident that the selected materials met teacher and student needs. One high school principal described the productive process as follows:

We go to the vendor's presentations on the curriculum, and we dialogue with our teachers. I try to make sure they are looking at all of the variables. . . . I might bring up things that our students need that maybe they're not thinking of. It is collaborative. . . . I try to guide that discussion and make sure they're not missing any blind spots and try to make sure we're picking a curriculum that's really suited to the students' needs. Ultimately, our school board does have to . . . approve the decision made by our teacher groups. But they've always been supportive of whatever the teachers ultimately vote [for].

Although the final decision was made at the district level, the principal appreciated that he or she could take the lead in engaging the school staff in substantive discussions about the materials and that the resulting recommendation was honored by the district.

On the other hand, school leaders in districts that did not consult with school staff during the selection process expressed some concerns. For example, one high school principal stated,

They had us review the materials and then rank which we thought [were] the best materials. But the ultimate selection did not reflect our recommendations. We don't really have a voice. . . . Teachers do not provide feedback. The process is not transparent.

In this and other instances, districts asked teachers for feedback, but the school leaders we interviewed did not know how or whether that feedback was con-

sidered during the decisionmaking process. These school leaders reported feeling that their school's instructional priorities were not addressed by the chosen materials.

### School Leaders Used Various Sources of Information and Tools to Assess the Quality of Instructional Materials

To inform their district's or school's material selection, school leaders and teachers engaged in a variety of activities and processes. School leaders we interviewed thought that piloting materials was especially important. Allowing teachers and students to try and practice with the materials helped school leaders see the materials "in action." Relatedly, principals reported relying heavily on teacher feedback because they viewed teachers as "content specialists" and experts on what they need in classrooms. Teachers can draw on prior experience with instructional materials to provide a helpful critique of the materials under consideration. Some school leaders reported consulting with teachers from other schools and districts about the materials that they had used, especially targeting schools that had implemented the materials being evaluated. Furthermore, school leaders took time to review the materials themselves. Principals described reviewing teachers' guides or manuals to look for the components that they consider to be important. Finally, school leaders asked publishers questions as needed to help guide their decision.

District and school leaders also drew on other sources of information. These other sources included state standards, research, and school data. Some school leaders did not describe specific standards that they used but noted that they had lists of instructional priorities that were important for their schools. Other leaders mentioned that their schools looked for data-driven and evidence-based materials during the selection process. Some leaders researched materials by conducting Google searches and consulting online sources. Others targeted materials that were supported by research. Fewer than one-quarter of principals mentioned consulting EdReports to help them decide between curriculum options.

Fewer than one-quarter of interviewed school leaders indicated that their school or district developed and/or used review rubrics to guide their material selection process. One middle school leader explained,

I developed rubrics and check-off lists. [The school's material selection committee] held workshops. These were days where we went through and looked at, say, the top two considerations, and we checked: Are [the materials] really representative of the standards? Are they really supporting all students?

Other school leaders described a similar process that involved identifying dimensions or qualities of materials to prioritize and then assessing each material option against the established criteria.

## School Leaders' Guidance and Support for Teachers' Use of Materials

Beyond being involved in the selection process, school leaders in our sample indicated playing a key role in supporting teachers' buy-in to and use of newly adopted instructional materials. This qualitative data aligns with our American Educator Panel findings indicating that school leaders' feedback on curriculum materials is closely related to how teachers use their materials (Kaufman et al., 2020). In the following section, we describe the multiple strategies that school leaders used to create buy-in for instructional materials. We then describe how school leaders balanced a desire for fidelity of curriculum implementation with respect for teacher autonomy. District leaders can benefit from knowing the different approaches principals take; this could, in part, explain variation in how teachers use instructional materials.

### School Leaders Used Multiple Strategies to Support Teacher Buy-In for Newly Adopted Instructional Materials

School leaders we interviewed recognized that they have a key role to play in creating buy-in for the implementation of a new instructional material and in providing implementation guidance and support to teachers. More than three-quarters of school

### Key Sources and Tools That School Leaders Reported Consulting as Part of the Instructional Material-Selection Process

- Teacher and student feedback from piloting materials
- Reviews from teachers in other schools and districts using materials
- School leaders' firsthand review of key components of materials
- Information from publishers
- State standards
- Schools' instructional priorities
- Research on materials
- EdReports
- Published rubrics and criteria

leaders reported experiencing a lack of buy-in for a new instructional material or some resistance to its implementation from at least a few teachers. As one principal indicated,

You have your covert and overt people. Some are gonna blatantly say, "I'm not using this." Some will say, "Sure, I'm gonna use it," and then they don't. And other people follow the rules.

To address resistance, principals acknowledged that part of their role as instructional leaders was to facilitate buy-in and navigate the tension between recognizing teacher autonomy and expertise and facilitating the faithful implementation of school- or district-required or recommended materials. School leaders described using a variety of strategies to persuade or motivate teachers to implement a curriculum or to do so with greater fidelity.<sup>7</sup>

One of the strategies that school leaders mentioned was involving teachers in the curriculum-selection process. According to about one-quarter of school leaders, buy-in is most easily gained during the selection and adoption process and prior to implementation. As one principal explained, "Buy-in is perfectly proportional to the amount of participation [teachers] had in the [curriculum-selection] process." Similarly, buy-in also was facilitated through piloting curriculum; this allowed some teachers to get acquainted with a new material, provide feedback

### Strategies That School Leaders Reported Using to Generate Teachers' Buy-In for the Use of Instructional Materials

- Involving teachers in the curriculum selection process
- Enlisting teachers in leading adoption and implementation efforts
- Persuading teachers of the value and legitimacy of a new curriculum by showing that it is standards-aligned, high-quality, effective at improving student performance, and/or research-based

on its quality and implementation, and then vouch for it once it was selected for school or district-wide implementation. One school leader described it as “peer pressure in a positive way.” She elaborated, “If anybody’s had positive experiences with the engagement of the curriculum, then they share that with their colleagues . . . that tends to get the buy-in needed to support one curriculum over another.” Even when teachers were not directly involved in the selection or piloting process, school leaders believed that knowing that their fellow teachers were involved promoted buy-in.

School leaders also described the importance of creating teacher advocates for a new curriculum or for its implementation. Rather than mandating implementation, school leaders described improving buy-in and the consistent implementation of an instructional material by enlisting teachers in leading adoption and implementation efforts. As one principal described, “Because of these two wonderful educators, my teachers have bought in more than they would have if it was a top-down situation.” Relatedly, school leaders described asking teams of teachers to coordinate the implementation of a new material in a way that created grade-, subject-, or school-wide standardization or consistency. This allowed school leaders to shift the responsibility of implementation to teachers. Some believed that this improved buy-in by acknowledging teacher expertise and leadership in the process.

A third strategy used by school leaders to persuade teachers of the value and legitimacy of a new curriculum was to appeal to district or state man-

dates, research, and/or student performance. When school leaders encountered resistance to implementing materials that they deemed high-quality or effective in improving student outcomes, according to one principal, they emphasized to teachers that selected materials were “standards-aligned, research-based, valid, and reliable.” This sometimes entailed showing teachers evidence, such as research or student performance data from other schools that demonstrated a material’s effectiveness.

Other strategies used to compel teachers to implement materials included using monitoring and evaluation tools. For example, a couple of school leaders indicated that adding use of curriculum materials to teacher observation protocols can help ensure that teachers implement the materials. School leaders also created regular opportunities for teachers to seek guidance and support during implementation.

### School Leaders Provided Guidance That Balanced Teacher Autonomy and Fidelity of Curriculum Implementation

When asked about the guidance they provided around the implementation of district-required or -recommended materials, school leader responses varied widely. The types of guidance can be arrayed on a spectrum, from mandating and then monitoring fidelity of implementation to encouraging teachers to deviate from the materials as much as they want in order to meet their students’ needs. However, as shown in Figure 3, most school leaders provided guidance that fell somewhere in between.

Specifically, almost three-quarters of school leaders expressed trying to find a balance between ensuring that the required material was implemented effectively and acknowledging that no instructional material is perfect and that teachers should sometimes make modifications or use supplemental materials to better align curriculum with state standards, reinforce a particular concept, or make materials more engaging for students. Therefore, principals’ perceptions about this balance between the need for some fidelity to the curriculum and the need to allow teachers to modify likely play a major role in how principals support and encourage the use of instruc-

tional materials. As one middle school principal noted,

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.

Notably, the principal in this excerpt prioritized teachers using the deliberately selected curriculum, but he also allowed room for teacher autonomy. The autonomy is not unrestricted, however; the condition is “if something isn’t working.” And saying “we can problem-solve” implies that there is a process to follow and there is some joint decisionmaking between the school leader and the teacher about whether and how to implement a different material.

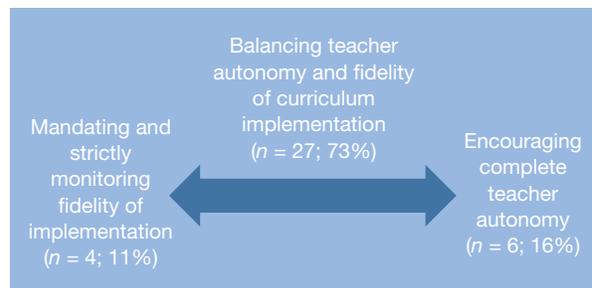
Our findings suggest that the approach that school leaders reported might be associated with the school grade level and the type of curriculum-selection process that their schools have. Of the six principals who indicated encouraging complete teacher autonomy in curriculum use, four were high school principals, and four had also indicated that their curriculum-selection process occurred at the school level. Of the four principals who mandated and strictly monitored curriculum implementation, three were elementary school principals. Although our sample is too small to test this hypothesis, future research could look into how guidance on curriculum use varies by the type of curriculum-selection process and grade level of schools.

### School Leaders’ Guidance Included When and How Much to Supplement or Modify Materials

Along with giving permission or encouragement to use supplemental materials, about half of the school leaders provided some guidance around how much or when it was appropriate to supplement those materials. One elementary principal explained it in this way:

One thing I’ve found with supplemental materials is they are fun. Kids like them, and teachers like them. But . . . if we are just doing supplemental materials, how are we ensur-

FIGURE 3  
Guidance That School Leaders Provided Teachers Around the Implementation of District-Required or -Recommended Materials



NOTES:  $n = 37$ . The total number of school leader responses represented in this figure is 37 because two school leaders reported having no experience implementing a district-required or -recommended instructional material. Therefore, they were not asked about how they provide guidance around the implementation of district-required or -recommended materials.

ing that we cover a grade level worth of standards? . . . The standards drive the teaching and learning, so if [teachers] are able to show that [the standards are covered] within their lesson plans or within their unit, [they can use supplemental materials].

We also found that a little more than one-quarter of school leaders either encouraged the use of as many supplemental materials as teachers wanted to use or did not provide any guidance or restrictions around their use. Four school leaders discouraged or prohibited the use of supplemental materials.

Similarly, more than half of the school leaders we interviewed reported providing teachers with direction as to how and when modifying instructional materials was appropriate. For example, in the excerpt below, one elementary principal describes generally allowing modifications, such as shortening a lesson to better fit students’ attention spans, if they met student needs. She also mentioned that less experienced teachers might be better off implementing a curriculum without modifications because this ensures that they will address all the standards:

I would say that [teachers] are allowed to modify. . . . I want them to modify if needed based upon . . . any number of factors. A lesson might be too long for the attention span of

the students. As long as the majority of the students are able to demonstrate proficiency or mastery, I am fine with them making the modifications. I trust them as practitioners. As a general rule of thumb, [for] my teachers that are first, second, or third year, I do like for them to stick with the plan. . . . There's a reason why. We have a well-thought-out evidence-based curriculum. . . . The majority of the students, when they're taught those things, should be able to access [the standards] and demonstrate in a reasonable amount of time proficiency or beyond.

A couple of school leaders, including a middle school principal, acknowledged that some modification was necessary but expressed concerns that certain modifications could dilute content or lower the rigor of materials:

Teachers can modify as long as modifications do not lower rigor of instruction. Modifications need to still allow teachers to teach to the level and complexity of the standard. We provide training to teachers to help them understand how materials are aligned to standards and how modifications can be made.

Although more than half of school leaders had an approach that provided guidelines around appropriate and inappropriate modifications, two principals discouraged all modifications, with one saying, "We really question [modifications] hard, because it's easy to break the research base by modifying it and going in the wrong direction." Meanwhile, six principals encouraged unrestricted modifications, stating that they trusted their teachers to modify their materials as much as needed to meet student needs.

Overall, school leaders emphasized the importance of providing adequate supports for implementation of instructional materials. More than half of the interviewees emphasized the role of teacher leaders or coaches in supporting implementation through (1) providing regular opportunities for collaboration and planning, such as during monthly professional learning opportunities; (2) conducting coaching walkthroughs with feedback; and (3) encouraging teacher leaders to model instruction. As one principal explained, "If we see someone who's struggling with implementation or resisting it or what have you, we

will schedule that person to come in and meet with the teacher, model how they ought to be using it, if they're having trouble actually doing so."

## Use of Instructional Materials During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly disrupted typical teaching and learning practices, our interviewees reported that it had not significantly changed the instructional materials used in their districts and schools. However, school leaders offered support for teachers' use of instructional materials during the pandemic, particularly for remote learning, as we describe below. In the following sections, we also show one significant shift that the pandemic brought about in school leaders' views on the dimensions of good materials. Specifically, school leaders have been more concerned with the social-emotional learning supports that materials offered than they were before the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, school leaders also expressed an increased interest in the technology integration with curriculum materials. Overall, these shifts might have implications for selecting and using materials that are likely to endure beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

### By and Large, Required or Recommended Instructional Materials Did Not Change Because of the COVID-19 Pandemic, but School Leaders Offered Supports for Remote Instruction

School leaders we interviewed reported that, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, their schools provided instruction in various modes—completely online, in hybrid format, or in person—during the 2020–2021 school year. Schools often shifted among modes depending on rates of infection in their district or region. For more than half of our interviewees, the change to a remote or hybrid instructional mode did not entail a change in the main instructional materials that teachers used. However, three districts and schools adopted or recommended new materials because existing materials were not available in an online format or did not provide opportunities for online assessment. These schools and districts

adopted new materials to facilitate the delivery of remote instruction. Eight school leaders reported purchasing supplemental materials to provide differentiation for students or to enhance materials that did not have an online component.

According to our interviewees, district and school leaders offered guidance and resources to support teachers' use of instructional materials during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the supports focused on helping teachers adapt to remote instruction. As teachers changed their instructional mode and increased their reliance on such online learning platforms or learning management systems as Blackboard, Canvas, and Google Classroom, school leaders reported increasing professional development related to these platforms. In general, professional development during the 2020–2021 school year addressed teachers' use of online materials and how to increase student engagement in an online learning environment. For example, one high school principal described changes in professional development related to the use of online platforms as follows:

We had to do a lot of [professional development] and teaching differently. . . . Some of the supports . . . help teachers understand that you can't go on a Zoom and lecture for 90 minutes because nobody's listening, that kind of thing. So, it's . . . changing their strategies to incorporate 21st-century skills [and] doing things to help [students] learn.

### During the COVID-19 Pandemic, School Leaders Were Concerned with the Implications of the Dimensions of Instructional Materials for Online Instruction and Were More Focused on Social-Emotional Learning Supports

We asked school leaders about which dimensions mattered most for instructional materials used during the pandemic. Usability, engagement, and appropriateness of challenge remained top-of-mind, as they were before the pandemic (Table 1), but school leaders focused on the implications of these dimensions for online instruction. For example, responses about usability focused on the digital availability of materials for students. Engagement was especially a

concern for leaders in schools with an online-only instructional model. School leaders reported that students missed class or turned their cameras off during lessons. They felt that it was important to have materials that kept students engaged in the lessons while at home. Examples included materials that incorporated videos or stories that were of interest to students and physical materials and manipulatives, such as blocks or fraction towers, that could be sent home to help students engage in mathematics lessons. Moreover, school leaders expressed a greater need for differentiated materials because the pandemic exacerbated student needs. Specifically, when online instruction was the only option for schools, leaders described a need for an online platform or digitally available materials for assessing student progress and providing instructional support for struggling students.

More school leaders deemed social-emotional learning supports in instructional materials critical during the COVID-19 pandemic compared with before the pandemic. They referenced the need to support students who might feel isolated at home. As one middle school principal said, "I think we have had to really give efforts to social-emotional learning as part of our instructional delivery, because our students are, in some cases, in homes that are unsupportive." Another school leader explicitly desired a trauma-informed approach in the materials. Essentially, recognizing that students might be facing the emotional impact of sickness and death in their families and/or among close friends, some school leaders believed that academic rigor and standards alignment might not have been the most important aspects; the moment called for connecting with students and building social and emotional learning skills.

### School Leaders Learned Lessons About Selecting and Using Instructional Materials Through the Pandemic

The pandemic, and the changes to teaching and learning that it brought, led school leaders to some realizations about instructional materials and their use that might shape their future decisions. First, leaders realized that it is important to have materials that are available, accessible, or adaptable for online

learning; this helps ensure continuity of learning opportunities for students should they be unable to attend school. Second, school leaders discovered that usability and user experience are key considerations in selecting online materials. Materials that were difficult to navigate disrupted instruction. School leaders noted that teachers spent excessive amounts of time planning lessons and struggled to manage their classrooms when they had difficulties with online instructional materials. Third, with districts and schools increasingly requiring teachers to use online materials, and with even the most technology-shy teachers now familiar with online instruction (because they were forced to learn and adapt during the pandemic), some school leaders sensed an opportunity to advocate for online instruction as part of routine offering. Some leaders wanted to introduce and implement flipped classrooms—a model of instruction in which students watch recorded lessons or read materials at home, then engage in learning experiences and discussions and receive individualized supports in the classroom. Flipped classrooms are compatible with the use of online materials. One elementary school leader said,

I've seen very [few] inroads of a flipped classroom in education prior to March of last year. I don't think that it was ever really articulated particularly well. Like, why would it in any way be useful, especially at the elementary level? Teachers kind of thought this is a buzzword that's gonna come and go. [Since the pandemic], I've had a lot of discussions with people where they've said, "You know, I'm never gonna go back to the way that I taught. . . . I've learned things in this pandemic that [are] gonna make me more effective. I can use my materials in a different way. I can use my homework time in a different way. I can assign different materials for home use, and then utilize my time with [students] more effectively.

## Implications of Findings for Policy and Practice

Past research has shown that school leaders can shape teachers' use of instructional materials by signaling how or to what extent teachers should use particular materials, purchasing professional development that is directly related to instructional materials, and encouraging teachers to use common planning time to discuss curriculum implementation (e.g., Clune, 2001; Coburn and Russell, 2008; Penuel et al., 2007; Spillane and Anderson, 2019; Supovitz and Spillane, 2015; Ylimaki, 2012). Furthermore, our findings to date from the AIRS have identified principals' feedback and input on the use of instructional materials as one of the few factors that appears to be related to the extent to which teachers modify and use their curriculum materials (Kaufman et al., 2020).

This report builds on this prior work by showing the various ways in which school leaders likely influence teachers' use of instructional materials. We specifically found that school leaders play a role in involving teachers in the selection of instructional materials, creating buy-in for district-recommended or -required curriculum, and providing guidance that balanced teacher autonomy and the fidelity of curriculum implementation. Our research also provides insight into principals' perceptions of good instructional materials and the dimensions that they pay attention to most when making decisions about what instructional materials to recommend to school or district selection committees or to teachers seeking guidance on the use of supplemental materials. These findings can provide useful guidance to district policymakers about how to leverage the role of school leaders in the use of instructional materials and what might support school leaders in helping teachers use their materials thoughtfully.

In this section, we look across the key findings from our interviews with school leaders and provide some relevant implications for district policymakers who are in positions to influence the selection of instructional materials or the role that school leaders play in selecting or guiding teachers' use of such materials.

## District Leaders Should Engage School-Level Staff, Including School Leaders and Teachers, in the Material-Selection Process to Ensure the Consideration of Important Dimensions and Establish Buy-In

Considering the findings that we have presented relating to what school leaders consider important dimensions of materials, along with prior findings, we conclude that district leaders, school leaders, and teachers invariably bring different perspectives to their assessments of instructional materials, according to their roles. Specifically, prior RAND research has found that the dimensions that might matter most to district administrators—for example, alignment to policy in the form of standards—are not necessarily highly regarded by teachers (Wang et al., 2021). The same RAND research found that teachers focused on students’ day-to-day needs; they prioritized instructional materials that they considered engaging, appropriately challenging, and easy to use for the students in their classes. In this study, we learned—perhaps unsurprisingly—that school leaders straddled both district administrators’ and teachers’ perspectives: They regarded standards alignment as critical and also valued materials that were engaging and appropriately challenging. However, school leaders especially prioritized those characteristics of materials that supported teacher implementation of the materials, such as the comprehensiveness of components and digital availability. They appreciated the opportunity to pilot and review instructional materials that were being considered for adoption to help make sure that teachers could use materials without technical difficulties.

This collection of findings suggests that, if it is not already typical practice, districts should engage school-level staff—i.e., school leaders and teachers—in the material-selection process. This enriches the conversation about what qualities make for good instructional materials. Convening these different stakeholders—district administrators, school leaders, and teachers—in the selection process can help ensure that the adopted materials address the concerns and needs of all constituents and users. It can also help stakeholders understand the importance

of dimensions to which they had not previously attended.

Relatedly, engaging school leaders and teachers in the material-selection process also helps to garner buy-in, thereby facilitating eventual implementation. Principals we interviewed preferred to play a role in the selection process, but our data also illustrate that they understood the importance of district-level priorities and did not necessarily require complete autonomy to be satisfied with the process. School leaders were satisfied with a district-driven selection process when they were involved and/or could select teachers in their schools to participate. Such school-staff representation can give voice to specific school-level needs and provide teachers with a sense of agency and ownership that can translate into the thoughtful, effective use of materials. Conversely, a district-centric instructional material-selection process with little school-level input risks inadequately addressing the needs of school-level staff who are ultimately responsible for implementing the materials, which could lead to resistance to use the materials as intended. Overall, a clear and transparent process with opportunities for teacher and school leader input would help districts guarantee that the selected materials meet students’ needs and have the support of school leaders and teachers with respect to implementation.

## Districts and Schools Should Develop and Use Rubrics or Explicit Criteria and Processes for Evaluating Instructional Materials

School leaders we interviewed indicated that they and district leaders used such tools as rubrics, checklists, and academic standards to help ensure that certain dimensions of materials and student characteristics are considered when evaluating curriculum options. These tools supported school and district staff in assessing their instructional priorities against the material options being considered. School leaders agreed that having explicit, written criteria helped different stakeholders involved in the review process (e.g., district administrators, school leaders, teachers) evaluate materials in a consistent manner and

provided transparency and clarity throughout the process. Using this finding, we suggest that districts and schools adopt some of the selection practices and tools that we have highlighted.

Because of the general view of school leaders we interviewed that multiple dimensions are important, no single existing rubric may capture all of the elements that particular districts and educators might value. For this reason, districts—in consultation with multiple stakeholders—might want to look across multiple rubrics to curate criteria or develop a comprehensive rubric to guide their review. For example, many established curriculum rubrics, such as those developed by Achieve and EdReports, provide important models for assessing the standards alignment of materials.<sup>8</sup> However, many rubrics attend minimally to areas of growing importance in curriculum research, including the cultural relevance of materials, language acquisition, and social-emotional learning supports. Districts would need to look to other organizations and frameworks for guidance on these aspects.<sup>9</sup>

### **Districts Should Provide Specific Guidance for School Leaders on How to Assess and Select Materials for Cultural Relevance**

Less than half of the school leaders we interviewed considered cultural relevance to be a key dimension. Among them, various conceptions of what makes materials culturally relevant prevailed. Some principals did not or could not elaborate on how to assess materials on this dimension. Given school leaders' developing understanding of how cultural relevance could be operationalized in instructional materials, this might be an area in which districts can provide additional guidance on how to assess and select materials. Districts might consider embedding concrete, research-based components that are related to these dimensions within rubrics or tools. Districts also might consider consulting experts on these topics during the material-selection process. These strategies could help principals gain a stronger understanding of how these dimensions can be operationalized. For example, many school lead-

ers described looking for visual representations of diversity in textbooks to assess the cultural relevance of materials. However, a more systematic approach, built on the foundation of research that is conducted around what cultural relevance could look like in the classroom, could support principals to more deeply and critically assess how cultural relevance manifests in instructional materials.

### **Districts Should Provide School Leaders with Training and Guidance to Support Teachers' Use of Curriculum Materials**

The school leaders we interviewed felt accountable—to varying degrees—for ensuring that teachers used district-required or -recommended curriculum materials and used them in ways that support student learning. We found that school leaders adopted a variety of approaches in terms of how much to encourage teachers' autonomy and their choices in using supplemental materials and modifying their adopted curriculum materials. Given the variety of approaches, we suggest that districts with a particular vision for how teachers should use materials could benefit from clearly communicating that vision to their principals. This will help ensure that school leaders are giving teachers appropriate and consistent messages and guidance. Similarly, school leaders—and, particularly, newer principals—could benefit from learning about strategies to help teachers buy into and use curriculum materials. Principals we interviewed indicated using a variety of strategies on which districts could build to provide guidance or training on how to generate buy-in, such as by involving teachers in the curriculum-adoption and piloting process, identifying teacher leaders who could serve as advocates for the curriculum and its use, and referencing the evidence-based qualities of materials.

Past research suggests that school leaders can misinterpret the intentions of standards (Hill, 2001; Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer, 2002). As part of their support for principals, districts should provide them with professional development about disciplinary standards and curriculum materials. This might be

key in supporting principals' ability to guide teachers' implementation. If school leaders understand adopted curriculum deeply, they will understand which aspects of the curriculum are flexible and which aspects are important to maintain to guarantee student learning, which can help them provide sound advice to teachers on how much modification is appropriate. Past research shows that modifications can weaken the design of the materials in ways that undermine students' opportunities to achieve academic standards and potentially can increase inequity in learning opportunities (Remillard, 2005; Sosniak and Stodolsky, 1993; Stein, Remillard, and Smith, 2007). This underscores the need to provide school leaders with professional development in this respect. Overall, professional development could help school leaders better articulate rationales for teachers' use of materials and better understand what aspects of those curriculum materials are most important to monitor and support in implementation.

### **Districts Should Consider Whether Differences in School Leaders' Perceptions and Decisions Around Instructional Materials by School Grade Level Are Intended and Provide Targeted Supports for School Leaders, if Necessary**

Looking across our research questions and findings, we observed that, among the five school-level characteristics we examined, the grade level of the school seemed to underlie the most differences in perceptions and decisions around instructional materials (see Table 3). Specifically, compared with their counterparts in middle and high schools, leaders of elementary schools were more likely to regard appropriateness of challenge and language-acquisition supports as dimensions of good instructional materials and less likely to consider cultural relevance. Also, a higher percentage of elementary school principals reported selecting materials through a district and school collaboration process and mandated or strictly monitored curriculum implementation, while a higher percentage of high school principals reported

a school-level process and encouraged complete teacher autonomy in materials use.

Although subgroup differences with a small sample such as ours should be interpreted with caution, the pattern suggests that districts could benefit from identifying and understanding differences related to instructional material selection and use by school grade level (e.g., elementary, middle, high). This involves reflecting on whether the differences are intentional and helps achieve teaching and learning goals. For example, is it strategic and desirable for high school principals—compared with middle and elementary school principals—to provide their teachers more autonomy with respect to implementing materials? If so, why, and if not, what guidance can districts provide to high school principals to shift them toward supporting teachers to adhere more to the curriculum?

Differences in dimensions of materials that leaders of different school levels prioritize also might suggest differentiated district action. For example, middle and high school leaders might benefit from training that is focused on addressing the needs of ELs through instructional materials that provide language-acquisition supports. Districts also might require middle and high school leaders to include an EL specialist when engaging in school-level material-selection processes.

### **Districts and Schools Should Capitalize on Increased Interest in Incorporating Technology Supports in Instruction as a Result of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the changes to teaching and learning that it has brought have led school leaders to pay greater attention to the digital availability of instructional materials. The demands of virtual instruction during the pandemic resulted in a rapid increase in teachers' familiarity with online instruction and the use of technology. School and district leaders can capitalize on this shift to incorporate technology and online instruction on a more regular basis. Doing so could address the needs of students who prefer to or must learn from home (e.g., students with chronic illnesses or disabilities and

TABLE 3  
Findings That Differed by School-Level Characteristic

School-Level Characteristic	Findings That Differed by School-Level Characteristic
Grade-level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriateness of challenge, cultural relevance, and language-acquisition supports as dimensions of “good” materials</li> <li>• Material-selection process</li> <li>• Guidance provided to teachers around implementation</li> </ul>
Percentage of Hispanic and Black students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural relevance and language-acquisition supports as dimensions of “good” materials</li> </ul>
Percentage of ELs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Material-selection process</li> </ul>
Percentage of students with disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Material-selection process</li> </ul>
Percentage of students performing below grade level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriateness of challenge as a dimension of “good” materials</li> <li>• Material-selection process</li> </ul>

those who require more flexibility in their schedules). More generally, incorporating the use of these technologies could provide students with new, engaging materials. In past RAND research, teachers reported that students found the use of online, interactive activities and games to be engaging (Wang et al., 2021). Relatedly, the experience of the pandemic has forced many school leaders to make online materials readily available to both teachers and students. Schools and districts can learn from this experience, to include access to digital components of materials as an important criterion when assessing instructional materials for adoption.

In making this vision of integrating online resources a reality, however, school and district leaders must be prepared to first address the challenge of ensuring that all students have the necessary devices and broadband to access learning materials. Moreover, schools and districts must offer continued support to enable teachers to use digital materials and provide online instruction effectively.

### In Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, Districts and Schools Should Seek Materials That Provide Social-Emotional Learning Supports

In light of the pandemic, school leaders have become more attuned to the importance of supporting students’ social and emotional needs as part of classroom instruction. Increased interest in students’ social and emotional well-being as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic can motivate schools and

districts to look for opportunities to find materials that incorporate social-emotional learning. Educators often struggle to fit explicit social-emotional learning lessons into the school day. However, when social-emotional learning is integrated into instructional materials, the practices might be more likely to be implemented as teachers come to understand that these practices can support—rather than detract from—learning in core subjects, such as ELA or mathematics (Schwartz et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

As we have shown in this report, school leaders play a central role in creating buy-in for and supporting the use of instructional materials. State education agencies and school districts that aim to support teachers in implementing high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials can benefit from including not only teachers’ but also school leaders’ input into curriculum-selection processes and professional development about selected curriculum. Our findings suggest that including both could enrich conversations about the essential features of an instructional material, improve buy-in for curriculum implementation, and create shared understanding about how and when to supplement or modify materials to meet student needs.

Our findings also suggest that most school leaders balance providing guidance around how to implement, supplement, and modify instructional materials and encouraging teacher autonomy. Principals were aware that providing too much guidance could

be interpreted negatively by teachers and that providing too little guidance could lead to unrestricted modifications that can dilute the quality of carefully selected materials. Further research is needed to better understand how, in their role as an intermediary between the district and teachers, school leaders can support the selection and implementation of instructional materials that best address students' academic, social-emotional, and other needs.

## Appendix. Interview Protocol

In this appendix, we provide the full interview protocol.

We understand that how schools operate may have shifted quite a bit since COVID. For the majority of the interview, we are asking you to think about a typical year at your present school (or, if not possible, then at the current district) prior to COVID. At the very end of the interview, we have some questions about what may have been different since COVID.

### Background

1. How many years have you been a principal overall? \_\_\_\_\_ years
  - a. . . . in your current school district? \_\_\_\_\_ years
  - b. . . . in your current school? \_\_\_\_\_ years
2. Do you have a background in ELA or Math instruction? ELA/Math/Neither

Now, I am going to ask some quick questions about the students in your school **this school year (i.e., 2020–2021)**.

3. What grades are taught in your school? PK, K, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12
4. About what percentage of the students in your school this year . . .
  - a. . . . are Black/Latinx \_\_\_\_\_%
  - b. . . . are English Learners? \_\_\_\_\_%
  - c. . . . have special needs? \_\_\_\_\_%
  - d. . . . are high-achieving? \_\_\_\_\_%
  - e. . . . low-achieving? \_\_\_\_\_%

### Selection of Instructional Materials

Now I have questions about how decisions around the selection or adoption of instructional materials for ELA and math teachers in your school are made *in a typical year*, so maybe the year prior to COVID.

5. Who is involved in deciding which ELA and mathematics instructional materials teachers use in their classroom each day?
  - a. What is the role (if any) of the *school district* in that decisionmaking process? Does district leadership require or recommend the use of particular instructional materials?
  - b. What is your role, as the *school leader* (if any), in the decisionmaking process around materials selection or adoption? Do you require or recommend the use of particular instructional materials apart from the district?
  - c. How (if at all) are *teachers* involved in the selection process?

*[If the respondent has a role in making decisions about instructional material selection or it is clear that they are familiar with the process that their teachers or district use to select materials, skip to question 6a. If the respondent does not have a role in decisionmaking or it is unclear whether they are familiar with the process, ask question 6 first.]*

6. Are you familiar with how [your district or teachers at your school] make(s) decisions about what instructional materials they select or adopt? *[If the respondent is familiar with the process, continue asking questions 6a–6d. If the respondent is unfamiliar, skip to question 7.]*
  - a. What does the instructional material selection process look like? What are the steps involved?
  - b. How do [you, teachers, your district] look for options to consider? And how are those options assessed?
  - c. Are there particular student subgroups that [you, teachers, the district] keep in mind when selecting a material? Who are they, and how do they influence the decision-making process?

- d. Are there particular teachers that [you, other teachers, the district] keep in mind when selecting materials? Who are they, and how do they influence the decision-making process?
7. What tools and information do you use to make recommendations or decisions about what instructional materials teachers should use?
    - a. *Probe on state standards, district recommendations, recommendations or feedback from teachers or other school leaders, publishers' suggestions, ratings (e.g., from EdReports).*

## Dimensions of Quality

In this section, I'm going to ask you about what makes an instructional material good, in your opinion.

8. Thinking broadly about *ELA instructional materials* that you have encountered, what does a *good* ELA instructional material look like?
  - a. What are some of the characteristics of a *good* ELA instructional material? In other words, if you were to create a checklist to assess whether an ELA instructional material is good, what would be on that checklist?
  - b. How do you know if an ELA instructional material has those characteristics? [*Probe for examples.*]
9. Now thinking about *Math instructional materials*, what does a *good* Math instructional material look like?
  - a. What are some of the characteristics of a *good* Math instructional material? In other words, if you were to create a checklist to assess whether a Math instructional material is good, what would be on that checklist?
  - b. How do you know if a Math instructional material has those characteristics? [*Probe for examples.*]
10. In our research, we have found that teachers value instructional materials that are engaging, appropriately challenging, and easy to use. Would you include those on your list of key dimensions of *good* materials? Why or why not?
  - a. Does your answer differ for ELA and for Math?
11. What are other dimensions of quality that you would prioritize? [*Before moving on to question 12, allow interviewee enough time to respond with their priorities.*]
12. Does what you consider *good* instructional materials—or what teachers need—differ by
  - a. specific grade level? If so, how?
  - b. students' achievement level or needs? If so, how?
  - c. other variables (e.g., teacher experience)? If so, how?
13. In sum, if you had the opportunity to assess the quality of an instructional material (or if you had to give a novice school leader advice about how to do so), what would you say are the top three dimensions of quality to pay attention to?

Now, we have questions about how these and other dimensions of materials are used in selecting or recommending materials.

*[If the respondent expressed being unfamiliar with the selection process in question 6, skip question 14 altogether.]*

14. How, if at all, are the dimensions of quality you would prioritize actually considered or used during decisionmaking processes about selection or recommendation of instructional materials? [*Before moving on to question 14a, allow the interviewee enough time to respond to this first question.*]
  - a. Do you, your teachers, or district consider the *cultural relevance* of instructional materials in selecting or recommending materials? If so, how do you assess whether a material has cultural relevance?

- b. Do you, your teachers, or district evaluate whether materials in core classes, such as math and ELA (not just English Language Development classes), have *language acquisition supports* (i.e., supports for English learners)? If so, how do you assess whether a material has such supports?
  - c. Do you, your teachers, or district consider whether instructional materials provide *good user experience* when assessing the quality of or selecting an instructional material? By this, we mean the degree to which materials make it easy for educators to implement—how it integrates with school technology, fits into classroom time, is structured for easy adaptability. If so, how do you assess whether a material is user-friendly?
  - d. Finally, do you, your teachers, or district consider whether instructional materials include *social-emotional supports* when assessing the quality of or selecting an instructional material? If so, how do you assess whether a material has such supports?
- a. To what extent do or did teachers buy in to using those materials in their classroom? What do you attribute the level of buy-in to? [*Probe for whether low or high teacher buy-in was due to teachers or the quality of the materials.*]
  - b. What support or guidance (if any) did you provide to teachers around implementing the school or district-required or -recommended material? [*Probe for guidance or support with respect to messages the principal provides, how or where she or he provides those messages, and guidance or supports provided through professional development or teacher evaluation.*]
  - c. In our recent study, teachers indicated that there was tension between school and district requirements for using particular materials or covering particular content and their opinion of what was best for their students. Have you ever experienced that with your teachers? When? How (if at all) did you try to navigate or reconcile the tension between school or district requirements and recommendations and teachers’ professional autonomy?

## Guidance or Support for Teachers’ Choice and Use of Materials

The next few questions are about how teachers use materials and any support or guidance you provide.

*[If the respondent already told you that their district requires or recommends particular instructional materials, say, “You said that your district requires or recommends particular instructional materials . . .” then skip to question 15a. If you do not know whether their district requires or recommends particular materials, ask question 15 first.]*

- 15. Have your teachers ever had to implement a school or district-required or -recommended instructional material? [*If they answer yes, ask questions 15a–c. If they answer no, skip to question 16.*]

- 16. We found that teachers like to use *supplemental materials* to either cover content that is not included in their main curriculum or to provide enrichment opportunities to students. What guidance or support did you provide to teachers around the use of supplemental materials? [*Probe for whether, how much or often, when to use, how to find supplemental materials, etc.*]
- 17. We also found that teachers often *modify their instructional materials* to meet the needs of their students. By *modify*, we mean editing or making adjustments to instructional materials, such as shortening a lesson plan. What guidance or support do you provide teachers around modifying materials? [*Probe for whether, how much or often, when to modify, types of modification.*]

## Use of Materials During COVID-19 Pandemic School Closures

To end, we wanted to acknowledge the disruption caused by the coronavirus and ask you how that may be affecting how teachers in your school use instructional materials.

18. Have teachers been delivering instruction online during part or all of this school year?

*[Only ask the remaining questions if the answer to question 18 is yes.]*

19. What new materials (if any) has your school or district adopted or recommended for teachers to use during COVID?
  - a. Why were those materials adopted or recommended?
  - b. What was not working about the instructional materials teachers had used in the past?

20. What dimensions of quality matter most for instructional materials being used during COVID?
21. What additional or different supports are you or your district providing to teachers with respect to the use of instructional materials during COVID?
22. Has your experience in the time of COVID made you think differently about the selection and use of instructional materials? If so, how?
  - a. How (if at all) will this experience change how you think about the selection and use of instructional materials in the future after schools return to in-person instruction?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The 2020 AIRS is sampled to be representative of the country with respect to principal demographics (e.g., experience, education level, gender) and school demographics (e.g., percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, percentage of Hispanic and Black students, school size). For details about the survey sample, see the AIRS 2020 Technical Documentation and Survey Results (Doan et al., 2020).

<sup>2</sup> We excluded school leaders who had fewer than three years of total experience as a principal because we wanted respondents who were likely to have some experience or knowledge of the materials adoption and selection process, and this process is not likely to occur annually. We also excluded the one school leader who required or recommended that teachers use only teacher-created materials (and not district- or school-recommended materials) because one of our main research questions asked about how school leaders provide guidance and/or support to teachers to implement materials that are required or recommended by the district and/or school.

<sup>3</sup> The grade band is based on self-reported data from the 2020 AIRS. We considered any school with grades 6, 7, or 8 to be a middle school. Specifically, among the 12 middle schools in our sample, three schools served only students in grades 6 to 8; three schools served grades below 6 (e.g., pre-kindergarten to 8th grade); five schools served grades beyond 8 (e.g., 6–9, 6–12); and one school served grades pre-kindergarten to 12.

<sup>4</sup> EdReports is an independent organization that has undertaken the most comprehensive review of existing ELA and mathematics curriculum materials, as of the time of this writing. At the time of these report analyses, the EdReports website included reviews for 41 ELA and 84 mathematics curriculum materials. EdReports reviews focus on the alignment of materials to standards. Materials assessed as aligned to standards are subsequently assessed for usability. For more details, see EdReports.org, undated-a.

<sup>5</sup> See Small, 2011, on the inappropriateness of frequency counts or subgroup analyses for many interview studies, especially when interview protocols allow for flexibility in the follow-up questions that interviewees are asked.

<sup>6</sup> Readers should interpret subgroup findings as tentative and subject to verification with a larger sample.

<sup>7</sup> These strategies were similar to the social tactics that Spillane and Anderson, 2019, identified when studying how principals persuaded teachers to implement district policy.

<sup>8</sup> See Achieve’s Educators Evaluating the Quality of Instructional Products (EQuIP) rubrics for ELA, mathematics, and science materials (Achieve.org, undated). EdReports rubrics for ELA, mathematics, and science are available at EdReports.org, undated-b.

<sup>9</sup> For an example, see the framework that the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) established for reviewing effective social and emotional programs, some of which could be applicable to curriculum programs in various subjects (CASEL, undated). In another example, see the scorecard that the Metro Center at New York University developed for assessing the cultural responsiveness of curriculum for various subjects (New York University, undated). For a state-level example, see the Rhode Island Department of Education’s Understanding Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education ELA and Mathematics Curriculum Review Tool (Rhode Island Department of Education, undated).

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## About This Report

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country. In this report, we build on past studies by using interview data to understand school leaders' role in selecting instructional materials and their perceptions about what makes for quality instructional materials. Our interviewees are members of the American School Leader Panel who responded to the 2020 American Instructional Resources Survey (AIRS).

## RAND Education and Labor

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