

Do Your Materials Measure Up?

Remote Learning Underscores the Need for Quality Curriculum

By Eric Hirsch & Courtney Allison, August 2020 THE LEARNING PROFESSIONAL

Conversations about technology tend to get at the how and where of instruction, but what is taught remains paramount. Research shows that quality curriculum influences classroom practice and ultimately student outcomes.

This article review focuses on five recommendations to educators on how to identify, build capacity for, and leverage high-quality instructional materials to support students. The following recommendations apply to learning in the classroom, at home, or in a hybrid setting.



1. When it comes to curriculum, make content the top priority.

Districts now have dozens of quality curriculum options to consider, but aligned materials are not being widely used. Only 16% of English language arts and 26% of math materials used in classrooms are aligned to the standards, according to the latest *State of the Instructional Materials Market* report (LaVenía, 2020).

A lack of professional learning and commitment to smart adoption practices contribute to these low rates of alignment. This is a disturbing trend when students must overcome a multitude of challenges to their schooling.



LEVERAGE

2. Leverage quality curriculum to accelerate learning.

Making sure all students and families have access to grade-level, appropriate, engaging materials, instruction, and support is one important way to prevent opportunity gaps from growing. When students have a foundation of quality content, teachers can then focus on accelerating learning instead of falling back on remediation tactics (Steiner & Weisberg, 2020) that research clearly shows do not work.

Educators should prioritize accelerating students' learning by ensuring their exposure to grade-appropriate content—so that every student can get back to grade level. Results may not be evident in a single year, but without the goal and a strategy for it, it will not happen at all.



3. Take time to analyze your remote learning options.

Giving all students access to high-quality instructional materials is more important than ever, and technology plays an essential role in that access. Districts are seeking more precise guidance about the extent to which instructional materials align to remote learning needs.

Visit [EdReports.org](https://edreports.org) to explore free COVID-19 resources (edreports.org/resources/covid-19) and educator-created reviews for more than 700 grade-level reports of English language arts, math, and science materials (edreports.org/reports).



4. Beware of marketing hype & sales spin.

Most digital resources used last spring (2019) fell far short of what students need. For example, a RAND survey (Kaufman & Tosh, 2020) found: Most digital materials are not curricula. They typically do not include lessons that build on one another over time and are not necessarily clearly tied to academic content standards for particular grades and subject areas. Many materials were no more than practice worksheets.

Ultimately the quality of the content is what will make a difference for student outcomes.



5. High-quality professional learning will be the key.

A recent meta-analysis (Lynch et al., 2019) by Heather Hill and her colleagues looking at 95 research studies on STEM programs found that implementing curriculum with professional learning—specifically with support for learning how to use materials and improving teachers' content knowledge and knowledge of student learning—led to stronger student outcomes.



Looking Ahead

The pandemic crisis has exposed gaps in the instructional materials many districts are using. Conversely, we have also seen the benefits of having an aligned, quality curriculum in place that clearly articulates what students should be learning all year long!



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