Materials in a Standards-Based Learning System

By Jordan Koch

The two leading influences on student learning in the classroom are interactions with teachers and peers and use of instructional materials. Although there is a vast amount of hands-on and digital material available for teachers’ use, much of it does not align with learning standards. Under a standards-based leadership framework, students are less likely to be prepared for college, careers, and civic life if they lack standards-aligned materials.

Instructional materials include the textbooks that schools or districts purchase and also open educational resources (OERs), which are comprised of teacher-created materials, videos, lesson plans, and even full courses. For both copyrighted material and OERs, misalignment to state learning standards is a problem. For example, out of 20 state-approved K-8 math series textbooks that EdReports analyzed, only 3 were aligned to Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

COPYRIGHTED MATERIALS

State boards of education (SBEs) have varying levels of authority for textbook adoption, but each state has its own adoption policy. Textbooks are either selected at the state level by the state board or state education agency or by local education agencies (LEAs). At the state level, 18 state boards have authority over policies (see map). Georgia, for example, adopts materials at both state and local levels. Georgia’s state board selects a committee to provide recommendations for full board approval. School districts, schools, or teachers can also request that a textbook be added to the state’s list.

While instructional materials are not synonymous with curriculum, some educators use textbooks as if they were, compounding the problem of misalignment with state learning standards and making student mastery even less likely.

Standards-aligned textbooks increase mastery by “reducing the variability in performance across teachers, raising the overall performance level of the entire distribution of teachers, or both.” However, states that are unaware of what textbooks districts and schools use will find it difficult to assess the quality of the materials, much less align them to learning standards. Florida is the only state that tracks and displays the materials districts and schools use.

OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

Only eight states have established definitions for open resources, although many have a definition of instructional materials consistent of. The State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA) lists three general definitions, including their own, that may help SBEs frame their own:

- “teaching and learning materials licensed in such a way that they are free and may be used, reused, remixed, and otherwise customized to meet specific needs” (SETDA);
- “teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and repurposing by others” (William and Flora Hewlett Foundation);
- “any type of educational materials that are in the public domain or introduced with an open license. It means that anyone can legally and freely copy, use, adapt, and reshar e them.” (UNESCO)

A limited understanding of what OERs are and what constitutes quality materials hinders states from creating definitions or databases of materials, let alone policies (see map). The Utah State Office of Education developed a definition and policy, but its state board does not have authority over OERs. New York and Illinois, for example, have no policies but created OER repositories. Producing a standards-aligned instructional materials database takes collaboration among standards, curriculum, and technology experts.

Although most states have no OER policies, many have begun to show interest or have
launched statewide initiatives. Out of 44 state chiefs surveyed in 2014, 36 want to learn more about OER initiatives they might implement in their state. This past February, 13 states pledged participation in the US Department of Education’s #GoOpen initiative, which promotes the transition from copyrighted materials to open resources.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Although copyrighted materials and OERs share the misalignment problem, state boards will tackle the two differently.

**Textbooks.** SBEs with policy authority can make sure that instructional materials align to state learning standards and that a strong vetting process is in place. Requiring publishers to submit a formal proposal outlining alignment to state standards is one option. If LEAs have adoption authority, then the SBE can collect data by questioning districts about what textbooks they use and their selection process. All SBEs can also convene school board members, superintendents, principals, and teachers to discuss vetting processes and how they can be improved.

**Open Educational Resources.** SBEs can investigate whether OERs fall into the existing state definition of instructional materials. If that definition is due for an update, an SBE could consider extending it to include OERs or consider updating policy. However, because state policy is different from legislature-created state code, in these instances it may be necessary for SBEs to work with legislatures to create a common definition for OERs. As with textbooks, SBEs may question whether the current state, district, and local material vetting process will suffice to ensure OER quality and alignment to state learning standards. If the state wants to create an OER repository, it can convene specialists to begin a conversation.

**STATE EXAMPLES**

In Louisiana, districts select instructional materials, but the state found that districts lacked guidance on what constituted effective materials and that less than 20 percent of districts were using standards-aligned resources. Subsequently, the SEA reviewed all copyrighted instructional materials and rated them in three tiers, from exemplary to failing to meet criteria. The reviews are posted on the SEA’s website. Now 75 percent of districts use fully aligned materials.

In 2012, the Washington state legislature passed a law to create and fund a CCSS-aligned open course library. The state projects $6 million in savings from the use of OER textbooks. In mandatory reviews of 4 full-course mathematics curricula and 60 English language arts units, the state’s SEA found many were align to CCSS.

**CONCLUSION**

As part of a system of coherent education policies, copyrighted materials and OERs form an essential part of strategic planning and decision making. By enacting policy, convening, and questioning, state boards of education can use their powers of enacting policy, questioning, or convening to bring materials into alignment.