



DELIVERING High-Quality Curricula

WHAT EDUCATORS NEED TO KNOW

AT A GLANCE: Louisiana has made adopting high-quality (or Tier 1) curricula a primary focus of the state's improvement plan for K-12 schools. This shift requires making high-quality instructional materials more broadly accessible and supporting teachers in understanding and using them.

Implementing a Tier 1 curriculum is a major challenge for teachers, principals and district leaders. Higher expectations for students create higher expectations for classroom instruction, and this is even more challenging for teachers in high-need schools with more students working below grade level.

“When students struggle with new and more challenging material, their teachers need support in anticipating those struggles and being prepared to make adjustments for students to be successful,” explains NIET Senior Trainer Teddy Broussard. “Tier 1 curricula is the ‘what’ and school-based structures and supports for teachers are the ‘how.’”

To be effective, teachers need ongoing, job-embedded professional learning that enables them to deeply understand the content and intent of a high-quality curriculum while simultaneously shifting their own instructional practices to enable their students to meet higher expectations.

THE NEED FOR HIGH-QUALITY CURRICULA

In 2016, Louisiana adopted college and career ready standards or “Louisiana Student Standards,” which set higher expectations for student learning across the state.

Districts started looking for curricula aligned to the new standards, but had difficulty identifying the best options or struggled to train teachers on the new options. Too many teachers continued to use resources, such as Pinterest, to find materials.

To offer more specific guidance, the state department of education undertook a review of curricula to determine the alignment with higher, more challenging standards. With statewide involvement of educators, the department created an overall ranking of curricula. Their analysis resulted in ratings for curricula that reflect whether instructional materials address new state standards, with Tier 1 curricula being most closely aligned. These ratings provide districts with information to evaluate various curricular resources.

“Tier 1 curricula are really important because they help our students to think in a more complex way, and access the type of reading, writing, computing and thinking they will face in college and beyond,” says Faydra Alexander, executive director of instruction in the Algiers Charter School Association located in New Orleans. We need to prepare our students for that.”

Sarah Guidry, executive master teacher in East Feliciana Parish, agrees: “Getting the right instructional materials is key to moving students.”

UNDERSTANDING THE DEPTH OF THE NEW CURRICULA

Even as districts moved to adopt the new curricula, their professional learning systems were often stuck in the past. “Indicators showed that districts were investing in high-quality curricula and resources, but few teachers felt they had the professional development support to implement the new curricula,” notes Louisiana Department of Education Executive Director of Talent Pipeline Jennifer Tuttleton. “We spent the last three years working to address this challenge by

building cadres of teachers capable of supporting other teachers. This included developing content leaders and mentor teachers as well as teacher leaders who deeply understood the new curricula. In all, we trained over 1,500 teacher leaders and 20,000 teachers.”

The increased learning expectations in the new curricula are substantial. NIET Senior Program Specialist Lindsey Parker describes the change using an English language arts (ELA) example:

BEFORE

The old ELA instruction might be characterized by using a text from the novel “Hatchet,” about a boy surviving on his own in the wilderness.

Teachers would ask, “Who was the main character? What are some of the events or challenges he faced? How did those experiences impact him?”

AFTER

Now, students are expected to read the novel as well as nonfiction texts on the topic of wilderness survival. The unit assessment asks students to select an event from the novel and describe how the main character’s actions aided or hindered his survival.

Students are asked, “Does the novel have value as a survival guide? Make a claim and provide reasons and evidence about the instructional value of the novel as a survival guide using both the fiction and nonfiction texts.”

This requires teachers to redefine how they approach the lesson, to think about how students will analyze texts and apply their learning in a new context. The curriculum expects students to understand and analyze the novel, and become capable of applying that knowledge within and outside the genre.

WHERE HIGH-QUALITY CURRICULA MEETS THE CLASSROOM

As executive director of the LA BOLD initiative and NIET's lead in Louisiana, Vicky Condalary works with partner districts across the state to ensure that teachers and principals understand the new curriculum and how to change their instructional practices to deliver it with integrity. A federal Teacher and School Leader Incentive grant provides resources to spur innovative practices that can later be expanded both within the grant districts, and across other districts and charter networks in the state.

"We work side by side with educators as they focus on what needs to happen at the classroom, school and district level," she shares. "This ensures that a Tier 1 curriculum is delivered to students in a way that supports their success in learning at high levels. We work with our partner districts to identify needs as they arise, and together create solutions to strengthen the implementation in classrooms and schools."

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Vicky Condalary

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF LA BOLD



Challenges for Teachers

Teachers needed help both anticipating where their students would struggle with the new learning, and identifying supports for these students. “Teachers were attempting to implement the new curriculum and really struggled with pacing and differentiating,” Condalry explains. “Some teachers felt like their students weren’t ready for the more challenging standards and lessons that required them to think more and differently. This began impacting school culture and climate — which is so important for student learning — as students were overwhelmed and teachers struggled to shape effective lessons.”

UNDERSTANDING THE NEW CURRICULA AND INSTRUCTIONAL DEMANDS

“Teachers cannot just read the script from the new curriculum, cherry pick questions from the script or skim the surface of engagement,” Condalry says. “Principals would observe this type of scripted instruction and pre-suppose it was successful because it was following the new curriculum. What was often overlooked was the missing rigor and depth of the lesson compared to the new standards.” The result, Condalry emphasizes, was that students were not successful on the assessments

since they had not engaged in the deep critical thinking required by the new curriculum.

As the new standards and curricula were rolled out, it was clear that principals, teacher leaders and coaches needed a deeper knowledge of the new curricula. District executive master teachers, NIET trainers and state team members decided to work together to plan a lesson using the new curriculum. They identified the steps needed to plan effectively and the importance of working through the material as a team. It was clear that teachers and teacher leaders would need time and space to work collaboratively to explore curricula in order to understand how units are organized, review available resources, and identify instructional practices that need to be considered during delivery of that lesson.

COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND INDIVIDUAL COACHING BY TEACHER LEADERS

Parker describes the importance of weekly professional learning (cluster) meetings where teacher leaders who have “gone first” in teaching the curriculum support their colleagues. For example, she describes a math cluster



where teachers analyzed what happened during a lesson on fractions, and problems students encountered.

“Some students lacked math fluency skills—multiplication in this case—and were taking ten times as long on each problem,” she says. “How can we help them to overcome that hurdle? If the objective of the lesson is understanding operations with fractions, let’s teach those students support strategies to use so they can master the fifth-grade objective without a deficiency in a third-grade skill getting in the way during core instruction. At the same time, let’s plan with teachers how they will continue to

support those students to build their math fluency skills during other parts of the school day.”

Another lesson was that teacher leaders and coaches need to teach a class every day using a Tier 1 curriculum. This helps them understand what is needed to successfully implement the curriculum—whether it’s assessment, structure, pacing, or differentiation—before coaching others. Some district leaders were initially resistant to this idea, but soon realized that the quality of cluster and coaching were not strong enough and would not improve without changes.

Challenges for Principals

Principals faced challenges understanding whether the curricula were being implemented at the intended level of depth and rigor in every classroom, and how to support teachers who needed help. They felt pressure to tell teachers to stick to the script and pacing to ensure all students were exposed to grade-level material, even when adjustments were clearly necessary for some students.

BUILDING PRINCIPALS’ KNOWLEDGE FIRST

“One of the things we found early on—and had been a misstep in our previous efforts with a new curriculum—was that we had to build the knowledge base of our principals in the new curricula,” says Alexander.

“Principals think they need to correct a teacher who is making an adjustment to the lesson, but that teacher might be doing exactly what is needed for students to learn the material.”

Teddy Broussard

NIET SENIOR TRAINER

“They needed to understand the depth of knowledge expected of students ahead of their teachers.”

Broussard recalls how one principal observing a teacher’s Tier 1 curriculum lesson remarked, “But she isn’t reading the script!” as a teacher made an adjustment to support students who were struggling with the lesson.

“Principals think they need to correct a teacher who is making an adjustment to the lesson,” he explains, “But that teacher might be doing exactly what is needed for students to learn the material. She might have added a mini-lesson in an area where students struggled, or asked students to turn and talk to a neighbor at a particular moment. Teacher leaders, instructional coaches, principals and others who support teachers need to provide professional development for them and guidance in knowing when and how to make those adjustments in ways that support individual student learning. At the same time, they need to maintain the integrity and rigor of the curriculum and standards being addressed.”

CREATING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR PRINCIPALS

Another strategy being piloted by NIET is to build networks of principals across the state, using in-person meetings and regular communications. Guidry describes

how her district took the experience of the statewide principals meeting and brought it home, creating a monthly principal meeting in the district. “Our principals love collaborating with their peers, including those in other districts,” she says. “During one of our first monthly principals’ meetings here in East Feliciana, we had them doing data analysis and understanding how much growth they could make in ELA if they moved

kids that were within ten points of the standard. It helped them to see how to meet their goals through a series of key steps.”

Adds Tuttleton, “One of the most important ways we are supporting principals is in understanding what it takes, and the trade-offs required, to create time and space for collaborative ongoing professional learning.”

Challenges at the District Level

“At the district level, curriculum specialists found it challenging to implement the curriculum at the right pace,” describes Condalary. “A lot of districts introduced multiple new instructional materials all at once, overwhelming teachers. Teachers were accustomed to lessons flowing step by step from a written plan, but the new curriculum required a lot more scaffolding and questioning.” With new curriculum comes new vendors who are in and out of classrooms. This led to a lot of “noise” and competing programs at the classroom level.

look like in a classroom for teachers? What does it look like from the perspective of a content area or grade level? What do people at each layer of the system need to be successful?”

“What is powerful about our partnership with NIET over the years,” Alexander adds, “is they provide non-judgmental support, and the right support at the right time. They walk with us in the work and are willing to own the results with us.”

CREATING COHERENCE IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Districts can play a key role in creating coherence in professional learning. For example, a small rural parish working with NIET has five partners providing professional learning support in their district: TNTP, LSU Cain Center, LearnZillion, NIET and LDOE network coaches. Working with district leaders, NIET is blending its support with the work of other vendors to create coherence for teachers. Regular phone calls help to ensure that all partners are aware of what is being provided for teachers, and identify opportunities to streamline and speak with one voice. LDOE has also recognized the problem and changed their grant process to require that applicants plan for coordination of partners and vendors.

The Louisiana experience demonstrates that teachers need significant support in implementing a Tier 1 curriculum, and much of this support must be embedded in their daily work. NIET’s work with district partners illustrates how to create supports at the district, school and classroom level that enable teachers to use high-quality instructional materials to help every student meet high expectations for learning.

SUPPORTING DISTRICT LEADERS

“More and more I see that there needs to be someone at the district level who understands this work deeply and at multiple levels,” notes Alexander. “What does it

“NIET provides non-judgmental support, and the right support at the right time. They walk with us in the work and are willing to own the results with us.”

Faydra Alexander

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF INSTRUCTION,
ALGIERS CHARTER SCHOOL ASSOCIATION

Tackling District Needs Head On: Lessons Learned

1. **Establish regular communication opportunities** between State Department of Education leaders and district leaders to discuss priorities and needs around implementation of Tier I curricula.
2. **Work alongside district leaders to “go first” and dig into the curriculum** to plan lessons and label the process used. For example, NIET worked with district-based executive master teachers to plan lessons from the new curricula, deepening their understanding of the content, instructional strategies, planning and assessment.
3. **Support district leaders, teacher leaders and principals** to strengthen their understanding of Tier 1 curricula through role-specific opportunities for collaboration throughout the year. This work began in LA BOLD districts and will be extended to other partners outside the grant.
4. **Assist districts and school leaders** to understand how teacher professional learning needs to be embedded to implement Tier 1 curricula, and how to plan, deliver and measure the impact of professional learning on student and teacher growth.
5. **Empower teacher leaders** experienced with the new curricula—and trained to work with adults—to lead job-embedded professional learning.
6. **Engage teacher leaders, along with school leaders, in coaching individual teachers** in their classrooms to support transference of new learning to every classroom.
7. **Include teacher leaders in school leadership teams** to build instructional leadership and advance instructional goals.
8. **Help leaders develop, stay focused, and track progress on goals.**
9. **Provide assistance to district leaders in coordinating outside partners** in order to streamline and create coherence or “one voice” in support for teachers. ■