

High-quality Curriculum Matters — Especially Right Now

Even the best teachers find it hard to push students to master state standards without a curriculum that supports them. This is especially true for teachers working with students who need extra support to access grade-level expectations, and educators often spend hours of their time each week looking for better texts, activities, and materials to make up the gap. But a new curriculum by itself is not the solution, and many teachers struggle to use a new curriculum that is introduced with little embedded professional development for teachers or buy-in from leaders to make it effective.

Together with our partners, NIET is developing a better way forward that blends the “what” to teach with “how” to teach it. NIET schools are proving that it’s not just possible to strengthen both curriculum and instruction at the same time but that it is necessary to do so. In June, we shared our findings in *High-quality Curriculum Implementation: Connecting What to Teach with How to Teach It*.

Here are a few takeaways we think are important to highlight from that work. The findings are particularly relevant as educators identify individual student learning gaps created by the challenges of COVID-19 and plan how to address them.

High-quality Curriculum Is a Tool to Increase Equity

Because high-quality curriculum — a standards-aligned curriculum that provides a scope and sequence along with questions and materials that increase students’ depth of knowledge — is rich in content, instructional expertise is key.

Without high-quality instructional

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Faydra Alexander, director of leadership development in the Algiers Charter in New Orleans

materials, students are not challenged to work at a higher level and often waste time on irrelevant or disconnected activities and assignments. “Using high-quality curricula is key to helping our students think in a more complex way and access the type of reading, writing, computing, and problem-solving they will face in college and beyond,” said Faydra Alexander, director of leadership development in the Algiers Charter in New Orleans. “We need to prepare our students for that.”

Maximize the Potential of a High-quality Curriculum

Identifying and selecting a high-quality curriculum is the first step, but implementing it well is just as important. School leaders have to create a professional learning environment where educators are always talking about, planning, and using the curriculum. This requires teamwork at every level of the system, from district administrators to teachers, and intentionality to marry curriculum with instruction. Success also involves communicating to parents the new expectations

embedded in the curriculum and supporting them to reinforce their child’s learning at home.

Blending Curriculum and Instructional Support: Lessons Learned

For 20 years, NIET has worked with district partners in connecting what to teach with how to teach it well, and this requires professional learning grounded in the content.

Katrina Harris — a fourth-grade teacher at Queensborough Leadership Academy in Caddo Parish Public Schools, a high-poverty district located in northwest Louisiana — knows firsthand the power of combining these supports. “It’s about taking the intended curriculum activities and understanding the alignment among the learning objectives, standards, and assessment, and then making instructional decisions that help students to reach the learning goal,” Harris said. “When coaching and support for curriculum and pedagogy are done together, it makes more sense to a teacher. It doesn’t feel like two separate decisions; it feels like one.



Executive Master Teacher Dr. Marvin Rainey led a discussion with the instructional leadership team at Queensborough Leadership Academy, which has been a leader in the transition to Tier 1 materials.

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Here are our lessons learned:

1. Focus on **leaders first**.
2. Create time, structures, and formal roles for **ongoing, collaborative professional learning** at the school level.
3. Adopt a **research-based, instructional rubric** to guide conversations around teaching and learning with the curriculum.
4. Anchor **coaching and feedback** in the curriculum.
5. Recognize the **stages of curriculum implementation** and what teachers need to progress to higher levels.
6. Ensure that districts **work closely with school leaders** to plan for, communicate, and implement school-based professional learning that blends support for curriculum and instructional practice.

The use of a high-quality curriculum is a powerful foundation for improvements in teaching and learning, and it represents an especially important opportunity for low-income students and students of color to have access to challenging, grade-level work. Read the full report on NIET’s website at bit.ly/NIETCurriculumPaper.



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Katrina Harris (above), fourth-grade teacher at Queensborough Leadership Academy in Caddo Parish Public Schools