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POLICY BRIEF - REVISED EDITION

# Using the RFP Process to Drive High- Quality Curriculum: Findings from the Field

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## Executive Summary

A growing number of policymakers, researchers, and philanthropists are turning to high-quality curriculum as a lever to drive student academic success. Doing so has a strong basis in domestic and international research.<sup>1</sup> When it comes to the actual selection of materials, however, states and districts draw upon very different processes – only some of which lead to the adoption of high-quality instructional materials. How can policymakers make the most of the selection process and maximize the chance of high- rather than low-quality curriculum adoption?

This policy memo focuses on one mechanism: the district-level Request for Proposal (RFP). The memo explores *how districts can use the curriculum RFP process to encourage the highest-quality submissions*. Specifically, it explores how districts can signal that they are serious about quality – and conversely, which components of an RFP actually *discourage* high-quality applicants.

The Institute explored the world of district RFPs through structured interviews with highly-ranked curriculum vendors and recognized experts in the field, and through an examination of real-world RFPs.<sup>2</sup>

### *The following factors drive high-quality submissions:*

- Language that lays out a clear scope of work and evaluation criteria;
- The requirement that the curriculum be highly-ranked by independent reviews; and
- The inclusion of technology requirements that accommodate newer, more nimble curriculum providers.

### *The following factors deter high-quality submissions:*

- Lengthy, unclear or convoluted RFPs;
- Technology components that smaller providers and more contemporary cloud-based providers cannot meet; and
- Inclusion of specific requirements written so that only a preferred provider could qualify.

<sup>1</sup> The sources are numerous, but a 2017 review of research may be found here: David M. Steiner et al., “StandardsWork: A Narrative Research Review,” Center for Research and Reform in Education; Institute for Education Policy (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, January 2017), and summarized here: David Steiner, “Choosing a Curriculum: A Critical Act,” Education Next (blog), August 21, 2017, <http://educationnext.org/choosing-curriculum-critical-act/>, and here: Ashley Berner, “CenterPoint - Curriculum and Education Policy,” CenterPoint Education Solutions (blog), August 1, 2018, <https://centerpointeducation.org/guest-post/curriculum-and-education-policy>.

<sup>2</sup> The interviewees spoke with the Institute “on background” only, and in some cases, on the condition that the specific RFP they referenced not be named.

## Why Does Curriculum Matter?

A growing body of evidence connects access to high-quality instructional materials, implemented with fidelity, to outsized gains in student achievement.

Examples from the research record include:

- **High-quality textbooks.** Numerous, recent studies<sup>3</sup> suggest that switching from a low- to a high-quality textbook can boost student achievement more than other, more popular interventions such as expanding preschool programs, decreasing class sizes, or offering merit pay to teachers. It is also cost effective.<sup>4</sup>
- **Content-rich curricula.** Instructional materials that intentionally build knowledge content rather than merely reinforce skills, exercise an outsized, positive effect upon student success. For instance, quasi-experimental studies of two of the country's highest-ranked, standards-aligned, content-rich curricula yielded gains in student learning – and increased those gains with every additional year.<sup>5</sup> This should not surprise us; requiring students to learn specific content is a signature feature of high-performing systems around the world.<sup>6</sup>

It is thus gratifying to track the increased attention given to curriculum materials amongst membership organizations such as [Chiefs for Change](#) and [Council of Chief State School Officers \(CCSSO\)](#) and think tanks as diverse as the [Center for American Progress](#) and the [Thomas B. Fordham Institute](#), as well as the national attention bestowed upon early adopters such as Louisiana and Duval County Public Schools FL).<sup>7</sup>

But how do we define “quality”? Several sources provide guidance, including the Institute of Education Sciences’ [What Works Clearinghouse](#) and the Center for Education Research and Reform’s [Evidence for ESSA](#) tool. Both offer robust causal or correlational studies of specific curricula. One limitation of such sources, however, is that much of the cited research was conducted prior to the introduction of

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3 Thomas Kane et al., “Teaching Higher: Educators’ Perspectives on Common Core Implementation” (Cambridge, MA: Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University, February 2016), <http://cepr.harvard.edu/files/cepr/files/teaching-higher-report.pdf?m=1454988762>., Morgan Polikoff and Corey Koedel, “Big Bang for Just a Few Bucks: The Impact of Math Textbooks in California | Brookings Institution,” Evidence Speaks (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, January 8, 2017), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/big-bang-for-just-a-few-bucks-the-impact-of-math-textbooks-in-california/>., U. Boser, M. Chingos, and C. Straus, “The Hidden Value of Curriculum Reform” (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2015), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2015/10/14/122810/the-hidden-value-of-curriculum-reform/>.

4 Grover Whitehurst, “Don’t Forget Curriculum,” Brown Center Letters on Education (Brookings, October 2009), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/dont-forget-curriculum/>.

5 Mathematica Policy Research, “Evaluation of Expeditionary Learning” (Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, 2013), <https://eleducation.org/news/mathematica-policy-research-releases-evaluation-expeditionary-learning-middle-schools>., S. Stringfield et al., “National Evaluation of Core Knowledge Sequence Implementation: Final Report.” (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk, December 2000), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED451282>. December 2000, Robert Pondiscio, “Louisiana Threads the Needle on Ed Reform: Launching a Coherent Curriculum in a Local-Control State,” Education Next 17, no. 4 (Fall 2017), <http://educationnext.org/louisiana-threads-the-needle-ed-reform-launching-coherent-curriculum-local-control/>

6 Common Core, “Why We’re behind: What Top Nations Teach Their Students but We Don’t.” (Washington, D.C.: Common Core, 2009).

7 Julia Kaufman, Lindsay Thompson, and V. Darleen Opfer, “Creating a Coherent System to Support Instruction Aligned with State Standards: Promising Practices of the Louisiana Department of Education” (Arlington, VA: The Rand Corporation, September 2016), [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1600/RR1613/RAND\\_RR1613.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1600/RR1613/RAND_RR1613.pdf)., David Steiner, Duval and High-Quality Curriculum: A Conversation with Superintendent Nikolai Vitti, October 27, 2016, <http://edpolicy.education.jhu.edu/wordpress/?p=940>., Chiefs for Change, “Hiding in Plain Sight: Leveraging Curriculum to Improve Student Learning” (Chiefs for Change, August 2017), <http://chiefsforchange.org/policy-paper/4830/>. Chiefs for Change, “Statement on the Need for High-Quality Curriculum – Chiefs for Change” (Washington, D.C.: Chiefs for Change, June 16, 2018), <http://chiefsforchange.org/statement-on-the-need-for-high-quality-curricula/>., The Aspen Institute, “Improving Access to High-Quality Instructional Materials,” Seizing the Moment (Washington, D.C.: The Aspen Institute, 2018), <https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2018/04/ESSA-Improving-Access-High-Quality-Instructional-Materials.pdf>.

the Common Core State Standards and the assessments matched to those standards, or others that followed from them. Thus, for many practitioners, the go-to source for reviews of current curricula materials is [EdReports.org](https://edreports.org), a nonprofit launched in 2014 that evaluates published curricula for their standards-alignment, rigor, and usability. EdReports recruits master teachers to conduct its extensive reviews, which are published on EdReports' website. Thus, as we will see, a district's reference of EdReports in its RFP signals to potential bidders an intention to aim at high-caliber materials.

## The Curriculum Approval Process

According to *EdWeek Market Brief*, roughly half of the approximately 13,600 school districts in the United States use the RFP process for purchasing.<sup>8</sup> Larger school districts utilize the RFP process for curriculum (and other procurement projects) more often than small districts.

Overall, 44 percent of districts make sole-source purchases, often hiring the same curriculum providers year after year without issuing RFPs. In some cases, districts issue a Request for Information (RFI) that identifies specific criteria that must be included in the curriculum, while acknowledging that they will continue to use a particular provider absent proof that another provider can meet the criteria. This memo includes evidence from both RFPs and RFIs under the general heading of the former.

Districts that do use the RFP process to attract and select curriculum providers typically announce the RFP, provide a short period for prospective bidders to ask questions, conduct an internal or teacher-led committee review process (possibly drawing upon evaluation rubrics and multi-week pilots), and then award the contract. According to Morgan Polikoff, Associate Professor of Education at USC's Rossier School of Education, "School districts have complex, highly ceremonial practices when it comes to textbook adoptions, which would likely be a barrier to more streamlined forms of decision making."<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, as we will evidence, high-caliber curricula providers seek clearly written and well-structured RFPs. When reviewing opportunities, these providers – often new to the district in question – must determine if there is truly an alignment between what the district is looking for and what the provider can offer. Of course, RFPs are designed to winnow the applicant field; this is appropriate. But at times, districts are clearly preserving the status quo by creating RFPs that only the existing provider can decipher.

In what follows, we focus on the barriers to *high-quality applicants* – not to any applicants.

What induces high-quality providers to apply? What dissuades them? To answer these questions, we interviewed twenty-one leaders from highly-ranked *curriculum providers* and *national experts* in the high-quality instructional materials field,<sup>10</sup> to ascertain their experiences, both positive and negative, with district RFPs. We asked:

- What do you look for in an RFP?

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8 EdWeek Market Brief (Jan. 19, 2018), "Breaking Down When K-12 Districts Use RFPs Versus Single-Source Purchasing." <https://marketbrief.edweek.org/exclusive-data/rfp/>.

9 Polikoff, Morgan. (July 2018). "The Challenges of Curriculum Materials as a Reform Lever." Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-challenges-of-curriculum-materials-as-a-reform-lever/>.

10 The providers and leaders interviewed were chosen due to their high ratings in the EdReports.org curriculum review process and/or their considerable experience in the district-selection process.



- What are the indicators that the district is serious about quality?
- What are the specific deterrents to high-quality applicants?

All told, we conducted more than thirty hours of structured interviews. Our findings are summarized below.

## Indicators of Quality

Our interviewees offered fairly consistent responses on the indicators that a district is committed to attracting high-quality curriculum providers. The most important were:

- ***Commitment to standards-aligned and/or evidence-based curriculum.*** Districts communicate a commitment to standards-aligned curriculum by referencing their own internal use of Student Achievement Partners’ **Instructional Materials Evaluation Tool (IMET)**, a nationally-vetted tool aligned to the standards; by including a requirement that the curriculum have been vetted and rated highly by an independent, third-party reviewer (EdReports.org or **Learning List**); or by requesting that evidence from high-quality research be provided (“**What Works Clearinghouse**” or “**Evidence for ESSA**”). Some providers suggested that districts should specify “rated highly by EdReports.org,” rather than just “reviewed by” or “evaluated by” a third-party. This is to prevent situations in which a provider can simply have a university professor “review” curriculum or textbook and say that it aligns with “trends in the field.”

As a positive example, Broward County Public Schools (FL) embedded a derivative of the IMET and Achieve’s EQUIP into its recent science and math materials RFPs. The RFP rubric focused on standards-alignment and core content – a very clear signal to applicants that their materials needed to meet the district’s expectations.

Another positive example: Montgomery County Public Schools (MD)’s August 2018 RFP, which calls for “comprehensive ELA and mathematics curriculum that provide up-to-date, evidence-based, research-based, relevant, and appropriate materials that will effectively support teaching and learning of all learners in all classrooms in Kindergarten through Grade 8.”<sup>11</sup>

And even more directly, materials must:

*Have a comprehensive, independent evaluation. MCPS strongly prefers evaluations conducted by EdReports ([www.edreports.org](http://www.edreports.org)), an independent nonprofit designed to improve K-12 education that offers reviews of K-12 instructional materials that focus on alignment to college and career-ready standards and other indicators of high quality as recommended by educators. MCPS reserves the right to consider other external independent evaluations comparable to EdReports, but such independent evaluations must be robust and comparable in scale, depth, and methodology.*

*For materials that have EdReports ratings (using Gateways described on EdReports.com). MCPS reserves the right to reject products that:*

- *Do not meet expectations for Text Quality or Building Knowledge;*
- *Do not meet expectations for Focus and Coherence or Rigor and Mathematical Practices.*

<sup>11</sup> Montgomery County Public Schools Bid/RFP Number: 4478. English Language Arts and Mathematics Curricular and Instructional Materials Elementary and Middle School. (August 20, 2018). Retrieved from [http://procurement.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/home/Bid\\_Record/1638](http://procurement.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/home/Bid_Record/1638)

- ***A Clear Evaluation Process.*** A strong RFP includes not only specific evaluation rubrics but also a transparent review process.

The Newport-Mesa Unified School District (CA), for example, selected high-quality instructional materials finalists using a steering committee of trained educators. The district also piloted the two finalists with 123 teachers and sought consensus from the lead pilot teachers before making the final decision.

Other providers mentioned both Wake County Public School System (NC) and Orange County Schools (NC) as strong models; these North Carolina districts conducted a public evaluation process that rated providers on a clear scale and sought community input. As another example, before choosing an English language arts (ELA) curriculum, Baltimore City Public Schools (MD) held community workshops, posted videos about the two curriculum finalists, and created a community feedback survey.

- ***Protection of the process.*** This is a complex matter. On the one hand, smaller, non-profit curriculum providers expressed concern that they cannot compete with large publishers who provide a lot of “free stuff” to districts. One provider recalled a time when a large publisher sent staff members to “camp out” at the district, requesting meetings and lobbying district staff.

Several interviewers highlighted Wake County Public School System as a model for other districts in this regard. The county asked applicants to avoid contact with district staff beyond the appointed contact for the RFP during the process and to not offer “swag” (free items) as incentives. Broward County Public Schools recently stopped allowing a publisher-presentation portion of the materials review process.

On the other hand, unless a district includes piloting pieces of new curricula, forbidding publishers to make presentations risks excluding unfamiliar curricula - especially those in novel formats - due simply to a lack of understanding with how they are intended to function. Recall that the provider of the current instructional materials will have an extensive professional relationship with the district, and teachers will be familiar with the materials - so for potential new publishers there are already inherent barriers of entry.

If districts do not authorize piloting, we recommend that the lead author of the curriculum in question (not publisher or sales representatives) be invited to present their curriculum to the selection committee.

- ***Commitment to implementation and professional development (PD).*** Research suggests that professional development must be curriculum-specific to be effective; high-quality providers are thus looking for evidence of the district’s intent to tie the selected curriculum to PD. A strong curriculum approval process should be, “transparent, data-driven, alignment-focused and teacher-centered.”<sup>12</sup> Providers were quick to note that a well-developed RFP document is only the beginning; the entire cycle needs to be a strong process from start to finish.

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12 “Building capacity and consensus Through a Teacher-Led materials adoption: A case study from Newport-Mesa Unified School District” (March 2018). Durham, NC: EdReports.org. Retrieved from <https://www.edreports.org/news/voices/building-capacity-and-consensus-through-a-teacher-led-materials-adoption.html>

## Deterrents to Quality

Those we interviewed also agreed about the elements of RFPs that deter high-quality providers from submitting.<sup>13</sup> The most important were:

- **Outdated technical requirements.** The most commonly cited deterrent to high-quality applications was the requirement that applicants interface their products with the district's existing Learning Management System (LMS). Many new curricula are cloud-based and designed to operate from numerous devices without the use of downloads and files. Sometimes the district even includes a requirement to comport with platforms that are no longer viable; one recently-issued RFP referenced Microsoft 95, which was replaced in 1998 and has not been supported by Microsoft since 2001.

One leader summed it up: “If there is one problem to solve, it’s the tech requirement. No one builds software in files any more. Building a custom integration for a district’s LMS is a non-starter for many of us.” To be even more specific: if the district’s LMS has wide use in the field, such as Canvas, then an interface would be transferable to other districts and thus a reasonable investment – as occurred with the respondent to Broward County Public School’s science RFP. If the district’s LMS is proprietary, however, the one-off expenditure is likely too high for smaller providers.

For example, the otherwise well-crafted Montgomery County Public Schools (MD)’s RFP, cited above, included a number of technical requirements that, taken together, may discourage potential high-quality vendors:

- “Curricular and Instructional Materials support integration with Canvas by Instructure, the district’s Learning Management System (LMS), or alternative LMS that MCPS adopts at its sole discretion, via the Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI) specification, version 1.1 or higher.<sup>14</sup> Respondent is required to remain current with the subsequent versions of the LTI open standard within a reasonable time period.
- “Curricular and Instructional Materials, in part or in whole, are in editable formats including but not exclusive to Google Docs and Microsoft Word, or are customizable within the platform, for the purposes of tailoring lessons on an as needed basis.
- “Respondent shall conduct daily backups of MCPS data, either incremental or full, and must conduct full weekly backups.”

As a final example, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) recently issued an RFP for its social studies curriculum that required a seamless interface with its classroom management platform – which one high-quality provider called “idiosyncratic and tough to match up.”

One provider also observed that, “A disconnect between the technology department’s requirements and what the curriculum department is looking for can create impossible, contradictory requirements. The technology and curriculum district teams need to be in sync.”

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<sup>13</sup> All of the issues raised by the vendors are not necessarily weaknesses from a school district perspective. A requirement that all materials be provided in digital format is not necessarily a bad request, for example, even though some high-quality curriculum provider might be deterred from applying as a result.

<sup>14</sup> It is important to point out that an LTI requirement per se is not an unreasonable requirement. Our suggestion, however, is that the district not demand it as a condition of a successful submission. Rather, the district can make it clear that if a publisher is chosen for the contract on grounds of merit, that publisher will be expected to render its materials LTI compatible prior to the awarding of the contract itself.

- **Customization requirements that may undo the integrity of the curriculum or be too costly for smaller providers.** A recent Chicago Public Schools RFP required providers to customize a significant portion of the curricular content. Several high-quality providers expressed concern that changing their content to meet the district’s requirements would threaten the quality of their materials. Large amounts of customization may also preclude smaller providers. One leader expressed concern, for example, about Hillsborough County Public School (FL)’s requirement that curriculum align with WIDA standards for English language learners: “A larger company may be able to add in WIDA, but it could be that their core curriculum isn’t as strong.”
- **An outsized scope.** A full pre-K-12 curriculum request privileges larger publishing companies; few high-quality providers have developed instructional materials for the entire PK-12 pipeline. Every single one of our interviewees mentioned Chicago Public Schools’ recent RFP as particularly cumbersome, not only because it requested pre-K-12 in all subjects but also required assessments, professional development, and customization. The sheer complexity virtually ensured that each application would comprise either one very large applicant, or complex arrangements with multiple partners and, in at least one case, an external consultant to manage the parties to the application. Many smaller companies simply withdrew.<sup>15</sup> Another call for submissions required that applicants: “Provide the District with funding for one to three consultants for the first year or one consultant for three years (specifics to be determined by number of instructional programs adopted).”
- **Restrictive format requirements.** RFPs sometimes require that all materials be available in digital or editable format. While a textbook provider can easily comply with a requirement to submit textbooks in digital format, some of the newer curriculum providers use materials in a variety of formats – a “curated classroom collection,” as one provider described their materials – making compliance more difficult. Requiring extensive editing capacity is not feasible, according to one provider, and results in “endless, impossible copyright issues.”
- **Restrictive pricing templates and guidelines.** Restrictive pricing structures built into RFPs can reveal that the district intends to make a long-term *textbook* purchase rather than a full instructional materials program. One provider gave an example of a district RFP requesting pricing for 50 books per grade for seven years, a pricing structure that aligns with annual textbook purchases. This particular high-quality provider utilizes a large number of books per grade, as well as additional materials, resulting in a pricing model that cannot comply with the RFP. A stronger RFP would either include a more flexible pricing template or allow providers to propose an alternative pricing methodology or schedule.
- **Requests for intellectual property rights.** One recent, urban-district RFP required ownership of a portion of the company’s intellectual property. Our interviewees expressed concern with this approach; one said, “If we are unable to use what we create for other partners, the opportunity is significantly less attractive to us.” By contrast, Orange County School (NC)’s RFP usefully includes language protecting trade secrets and intellectual property: “As provided by statute, the OCS will endeavor to keep information identified by the Respondent as trade secret confidential. Each page

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<sup>15</sup> To be clear, Chicago surely decided that it needed, at least potentially, to replace its entire K-12 curriculum, and we are not suggesting that their need isn’t paramount. But the district could have split the RFP into elementary and secondary, ELA and math, and so on. Only a very small number of long-standing, large publishing houses have the capacity to meet the demands of the RFP as issued.



containing trade secret information must be identified in boldface at top and bottom of the page as ‘CONFIDENTIAL.’”<sup>16</sup>

- ***Requests for lengthy responses, and multiple copies, in a very short timeframe.*** According to a provider, “Sometimes districts ask for a 50-page document, along with copies of all of our instructional materials, to be submitted within a 10-day window.” Requirements that materials be sent to multiple locations in a short period of time cause a significant financial burden for smaller companies. One smaller curriculum company indicated that even though they upload their materials for districts to access online, some RFPs still require the submission of hard copies. “Especially for a non-profit, mailing out hard copy samples can be costly,” one provider mentioned. The provider also shared concerns with districts placing excessively specific requirements on the RFP presentation format, giving an example of a recent RFP requiring 12 copies of a binder with 36 tabs in each binder.
- ***Specifications clearly written for a particular provider.*** Some districts include RFP language requiring a curricular component only used by a particular provider or the RFP even includes the name of the provider. “A lot of RFPs are written with language customized for the winner,” according to one provider. “Districts reach out to a vendor to ask for ways to craft language so the pre-selected vendor will be chosen.”
- ***Professional development (PD).*** While high-quality providers look for the district’s intention to support the chosen curriculum with commensurate PD, RFPs that specify that a provider’s staff must be onsite for substantial lengths of time can dissuade application. “We provide ongoing support for teachers implementing our curriculum. We don’t have a large enough staff to send a team to live in the school district for months at a time, though,” observed a small provider.<sup>17</sup>
- ***Excessively lengthy or unclear wording.*** Providers cited recent examples from Florida of “cutting and pasting” text from past RFPs and consequently including outdated or irrelevant information. Providers mentioned one RFP that included science curriculum requirements in a math curriculum RFP. In addition, many large-district RFPs can run more than 60 pages. One curriculum provider indicated that streamlined RFPs make it easier for her company to determine if they will apply. In other cases, the issue is just clarity: one provider commented, “Districts sometimes have to release supplemental information because the original RFP was so poorly drafted and confusing.”
- ***District curriculum staff inaccessible and/or RFP application process outsourced.*** In some large districts, procurement officers, or even contractors, oversee the RFP process. One provider indicated that certain contractors, used by several Florida districts, create a process that is cumbersome and difficult to navigate. Access to knowledgeable instructional staff who can answer RFP-related questions is important. “It’s frustrating when the answer to a submitted question is to ‘see Section 4.1 of the RFP,’” observed one provider. “In most cases, referring the vendor back to a previous section is not helpful and seems like a way for the district to remain vague in their response.”

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16 Orange County Public Schools Request for Proposals. Core Instructional Curriculum for Elementary Mathematics (K-5) and Core Instructional Curriculum for High School Mathematics. (2018). Retrieved from <http://www.orangecountyfirst.com/sites/default/files/bids/MATH%20RFP%20-%20Core%20Instructional%20Curriculum%20for%20Elementary%20and%20High%20School%20Math%20-%20Revised%201-22-18.pdf>

17 It might be argued that the district requirement is reasonable, given the clear importance of PD to the success of a curriculum implementation. But some curricula come with really detailed teacher-guides built into their materials, while in other cases high-quality third party support has already demonstrated strong results with a particular curriculum.

- **Requiring specific assessments.** Not all high-quality providers have online formative assessments, for example, so this requirement can deter applications – unless the district states clearly that partnership applications are welcome.

In sum, the details of an RFP make a difference in who answers the call. As one provider, who formerly served as a district curriculum director, said, “Districts, particularly those with a lack of resources, don’t know the best criteria to include in RFPs and don’t set good conditions. As a consequence, the districts, teachers, and students end up with lousy curriculum.”

## Conclusions: Policies for Districts

On balance, our interviews left us with some confidence that America’s school districts are increasingly in-the-know about high-quality materials and often channel this knowledge into the RFP process. Nevertheless, we heard from across the field that, in far too many cases, key barriers to quality remain.

Districts that want to incorporate high-quality curriculum should, first and foremost, ensure that RFPs include clear evaluation criteria that *focus on alignment and academic quality*. The weighting of criteria matters; having too many proxy measures de-values these two key indicators and makes quality adoption less likely. Second, districts should require that applicants be *highly-ranked by independent reviews* such as EdReports, or have an evidentiary base as determined by the Institute of Education Sciences. Finally, districts should articulate a *clear and transparent evaluation process* that signals new providers are welcome at the table.

We also learned that *outdated formatting or technology requirements* pose a significant barrier to newer providers. Likewise, RFPs drafted in *unclear or convoluted language* with criteria that indicate a *pre-selected provider*, can dissuade high-quality providers from investing the time and effort into the process.

## About

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## APPENDIX: Case Studies of District RFPs

### **Sample RFPs designed to attract high-quality curriculum providers:**

Baltimore City Public Schools (MD) issued an RFP for a Comprehensive K-12 Literacy Program in early 2018. Excerpts from the RFP that reveal areas of strength include:

- “City Schools is seeking a comprehensive literacy program that has a copyright date of 2015 or later and has been externally validated by EdReports. Proposals that do not meet these two criteria will not be reviewed.”
- “Moreover, City Schools is seeking a comprehensive literacy program that has been fully vetted and received high scores from EdReports in text quality, building knowledge, and usability.
- “City Schools has assessed the needs of its student population, provided teachers with Instructional Models to inform structure in the classroom.”
- Baltimore City Public Schools: “seeks a K-12 curriculum that is research based”; “program must provide research-based evidence of program effectiveness”; and “research should be available on the impact of program implementation in an urban school district with characteristics similar to that of BCPS.”
- “Proposals must include options to support teacher training and implementation, including web-based and in person training or professional development.”
- “Through progress monitoring tools, online applications, or other means, it is critical that a comprehensive program have the ability to assess student progress in a meaningful way.”
- “Should you deem any portion of your proposal as confidential or proprietary, it must be conspicuously indicated.”

Although not mentioned in the RFP, Baltimore City Public Schools scheduled [curriculum public input workshops](#) to receive public feedback on two finalists.

Orange County Schools (NC) issued an RFP for [Core Instructional Curriculum for Elementary Mathematics \(K-5\)](#) and [High School Mathematics](#) in early 2018. The RFP's areas of strength include:

- Sufficient time to complete a strong application, and a review timeline that indicates attention to quality:  
RFP due: Feb. 1, 2018  
Revised Deadline: extended to Monday, February 5, 2018  
Decision to Board of Education no later than June 30, 2018
- Proposal should be “compatible and compliant with IMET.” [IMET](#) is a tool used to determine if curriculum aligns with curriculum standards and shifts.
- RFP lists non-negotiable math indicators, math alignment criteria, math indicators of quality and additional criteria with which the vendor should be compliant. Example: “Research is included that demonstrates the effectiveness of the resource.”
- Requested implementation methodology.
- Sample materials can be returned to the “bidder” (curriculum provider) at their expense.
- **“Respondents are asked to honor the fidelity of the proposal process by limiting contact regarding the proposal to only the interim Chief Academic Officer.”**
- **“OCS will endeavor to keep information identified by the Respondent as **trade secret confidential.**”**
- Orange County included an appendix describing sample students and teachers (“personas”). The district asked providers to, “respond how your product enables the goals of each persona, provides options to meet their preferences, while alleviating their challenges.”
- The district issued a clarification Addendum of questions & answers about the RFP.

## Sample RFP that deterred applications from high-quality curriculum providers:

Chicago Public Schools (IL) issued an RFP for PK-12 Curriculum Content and Student Assessment Platform in 2018. Providers referred to the 79-page RFP as “a beast,” “massive,” and “convoluted.” Excerpts from the RFP revealing its extensive requirements include:

- Short timeline for a very large RFP:  
Advertisement Date: June 7, 2018  
All questions must be submitted in writing via e-mail no later than Tuesday, June 12th  
Pre-Submittal Conferences: June 26, 2018 and July 11, 2018  
Deadline: AUGUST 2ND, 2018 (subsequently extended two months)
- Broad PK-12 grade band requirement: “Proposals to provide the curriculum and assessment content described in this Category must address all grade levels PK-12. Proposals that do not include curriculum for all grade levels may be considered non-responsive and not evaluated.”
- Massive in scope: “a seamless Scope and Sequence for grades PK through 12 for six content areas: Arts, English/Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Science and World Languages;
  - “a comprehensive, customized and standards-aligned, PK-12 digital curriculum for Arts, English/Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Science and World Languages that is vertically and horizontally aligned and intentionally designed for all students, including English Learners and students receiving specialized services
  - a curated collection of standards-aligned, supplemental resources centralized in the District’s Learning Object Repository (LOR);
  - tightly-aligned, instruction-centered programs, services and supports (including professional learning) for teachers, school leaders and network/central office teams;
  - a modern student assessment and analytics platform configured to provide teachers with the data they need to inform their instructional practice and District leaders with the data they need to effectively support schools; and
  - a formal suite of interoperating technologies (plug and play architecture) that improves the user experience for teachers, students and parents, diminishes administrative burdens for employees and supports the District’s digital transition.”
- Extensive customization requirements:
  - “Proposals must include analysis of how Proposer’s solution is bias-free and culturally relevant
  - The application of (social and emotional) skills must be explicit in materials for all content areas
  - Curriculum content, including assessments, will be designed and developed by the Proposer, but CPS will have the ability to recommend modifications
  - CPS has an existing set of internally-developed and/or procured curriculum elements



- (units, lessons, etc.) that must be included in the curriculum
  - CPS has already made significant investment in digital supplemental resources. Successful Proposer(s) will be required to utilize existing those resources...
  - All content must be accurately translated to Spanish
  - the Products and Services shall be aligned with the District’s current standards, frameworks, and strategies, which include the following (plus additional standards requirements for specific subjects):
    - WIDA (ELD & SLD )
    - World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (ACTFL Standards)
    - CPS Framework for Teaching
    - Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)
    - Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
    - Illinois Learning Standards
    - Illinois Social and Emotional Learning Standards”
- All proposals must include two Curriculum Samples for every content area addressed (one elementary and one high school). Each lesson included in the Curriculum Sample must contain clear modifications based on four student profiles.
- Specific assessments requirement: “All assessment components will be delivered both via computer and paper and pencil with scan-score capability.”
- Requirement that curriculum be editable: “Users should be able to add visual stimuli or edit wording if necessary.”
- RFP includes 14 pages of detailed requirements for a Student Assessment Platform, as well.
- Communication Plan and Collaboration Plan requirement: “a Collaboration Plan will describe how the successful Proposer(s) will work and collaborate with the necessary internal and external groups necessary to complete the contract. Examples of internal groups include: internal departments (Assessment, Accountability, ITS, etc.), steering committees, working groups, teacher teams, unions and other contractors, including market competitors.”
- Intellectual Property requirement: “Vendor irrevocably grants, assigns, and transfers to the Board all right, title, and interest in and to the Work Product in all media throughout the world in perpetuity and all intellectual property rights therein, free and clear of any liens, claims, or other encumbrances, to the fullest extent permitted by law. All Confidential Information, Work Product, and intellectual property developed by, created for, or incorporating information gained from the Services performed under the Contract, shall at all times be and remain the property of the Board.”