

From Policy to Impact

*Louisiana's Implementation of High-Quality
Instructional Materials*

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Introduction

State legislatures and education agencies have increasingly been turning to high-quality instructional materials (HQIMs) as a key lever for systemic improvement of student learning.¹ Louisiana’s accomplishments in this area have been particularly noteworthy, evidenced by modest improvements in student outcomes,² “large and intriguing differences” in Louisiana teachers’ behavior compared with other states,³ and high rates of adoption across districts statewide. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) estimates that 99% of middle and high school students in Louisiana now have access to HQIMs,⁴ and research has shown that this access will have statistically significant effects on these students’ future outcomes.⁵ Louisiana’s success established the state as “the progenitor” of CCSSO’s High-Quality Instructional Materials and Professional Development Network, which aims to support other states in implementing similar changes.

Louisiana’s approach serves as an instructive example for good reason. By avoiding mandates and requirements, state leaders at the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) successfully navigated political tensions and local control concerns — common challenges that state education agencies (SEAs) encounter during policy implementation.⁶ Additionally, LDOE’s reforms originated in administrative rather than legislative change, with many of the changes only codified into law years later.⁷ The enduring impact of these reforms demonstrates how strong implementation can drive future policy change, inverting the typical legislative-driven reform model.

This case study focuses on three particular phases of implementation in which LDOE excelled and that drove their success: Purposeful Policy Design, State and Local Coordination, and Rollout and Monitoring.

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The elements in this analysis draw on [From Policy to Impact: A State Education Agency’s Guide to Implementation](#), which offers a new framework to help SEA leaders and staff think about policy implementation.

For other examples of high-quality implementation, see [From Policy to Impact: North Carolina’s Implementation of the Science of Reading](#) and [From Policy to Impact: Illinois’ Implementation of High-Impact Tutoring](#).

Policy Overview

In 2010, Louisiana revised its state standards to align with the Common Core State Standards Initiative (Common Core). LDOE found, however, that educators did not feel as though they were prepared to teach to the new standards. A former state leader sympathized: “You’re changing standards [and] massively changing expectations. ... That is really stressful pressure.”⁸ Growing momentum around curriculum led state leaders to focus on instructional materials, and they developed a vision of ensuring that all students throughout the state had access to high-quality materials.

Over three stages and several years, state leaders worked with educators, administrators, and curriculum publishers to realize this vision. The initial stage began with the Curricular Resources Annotated Review, where an LDOE-led team of content specialists and educators evaluated and ranked curricula for rigor and alignment to the new state standards. In the first year, only one math curriculum earned a Tier 1 designation (which signifies that it “exemplifies high-quality”)⁹ and no English language arts (ELA) curricula were recommended.¹⁰

Based on this evidence, LDOE worked with educators to develop a custom ELA curriculum,¹¹ then tested adoption of Tier 1 curricula with interested districts. A pilot program helped LDOE’s team refine and expand its support to include online guidance, robust professional development resources, and on-demand guidebooks with fully developed lesson plans, texts, and formative assessments.¹² As districts in the pilot program provided positive feedback, LDOE began formally incentivizing widespread adoption. The agency negotiated procurement contracts with curriculum publishers, consolidated administrative processes, and offered competitive funding to districts that adopted Tier 1 curricula. These changes were eventually codified by the state legislature in 2015, and they are still in place over a decade later.¹³

Implementation Highlights

Purposeful Policy Design

Often, policy implementation follows a new law; however, as one former SEA leader explained, “There are times when legislation is helpful, but we didn’t see it having the same value when we were asking 40,000 teachers to change their behavior. Other strategies were more likely to gain

both buy-in and sustained change.”¹⁴ State leaders instead adjusted existing laws to give the department freedom to create a new approach.¹⁵ Rather than relying on new legislation mandating how to identify high-quality curricula, state leaders **chose a mix of administrative incentives that supported districts’ decision-making**. These incentives also evolved over time as the new policies gained buy-in: At first, the state leaned on signaling high quality via the annotated curricular reviews. Then, it began providing guidance and materials to support adoption, and by the final stage, adoption was tied to competitive funding. Districts were never required to use a certain curriculum. Rather, Louisiana’s slower, supportive approach allowed leaders to avoid the political tension surrounding Common Core and typical concerns about local control.

The sustained buy-in from educators and local administrators also stemmed from proactive stakeholder communication throughout policy development. From the beginning, state leaders **grounded reforms in educator feedback and needs**; as one former leader summarized, “It started with everyone being mad about Common Core and feeling like ‘no one prepared us.’ [LDOE asked,] ‘What do you need?’ and the answer was ‘curriculum.’”¹⁶ Throughout planning, the state also met with districts’ chief academic officers once a month,¹⁷ and their feedback helped administrators identify barriers and pain points that could be removed to better support districts.¹⁸ Finally, state leaders intentionally involved educators from the beginning by asking districts to nominate “Teacher Leaders,” who would ultimately be deeply involved in policy planning, reviewing curricula, and disseminating information.

Educator input also strengthened the Curricular Resources Annotated Review, which ultimately gave state leaders **an evidence base and credible rationale for reform**. The rubric used to evaluate instructional materials was based on nationally recognized tools and standards,¹⁹ which, in combination with Teacher Leaders’ involvement, gave the final rankings greater significance. When the results demonstrated a clear shortage of high-quality materials, stakeholders across the education system could see the need for change.

Throughout this phase, **state leaders stuck to a single instructional vision** that centered high-quality curricula. Rebecca Kockler, LDOE’s former assistant superintendent of academics, explained, “We saw our instructional vision and core curriculum components as a center for how all policy flows. ... For our efforts ... everything was rooted in our instructional vision and aligned across initiatives,” from funding formulas to teacher evaluation to pre-K and even tutoring.²⁰ The adherence to a single vision ensured alignment and coherence throughout the evolution of policy design over multiple years.

State and Local Coordination

LDOE established a **regular cadence of communications** that were “disciplined, routine, and very predictable”²¹ to keep stakeholders aligned. In addition to the monthly meetings with chief academic officers, state staff planned regular touchpoints with superintendents and school leaders,²² which were supplemented by webinars, newsletters, and regional networks.²³ By maintaining consistent and structured communication channels, LDOE ensured that stakeholders understood their expected roles in implementation. A RAND study found that “the state’s signal regarding which curricula are high-quality [came] through loud and clear to school system administrators and school leaders,”²⁴ and a school leader who led adoption of a Tier 1 curriculum commented, “Teachers have a clear picture of what they’re supposed to be doing in the classroom.”²⁵

A critical pillar of this communication strategy was LDOE’s **intentional and direct engagement with educators** through Teacher Leaders. One state official remarked, “We realized early on that we would never be able to communicate coherence if ... we needed to filter every bit of information [to teachers]. ... We had to go right for the teachers.”²⁶ Through monthly newsletters and webinars, as well as quarterly collaborations, Teacher Leaders were able to disseminate information among their peers more efficiently and rapidly compared with traditional communication channels.²⁷

LDOE also went beyond facilitating communications to **removing financial and administrative burdens for districts**. One unique approach the agency took was negotiating state contracts with Tier 1 publishers to reduce costs for districts who bought Tier 1 materials. This removed a significant barrier to access for districts and brought “much-needed efficiencies” to the process of procuring high-quality materials.²⁸ LDOE also consolidated three administrative processes into one “Super Application” that districts use to establish annual priorities, budget federal formula funds, and apply for competitive funding tied to adoption of Tier 1 materials.²⁹ The Super App not only reduced districts’ paperwork burden but also helped districts incorporate a priority for HQIMs into their overall plans.

Throughout these efforts, LDOE also regularly collected **satisfaction and feedback surveys**. The ongoing assessments allowed state staff to ensure that the resources provided were useful and meeting the needs of teachers and administrators.³⁰ By actively seeking feedback, LDOE had concrete data that allowed staff to continually maintain the quality and relevance of their support.

Rollout and Monitoring

Monitoring the adoption of Tier 1 curricula was critical to Louisiana's progress, especially given the ongoing and iterative nature of the reforms. LDOE **gathered multiple types of quantitative and qualitative data to monitor rollout**, including trends in educator use of materials, perceptions of the state's guidance and resources, and emerging needs for greater support.³¹ This multifaceted approach to data collection facilitated more informed decision-making and supported the development of a simple tool to track adoption progress.

LDOE leaders then established **routines to analyze data trends and discuss findings** in regular meetings.³² This systematic approach allowed LDOE to respond quickly to challenges and opportunities as they arose, keeping the reform effort on track and responsive to emerging needs.

Monitoring meetings also **included staff from across the agency, as well as educators and partners**. Together, they reviewed data trends, conducted site visits to observe classroom-level implementation,³³ and elevated opportunities for educators to testify about their experiences to the state legislature and board of education.³⁴ By engaging a wide range of stakeholders in the monitoring process, LDOE generated a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for outcomes and implementation progress.

To support this data-driven approach, LDOE had to **shift funds to prioritize data collection** and emphasize monitoring, analysis, and reporting.³⁵ Reallocating resources enabled a consistent stream of information that could be shared among stakeholders for decision-making. By investing in robust data systems and analysis capabilities, LDOE equipped itself with the tools necessary to make informed choices throughout the implementation process.

Conclusion

Louisiana's success with HQIMs reform stands as a testament to the power of strong implementation practices. Without a mandate, LDOE achieved widespread buy-in and adoption by focusing on purposeful policy design through incentives, support, and removing barriers for districts. LDOE's care and attention to statewide systems coordination as well as rigorous rollout and monitoring practices facilitated a 60-percentage-point increase in Tier 1 curricula adoption (from 20% of districts to 80%) over just five years.³⁶ Louisiana's graduation rates also rose to "all-time highs" in 2016,³⁷ and more recently, Louisiana is one of only three states whose 2023 reading test scores exceeded pre-pandemic levels.³⁸ These successes are driven by LDOE reforms that have lasted more than 10 years later, and they demonstrate that SEA-led changes, when executed with care and collaboration, can drive significant improvements in educational quality. ✦



Endnotes

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About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit bellwether.org.

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