edreports

THE DECISION LAB

Beyond Selection:

Rethinking How Districts Adopt Curriculum

FALL 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Survey Findings

- **Districts cite consensus-building and implementation as their greatest challenges** in the later stages of the curriculum adoption process—49% reporting difficulties achieving stakeholder buy-in and 48% struggling with implementation—significantly higher than challenges in earlier phases such as determining needs (13%) or narrowing options (14%).

- **Regulatory and technological factors rank as critical priorities.** Despite appearing manageable, districts rate "incompatibility of existing infrastructure with new technology systems" as the most critical challenge, and "understanding and adhering to local, state, and federal regulations" as the second most critical challenge, reflecting the increasingly complex regulatory landscape in which 40 states have passed "science of reading" laws since 2013.

- **A confidence-implementation gap highlights challenges in strategic planning.** While 72% of district leaders express confidence in their ability to identify and adopt high-quality instructional materials, only 59% report having processes to assess curriculum efficacy during implementation, and just 60% pilot curricula before adoption. These findings suggest that despite strong intentions and commitment, underdeveloped early adoption stages contribute to later implementation challenges.

- **While districts want to make their own selection decisions, they are open to external support with evaluating and implementing choices.** Districts strongly prefer to maintain control over final curriculum decisions, with only 14% willing to seek external support for decision-making, but express greater openness to external support with technical aspects such as data interpretation of curriculum options (55% would seek help), curriculum evaluation (41%), and implementation support (40%).

- **Process management and communication emerge as top values from external partnerships.** District leaders rank help with "communicating decisions effectively to stakeholders" as the most valuable contribution external organizations can provide, followed by assistance with administrative project management tasks, highlighting the importance of implementation-phase support beyond technical curriculum expertise.
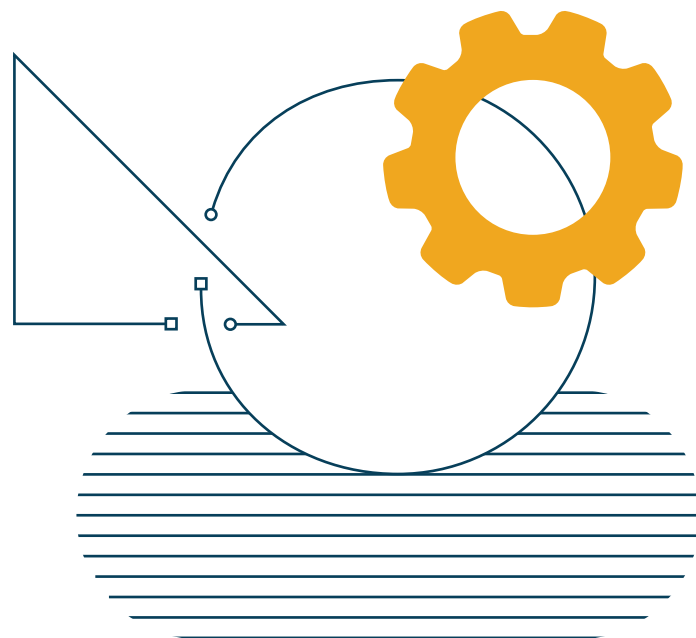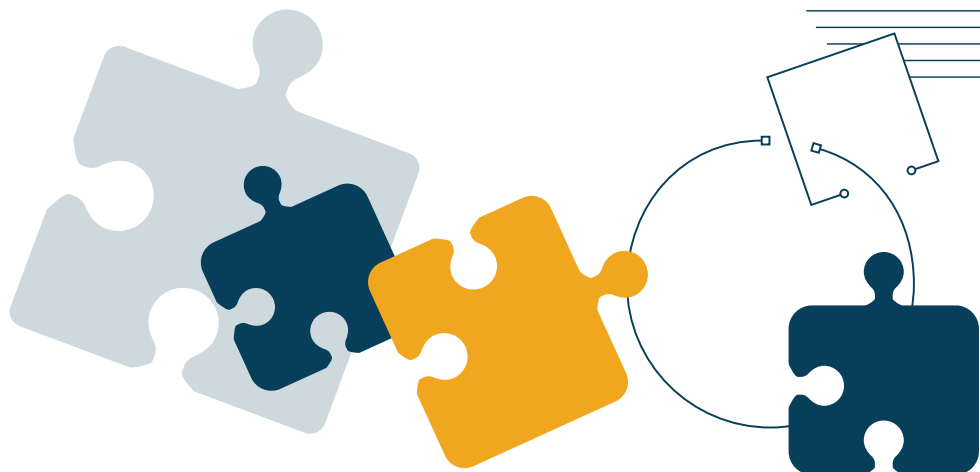
CALLS TO ACTION

▶ **Establish strong foundations early** by understanding local, state, and federal requirements and assessing technology infrastructure compatibility before beginning material review.

▶ **Design comprehensive adoption processes that plan for implementation from day one** rather than treating selection and implementation as separate activities. The gap between selection confidence and implementation readiness suggests districts need integrated planning that connects early decisions to classroom success.

▶ **Center educator voice while building broad stakeholder consensus** through structured engagement processes. With stakeholder buy-in identified as districts' top challenge, meaningful teacher involvement and strategic communication are critical for sustainable implementation.

▶ **Leverage external expertise strategically** for high-value, complex aspects of adoption while maintaining local decision authority. In a resource-constrained environment, targeted partnerships for data interpretation, process management, and implementation support can maximize impact while preserving funds for core priorities.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The selection and adoption of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) play a pivotal role in shaping student learning outcomes. Quality materials provide educators with research-aligned content, coherent instructional frameworks, and embedded supports that enhance the rigor and consistency of classroom instruction. When used effectively, HQIM demonstrably improve student achievement, particularly for historically underserved populations. However, despite the growing availability of such resources across subjects, consistent use of them remains surprisingly low. In a recent survey, only 35% of ELA, 51% of math, and a mere 6% of science teachers reported using HQIM regularly (once per week or more).

Challenges in Adoption and Use

This usage gap is not due to a lack of high-quality options but rather to a complex web of interrelated challenges, as demonstrated by both research findings and EdReports' firsthand experiences supporting state departments of education and school systems. Many districts operate with limited resources and capacity, making it difficult to establish transparent, comprehensive processes for evaluating and selecting curriculum. Without clear criteria and predictable protocols, decision-making can understandably become fragmented or reactive, shaped by pressing demands rather than ideal timelines or priorities. Even when strong materials are selected, districts often face significant constraints that limit investment in the professional learning and change management required for successful implementation, leaving educators striving to adapt to new materials without the robust support they need.

Compounding these challenges is an increasingly complex set of requirements for curriculum selection. Understanding local, state, and federal government regulations is becoming more difficult as lawmakers pay more attention to local curriculum. For example, since 2013, 40 states have passed laws supporting evidence-based reading instruction, some with specific mandates relating to curriculum and professional development. Recent survey data from EdWeek Market Brief shows that state adoption lists, especially in English language arts, have surged in importance in district evaluations of materials, while state policy shifts are placing more responsibility on state agencies and district leaders.

Actionable Insights to Strengthen District Processes

To better understand these dynamics, EdReports partnered with The Decision Lab, an applied research and innovation firm, to conduct a comprehensive survey examining the preferences, pain points, and decision-making behaviors of a nationally representative sample of over 250 district leaders and educators around curriculum adoption. This research was funded by the Gates Foundation. The findings paint a nuanced picture of districts' challenges, revealing that while leaders often feel confident about early-stage activities such as needs assessment and shortlisting curriculum options, the most significant difficulties emerge later in the adoption process as materials are identified in areas such as consensus-building and implementation.

This report is designed to build on these findings, equipping district leaders, policymakers, and education stakeholders with actionable insights to strengthen their HQIM adoption process. By establishing strong foundations early, designing comprehensive processes, centering educators' voices, and strategically leveraging external expertise, districts can build on their existing efforts to move from ad hoc curriculum decisions toward more strategic, sustainable practices that ultimately help ensure every student benefits from excellent teaching and learning.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand the factors influencing district adoption of HQIM, EdReports and The Decision Lab conducted a comprehensive survey, funded by the Gates Foundation, of district leaders and educators with direct experience in curriculum adoption processes.

Study Design and Data Collection: We surveyed district leaders and educators to assess current adoption challenges, selection priorities, and decision-making behaviors when selecting instructional materials. The survey included questions about districts' adoption processes, challenges experienced at different stages, openness to external support, and preferences for various adoption approaches.

Sample and Participants: The study included responses from 254 district educators and leaders representing a diverse[1] range of school systems across the United States. All participants took part in a curriculum adoption process

during the two years prior to the survey, ensuring insights from direct experience. Participants held key decision-making roles, such as chief academic officers, curriculum directors, district procurement specialists, and classroom teachers that served on adoption committees.

Data Analysis: Survey responses were analyzed to identify patterns in adoption challenges, preferences for external support, and decision-making priorities. Findings were contextualized using EdReports' existing research on curriculum adoption and implementation practices.

---
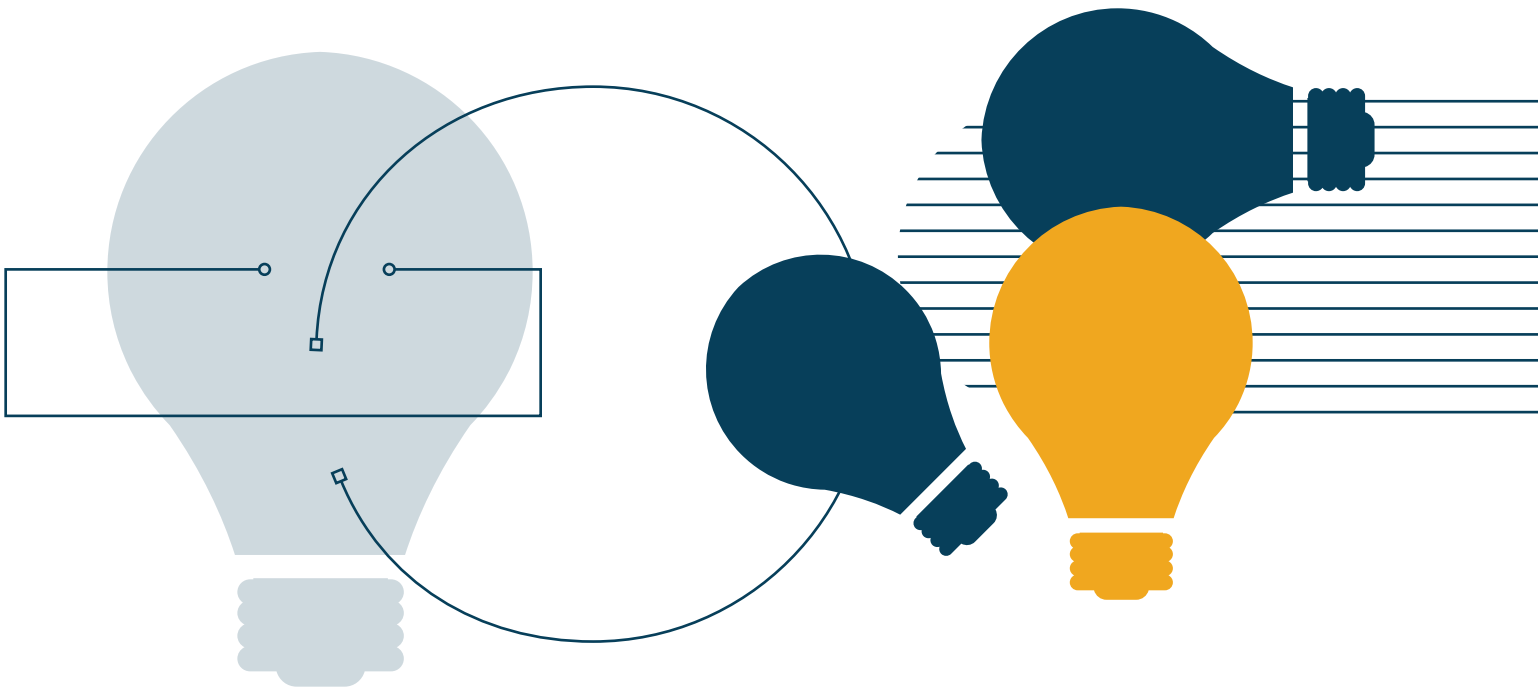
1   Refers to variation across district enrollment size (from under 2,500 to over 25,000 students), geographic region (e.g., South, Northeast, Midwest, West), urbanicity (e.g. urban, suburban, and rural communities), and demographics of the student population, including percentages of students of color, English language learners, and students from low-income households. This diversity ensures findings reflect a broad spectrum of district contexts and challenges.

BACKGROUND

The State of Curriculum Adoption and Usage

Research consistently demonstrates that HQIM positively impact student outcomes. However, adopting a quality program is only the first step. As the Overdeck Family Foundation notes:

> *"[J]ust using HQIM may not be effective for boosting student achievement. How these materials are implemented, including the support educators receive in implementation, is important and could ultimately be a key factor in impacting student learning."*

States and districts that have seen notable improvements—as in the case of Louisiana—approach curriculum reform not as a one-time purchasing decision, but as a multi-year process combining quality materials, intentional implementation, and aligned teacher training.

Yet a troubling gap persists between the availability of HQIM and their regular use by teachers. EdReports' 2023 State of the Market report found that while approximately half of K-12 ELA and math materials meet quality expectations, only about one-third of teachers report using standards-aligned materials at least once a week. More quality materials are available, but they are not regularly influencing classroom instruction.
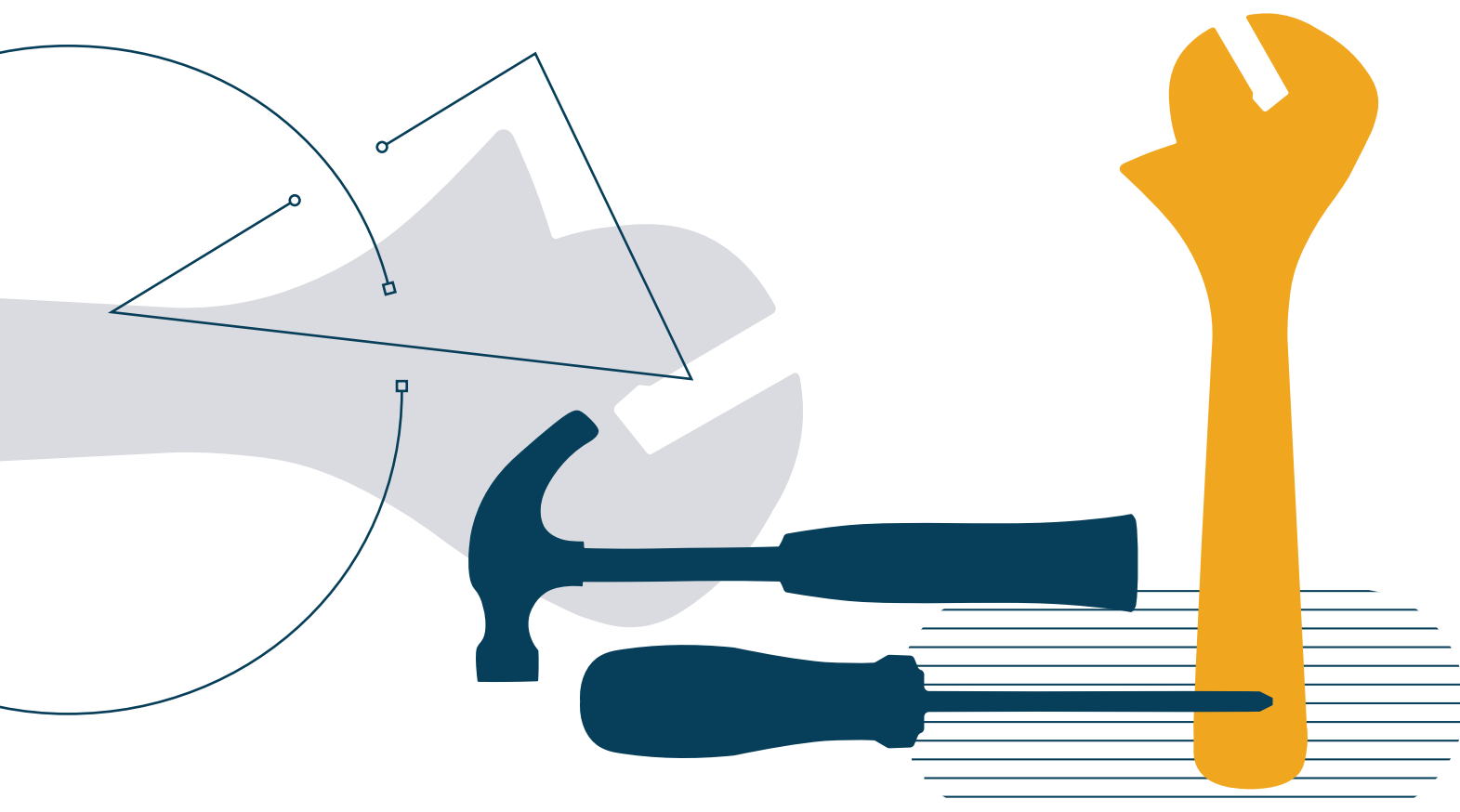
FACTORS IMPACTING ADOPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Through reviewing existing surveys and studies, and from our observations and conversations with districts and states, we've identified several common, interrelated factors that impact effective curriculum adoption and implementation.

Process, Decision-Making, and Timeline: The process of selecting instructional materials varies significantly across districts, reflecting a wide spectrum of practices, ranging from structured to improvised. While some have adopted formal curriculum review protocols grounded in research and stakeholder involvement, many face constraints that make it challenging to clearly articulate goals and maintain consistent guidelines.

In striving to balance competing priorities and limited time, many districts find themselves rushing through adoption, sometimes skipping critical steps such as full stakeholder engagement or educator training. Conversely, others extend the process without clear milestones, leading to decision fatigue. These variations contribute to fragmented decision-making and, in many cases, adopting materials that do not meet academic standards, align with local instructional priorities, or support effective classroom use.

Use of Publisher-Provided Information: Marketing materials, product demos, and promotional claims, though polished and persuasive, can omit critical limitations of the materials and may over-promote alignment to academic standards or evidence-based instructional practices.

As CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools, Dr. Sonja B. Santileses has noted, curriculum decisions in the past were occasionally influenced by "going to the right dinner" with publishers. While Baltimore has been able to take a strategic approach to adoption for years, many school systems continue to face challenges integrating independent,

rigorous evaluations into their decisions. This can lead to heavy reliance on vendor-provided information, which can unintentionally lead to choices influenced more by presentation than by the materials' true instructional quality.

Stakeholder Engagement and Buy-In: Some districts have developed inclusive practices that bring together teachers, instructional leaders, school administrators, and community members to collaboratively assess options and align selections with classroom realities. These participatory models tend to yield stronger buy-in, increased trust in the process, and more consistent implementation fidelity.

However, these approaches are the exception more than the rule. Only 22% of teachers report having a role in selecting instructional materials, according to Voices from the Classroom 2024 by Educators for Excellence (E4E). Districts often conduct reviews through small committees with limited educator involvement, which can result in low enthusiasm and inconsistent use of newly adopted materials. Teachers who feel disconnected from the process are less likely to engage deeply with the curriculum, reducing its potential impact on student learning.

Capacity and Resource Constraints: Smaller or under-resourced districts often lack dedicated curriculum teams or content experts, making it difficult to conduct comprehensive reviews, build consensus, or plan for successful implementation. Limited digital infrastructure, inadequate access to print materials, and tight budgets create practical challenges for full-scale adoption. Even

> Teachers who feel disconnected from the adoption process are less likely to engage deeply with the curriculum, reducing its potential impact on student learning.

edreports

THE DECISION LAB

when promising materials are identified, many districts lack the capacity to provide sustained instructional coaching for effective long-term use.

State and Local Requirements: Understanding government regulations is becoming increasingly complex as state-level influence over education policy intensifies. Traditionally, states have shaped the K-12 market through adoption cycles and funding—often providing 40% or more of district budgets—but this influence is expanding. Since 2013, 40 states have passed laws supporting evidence-based reading instruction, some with specific mandates relating to curriculum and professional development.

District leaders are increasingly attuned to this shift; recent survey data shows that state adoption lists have surged in importance as starting places for district curriculum evaluations. Policy trends around high-quality instructional materials could place even more responsibility on state agencies as they guide districts through the adoption process. In an ever evolving landscape, districts face growing pressure to navigate regulatory and policy changes and balance competing priorities—impacting their ability to adopt and use HQIM effectively.

KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

The experiences of 250 district leaders illuminate the realities districts face when adopting curriculum in today's resource-constrained environment. These findings highlight both challenges and opportunities for improvement.

1. Districts Can Build on Agreement Regarding the Importance of HQIM

District leaders and educators report entering the instructional materials adoption process with several foundational strengths. Most respondents (87%) agree that there is strong alignment in their district that instructional materials matter (with only 6% disagreeing). This shared belief provides a strong cultural foundation for meaningful curriculum work.

There is also substantial agreement on what constitutes quality, with 77% agreeing that there is strong alignment in their district on the most important criteria for identifying high-quality core curricula.
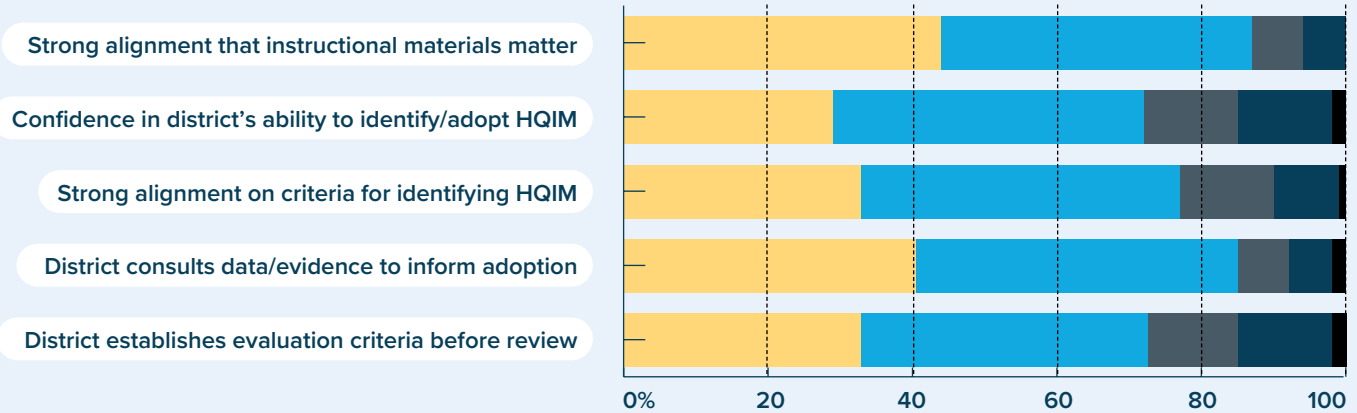
Confidence in districts' ability to navigate the adoption process is relatively strong, though somewhat less certain than other measures. A full 72% of respondents express complete confidence in their district's ability to identify and adopt HQIM, while 15% disagree, indicating an uncertainty about this critical function in several districts.

> This widespread consensus from district leaders around both the importance of instructional materials and the key criteria for quality creates a promising foundation for districts to build upon.

Evidence-based adoption practices appear to be common across districts. A large majority (86%) agree that their district consults data such as student achievement records or vendor reports when making adoption decisions. Additionally, most districts draw on structured review practices: 72% report that their district usually establishes predetermined evaluation criteria internally, such as using a rubric. This widespread consensus around both the importance of instructional materials and the key criteria for quality creates a promising foundation for districts to

District Leader Agreement with Curriculum Adoption Statements

Legend: STRONGLY AGREE · AGREE · NEUTRAL · DISAGREE · STRONGLY DISAGREE

- Strong alignment that instructional materials matter
- Confidence in district's ability to identify/adopt HQIM
- Strong alignment on criteria for identifying HQIM
- District consults data/evidence to inform adoption
- District establishes evaluation criteria before review

X-axis: 0%, 20, 40, 60, 80, 100

build upon. Rather than having to establish basic buy-in to HQIM or navigate fundamental disagreements about what constitutes effective curriculum, districts can focus their energy on addressing the more complex challenges of implementation and sustainable change. This alignment represents a significant asset that districts can leverage as they work to bridge the gap between their commitment to high-quality materials and the practical realities of classroom implementation.

It's worth noting that these high levels of agreement may reflect, in part, the composition of our survey sample, with all respondents having participated in a recent curriculum adoption process with more resources available around components of HQIM and how to incorporate them into materials selection. Many respondents come from districts that already value HQIM, but even with high-level alignment around their importance, districts still struggle with effective implementation. Understanding the disconnect between intent and practice is central to our inquiry.

2. Districts Struggle with Stakeholder Buy-in and Materials Implementation

When asked to identify where they experience the greatest challenges during curriculum adoption, respondents pointed to activities spanning the middle and later stages of the process, with the most significant difficulties concentrated in the later phases.

Half of Districts Are Challenged in Achieving Consensus and Implementation

The two highest-ranked challenges both occur in the later stages of adoption: 49% of those surveyed cited "achieving consensus or stakeholder buy-in to the decision" as their biggest challenge, while 48% identified "implementing purchased curriculum" as a major roadblock. Notably, "making a decision about which curriculum to adopt" ranked much lower (only 22%), creating an interesting gap. This suggests that the decision-making process itself may not be conducted with sufficient consensus-building, contributing to the downstream challenges districts face in securing stakeholder buy-in.

Investigating Options and Evaluating Choices Can Be a Struggle

The middle phases of adoption also present notable difficulties, though not as severe as the later stages: 35%

District-Reported Challenges by Curriculum Adoption Phase
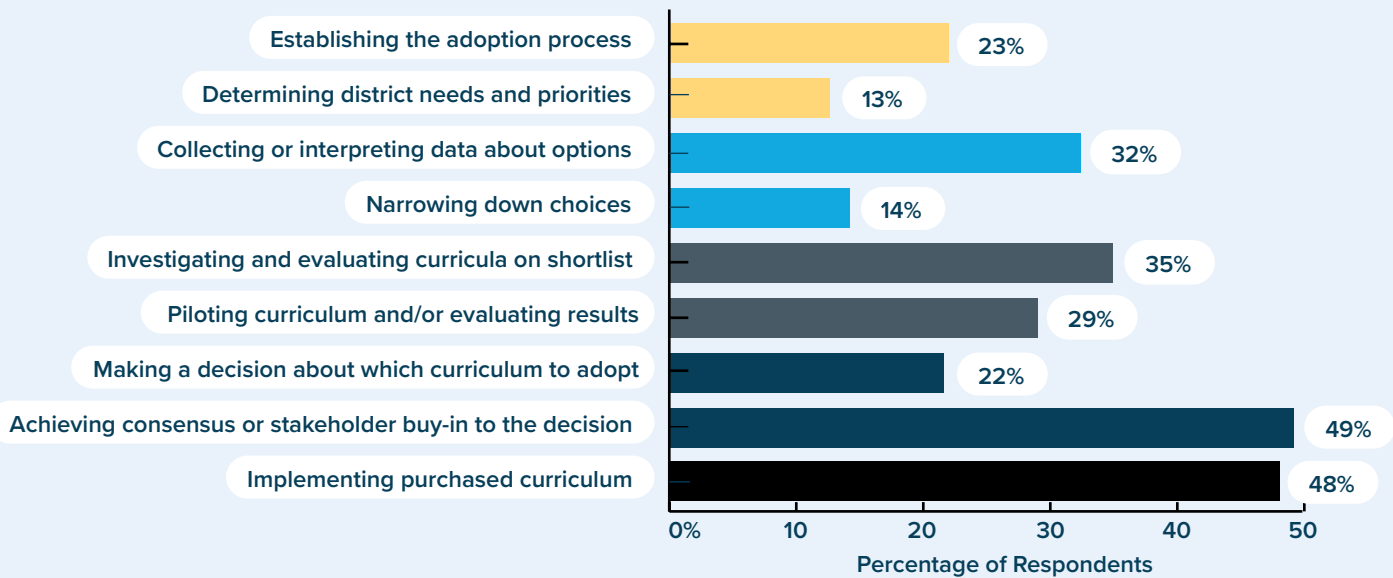
Adoption Phase: 🟡 EARLY 🔵 EARLY-MID ⚫ MID 🔵 MID-LATE ⚫ LATE

Challenge	Percentage
Establishing the adoption process	23%
Determining district needs and priorities	13%
Collecting or interpreting data about options	32%
Narrowing down choices	14%
Investigating and evaluating curricula on shortlist	35%
Piloting curriculum and/or evaluating results	29%
Making a decision about which curriculum to adopt	22%
Achieving consensus or stakeholder buy-in to the decision	49%
Implementing purchased curriculum	48%

Percentage of Respondents (0% – 50%)

Note: Percentages represent the proportion of respondents who selected each option in a "Select all that apply" format. Totals may exceed 100%

shortlist," while 29% reported difficulties with "piloting curriculum and/or evaluating results." These activities, which involve deep evaluation and testing of potential materials, represent substantial challenges for over one-third of respondents.

Districts Are Generally Comfortable with Identifying Curriculum Needs and Establishing a Process

The early phases present a more varied picture of challenge levels. While "collecting or interpreting data about options" ranks as the fourth-greatest challenge overall at 32%, other early-stage activities pose fewer difficulties. "Narrowing down choices" and "determining district needs and priorities" were cited by only 14% and 13% of respondents respectively, while "establishing the adoption process" ranked sixth overall at 23%. This suggests that while districts may struggle with the technical aspects of data work early in the process, they generally feel more confident about foundational planning and initial scoping activities.
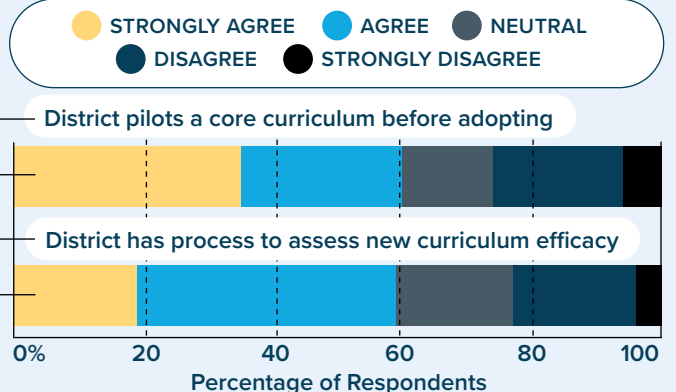
This pattern is reinforced by responses about current district practices. While 86% of respondents report their districts "consult data or evidence to inform adoption,"

significantly fewer demonstrate strong practices in the challenging mid-to-late stages. For example, a common, and helpful, practice for districts adopting new materials is to conduct a field test or a pilot to ensure the program meets the needs of the teachers and students.

- **60%** report that their district pilots curriculum before adoption

- **59%** report having processes to assess curriculum efficacy during implementation

Notably, when it comes to assessing efficacy during implementation, only 19% "strongly agree" their district

District Practices for Piloting and Evaluating Core Curriculum

🟡 STRONGLY AGREE 🔵 AGREE ⚫ NEUTRAL
🔵 DISAGREE ⚫ STRONGLY DISAGREE

District pilots a core curriculum before adopting

District has process to assess new curriculum efficacy

Percentage of Respondents (0% – 100%)

has a process in place, compared to 40% who "agree"—suggesting that even those who examine efficacy believe they may be able to do more.

When ranking potential challenges, districts identified two clear areas that emerge in the foundational stages of adoption:
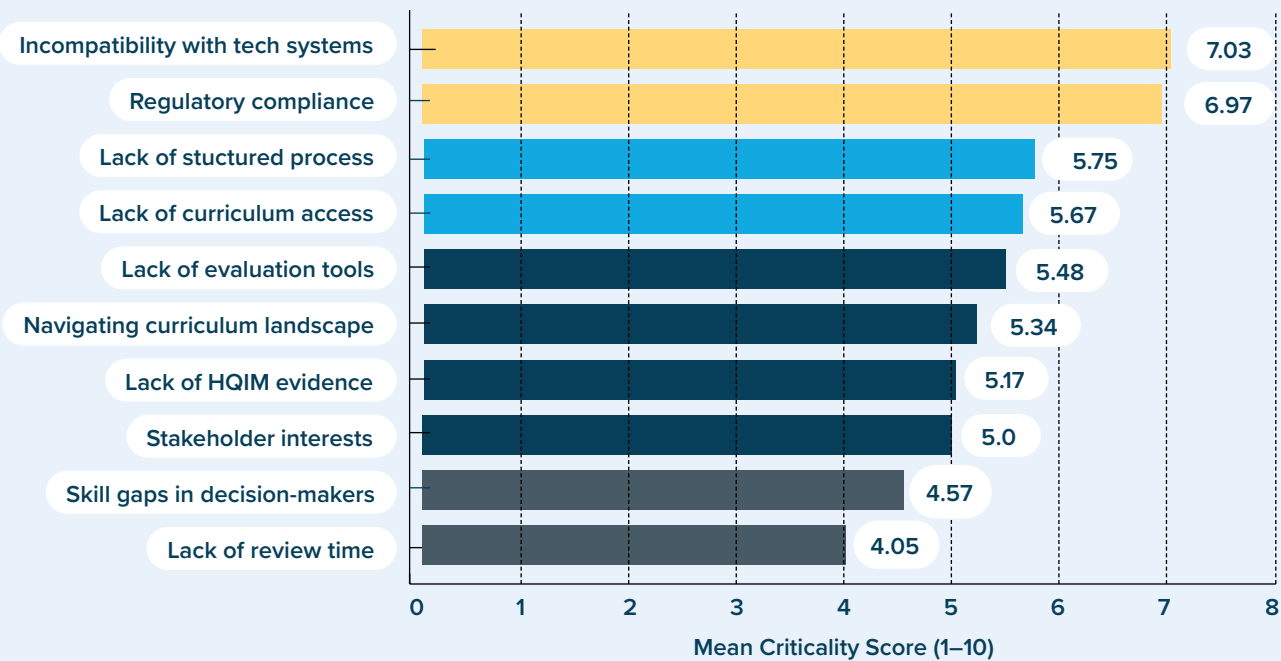
1. Incompatibility of existing infrastructure with new technology systems (biggest challenge)

2. Understanding and adhering to local, state, and federal regulations (second biggest challenge)

> While districts may feel confident about their general selection capabilities, they recognize the critical importance of foundational work, understanding regulatory requirements and ensuring technological compatibility, before effective evaluation and selection can occur.

These early-stage concerns significantly outpaced other challenges, such as lack of standardized adoption processes or access to curriculum information. This suggests that while districts may feel confident about their general selection capabilities, they recognize the critical importance of foundational work, understanding regulatory requirements and ensuring technological compatibility, before effective evaluation and selection can occur.

Interestingly, this creates a tension in the data: districts report significant challenges in mid-to-late stage activities such as consensus-building and implementation, while simultaneously identifying early-stage infrastructure and compliance work as their most critical priorities. This pattern suggests that districts may need stronger foundational planning to set up for success in later stages.

District-Ranked Curriculum Adoption Challenges

Challenge	Mean Criticality Score (1–10)
Incompatibility with tech systems	7.03
Regulatory compliance	6.97
Lack of stuctured process	5.75
Lack of curriculum access	5.67
Lack of evaluation tools	5.48
Navigating curriculum landscape	5.34
Lack of HQIM evidence	5.17
Stakeholder interests	5.0
Skill gaps in decision-makers	4.57
Lack of review time	4.05

Note: the score is the mean of an ordinal ranking of each challenge amongst the ten options with 10 being the highest and 1 being the lowest score possible

3. Districts See Clear Value in External Support, Particularly for Process and Communication
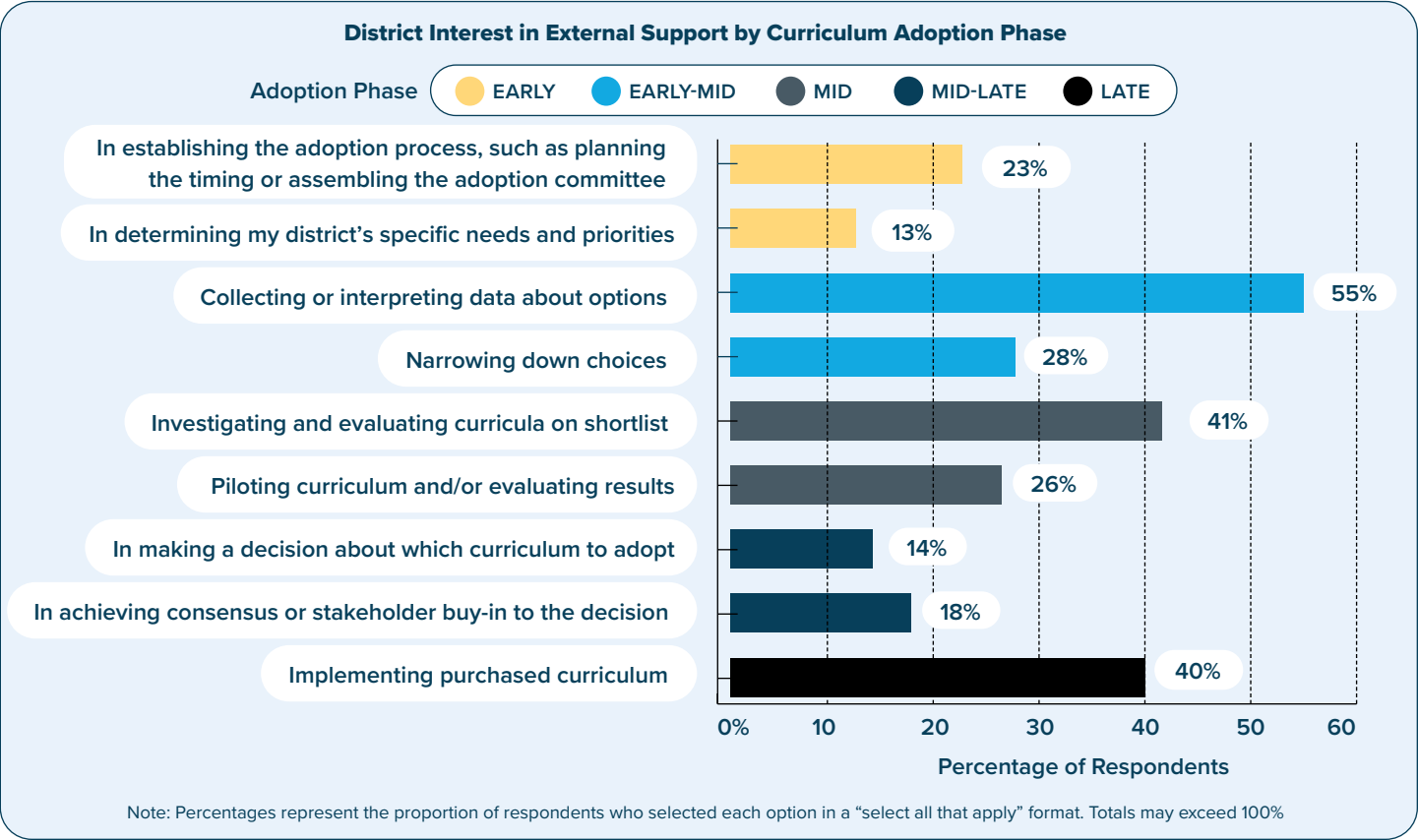
Our survey data reveals that districts are open to external support across multiple stages of the adoption process, with particularly strong interest in areas related to data interpretation, evaluation, and implementation. This openness suggests that districts recognize their capacity limitations and see value in specialized expertise.

> Districts may be underestimating the complexity of change management and stakeholder engagement, viewing these as inherently internal responsibilities despite the availability of specialized expertise in these areas.

Data Interpretation, Evaluation, and Implementation Top the List for External Support

When asked during which part of the curriculum adoption process they would consider turning to an external organization for advice and support, districts showed clear preferences. The top response was collecting or interpreting data about curriculum options (55%), while 41% want support for investigating and evaluating curricula on their shortlist, and 40% for implementing purchased curriculum. Smaller but still significant portions would turn to external partners for narrowing down choices (28%) and piloting curriculum or evaluating results (26%).
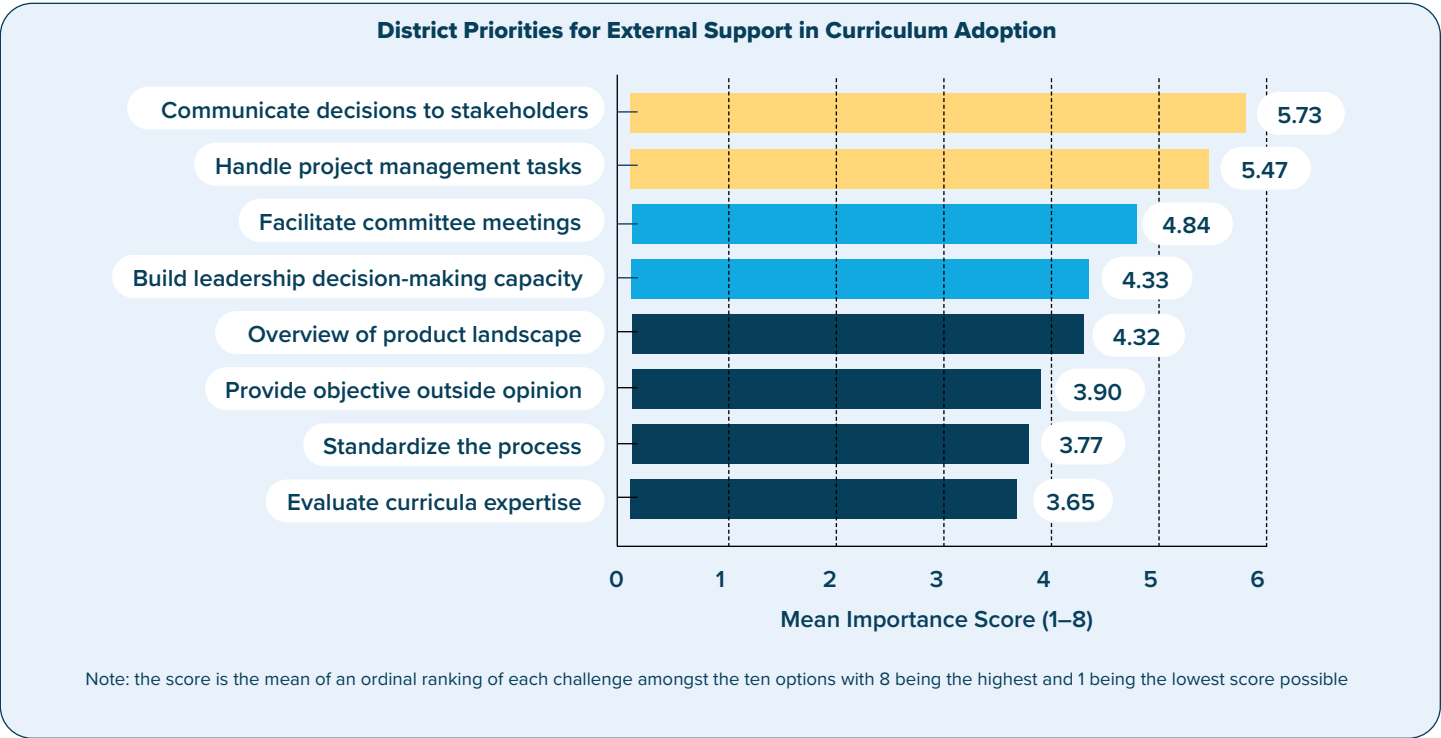
Notably, districts were less interested in external support for consensus-building (18%) and final decision-making (14%), suggesting they prefer to retain control over these more political and strategic aspects of adoption while seeking technical assistance with evaluation and implementation.

District Interest in External Support by Curriculum Adoption Phase

Adoption Phase: EARLY — EARLY-MID — MID — MID-LATE — LATE

Phase	Percentage
In establishing the adoption process, such as planning the timing or assembling the adoption committee	23%
In determining my district's specific needs and priorities	13%
Collecting or interpreting data about options	55%
Narrowing down choices	28%
Investigating and evaluating curricula on shortlist	41%
Piloting curriculum and/or evaluating results	26%
In making a decision about which curriculum to adopt	14%
In achieving consensus or stakeholder buy-in to the decision	18%
Implementing purchased curriculum	40%

Percentage of Respondents (0% – 60%)

Note: Percentages represent the proportion of respondents who selected each option in a "select all that apply" format. Totals may exceed 100%

External Organizations Provide Value with Project Management and Communication Skills

When ranking what they value most from external providers, districts prioritized organizational and interpersonal capabilities over technical curriculum expertise. The highest-ranked reason for working with external organizations was helping to communicate decisions more effectively to stakeholders; followed by taking over project management of materials adoption, facilitating and moderating committee meetings, and supporting stakeholder alignment. Districts also valued the ability of external organizations to build district leaders' capacity, teach skills to inform better decisions, and understand the broader overview of the product landscape.

Interestingly, "bringing expertise and experience in evaluating curricula that the district is currently lacking" ranked lowest, despite districts' strong interest in evaluation support. This suggests districts may see external evaluation support as valuable, but prefer organizations that can also provide broader process management and communication expertise rather than solely technical curriculum knowledge. This may reflect a growing confidence among districts in conducting internal evaluations supported by widely available tools, like EdReports. However, since adoptions don't occur frequently, many districts may not be equipped to manage evaluations effectively, highlighting the disconnect between perceived capacity and actual needs.

District Priorities for External Support in Curriculum Adoption

Priority	Mean Importance Score
Communicate decisions to stakeholders	5.73
Handle project management tasks	5.47
Facilitate committee meetings	4.84
Build leadership decision-making capacity	4.33
Overview of product landscape	4.32
Provide objective outside opinion	3.90
Standardize the process	3.77
Evaluate curricula expertise	3.65

Mean Importance Score (1–8)

Note: the score is the mean of an ordinal ranking of each challenge amongst the ten options with 8 being the highest and 1 being the lowest score possible

These insights can inform professional development offerings for district leaders. District decision-makers aren't asking for an external organization to tell them what to do, they're asking for supplemental capacity for some of the most resource-intensive parts of curriculum adoption, primarily creating a data-driven understanding of the curricula they think are best for their learning community. The most impactful professional development helps districts bridge the gap between adoption and implementation, which was not only a highly ranked need for external support, but also one of the most widespread challenges for district leaders.

4. Complex Tradeoffs in Seeking External Support May Lead to Missed Opportunities

Comparing how districts rank their adoption challenges against their openness to external support reveals patterns that highlight complex district-level decisions, such as where to invest limited resources, whether or not to avoid organizational support, and considering the change-management aspects of curriculum adoption.

The Consensus Paradox: Top Challenge, Low Priority for External Support

A striking misalignment appears around consensus-building and stakeholder buy-in, which ranks as districts' number one challenge (49%), but falls to seventh place for external support (18%). This dramatic gap likely reflects districts' desire to maintain control over sensitive stakeholder relationships and political dynamics within their communities. Districts may view consensus-building as inherently requiring internal leadership and local knowledge.

> Overconfidence in early stages may blind districts to the critical need for robust strategic planning and sustained resources to ensure effective long-term uptake and impact of high-quality materials.

This tension becomes even more interesting when considered alongside districts' ranking of "communicating decisions effectively to stakeholders" as the top value they see from external organizations. Districts seem to value communication expertise, but continue to struggle with consensus-building internally, where such communication is most critical. This suggests an opportunity to explore how external support could complement—rather than replace—internal leadership.

Implementation and Piloting Show Reasonable but Incomplete Alignment

Implementation demonstrates fairly good alignment, ranking as the second-highest challenge (48%) and tying for second place in openness to external support (40%). However, given that implementation ranks as districts' most pressing concern alongside consensus-building, the eight-percentage-point gap suggests room for greater openness to external assistance in this critical area.

Similarly, piloting shows consistent ranking, placing fifth for both challenge level (29%) and external support interest (26%). Yet, effective piloting could serve as a critical lever for reducing the implementation difficulties and consensus challenges that cause districts the most problems. Preventive assistance could address the root causes of districts' most pressing concerns.

Undervalued Prevention Opportunities Point to Root Causes

The most concerning pattern emerges when considering the relationship between early- and late-stage challenges. Many district leaders express confidence in their ability to manage the early stages of curriculum adoption, such as defining instructional needs and developing shortlists of candidate materials. However, the later-stage challenges that commonly emerge during consensus building, engaging stakeholders, and implementation could be mitigated by greater investment in the start of the adoption process.

This misalignment reflects a broader issue of underinvestment in strategic adoption practices. Process establishment ranks sixth for both challenge level and external support interest (23% each), while determining district needs ranks ninth for both measures (13% each). Yet the consensus and implementation difficulties that plague districts likely stem from problems in these foundational phases.

Districts rating these early-stage activities as relatively low concerns may reflect a significant blind spot for ensuring long-term uptake and impact of high-quality materials. The foundational activities where districts report the least concern may create the very conditions for the consensus and implementation problems that districts identify as their greatest challenges. The low priority placed on strengthening these foundational elements means the external support district leaders are most likely to invest in may only address symptoms instead of preventing adoption difficulties at the root.

CALLS TO ACTION

These findings should prompt state and district leaders to reassess their approach to curriculum adoption and implementation. Our survey reveals clear opportunities for districts to strengthen their processes by addressing foundational barriers, designing comprehensive approaches, and strategically leveraging both internal expertise and external support.

1. Establish Strong Foundations: Address Regulatory Requirements and Infrastructure Early

Districts rank understanding government regulations as their second-highest priority challenge, reflecting the increasingly complex landscape of state mandates and policy requirements. With 40 states having passed science of reading laws and the growth of state influence over curriculum decisions, districts must build capacity to navigate this evolving environment.

- Conduct regulatory mapping to understand all applicable state, federal, and local requirements before beginning material review

    - **Leverage state department of education resources** including HQIM definitions, approved materials lists, guidance documents, curriculum frameworks, and alignment tools to ensure aligned decision-making

- **Assess technology infrastructure compatibility** early in the process (ranked as districts' #1 critical challenge) to ensure the necessary information for evaluating curriculum compatibility

- **Build internal expertise** or partnerships to interpret changing compliance requirements

- **Align adoption timelines** with regulatory deadlines and state adoption cycles

- **Document compliance strategies** to streamline future adoption processes

Rhode Island exemplified this approach by establishing a clear state definition of HQIM and developing guidance documents and resources that districts used to improve their local selection process. These resources provided necessary support to districts and enabled more consistent adoption decisions across districts within the state. As Commissioner Angelica Infante-Green noted, "We made sure that all curriculum [sic] were aligned to our curriculum frameworks, academic standards, and we looked at our assessments to do that kind of work."

2. Design Comprehensive Adoption Processes That Plan for Implementation from Day One

While 72% of surveyed districts express confidence in their selection abilities, only 60% pilot materials before adoption, 59% have processes to assess curriculum efficacy during implementation, and 48% struggle with implementation challenges. These gaps suggest that districts need more comprehensive planning to connect early decision-making to classroom success.

- **Begin with a clear instructional vision and a deep understanding of local needs**. Gather data, set priorities, and plan thoroughly before reviewing materials.

- **Create detailed adoption roadmaps** that extend beyond selection to multi-year implementation support.

- **Establish clear metrics and monitoring systems** before materials are purchased.

- **Allocate adequate time for each phase**, avoiding rushed decisions that contribute to consensus problems.

- **Build piloting and evaluation into the timeline.**

- **Plan professional learning and coaching support** as part of the initial adoption decision.

For example, in Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, leaders developed their instructional vision alongside teachers, shaping priorities and building buy-in. In Fife, Washington, math facilitator Jennifer Burrus spent a year researching curricula, visiting schools, and talking with teachers before launching the selection process. Kentucky and Nebraska supported holistic, strategic adoption at the state level through statewide guidance: Kentucky used a Model Curriculum Framework, integrating collaboration and evidence-based practices; while Nebraska piloted local tools that led to a statewide instructional materials hub.

3. Center Educator Voice While Building Broad Stakeholder Consensus

Achieving stakeholder buy-in ranks as districts' greatest challenge (49%), yet only 18% would seek external support for consensus-building activities. This suggests districts may be underestimating the complexity of change management while trying to handle it entirely internally.

- **Involve teachers meaningfully** in evaluation committees from the beginning, not just in final review.

- **Create structured feedback opportunities** throughout the process to build ownership.

- **Engage diverse stakeholders** including students, families, and community members for broader perspectives.

- **Use facilitated processes** to work through disagreements and build consensus.

- **Invest in communication strategie**s to help stakeholders understand the rationale behind decisions.

Rebecca Kockler, former Assistant Superintendent of Academic Content at the Louisiana Department of Education, describes the state's successful approach to educator engagement and professional learning: "We had so many teachers fired up about high-quality curriculum, which is why I think Louisiana is now 12 years into high-quality curriculum being used in the state. … It was critical to have the perspective of the people in the schools—because they had expertise that nobody else was going to have."

4. Leverage External Expertise Strategically in a Resource-Constrained Environment

With districts facing increasing budget pressures and potential resource constraints, strategic use of external support for high-value, complex parts of the adoption process can maximize impact while preserving funds for core priorities. Survey data shows districts are most open to external help with data interpretation (55%), curriculum evaluation (41%), and implementation (40%)—areas where specialized expertise could provide meaningful return on investment.

- **Consider external support for process design and project management** to free internal capacity for strategic decisions. Districts rank help with "communicating decisions effectively to stakeholders" as the most valuable external contribution, followed by assistance with "administrative tasks of project management." External facilitation can also address consensus-building challenges through structured stakeholder engagement processes.

- **Leverage independent curriculum reviews** such as EdReports' to streamline evaluation work rather than conducting comprehensive alignment reviews in-house. This allows districts to focus internal expertise on applying quality criteria to local context and needs rather than technical alignment analysis.

- **Invest selectively in implementation support** where districts show the greatest struggle (48% report implementation challenges). Curriculum-based professional learning and coaching from external providers can accelerate teacher readiness while building internal capacity for ongoing support.

- **Prioritize partnerships that build internal capacity** rather than create dependency. The most effective external support teaches districts to manage these processes independently over time, as demonstrated in Rhode Island's approach where state-facilitated learning cohorts helped districts develop their own comprehensive selection capabilities.

Rather than viewing external support as an additional expense, districts would benefit from a strategic investment that can prevent costly implementation failures and maximize the impact of curriculum investments already being made.

By implementing these strategies, districts can address the root causes of adoption challenges rather than just managing symptoms. The evidence from successful districts like Baltimore City and states like Rhode Island shows that when foundational work is done well, consensus and implementation challenges become much more manageable. Strategic external partnerships can provide specialized expertise while local teams maintain the control and ownership necessary for sustainable success.

ABOUT EDREPORTS AND THE DECISION LAB

EdReports

With the firm belief that what is taught matters and that all students deserve standards-aligned, research-based materials tailored to diverse needs, including multilingual learners, EdReports publishes free, online, evidence-rich reviews of instructional materials. Since its launch in 2015, EdReports has trained over 1,000 educators to conduct rigorous reviews of instructional materials and has released more than 1,200 free reviews of math, ELA, and science curricula. The organization's work has been instrumental in helping educators across the country make informed decisions about the materials they use in their classrooms.

The Decision Lab

The Decision Lab is an applied research and innovation firm using behavioral science and design to help ambitious organizations create a better future. The Decision Lab provides consulting services to some of the largest organizations in the world, carrying out research in priority areas, and running one of the largest publications in applied behavioral science. In the past, this work has helped organizations such as the Gates Foundation, Capital One, the World Bank and numerous Fortune 500 companies solve some of their thorniest problems using scientific thinking.