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CALIFORNIA CURRICULUM COLLABORATIVE

From Materials to Outcomes: California's Curriculum Opportunity

How California's math framework and state adoption list shape curriculum decisions—and what districts must do to translate materials into stronger outcomes.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

California is at an inflection point for instructional materials—one that will shape students' access to grade-level learning for years to come. The release of the 2023 Mathematics Framework for California Public Schools (framework) and the state's first updated math adoption list since 2014 marks a major policy moment after more than a decade of limited statewide guidance. At the same time, California is advancing literacy efforts aligned to the science of reading and preparing for a K-8 English language arts instructional materials list in 2027. Together, these shifts create urgency and opportunity: districts are being asked to make high-stakes curriculum decisions at a moment of heightened expectations for instructional quality.

The 2023 framework reflects a clear and ambitious vision for high-quality math instruction, representing a significant public investment in defining what quality should look like in classrooms. It provides extensively detailed guidance on instructional shifts, emphasizing conceptual understanding, mathematical reasoning, discourse (explaining and discussing mathematical thinking), and access for multilingual learners. In theory, this clarity should support stronger adoption and implementation decisions. In practice, however, the 2025 math adoption resulted in a broad list of 64 state-approved programs, with all K-8 submissions approved for inclusion. While the list establishes eligibility and compliance with state criteria, it offers limited comparative evidence to help districts distinguish among options or determine which materials are most likely to succeed in their local context.

California's locally driven system carries important implications. Districts may adopt on their own timelines, select off-list materials, and make purchasing decisions shaped by local priorities and funding cycles. This flexibility reflects the state's commitment to local control, but it also means that decisions about when and how to update materials rest entirely at the district level.

Current data illustrate how this plays out in practice. Most California students are still using math materials published before 2018, particularly in districts serving multilingual learners, rural communities, and students from low-income families. Meanwhile, the instructional materials market has improved substantially in quality over the past decade, expanding the availability of programs designed to reflect current research and standards. The challenge then is not simply the availability of higher-quality options, but the varying levels of resources and structures districts have in place to support the adoption and implementation of new programs in a sustainable way.

In California's decentralized system, capacity gaps can slow or complicate the shift to updated materials, even when high-quality options are available. What's more, even when districts are able to select new programs, this doesn't always translate into quality use in the classroom. Findings from Beyond Selection, a national study conducted by EdReports and The Decision Lab, found that while many district leaders nationally express confidence in selecting instructional materials, far fewer have the structures, criteria, and capacity needed to support effective implementation. Standards and adoption lists create important guardrails, but translating them into improved student experiences depends on disciplined local processes and long-term implementation support.

Translating California's ambitious instructional vision into classroom impact will require coordinated action across the system. Districts will need to strengthen local decision-making and implementation processes. County offices and partners can play a critical role by expanding support for evaluation, calibration, and professional learning, and the state can continue pairing ambitious guidance with practical supports. Whether California's investments lead to improved learning experiences will depend not on the framework or list alone, but on how effectively local systems support strong selection and implementation processes to ultimately improve use in classrooms.

CALLS TO ACTION

1. **Connect Selection to Instructional Vision:** Anchor curriculum decisions in a clear, locally defined vision for teaching and learning that aligns materials with professional learning, assessment, and instructional coherence.

2. **Center Teacher Experience:** Ensure curriculum decisions are grounded in educator expertise by engaging diverse teachers throughout the review process, and giving them the time and support to deeply understand the instructional shifts of the framework.

3. **Strengthen Local Decision-Making Processes:** Build transparent, evidence-informed adoption processes that clearly articulate criteria, timelines, and rationales so districts can differentiate among state-approved options and make defensible choices.

4. **Thoughtfully Plan Resource Allocation:** Invest beyond purchase costs by prioritizing professional learning, coaching, and implementation support, especially in districts serving students with the greatest needs.

5. **Partner for Continuous Improvement:** Leverage county offices and regional networks to share expertise, build capacity, and support continuous learning from selection through sustained implementation.

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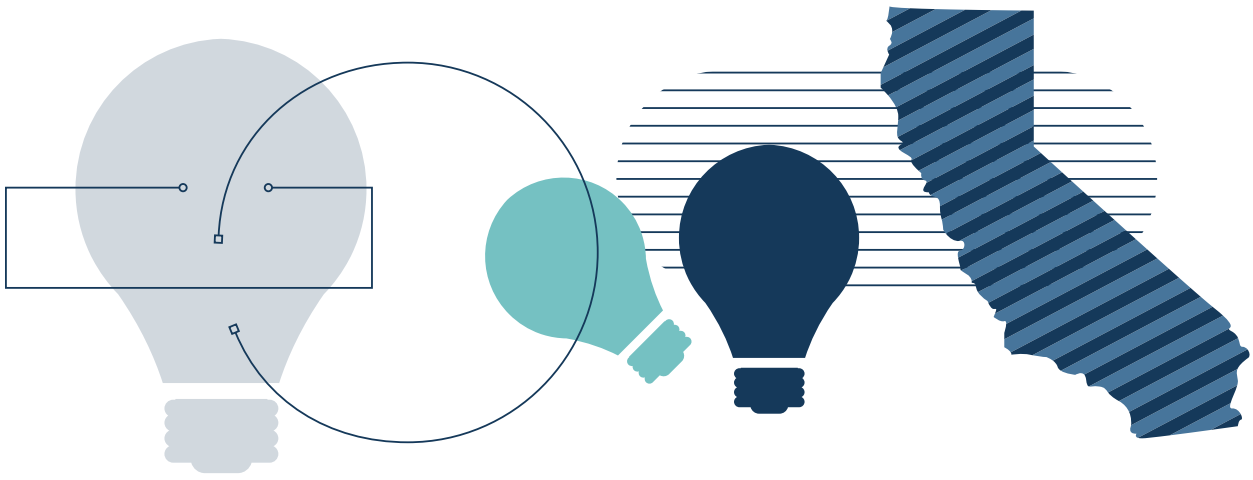
INTRODUCTION

California is entering a moment that will shape students' access to grade-level learning for years to come. The state's recently released K-8 math adoption list, its first since 2014, offers districts an opportunity to move away from aging programs they may have been using for over a decade that no longer reflect current standards or student needs. At the same time, California has advanced a new approach to early literacy, aligned to the science of reading, and is preparing for an updated K-8 ELA adoption in 2027. These shifts place California at a critical moment: one in which districts have an opportunity to rethink their curricular choices, strengthening the instructional foundations that shape student learning.

California's longstanding commitments to equity and high-quality standards are visible in its robust instructional materials review process and policies. Yet many classrooms still lack consistent access to quality instructional materials: those that are standards-aligned, well sequenced across grade levels, and designed to support all learners. These gaps are most pronounced for multilingual learners, students in rural communities, and those in under-resourced districts. The state's size and diversity of district characteristics also create capacity challenges in smaller and less well-resourced districts. These challenges include uneven access to curriculum expertise, limited time for educator-led review, and insufficient staffing and professional learning to translate strong state guidance into consistent classroom practice.

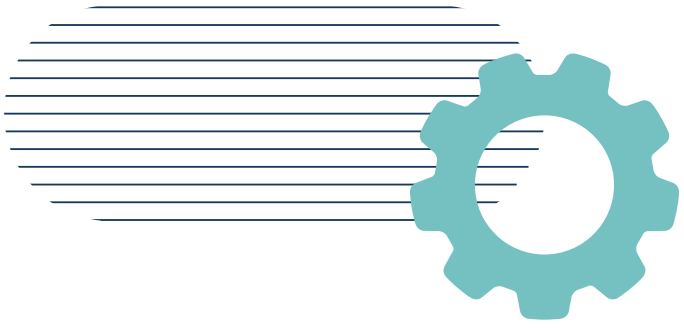
This paper builds on Beyond Selection, a national study conducted by EdReports and The Decision Lab, that found choosing high-quality instructional materials is only the first step toward improving student learning. It applies those insights to California's unique policy and educational context, examining the structures that shape district adoption, the implications of the state's new math list, and the conditions necessary for policy commitments that will result in consistent, high-quality learning experiences for every student.



CALIFORNIA'S INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS CONTEXT AND THE 2025 MATHEMATICS ADOPTION

California's Instructional Materials Context—At a Glance

- California released a new K-8 mathematics framework in 2023 and finalized a new K-8 math adoption list in 2025, its first since 2014.
- The 2025 math adoption list includes 64 approved programs; all K-8 submissions were approved, offering limited comparative signals among options.
- California's system emphasizes local control: districts may adopt on their own timelines, select off-list materials, and make decisions shaped by local funding cycles.
- Despite improvements in the curriculum market, most California students are still using math materials published before 2018, with the greatest gaps in districts serving multilingual learners, rural communities, and students from low-income families.
- Due to the local control system, districts bear primary responsibility for translating strong state guidance into effective classroom practice—making local capacity and decision-making processes central to impact.



Statewide Guidance with Local Flexibility

California's instructional materials system is designed to accommodate the scale and diversity of nearly six million students across close to 1,000 districts, balancing statewide guidance with local control. The State Board of Education (SBE) establishes academic expectations through content standards, which set a shared vision for what students should know and be able to do, while leaving day-to-day instructional decisions to districts and educators.

Those expectations are further interpreted through California's curriculum frameworks for each content area, developed with substantial educator input through the Instructional Quality Commission (IQC). In mathematics, the 2023 framework provides extensive guidance on what high-quality instruction should look like, emphasizing conceptual understanding, mathematical reasoning, discourse (explaining and discussing mathematical thinking), and access for multilingual learners. At more than a thousand pages, it articulates lesson structures, instructional routines, and supports intended to help educators translate standards into classroom practice.

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How Frameworks Shape the State Adoption Process

California's frameworks also guide the state's instructional materials adoption processes. Using framework-aligned evaluation criteria, educator review panels examine submitted materials for standards alignment, access and equity, instructional supports, and compliance with social content requirements. Based on these reviews, the IQC makes recommendations to the SBE, which adopts a list of approved instructional materials for grades K-8. Although state adoptions are intended to occur on a regular cycle, due to a variety of factors, in this cycle mathematics materials were not updated for more than a decade.

The 2025 Math Adoption List: Broad Signal, Limited Differentiation

For the 2025 mathematics adoption, all 38 K–8 programs submitted were approved, along with 26 of the 29 Algebra I/Math I programs—resulting in 64 state-approved programs spanning kindergarten through Algebra I/Math I. As a result, the list primarily functions as a signal of alignment with state requirements, rather than as a tool for distinguishing among programs based on how they may support instruction across varied local contexts.

> The [2025 Math] list primarily functions as a signal of alignment with state requirements, rather than as a tool for distinguishing among programs

This outcome reflects California's longstanding commitment to local control. This flexibility supports local decision-making and responsiveness to community needs, while also placing greater responsibility on districts to interpret a broad statewide signal and translate it into effective classroom practice.

While the intention is to empower districts, this also means districts must assess which curricula best fit their instructional vision, educator expertise, and implementation capacity —often without detailed comparative guidance from the state adoption process.

> In California's system, the burden of instructional decision-making ultimately rests with districts.

What the Data Show About Materials in Use

Current data illustrate how these dynamics play out in practice. Data from the Center for Education Market Dynamics show that most California students are still using math materials published before 2018, with particularly high concentrations of older materials in districts serving multilingual learners, rural communities, and students from low-income families.

Capacity constraints play a significant role in these patterns. Updating instructional materials requires time, staffing, and expertise to conduct reviews, engage educators, and plan for implementation—resources that are unevenly distributed across districts.

A Market That Has Moved Faster Than Adoption

At the same time, the instructional materials market has evolved substantially. Over the past decade, the share of math materials meeting expectations for alignment and quality has increased markedly. Many materials currently in use in California classrooms were designed before these market improvements and before the release of the 2023 framework.

As instructional research and expectations have advanced, even well-regarded older programs may no longer align with current classroom needs—not because they were poorly constructed, but because the field has moved forward.

> The gap between what is available and what is used continues to widen.

California has now articulated one of the most detailed visions for high-quality mathematics instruction in the country and released a new adoption list aligned to that vision. The question is not whether aligned materials exist, but how districts will be able to effectively transition to them. Adoption structures, local timelines, funding flexibility, and uneven district capacity all shape the landscape.

In this context, the 2025 adoption list represents both an important opportunity for alignment and a reminder that stronger local processes—and the supports that enable them—are essential for state guidance to translate into classroom impact.

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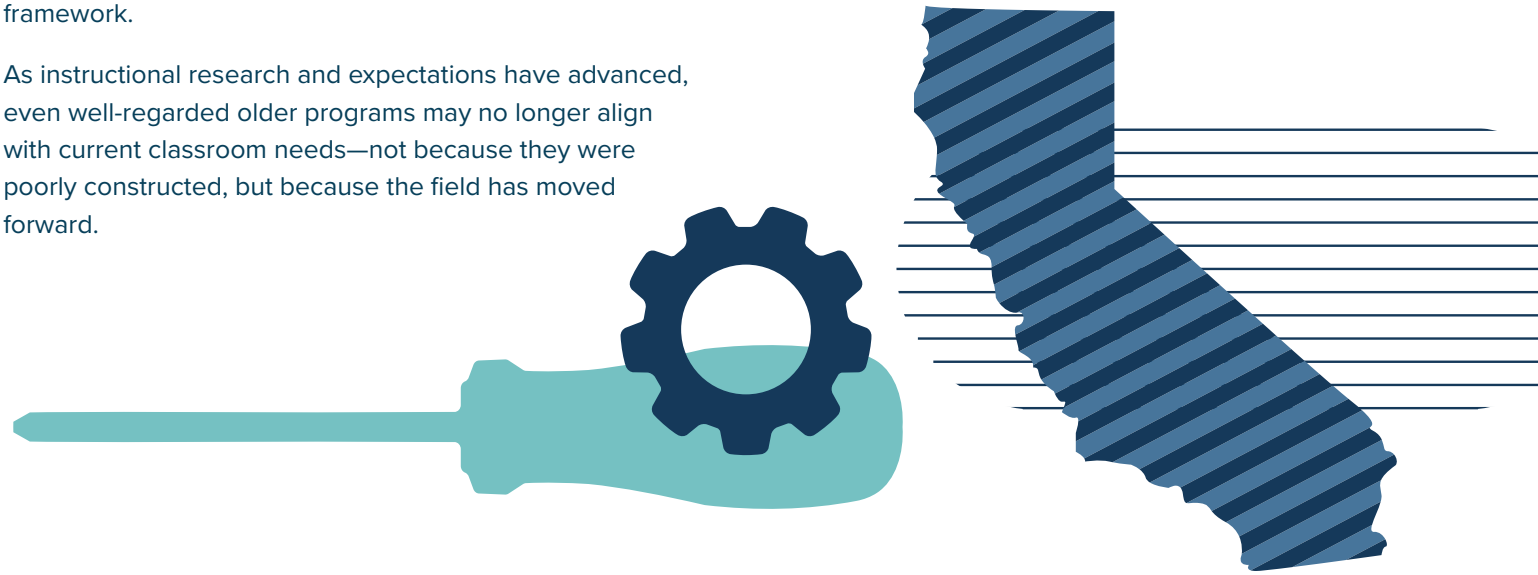


NAVIGATING MATERIALS ADOPTION

Even with strong state guidance and a robust adoption process, districts must still determine whether materials will support high-quality instruction and ensure they are implemented with fidelity—decisions that require more than confidence in selection alone.

From State Guidance to Local Decision-Making

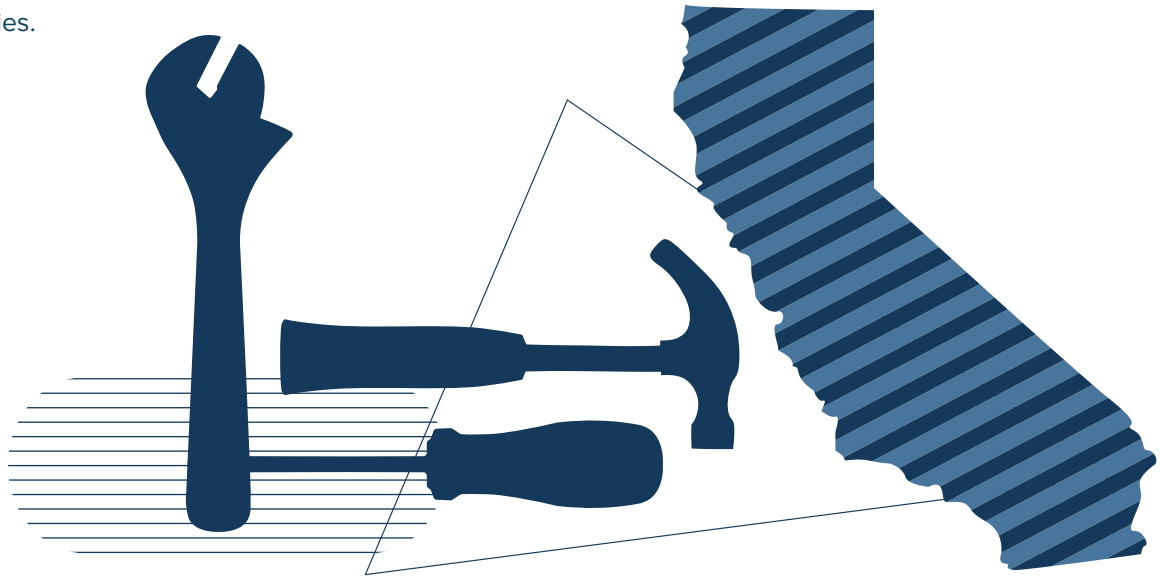
California's mathematics framework provides detailed guidance on what strong mathematics instruction should include and the instructional shifts needed to support student learning statewide. However, the framework is not a selection tool. It does not advise districts on how to prioritize among multiple state-approved options or determine what successful implementation will require in their local context.

In EdReports' experience, districts that navigate adoption most successfully start by translating state instructional guidance into a clear, locally grounded instructional vision—one that reflects their students and educators. These districts articulate not only what high-quality mathematics instruction should look like, but what it will require locally to bring it to life: how reasoning, modeling, and discourse will be emphasized in classrooms; what meaningful access looks like for multilingual learners; and how new materials will drive professional learning and instructional routines. This local vision becomes an anchor for decision-making, helping districts move from broad state guidance to actionable priorities.

What Successful Adoption Processes Have in Common

Successful districts use their instructional vision to intentionally narrow their options. Rather than attempting to deeply review many programs, they identify a small set of non-negotiables—drawn from the framework, student data, and local instructional goals—and use those criteria to focus their analysis. They create structured opportunities for teachers to examine lessons, try out instructional routines, and reflect on how materials would function in real classrooms. Importantly, they build shared understanding across teachers, principals, coaches, and district leaders, so that alignment begins during selection—not after materials are purchased.

> **Successful districts translate state guidance into a clear, locally grounded instruactional vision.**



In districts with limited capacity, these processes may be difficult to execute. Many lack curriculum specialists who can lead evaluations. Others have teachers who carry full instructional loads with little time to explore materials. Rural regions may lack stable broadband, limiting access to digital components. High turnover can disrupt continuity year to year.

California districts also navigate adoption within local contexts that vary widely. County offices differ in the level of instructional support they can provide, school boards bring different expectations to the adoption process, and districts operate on a range of timelines. These differences shape how much time educators have to engage in review, whether pilots are feasible, and how consistently adoption decisions are implemented across schools.

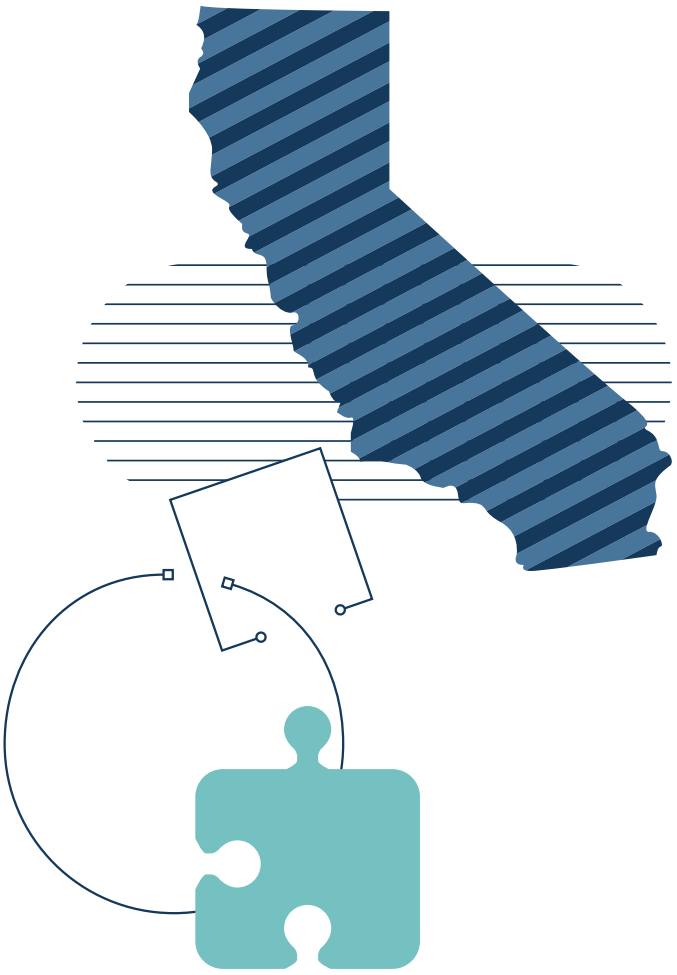
Statewide tools can help mitigate some of these challenges. Resources such as CalCurriculum provide districts with research-aligned guidance and shared language for evaluating instructional materials, and specific advice around California's math framework including this crosswalk between the framework and EdReports' review tools. When used alongside local data and educator expertise, tools like these can help districts narrow options and ground decisions in evidence rather than surface features.

The Confidence-Capacity Gap

The Beyond Selection report helps illuminate a recurring challenge in curriculum decision-making: a gap between confidence in selecting instructional materials and the capacity to support effective implementation. While many district leaders report feeling prepared to choose materials, far fewer have systems in place to define quality in concrete terms, plan for implementation, or assess whether materials are improving instruction once adopted. This confidence-capacity gap often reflects deeper challenges, including limited time for educator learning, insufficient curriculum-based professional learning, and unclear criteria for what implementation of their high-quality materials should look like in classrooms.

> **In a locally driven system, gaps in capacity can amplify variation in students' access to high-quality instruction.**

In California's locally driven system, the confidence-capacity gap carries particular weight. Districts have broad authority to adopt materials on their own timelines, select off-list programs, and make purchasing decisions shaped by local funding cycles under the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). When districts lack the structures needed to bridge this gap, local flexibility can amplify variation across systems—affecting not only` which materials are selected, but whether and when students gain access to instruction that reflects the state's vision for mathematics learning.



HOW EVIDENCE AND TRANSPARENCY STRENGTHEN LOCAL DECISION-MAKING

Transparency as a Foundation for Coherent Decision-Making

Findings from Beyond Selection reinforce the importance of this approach. While many district leaders report confidence in selecting instructional materials, the study found that challenges related to stakeholder buy-in and implementation are far more persistent than challenges related to selection itself. When criteria for quality are implicit or poorly communicated, educators may struggle to see how materials connect to instructional goals, and districts may find it difficult to build the shared understanding necessary for effective use.

One way districts can begin to bridge the confidence-capacity gap is by strengthening the transparency and rigor of local decision-making processes. In a state as large and diverse as California, districts need reliable, accessible information that helps educators and communities understand not just what decisions were made, but how and why. Districts that develop and share clear rubrics, criteria, timelines, and rationales create a shared frame of reference for quality—one that supports coherence during selection and lays the groundwork for implementation. Transparent processes help surface assumptions, align expectations, and reduce friction as materials move from adoption into classrooms.

How Evidence Supports, but Does Not Replace, Local Judgment

Independent curriculum reviews can also help districts strengthen local decision-making by adding instructional evidence that goes beyond what is available through the state adoption process alone. EdReports' reviews examine national editions of instructional materials using consistent criteria that were developed by educators and that focus on instructional design, coherence, usability, and support for diverse learners. In many cases, state-specific editions closely mirror the national versions, drawing on the same underlying structure and instructional approach. As a result, national reviews offer valuable insights for districts as they evaluate state editions, particularly when used to understand how materials are designed to support teaching and learning.

> Independent reviews are best used as a starting point—not a final judgment.

At the same time, EdReports does not review state-specific editions directly. As a small, independent nonprofit, EdReports prioritizes reviews that reach the greatest number of districts and students nationwide. State editions are not always publicly accessible for independent review, and localized adaptations can vary. For California districts, this means EdReports reviews are best used as a starting point rather than a final judgment, helping educators understand the instructional approach of a program, ask informed questions about how state editions differ, and conduct deeper, localized analysis using the state's framework, local data, and educator expertise.

From Transparent Selection to Effective Use

Evidence and transparency alone, however, are not sufficient. They must be paired with meaningful educator engagement, collaborative structures that connect classrooms to central offices, and sustained, curriculum-based professional learning. When these elements work together, districts are better positioned not only to select strong instructional materials, but to support teachers in using them well—turning confidence in selection into capacity for impact.

> Evidence and transparency matter most when they are paired with educator engagement and sustained professional learning.

THE PATH AHEAD FOR CALIFORNIA

California's revised math framework, new math list, and upcoming adoptions represent more than procedural milestones. They mark an opportunity to recalibrate mathematics learning statewide to reflect California's commitment to equity and rigorous instruction.

Seizing this moment will require instructional coherence and sustained investment. Districts will need time to clarify instructional vision, opportunities for teacher leadership, and systems that encourage shared learning. County offices, professional learning providers, and regional networks will play indispensable roles supporting districts with training, calibration, and implementation planning.

If California can pair strong policy with strong practice, it has the potential to model what equitable access to high-quality materials looks like at scale. More importantly, it can ensure that every student, regardless of zip code, language background, or district capacity, experiences mathematics in ways that cultivate deep understanding, confidence, and opportunity.

Calls to Action for California's District Leaders

California has clarified what strong mathematics instruction should look like. The next challenge is ensuring districts have the processes, evidence, and capacity to select and implement materials that actually live up to that vision.

District leaders play a central role in ensuring that California's current mathematics adoption and upcoming English language arts adoption translate into stronger, more coherent instructional experiences for all students. As districts navigate this moment, several actions are especially critical.

1. **Connect Selection to Instructional Vision**
   - Ground selection in a clearly articulated district vision for student learning, equity, and access to rigorous content.
   - Align adoption decisions with a coherent system of professional learning, assessments, and instructional coaching.
   - Use the content area framework as an anchor for decision-making.
2. **Center Teacher Experience**
   - Create diverse, representative teacher review teams.
   - Ensure teachers have structured time to examine lessons, analyze student work, and understand the instructional shifts in the state framework.
3. **Strengthen Local Decision-Making Processes**
   - Publicly post adoption timelines, rubrics, and final rationales to build trust and clarity with educators and communities.
   - Use evidence from California's framework, EdReports reviews of national editions, and local data to inform decision-making.
4. **Thoughtfully Plan Resource Allocation**
   - Prioritize funding for curriculum-aligned professional learning, coaching, and implementation, not just the purchase of materials.
   - Collaborate through county offices or existing networks to share expertise, pilot structures, and review capacity.
   - Ensure that multilingual learners, rural communities, and students in historically underserved settings are central considerations, not afterthoughts.
5. **Partner for Continuous Improvement**
   - Work closely with county offices and partners to support calibration, training, and implementation planning.
   - Engage educators, families, and community members early and throughout the adoption process to foster buy-in and transparent communication.
   - Participate in regional networks that allow districts to share lessons learned, analyze data, and improve implementation over time.

ABOUT 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.

For more information on this publication, visit: www.edreports.org.

ABOUT CALCURRICULUM

The California Curriculum Collaborative (CalCurriculum) is a partnership between EdReports and UnboundEd (formerly Pivot Learning). CalCurriculum helps districts adopt and implement great instructional materials by providing independent reviews, content-specific resources, and adoption and implementation guidance tailored to the California context.