

REPORT SUMMARY

# Wisconsin Educators' Perceptions of Instructional Materials and Professional Learning

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Center for Public Research and Leadership at  
Columbia University

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### **ABOUT THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC RESEARCH AND LEADERSHIP (CPRL) AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY**

The Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University is a partnership of university-based professional schools that works to revitalize public education while reinventing professional education. CPRL provides talented education, law, management, and policy students with rigorous coursework and skills training and engages them in research and consulting projects to ready them for challenging careers enhancing the education sector's capacity to improve the outcomes and life chances of all children, particularly those of color, from low-income households, or otherwise traditionally underserved. CPRL's highly rated professional services run the gamut from evaluative research to strategic initiatives to enhance organizational learning to content areas such as personalized and socio-emotional learning, teacher preparation and retention, early childhood education, and school integration. To date, CPRL has completed more than 100 research projects; formed partnerships with two dozen professional schools; and prepared more than 325 students, with some 70% of its graduates serving public education and allied organizations.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) aims to improve the quality of education all Wisconsin students receive and to address equity gaps that have persisted within the state for decades. In service of these academic and equity goals, DPI and its partner organizations are pursuing several strategies. One of these is to align DPI's academic strategy and work with educators from all system levels and all corners of the state under a coherent approach to ensure all classrooms have access to standards-aligned high-quality instructional materials and all teachers are supported in the use of those materials through aligned professional learning.

DPI seeks to do this in a way consistent with the state's and DPI's organizational values: local control and a recognition of classroom educators' position to best know their own and their students' needs. Thus, DPI has identified that its structure and position within lines of communication allow it to function best as a facilitator to this strategy, ensuring that educators themselves are positioned as the designers and implementers.

As one of its first steps, DPI asked the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University to lead focus groups of teachers and instructional coaches. The goal of these sessions was to learn about (1) how educators define, participate in selecting and developing, and would like to improve their access to high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) and associated professional learning (PL) systems; (2) what generally resonates with,

excites, or concerns educators in these areas; and (3) what steps educators would like DPI to take to support districts, schools, and teachers in these areas.

The ensuing focus groups provided an explicit opportunity for teachers and instructional coaches to discuss instructional materials and professional learning. In total, nearly 80 educators of varying experience levels, grade levels, and subject areas, from five Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESAs) ranging in state geography and population density participated. Conversations with these educators covered: the merits of both content of and selection processes for HQIM and PL; the responsibilities for different stakeholders in supporting the selection and use of HQIM and selection and provision of PL; ideas for how best to discuss HQIM and PL in a commonly understood and respected way; and the extent to which educators see access and effective use of HQIM as a means to addressing equity gaps across the state.

These conversations yielded findings in six areas: instructional materials, instructional materials selection, professional learning content, professional learning selection, efforts to improve equitable student outcomes, messaging about instructional materials and professional learning, and DPI communications with educators about this and other topics. These findings are listed and detailed in this report.

# INTRODUCTION TO PROJECT

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) aims to ensure that every child in the state graduates ready for higher education and the workplace. In pursuit of this vision, DPI is investigating how it can better support districts, schools, and teachers in adopting and implementing, high-quality instructional materials and aligned professional learning in all schools in the state.

In November 2018, DPI will bring together approximately 1,500 educators and stakeholders in a one-day blended convening held in 14 regionally run groups connected virtually across the state. The convening will explore and address why high-quality instructional materials and professional learning matters and how Wisconsin schools and districts can determine quality. It will also include opportunities to hear from Wisconsin educators using this equity strategy.

Having and communicating a clear stance on quality curriculum and professional learning, would be different from the way DPI has previously engaged with districts and schools. In anticipation of the November convening, when this new direction will be developed in a collaborative manner with educators across the state, DPI has begun developing an engagement and stakeholder participation plan that establishes systematic and meaningful lines of communication with and between districts, educators, and other stakeholders. The goal is to position DPI as a facilitator of decisions made by leaders and educators throughout the

state, rather than as the driver. In preparing for the November convening, DPI is accordingly committed to understanding and incorporating the views and needs of districts and educators, providing a mechanism for receiving and responding to district and educator feedback, and in those and other ways maximizing the success of the November event and of Wisconsin's statewide shift toward standards-aligned high-quality instructional materials and professional learning.

In support of that commitment, DPI engaged CPRL to conduct a series of focus groups with teachers and instructional coaches throughout the state. The objective of the conversations was to learn how educators define, participate in selecting and developing, and would like to improve their access to high-quality instructional materials and associated professional learning systems; what generally resonates with, excites, or concerns them in these areas; and what steps they would like DPI to take to support districts, schools, and teachers in these areas.

DPI asked CPRL to assist in this part of the project based on CPRL's neutral perspective and to assure the participating educators that the discussions would be conducted without any preconceived notions about Wisconsin's public education system.

This report presents CPRL's findings in connection with both goals.

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To organize the research and achieve DPI's goals, CPRL developed five research questions:

1. What do teachers think about the way curricula and PL are currently selected or developed?
  - a. What do teachers like about existing curricula and PL?
  - b. What needs do teachers currently have related to existing curricula and PL?
  - c. What beliefs – positive/negative – do teachers have about high quality instructional material (HQIM) and PL associated with it?
2. What does the decision-making process related to the selection of curricula and PL currently look like? What role do districts, schools, and teachers play?
3. What responsibilities for the selection of curricula and PL do teachers feel should be borne by which levels of the system? (Governor and State Legislature, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), Cooperative Educational Service Agencies (CESAs), district leadership/central office, school leadership, teachers)
4. Are their particular words or concepts relating to curricula and PL that positively or negatively resonate with teachers?
5. Does messaging about equity resonate with teachers? In other words, do teachers agree that access to rigorous high-quality instructional materials is an important strategy for reducing achievement gaps?

These questions guided the development of the methodology described below for collecting and making meaning of research and focus group data, as well as the organization of the project's findings.

# METHODOLOGY

The study's methodology included three phases: (1) research of publicly available material and due diligence interviews with eight DPI and other Wisconsin education leaders; (2) focus group sessions with 79 educators across the state; and (3) analysis of focus group data to develop findings and develop recommendations.

In the first phase, CPRL conducted interviews with DPI staff members, staff from the Wisconsin Rtl Center, and other education partners. Learnings from these initial informational interviews allowed the team to refine the five key research questions described above and design an overall research approach tailored to Wisconsin's local context.

In the second phase, CPRL prepared for and conducted focus groups with Wisconsin Educators. DPI and CPRL determined that in-person focus groups held in locations across the state would be the best way to solicit meaningful feedback from educators. Focus groups were held on-site at five locations:

- CESA 1 in Pewaukee
- CESA 2 in Madison (divided into two focus groups to be responsive to high attendance)
- CESA 5 in Portage
- CESA 10 in Chippewa Falls
- CESA 11 in Turtle Lake

These five locations were selected in order to maximize the total number of focus group sessions conducted over a three-day period while also covering as great a geographical reach as possible. To focus on those stakeholders directly using and impacted by HQIM and associated PL, and to do so while maintaining a safe, low-stakes environment,

focus groups targeted teachers and instructional coaches only. Sessions were two hours, and educators were offered a \$50 stipend for their participation. CESA staff served an instrumental role in promoting the focus group sessions to educators in their regions and providing space for the sessions. For educators unable to attend one of the six in-person focus group meetings, a series of additional remote sessions were offered in the weeks immediately following.

CPRL drew upon the five research questions above to develop a standard protocol which was used for every focus group session, which allowed the team to ensure some consistency across all sessions. The protocol included open-ended questions related to educators' experience with and recommendations regarding instructional materials and associated professional learning and how DPI might better support teachers in those areas. By implementing a "step up, step back" norm during the discussions, all educators were able to participate, which was a conclusion repeated many times in end-of-session feedback forms. Each focus group session also included an interactive exercise designed to learn about educators' values for different dimensions of HQIM. In this activity, educators were each provided with sixteen notecards with phrases describing various characteristics of high-quality curriculum. Participants were asked to sort these characteristics into three priority groups (high, medium, and low), and then were asked to rank-order just those cards already sorted as high priority. Educators were also encouraged to use guided note forms with questions mirroring the focus group protocol so that the study could capture all perspectives should time run short or individuals prefer not to share aloud with the group.

Nearly 80 Wisconsin educators from across the state participated in the focus groups, representing a balance of instructional roles, years of experience, and grade level (see Figures 1-4b below). Educators represented a variety of subject areas and specialties, including math, ELA, Title I, English Language Learners, and special education. A comparison to all educators statewide shows that in almost every

dimension, the focus group was representative of all teachers statewide. In the study's final phase, CPRL analyzed focus group data to develop the findings detailed in this Report. Again, the study's research questions served as a guiding framework. CPRL used qualitative coding to synthesize the large amounts of data collected during focus groups, identify trends in participant responses (see Findings below).

Figure 1: Focus group attendees by role

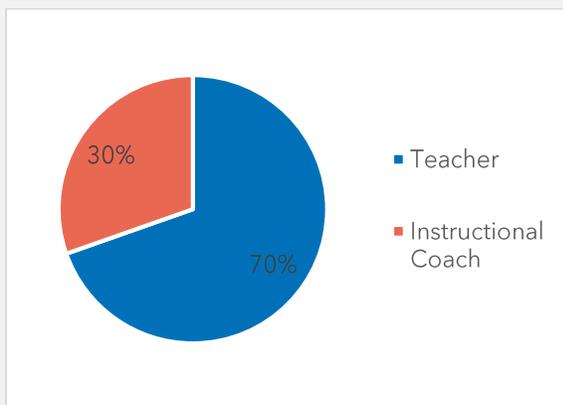


Figure 2a: Proportion of educators' grade levels in the focus groups

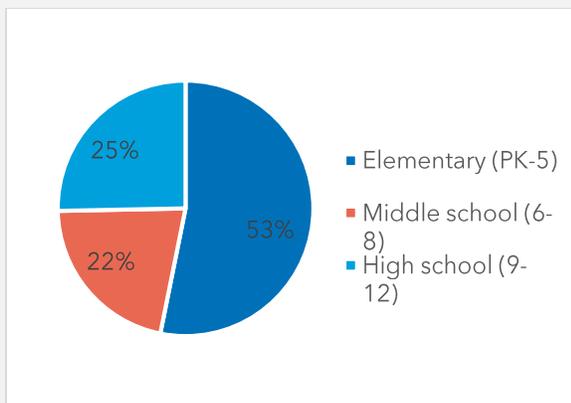
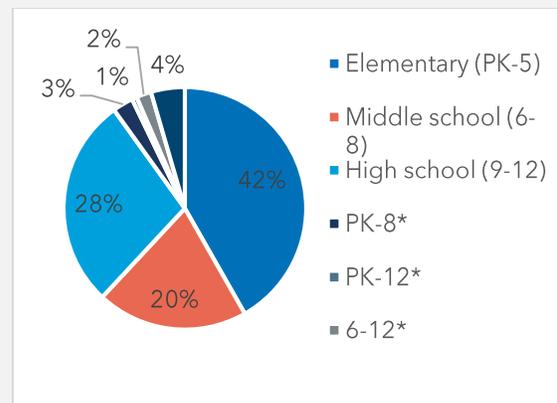


Figure 2b: Proportion of educators' grade levels in the state\*



\* Focus group participants were asked to select the primary grade level and subject area they teach, whereas statewide data includes all grade levels and subject areas taught by each licensed teacher. Without surveying all teachers in the state to identify their primary areas of focus by grade and subject, this Report uses best available data and data bands.

Figure 3a: Proportion of educators' years of experience in the focus groups

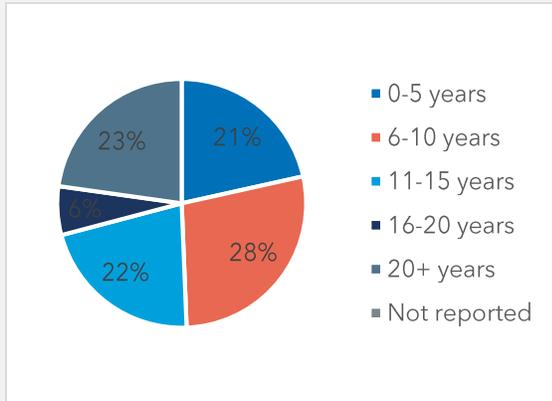
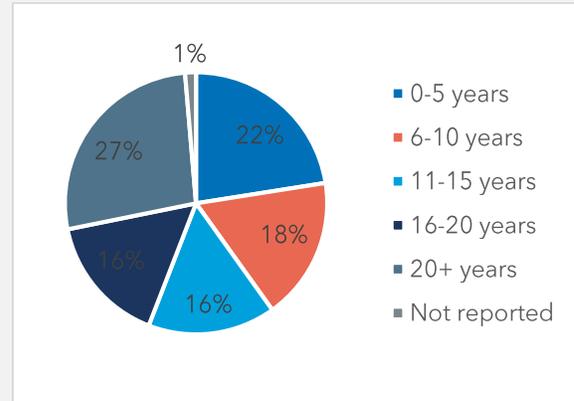


Figure 3b: Proportion of educators' years of experience in the state



\*\* Statewide data on educators' years of experience is self-reported and, in approximately 10% of cases, has been found to be imprecise or incorrect. Because focus group participants also self-reported this (and other) data, CPRL has concluded the data are still helpful for comparing the breakdown of years of experience of focus group participants and statewide educators as a whole.

Figure 4a: Proportion of educators' subject areas in the focus groups

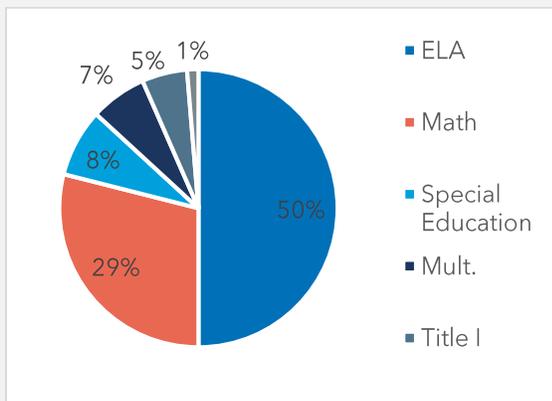
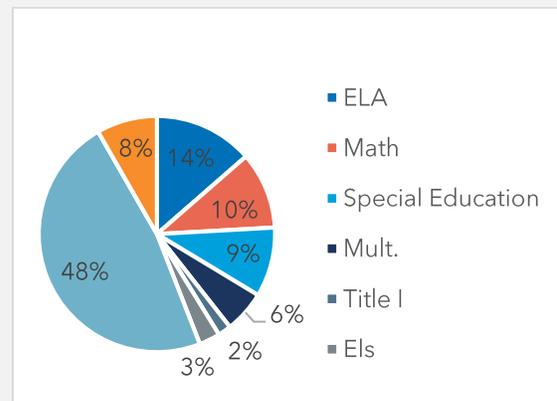


Figure 4b: Proportion of educators' subject areas in the state<sup>+</sup>



+ Similarly, while the focus groups specifically recruited ELA, math, special education, English Learners, and Title I teachers (and almost all were able to identify a primary subject, and only five participants did not fall into one of these categories), statewide data on educators' experience are categorized by many more subject areas. First, to ensure the comparison to the whole could be made in as parallel a way as possible, teachers teaching other subjects were excluded from the analysis in 4b. Second, statewide educators listed as teaching more than one subject in statewide data were not surveyed for their primary subject and therefore were included as teaching multiple subjects or, in the case of elementary grades, as teaching all subjects.

# FINDINGS

<a href="#">Instructional Materials 1</a>	<p>Teachers want curricula that cohere and align with Wisconsin Academic Standards and across grade levels.</p>
<a href="#">Instructional Materials 2</a>	<p>Teachers are skeptical of the quality of purchased instructional materials, particularly of textbooks. They have greater faith in self-designed curricula, while recognizing difficulties, such as time, effort, and inconsistent content and quality, associated with these self-made curricula.</p>
<a href="#">Instructional Materials 3</a>	<p>Teachers seek a balance between having resources available and being able to choose the ones that are most appropriate for their students.</p>
<a href="#">Instructional Materials 4</a>	<p>Teachers especially want curricula with resources useful for differentiation among students with different learning levels and styles. Here again, teachers want a balance: structured support for differentiation and the freedom and flexibility to make the choices they feel are best for their students.</p>
<a href="#">Instructional Materials 5</a>	<p>Teachers' opinions vary regarding curricula that is particularly directive. Some teachers dislike its restrictive nature, preferring the freedom to design their own instructional materials. Other teachers report liking the consistency that a scripted curriculum provides for students across multiple classrooms within a district.</p>
<a href="#">Instructional Materials Selection 1</a>	<p>Across the state, there is broad variability in how districts and schools select new curricula and in teachers' involvement in the selection process. When involved, teachers' role varies from a limited one (causing frustration) to deeply integrating teachers in the process (generating higher investment in the process and curricula selected).</p>
<a href="#">Instructional Materials Selection 2</a>	<p>School and district instructional materials selection processes operate as a funnel. Consequently, if HQIM are not among the three to 12 options that typically comprise the initial pool of options, they are unlikely to be considered at all as options are narrowed to a single choice.</p>
<a href="#">Instructional Materials Selection 3</a>	<p>Instructional materials selection decisions are affected by factors other than the quality of the curriculum, including the amount and timing of available public funding for curricular materials and a curriculum's consistency with the schedule in use in the relevant district or school.</p>

<a href="#">Professional Learning Content 1</a>	Teachers prefer receiving PL directly rather than secondhand from other teachers.
<a href="#">Professional Learning Content 2</a>	Teachers prefer PL delivered by individuals with real and recent (ideally current) teaching experience so they can have confidence in descriptions about how PL, especially with respect to HQIM, might be applicable in their own classrooms.
<a href="#">Professional Learning Content 3</a>	Teachers prefer PL that is ongoing and revisits the same topic throughout the school year, allowing teachers to try implementing what they have learned, share and debrief results, make adjustments, and spiral learning into more advanced practices.
<a href="#">Professional Learning Selection 1</a>	As with instructional materials selection, there is variability statewide in how districts and schools select PL providers. However, teachers have input in PL selection more often than they do in instructional materials selection.
<a href="#">Professional Learning Selection 2</a>	Teachers want PL that is differentiated based on their amount of experience and instructional or student needs. Teachers believe “one size fits all” PL is low-quality.
<a href="#">Equity 1</a>	Teachers who are more familiar with state and local achievement gap data and have experience talking about issues of educational equity are clearer and more vocal about its importance, the education system’s historical role in allowing the persistence of achievement gaps, and in the system’s responsibility to address such gaps.
<a href="#">Equity 2</a>	Awareness and understanding of equity issues is highest among educators who received equity-related communication or support directly (from DPI or others). This suggests messaging about equity (again, from DPI or other sources) has been effective.
<a href="#">Messaging 1</a>	Teachers and instructional coaches seem to find certain concepts motivating, whereas others evoke negative reactions. Still others elicit mixed responses.
<a href="#">Messaging 2</a>	Several key phrases and concepts resonate with teachers and instructional coaches as characteristics of high-quality curriculum.
<a href="#">DPI Communications 1</a>	Teachers cite being most influenced by other teachers they know personally.
<a href="#">DPI Communications 2</a>	Teachers view DPI as responsible for licensure, accountability, and data analysis and have very little contact with DPI outside of these areas. Educators are interested in DPI taking a greater role in offering PL, vetting lists of curricula and PL, and providing libraries of resources.