Annual Report 2025

EdSignals Studio

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01 Introduction

Who we are

We are a nonprofit initiative that empowers K–12 leaders with evidence-based insights to make confident, student-centered decisions.

Our Mission

Our mission is to strengthen the K–12 ecosystem by turning evidence into action. We help districts adopt high-quality instructional materials and support actors in the education sector with behavioral science and research-based guidance.

Our Vision

We envision a future where every student has access to equitable, engaging learning experiences. By aligning evidence, resources, and people, we work toward classrooms that thrive and decisions that consistently put students first.

What we do

Market Insights

Independent, evidence-based research on instructional materials and adoption trends.

Capacity Building

Tailored support for educators and leaders on the skills needed to implement high-quality materials.

Tools & Resources

Interactive dashboards, practical guides, and frameworks designed to make evidence easier to access and apply.

Partnerships

Connections across the education ecosystem to align efforts, share knowledge, and maximize impact.

Executive Summary

In 2025, the EdSignals Studio focused on increasing the **availability of evidence around instructional materials** to improve decision-making in the K-12 marketplace. Through work with curriculum and EdTech review organizations, regional education agencies, product vendors, district leaders, and other market actors, we uncovered common challenges and tested cooperative solutions to **improve the adoption and implementation of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM).**

Evidence Must Be Contextual and Credible

District leaders adopt HQIM when evidence feels relevant, trustworthy, and actionable.

64%
of district leaders cite social proof (regional client lists, authentic peer testimonials) as a primary driver of adoption

87%
of district leaders value clear information on usability and implementation, yet this content is often buried

78%
of instructional leaders prioritize evidence showing a product's direct impact on student outcomes

What this means

Quality arbiters should aim to provide contextually rich, evidence-based narratives.

Information Delivery Drives Adoption

How information is delivered significantly affects whether it is used.

Meaningful interactivity
helps users intuitively explore detailed content without cognitive overload, while differentiating the experience for various user types

Co-Creation Messaging
allows educators to act as partners in a resource's creation, while tapping into a narrative that motivates 67% of users to become active promoters of a resource

68%
of district leaders identify conferences as a primary discovery channel

What this means

Design, format, and distribution are essential considerations for maximizing impact.

Educational Intermediaries Enable Scaled Impact

Intermediaries accelerate systemic change by extending reach and credibility.

Regional education agencies act as a bridge
between state policy and classroom practice

Engaging one intermediary
(e.g., County Office of Education or Education Service Center) can indirectly support dozens of districts

District leaders view intermediaries as highly credible sources
that influence their awareness and adoption of HQIM

What this means

Relationship-building with intermediaries is a lever for improving the adoption of HQIM.

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Partner Work

Article at a glance

Maximizing Utility of Product Certifications

Product certifications are a currently underutilized resource for streamlining the EdTech procurement process and improving the quality of products in the marketplace. We've developed several recommendations certifying organizations and other market actors can use to increase uptake of quality certifications.

40%
of instructional leaders do not use product certifications in their EdTech procurement decisions.

92%
of EdTech vendors want to see evidence of buyer demand before pursuing a product certification.

78%
of instructional leaders want product impact on student outcomes to be verified by a third party.

Calls to Action for Certifying Organizations

1. Prioritize instructional leaders as a primary audience, focusing certification criteria and communications on the factors that matter most to them: student outcomes, privacy, and alignment with digital pedagogy.

2. Concentrate marketing efforts on high-impact channels—particularly conferences, professional associations, and local educational bodies—where instructional leaders actively seek trusted guidance.

3. Recognize that vendor adoption depends heavily on demonstrated buyer demand, creating a feedback loop that begins with building awareness and credibility among district leaders.

Maximizing Utility of Product Certifications

Introduction

Product certifications are a powerful tool for quickly and reliably signaling the quality of an EdTech product. They save district leaders time by not having to validate key product features themselves, they support vendors in improving their products to meet standards of quality, and they reward vendors who adhere to these standards with increased attractiveness and reach to potential buyers.

40% of instructional leaders don't use any product certifications in their procurement decisions.

Despite their widespread utility, about **40% of instructional leaders say they don't use any product certifications in their EdTech procurement decisions.**[1] The underutilization of product certifications by the ecosystem represents an impactful opportunity to improve evidence-based decision-making for EdTech adoption.

Our Research Questions

- What are the **information seeking behaviors** of EdTech vendors and instructional leaders for signals of quality?
- What would drive vendors and decision-makers to **rely on product certifications**?
- How can product certifications be marketed to **drive engagement**?

To understand why product certifications are so underutilized, we collaborated with a quality arbiter of EdTech products to further understand what keeps instructional leaders and EdTech vendors from relying on these useful tools.

Instructional Leader Priorities for EdTech

When we asked instructional leaders about what they most prioritize when evaluating EdTech products, three factors consistently stood out: **impact on student outcomes, alignment with digital pedagogy, and data privacy.**

Using a MaxDiff experiment (a preference measurement tool) with 22 participants, we found that student outcomes were the most prioritized certification feature, with nearly double the score of the second-place option. Surveys (n = 50) corroborated this finding, with **78% of instructional leaders saying they prioritize evidence of impact on student outcomes** when evaluating an EdTech product for purchase, making it the most frequently chosen option. Furthermore, when asked about what features of an EdTech product they would like verified by an external organization, evidence-based effectiveness in improving student outcomes was the most frequently chosen option (by 74% of respondents).

Alignment with standards of digital pedagogy was the second-most preferred choice in the MaxDiff, and was highly ranked by 48% of respondents as an important feature of EdTech products.

Data privacy and security received similar enthusiasm, with 66% of respondents saying they would want it verified by an external organization, and 46% saying they prioritize it when evaluating an EdTech

1. EdSignals Studio, Cohort 1, 2025

92% of EdTech vendors want to see evidence of buyer demand before pursuing a certification.

They also seek continued partnership from the certifying organization.

product. Validation of a product's data privacy and security practices was the third-most preferred choice in the MaxDiff.

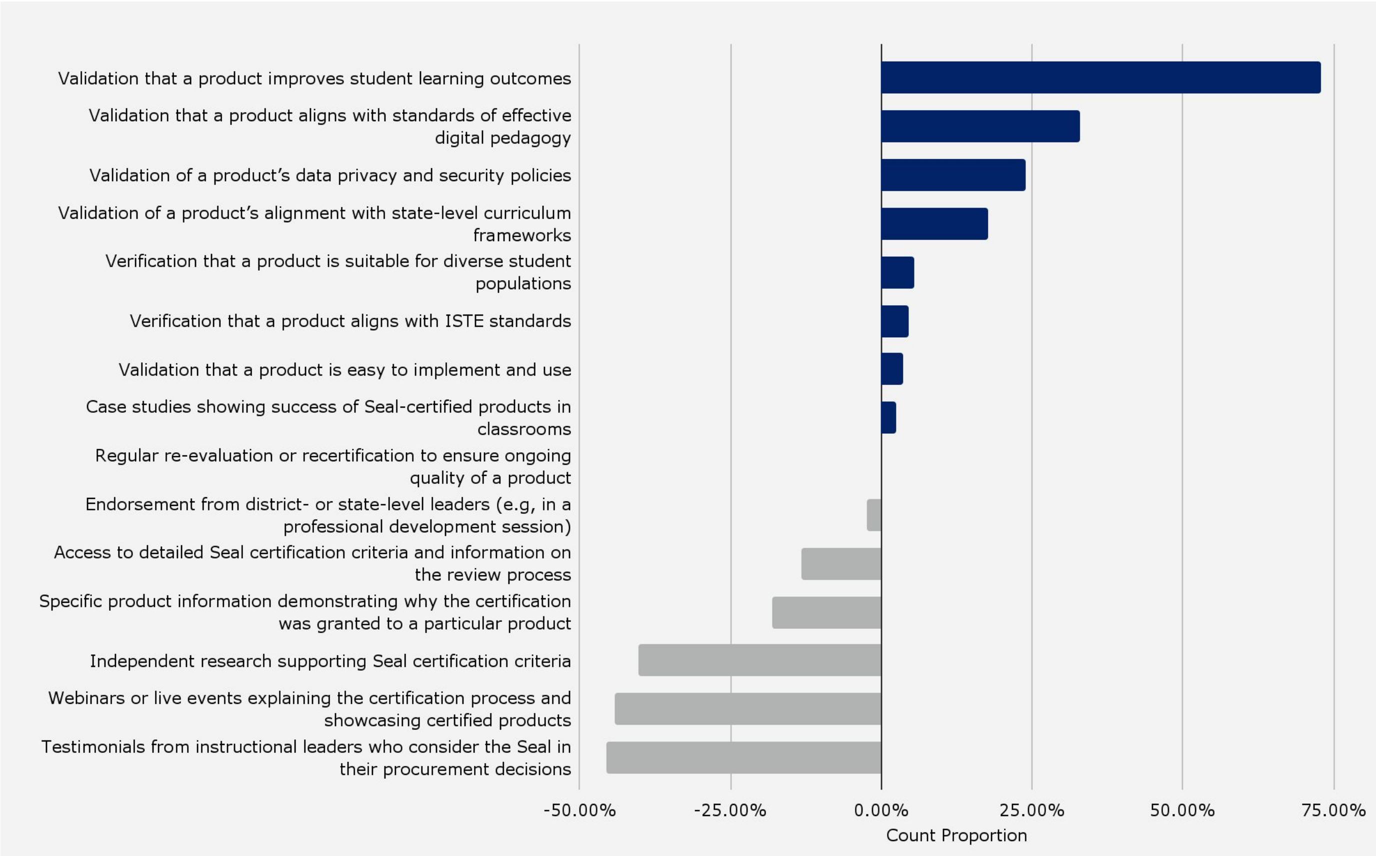
This data signals to certifying organizations that **robustly investigating student outcomes, data privacy, and alignment with digital pedagogy in their certification criteria** can help drive demand from instructional leaders**.** It follows that featuring these components in external communications can increase the perceived attractiveness of the certification.

The Demand Feedback Loop

Throughout our research we investigated what factors encouraged or dissuaded EdTech vendors from pursuing certifications in the past. While the price of getting certified, the demand on internal resources, and the desire to improve the product were considerations for vendors, the decision to certify their product rests almost entirely on evidence of buyer demand for the certification.

In a survey of 13 EdTech vendors, we found that **92% say they would like to see evidence of buyer demand from the certifying organization,** as well as case studies showing how the certification improved buyer trust. The data from the MaxDiff experiment (n = 10) expands on these results; when asked what would motivate them to apply for a certification, most vendors selected "direct introductions to districts seeking certified products" and "a curated list of districts that are looking for certified products".

These results tell us that certifying organizations can build compelling evidence of their product's value by



Which of the following aspects of an EdTech product certification would most and least motivate you to incorporate it into your decision-making?

A bar graph representing responses to a MaxDiff question. Options toward the top were marked "most important" by the highest proportion of respondents.

focusing on instructional leaders as their primary audience, rather than EdTech vendors. Since vendor demand depends on instructional leader value of the certification, gathering evidence of demand should be an early goal of any certifying organization. This may mean temporarily shifting marketing and research efforts away from vendors and toward instructional leaders.

Efforts to drive demand among vendors can be supplemented with partnership efforts that extend beyond the certification itself. For instance, surveyed vendors tended to seek opportunities to speak or exhibit at events, participate in promotional marketing, and be featured on the certifying organization's website.

Leveraging Impactful Channels

68% of instructional leaders discover product certifications through conferences.

Professional associations and local educational bodies are also highly used and trusted channels.

To understand the information-seeking behaviors of instructional leaders and EdTech vendors, as well as how certifications could be marketed more effectively, we asked survey takers about the channels through which they discover product certifications, and which of those channels they find the most credible.

For instructional leaders, conferences stood out as the most important channel—**68% of respondents said they discover product certifications through conferences,** making it their most-selected option. Instructional leaders also said conferences had the greatest potential for influencing their awareness and opinion of certifications.

Professional associations were also an important channel for instructional leaders, and one that may be less utilized by certifying organizations. **Sixty-two percent of instructional leaders say professional associations have high potential to increase their awareness** of product certifications, and 54% picked professional associations as a top credible source for information on certifications.

Another potentially underutilized channel, for reaching both vendors and instructional leaders, is **local educational bodies. EdTech vendors ranked this channel highest** for its potential to influence their opinion of a certification, and 48% of instructional leaders say local educational bodies have high potential to increase their awareness of a certification.

Certifying organizations seeking to revamp their marketing strategies may benefit from revisiting or initiating use of these channels. Professional associations and local educational bodies can likewise seek out quality certifications to support district level professional learning, adoption toolkits, and other supports for districts.

> *I went through a **state training** on how to set up a curriculum committee, and they were working with EdReports.... And now I'm never not using [EdReports]. So like, **it took the state level Department of Ed to say, here's a process that you can use. And now that's what we use.***
>
> \- *Instructional Leader*

Conclusion

Product certifications hold significant potential for streamlining the EdTech procurement process and improving outcomes for students. This research reveals that the path to broader certification adoption may require a strategic shift in how certifying organizations approach the market.

The findings point to three critical actions. First, certifying organizations must prioritize instructional leaders as their primary audience, focusing certification criteria and communications on the factors that matter most to them: student outcomes, data privacy, and alignment with digital pedagogy.

Second, these organizations should concentrate their channels—particularly conferences, professional associations, and local educational bodies—where instructional leaders actively seek trusted guidance. Third, certifying organizations must recognize that vendor adoption depends almost entirely on demonstrated buyer demand, creating a feedback loop that begins with building awareness and credibility among district leaders.

By leveraging these strategies, certifying organizations can break through the current underutilization barrier and help to cultivate an EdTech marketplace that is not only more efficient for buyers and vendors, but also more beneficial for students.

Article at a glance

Building A Roadmap for Audience Expansion

To bridge the gap between rigorous research and district-level adoption, support organizations can pivot from static information broadcasting to a social-proof-driven strategy that prioritizes educators' experiences.

By breaking down internal silos through agile sprints and elevating authentic peer voices as the primary messengers, support organizations can increase the impact of their resources.

67%

of an organization's users were motivated to recommend the organization when framed as "co-creators," demonstrating that a sense of ownership and partnership in a tool's evolution is a more powerful driver of advocacy than rewards or recognition.

64%

of prospective users identified colleague testimonials as the primary driver for adopting new resources, highlighting that peer-to-peer social proof is more effective at overcoming skepticism than technical data.

Calls to Action for Support Organizations

1. Move away from large, infrequent departmental meetings and implement short, time-boxed, cross-functional sprints with clear documentation to transform fragmented internal operations into a unified outreach strategy.

2. Shift resources from one-way broadcasting and data-heavy white papers to authentic peer testimonials. Center your messaging around educators who can speak to the practical, user-friendly nature of your tools.

3. Convert passive users into active promoters by using co-creation narratives that frame them as partners in the tool's evolution.

Creating a Roadmap for Audience Expansion

Introduction

In the realm of K-12 education, there are abundant organizations that exist to support school districts in identifying high-quality instructional materials. Organizations in this marketplace face a variety of challenges in achieving their goals, chief amongst which is **building the internal capacity to connect with district leaders—an audience that is notoriously difficult to reach.**

In this article, we showcase how behavioral science can help address internal and external challenges for organizations supporting K-12 education. More specifically, we'll explore how a transition from fragmented internal operations to a unified, social-proof-driven strategy can transform outreach.

Breaking Internal Silos to Support Outreach Readiness

Challenges in disseminating resources often start within the internal structures of the organizations that produce them. Our recent capacity-building work with K-12 support organizations has revealed that departmental silos often stem from a combination of fragmented internal processes and ineffective documentation.[1] Previous strategies to mitigate these problems have failed due to lack of leadership support and the tangible investment of time by others within the organization. Without a culture of shared accountability, **even the most rigorous educational research can become trapped within the organizational machinery,** never reaching the instructional leaders who need it most.

Shifting the focus toward smaller, decision-oriented, cross-departmental working groups can help overcome these barriers. Rather than relying on large, infrequent meetings that increase cognitive load, organizations can default to short, time-boxed sprints with clear roles and documented debriefs. This approach makes collaboration feel rewarding rather than burdensome. By embedding these triggers into existing project tools, an organization can move from ad-hoc cooperation to a standard operating procedure of integrated work. When internal staff are aligned and confident in their own processes, the resulting outreach is naturally more consistent and impactful, providing a stronger foundation for external stakeholders to engage with.

Leveraging Peer Influence Over Traditional Marketing

The way district leaders discover and build trust in new tools is fundamentally social, but support organizations rarely design their approaches around this reality. Through surveying instructional leaders, we found that curriculum directors, superintendents, and professional learning leads **discover new resources primarily through trusted channels such as presenter-led workshops and informal conversations with their peers.**[2] In contrast, traditional marketing materials and vendor booths, while still relevant for initial visibility, carry significantly less weight when it comes to actual adoption. This finding is critical for any support

1. EdSignals Studio, Cohort 1, 2025
2. EdSignals Studio, Identifying and Utilizing Effective Marketing Channels. November 2025. https://edsignals.org/success-stories/identifying-and-utilizing-effective-marketing-channels/

organization: **the most effective messaging format is not a data-heavy white paper, but an authentic endorsement from a colleague who has already successfully integrated the framework into their district.**

An example of Co-Creation Messaging

> *When you promote our materials, you're not just sharing a tool—you're shaping its future. Promoters will have the chance to give feedback, test new features, and be part of our evolution.*

67% of users were motivated by "Co-Creation Messaging" to recommend an organization to their peers.

A sense of ownership and partnership in a tool's evolution is a more powerful driver of advocacy than rewards or recognition.

In our capacity-building work, we surveyed over a dozen prospective users to identify which forms of "social proof" most effectively drive adoption of the support organization's resources. **A testimonial or quote from a colleague was cited as the single most important driver of adoption by 64% of respondents.**[1] This underscores the need to move away from one-way communication styles—instead of simply broadcasting their research, organizations should focus on highlighting testimonials from educators who can speak to the user-friendly and practical nature of the resources. When a colleague from a peer district shares how a resource changed their approach to teaching, that message carries a level of social proof that technical data cannot replicate. By positioning existing users as the primary messengers, organizations can tap into existing loyalty to reach new, skeptical audiences.

Turning Users into Promoters Through Co-Creation

Organizations looking to build social proof around the quality of their resources need to source evidence from existing users. However, converting passive users into active promoters of resources is a delicate behavioral shift.

Our research into promotional narratives found that "**Co-Creation" messages are the most effective way to motivate current users to recommend an organization to their peers.** These messages frame the user not just as a consumer of a resource, but as a partner in its evolution. When users are told that their feedback helps shape the next generation of tools, they feel a deeper sense of ownership and investment in the organization's success. For one particular organization, **this narrative appealed to 67% of current users,** far outperforming messages based on recognition or rewards.[1] Providing these users with ready-to-use tools (such as flyers, short videos, or testimonial templates) can help lower the friction of promotion for those who feel that a lack of hands-on experience or time are barriers to advocacy.

Strategic Outreach through High-Impact Channels

Optimizing outreach requires meeting district leaders where they are. Conferences serve as the primary hubs for these interactions, but the approach to these events must be driven by meaningful data.[2] Currently, lead management at such events is often fragmented and undocumented, making it nearly impossible to understand the customer journey or connect outreach efforts to actual results.

To maximize the impact of conference

1. EdSignals Studio, Cohort 2, 2025.

participation, support organizations can prioritize strategic event selection alongside the centralization of lead capture and follow-up processes. Leveraging social proof by centering the voices of current users ensures that communications resonate as authentic and evidence-based. **Meaningful engagement functions as a continuous lifecycle** that begins well before the event and extends long after, ensuring consistent and thoughtful interaction with target audiences.

Conclusion

The path to optimizing outreach lies in a fundamental shift from viewing resources as products to viewing them as relationships. Support organizations can be better prepared to build those relationships with a unified voice by breaking down internal silos through more agile working group models. Externally, by prioritizing social proof and co-creation narratives, they can turn their existing user base into a powerful engine for growth. Together, these strategies bridge the gap between rigorous research and the daily realities of district leadership to better support the work of K-12 leaders everywhere.

Article at a glance

Enhancing the Usability and Impact of Curriculum Reviews

Complex, data-heavy reviews of instructional materials can be made more user-friendly by surfacing details on implementation and instructional strategies, designing for navigation that encourages deep dives into what matters most, and providing intuitive support for jargon-heavy sections.

87%
of report users agreed that surfacing information on curriculum implementation would improve how easily they could apply report information.

89%
of users agreed that highlighting the instructional strategies in a curriculum would help them find what they need from a report.

Calls to Action for Review Organizations

1. Communicate with your users to identify what information from your reviews they care about the most, then bring this information to the forefront of your reports.

2. Prioritize meaningful interaction so that users can make the most of your resources. Consider moving away from static documents and into designs that encourage intuitive exploration.

3. Work to support regular and casual users by preserving the rigorous detail required by experts while simultaneously providing simplifications and summaries.

Enhancing the Usability and Impact of Curriculum Reviews

Introduction

In the complex landscape of instructional materials, **third-party reviews are a crucial tool** to support evidence-based purchasing; providing objective evaluations of curricular quality can help reduce cognitive load for district leaders and cut through the noise from publishers. These reviews require a high degree of depth and rigor to effectively support users, but the density and complexity of information can become a barrier to engagement.

In our recent capacity-building work, we collaborated with a premier reviewer of core curricula to identify opportunities to improve the user experience of their website and review tools. The challenge was not to reduce the rigor of the evaluations, which was appreciated by many users, but to present the complexity in a way that aligns with the needs and mental models of time-constrained stakeholders. By combining focus groups, a quantitative conjoint analysis, and live usability testing, we identified specific friction points in the user experience and uncovered opportunities for impactful new features. The resulting design recommendations **reduced cognitive load and made it easier for users to find what they need** from a report, allowing them to **navigate and apply information more efficiently and confidently.**

From Information Shortcuts to Informed Choice

Reviews of instructional materials often use a quality threshold to indicate to users whether a curriculum generally "passes" evaluation. While this is a useful shortcut for busy instructional leaders looking for a broad signal of quality, discerning whether or not a curriculum is a good choice for a particular district requires more in-depth evaluation. One of the more nuanced challenges addressed during this engagement was supporting users in examining reviews more deeply, especially in an expanding sea of curricula that pass quality shortcuts. When users are presented with multiple high-quality options, general signals of quality can become a baseline rather than a differentiator, making it difficult for decision-makers to choose between them based on what matters most for their district context.

To solve this, we proposed a new design strategy focused on **surfacing and summarizing information from deep in the reports** that users look for to differentiate between approved options. In particular, there was user demand for connecting quality scores to concrete classroom realities. Users wanted to understand a curriculum's classroom fit by surfacing details that help distinguish between curricula based on fit and feasibility, rather than just quality and compliance.

This led to the creation of an **"Information on Implementation" feature** to surface key logistical considerations that are often decisive in purchasing decisions. In the recommended design, previously buried information regarding technology requirements, materials preparation, and lesson formats were organized into clear, scannable categories. In our subsequent impact audit, **87% of users agreed this new section would improve how easily they could apply report information,** making it a vital tool for operational planning.[1]

We also proposed an **"Instructional Strategies"** feature to complement the logistical data by providing pedagogical context. This feature identifies the top instructional strategies present (e.g., explicit modeling, spiral review), their primary learning purpose, and their consistency across units. By surfacing this information early in the report, it helps decision-makers determine if a curriculum aligns with their teachers' existing skills or if additional professional development will be required, while also making the reviews more relevant for teacher users. **Eighty-nine percent of users indicated this feature would improve how they find what they need from a report.** Together, these features bridge the gap between theoretical alignment and practical reality.

89% of survey respondents agreed that highlighting the instructional strategies in a curriculum would help them find what they need from a report.

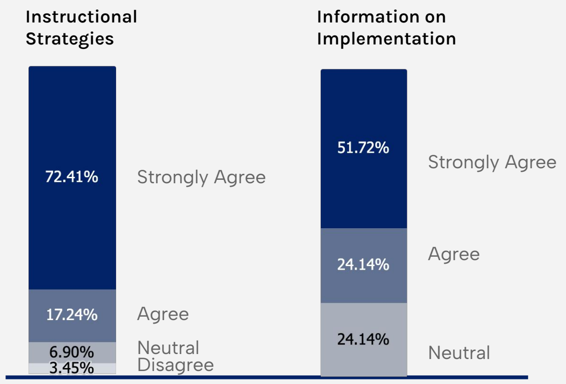
Third-party reviewers of core curricula or other instructional materials who struggle with information density can use a similar approach to investigate the needs of their users and surface information accordingly.

Aligning Interface Design with Mental Models

In addition to investigating what kinds of information needed to be more salient in the report, we used live user testing to evaluate navigation and interactivity of the online reviews. Our testing revealed some discordance between the website's interactive elements and users' intuitive mental models. For example, users naturally expect summary elements, such as scorecards and grade-level overviews, to be interactive pathways to deeper content. However, these elements were not clickable in the previous design, forcing users to hunt for a specific link that led to the full review.

By making summary cards clickable, **static summaries become active navigation portals.** If a user sees a lower score in a particular category, they can click directly on it to be taken to the specific evidence justifying that score. This interaction model promotes exploration and helps users investigate why a curriculum might have lost points—a key need identified during the user tests.

For organizations creating resources to support the purchasing of instructional materials, prioritizing meaningful interaction is important for users to make the most of resources. When designing new resources or evaluating old, consider moving away from static documents and into designs that encourage intuitive exploration.



Survey Responses (n = 29)

Please rate your level of agreement with the following statement: The addition of this section to the reports would improve how I find what I need from a report.

Iterating for Distinct User Types

Engagement with users also revealed a distinct bifurcation in the audience for these reviews: "Power Users" (who usually spend hours analyzing indicators for adoption decisions) and "Light Users" (who typically spend

1. EdSignals Studio, Cohort 2, 2025.

under an hour scanning for high-level quality markers) . **While Power Users use a variety of report features effectively, Light Users are more susceptible to cognitive overload and struggle more frequently to interpret technical jargon.**

Our proposed design changes support Light Users in understanding unfamiliar terms by expanding a Glossary feature. The implementation of a global Glossary and additional entry points to the Glossary through "What is this?" tooltips allows users to access definitions without leaving their current page. This approach helps to onboard new users and deepens understanding for existing users without cluttering the interface. Power Users were also supported with the aforementioned content and navigation changes that support deep exploration.

Static summaries can become active navigation portals.

Third-party reviews of instructional materials should prioritize meaningful interactivity to support deep engagement.

While our design recommendations considered both users' type needs, future designs must work to bridge this divide. Reviewers should focus on **preserving the rigorous detail required by experts while simultaneously providing simplifications and summaries for casual users.** This dual-track approach ensures that reviews remain useful for deep evaluation while staying more accessible to the broader user base.

Conclusion

Our work resulted in a set of design recommendations that honor reviewers' commitment to rigorous evaluation while modernizing the user experience. By harnessing decision science and responding to direct user feedback, the new designs address tensions between information density and usability.

The anticipated impact of these changes is substantial. Quantitative testing suggests that the updated designs will lead to improved comprehension, as new users can more easily navigate any jargon and grasp the content. Navigation speed is expected to increase, with users navigating reviews more efficiently and confidently through clickable elements. Furthermore, the clicks themselves become more meaningful; by reducing friction, both new and experienced users can quickly locate the information most important to them, such as instructional strategies and implementation logistics. Ultimately, these changes foster easier scanning, ensuring that stakeholders are less overwhelmed by the data and more empowered to make evidence-based decisions for their schools and students.

Article at a glance

Empowering Regional Education Agencies to Center Multilingual Learners in Curriculum Adoption

REAs (e.g., County Offices of Education and Education Service Centers) are a crucial intermediary in the adoption of High-Quality Instructional Materials. Our research identifies them as a high-leverage entry point for improving equity for Multilingual Learners, provided they are supported with sufficiently granular datasets, usable evaluation rubrics, and trusted partnerships.

800+

REA stakeholders identified across CA and TX as key champions for equity-focused outreach.

"*The needs of MLL are often secondary... The curriculum is there, the materials are there, and then on the sideline, it's like, 'oh, do this for your multilingual student'.*

- *California County Office Employee*"

Calls to Action for Support Organizations

1. Move beyond general "English Learner" data. Equip REAs with statistics that disaggregate student data (e.g., newcomers vs. long-term learners) to support them in setting accurate adoption priorities.

2. Refine evaluation toolkits to be scannable and modular. Reduce the "interaction cost" for busy district leaders by embedding light-touch training directly into the tools they use.

3. Shift from broad marketing to targeted relationship building. Engage specific champions (Curriculum Leads, MLL Coordinators) through regional convenings and context-specific messaging (e.g., state-specific alignments).

Empowering Regional Education Agencies to Center Multilingual Learners in Curriculum Adoption

Introduction

In the intricate landscape of U.S. education, the journey from high-level state policy to the reality of a classroom desk is long and often fractured. This fracture is particularly acute in the **adoption of High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) for Multilingual Learners (MLLs)**. While states set standards and districts make purchases, a crucial layer of infrastructure sits in the middle: Regional Education Agencies (REAs).

Regional Education Agencies, such as County Offices of Education (**COEs**) in California and Education Service Centers (**ESCs**) in Texas, **play a pivotal but often overlooked role** in shaping instructional decisions. They act as the connective bridge of the education system, providing the guidance, professional development, and vetting of instructional materials that districts (smaller ones, in particular) rely on to navigate the overwhelming marketplace of educational technology and curricula. However, despite their importance, limited budgets and high workloads limit the impact REAs can have on MLL-centered equity in the instructional materials landscape.

To determine **how to enhance the reach and influence of evidence-based tools** that center MLLs, we investigated the behaviors, information-seeking patterns, and decision-making processes of these regional leaders. Our research revealed that empowering these "middle tier" actors requires more than just better instructional materials; it requires a behavioral shift in how data is utilized, how tools are designed for cognitive ease, and how trust is constructed in a fragmented ecosystem.

From Generalities to Granularity

We began our research into MLLs by **mapping four key moments in the REA support cycle**: (1) Learning Needs Diagnostic, (2) HQIM Exploration, (3) Evaluation Support, and (4) Implementation Prep. We found that one of the most persistent challenges in equitable procurement is the **"invisibility" of specific learner needs** during the very first stage.[1] While REAs and districts prioritize data-driven decision-making in theory, the reality is often hindered by a lack of granular, actionable data.

We found that while general data on "English Learner" populations is accessible, it is frequently treated as a monolith. Detailed insights into student proficiency levels, specific typologies (such as newcomers versus long-term English learners), and distinct instructional needs are often missing or trapped in siloed systems. As one COE leader in California noted: "How we interpret the data is... a big need... being able to gather data, understand it, interpret, analyze, all of that is something that's really lacking."

When decision-makers lack specific, granular data, they default to heuristics, making decisions based on "average" students rather than marginalized populations. To counteract this, the ecosystem must move beyond providing raw data and toward **providing segmented insights that reflect real learner populations**.

For technical assistance providers and

1. EdSignals Studio, Cohort 1, 2025.

equity-focused organizations, this presents a strategic opportunity to equip REAs with a structured diagnostic process. This process should first **help districts map MLL typologies and linguistic diversity** beyond broad categorizations like "Spanish speakers". Furthermore, it must **enable leaders to distill complex data** into a short list of "must-haves" that guide the entire selection process, effectively converting data points—such as literacy gaps—into mandatory criteria within Requests for Proposals. By embedding MLL-focused diagnostics into the earliest stage of the adoption funnel, we can ensure that **equity is not an afterthought, but the primary lens through which materials are viewed.**

> *The needs of MLL are often secondary... The curriculum is there, the materials are there, and then on the sideline, it's like, 'oh, do this for your multilingual student'.*
>
> \- *California County Office Employee*

Reducing Friction in Evaluation Tools

Once needs are identified, REAs assist districts in sifting through the noise of the marketplace. The challenge here is cognitive overload. Instructional leaders are inundated with vendor pitches, state lists, and complex rubrics.

Our research highlighted that **while tools for evaluating materials exist, they often fail to integrate MLL needs organically**. As one stakeholder shared: "The needs of MLL are often secondary... The curriculum is there, the materials are there, and then on the sideline, it's like, 'oh, do this for your multilingual student'."

Furthermore, the tools *themselves* can be barriers. Comprehensive toolkits that require navigating multiple PDFs, complex downloads, or unintuitive website structures increase the "interaction cost" for users. If a tool is difficult to access or parse, it will not be used, regardless of the quality of its evidence base.

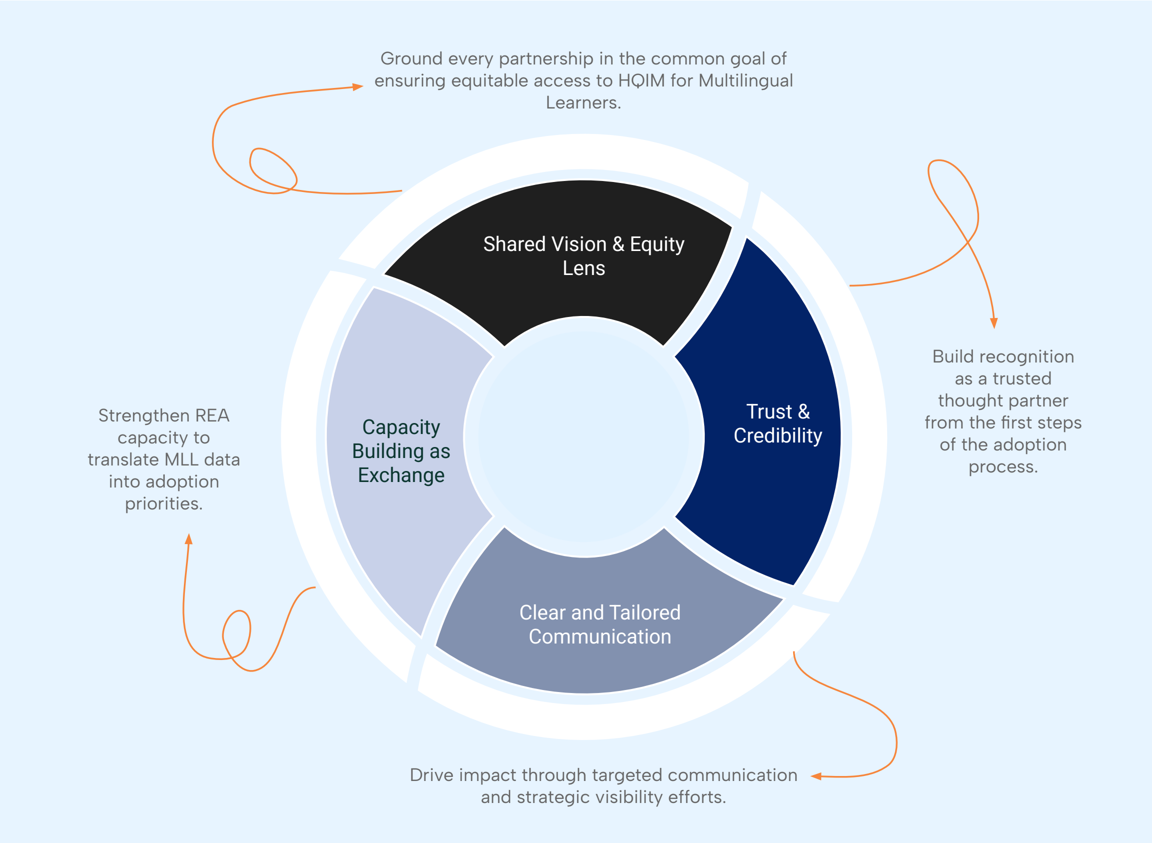
To increase the uptake of evidence-based evaluation tools, developers and technical assistance providers must design for cognitive ease and actionability. This involves packaging resources for scannability, moving away from dense text and more towards "at-a-glance" summaries that allow busy coordinators to extract value in seconds. It also requires **embedding capacity building directly into the tools**—transforming static rubrics into active learning opportunities through "light-touch" training modules, such as short explainer videos or annotated guides. Finally, providers should **create audience-specific pathways**, differentiating resources so that a superintendent receives a strategic overview while a committee member receives a practical "how-to" guide. By refining core tools to be more user-centric, organizations can lower the barrier to entry, ensuring that rigorous, equity-centered evaluation criteria are actually applied during the decision-making process.

Trust Networks Over Transactional Marketing

Perhaps the most significant finding regarding the REA landscape is the nature of influence itself. REAs operate in a **relationship-based ecosystem**. In Texas and California alike, instructional leaders prioritize relationships with trusted thought partners who understand their specific context. Our research revealed that REAs struggle with **differentiating their services and building a recognizable brand that district leaders trus**t. In California, equity-focused organizations risk blending into a crowded landscape of market actors. In Texas, low brand awareness creates challenges in relationship-building with new districts.

For technical assistance providers and market actors, effective engagement with REAs requires **shifting from a "promotion" mindset to a "partnership" mindset**. The *Evidence Uptake Framework* utilized in our research points toward building trust through consistency, shared vision, and local relevance.

Key strategies for the ecosystem include leveraging champions by **identifying and empowering specific roles** within REAs, such as Curriculum Leads and MLL Coordinators, who act as gatekeepers and influencers within their regions. Additionally, **outreach must be regionally contextualized,** avoiding generic "national" messaging in favor of alignment with state-specific frameworks like the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). Finally, **market actors must practice strategic visibility,** showing up at key convenings not just as exhibitors, but as content experts facilitating workshops to build the credibility required to advise on high-stakes procurement.



A diagram illustrating various strategies for building partnerships that advance MLL-focused HQIM adoption.

Conclusion

Regional Education Agencies represent a high-leverage opportunity for improving MLL outcomes in the education sector. By targeting one COE or ESC, market actors can indirectly support dozens of school districts and thousands of students. However, unlocking this potential requires meeting these agencies where they are: resource-constrained, data-hungry but data-inundated, and reliant on trusted networks.

For organizations committed to educational equity, the path forward involves a dual focus. First, on the technical side, tools must be refined to reduce friction and turn granular data into actionable adoption criteria. Second, on the relational side, engagement must move beyond dissemination to genuine capacity building.

When we equip regional leaders with the right diagnostics, usable tools, and trusted partnership, we ensure that the specific assets and needs of multilingual learners are not left "on the sideline," but are central to the definition of instructional quality.

EdSignals Studio

03

Ecosystem Research

Article at a glance

Bridging Disconnects Between Educators and Vendors at Conferences

Education conferences are a strategic cornerstone of the K-12 ecosystem, but common disconnects between the supply and demand sides of the marketplace limit their impact. Vendors, district leaders, and conference organizers alike can adjust their approaches to these events to maximize value.

> *One of the things that we started doing on the booth was listing all the schools in that region...often people will come up to us and be like, Oh, I know this school, or that is my school right there, and so building that social proof was huge.*
> - *Vendor, Product Experience Designer*

> *I don't go to any sessions that are sponsored and only being presented by someone from the company. If you don't have someone with you who can talk about their usage, it just becomes a sales call and I have very rarely left one of those feeling like I used my time well.*
> - *Chief Academic Officer*

Calls to Action

For Vendors

- Lead with pedagogy, not product, to build credibility with district leaders
- Equip district leaders with teacher-facing materials to help them socialize what they learned from you
- Prepare locally relevant data to help district leaders see success in a context that mirrors their own

For District Leaders

- Convene key members of your team before the event to align on priority problems and key questions
- Seek out sessions where vendors co-present with a district partner to gain insight into implementation

For Conference Organizers

- Release vendor information in detail and at least two weeks prior to the event to enable strategic planning
- Organize vendor lists and sessions not just by subject, but by attendee goals
- Create structured opportunities for connection to bring together district leaders and vendors with shared problems

Bridging Disconnects Between Educators and Vendors at Conferences

Introduction

Educational conferences are a strategic cornerstone of the K-12 ecosystem, serving as a critical marketplace where new ideas, pedagogical approaches, and instructional tools are exchanged. These events hold immense potential to connect innovative solutions with the district leaders who need them.

However, the full potential of these events often goes unrealized. Through interviews with a dozen district leaders and vendors, we found that **there is often a fundamental disconnect between the goals of vendors and the needs of district administrators.** The result is a landscape of missed connections, low-value conversations, and mutual frustration.

This article analyzes four primary areas of misalignment, drawing on in-house qualitative research to provide actionable recommendations for vendors, district leaders, and conference organizers to create a more efficient and productive conference experience for all stakeholders.

Vendors and district leaders come to conferences with distinct purposes.

Vendors are looking for lead generation, while district leaders look for later-stage product validation.

The Purpose Disconnect: Discovery vs. Verification

The first disconnect lies with what vendors and district leaders hope to gain from their interactions at conferences. Vendors typically approach conferences as **top-of-funnel opportunities** for introduction and lead generation, and while district leaders are open to product discovery, they usually treat conferences as a **later-stage moment to validate solutions they are already considering.**

The primary frustration for district leaders arises when they approach a vendor booth looking to discuss the specifics of adopting and implementing for their district, and are met only with a generic pitch from a vendor. As one Chief Academic Officer said: "I don't go to any sessions that are sponsored and only being presented by someone from the company. If you don't have someone with you who can talk about their usage, it just becomes a sales call and I have very rarely left one of those feeling like I used my time well."[1]

> *I don't go to any sessions that are sponsored and only being presented by someone from the company. If you don't have someone with you who can talk about their usage, it just becomes a sales call and I have very rarely left one of those feeling like I used my time well.*
>
> \- *Chief Academic Officer*

The direct result of this disconnect is unproductive dialogue, wasted time, and missed opportunities for the deeper engagement both sides ultimately seek. To address this, vendors can frame presentations around **solving a real pedagogical problem**

1. EdSignals Studio, Ecosystem Research, 2025

first, then demonstrate how the product serves that solution. This directly addresses the mindset of district leaders and shifts the conversation from a generic pitch to a problem-solving dialogue.

District leaders can support moving conversations past a generic pitch by clearly sharing their district's adoption timeline, evaluation criteria, or key decision-making needs. This transparency enables vendors to provide more substantive, relevant information tailored to specific contexts.

The Audience Disconnect: The Buyer vs. The Users

The implementation of new instructional materials can stall when end-user teachers haven't been engaged in the early stages of adoption.

One of the core problems districts face in their adoption processes is that the **people who approve purchases are not the same people who must implement them.** Conferences are designed around engaging administrative decision-makers, yet the long-term success of any product depends on teacher understanding, buy-in, and day-to-day use.

Vendors logically focus on district leaders, the individuals who authorize contracts. District leaders attend conferences because they are accountable for adoption decisions and must evaluate options efficiently. While district leaders are acutely aware that a product's value is only realized if teachers embrace it, they face capacity constraints in bringing full implementation teams to conferences.

A district administrator described the logistical challenge of building teacher buy-in: "It's a Tuesday in November, I can't bring a team of nine people, it's going to be me and a principal and maybe a teacher or two. So then we have to...convene in some way to share our own learnings and then bring it back to the larger group."

This creates an implementation gap that vendors are keenly aware of and frustrated by. A product may be purchased, **but the teachers who end up using it may not yet understand what it is, why it matters, or how it fits into their instructional reality.** As one vendor described: "The rollout of it is where the disconnect happens, like [teachers] not even knowing that this is even something that they have access to...there's oftentimes that disconnect between the leadership and school-based personnel."

Vendors can help remedy this challenge by recognizing that an interested administrator must "sell" the idea back in their district. District leaders should be able to leave pitches equipped with **teacher-facing materials, implementation guides, and data that speaks directly to ease of use and classroom impact.**

District leaders should consider convening the attending team before the event to align on instructional priorities, a shortlist of vendors to vet, and key questions to ask. This ensures a focused, strategic approach that maximizes the limited time available for the entire team. District leaders can also avoid communication bottlenecks after conferences by sharing insights promptly with all relevant audiences such as teachers, curriculum specialists, or those on adoption committees.

The Content Disconnect: Sales Pitches vs. Practical Applications

In the high-stakes, time-constrained environment of a conference, district leaders are looking for readily-available evidence that a product has worked in districts with similar contexts, demographics, and regulatory environments. However, vendors are often unable to surface this context-specific proof on the spot.

One superintendent expressed a common frustration with vendors who lack this hyper-local awareness: "I hate having to reach out or say, What schools in Montana currently use your product?...And then they kind of look at you with a blank stare and they go, I don't know. I'll have to get back to you on that."

> *One of the things that we started doing on the booth was listing all the schools in that region...often people will come up to us and be like, Oh, I know this school, or that is my school right there, and so building that* ***social proof*** *was huge.*
>
> - *Vendor, Product Experience Designer*

Conversely, savvy vendors understand this is the most critical information they can offer and prepare it proactively, building trust and accelerating the conversation. As one vendor explains: "...one of the things that we started doing on the booth was listing all the schools in that region...often people will come up to us and be like, Oh, I know this school, or that is my school right there, and so building that social proof was huge."

When vendors fail to provide relevant proof, the adoption process stalls. District leaders are forced to undertake additional research that extends an already arduous purchasing cycle, or they must rely on generalized evidence that has not been validated for their district's context to make their final decision.

By arriving with **ready-to-share lists of client schools organized by state and region,** vendors can demonstrate market awareness and allow district leaders to see success in a context that mirrors their own.

Districts leaders looking for contextualized information can actively seek out sessions where vendors co-present with a district partner. These sessions may offer more concrete implementation insights that go beyond a generic pitch.

The Information Disconnect: Managing Logistical Friction

Finally, a significant disconnect emerges from simple logistical failures, particularly the late or incomplete release of critical conference information. This prevents both vendors and district leaders from planning strategically, leading to cognitive overload and missed opportunities.

District leaders need detailed vendor lists, company descriptions, and booth maps well in advance. Without this information, the conference floor becomes a chaotic environment rather than a curated one as there is little to no time to identify vendors who match a district's needs. This problem can be compounded when the information that *is* provided lacks utility; one superintendent noted that a list of company names is useless without a description of what each company actually does.

A curriculum director clearly articulated both the problem and the solution: "If I had all of that material at once, I could coordinate what vendors I wanted to see with what sessions I wanted to go to. Because sometimes I might choose to skip a session and go see a vendor because I know I want to talk to them for a little bit and I don't have enough time in the 10 minutes in between sessions."

This logistical friction forces district leaders into reactive navigation, undermining the primary value of the event. Conference organizers should provide attendees with a comprehensive digital guide, interactive map, detailed company descriptions, and product categories at least two weeks before the event to better enable strategic planning. **Vendor lists and sessions can be organized not only by subject, but also by attendee goals** (e.g., “Tools for Easing Implementation”, “Solutions for English Learners") to help district leaders quickly prioritize relevant events. Additionally, organizers can move beyond open expo halls towards structured opportunities for connection; events like **“speed dating” between district leaders and vendors with shared problems can lead to more focused, higher-value dialogue.**

Conference organizers can arrange vendors lists not only by subject, but also by attendee goals to help district leaders prioritize relevant events.

Conclusion

The sense of frustration and inefficiency at educational conferences is not an inevitable cost of doing business; rather, the systemic misalignment of goals, audiences, and information is a problem that can be directly addressed through cross-stakeholder collaboration. Bridging this gap means creating a more effective ecosystem for identifying and delivering high-quality materials to students. The path forward requires moving toward a more collaborative model of "co-design," where conferences become spaces for partnership rather than pitches. By doing so, all stakeholders can work together to ensure the best tools reach the students who need them most.

EdSignals Studio

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Conclusion

Conclusion & Future Directions

Our work demonstrates that current barriers to the adoption of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) stem from solvable problems. Cooperation across the ecosystem (including support organizations, regional education agencies, vendors, and district leaders) can improve the way evidence of quality is created, disseminated, and consumed to better meet the needs of schools everywhere. The solutions we propose in this report, from recommendations on how to best reach district leaders to strategies for breaking down organizational silos, help to bridge gaps and advance procurement practices for actors across the K-12 marketplace.

In the upcoming year, our work will focus on improving the actionability and contextual relevance of evidence around HQIM through continued capacity-building with our partners and independent research initiatives. As part of this effort, we're examining attitudes toward and use of AI in K-12 districts across the U.S., while also launching a webinar series on topics like effective EdTech adoption and rethinking conference design for better engagement and impact. We'll continue publishing articles about our evidence use journey maps across the core curriculum, EdTech, and professional learning ecosystems, building on the frameworks introduced in this report. Ultimately, our goal is to ensure that evidence of quality translates into meaningful improvements in classrooms across the country.

2025 Ecosystem Engagement

571
completed surveys

74
individuals interviewed

7
partners supported

> *TDL's Market Studio brought a uniquely strategic and adaptive approach to our engagement. Their team combined deep behavioral science expertise with a high-touch, full-service model that made every phase—from scoping to synthesis—feel thoughtful and rigorous. They didn't just execute the work; they challenged our assumptions, pivoted thoughtfully based on emerging insights, and elevated our thinking throughout. We walked away with a much clearer understanding of our audiences and actionable design choices that directly align with our goals for improving the usability and impact of our reports.*
>
> *- 2025 Partner Organization*

Acknowledgements

The EdSignals Studio's work was made possible with the generous support and collaboration of numerous partners and stakeholders committed to advancing educational equity and quality. We gratefully acknowledge the Gates Foundation for their support, which has enabled us to develop the tools, insights, and partnerships necessary to bridge the gap between high-quality educational resources and the decision-makers who adopt them.

We also wish to thank our partners across the education ecosystem—districts, quality arbiters, curriculum developers, EdTech providers, and professional learning organizations—who have collaborated with us to make evidence more accessible and actionable. Your willingness to engage with our research, participate in our capacity-building initiatives, and share your insights has been instrumental to our work.

Finally, we acknowledge the educators, administrators, and leaders who work tirelessly for the benefit of their communities. Thank you for your dedicated work on behalf of students everywhere.

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