

## Issue Brief:

# *Replacing Preprinted Textbooks with Custom Workbooks to Improve Proficiency Scores*

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## 2 THE SCENARIO

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Political pressure, regional preferences and local district population expectations have created push back against the “Common Core” national standards over the past decade.

Given recent legislative events, states are now more likely to implement their own processes, rather than being forced to adopt the national curriculum created by the US Department of Education. This migration of educational control “back to the local environment” has opened up a wide range of opportunities for states and districts to innovate with respect to teaching tools and instructional materials.

### **New Sources of Content**

“Off the shelf” textbook publishers are now offering digital content – which often carries a license fee – enabling districts to download and produce materials in printed form or repurpose in on line educational tools.

The evolution of “open source” content has also progressed so that there are now nationally available repositories of “free” resources that districts can use to develop their own specific teaching materials and textbooks. With regulation change and the availability of content, districts can now meet state standards and also open pathways to developing content that is more relevant at the local level.

While districts are often now selecting teaching materials at the district level, teachers who have “small group learning environments” (serving specific population needs or learning environments) are selecting and aggregating materials which are useful to these specialized

learning groups. Public schools are evolving, but this process has been in place for many years in the Charter School environment.

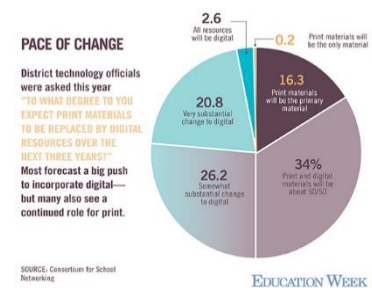
## **The Charter School Model**

Charter Schools have been customizing curriculum materials for years. In the spring of 2012, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) conducted a national survey that looked at how Charter Schools were delivering instructional materials. In this survey, they found that only 5% of all schools were using exclusively “Off the Shelf” curriculum materials. Additionally 23% were using exclusively “Customized” materials. Almost 72% of Charter Schools use a combination of Off the Shelf and Customized instructional materials.

## **Printed Textbooks v. Digital Resources**

The choice to use, and the pace of implementing digital teaching materials is highly influenced at the local level. In some districts, teachers and parents (and some students) prefer printed materials over digital. In others, digital tools are seeing high adoption rates.

In it's April, 2015 article “K-12 Print Needs Persist Despite Digital Growth, Education Week estimated that 50% or more of instructional materials will still be produced in print over the next three years, even though the push for digital content at the state level can be substantial.



This would indicate that the need for effective textbooks and other printed materials will persist in the near future.

## **3 THE ISSUE: FUNDING, PROCESS CHANGE, AND OUTCOMES**

The cost of preprinted textbooks can be as high as \$ 500 per student per subject, and school districts who are under tight budget constraints are caught between trying to balance expenditures with more effective teaching materials for the bulk of their students.

Proficiency testing is also approached in a variety of ways, often determined at the state level. Testing is either done at the end of each academic year, or is conducted at certain periods throughout the student’s educational career. For example, many math proficiency tests are conducted at the K-5 level. So in order to improve the 5<sup>th</sup> grade proficiency outcomes, K-4 review materials should be included in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum. This gives teachers the ability to refresh concepts learned at an earlier grade level and in the end, improve test scores – a process that is not readily supported by national textbook publishers. As states continue to refine their standards, and districts look to create more effective materials for their local populations, it will continue to be challenging for large national textbook publishers to keep up. Hence, it becomes incumbent upon districts to find and implement tools that support the requirements of state standards and also serve the needs and nuances of local populations.

## The Challenges of Customization

Managing the customization of printed textbooks is challenging at the district level. Budgets are relatively fixed – so districts must find the balance between Simple– i.e. “off the shelf” textbooks and Customized – which entails creating district specific textbooks that meet state standards while serving the needs of the population. In order to implement a program focused on customized printed text books, the district has to commit to:

- Hiring and/or refocusing staff (experts) to create the materials.
- Finding and certifying “open source” or licensed content that meets the state standards
- Building supplemental materials, including assessments & teacher guides, which are often not part of the available open source material.
- Implementing a process for production that delivers high quality, engaging text book materials which are on par with national “off the shelf” textbook providers.

## **4 CASE STUDY: DUVAL COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

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Duval County Public Schools has created a unique solution to this challenging issue. In 2015, the district began deploying a custom workbook strategy that uses “open source” curriculum materials (researched and augmented at the district level), licensed content, and district developed add-ins which are published on demand for use in the PreK-12 environment.

Open source content is pulled from the EngageNY.org and other free content web sites. In some cases, premium, licensed content is sourced from national publisher sites.

DCPS curriculum experts augment the materials – either re-sequencing modules for a more efficient teaching process, adding logos and changing fonts, or replacing sections of content to create a more relevant local experience.

The result is a set of fully customized major course materials that are delivered to the Duval County Public School District classrooms just in time for the upcoming teaching cycle. These materials – including textbooks, teaching guides and other classroom resources – are deployed across 150+ individual schools, ensuring that the curriculum is delivered consistently across the district. After initial feedback, the district has continued to refine the process to improve the aesthetics and quality of the materials, in order to make them more engaging for students and parents.

### **Results**

In the end, Duval County’s process is “budget neutral” on a district level. DCPS has adjusted the balance of expenditures between purchasing pre-printed textbooks, refocusing staff to customize materials and deploying on line learning tools, to accommodate the broad range of learning styles found in the student population across the district.

More importantly, because of this program, Duval County has seen an improvement in 16 of the 22 annually tracked district performance indicators.

In summary, by deciding to create customized textbooks, leveraging “open source” content, and focusing on materials that are more relevant to the local population, Duval County has created a process that delivers high quality teaching tools that drive up test scores and satisfy the preferences of the local population.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

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There can be great benefits to school districts who choose to replace or augment textbooks with custom workbooks at the district level, and Duval County has pioneered the process with strong results. Duval has seen significant improvements in test scores by deploying a budget neutral process – making the payoff well worth the journey.

In order to achieve similar results, districts must be willing to refocus curriculum experts to effectively create localized materials that meet state standards. These experts must assemble and certify content, and the finished products – the workbooks themselves – must be high quality in order to earn the acceptance of students and parents. Creating customized workbooks is an easy way to align teaching materials with lesson plans – and give students integrated, “homework friendly” worksheets that can be pulled directly out of the books and handed in daily.

In the future, the process of redefining how textbooks are used will continue to advance – ultimately reflecting the learning needs of individual students in both printed and digital format. The technology to produce “hyper customized” textbooks and workbooks already exists. For now, districts can take a step forward in the process by creating customized workbooks at the district level – with the end game ultimately being an individualized learning environment for each and every student.