

SOLVING THE CURRICULUM CONUNDRUM

BY THOMAS ARNETT AND BOB MOESTA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A growing body of research reveals that better curricula can improve student outcomes. Notably, many of these studies find achievement gains that outpace those of other popular education reforms. Inspired by this body of evidence, a number of prominent stakeholders from across the education landscape have rallied to promote high-quality curricula as a key lever for advancing student achievement.

Nonetheless, these curriculum-focused efforts face a number of hurdles, one of which is that school districts often do not seem to prioritize quality as they make their curriculum selection decisions. Curriculum advocates have made important strides in signaling the excellent options available on the market and pressuring publishers to improve curriculum quality. But these improvements in the supply have not caused commensurate demand on the part of school districts. To increase the likelihood that districts adopt high-quality curricular materials, advocates need better insight into the factors that influence school districts as they make a curriculum selection decision.

Applying the Jobs to Be Done theory helps provide this much-needed insight by uncovering what causes people and organizations to adopt new products and services. All people have Jobs to Be Done in their lives—the

progress they are trying to make as they strive toward a goal or aspiration within particular circumstances. We call these jobs because just as people hire contractors to help them build houses or lawyers to help them build a case, people search for something they can “hire” to help them when “jobs” arise in their lives.

Through interviews with school district leaders who recently led a curriculum selection effort, we uncovered four distinct jobs that characterize the drivers of districts’ curriculum selection decisions.

1. Overhaul: Help us transform instruction to tackle low achievement
2. Build Consensus: Help us manage a selection and get to consensus
3. Update: Help us refresh our materials to better support teachers
4. Influence: Help us shape the field

Understanding these Jobs to Be Done can aid efforts to steer districts toward quality materials by making clear that one-size-fits-all solutions for encouraging adoption of high-quality curricula are really one-size-fits-none. This paper aims to help curriculum proponents see how districts that ostensibly want the same product—quality curricula—are actually seeking very different solutions, and recommends ways to design solutions for districts in each of the four jobs. We hope that this research helps curriculum advocates think more broadly and strategically about how best to encourage adoption of high-quality instructional materials.

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INTRODUCTION

Consider a tale of four districts on the brink of major curriculum purchases. In District A, key stakeholders agree that low student achievement is an equity crisis. In response, the new superintendent makes a bold push to revamp curriculum and instruction. In District B, teachers voice regular frustration over the time it takes to cobble together lesson materials. They feel ill-equipped to improve their district's low student achievement because their outdated textbooks do not align with the latest state standards. In District C, the curriculum director initiates a curriculum selection process because the state provides use-it-or-lose-it funding for math curriculum this year. In District D, senior leaders want new materials so they can pioneer new approaches to teaching and learning and maintain their district's reputation as a trailblazer.

Now ponder this question: which of these districts is most likely to purchase *high-quality* materials and see subsequent gains in student achievement? Before you hazard a guess, however, consider what we do—and don't—know about curriculum selection and student outcomes.

Curricula affect student achievement

Empirical research provides a compelling case: curricula matter. Decades of studies show that switching to better curricula can lead to gains on the order of 0.1 to 0.25 standard deviations.¹ To put those numbers into perspective, such improvements outpace the gains of some of the most prominent education reforms—such as charter schools, preschool programs, and restructuring the teacher workforce.² Furthermore, achievement gains from improving curricula are often most marked in the classrooms of the least-experienced teachers.³ In short, getting the best curriculum into the hands of teachers seems to be a winning combination.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that a number of education policy and advocacy organizations have focused recently on improving curricula in schools, particularly where there are equity concerns. In 2012, the state of Louisiana launched curricular reviews that have become a national bellwether of state curriculum policy. Two years later, EdReports entered the scene—a nonprofit whose core work entails rating the various curricular options on the market. In 2017, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation

announced a major pivot in its strategy for K–12 education philanthropy that included major investments in curricula. Meanwhile, prominent national organizations—such as the Brookings Institution, the Center for American Progress, Chiefs for Change, the Harvard University Center for Education Policy Research, the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, and the Fordham Institute—have published a bevy of studies, articles, and reports focused on policies and practices to advance the adoption and use of high-quality curricula.⁴

Raising the bar on curriculum selection

Yet despite curricula's potential, improving student achievement through high-quality curricula is easier said than done. At least three challenges hinder these well-intentioned efforts.

First, detecting high-quality curricula is an elusive endeavor.

Although studies show that curricula matter, there is no straightforward way to positively identify which curricula will be best at improving students' learning. In an ideal world, empirical evidence would be the stamp of quality. Educators would turn to the What Works Clearinghouse or a similar source for studies gauging the efficacy of all the instructional materials on the market. But studies such as these are expensive and difficult to produce, and often have short shelf lives given the continuous evolution of curricular products.

Absent empirical data, the reviews produced by EdReports and the state of Louisiana currently offer the best available signals of quality.⁵ They gauge quality by looking for components of curricula that *should* make them effective—such as alignment to standards, rigor, coherence, usability, cultural relevance, and suitability for English language learners. But a curriculum’s scores on these input-focused metrics don’t always predict accurately its effect on student outcomes.⁶

Second, identifying high-quality materials does not mean districts will select them.

Even with the recent emphasis on the importance of curricula, most districts do not seem to cue in to quality ratings in their selection decisions. Researchers at the Center for American Progress found that 40% of districts they included in a recent study are not using any instructional materials that are highly aligned to standards.⁷ As University of Southern California education professor Morgan Polikoff notes, curriculum selection is mostly a local decision, and districts have complex selection processes that do not necessarily optimize for high-quality curricula.⁸

Third, getting districts to buy high-quality materials does not guarantee improved student achievement.

To further complicate matters, merely deploying a highly-rated curriculum in a school does not guarantee student achievement gains. A curriculum’s effect on student outcomes hinges on the practices teachers employ as they use the curricula. Even when high-quality materials are available, teachers may use them differently than designed, or not use them at all.

A recent Harvard study on curricula found that only 32% of surveyed teachers rely extensively on district-provided materials.⁹ In lieu of using their district’s purchased resources, many teachers seem to be creating or curating their own materials, often from sources such as Google and Pinterest.¹⁰ This trend is troubling because the materials teachers curate from online sources are often of substandard quality.¹¹

Yet as David Steiner, executive director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, notes, even teachers with best-in-class materials often have legitimate reasons for not using them.¹² When teachers do not receive

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adequate training on new materials, or when new materials are incoherent with the programs, practices, and circumstances of their schools, they justifiably turn to other sources to help their classroom instruction work.

Discovering who buys what and why

Taken together, these challenges present a formidable hurdle for getting high-quality instructional materials into the classroom. The first and third challenges—gauging quality and ensuring teacher usage—both merit significant attention.¹³ This paper, however, focuses on the equally important second challenge: understanding why and how districts go about selecting new materials.

In the tale of four districts previously described, predicting which districts will select high-quality curricula and achieve better outcomes depends on context.¹⁴ Different districts decide to purchase new materials for different reasons, and follow different patterns in making their selection decisions. Assuming that curriculum will be selected just because it’s high-quality blinds curriculum proponents to the varied problems, pressures, and political dynamics districts navigate.

This paper aims to help curriculum proponents see how districts that ostensibly want the same product—quality curricula—are actually seeking very different solutions. Our lens for understanding how context shapes decisions is a theory known as Jobs to Be Done.

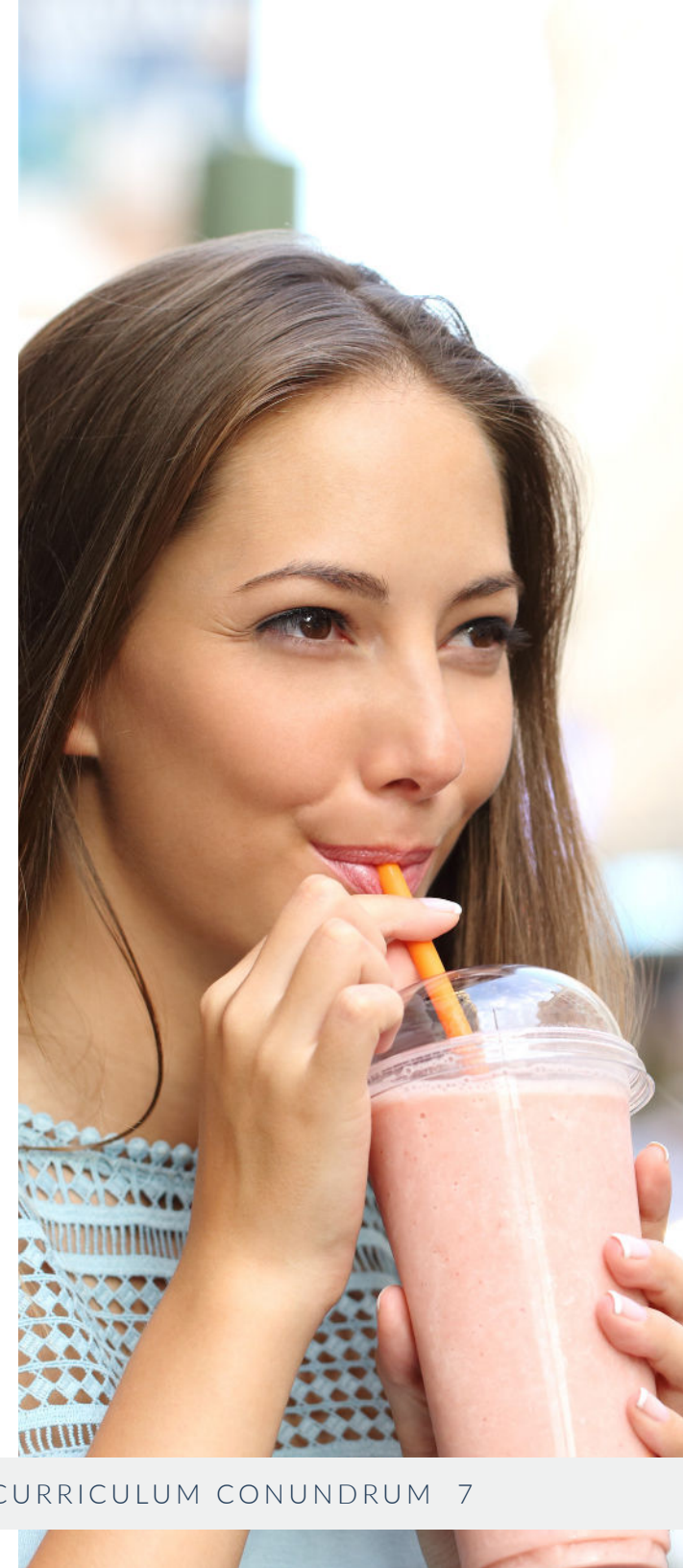
WHAT ARE JOBS TO BE DONE?

The Jobs to Be Done theory starts with a simple premise: all people strive to make progress in their lives. Progress, however, does not happen devoid of context. People seek progress within their particular circumstances, and those circumstances shape their decisions. When we identify a common set of circumstances linked with a common desire for progress, this is what we call a “job.” Just as people hire contractors to help them build houses or lawyers to help them build a case, people “hire” different types of products and services to help them make progress when “jobs” arise in their lives.

One of the first Jobs to Be Done studies elucidates the important role circumstances play in shaping decisions. To help a fast-food restaurant understand why people buy milkshakes, researchers spent a day interviewing their milkshake customers. The interviews revealed that many people who purchased milkshakes in the morning faced a long, boring commute and needed something to make the commute more interesting. They weren't yet hungry, but they knew that they'd be hungry by 10 a.m. and they wanted to consume something now that would stave off hunger until noon. They also faced constraints: they were in a hurry, they were wearing professional work clothes, and they only had one free hand. People hired milkshakes over coffee, bananas, or donuts because the milkshake was the best-available option to satisfy their appetite in the context of a tedious commute.

While one might assume that flavor, thickness, and packaging were the keys to increasing milkshake sales, Jobs to Be Done theory revealed that demand really came from addressing the circumstances of a daily commute. Milkshake purchasing decisions had more to do with *context* than the attributes of the *product*.

Jobs to Be Done theory also reveals how to tailor a solution to circumstances so people will be more likely to choose it. Bob Moesta, one of this paper's authors and an early collaborator with Clayton Christensen on the Jobs to Be Done theory, applied this lens a number of years ago to help a Detroit-area home builder market townhomes. The company had a problem: it offered affordable homes with a host of customizable amenities—such as granite countertops, crown molding, and stainless-steel appliances—that attracted lots of interested customers. But very few of those potential customers signed purchase agreements.

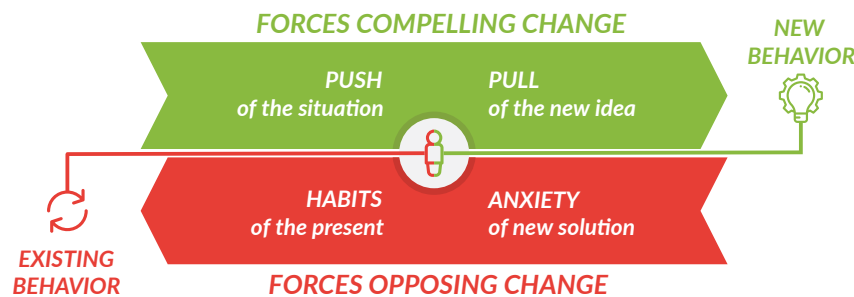


Through interviews, Moesta found that many potential customers were empty nesters looking to downsize their homes. Their decision to sign a contract hinged on figuring out what to do with all the memory-laden possessions they couldn't take with them. Equipped with this insight, the builder was able to dramatically boost townhome sales by making some unconventional additions to the purchase agreements: offering free moving services and two years of free storage space with on-site sorting rooms where people could take their time going through their belongings. Increased townhome demand resulted from addressing customers' circumstances, not from adding more desirable features.

Forces of Progress

To identify specific Jobs to Be Done, we look for four types of circumstances that show up in people's stories and shape their decisions, as illustrated by the Forces of Progress framework in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. The Forces of Progress



The first force is the *pull of the new idea*. It represents the magnetism and allure of a particular solution when people envision how it can improve their lives. Marketing curricula at an education conference is a classic strategy to generate pull. But pull is only one piece of the puzzle.

A second force that also moves people toward a decision is the *push of the situation*. Push represents the moments of struggle that cause them

to crave a change—such as when district leaders regularly hear teachers complaining about the failings of their current curriculum.

Push and pull describe desires for change, but two forces opposing change are just as powerful for understanding why change happens with varying degrees of success. First, *habits of the present* keep people invested in the status quo. Thoughts such as “We’ve worked with this vendor for years” or “I like this textbook because it’s similar to what we’ve been using” reveal the power of habits.

Second, the *anxiety of the new solution* deters people from adopting a new solution. Concerns such as “Will technical glitches keep teachers from using this online curriculum?” or “What if our state standards change and these materials are out of date next year?” reveal some of the real anxieties that can hold districts back from adopting something new.

Together, these four categories—the four *forces of progress*—help us see how different circumstances shape adoption decisions. They reveal the elements of context that help us determine how a person or organization will navigate a choice. Habits and anxieties tether a district to the status quo while pushes and pulls compel change. Ultimately, a curriculum purchase reveals how the forces of progress play out in each district’s situation.

In introducing Jobs to Be Done theory, it’s also important to clarify what Jobs to Be Done are not. The term ‘Jobs to Be Done’ does not refer to the roles people occupy in their professions, such as teacher, principal, or district director of curriculum. Additionally, Jobs to Be Done do not represent a person’s professional responsibilities—such as attending staff meetings, reviewing reports, writing RFPs, and communicating with vendors. Lastly, Jobs to Be Done theory explains the choices people actually make, not the choices they should make. For example, all people should exercise regularly and eat healthy food, but manifest behaviors reveal that, for many people, “live a healthy lifestyle” is not a Job to Be Done.

With this description of what Jobs to Be Done are and how they shape decisions, we now dive into our research process and findings. Through interviews with districts across the country, we uncovered four Jobs to Be Done that provide insight into why and when districts select new curricula.

THE JOBS TO BE DONE SHAPING CURRICULUM DECISIONS

To find the Jobs to Be Done that shape districts' curriculum-selection decisions, we started by interviewing district curriculum leaders who recently led a curriculum-selection process. Our interviews avoided asking people to explain their decisions because the post-hoc rationalizations people give rarely reveal how circumstances influence their actions. Instead, we asked people to “help us shoot the documentary” about their selection experience. Our aim was to capture the conditions and events that shaped their choices: from the moment of the first fleeting thought that the status quo wasn't cutting it; through the twists and turns of struggling with their old options, learning about new alternatives, and confronting the inevitable anxiety that accompanies prospective change; and then finally to the point when they decided “Today's the day I'm going to invest in something new.”

Once we completed a set of interviews, we coded the events in people's stories and then used cluster analysis to look for similarities across the interviews. As the clusters emerged, they revealed common sets of circumstances people struggled through that shaped the decision criteria underlying their choices. Each cluster of stories connected by similar types of “struggling moments” and circumstances constitutes what we call a 'Job to Be Done.' The four we identified are highlighted in the sidebar; more complete descriptions follow. (See Appendix B for additional details on our research methodology.)



Job 1: Overhaul

Help us transform instruction to tackle a major challenge



Job 2: Build Consensus

Help us manage a decision process and get to consensus



Job 3: Update

Help us refresh our resources to address a problem



Job 4: Influence

Help us shape the field

#1 Overhaul: Help us transform instruction to tackle low achievement

Johnstown School District was at a crossroads.¹⁵ A few months before the end of the previous school year, the board had hired a new superintendent with a clear mandate: to address inequitable outcomes among the student population. Low test scores had plagued the district for years, and the latest round of benchmark assessments forebode a turn for the worse.

As he accepted the new superintendent's offer to become the district's chief academic officer, Daryl knew he had his work cut out for him. He'd started his career as a teacher in Johnstown but had spent the last five years as a consultant helping districts across the state with turnaround work. He had landed on the radar of the new superintendent after consulting with her the previous May to audit the district's curriculum and instructional practices.

From the audit, Daryl already had a clear sense of what the district needed to do. It wouldn't be a pleasant process for the teachers and school leaders involved. He needed to institute a major update and renovation of the district's instructional methods in order to bring quality and consistency to classroom teaching. His plan was to purchase Student Connections, a curriculum that was both highly rated and affordable. He had seen it prove its worth over and over in his consulting work.

This year wasn't the scheduled year for updating materials, which unfortunately meant he would have to get creative with his budgets and purchase the new materials as a supplement. But the upside of making a purchase off-cycle was that he could sidestep the district's lengthy curriculum selection processes and just get the materials he knew they needed. By the time the regular selection cycle came around, he was confident their newfound student achievement success would have earned district stakeholders' buy-in.

What are the struggling moments?

Johnston School District has a Job to Be Done we call "Help us transform instruction to tackle low achievement," or "Overhaul" for short. This job comes into play when two key conditions exist: First, the district has a persistent

problem with low test scores. Second, influential stakeholders, such as the school board, determine that those low test scores are unacceptable and must be addressed straightaway. The general sense of urgency around improving student achievement provides the superintendent and her executive team with a necessary mandate to overhaul the districts' instructional practices.¹⁶

What does desired progress look like?

For districts with an Overhaul job, curriculum is usually just one aspect of a multi-pronged effort to improve student achievement. Knowing that curriculum and instruction are intertwined, they often aim to revamp both curriculum and instruction to generate needed test score gains. Thus, professional development and accountability structures usually have prominent roles in their overall strategies.

When it comes to curriculum, districts with an Overhaul job want two types of progress: student achievement gains and stakeholder buy-in for change. For both of these, evidence is key.

First, Overhaul districts' curriculum strategies need to chalk up demonstrable improvements in student achievement. Thus, districts with this job value materials backed by evidence that they work—or at least high ratings that suggest they are likely to work.

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Second, these districts need their curriculum strategy to help them generate buy-in. A curriculum and instruction overhaul doesn't necessarily come easily for the staff who have to carry out the changes. For school-site educators, change means letting go of their current resources and teaching practices. Thus, district leaders need compelling evidence to persuade these educators that burdensome change efforts are worthwhile. Then, with implementation underway, they need benchmark results to show that the new materials and approaches are making a difference.

What solutions help these districts select high-quality curricula?

Leaders in these districts are on the hook with other stakeholders to produce improved student achievement. Thus, the resources and supports they most seek are those that will help them drive overall student success.

Marshal evidence to back curriculum strategies. Leaders at these districts value sources of data that can give them confidence in a chosen strategy and help them win the confidence of other stakeholders.¹⁷ That evidence could come in many forms. For example, *empirical research*—such as that cited in the introduction—helps demonstrate the power of curriculum as a lever for improving achievement. This research helps district leaders make a case for using curriculum as a core plank of their strategy to boost student achievement. Empirical evidence for specific curricular materials is even better.

Many district leaders we interviewed also emphasized the value of *audits* of their districts' curriculum and instructional practices with the help of partner organizations such as TNTP or Instruction Partners. These audits served two important roles. First, they gave district leaders an outside second opinion to expound the inadequacy of the status quo to stakeholders. Second, they helped pinpoint where district leaders should focus their efforts.

A third important form of data for these districts is *benchmark assessment data* on student achievement. Again, it serves two purposes. First, it provides an early indicator of whether curriculum strategies are working, enabling district leaders to pivot as needed. Second, when the results turn positive, they can be used to win over stakeholders who have been reluctant to make the pivot.

Endow rising curriculum leaders with cross-district experience. What influences district leaders to pick curricula as their improvement strategy of choice? Experience. From our interviews, the strategies district leaders tended to choose were those they had seen work elsewhere—either in prior roles or prior consulting work. Thus, to help districts in an Overhaul job, we see value in programs that foster inter-district collaboration between emerging leaders so that they can share implementation and improvement strategies that work for their respective contexts.



Furnish supports to complement curricula. Districts with an Overhaul job are keenly aware that students learn both through interacting with instructional materials and through learning from teachers. Any curricular strategy for improving student achievement, therefore, also depends on giving teachers the supports they need to utilize new materials successfully. District leaders know that a one-day session of sit-and-get professional development on the key features of new materials isn't effective at moving the needle on teacher practices. What teachers need, instead, is regular coaching over time to help them change how they teach.

Proffer funding to support change. As mentioned above, districts with an Overhaul job often make their curriculum purchases off-budget and off-cycle. Their ingenuity in finding funds is impressive. At the same time, they risk shortchanging their efforts if cobbled-together funding falls short. For example, they may select open educational resources (OER) assuming their only cost will be printing the free materials. Only later do they discover that successful implementation requires extensive professional development that falls outside their budget. States or foundations can help prevent half-baked executions by identifying districts in Overhaul circumstances and helping them with their purchases.

Districts with an Overhaul job often make their curriculum purchases off-budget and off-cycle, but they risk shortchanging their efforts if cobbled-together funding falls short.

This recommendation, however, comes with a cautionary note: easy access to additional funding should not be a reason districts decide to pursue

new curricula. If an opportunity to get funding pulls a district into replacing its curriculum, then Overhaul is not that district's Job to Be Done; and such a district is unlikely to have the laser focus on results that drives Overhaul district leaders. Thus, we recommend that additional funding should come in targeted amounts and should only partially cover the cost of new materials and associated supports. It should help with the change, but should not be a core reason for the change.

#2 Build Consensus: Help us manage a selection and get to consensus

In June, as Kendra prepped for the start of the next school term, she knew her turn had come. She was the director of the elementary English language arts curriculum for her district, and this year was the year her state provided funding to update materials for the grades and subject areas she covered. Since Kendra had only been in her role two years, this was her first time going through this process. She knew that managing this selection cycle would be a critical indicator of her job performance in the eyes of her director and the superintendent.

When she first stepped into this role, Kendra assumed she would spend a lot of time studying the features, benefits, and drawbacks of all of the curriculum options on the market so that she would know what was best for her district. But after a conversation with her science counterpart who led a selection last year, she realized that her attention needed to shift.

Unlike most other decisions at the district, curriculum selection would follow a very grassroots, democratic process as stipulated by both state policy and long-standing district tradition. Her role was not to evaluate and choose materials for her district. Rather, her role was to find options and then coordinate the selection process. The curriculum committee had the final say over the decision. Kendra's goal was to shepherd the committee members through the process so that the final decision came out on time, within budget, and with a set of materials that everyone on the committee was happy with.

What are the struggling moments?

Unlike districts with an Overhaul job, the factors that motivate districts like Kendra's have nothing to do with low test scores. For these districts, the

Teachers with the job of Build Consensus want materials that help them better serve their students, but those materials need to be user-friendly and straightforward.

Job to Be Done is “Help us manage a selection and get to consensus,” or “Build Consensus” for short. To be clear, this does not mean their tests scores are high. It just means that test scores aren’t the pressing problem that moves these districts to action.

In fact, the Build Consensus job has little to do with struggle. These districts seek new curricula because their states’ curriculum selection policies tell them “It’s time.”¹⁸ In districts with a Build Consensus job, their search for new materials is prompted by the desire to follow state cycles, comply with state policies, and in some cases get access to contingent curriculum funding.

What does desired progress look like?

For this job, two important constituencies each shape a two-pronged definition of progress. One is curriculum leaders. The other is the teachers who take part in curriculum selection committees.

Curriculum leaders’ desired progress focuses on effectively navigating the curriculum selection process so that stakeholders reach consensus and are satisfied with the outcome. They narrow a list of options most suitable for their district. They organize committees of teachers, principals, and other stakeholders to review the curriculum options. They provide the committees with timelines, guidelines, and rubrics for evaluating the curricula. They manage school-site pilots of various materials. They arrange for finalist curriculum publishers to showcase their materials and answer questions at public meetings. After a decision is made by the curriculum selection committee, they present that decision to their school board for ratifying approval. And all along the way, they communicate with the various stakeholders to make sure the process stays on time and within budget. In the end, a major win comes from having broad support for the final choice. For them, this job is all about getting to a solution that key stakeholders can be happy with when everything is wrapped up.¹⁹

If curriculum leaders in a Build Consensus district focus on managing—not making—the decision, whose desired progress shapes the actual curriculum selection? Teachers. On a district’s curriculum selection committee, teachers usually have the strongest voice in the final outcome. Therefore, the Jobs to Be Done that shape teachers’ choices for their classrooms also shape curriculum selection in Build Consensus districts.

Our recent research on teacher motivation suggests that the most common teacher Job to Be Done is “*Help me find manageable ways to better engage and challenge my students.*”²⁰As the name of this teacher job suggests, teachers want materials that help them better serve their students, but those materials need to be user-friendly and straightforward. They don’t want materials that come bundled with a major change initiative hidden inside. Instead, they favor materials similar to those that worked for them in the past.

What solutions help these districts select high-quality curricula?

Districts with this job usually aren't looking explicitly for what curriculum experts consider high-quality materials. But that doesn't mean high-quality materials are off the table. Solutions that address their job can also thread the needle of nudging them toward high-quality options.

Narrow the set of potential options. The first step in a curriculum leader's work is to identify three to five curricula to review in-depth and potentially pilot. This can be a daunting task given the multiplicity and complexity of curricular products on the market. The challenge proves greatest for leaders in smaller districts that are often juggling multiple roles in addition to curriculum selection.

It's no surprise, therefore, that these leaders often rely on trusted shortcuts to help them do their initial vetting. Unfortunately, these shortcuts make districts vulnerable to slick marketing tactics. For example, district leaders may end up shortlisting the materials that have the most attractive display booths at a curriculum fair; or they may start their search by calling the two or three vendors they already have relationships with.

Fortunately, their demand for help in streamlining the initial vetting process also offers a prime opportunity to steer these districts toward high-quality materials. In our interviews, a number of district leaders mentioned that they turned to curriculum reviews—such as EdReports or those provided by the Louisiana Department of Education—to get a shortlist of reliable options. State-approved curriculum lists were the other common vetting shortcut, which means states have considerable influence on whether Build Consensus districts focus on quality materials.

Provide tools to help manage the selection process. Given that curriculum leaders focus primarily on facilitating the selection process, tools to help them manage the process appeal to their Job to Be Done. These tools might include project-management software designed specifically for curriculum reviews, or communication platforms that help keep all key stakeholders in the loop on upcoming phases of the selection process. Other valuable solutions include guides on how to manage the process

(such as those by EdCredible or Instruction Partners' Curriculum Support Guide), rubric templates that districts can use for rating and comparing materials (such as EQUIP, IMET, or EdReports' tools), or consulting services (such as those offered by Achievement Network, Instruction Partners, Student Achievement Partners, EdReports, or TNTP). As a rule of thumb, the most attractive solutions eliminate the need for curriculum leaders to create tools and processes from scratch and manually manage them. Well-designed tools and services can be a win-win—simultaneously helping leaders manage the process while also steering them toward quality materials.

Gauge alignment with context. Curriculum committees in these districts may not list "select high-quality materials" as their top priority when reviewing materials. But that does not mean they do not value quality. Rather, committees in these districts look for dimensions of quality that align with teachers' Jobs to Be Done. Teachers want materials that will be straightforward to implement and delightful to use with their students. How to meet those criteria depends on context.²¹ Teachers' "look-for" attributes might include how the materials align with their school's particular instructional philosophies, how much training will be required to figure out the new materials, whether the materials include fun activities and engaging content, and whether they think their students will relate to the materials.

Districts with the Build Consensus job usually aren't looking explicitly for "high-quality materials." But that doesn't mean they are off the table.



Tools and supports for these districts should focus on helping them gauge if materials align with their teachers' local needs. Curriculum reviewers might consider appraising—but not ranking—curricula based on alignment with some of the contextual factors teachers care about. Additionally, providers of high-quality curricula should be sure to design and market their materials with contextual fit in mind.

#3 Update: Help us refresh our materials to better support teachers

It was a quiet September morning at the district office, and Marcus was at his computer, delving into reports on various curriculum options on the market. He was the district's assistant superintendent over educational services, and yesterday afternoon, his superintendent had given him the go-ahead to start a curriculum selection process.

Over the last couple of years, teachers in the district had voiced repeated complaints that they couldn't improve test scores with their current materials—and Marcus agreed. Six years earlier, when their state adopted new standards, the district had tried to get new materials to match those standards but had come up short. Many publishers had claimed their materials met the new standards, but in reality, they did not. Instead, the district resorted to creating materials in-house, but this did not play out as well as hoped. The materials had been sparse, and teachers were left scrambling to fill in the gaps. Creating supplemental materials put a huge burden on teachers' already busy schedules, and few teachers had the curriculum design expertise to ensure their materials were high-quality.

As Marcus considered options for helping their teachers improve test scores, it became clear that standards-aligned materials would go a long way toward improving the situation. Ultimately, the district's curriculum choice was not Marcus's decision to make. It would result from months of reviews, pilots, and deliberation among the teachers and other stakeholders on the selection committee. But on the front end of that work, Marcus needed to shape the field of options to make sure only standards-aligned materials made it to the committees in the first place.

What are the struggling moments?

Districts like Marcus's go into a curriculum selection process to address a problem: teachers are protesting the inadequacy of their current materials. In Marcus's case, materials do not support teachers in covering the state standards. In other districts, materials may no longer match teachers' current instructional philosophies and practices. But in all cases, the struggling moment comes from teachers' complaints about the current materials. Districts with circumstances similar to Marcus's have a job we call "Help us refresh our materials to better support teachers," or "Update" for short.

The Job to Be Done for Update districts lies somewhere between Overhaul and Build Consensus. Like the Overhaul districts, Update districts seek new materials to address a problem. But unlike Overhaul districts, the leaders of Update districts are not marshalling political momentum to change teachers' instructional practices. Rather, their goal is to give teachers better options and then get out of their way. Once they initiate a curriculum selection, their process mirrors that of Build Consensus districts: the district curriculum leader facilitates the work of a selection committee, and the committee makes the final choice.

What does desired progress look like?

Update districts' desired progress is first and foremost about ensuring that curriculum options align with current needs and minimize the burden on teachers. Second, these districts want the process to go smoothly: within budget, on schedule, and leading to consensus among stakeholders—similar to Build Consensus districts.

What solutions help these districts select high-quality curricula?

In general, districts with an Update job will value the same solutions that appeal to Build Consensus districts—their selection processes are similar. But the particular struggling moments of Update districts add noteworthy nuances to how they seek solutions.

Collect materials that address local challenges. Like their counterparts in Build Consensus districts, the curriculum leaders in Update districts look for ways to narrow the set of potential options they present to their curriculum committees. But unlike in Build Consensus districts, they will not settle for just any rational approach to narrowing the list. Rather, they need to ensure that their vetting approach will address the specific struggle that led their district to seek new materials in the first place.

For example, if their struggles stem from old materials that are not standards aligned, they value EdReports' specific focus on alignment to standards. If teachers demand materials to better support project-based learning practices, they turn to a source such as PBLWorks. If the district's new focus on exploratory learning is what makes old materials subpar, leaders look to EL Education for guidance. The tools and strategies that appeal to them will help them vet curricular options according to their particular causes of struggle.

Encouraging Update districts to select high-quality materials is a matter of ensuring high-quality options surface as solutions to their struggles. For example, curriculum reviewers and consultants that encourage districts to select high-quality materials will find inroads with Update districts

Districts with the Update job care first and foremost about ensuring that curriculum options align with current needs and minimize the burden on teachers.

by showing how quality options address the curriculum struggles their teachers complain about. Likewise, high-quality curriculum providers can differentiate their offerings for Update districts by showing how their products relieve the challenges posed by outdated materials.

#4 Influence: Help us shape the field

As the year for selecting new math materials approached, Josephine was working on a strategy. From her six years of experience as her district's director of secondary mathematics, she knew curriculum selection could easily turn her work into an exercise in bureaucracy. But her aspirations for her district weren't going to let that happen.

Over the last few years, the district's reputation had bounded ahead of the pack. Their test scores were the best in the state compared to other districts serving similar student populations. With this success had come attention from state leaders, which then translated into opportunities to provide input on new state policies. The district had also been featured recently in local newspapers and education trade magazines for their use of technology and their success in serving English language learners. The positive press, in turn, had led to requests for site visits from schools in other parts of the state.

With this track record in mind, Josephine determined to make sure the outcome of the curriculum selection process kept them on the cutting edge and positioned them to continue to influence the field. To get the materials she wanted, Josephine would need to strategically recruit people for the curriculum selection committee and then lobby its members to pick innovative new materials rather than default back to the materials they had chosen on their last cycle. If everything went well, at the end of the process she would position her district—and her professional reputation—at the forefront of the state education landscape.

What are the struggling moments?

The Job to Be Done for districts like Josephine's present a rare and interesting case among our interview sample. The actual selection process for these districts looks identical to those of Build Consensus districts: selection happens in sync with state curriculum cycles—not in response to a problem—and curriculum selection committees are the nominal decision-making authorities. Yet behind the scenes, the circumstances that define the job look very different. Districts like Josephine's have a reputation to build, which puts them in a job we call "Help us shape the field," or "Influence" for short.

In Influence districts, curriculum leaders work hard to shape the outcome of the selection decision. Unlike their Overhaul counterparts, however, they cannot sidestep the selection timeline and the democratically-oriented selection processes. There's no sense of crisis to justify such moves. These leaders won't, however, let important decisions rest wholly on the whims of distributed authority. They are laser-focused on continuing to rack up wins for their districts so they can stand out and have a role in shaping their regional education landscape.

What does desired progress look like?

As a baseline, these districts need materials that meet the needs of their teachers and do not jeopardize their current success. But once they ensure new curricula will be functional and acceptable to all stakeholders, district leaders care less about the features of the curricula and more about the opportunities the curricula may afford.

Influence leaders want to know "Where will these materials take us?" as they survey their options. For example, a large contract with a smaller publisher may bring an opportunity to influence that publisher's future editions of the curriculum. Materials that support innovative practices—such as those with strong digital learning supplements—may present an opportunity to stand out as a digital learning pioneer. Selecting materials that the state created through a major initiative may give the district an opportunity for collaboration with state leaders. Sometimes, districts may opt to create their own materials because they find their innovative practices don't fit with any off-the-shelf products. They hope to codify their methods and then share them with the field.

Once Influence districts ensure new curricula will be functional and acceptable to all stakeholders, district leaders care less about the features of the curricula and more about the opportunities the curricula may afford.



Interestingly, however, these districts' desire to stand out as leaders and influencers does not tempt them to overhaul instruction. In their view, current practices already work well, as evidenced by the district's record of success. They want to build on their accomplishments, not undermine their prior work.

Lastly, this job may also have a social component for curriculum leaders. Spearheading noteworthy curriculum shifts enhances their professional reputations. As they consider the arc of their careers, they expect their leadership at a highly regarded district will open doors in the future.

What solutions help these districts select high-quality curricula?

Addressing the Job to Be Done for Influence districts entails helping them identify and seize opportunities to stand out and have regional impact. To encourage districts with this job to adopt high-quality materials, opportunities for influence must be predicated on good curricular decisions.

Addressing the Job to Be Done for Influence districts entails helping them identify and seize opportunities to stand out and have regional impact.

Generate publicity for quality. On the front end of a curriculum selection decision, districts with this job value information that keeps them apprised of cutting-edge materials. They want to know not just about the efficacy, alignment, and usability of curricular materials, but also what's new and innovative in the curriculum space. Trade news outlets and professional associations are prime sources for this kind of information. Those that publish this information, therefore, should make sure they highlight trends that show signs of quality and avoid amplifying trends devoid of quality. Therein lies a ripe opportunity to elevate the most promising high-quality materials.

Publicity for districts is another angle for emphasizing quality. Influence districts want recognition for their choices and their successes in implementing novel resources. Trade news outlets or professional associations can offer this kind of publicity as well. But for the sake of advancing quality, they should ensure that any recognition they give to districts hinges on the quality and efficacy of the districts' decisions.

Predicate collaboration on selection of quality materials. Influencing is obviously not a lone wolf activity. Districts with an Influence job need network partners in order to have influence. Opportunities to influence

usually come from working with state and local education agencies, foundations, publishers, and professional associations. Thus, all of these actors can help nudge Influence districts toward high-quality materials by making the use of quality materials a key characteristic they look for in district partners.

Lastly, districts with this job will also value the solutions that appeal to Build Consensus districts. Because their formal selection process parallels the process in Build Consensus districts, they also value solutions that help them manage the selection process and gauge alignment with local context.

Figure 2. The four jobs that shape curriculum selection



CONCLUSION

The four Jobs to Be Done detailed in this paper reveal a refreshing truth: any district can end up selecting high-quality materials. High-quality curricula get picked when curricular solutions address districts' Jobs to Be Done. For Overhaul districts, it's about giving them a winning strategy for improving student achievement. For Build Consensus districts, it's about nudging curriculum directors toward quality options by helping them manage the selection process and address teachers' Jobs to Be Done. For Update districts, it's about positioning quality materials to fix a disconnect that causes teachers to agitate for new resources. For Influence districts, it's about making sure opportunities to stand out and lead hinge on the use of high-quality materials.

Good curricular solutions aren't just those that meet general quality indicators. For districts with any job other than Overhaul, a curriculum's designation as "high-quality" connects only loosely to the requirements of their circumstances. Demand for high-quality curricula only happens when solutions that meet districts' jobs come with quality baked in.

With these encouraging insights, however, we leave a cautionary note: these Jobs to Be Done reveal the futility of one-size-fits-all solutions. Some may read the growing research base on high-quality curricula and infer that curriculum has a platonic ideal: aligned to standards, rigorous, easy to use, culturally relevant, etc. Unfortunately, identifying the perfect solution doesn't ensure more perfect selection. As districts' circumstances vary, so too must solutions vary to address their circumstances.

The jobs also reveal that when districts seek new curricula, their overall experience through the selection process matters more than the features of particular curricular products. Recall that the fast-food chain from our earlier story didn't sell more milkshakes by designing the perfect-tasting milkshake. Rather, it needed to design a milkshake experience that addressed the circumstances of commuters. Similarly, advocates of high-quality materials should focus on designing solutions that help districts navigate the experience of selecting curriculum.

Right now, there's no shortage of efforts to get better curricula in front of students. As we noted at the beginning of this paper, a host of research projects, partnerships, advocacy campaigns, and curriculum review efforts are underway to improve the availability and adoption of high-quality materials in K-12 schools. These efforts all have value. But the current share of districts using high-quality materials reveal that efforts in this arena are still wanting. We hope this research will help proponents of high-quality curricula better understand the factors that drive districts' choices. With that understanding, curriculum proponents will be able to design solutions that lead to higher rates of uptake and greater student success.

High-quality curricula are selected when
curricular solutions address districts'
Jobs to Be Done.

APPENDIX A: RESEARCH ON HIGH-QUALITY CURRICULA

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APPENDIX B: METHODOLOGY

The value of Jobs to Be Done

Clayton Christensen, Bob Moesta, and others pioneered the Jobs to Be Done theory to address a major limitation in conventional marketing research. First, quantitative research tends to surface only correlations among customer demographics, product features, and purchasing decisions—not the true causes of demand. Second, more qualitative market research, such as focus groups, tends to uncover customers’ stated preferences, not their actual preferences as revealed by their decisions and trade-offs. Jobs to Be Done aims to uncover the circumstances in people’s lives that cause them to make the choices they make.

Sample selection

To understand the Jobs to Be Done driving districts’ curriculum purchasing decisions, we interviewed people who were actively involved and invested in curriculum selection. Their roles ranged from chief academic officer, to director of curriculum and instruction, to assistant superintendent of educational services. None of these individuals had sole authority over curriculum selection, as decisions always involved multiple stakeholders, including teachers, school-site administrators, parents, other district staff, and school board members. But the people we interviewed played the most significant role in guiding the district’s selection process and were deeply invested in the outcome. Their individual stories revealed the dynamic ways that various stakeholders’ interests shaped the decision-making process.

Our sample is not statistically representative of school districts across the country. Nonetheless, we wanted our research to offer insights relevant to districts beyond our sample. We therefore took efforts to diversify our initial sample to increase the applicability of our findings to districts that serve historically disadvantaged students.

District variation by size	
Small (<15,000)	4
Medium (15,000 to 30,000)	1
Large (>30,000)	6

Districts we selected to interview fit the following characteristics:

- Served high-need populations: a majority of students were free- and reduced-lunch recipients, and/or Black or Hispanic minorities.
- Made a curriculum selection decision within the last three years. (This ensures that the stories shared by the interviewees would be relatively recent memories.)
- Varied in size and geographic location.

The district leaders we interviewed were based in the following states: California (1), Florida (3), Georgia (1), North Carolina (1), New York (1), Ohio (1), Tennessee (2) and Texas (1).

We identified district interviewees through a variety of channels including curriculum publishers, technical assistance providers, and online data from the U.S. Department of Education. Interviewees received \$100 gift cards in appreciation for their participation.

Interview method

Interviewees were asked to describe their experiences as if they were creating “mini-documentaries” to reveal how they selected a new curriculum. As key events came up in their stories, we dug deeper to understand how these events influenced the eventual decisions. These mini-documentaries allowed us to capture the forces shaping curriculum-selection decisions in the language of the curriculum leaders themselves.

Analysis

After each interview, we categorized key elements of the stories as pushes, pulls, anxieties, or habits, according to the Forces of Progress framework. After categorizing the elements of the interviews, we consolidated the interview data and conducted a cluster analysis of the interviews based on the similarities among their Forces of Progress. This analysis revealed four clusters of interviews with similar circumstances. By reviewing the details of the interviews within each cluster and noting the commonalities across their stories, we developed the four Jobs to Be Done characterized in this paper.

NOTES

1. David Steiner, "Curriculum Research: What We Know and Where We Need to Go," StandardsWork, March 2017, <http://standardswork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/sw-curriculum-research-report-fnl.pdf>.
2. Grover J. "Russ" Whitehurst, "Don't Forget Curriculum," Brookings, 2009, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/dont-forget-curriculum/> (accessed December 4, 2019).
3. C. Kirabo Jackson and Alexey Makarin, "Can Online Off-the-Shelf Lessons Improve Student Outcomes? Evidence from a Field Experiment," National Bureau of Economic Research, NBER Working Paper No. 22398, issued in July 2016 and revised in January 2017, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w22398>.
4. A selected bibliography of these studies and articles is included at the end of this paper in Appendix A.
5. Quality ratings are an imperfect proxy for efficacy. As Robert Slavin of Johns Hopkins University notes in his blog, "We once examined all of the textbooks rated 'green' (the top ranking on EdReports, which reviews textbooks for alignment with college- and career-ready standards). Out of dozens of reading and math texts with this top rating, two had small positive impacts on learning, compared to control groups." See Robert Slavin, "The Gap," *Robert Slavin's Blog*, September 5, 2019, <https://robertslavinsblog.wordpress.com/2019/09/05/the-gap/> (accessed February 4, 2020).
6. In a recent article for *Education Next*, Tom Loveless highlights an example of how input-focused ratings can miss the mark in identifying high-quality curricula. "A curriculum-review process that gives greater weight to adherence to standards than to impact on learning is not identifying high-quality curricula; it is identifying conforming curricula. An example rich with irony can be found in the textbook series *Math in Focus*, which is based on the math standards of Singapore. ... *Math in Focus* produced impressive learning gains in three rigorous studies of effectiveness that involved about 3,000 children. But *Math in Focus* failed the EdReports review. How can that be? The textbook series moves students more quickly through elementary math than Common Core dictates." See Tom Lovelace, "Common Core Has Not Worked," *Education Next* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2020) <https://www.educationnext.org/common-core-has-not-worked-forum-decade-on-has-common-core-failed/>.
7. Lisette Partelow and Sarah Shapiro, "Curriculum Reform in the Nation's Largest School Districts," Center for American Progress, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2018/08/29/454705/curriculum-reform-nations-largest-school-districts/>.
8. Morgan Polikoff, "The Challenges of Curriculum Materials as a Reform Lever," Brookings Institution, June 28, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-challenges-of-curriculum-materials-as-a-reform-lever/>.
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11. Morgan Polikoff and Jennifer Dean, "The Supplemental Curriculum Bazaar: Is What's Online Any Good?" Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2019, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/supplemental-curriculum-bazaar>.
12. David Steiner, "Staying on the Shelf: Why Rigorous New Curricula Aren't Being Used," Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2019, https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/staying-shelf-why-rigorous-new-curricula-arent-being-used#_ftnref7.

13. One of Thomas Arnett's recent papers addresses the topic of why teachers don't use the materials their districts purchase. See Thomas Arnett, "Why Aren't Teachers Using the Resources Companies Sell to their Districts?" American Enterprise Institute, December 2019, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/why-arent-teachers-using-the-resources-companies-sell-to-their-districts/>.

14. Throughout the remainder of this paper, we use the term "high quality" as an imperfect shorthand for referencing highly-rated curricular products.

15. The stories that introduce each job are an amalgamation of the stories we heard across multiple districts during our interviews. Names of individuals and districts have been changed to protect their privacy.

16. It's worth noting that curriculum is just one option among many that leaders may decide to invest in as the best way to improve achievement. Just as coffee or bagels could serve as alternative solutions for the Jobs to Be Done of commuters, districts with an Overhaul job might choose other strategies over curriculum—such as expanding instructional minutes for core subjects, launching new remediation programs, or implementing new tools for monitoring student progress.

17. District leaders may embark on curriculum change with the support they need from key stakeholders. But that does not mean they have consensus for the solutions they are pushing. Teachers and building leaders are not likely to all be on board. Evidence on what works not only informs the overhaul strategy, but also helps leaders make the case for that strategy.

18. Many states mandate or encourage all their districts to update their materials every five to seven years. Different subjects and grade levels happen on alternating years on a rolling basis. Often, states determine their own lists of recommended curriculum options and provide districts with funding to purchase from the state-approved lists during designated years.

19. There is an important social component at play for curriculum leaders in districts with this job. When we asked whether the final outcomes of their processes gave them the curriculum they thought their districts needed, they were quick to state emphatically that the curriculum was not theirs to choose. One district curriculum leader shared that if he had made the decision himself, he would have been to blame if schools and teachers were dissatisfied with the outcome. But as long as he managed the selection process thoroughly and effectively, responsibility for that decision was distributed across the various stakeholders, and he could justify the outcome even if people later disliked it.

20. See Thomas Arnett, Bob Moesta, and Michael B. Horn, "The teacher's quest for progress: How school leaders can motivate instructional innovation," Clayton Christensen Institute, September 2018, <https://www.christenseninstitute.org/publications/teachers-jobs-to-be-done/>.

21. For additional insight on this point, see Steiner, "Staying on the Shelf."

About the Institute

The Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank dedicated to improving the world through Disruptive Innovation. Founded on the theories of Harvard professor Clayton M. Christensen, the Institute offers a unique framework for understanding many of society's most pressing problems. Its mission is ambitious but clear: work to shape and elevate the conversation surrounding these issues through rigorous research and public outreach.

About the authors



Thomas Arnett is a senior research fellow in education for the Christensen Institute. His work focuses on Disruptive Innovations in K-12 education and the changing roles of teachers in innovative educational models. He holds a BS in Economics from Brigham Young University and an MBA from the Tepper School of Business from Carnegie Mellon University, where he was a William G. McGowan Fellow.



Bob Moesta is the president of The ReWired Group and serves as an Adjunct Fellow at the Clayton Christensen Institute. Along with HBS Professor and Christensen Institute cofounder Clayton Christensen, Moesta was among the principal architects in the mid-1990s of the Jobs to Be Done theory, one of the basic and vital building blocks for helping to make innovation more predictable and successful.

