

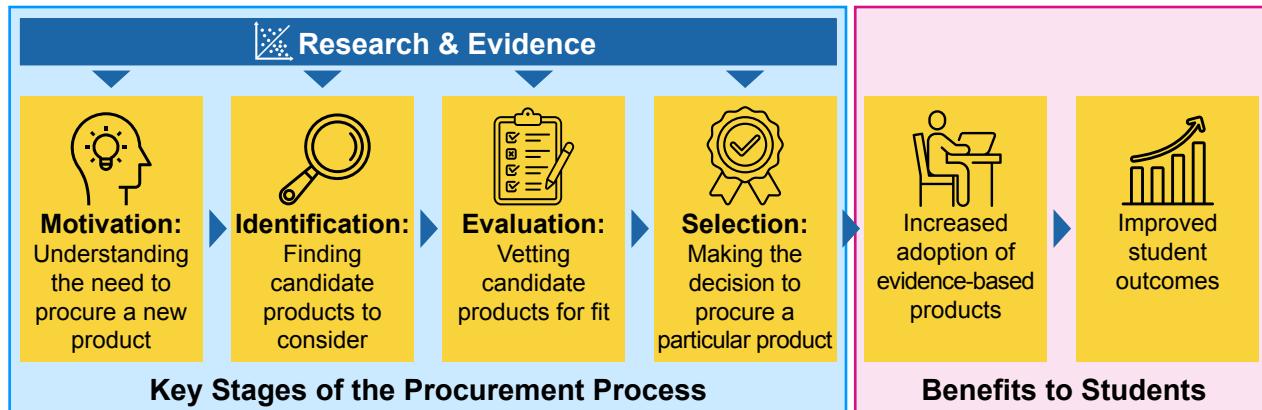
Leveraging Evidence to Procure Educational Products That Work: Strategies for School and District Leaders

By Erin Smith, Candice Benge, Ela Joshi, and Jessica Mislevy

Improving student outcomes is at the heart of every school or district leader's mission, but choosing the right products to support teaching and learning is not easy. With so many options on the market, it can be hard to know which ones are effective and will truly meet students' needs. Evidence-based **educational products**—such as interventions, programs, or other solutions tested in classrooms and shown to improve outcomes—reduce the guesswork. They give leaders greater confidence that investments will pay off and that teachers will have tools more likely to work for their students.

So how do we get more evidence-based educational products into classrooms? It starts with integrating research and evidence into the **procurement process**. Districts go through four key stages of decision-making when procuring new products: motivation, identification, evaluation, and selection (Exhibit 1). At the LEARN Network, we've studied how school and district leaders navigate these stages and use evidence in the process. Based on what we learned, this brief defines each stage, highlights what districts across the U.S. are doing, and offers practical strategies to help leaders enhance the use of research and evidence in procurement decisions.

Exhibit 1. Leveraging evidence occurs in every stage of the K-12 procurement process.¹



About the LEARN Network

At the [LEARN Network](#), our goal is to help education leaders make evidence-informed decisions about the products and programs they procure for their schools. To better understand the landscape of educational product procurement, we conducted nationally representative surveys of school leaders and interviewed a wide range of education stakeholders.

Learn About Districts Like Yours

Learn more about our [research](#) and dig deeper into the survey results through our interactive [data dashboard](#).



Motivation: When to look for a new evidence-based product

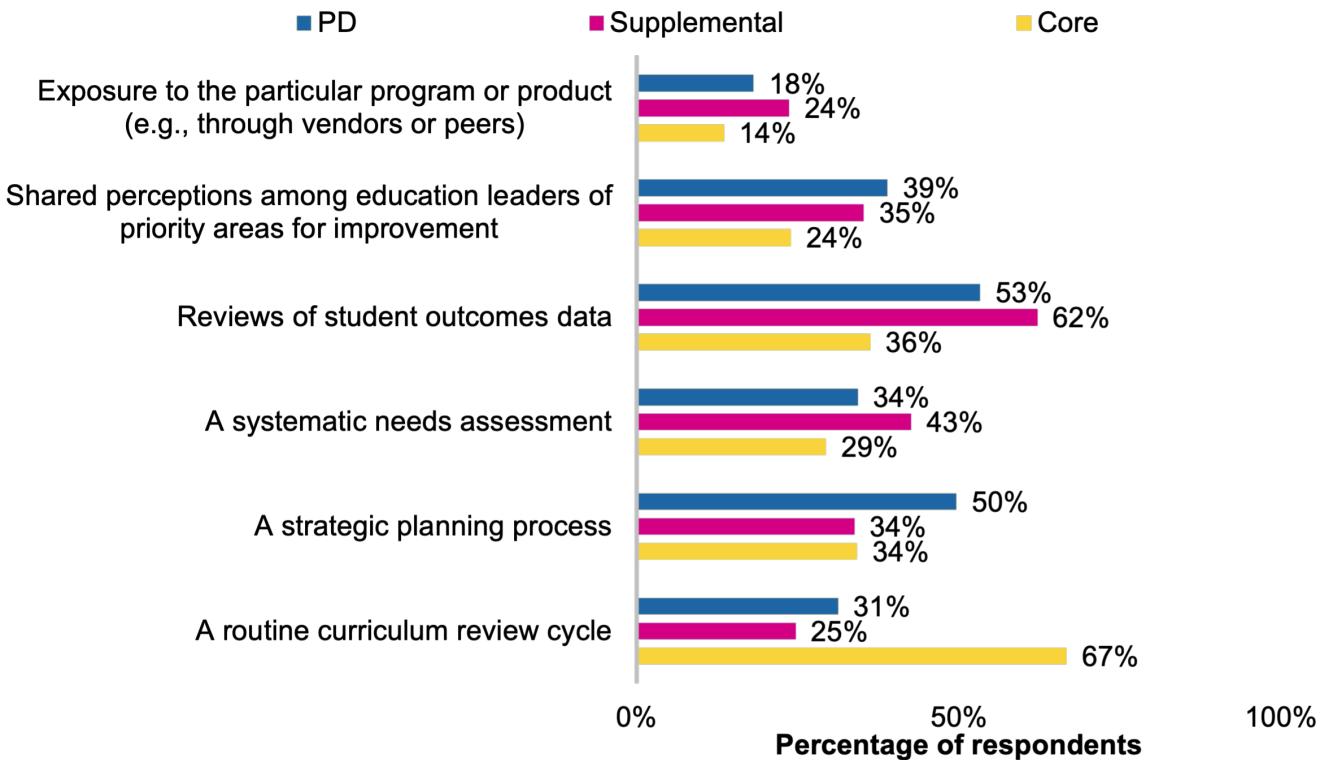
Motivation refers to the internal and external factors that drive schools and districts to seek out new products. These factors may include policy requirements, student performance data, or scheduled curriculum reviews. Our school leader survey² asked what motivated schools or districts to procure new core or supplemental curriculum materials, or professional development (PD) products.

What's happening in schools and districts?

School leaders reported that the motivation to purchase varied depending on the type of product (Exhibit 2).

- For core curriculum materials, the most common driver was a **routine curriculum review cycle**, selected by 67% of school leaders.
- For supplemental materials (materials that enhance or extend the core curriculum), school leaders were more likely to be motivated by **reviews of student outcomes data** (62%).
- Across product types, school leaders also reported being influenced by **shared leadership priorities**, **strategic planning processes**, and **needs assessments**.
- Exposure to a particular product**—through vendors or peers—also played a role, especially for supplemental products.

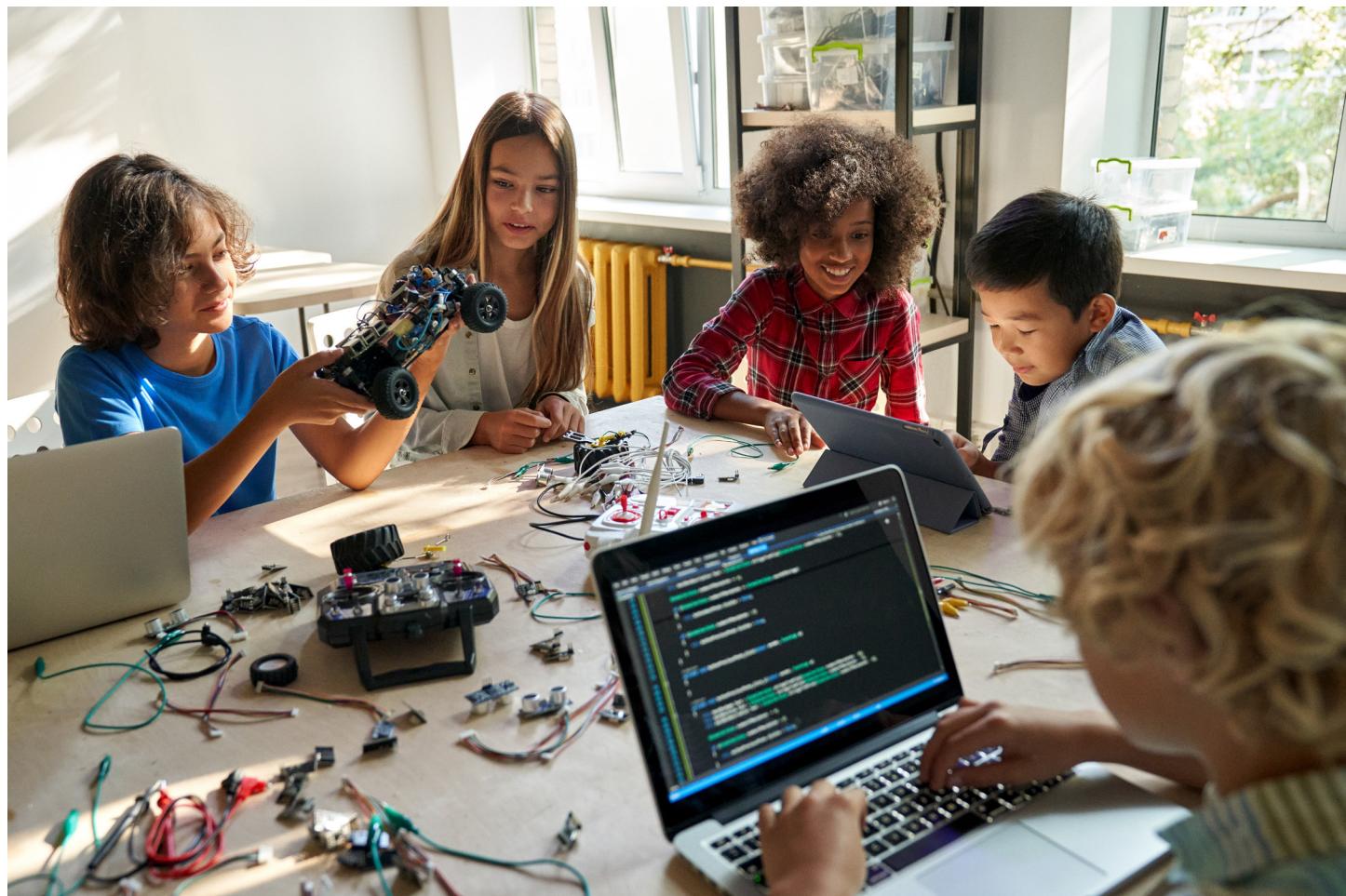
Exhibit 2. School leaders reported that routine curriculum reviews most often motivated the procurement of core curriculum materials, whereas reviews of student outcome data more often motivated procurement of supplemental materials.³



Strategies to consider

Based on these insights, school and district leaders can take several practical steps to ensure their procurement decisions are needs-driven and evidence-informed.

- **Start with a needs assessment driven by data.** A clear understanding of needs helps ensure product purchases address real gaps. Use data such as student assessments, teacher feedback, and product usage metrics to identify where gaps exist and ensure future product purchases meet current priorities. If a full needs assessment isn't feasible, consider a "lean" approach—form a cross-functional team, gather input, and identify key areas for improvement before buying.⁴
- **Build a routine review cycle** that includes an evaluation of existing products, usage patterns, and alignment with standards and priorities. Review cycles can also be checkpoints to revisit whether products are still meeting needs, are being used as intended, and align with evolving district priorities or community expectations. Our survey findings showed that review cycles are already common practice for procuring core curricular materials. Extending this practice by embedding "lean" needs assessment cycles when procuring supplemental or PD products may also be beneficial.





Identification: Where to look for evidence-based products

Identification is the stage where schools and districts search for product options and gather information to guide their choices. Leaders often draw on a variety of sources depending on their context and needs. We asked school leaders about the sources of information they rely on when exploring new educational products.

Exhibit 3. School leaders reported that recommendations from other leaders and end users were among the most influential sources for procurement decisions, with research and evidence playing a moderately influential role.⁵



What's happening in schools and districts?

School leaders reported turning to a number of sources when identifying new products (Exhibit 3). Across the board, the most influential voices were:

- **other education leaders within their district**, and
- **end users such as teachers**—those who will ultimately implement the product.

School leaders were least influenced by professional associations or conferences, despite these venues being rich sources for learning about evidence-based products. This may represent a missed opportunity to expand the range of high-quality products under consideration.

Even though school leaders relied on recommendations from end users, our survey also found that teachers were involved in identifying candidate products in only a third of schools (Exhibit 4).

Strategies to consider

To make the most of the product identification stage, leaders can reflect on who is involved in their school or district procurement process and how to expand input to sources of information that elevate both classroom insights and research-based evidence.

- **Consult end users.** Teachers are uniquely positioned to identify products that work in real classroom settings.
- **Leverage professional networks.** Conferences, associations, and collaborative groups can surface promising, evidence-based products that may not yet be widely known.⁶





Evaluation: Who to include in exploring evidence-based products

Evaluation is the process of assessing whether a product is a good fit for a school's or district's needs. This stage involves weighing factors such as alignment to standards, usability, and evidence of effectiveness. We asked school leaders who was most involved in evaluating products once options were identified.

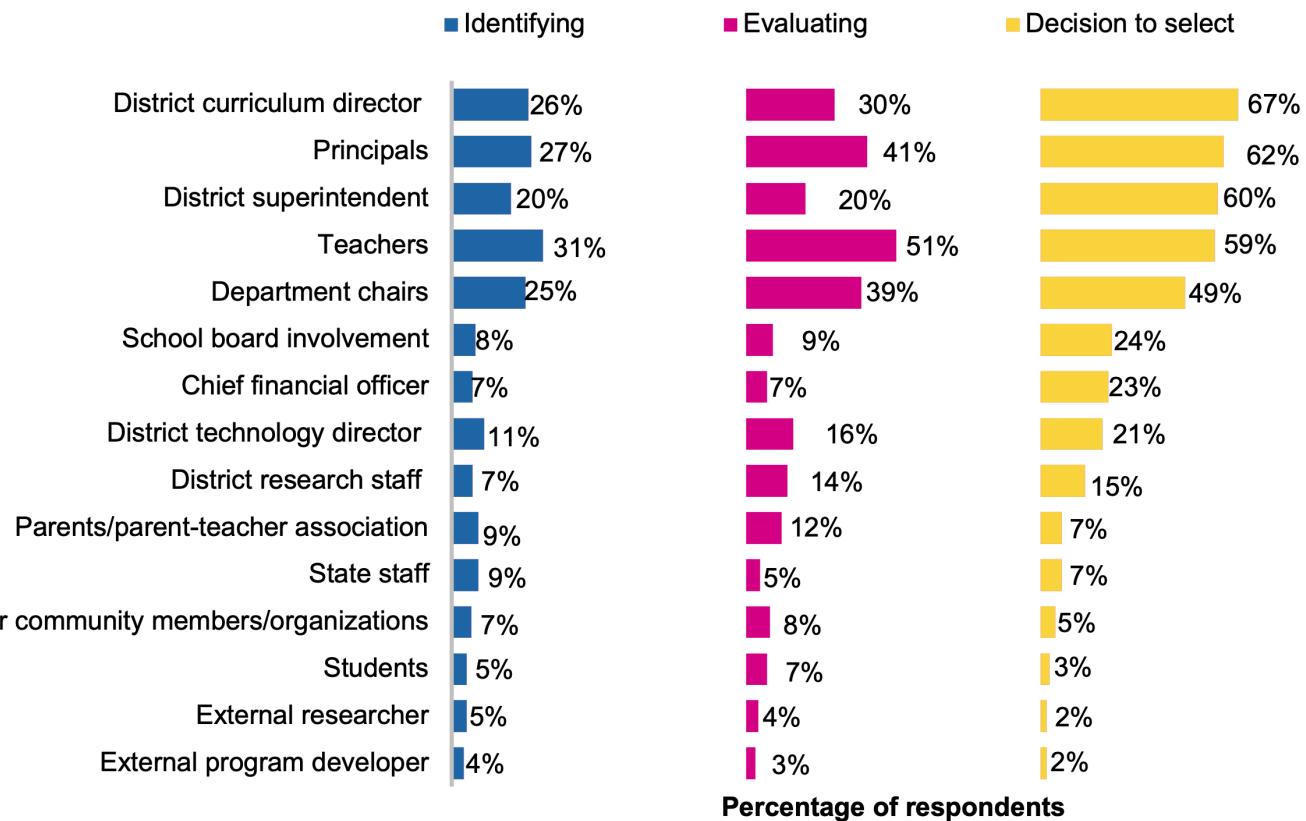
What's happening in schools and districts?

As shown in Exhibit 4, more than half (51%) of school leaders reported that teachers were the most involved in product evaluation. Principals followed closely behind. Research-focused staff were less often involved:

- Only 14% of school leaders said **district research staff** were involved.
- Even fewer (4%) reported that **external researchers** were involved.

This means the people who may be most familiar with a product's evidence base—such as researchers and research staff—are often not part of the evaluation process. While we recognize not all districts have dedicated research offices, this finding still represents a missed opportunity to strengthen decisions with evidence.

Exhibit 4. School leaders reported that teachers were most involved in evaluating products, while leaders were more involved in making final selection decisions.⁷



Strategies to consider

Ensuring the right people are at the table during the product evaluation stage can help align product decisions not just with evidence, but with the needs of students and communities.

- **Include multiple voices in product evaluation.** When possible, include teachers, district research staff, instructional coaches, or content area experts who can interpret product evidence. These sources of expertise may help select products that are both contextually relevant and evidence-informed.⁸
- **Engage with external partners.** Collaborate with [Regional Educational Labs](#), [Research-Practice Partnerships](#), local universities, or other research groups that can help evaluate the evidence base for a product.⁹ These types of intermediary organizations can be a particularly useful resource for districts without dedicated research staff.

Where to turn for evidence and evidence-based products

While research and evidence can help educators make more informed choices about the educational products that would best meet their students' needs, many obstacles can get in the way. Research from the LEARN Network and others shows that leaders often cite a lack of time, limited access to timely and relevant studies, and weak connections with researchers or developers as obstacles.¹⁰ Leaders also note that much of the available research doesn't always reflect the students they serve, making it difficult to know which products will work best in their context.

For school and district leaders looking to make evidence-informed purchasing decisions, several reliable, easy-to-access resources are available online. These resources can help leaders identify products backed by research, support thoughtful evaluation, and reduce the burden of starting from scratch—especially when time and capacity are limited.

- **Evidence repositories:** Nationally available evidence repositories like the [What Works Clearinghouse](#) (WWC), [Evidence for ESSA](#), and [Proven Tutoring](#) offer summaries of products and their effectiveness based on rigorous research.
- **Curated lists and decision-making guides to support evidence use:** Organizations like [International Society for Technology in Education](#) (ISTE) and the [IRIS Center](#) provide searchable product lists, decision-making [guides](#), and implementation tips. The [U.S. Department of Education](#) also offers resources to help leaders apply evidence standards in real-world purchasing decisions.
- **State- or district-vetted or approved curriculum lists:** Many states and districts maintain approved lists of instructional materials, which are often available through state department of education websites. To be included on the lists, products typically must meet evidence requirements, such as demonstrating effectiveness under specific ESSA tiers. These lists can be a valuable starting point for identifying options that are both evidence-based and aligned with state guidelines.

Together, these resources can help leaders build more confident, informed, and strategic procurement practices that are grounded in research and responsive to the needs of their schools and communities.



Selection: How to make a final decision

Selection is the point at which leaders decide which products to purchase. This stage requires balancing evidence with practical considerations and determining how to incorporate input from those involved in the process. In our survey, we asked school leaders to identify who played the biggest role in making final procurement decisions.

What's happening in schools and districts?

As shown earlier in Exhibit 4, school leaders reported that **principals** and **superintendents** played key roles in product selection:

- 62% of school leaders said **principals** were involved.
- 60% of school leaders said **superintendents** were involved.

At the same time, other roles also shaped the final purchasing decision:

- 67% of school leaders reported that **district curriculum directors** were important players.

These findings suggest that the final choice often reflects a mix of perspectives—and that schools and districts are already working to bring different voices to the table.

Strategies to consider

Just as leaders engage multiple stakeholders during product identification and evaluation, they can continue to do so during selection. This can lead to stronger decisions and greater buy-in.

- **Balance evidence with practical realities.** While evidence of effectiveness is important, it's not the only factor to consider. This [blog post](#) describes other important factors leaders may consider when making final decisions—such as reliability, cost, and convenience. Leaders are uniquely positioned to consider these factors and how they align with school and district systems and policies.
- **Be transparent about how decisions are made.** Share how input from different roles shaped the final selection—and where research and evidence played a role.¹¹

After procurement: Don't forget implementation

Securing the right product is only the beginning. Building a strong rollout and feedback process is essential. Districts and schools have an important role in creating structured opportunities for teachers and principals to reflect on the product choice and in establishing a clear plan for rollout, ongoing support, and continuous improvement.

Another effective strategy is to pilot before scaling. Start with a small, intentional pilot to see how the product works in the local context. Pilots give educators the chance to adapt the product, gather local evidence of effectiveness, and build ownership that supports broader adoption. Learn more in [our blog post](#) on successful scaling.

Continue involving teachers and support their use of research and evidence

Teachers bring valuable insight into what's working in the classroom. They can help identify which products meet student needs—and why.

While teachers are highly involved in product selection, [a recent study](#) found they're less likely than other staff to use research when reviewing options. The biggest barriers? A lack of time and difficulty accessing user-friendly research resources.

One way to support stronger, evidence-informed decision-making is to make sure teachers have access to resources that help them use research and evidence effectively in their evaluation.

Another opportunity is to include teachers on product selection committees—alongside staff who have expertise in understanding and applying research, such as district research staff or instructional leaders. This balance helps ensure product choices reflect both classroom realities and the best available evidence.

Students, caregivers, and other community members also contribute meaningfully to strong procurement decisions. Visit [our blog post](#) to learn more about their role.

Takeaways

School and district leaders don't need to overhaul their systems to make smarter, evidence-informed procurement decisions. Small, practical shifts—like reviewing student data before selecting a product, seeking input from a broad range of educators, and using curated lists or evidence-based repositories—can make a big difference.

Reinforcing what's already working, while refining how decisions are made at each stage of the process, can help ensure purchased products are well aligned to a school's or district's goals, student needs, and classroom realities.

By intentionally weaving research and evidence into procurement decisions, leaders can feel confident they're making sound investments, setting teachers up for success and supporting better outcomes for students.

Want to know even more about your school's or district's procurement practices compared to others?

Check out the [LEARN Procurement Data Dashboard](#), where you can filter and slice the data from our national survey of school leaders based on school contexts and product types.

Endnotes

- 1 This exhibit is adapted from and expands on Morrison and colleagues' Procurement Action-Point Framework, which outlines stages in the procurement process. Morrison, J. R., Ross, S. M., & Cheung, A. C. K. (2019). From the market to the classroom: How ed-tech products are procured by school districts interacting with vendors. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 67(2), 389–421. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-019-09649-4>.
- 2 The LEARN Network also surveyed district leaders. As findings were similar, this brief presents results from school leader surveys only. For more information about the full survey, visit https://learntoscale.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/LEARN-Network-Research-Study-Methods_June-2024_Acc.pdf.
- 3 On the American School Leader Panel survey, school leaders were randomly assigned to think about a specific core, supplemental, or PD program their school or district had procured in the last two years. They were then asked, "What motivated or prompted your school or district to procure the product or program?" Participants selected all that applied from a list of possible motivations. This exhibit displays the weighted percentage of respondents selecting each option, by product type.
- 4 Morrison et al. (2019).
- 5 School leaders were asked which sources influenced their decisions to purchase core, supplemental, or PD products in the past two years. They rated each source based on how much it influenced their decision. This exhibit shows the percentage of leaders who said a source had some or a strong influence on their decision.
- 6 Kurtz, H. (2019, June 7). *Where do K-12 leaders go for product information? The education conference circuit*. EdWeek Market Brief. <https://marketbrief.edweek.org/sales-marketing/where-do-k-12-leaders-go-for-product-information-the-education-conference-circuit/2019/06>.
- 7 School leaders were asked on the American School Leader Panel survey to think about a core, supplemental, or PD product that their school purchased in the last two years. They were asked, "What involvement, if any, did each of the following individuals or groups have in identifying, evaluating, and/or deciding to select the products or programs?" For each individual or group listed, respondents selected whether they were "not involved / not applicable," "involved in identifying the products or programs," "involved in evaluating the products or programs," or "involved in the decision to select the products or programs." Respondents could also select "I don't know." The exhibit displays the weighted percentage of respondents who indicated each individual or group was involved in identifying, evaluating, and/or selecting the products or programs. If a respondent selected "not involved / not applicable" or "I don't know," their responses are not shown in the exhibit.
- 8 Farley-Ripple, E. (2021). *Research brokerage: How research enters and moves through schools* [Research brief]. Center for Research Use in Education. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED627983>.
- 9 Farley-Ripple (2021).
- 10 Chiefs for Change. (2017). *Hiding in plain sight: Leveraging curriculum to improve student learning*. https://chiefsforchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Hiding-in-Plain-Sight_Chefs-for-Change_August-2017.pdf.
Chingos, M. M., & Whitehurst, G. J. (2012). *Choosing blindly: Instructional materials, teacher effectiveness, and the Common Core*. Brookings Center on Education Policy. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0410_curriculum_chingos_whitehurst.pdf.
Agodini, R., & Harris, B. (2010). An experimental evaluation of four elementary school math curricula. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 3(3), 199–253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345741003770693>.
- 11 Wang, E. L., Prado Tuma, A., Lawrence, R. A., Kaufman, J. H., Woo, A., & Henry, D. (2021). *School leaders' role in selecting and supporting teachers' use of instructional materials: An interview study*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA134-9.html.

About the LEARN Network and Our Research

To understand the complex landscape of education procurement decision-making, the LEARN Network conducted a mixed-methods study that included:

- **Interviews** with 39 education leaders representing key roles at schools, districts, and state agencies serving students from diverse educational contexts and populations.
- **Focus groups** with 9 teachers representing a range of grade levels and contexts and with 11 parents/caregivers.
- **Surveys** of nationally representative samples of K–12 public school principals ($N = 1,036$) and school district leaders ($N = 208$) through RAND’s American Educator Panels. The analytic survey samples were weighted to produce estimates reflecting the national population of public schools and districts in the United States.

Learn more about our [research methods](#)!

The [LEARN Network](#) is an Institute of Education Sciences (IES)-funded initiative to promote learning and growth among students by increasing the use of evidence-based products. To do this, the Network provides capacity-building to researchers in scaling their evidence-based products and provides decision-makers at the school, district, and state levels with information and considerations around product selection. For more information, visit the LEARN Network’s [website](#), [interactive toolkit](#), and [blog](#).



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To learn more about the LEARN Network, visit the website at <https://learntoscale.org/>