



Project Background

Each year, schools and districts spend roughly \$12 billion on textbooks and other instructional materials. Recent research suggests that textbooks have an important influence on student outcomes. For example, in a recent survey of 1,500 teachers from five states in which we compared achievement gains for teachers using different texts, we found substantial variation in effectiveness among texts. Too often, districts and states must make decisions about textbook selection in the absence of empirical evidence of the success of these materials in promoting student achievement. It is clear that the school, district, and state leaders tasked with making curricular choices can benefit from rigorous and relevant evidence about *which* textbooks and curriculum materials are making a difference for their students.

Study Design

The research study, “*Never Judge a Book by its Cover: A National Evaluation of Curriculum Effectiveness*,” will examine the efficacy of the elementary math textbooks and instructional materials that schools are using in fourth and fifth grade classrooms in the current school year (2016–17) and two years prior (2014–15, 2015–16). The study is being conducted by the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University in partnership with six states: California, Louisiana, Maryland, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Washington. The research study will be completed in three phases:

1) Identify the instructional materials that are used for mathematics instruction in fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms through a school survey.

We will select a random sample of schools in each district in each state to participate in the study. One respondent per school will be asked to identify the math textbooks being used by fourth and fifth grade teachers in their school in the current and the two prior school years.

2) Understand the factors that might influence the efficacy of a given textbook by conducting a teacher survey.

Once we have collected information from schools about textbook selection, we will identify a small number of “the most commonly used” textbooks, and will survey a small, randomly selected subset of teachers who are using these texts. Survey questions will provide information about the intensity of teacher use of the text versus other instructional materials, teachers’ background in mathematics, and the types of instructional supports teachers receive.

3) Examine whether and how the use of such materials is related to students’ achievement.

To establish a measure of the effectiveness of mathematics textbooks, we will use state administrative data on student achievement to calculate an aggregate metric of student academic growth, which will be matched to the textbooks. We will use these data to examine the association between the use of a specific textbook in a given grade and the median achievement of students in that grade.