



# CASE STUDY

SELECTING QUALITY  
CURRICULAR MATERIALS TO  
STRENGTHEN INSTRUCTION  
IN PRE-K

# PORT CITY

Port City School District is located in a medium-sized city on the East Coast, where shipping, rail and manufacturing have long been mainstays of the local economy. The district serves approximately 36,000 students, 46% of whom are identified as Black, 44% of whom are identified as Hispanic and 8% of whom are identified as White. The median household income served by the district is about \$35,000 a year, and nearly 33% of the students live in poverty. In 2011, Port City expanded access to a pre-K program that now serves 1,800 children each year. The program is run out of the Office of Early Childhood (OEC), and is overseen by an Executive Director who reports to the district superintendent. Initially, Port City partnered with the Education Center to help them choose Early Childhood Education curriculum supplements for their pre-K program. However, over the course of two and a half years, the partnership has expanded to include professional learning for teachers and site leaders across the Early Childhood Education program, as well as strategic guidance for the OEC leadership team.

Early on, Port City's district leaders decided to create a professional fellowship as a means to address an essential question they developed with the Education Center staff:

*What curriculum resources and accompanying teacher development supports will strengthen instruction across pre-K programs?*

As part of an effort to choose supplemental curriculum materials for pre-K, the fellowship convened a group of instructional leaders, including central office staff, an early childhood principal supervisor, school leaders, teacher coaches and veteran pre-K teachers to investigate the essential question. As we began thinking through content for the fellowship sessions, it became clear that the district efforts to support high-quality teaching practice should be informed by feedback structures that helped the central office staff better understand the needs of teachers and site leaders. In consultation with the district, the Education Center designed learning sessions that helped participants take those needs into account as they reviewed and tried out in their classrooms the various curricular resource options for the pre-K program. Reflections from the fellows showed the fellowship was a welcome and successful initiative in the district. Furthermore, it confirmed our team's hunch that district leadership and staff had previously held wide-ranging beliefs of what constitutes strong instructional practice and high-quality curriculum, which led to a disjuncture between central office staff, site leaders and teachers in implementing a coherent instructional vision in the

district. Fellows told the Education Center in feedback surveys:

*This fellowship has given me the opportunity to be an integral part of choosing a curriculum for our youngest learners. Through our sessions my thoughts have been validated. As a result, I feel much more confident in being a leader for our teachers and an advocate for our children. Sharing with a variety of stakeholders within Port City Public Schools has also given me insight on how to lead teachers in providing the best experience for our students.*  
- Port City Teacher Coach

*This experience has been great. I feel that I have a say in the direction of where we are going based upon the review of various curricula for early childhood. I have never looked into any curriculum with this much tenacity and depth. Now I can pretty much support the curriculum chosen for the upcoming school year with my own professional rationale.* - Port City Teacher

*The norms established at the very beginning of the Fellowship allowed trust to be built and that trust was evident throughout the Fellowship. We were all on the same page when it came to ensuring our preschoolers received the best experience they can for the two years we have them. It also afforded me the opportunity to work with other professionals whom I may never have met or interacted with. The professionalism which the fellowship was conducted within was amazing.* - Port City Teacher Coach

Towards the end of the fellowship, the Education Center team delivered a site leader needs assessment, the results of which showed best practices for coaching instructional staff as the highest area of need (44% of site leaders identified this as an area of need). This data helped us target teacher coaches as a pivotal link in the Port City school system. Recent literature on coaching says that instructional coaches can be highly influential levers for improving instructional practice. Scholars have also identified the political role of coaches in translating and interpreting district policy. In Port City, teacher coaches were well positioned to understand the everyday concerns of the early childhood programs and to connect that knowledge to the vision district leadership was creating for early childhood education across the school system. Because of their potential to impact multiple layers of the system, the following school year the Education Center worked with the 25 teacher coaches to build a professional learning community and strengthen their skills and strategies for teacher support. We developed this group to build a common language around high-quality and developmentally appropriate pre-K

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PRE-K CURRICULUM

## DISTRICT FOCUS

The Education Center partnered with district leadership in Port City to strengthen curriculum and instruction in the expanding pre-K program. This work established new opportunities for scaling the program effectively.

teaching practice with district leadership, school leaders, and teachers aligned to the chosen curriculum. Guided by the state's Preschool Teaching & Learning Standards, and informed by Bank Street's deep knowledge of child development and adult learning, the Education Center and Port City's early childhood office used planning tools (such as the Professional Learning Map) to align each component of the sessions to coaches' practice. Across these sessions, in collaboration with the central supervisory team, the Education Center built teacher coaches' sense of ownership by providing opportunities for them to develop, observe, and share a set of norms and model coaching skills and techniques with one another. Coach feedback forms following each session helped the Education Center measure its impact, inform its engagement in subsequent professional learning sessions, and give coaches a voice in the district strategic planning meetings.

At the same time, the Education Center also supported Port City's OEC leadership team through strategic planning meetings that were focused on strengthening the district's pre-K leadership's vision and change management structures by refining the coaching model and establishing pre-K instructional priorities. Port City and the Education Center used our learning from the professional learning sessions, and our ongoing work together, to begin defining a vision of what high-quality, standards-based pre-K instruction looks like at a system-level and how district leadership can

support it. These conversations, grounded in evidence, mobilized our knowledge of how to take instructional initiatives to scale and established a previously non-existent thread of communication between district staff and teacher coaches.

Ultimately, engaging with Port City through these activities enabled the Education Center to directly support three layers of Port City's system: the early childhood principal supervisors, the teacher coaches, who worked with teaching teams in schools, and the district leadership team that was charged with strategic decision-making. In the early phase of the partnership, we touched nearly all layers of the early childhood system in the district, but our engagement was tightly connected to selecting pre-K curricular materials. As we built trust and district capacity, our work broadened in the district but became less connected to classrooms and teachers. One of the challenges we face is balancing the need to create productive learning experiences for leaders at the executive level, while continuing to ground our work in the experiences of students and teachers. Given the finite resources available in school districts, we have begun to focus on the **school as the unit of change**, so that all of our work with district leaders is connected to the everyday challenges of teaching and learning.<sup>1</sup>

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# PORT CITY PARTNERSHIP

## YEAR 1

### DEPTH & BREADTH

Through a curriculum-focused fellowship, the partnership enacted supports for a narrow initiative across all layers of the system.



----- DISTRICT LEADERS

----- SCHOOL LEADERS

----- TEACHER TEAMS

----- TEACHERS

## YEAR 2

### DEPTH & BREADTH

The partnership helped to build the district's vision for early childhood education, created supports for district leaders and professional learning opportunities for teacher coaches. The work with Port City expanded across some layers of the system but did not directly connect to teacher practice.



----- DISTRICT LEADERS

----- SCHOOL LEADERS

----- TEACHER TEAMS

----- TEACHERS