



NEWARK PUBLIC SCHOOLS USES LEARNZILLION TO CUSTOMIZE AND CURATE THEIR CURRICULUM TO BETTER ALIGN TO DISTRICT INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LearnZillion's software enabled Newark Public Schools to better shape and align the curriculum they were already using to their specific instructional targets.

NEWARK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Newark School District, with 66 schools, 5,595 employees, and a student population of 35,329, is the largest and one of the oldest school systems in New Jersey. The ethnic diversity of the city provides a rich educational experience for pre-kindergarten to secondary school students. The district continues to revise its services to meet the changing needs of students.

ABOUT SAMANTHA MESSER

Samantha Messer is the Executive Director of K-12 Literacy at Newark Public Schools. Messer earned her undergraduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania and holds a Master of Arts degree in Secondary Social Studies Education from New York University, a Master of Education degree in Education Policy and Management from Harvard University, and a Master of Education degree in Educational Technology at Columbia University.

NEWARK PUBLIC SCHOOL'S CHALLENGES

When Samantha Messer visited ELA classrooms in her district, she began to notice a pattern: the highest-performing classrooms were the ones whose teachers put special emphasis on two areas of study: text-dependent questions and writing skills.

"We want to make sure that all students are leaving our schools ready to succeed in college or career," said Messer. "Specifically in the literacy department, that means students are reading, writing, speaking, and listening at a level such that they will be successful for whatever they choose post-high school."

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But Messer also emphasized that it takes a lot to get to that place. “We struggle with reading, particularly starting at the lower grades, and then that problem compounds as kids get older. We really need strong materials that our teachers can use to help kids who may not have tons of exposure to books at home; may not come to school with some of the advantages of their suburban counterparts; may not come to us as readers; and who may lack some of the background knowledge that’s necessary to be successful as a reader.”

Newark Public Schools was using a rich, expansive ELA curriculum, but teachers in the district were often paralyzed by the wealth of choices it offered. “We started to notice that the implementation of the curriculum was not what we would have expected given the strength of the curriculum as written,” said Messer.

“We talked to a lot of teachers about what was challenging for them about implementing the curriculum and [discovered] that teachers were having

trouble making sense of the plethora of materials that our curriculum offers. There are a lot of documents to go through; there’s a lot of reading that they have to do. It’s very robust and in some cases too robust and overwhelming for new teachers or teachers new to a grade level.”

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Newark Public Schools had a curriculum that they loved, but the district needed help making it work for their teachers and their specific instructional goals.

WHERE LEARNZILLION CAME IN

“In working with LearnZillion, we wanted to keep the content of the curriculum, keep the novels, keep the tasks, but put it all into a format that’s more user-friendly for the teacher so that they’re not spending hours making sense of it all,” said Messer.

With LearnZillion’s help, Newark Public Schools was able to customize and curate their chosen curriculum, which in turn allowed their teachers to spend less time prepping and stressing and focus more energy on their students’ needs.

Said Messer: “It’s also great for our principals and vice principals who supervise the teachers, because in many cases they’re not actual content experts in 6th grade literacy [for example]. And so when they go in to observe a lesson, it’s hard for them to know exactly what they should be looking for, and whether students are responding at the level of rigor.

“But with Learnzillion, where we have the Student Look Fors and the Model Responses, administrators can now go into the classroom and they can pull up that lesson. They can know exactly what the student should be saying or should be writing. I think it’s not only a professional development tool for teachers; it’s also been helpful for administrators.”

THE RESULTS

Teachers in Newark Public Schools are becoming comfortable with the new format of their curriculum, and seeing positive classroom results in the process.

“[When we] gave interim assessments, we tracked teacher data and usage,” said Messer. “One of our teachers who uses [this new curated content] the most, her students scored the highest on our 6th grade literacy interim assessment.”

“She’s a strong teacher, but it’s not typically a class that has been at the top of all of our data or all of our classes in the past. That’s exciting for us.”

But test scores aren’t the only indicators of the newly curated curriculum’s classroom impact.

“Another thing that we’re seeing is that teachers are on pace,” said Messer.

“Pacing isn’t really a compliance issue, which people often think it is. It’s more that we want to make sure that kids get exposure to different kinds of texts and to different kinds of writing throughout the course of the school year. If we’re really off pace, kids only get exposure to a snippet of the curriculum. Pacing is much less of a challenge this year.”

WHY DID NEWARK PUBLIC SCHOOLS CHOOSE TO WORK WITH LEARNZILLION FOR THIS PROJECT?

“LearnZillion was the right partner for this work because it has the best people,” said Messer. “This is an unbelievably enormous undertaking, and there were a lot of people who said we couldn’t pull this off. But I know that if LearnZillion says it’s going to deliver, then it’s going to deliver.”

“The bar for quality is super high at LearnZillion. Knowing the amount of integrity the team puts into their work and the standards they have set for themselves made me confident that LearnZillion could pull this off.”

With LearnZillion’s help, Newark Public Schools are seeing positive results. Ready to make an impact in your classrooms? [Learn more.](#)

