



# LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION CREATES AND PUBLISHES DYNAMIC, HOMEGROWN ELA CURRICULA USING LEARNZILLION

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In response to new state standards, the Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE] evaluated high-quality, standards-aligned English Language Arts [ELA] curricular offerings based on the needs of their state's teachers. When they didn't find a comprehensive offering that met all of their requirements, they decided to create their own. Using LearnZillion's enterprise platform and professional services, they created dynamic, engaging ELA materials aligned to their instructional goals.

## LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The Louisiana Department of Education serves 131 school districts and 721,197 students in the state. Louisiana is the fastest-improving state in the country in ACT and AP exam scores.

## ABOUT LOUISIANA'S ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS GUIDEBOOKS TEAM

Louisiana's ELA Guidebooks were created through a partnership between LDOE and teacher leaders throughout Louisiana. Rebecca Kockler, Assistant Superintendent of Academic Content for LDOE, and Whitney Whealdon, Director of Academic Content for LDOE, worked with teachers across the state to create a comprehensive academic support model focused on helping teachers, principals, and districts access the resources and support they need to integrate curriculum with assessment and professional development.



*Rebecca Kockler*



*Whitney Whealdon*

## LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S CHALLENGES

In 2010, Louisiana adopted a new set of state English Language Arts standards.

"Early on, I didn't necessarily think curriculum was the role of the state, or the type of work that we were going to necessarily take on," said Rebecca Kockler. "That changed very quickly, and it really started from a group of 48 teachers."

The teacher advisory panel LDOE created during the transition to new standards spurred the state to start considering building their own curricula.

“These teachers said, ‘We need better tools in our hands, and we don’t know where to find them,’” said Kockler.

LDOE began the work of providing the state’s teachers with support around the new standards by evaluating existing curricular offerings.

“[Curriculum providers] were putting stickers on their programs, saying they were aligned to the new standards,” said Kockler. “There were tons of online resources and people just didn’t know what was quality and what wasn’t, so we started by just reviewing full curricular programs for English and posting those reviews publicly on our website.”

In their reviews, LDOE drew a line in the sand for curricular quality.

“We knew that putting quality in front of kids and giving quality materials to teachers was what was going to help them all learn faster, so we were very rigorous about the degree to which we’d say something was actually fully aligned to our new standards,” said Kockler. “We found very, very few programs that were aligned.”

**“These teachers said, ‘We need better tools in our hands, and we don’t know where to find them.’”**

After reviewing existing curricular offerings and outlining the holes in the content they found, LDOE made the decision to start creating curricula of their own, starting with English Language Arts, where they saw the biggest

market gap.

Said Kockler, “I think early on, we did this as a way to give teachers resources that they needed. I think we also very quickly learned that curriculum was a tool to get really good books in front of a lot of kids every single day, especially as we were trying to train a lot of new teachers on our new standards. At the end of the day, the curriculum teachers were using most often guided the books that they put in students’ hands.”

To begin this work, LDOE assembled a team of teachers from across the state to build what became the state’s [ELA Guidebooks curriculum](#). In order to make the curriculum as accessible to teachers across the state as possible, it centered around high-quality texts that were either free to use or that most districts would already own. Published as PDF documents, the curriculum was made available to any teacher in any district in the state.

“Helping teachers find the highest-quality default as they learned the new standards and figured out how to make adjustments really mattered to us,” said Kockler. “And it really mattered to our districts and our teachers.”

## WHERE LEARNZILLION CAME IN

After releasing the first iteration of their ELA Guidebooks curriculum, LDOE received feedback and data that showed Louisiana teachers were still struggling with the new material.

“We learned pretty quickly that it just wasn’t sufficient for teachers,” said Kockler. “We heard things like, ‘The new curriculum is great, but it’s so cumbersome to use. I spend more time just trying to understand how the lessons work than I did just creating my own stuff in the past.’”

In order to address this need, LDOE partnered with LearnZillion.

“We decided that we needed to build out more instructional tools for our teachers and put them in a platform that made it all easy and accessible,” said Kockler. “Sometimes, when you start to build really complex, meaty stuff, it’s so overwhelming and unwieldy to use. We wanted something that actually helped our teachers put the right instruction in front of students, and also helped them learn and grow. We wanted to make [the material] easy to access, easy to make sense of, and in a space where they could do something substantive with it. LearnZillion helped with that exact piece of the puzzle.”

**“I was surprised at how quickly we started to see curriculum having an impact in our classrooms and with our teachers.”**

Said Whitney Whealdon, “Implementing the original Guidebooks curriculum was difficult for teachers—there was a gap from paper to practice. LearnZillion’s platform helped close that gap, so that teachers could more easily take what was written and turn it into quality instruction.”

By rebuilding and retooling the ELA Guidebooks curriculum on LearnZillion’s enterprise platform and with support from LearnZillion’s professional services, LDOE sought to build upon the knowledge and expertise Louisiana teachers already had.

“Our teachers brought a lot of knowledge about our students and about our context,” said Kockler. “LearnZillion helped us first just make that accessible, then helped us restructure the materials and organize them in a way that our teachers could really make meaning of and grab a hold of.”

## THE RESULTS

Though the state has no mandated English language arts curriculum, 80 percent of districts in Louisiana currently use ELA Guidebooks for grades 3-8. And since the rollout of ELA Guidebooks 2.0, they’ve seen immediate changes in classrooms.

“I was surprised at how quickly we started to see curriculum having an impact in our classrooms and with our teachers,” said Kockler. “Within a year and a half, when we started looking at our end-of-year results, we saw that our top growing districts and schools were using the [Guidebooks 2.0] curriculum. It was the most common thing across our top-growth schools and districts.”

**“By changing the curriculum alone, you could, in a very short period of time, dramatically change the kind of daily experiences students were having. We realized very quickly that curriculum was a powerful lever for that.”**

After rolling out the Guidebooks 2.0 curriculum, LDOE also noticed growth in their teachers.

“We discovered that teachers were able to learn about quality ELA instruction and grow in their own practice as they used the Guidebooks lessons,” said Whealdon. “The original, paper form of Guidebooks didn’t support that kind of teacher learning.”

Based on an analysis of state assessment results, 95 percent of the top-growth schools and districts in Louisiana use the ELA Guidebooks 2.0 curriculum.

In a [2016 study](#) that surveyed teachers nationwide, RAND found that Louisiana’s English language arts teachers both demonstrated a better understanding of state standards and reported undertaking more instructional activities that aligned with those standards than their counterparts in other states. [On a number of indicators](#), Louisiana teachers scored higher than any other state in the survey.

“I credit a lot of that growth to curriculum,” said Kockler. “[The curriculum] made the standards concrete. It showed teachers what the standards looked like.”

Said a teacher who piloted the Guidebooks 2.0 curriculum, “Last year’s experience was so amazing to me because more than 60 percent of my students scored [a passing score of] basic and above. Out of those students, more than half were mastery and advanced. Amazing! Every child I taught grew. Even the lower students moved.

“The cooperative learning allowed them to feel free to make mistakes and take risks. It was a win/win, especially for me, because it made me become a better teacher. My expectations were too low. Seeing this rigor, at first I thought they would not be able to be successful. I was so wrong.”

But for Louisiana, measuring curricular effectiveness doesn’t stop with teachers.

“Most importantly, it’s what our students are telling us is different,” said Kockler. “They’re talking about reading really interesting books. I go into classrooms

and see them busy at work with partners, trying to make sense of something they've read, argue something that they've read, or build a presentation about something that they're interested in and how it connects to something that they've read in their classroom.

“Students just have a lot of excitement for what they're doing. Talk about a different experience in the classroom. That to me is the most important thing, that our students feel like they're getting what they need from this curriculum.”

## WHY DID THE LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION CHOOSE TO WORK WITH LEARNZILLION FOR THIS PROJECT?

“LearnZillion was a really important thought partner to us,” said Kockler. “They pushed our thinking on the way we should develop the materials, the kinds of materials we should be building, and where we had quality and where we didn't yet.”

“[Teachers were saying] ‘Please give us more support. Help us do this in a more efficient way. We're excited to take on this kind of teaching, but we need more help,’” said Kockler. “That's why we worked with LearnZillion to create a platform where the teacher guidance was much simpler and cleaner to use. We're thankful to have had that partnership.

“By changing the curriculum alone, you could, in a very short period of time, dramatically change the kind of daily experiences students were having. We realized very quickly that curriculum was a powerful lever for that.”

LDOE's partnership with LearnZillion has led to student and teacher growth. Check out how LearnZillion can help your district with classroom success. [Learn more.](#)

