

By Mary Beth Hertz

## Learning How to Scaffold Student Choice

**W**hen I first started teaching my Media and Design and Art elective in 2014, I knew I wanted to give my students a choice in what they learned. Many of them ended up in the class not by choice, but simply because it fit in their schedule, and those students needed some kind of agency to feel engaged and be successful. Choice would establish that agency.

Traditionally, projects in my classroom were based around an essential question and a few important understandings and skills that I wanted students to take away. I would usually set up an assigned topic and specific checkpoints for them to complete. However, that first year, I tried something completely new. I had students come up with a project idea and a proposal for me to approve, and then they worked on the project for the entire quarter (approximately 16 class periods).

Each week they would submit a one-sentence update to Canvas (our learning management system) explaining what they had accomplished, and I would meet with students each class to discuss their progress and support them as needed. The classes met only twice a week and each had more than thirty students. It was a struggle to meet with students to see how they were progressing and to review nearly 120 ongoing projects weekly.

### The Problem of Too Much Choice— and How to Fix It

Many students did not manage their time well, and the projects they submitted at the end of the quarter were lackluster and often incomplete. I realized that I had given them too much choice without the necessary guidance to help them be successful. Students often got stuck when they struggled with a piece of software or art medium, and some either gave up on their idea or spent many class periods frozen and

“By setting parameters around choice while allowing students to explore their own interests, I’ve seen my students’ independence increase, and the quality of their work has improved dramatically.”

unable to move ahead. In the course evaluation, a student told me that I should have had more checkpoints to hold them more accountable—and I took that to heart.

Over the last few years, I have strategically built structures around student choice in my classroom, starting with giving students the choice of a number of loosely defined, open-ended projects that last only a couple of weeks instead of an entire quarter. I now have a continuous feedback loop between me and my students. They use a Google Slides file in Google Classroom to document their daily progress on their projects in both words and pictures, which allows me to catch kids before they get stuck so I can provide just-in-time feedback. These portfolios also allow me and the students to see the projects’ development over time, and I can review them on my own if I don’t have time to meet with students in class.

One of the biggest challenges in a choice-based classroom is when students have buyer’s remorse: They chose a project and then, a few days or weeks into the work, they regret their decisions. I use this issue as a teaching moment around resilience and planning, conferencing with the students about what they’re struggling with and why they want to quit the project. That’s not an option, which I make clear to them from the beginning. They’re going to work on the project for only a few weeks, so there isn’t time to switch.

When meeting with these students, I try to get to the root cause of the frustration. Sometimes it’s a lack of confidence or a misunderstanding about what they’re expected to do, and sometimes the kids really just regret their choice. Depending on the situation, I may ask some probing questions or sit with the students and model aspects of the project for them. Together we tackle the issue they’ve been grappling with so they can get out of their rut.

Buyer’s remorse can be an important lesson for students. They learn what kinds of things they do and don’t enjoy doing. They also learn that doing something they don’t enjoy can still be a valuable source of learning.

Another thing they’re sometimes surprised to learn is that they are often each other’s best resource. The collaborating they do on these projects can make the work more engaging, and it allows them to see how their peers tackle a similar problem.

## Continuing to Refine the Process

While I’ve worked to fine-tune how I use choice in my classroom, it’s always a work in progress. What matters is that students feel a true sense of accomplishment, even when things don’t turn out the way they wish they had because they owned the process, no matter what grade they received.

In reading the reflections that students complete at the end of every project, I find that sometimes students who struggled with a piece of software or whose project did not turn out the way they wanted have learned a lot about perseverance or about how they could have managed their time better. In a project-based classroom with a lot of student choice, the journey is as important as the product; the journey is messy, but the rewards are worth it.

By setting parameters around choice while allowing students to explore their own interests, I’ve seen my students’ independence increase, and the quality of their work has improved dramatically. It was inspiring to see them work independently during our last project of the year using the strategies they’d learned. This was completely different from my first year—students were more invested in what they were learning and, with continuous feedback and better scaffolding on my part, were managing their time more effectively. ■

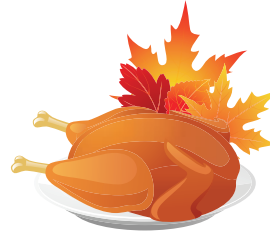
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[www.edutopia.org/article/learning-how-scaffold-student-choice](http://www.edutopia.org/article/learning-how-scaffold-student-choice)*



**Mary Beth Hertz** is an art and technology teacher at Science Leadership Academy at Beeber in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She is also a certified technology integration specialist.

Legal Corner:

# Keeping Holidays Happy in the Classroom



**F**all is a wonderful time of year: beautiful autumn colors, pumpkin-flavored everything, and many holidays just around the corner. Teachers can unintentionally present subject matter in the classroom or create holiday displays that can lead to issues and infractions, if policies are unclear.

The holiday season can mean many different things to many people. Some students celebrate Halloween, Thanksgiving, or Christmas. Others may celebrate Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, or nothing at all.

Here are some tips to help you navigate this time of year and enjoy the fall season.

**1.** Know the rules. What does your district/school say about holiday presentations, displays, music, and other holiday-related activities?



**2.** Once you know the rules, make sure they are clear. Vague policies help no one. Review your district policy and procedures regarding not only holidays but also diversity and inclusion. Any of these rules or procedures may come into play during this time of year.

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**3.** Clarify any rules, policies, or procedures that are unclear. The adage, “It is better to ask forgiveness than permission,” never applies in teaching. Always contact your administration directly if you are unsure about how to present any materials, create displays, and instruct students. Ideally these communications should

be in writing to help protect you should there be a problem in the future.

**4.** Communicate with administration about students who wish to participate differently or not at all. Make sure you have administrator approval before substantively deviating from approved curriculum or activities.

**5.** Approach the holidays from an instructional perspective. Several holidays

center on thankfulness, caring for others, forgiveness, and peace. Choose one or more themes or elements that run through each holiday and start your instruction with those. You can then expand from there to provide culturally diverse instruction.



**6.** If your curriculum permits, teach about different holidays throughout the year and do not limit instruction to just religiously themed holidays. This will help avoid an allegation of discrimination by a student or parent. It will also provide a perfectly valid excuse to throw multiple parties in your classroom throughout the year, if, of course, they are allowed!



Enjoy this time of year. Be mindful of the tips above as you prepare bulletin boards, school plays, parties, or instruction. AAE Legal Services wishes you a wonderful fall. As always, do not hesitate to reach out to us with any concerns. We are here to help. ■



**Sharon Nelson** is the director of legal services for the Association of American Educators. In this capacity, Ms. Nelson oversees AAE’s legal services team and works daily with members and panel counsel to address members’ legal concerns. A passionate advocate for educators, Ms. Nelson has been a lawyer focusing on employee rights issues for more than twenty years.

# AAE Advocacy Fellows Visit the Capitol

We introduced the 2018-2019 cohort of AAE Advocacy Fellows in the March/April issue of *Education Matters*. They were filled with anticipation and eagerness to develop their advocacy skills to make a difference for their students beyond the classroom. Little did they know that in less than eight months, they would publish more than twenty-five op-eds and letters to the editor in local and state newspapers on topics including school choice, autism awareness, facilities funding, and much more. Fellows also testified before two state legislatures, met with senior education policy analysts in Washington, D.C., participated in education panels and developed media messaging skills that will help them amplify their voice and stand up for the issues that will make a positive difference for their students, their educational community, and for their fellow educators across the nation.

We recently hosted our Fellows at our Alexandria offices for a three-day workshop. Their visit included a tour of Washington, D.C. and a private tour of the Capitol. AAE Fellows met with senior staff for Rep. Jahana Hayes, who sits on the Education and Labor Committee in the House of Representatives and was the 2016 National Teacher of the Year. The educators worked together on an advocacy project they developed to empower teacher voices.





We asked our 2018-2019 AAE Advocacy Fellows to share with you what their experience has meant to them:



I've learned skills that help me speak to others, that I will need for my entire teaching career and to advocate for my own child."

—  
*Roseangela Mendoza,  
Jersey City, New Jersey*



This program has taught me that I have to be the writer telling the narrative and when more people read that positive narrative, they'll see what we're doing is right for education."

—  
*John Unger,  
Siloam Springs, Arkansas*



I just feel so grateful and thankful to learn the skills to inform the public."

—  
*Bridget Allison,  
Aurora, Colorado*



The workshop in DC was amazing. I learned so much. It exceeded my expectations!"

—  
*Luke Henke,  
Pittsburg, Kansas*



I think magnifying the teacher voice is the most important thing that AAE offers."

—  
*Amy Goldberg-Tseng,  
Passaic, New Jersey*

Have you considered applying to be an AAE Advocacy Fellow? Our team will be soliciting nominations and applications for the next cohort of Advocacy Fellows later this year. ■



AAE Advocacy Fellow Op Ed:

# Who are the Change-Makers?

Change is an important and necessary part of life but it can also be scary, especially when that change will affect millions of students' futures. A majority of professionals in the education field agree that change is needed in our schools, but who weighs in on these changes? Should it be legislators and non educators who have never stepped foot in a classroom for longer than a photo opportunity; should it be school administrators who see how the school runs from start to finish, day in and day out; or should it be the teachers who implement the curriculum, and spend every moment with their students to ensure they stay on track and master their work?

While the 'who' is important, the 'what' and 'how' are more important. What needs to be changed to make schools more successful in your community and across the nation? What should be the change priorities? Equity across districts and schools within the same state is lacking nationwide. Facilities are falling apart because resources are either unavailable or diverted, in addition to leases being far too expensive. Classroom populations are growing, but the actual average classroom size is shrinking. Textbooks are outdated and being replaced with faulty technology. Curriculum is still focused on standardized test scores instead of realistic skills for future student success. These are just a sample of what needs to be addressed in education throughout the country.

How can these changes be made? I say to all educators, use your voice. It does not matter what role you play in the education system, but if you have an idea on how to improve our system—share it with those making the decisions. It's time to stop hiding behind our desks. Staying quiet and hoping someone else has the answers actually hurt our students. Students are taught to challenge and ask questions. They are taught to grow from mistakes. This needs to be modeled by us—their teachers. Challenge the curriculum; challenge the meal plans; challenge why the amount of assessments is important toward students' educational growth; engage beyond the classroom.

Getting involved can be scary, just as change can be scary, but education needs you, the education expert, to advocate as no one else can. Reach out to your local government, the state government, and federal officials. They want to hear your experiences, learn from your expertise, and they need to see through your eyes. The



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internet is an amazing resource to find the contact information for these influential policymakers. While it's important to reach out to legislators, it is also important to share your experiences and thoughts more broadly. Write to your local newspapers, talk with local reporters, and share on social media. The more you share, the more people you will reach. If you are a teacher who wants to see a better system for you and your students, talk with your administrative staff and work together to make positive changes. If you are a parent, speak with your school and see what is being done and how you can help.

The worst thing you can do is to sit back and wait for (or hope for) someone else to make changes. Use your voice. Speak out. This is the only way that those who make policy for all of us will know what is truly wanted and needed. Please advocate for the future for our students. They deserve a chance to be successful! ■



**Amy Goldberg-Tseng** is a special education mathematics teacher at the Passaic Arts and Sciences Charter Middle School in Passaic, New Jersey. This op-ed was previously published in New Jersey's *Tap into Parsippany*, *Hudson Reporter*, and *The Star-Ledger*.

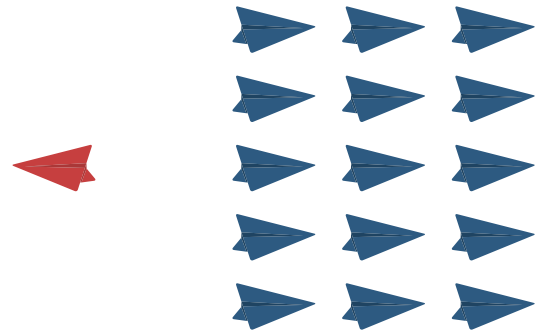
# Being the Change We Want to See

“Be the change you want to see in the world” is a quote by Ghandi that I have adopted throughout my life. Upon entering the field of education, I quickly realized I was my students’ biggest advocate for change. However, as a special educator for the past five years, advocating in one classroom with a caseload of eight to ten students per year at one school was not enough for me.

During my most recent year of teaching, I pursued two internships seeking to broaden my advocacy impact. My first internship was with Leadership ISD, an advocacy fellowship that trains today’s teachers to be tomorrow’s school board candidates through governance workshops and equitable education policy in the Dallas area. During this fellowship, I learned the essential components and functions of a school board, how to run for a position, and how to advocate for school funding. For my second fellowship, with Urban Leaders, I partnered with the Dallas Independent School Board to research and draft student-based dyslexia policy and presented a proposal to the school board. This internship also included partnering with the Texas Charter School Association to synthesize data and research regarding the use of restorative discipline practice in charter schools across Texas.

“Building advocacy knowledge and awareness never stops, just as the need for driving positive, student-centered change in education never stops.”

Now in my new role as development manager with Association of American Educators Foundation, I have found abundant opportunities for building my advocacy knowledge, skills, and partnerships. I recently attended the Policy Innovators in Education (PIE) Network Summit. PIE’s core mission is to connect state-level education advocacy organizations with colleagues across the country to amplify their voices and maximize their impact.



Education today faces the need for reform and advocacy on multiple fronts, and attendees from almost ninety organizations came together to advocate for a better education system that works for all students. At the conference, we discussed important issues such as teacher quality and preparation, “*What is the Purpose of Education?*,” school funding, teacher diversity, and much more.

Building advocacy knowledge and awareness never stops, just as the need for driving positive, student-centered change in education never stops. The questions I have learned to ask and continue to ask should resonate with every educator and anyone passionate about improving our education system for all children:

1. Who is represented when education reform conversations take place? More importantly, who is not being represented? How are groups’ voices being heard?
2. Who is the education system benefiting? Who is the education system not benefiting? How can we in our organizational and community roles work together to ensure all students receive and benefit from the education they deserve?
3. What personal biases do we harbor from our own educational experiences? How do those biases hinder the goal of equitable and accessible education for all? Are leaders truly focused on students first in all decisions? ■



**Lauren Golubski** joins AAE as the AAE Foundation development manager. Prior to her position with AAEF, she was a special education teacher with the Dallas Independent School District and an Urban Teacher Fellow and Mentor. She received a Bachelor of Science in Education/Teaching of Individuals in Elementary Special Education degree from Eastern Michigan University and a Master of Science in Education degree from Johns Hopkins University School of Education.

## Research Corner:

# A Moment of Clarity on Teacher Clarity

**T**eaching in the classroom can be a murky and messy business. A great deal of learning is hard to define. With so many students in a single room, each with his own needs and desires, chaos often rules the day. Yet one of the most powerful things we can do is to add some clarity into that murkiness.

Teacher clarity is a technique that has been hailed by John Hattie in his Visible Learning book series and program. If you're unfamiliar with Hattie's work, his goal is to find the factors that have the greatest effect on student learning, with teacher clarity being among them. To implement teacher clarity, each learning exercise should be defined through three lenses:

1. Laying out the learning intentions
2. Stating what success looks like
3. Defining learning progressions, or what the learner needs to know both before instruction and what the instruction is preparing them for

Researcher Larry Ainsworth defines these three lenses as what the learning target is, how you achieve it, and why it's important.<sup>1</sup>

### What the research says:

John Hattie made his conclusions after looking at a meta-analysis conducted by Frank Fendick in 1990.<sup>2</sup> This analysis found that

when teachers were clear in their in their lesson planning, explanation to students, and actual instruction, it had a sizable impact on student learning. It also found that this impact increased as students got older, making this technique more important for secondary teachers than for elementary teachers. Other researchers have found more modest results.<sup>3</sup> A meta-analysis conducted in 2015 found teacher clarity had a modest but still positive effect on student learning. While the impact of clarity is clearly positive, the definition of it is not. Hattie broke teacher clarity into three components, but these were not used in the meta-analysis he studied and have not been universally acknowledged since then, although they remain popular.

### How do I use this?

It's easy to take a technique a tad too far. Many administrators urge their teachers to plaster their learning objectives to the wall or to write them on the board for each lesson. This is not a good example of how to put teacher clarity into practice; such techniques rarely clarify anything.

To properly implement teacher clarity, you want to use it in two places: first, in your planning, and second, in your instruction. In your planning for every lesson, make sure you as a teacher know what you're doing and why. Meaning, every activity has a purpose that fits into your broader goals for the course. That's it. In your instruction, also communicate this to your students. Let them know your big goals for the year, and how the current lesson fits in. Most importantly, tell students how they can check to see if they've mastered the material. Achieving clarity in your instruction might take some practice, but it is well worth the effort. It's something that most experienced educators already know and instinctively do while teaching.

Adding clarity to your lessons doesn't need to be yet another series of hoops that you jump through simply to meet someone else's definition. It can be simple, intuitive, and most importantly a highly effective feature to add to your toolbox of instructional practices. ■



**Melissa Pratt** is AAE's senior professional programs manager. She is responsible for creating and managing programs that help AAE members increase their professional capacity.

Prior to AAE, Melissa taught science and social studies to middle school students in both public and private schools.

1. Larry Ainsworth, "The Clarity Problem—And The TEACHER SOLUTION!," Larry Ainsworth (blog), October 9, 2017. <https://www.larryainsworth.com/blog/the-clarity-problem-and-the-teacher-solution/>

2. Frank Fendick, "The Correlation between Communication and Student Achievement Gain: A Meta-Analysis," Doctoral thesis, University of Florida, 1990. <https://archive.org/details/correlationbetwe00fend>

3. Scott Titsworth et al., "Two Meta-Analyses Exploring the Relationship between Teacher Clarity and Student Learning," *Communication Education*, v64 n4 p385-418 (2015).



# How My Family Saves \$700 per year with AAE's Abenity Program

**M**y family saves more than \$700 each year through my membership in the Arkansas State Teachers Association (ASTA), AAE's Arkansas chapter. How do we do it? We use AAE's Abenity discount program.

With Abenity you can save more than the cost of membership with printable grocery coupons on brand names like Pampers, Gerber, Kellogg's, Energizer, Glade, Colgate, Pillsbury, Jif, Yoplait, and many more. Hopefully you are already doing that. However, did you know Abenity offers savings on electronics purchases, gift baskets, rental cars, eyewear, museum tickets, parking, restaurants, movie tickets, and more?

One of the greatest hidden gems for saving we found was a discount of \$70 per night at a hotel in St. Louis, Missouri. We searched for hotels on our way to Boston and back and found \$5 to \$25 discounts all along the way. However, just when I didn't think the program could get any better, Abenity added the hotel discounts page. You simply book online when you find the deal you want, and the booking company and the hotels work well together to make it an easy check-in and check-out process.

**Abenity**  
CELEBRATE YOUR SAVINGS!

It is great to check Abenity before buying tickets to museums, theme parks, movies, and concerts. I saved more than \$20 per ticket at Six Flags. One of my favorite discounts is paying only 2.5 cents per black and white copy and only 22 cents per color copy at Office Depot and Office Max. That is more than 80 percent off for the black and white copies and more than 60 percent off the full price of color copies. We save well over \$400 per year on our family car insurance.

I joined ASTA for its trusted professional services and legal protection. I hope I never have to use the legal assistance or the liability insurance. However, I am very happy to know that I can save more than three times my annual membership dues through this fantastic discount program alone, each year. If you haven't used it yet, you don't know what you're missing! Check it out! ■



**Kim Flowers** has been a professional member of the Arkansas State Teachers Association (ASTA), AAE's chapter in Arkansas, for six years and has been teaching for eight years. She currently teaches at the Providence Classical Christian Academy in Rogers, Arkansas. She and her family benefit year-round from the wide range of discounts that have stretched her classroom resources and made vacations and last-minute getaways more affordable for the entire family. Kim's husband Ronnie is a regional director for ASTA.

Have you been using the Abenity program to save money on school supplies, groceries, hotels, event tickets, and more? All active members of AAE and AAE's state chapters are eligible to enroll in Abenity, a free discount program. Instructions on how to register for this exclusive members-only program are included in our monthly membership update emails. Let us know how you use Abenity at [editor@aaeteachers.org](mailto:editor@aaeteachers.org).

# New Audits Help Schools Rethink Students' Reading 'Diets'

## Goal is to provide a richer curriculum

**K**ale and Iceberg lettuce both meet the formal definition of a leafy green, but that's where the similarities end. A new curriculum project is trying to help districts make similar distinctions in the diet of reading materials their students get: Are they complex and maybe a bit challenging—or bland, inoffensive, and not particularly nutritious? Johns Hopkins University's Institute for Education Policy has been developing its curriculum-mapping project to be sure that over their K-12 careers, students are exposed to enough high-quality literature—as well as nonfiction that illuminates core topics within science, history, and social studies—to give them sufficient background knowledge. The basic idea of auditing what students learn isn't a particularly new one. Dozens of consulting groups offer services promising insights into what students actually study, but few do so with an eye to a specific sequence of knowledge that young readers need to make sense of unfamiliar texts. The Johns

Hopkins project grows from a burgeoning body of cognitive science research backing up the notion that flat reading scores reflect not weak skills but uneven access to content. “The premise of all of this is that the achievement gap is really a knowledge gap,” said David Steiner, the institute's executive director. “We really start where the question of alignment stops and ask: What are we teaching? What is in the curriculum? Does it really build year after year or is it a scatter diagram of random topics?”

### Mapping Content

The Hopkins project also comes as another sign of the growing interest in the quality of the everyday learning materials used in classrooms across the nation. After decades of experimenting with school structure and teacher incentive programs, K-12 power players from the



Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation on down have grown interested in the promise of curriculum, drawn in part by research suggesting that some materials help students learn more than others. Curriculum reform is never without controversy and has in a sense been one of the Achilles' heels of K-12 education for the last century, as education traditionalists and progressives battled over whether to prioritize content or skills in successive waves of policy. The academic standards movement of the past two decades in effect called a truce to that debate: standards laid out basic end goals for student learning but left it to districts and often to individual teachers to select the actual content of lessons. And that's where the idea of auditing comes in. Sequencing content can be done in a coherent way, or it can be done in a slapdash fashion, according to Steiner. Developed with the help of the advocacy group Chiefs for Change, the Knowledge Map tool, as it's called, is largely informed by the work of E.D. Hirsch, Jr., a nationally known proponent of building student knowledge through content. It draws on Hirsch's most recent Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, to which Hopkins officials have added phonics in the earliest grades, an emphasis on cultural relevancy, and children's literature.

## How It Works

The tool sets out broad domains—like American literature—and then topics (Native American, realism, dystopia) and subtopics (Langston Hughes, Sandra Cisneros). Then trained teachers go through text by text to see what's covered in which grades, where topics are reinforced, and where holes or weaknesses lie. So far, the institute has worked with several districts and at least two states; Hopkins wouldn't release their names, citing confidentiality. However, leaders in Baltimore and Indianapolis agreed to share insights gained from their own audits.

**Worthwhile Texts.** When Indianapolis put three commonly used textbook series to the test, it discovered that too many of the core texts that anchored each themed unit were aimed at getting students to exercise a skill, like finding the main idea, rather than focusing on exposing students to knowledge, said Aleesia Johnson, the district's interim superintendent. "Oftentimes, the stories were pretty short," she said. "We needed to have more high-quality anchor texts from authentic authors, not just ones that are sort of just written for textbooks." By contrast, Baltimore's audit found that most of its anchor readings were of high quality. But the secondary readings were generally weaker, said Janise Lane, the executive director of teaching and learning for the district.

**Coherence.** As any parent whose children have studied dinosaurs year after year can attest, students often get repeated exposure to certain topics while other key areas go missing. In Indianapolis, readings on American history and geography were especially weak or missing, Johnson said. The review also helped to identify missed opportunities to connect content disciplines together, Lane noted. Baltimore had a 3rd-grade reading unit on oceans, but students didn't study marine biology in science until the 5th grade.

**Cultural Relevance.** Both Baltimore and Indianapolis wanted to be sure that the texts reflected the student population. The audits found that Indianapolis' materials did a good job reflecting its student body overall but didn't have much representing Asian-American students' experiences. In Baltimore, the problem wasn't so much a lack of diverse texts as it was what they emphasized: Students read over and over about the history of slavery and racism but got next to nothing on the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Migration, or the outpouring of black art and culture that shaped the twentieth century. That finding prompted the district to rebalance topics and to craft new lessons on the history and heritage of Baltimore, not just what's been portrayed about their city in popular media and in television shows like "The Wire." "It got us really thinking about how we build backwards so students have part of the hope and triumphant celebration of the rich culture of Baltimore," Lane said. Baltimore's audit informed its choice of a new English/language arts curriculum last year, while Indianapolis plans to incorporate the findings in its search for a new series in 2020. (It has not yet put out a bid for those materials.) So far, Hopkins hasn't made its review frameworks public, and the reviews are available only in English/language arts for a consulting fee. However, the group would eventually like to make the tool and the audits public so that all districts can benefit from them, Steiner said. ■

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**Stephen Sawchuk** is an associate editor for Education Week. His beat includes district leadership and management, school safety, and civics education.

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# AAE Out and About

