

The Impact of Supporting Teacher Choice with TpT School Access

AT BLUFFTON EXEMPTED VILLAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT



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INTRODUCTION

The Impact of Supporting Teacher Choice with TpT School Access



Bluffton Exempted Village School District, Bluffton, OH

At Teachers Pay Teachers (TpT), we believe in empowering educators to teach at their best by unlocking the collective wisdom of teachers. Inherent in this is the belief that teachers know what is best for their students. They can and should be trusted to choose the instructional materials they need. We found that this not only impacts students and their learning but also educators and their ability to teach and feel motivated and connected to their work. In fact, research has shown that by allowing teachers to select teaching materials and decide on curriculum, school leaders can enrich the job of teaching for educators, increase motivation, and raise performance levels (Kaiser, 1982).

At the **Bluffton Exempted Village School District (BEVSD)**, a public K-12 district in a rural area of northwest Ohio, school leaders also believe in giving their teachers the autonomy to choose the instructional materials they use. Teachers at BEVSD, similar to over 80% of U.S. teachers, were choosing to use resources from TpT for their instructional needs. As a result, BEVSD school leaders adopted TpT School Access — the new, school-wide subscription from TpT that gives teachers access to a library of over 3 million engaging resources, including standards-aligned content.

Read on to learn more about how teacher choice impacts teachers and classrooms at BEVSD and how TpT School Access fits in.

BLUFFTON EXEMPTED VILLAGE SCHOOL DISTRICT (BEVSD)

Location: Bluffton, OH

School Type: Public K-12

Number of Schools: 3

Teachers: 70 Teachers

Students: 1,200 Students

The Benefits of Teacher Choice and Empowerment

Based on what we know from the literature on teacher choice and anecdotally from our teacher users, our main research question was: In a district where teachers are empowered to choose the instructional materials they need, are educators more engaged in their teaching and more motivated in their work? In order to provide a foundation for our research question and understand our findings, we turned to existing research on teacher choice.

Thomas and Velthouse define choice as: “When individuals are able to intentionally select actions that likely will lead to desired outcomes,” (1990, as cited in Davis and Wilson, 2000). In the classroom, this can look like an educator choosing the instructional curriculum and materials she uses, how she sets up her classroom, or even how she delivers her lessons. Many authors have demonstrated that in a school setting, this kind of choice is a result of school leadership and the empowering environment created by those administrators (e.g., Bass 1990; Bennis and Nanus 1985; Gist and Mitchell 1992; Thomas and Velthouse 1990; Vogt and Murrell 1990; as cited in Davis and Wilson, 2000). Principal empowering behaviors can include:



Kerry H., 3rd Grade Teacher, BEVSD

- Transparent and inclusive communication
- Including teachers in decision-making
- Recognizing and rewarding educators’ successes
- Providing teachers with an environment that includes needed materials (Davis and Wilson, 2000; Firestone, 2014)

When principals engage in these empowering behaviors, the impact can be significant. In fact, researchers found that the more school leaders engage in behaviors that are personally empowering to teachers — including providing teachers with choice and decision-making power — the more teachers saw that they had autonomy in their work, and they perceived that they were making a greater impact through their efforts (Davis and Wilson, 2000). Further research around teacher motivation also indicates that choice is an important condition that motivates teachers and helps them feel success (Firestone and Pinnell, 1993). In fact, Davis and Wilson found that choice itself produces greater flexibility and creativity for teachers (2000).

Existing research presents an understanding that when school leaders establish an empowering environment for educators — one that includes teacher choice — teachers perceive that they’re making a greater impact, they feel successful, and they’re even more motivated. The research team at TpT set out to learn more at BEVSD, further investigating the possibility that choice in selecting instructional materials could lead teachers to be more motivated and ultimately enrich the job of teaching.

Teacher Choice in Practice at BEVSD

At BEVSD, the superintendent and school principals value their educators and trust teachers to make instructional decisions for their students. As such, school leaders provide teachers with the autonomy to choose the instructional tools they use in their classrooms. “We give our teachers a guide that we want them to follow: the academic content standards,” explained Superintendent Greg Denecker. “As far as how they get the material to our students, we want them to be creative and do different things, not just be out of some textbook.”



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GREG DENECKER
Superintendent

Similar to educators around the U.S., teachers in BEVSD are required to teach to either mandated state standards or content standards specific to the subjects that they teach. From there, they are provided the autonomy to choose the materials they use to ensure that their students master those learning standards. In fact, 98% of surveyed teachers at BEVSD agreed that teachers in their school have influence over the selection of instructional materials and methods (see fig. 1). The ability to select instructional materials and curriculum, however, isn’t the norm for many educators. In a 2017 survey from the American Federation of Teachers, of over 30,000 educators, 40% of respondents reported having “no influence”

or only “minor influence” in establishing curriculum at their schools (AFT, 2017). Why then do leaders at BEVSD let teachers choose the instructional materials they use? As Superintendent Denecker explains, it’s first and foremost to motivate teachers by supporting and providing them with the tools that they need to improve their craft. “It helps our teachers to be the best and give the best lesson to our students on a daily basis,” he said.

The environment that school leaders at BEVSD have established values teachers and gives them ownership over the instruction they provide. While we’ve heard over and over that teachers are feeling stressed and unenthusiastic about their work (AFT, 2017), BEVSD teachers are unique in that 100% agree that they are generally satisfied with being a teacher in their district, and 93% feel that their district empowers them to teach at their best (see fig. 2). The research team at TpT was curious to better understand what teacher choice looks like in practice at BEVSD, particularly when it comes to selecting instructional materials, and how it impacts teacher motivation and their ability to provide students with the best instruction. As a result, we spoke with 16 teachers across the elementary, middle, and high schools and the four administrators at BEVSD to learn more.

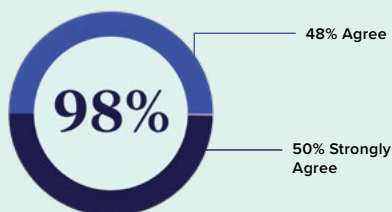


Fig. 1
Percentage of teachers who strongly agree or agree with the statement: Teachers in my school/department have influence over the selection of instructional materials and methods



Fig. 2
100% of BEVSD teachers agree that they are generally satisfied with being a teacher in their district and 93% feel that their district empowers them to teach at their best.

Research Methods

For this case study, the research team gathered evidence through more than 15 hours of semi-structured interviews, over 4 hours of focus group conversations, a quantitative survey of 56 teachers, and document review. During the interviews, the team asked exploratory research questions to understand if having the autonomy to choose instructional materials has an impact on teachers. Additionally, in the quantitative survey, respondents representing 80% of the BEVSD teacher staff were asked about their perspectives on the autonomy they're provided, their access to resources, and their satisfaction in their role as an educator. After completing the data gathering phase, all interviews and observational notes were recorded, transcribed, and coded in order to identify key themes, and survey results were analyzed. At the end of this report, you'll find an examination of examples from teachers — across the elementary, middle, and high schools — of the ways in which having the ability to choose the instructional materials they use in their classrooms impacts their craft of teaching.

Supporting Teacher Choice Through TpT School Access

In order to ensure that teachers are able to provide their students with the best instruction, school leaders at BEVSD provide teachers with materials like textbooks and curricula. Knowing that those materials don't always offer everything that a teacher might need, school leaders also provide their teachers with access to supplemental materials, like those on TpT School Access. Similar to over 80% of teachers in the United States, teachers in the district often turn to TpT — the world's largest site dedicated to teacher-created and teacher-tested materials — to find additional instructional materials. Recognizing this and seeking a way to provide his teachers with more instructional resources to choose from, Superintendent Denecker brought TpT School Access to all K through 12th grade educators in his district. As a result, 93% of surveyed teachers agree that they personally have access to the instructional resources, classroom materials, and classroom supplies that they need to do their job well (see fig. 3). Superintendent Denecker's decision has yielded a positive impact for teachers, particularly in their ability to build relationships and bring creativity to their classrooms.

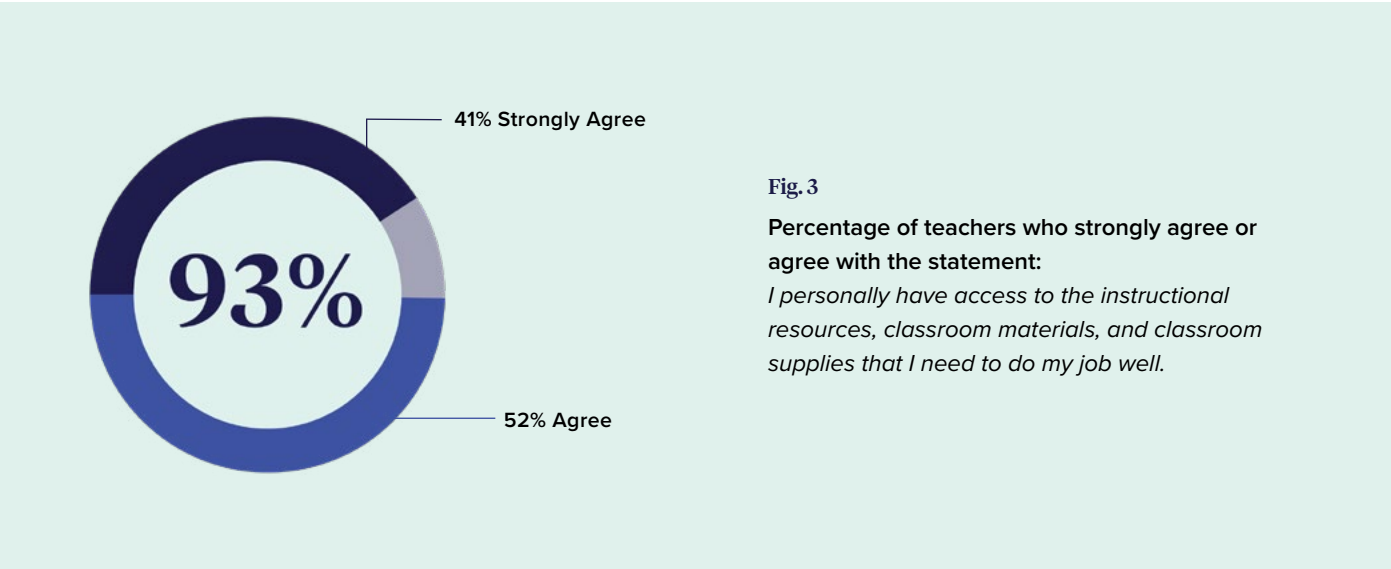


Fig. 3
Percentage of teachers who strongly agree or agree with the statement:
I personally have access to the instructional resources, classroom materials, and classroom supplies that I need to do my job well.

Creativity in Instruction

As we analyzed our notes and transcripts, key themes emerged. Among them, we heard from teachers that they could present their students with more creative learning opportunities. As noted in the literature review, researchers have demonstrated that choice gives teachers greater flexibility and creativity. When asked about the impact of providing teachers with a tool like TpT School Access, which offers more choice in selecting instructional materials, Superintendent Denecker pointed directly to creativity. He explained that giving teachers the ability to choose also allows them to present a lesson to their students in a way that is adapted to their class. This was echoed in our conversations with teachers. Of the teachers we spoke with, 75% shared that they're more creative because their administrators empower them to choose their instructional materials. Specifically, they cited that the materials they select impact the ways in which they deliver content and engage with students.

Teachers shared that they could be more creative in their instruction by presenting their students with **1) experiences that take a lesson beyond, say, reading and note taking from textbooks and 2) with content that they know will be more relevant and engaging.** For example, one middle school history and math teacher, Ms. Fox, constantly challenges herself to come up with creative instructional activities that keep her students engaged and get them excited about their learning. Recently, she had her students role play an argument within the Continental Congress about British taxation. The week before, she transformed her room into a bakery to bring fractions to life for her students.

DID YOU KNOW?

75% of the BEVSD teachers we spoke with shared that they're able to be more creative because their administrators provide them with the power to choose instructional materials.

Ms. Fox uses both a textbook and state standards as blueprints for teaching her history and math classes, and then turns to tools like TpT to create these kinds of experiences for her students. She explained, "I don't like teaching out of the textbook because my students aren't absorbing information. They're just memorizing stuff until the test and then they forget everything." So, Ms. Fox chooses to be more creative in her instruction. She shared, "I'm always thinking, 'How can I take [a lesson] one step further so that I feel like [my students are] really experiencing it?'" Ms. Fox feels confident in doing so because her school leaders give her that freedom, that choice. "My administration makes me feel empowered and they make me feel like I'm really in charge of my classroom," she said. "I don't have to be in a box with a certain set of curriculum or anything that we have to do. I like having the choice and really fitting [instruction] to what my students need to learn to the best of their abilities."

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MS. FOX

Middle school history and math teacher

Teachers also aligned creativity with being able to choose new instructional materials that are timely and engaging for their students. In a focus group with high school teachers, Ms. Bauer shared that because she is empowered to choose the content for her high school English classroom, she's able to teach with instructional materials that are more relevant to her students' experiences and even a bit more out-of-the-box. She's always looking for content that she knows will be exciting and engaging for them. For example, she taught a standards-aligned unit that paired with a popular documentary series to teach her students about bias and the media. As the selected resources both met the standards and was appropriate for her students, it was a hit.

THE IMPACT OF TPT SCHOOL ACCESS:

Building Relationships Through Instruction

Another theme that emerged was choice enabling teachers to build relationships with students through their instruction. Teachers said, by having choice in the materials they use, they're able to ensure that the content they present to their students resonates with them. Of the teachers we spoke with, 69% talked about being responsive to their students' interests with the instructional materials they select, which helps them develop relationships with their students. "I think that's what makes teachers good; when they're willing to try new [materials] that work for their students," explained Bluffton High School Latin teacher, Ms. Hoff.



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MS. HOFF
High school Latin teacher

Teachers talked about finding materials that would spark conversations with their students. Ms. Moser shared that when she finds resources that are relevant for her fifth grade students, “The kids are more willing to open up to us.” Recently she taught a lesson on greed as a character trait. Her students were able to understand and relate to the trait, which started a conversation about how they observed it in their own lives. “It was interesting, to say the least, to listen to how they thought they themselves were greedy,” she explained. Ms. Moser and her students talked about the ways in which they might see or exhibit greed in their lives. “It was a nice teaching moment,” she said.

Ms. Richards engages with her 7th and 8th grade students by asking them for feedback and then by adjusting the materials and the ways she uses those materials based on their feedback. Once a semester, she has a conversation with her students to reflect on her lessons, activities, and assessments in her ELA class. Recently, her students asked for more opportunities to use technology to demonstrate their learning. So, she offered her students the chance to present their recent research projects on biomes using Google Slides presentations.

Having choice in the materials she uses makes it possible for Ms. Richards to adjust to the interests of her students in this way. “For me, the freedom to adapt allows me to engage better with [my students], and I’m able to get to know them even better because we’re not just reading from a script and we’re not just having them regurgitate information.”



Ms. Richards in her classroom

“For me, the freedom to adapt allows me to engage better with [my students], and I’m able to get to know them even better because we’re not just reading from a script and we’re not just having them regurgitate information”

MS. RICHARDS
Middle school ELA teacher

The ability to reflect on and adjust her teaching makes Ms. Richards feel like she is constantly improving her craft. “I go home happy every day knowing that my students loved the lesson and they understood what we did,” she explained. “And if something didn’t work, I’ve had time to reflect on that before the day is over.”

Key Takeaways

Our research team sought to learn more about teacher empowerment and the impact of teacher choice. Specifically, we were curious to understand if educators are more engaged in their teaching and more motivated in their work if school leaders empower their teachers to choose the instructional materials they need. In our research with educators in the Bluffton Exempted Village School District — a district where teachers are given the ability to choose the instructional materials they use in their classrooms — we found that teachers were both more engaged and motivated in their teaching. What we discovered was that this emerged in two ways. When teachers at BEVSD are trusted to choose instructional materials for their classrooms, we learned that they are 1) more motivated to be creative in their teaching, and 2) better able to use instructional materials to respond to student interests and therefore build relationships with their students. We think this is great news for administrators who are looking to empower their teachers and give them more freedom in curricular decisions. By trusting teachers and providing them with the opportunity to not only access but also to choose the instructional materials they can use, school leaders can empower their teachers to provide the best instruction that they can for their students.



(Left) Kerry Hershberger, 3rd Grade Teacher
(Top right) Tim Clossen, Principal
(Bottom right) Students in Ms. Bourassa's
Social Studies Classroom

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