

Office of the Superintendent of Schools  
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
Rockville, Maryland

March 20, 2019

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education  
From: Jack R. Smith, Superintendent of Schools  
Subject: Benchmark Education Company, LLC (02-12-19-07)

**Question**

Mrs. O'Neill requested the response from information regarding why Benchmark Education Company, LLC, about why it was not "greenlit."

**Response**

EdReports.org is an independent nonprofit that supports efforts to increase the capacity of school districts to seek and identify high-quality instructional materials. EdReports.org rates instructional resources into two categories: Alignment and Usability. In the Alignment category, Benchmark Education, LLC, met expectations with text quality. However, Benchmark Education, LLC partially met expectations with building knowledge. Responses from Benchmark Education, LLC, in regard to the EdReports.org ratings are attached.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. Maria V. Navarro, chief academic officer, at 240-740-3040 or Mrs. Niki T. Hazel, director, Department of Elementary Curriculum and Districtwide Programs, Office of the Chief Academic Officer, at 240-740-3930.

JRS:MVN:BJC:smw

Attachments

Copy to:  
Executive Staff  
Mrs. Hazel  
Ms. Webb

January 17, 2019

**Angela McIntosh-Davis, CPPB**  
**Team Leader – Procurement Unit**  
Montgomery County Public Schools  
Department of Materials Management  
45 W. Gude Dr. Suite 3100  
Rockville, MD 20850  
301-279-3172 Office/240-279-3173 Fax

Dear Angela,

Following the discussion between Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) and Benchmark Education Company LLC (Benchmark Education) on Tuesday, January 15<sup>th</sup>, please find attached a copy of Benchmark Education Company’s publisher response submitted and found on EdReports.org.

Benchmark Education Company and EdReports.org agree on the importance of the two Gateways that are the focus of the evaluation criteria: Gateway #1: Text Quality and Gateway #2: Build Knowledge. *Benchmark Advance* received a “Meets Expectations” on Gateway 1: Text Quality and “Partially Meets” on Gateway #2: Build Knowledge. The 2a Indicator under Build Knowledge states: *Texts are organized around a topic/topics to build students’ knowledge and vocabulary which will over time support and help grow students’ ability to comprehend complex texts independently and proficiently.* (Indicator 2a)

**Benchmark Education Company respectfully disagrees with EdReports’ interpretation of Gateway 2, Indicator 2a as it relates to the intent and meaning of “topic/topics to build students’ knowledge and vocabulary.” Our interpretation, based on the study of the CCSS, is “build knowledge” is expected to be addressed in more than just the content area topics. The Publisher’s Response provides specific support for our interpretation of the scope of Build Knowledge. In the report, it is evident that *Benchmark Advance* was penalized for focusing on 3 literary topics out of 10 topics as seen in the following quote from EdReports review:**

*“While some units in the year-long materials focus on topics, many do not, instead focusing on a chosen thematic perspective (e.g. such as exploring literary themes), or on building a skill (such as character analysis...)” - EdReports Review*

We encourage districts to revisit the CCSS and all the supporting Appendices as they review *Benchmark Advance* and make their own decision about the meaning of Gateway 2: Build Knowledge and consider the best practices to achieve that indicator within and across grades.

Benchmark considered all 3 types of knowledge outlined in the CCSS in constructing its 10 vertically aligned K–6 knowledge strands (see publishers response for link to source):

- content knowledge (science, social studies)
- literary knowledge
- cultural knowledge

*Benchmark Advance* was built to directly address this indicator as seen in its Vertical Alignment of 10 topic knowledge strands that are the focus of 3-week units. Seven of these strands focus on **content knowledge** (Science and Social Studies) and 3 focus on **literary** strands: Character, Theme, and Point of View. The three literary strands were intentionally included in *Benchmark Advance*. The attached response provides specific details to support their inclusion and why we feel strongly that instruction in these strands is needed to meet this indicator. It is also important to point out that these knowledge strands are the focus of 3-week units within each grade as well as across the grades. Students for 3 weeks read about, talk about, and write about one topic, providing time for students to deepen their knowledge and vocabulary about the topic. The design of *Benchmark Advance* was intentionally structured around these topics within and across grades to build knowledge and vocabulary over time and is a fundamental strength of this comprehensive program.

We hope that any district reviewing *Benchmark Advance* using EdReports as part of their evaluation will read our Publisher’s Response and go to the links provided to consider our rationale along with the EdReports’ comments. Since we were limited to a specific word count in our response, we did not site all of EdReports’ quotes that state their position, rather we chose quotes that were used consistently in each grade. Our hope is that districts evaluating *Benchmark Advance* will see our perspective and take this time to consider their own interpretation of Gateway 2, Indicator 2a. If you have any question concerning this report or our response, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss those areas.

Respectfully,

Susan Rivers  
Chief Revenue Officer  
[srivers@benchmarkeducation.com](mailto:srivers@benchmarkeducation.com)  
(914) 560-1222



## **Benchmark Education Company’s Response to EdReports.org Review**

Benchmark Education appreciates the opportunity to respond to the EdReports.org Review of *Benchmark Advance*, Grades K-2.

Our response is divided into four parts:

1. *Benchmark Advance* Success;
2. EdReports.org Scoring;
3. Comparing Interpretations: Gateway 2, Indicator 2a;
4. Support for Building Literary Knowledge.

### **1. BENCHMARK ADVANCE SUCCESS**

*Benchmark Advance* is a new program that has participated in multiple independent evaluations focusing on alignment to the CCSS. The first review was done by the state of California with the result being that *Benchmark Advance* was placed on the state list and many districts are now using the program. A second independent review was done by Learning List with the program attaining a 100% score.

We welcome independent reviews and the valuable information they provide. As a result of this EdReports.org review, new content is available now for current and future users.

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However, the ultimate evaluation of a CCSS program is how well the students reach the expectations on an assessment measuring the desired outcomes. For that reason, efficacy studies by a third party provide invaluable information.

### ***Benchmark Advance: Independent Research Results Following Students Over 3 Years***

Evidence of the effectiveness of *Benchmark Advance* is mounting based on multi-year studies.

[Click here for complete research results.](#)

### **2. EdReports.org SCORING OF BENCHMARK ADVANCE K–2**

The EdReports.org’s review recognized that *Benchmark Advance* met expectations for text quality (Gateway 1) at all grade levels K-6. *Benchmark Advance* scored either “Meets Expectations” or “Partially Meets Expectations” on all indicators, with no indicator scored “Does Not Meet.” In Building Knowledge (Gateway 2), *Benchmark Advance* was found to partially meet expectations.

The architecture of the program was constructed specifically to build content knowledge within and across grade levels. The remainder of our response will focus on how our approach to building knowledge reflects the intention of the CCSS.



### 3. COMPARING INTERPRETATIONS: Gateway 2, Indicator 2a

*Texts are organized around a topic/topics to build students’ knowledge and vocabulary which will over time support and help grow students’ ability to comprehend complex texts independently and proficiently. (Indicator 2a)*

We respectfully disagree with EdReports.org’s findings on this indicator and will use this opportunity to provide additional evidence to others interested in reviewing *Benchmark Advance* so that an informed decision can be made when choosing a program. The report found *Benchmark Advance* 2 points from reaching “Meets Expectations” on Gateway 2. We were scored as “partially meets” on Indicator 2a for grades K-5.

**With regard to Indicator 2a, EdReports.org and *Benchmark Advance* agree that:**

- Text sets should be organized around a topic.
- Text sets should build knowledge and vocabulary.
- The goal of topic structure is to “grow students’ ability to comprehend complex texts independently and proficiently.”
- Knowledge is built over time on a topic.
- Instruction is building toward students attaining Standard 10 in both RI and RL.

**However, Benchmark respectfully disagrees with EdReports.org’s interpretation of indicator 2a:**

<b>EdReports.org interpretation of Indicator 2a</b>	<b><i>Benchmark Advance</i> interpretation 2a</b>
<p>Based on its analysis of <i>Benchmark Advance</i>, EdReports.org interprets Indicator 2a to mean that students “build knowledge and vocabulary” only within content-area (science and social studies) focused topics such as animal adaptations or weather.</p> <p>EdReports.org does not view literary topics (“genre or issue” focused) as contexts in which students can build knowledge and vocabulary.</p> <p><i>(Note, however, that other programs with genre as an organizing focus received full credit for this Indicator.)</i></p>	<p>Benchmark considered all 3 types of knowledge outlined in the CCSS in constructing its 10 vertically aligned K–6 knowledge strands:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• content knowledge (science, social studies);</li> <li>• literary knowledge; and</li> <li>• cultural knowledge.</li> </ul> <p>7 out of 10 units per grade focus on social studies and science topics to build <u>content knowledge</u>. In 3 units, knowledge and vocabulary are built around literary topics (characters in literature, point of view, and literary themes). We felt that a broader definition of knowledge more accurately reflects the intent of the CCSS.</p>

#### **Evidence Supporting *Benchmark Advance*’s Interpretation of Indicator 2a**

In our close reading of the standards, knowledge is not simply “content” knowledge (e.g. science or social studies). Knowledge is also the deep understanding of how texts work, their genres and characteristics, cross-cultural variants, themes, points of view, and techniques. According to the



CCSS Introduction, students who are college and career ready in reading, writing, speaking and listening not only “establish a base of knowledge across a wide range of subject matter by engaging with works of quality and substance” but they also “understand other perspectives and cultures” through “works of classic and contemporary literature.”

*Benchmark Advance* is the only reviewed program with a K–6 vertical alignment of knowledge strands and three-week-long units to support knowledge development. All topics were planned with the ultimate goal of building knowledge so that students could access complex texts! We are surprised and disappointed that the program’s strength was not acknowledged.

#### 4. SUPPORT FOR BUILDING LITERARY KNOWLEDGE: EVIDENCE FROM CCSS

**CCSS refers to three types of knowledge.**

The Supplement to CCSS Appendix A lays out the qualitative dimensions of text complexity, specifying the types of **Knowledge Demands** students must contend with.

- knowledge gained from readers’ **life experiences**
- **cultural/literary knowledge**
- **content/discipline knowledge**

[http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_A.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf)

*Benchmark Advance* builds knowledge in all of these areas. *EdReports.org* recognizes only *content/discipline knowledge*.

**In the “myths vs facts” section of CCSS, the importance of “knowledge in literature” is explicitly stated.**

“In addition to content coverage, the standards require that students systematically acquire **knowledge in literature** and **other disciplines** through reading, writing, speaking, and listening.” <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/myths-vs-facts/>

**The Anchor Standards for ELA address literary knowledge.**

“Through extensive reading of stories, dramas, poems, and myths from diverse cultures and different time periods, students gain literary and cultural knowledge as well as familiarity with various text structures and elements...”

See “Note on Range and Content of Student Reading” <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/R/>

**Anchor Standard 9 supports building knowledge through themes or topics.**

Students must “*Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge...*”

(This standard cannot be attained without predominantly literary-focused themes or topics.)



**In the CCSS section “Standard 10: Range, Quality, & Complexity » Texts Illustrating the Complexity, Quality, & Range of Student Reading K–5,” the text refers to both topics and themes.**

*“...At a curricular or instructional level, within and across grade levels, texts need to be selected around topics or themes that generate knowledge and allow students to study those topics or themes in depth.”*

**EdReports.org Evidence for Indicator 2a**

The EdReports.org evaluation states that *Benchmark Advance* “partially meets expectations” for Indicator 2a because:

- “Each three-week unit contains shared reading, mentor reading, and extended reading texts covering a variety of genres related to an essential question which sometimes focuses on a topic and **other times focuses on a genre or issue.**” (2<sup>nd</sup> grade, 2a)
- “While these units explore literary themes, they do not focus on the topical knowledge building called for in the standards.” (2<sup>nd</sup> grade, 2a)

**When asked to clarify its definition of knowledge, EdReports’ explanation was as follows:**  
*“While some units in the year-long materials focus on topics, many do not, instead focusing on a chosen thematic perspective (e.g. such as exploring literary themes), or on building a skill (such as character analysis...)”*

**Benchmark response to the EdReports.org explanation:**

<b>EdReports.org</b>	<b>Benchmark Response</b>
<i>“some Benchmark Advance units focus on topics”</i>	7 out of 10 unit topics are science and social studies focused.
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The EdReports.org statements are inaccurate. Other programs reviewed for Indicator 2a received a “Meets Expectations” score despite having literary topics such as “genre” and/or “science fiction.” In our opinion, such inconsistency could create an additional burden for districts using EdReports.org for program comparison.

[Click here for an example of the literary topics in Benchmark Advance.](#)

**Final Thoughts**

Creating a rubric and training reviewers to use it consistently and objectively is very challenging. We commend EdReports.org for taking on this task. We encourage them to refine the tool and provide more training to their reviewers for consistency and accuracy. In the meantime, we hope that districts evaluating *Benchmark Advance* will consider the comments we have provided as they use the review. Based on results from our efficacy studies, we know the program “will grow students’ ability to comprehend complex texts independently and proficiently.” (Indicator 2a)



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1. *Benchmark Advance* Success
2. EdReports.org Scoring;
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### ***1. BENCHMARK ADVANCE SUCCESS***

*Benchmark Advance* is a new program that has participated in multiple independent evaluations focusing on alignment to the CCSS. The first review was done by the state of California with the result being that *Benchmark Advance* was placed on the state list and many districts are now using the program. A second independent review was done by Learning List with the program attaining a 100% score.

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