Why Fishtank?

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Five years ago, our team launched Fishtank Learning (then called **Match Fishtank**) to share high-quality curriculum and instructional materials with teachers everywhere.

Our team, former teachers and instructional leaders, knew how important high-quality curriculum is to high-quality teaching. We had experienced the challenges of the DIY curriculum approach—teachers having to make it themselves—as well as the discomfort of having to teach from cumbersome lesson plans. We set out to create the kind of resources we wished we had in the classroom and that we knew could engage, challenge, and inspire ALL students.

In some ways, Fishtank was originally an experiment. If we built this new curriculum product and shared it through an easy-to-navigate website, would teachers use it? Would our approach to curriculum, honed by years in the classroom, resonate with them and address a need?

We were excited to find the answer was yes. Since that time over two million teachers have come to the Fishtank website to find curriculum resources. **Fishtank curriculum** is being used in hundreds of thousands of classrooms across the country and we now have a base of one hundred schools that are **fully adopting** either Fishtank Math or Fishtank ELA.

Today, as we launch a brand new design for the Fishtank website, I want to give you, our users, a window into who we are, what drives our work, and what makes Fishtank an important addition to the curriculum landscape. A few months ago, we worked as a team to set out our **core values**, which we are sharing for the first time on the newly designed website. Through a lot of collaboration and reflection, we settled on four primary values at the center of our work. Here they are.

We believe in students.

When they receive the support they need, all students can master grade-level content, solve critical problems, and discuss complex ideas.

We knew this one had to come first. At the center of our work is a deep belief that all students can and should be challenged academically. They must be presented with grade-level work that stimulates their natural curiosity and cultivates their ability to reason, argue and think critically about important problems.

In **Fishtank ELA**, all students read complex texts that expose them to rich vocabulary, nuanced characters, and important themes and topics. Students discuss weighty essential questions that have no easy answers.

Some of my personal favorites include:

- Can a person be entirely self-sufficient? (**4th Grade Unit 6 Discovering Self: Bud Not Buddy**)
- In what ways is the experience of growing up universal, and in what ways is it shaped by a person's setting and circumstances? (**8th Grade Unit 4 Surviving Repression: Persepolis**)
- To what extent are people innately good or evil? Who or what defines what is purely good and what is purely evil? (**10th Grade Unit 3: Feminism and Self-Respect in Sula**)

Having grown up in the age of "readers," story collections with names like Kaleidoscope or Calliope, I love that our curriculum has students engage with real books and grapple with questions like these in even the earliest grades. The goal of our ELA curriculum is not just that students grow as readers and writers, but also that they grow as human beings—better understanding themselves and their connection to the world around them.

Similarly, in **Fishtank Math**, we believe that students should not need to prove they can do rigorous, grade-level math in order to gain access to it. Lessons and units are carefully crafted so that students spend the majority of instructional time engaged in the major work of the grade. Fishtank Math received the highest possible ratings in **EdReports' review** for rigor and alignment to the standards. Across the math curriculum, students work independently and in groups on complex tasks that support productive, not destructive, struggle. Fishtank math problems are designed to provide students the opportunity to do the heavy, conceptual thinking, to understand the why and

the how, and to apply these ideas across a variety of contexts and applications. Our goal is that by creating opportunities for just the right amount of productive struggle, we can help teachers foster students' resilience, confidence, and curiosity.

When students do struggle with grade-level content, as they naturally will at times, our goal is to provide teachers with guidance on how to support students at grade level rather than substitute below-grade-level assignments. Over the last year, we have invested in a set of tools to help teachers weave in **just-in-time review** and practice with foundational content while ensuring students spend the majority of time in grade-level instruction.

The bottom line is that students deserve to be challenged and inspired by the work they are asked to do.

We trust teachers.

Teachers are in the best position to see what their students need, so we aim to provide them with the right balance of flexibility and support in our resources.

In addition to our belief in students, we want to underscore that **we trust teachers**. In all of our materials, we strive to honor teachers' experience and expertise. As a team of many former teachers, we know well that lesson plans are only one piece of the puzzle. No lesson plan can take the place of the myriad choices teachers make every day about how to best support their students' learning. As curriculum writers, we want to help teachers make good decisions, not take decision making out of their hands with heavily scripted lesson plans that are both challenging to internalize and can take the joy out of teaching.

When we first began writing the curriculum, our goal was to provide a flexible lesson structure that could leave room for teachers' different instructional routines and personal teaching styles. Since that time, we have layered in more guidance for teachers, with our Enhanced Lesson Plans in ELA and our Tips for Teachers in Math, but our goal is still to provide room for teachers to make critical decisions based on their own knowledge of their students' needs.

To help teachers in this work, we have developed a feature we call **Unit Launches**, resources that help teachers intellectually prepare to teach a unit by delving into the big ideas and essential questions, exploring the core standards, and considering how the content connects to prior and future learning. These online learning modules can be used by individual teachers or by teams of teachers working together to prepare to teach a new unit. By helping teachers more deeply understand the content they are teaching, we hope we can help them more effectively support student learning.

Over and over again we hear from teachers that we are hitting a sweet spot between the two

opposing poles of total autonomy and heavy scripting. Teachers' jobs are hard. Many of us gained a new appreciation for just how hard last year when we found ourselves deeply involved in our own children's education in ways we didn't always relish. Teachers deserve a curriculum that sees their experience and skills as an asset, while simultaneously lifting the burden of having to create their own materials from scratch.

We strive for racial equity and social justice.

We seek to create curricular materials that center students, reflect multiple perspectives and experiences, and empower students to think critically about the world they live in.

Significant research has emerged over the past several years about both the importance of high-quality curriculum and the lack of access to high-quality curriculum for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. TNTP's seminal research study the **Opportunity Myth** revealed that the average student spends 581 out of 720 available hours (80% of their time) on assignments that are not high-quality. And students of color and students from low-income backgrounds are even less likely to be in classrooms with grade-level assignments.

To expand access to high-quality curriculum, Fishtank provides our core materials as a free **Open Educational Resource**. That means any teacher or parent looking to support their students' learning can log onto Fishtank and access the highest quality resources. While many core curricula are purchased only through district contracts, there are many access points to Fishtank curriculum: individual teachers, department heads, school leaders and whole districts can make the decision to implement Fishtank curriculum.

But the most important way we actualize this core value is by striving to make sure our curriculum is as culturally responsive and affirming as it can be. All students deserve to see themselves and their own experiences reflected in the books they read, the problems they solve and the content they discuss in the classroom. For too long the lives and voices of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other marginalized populations have been absent from the materials we put in front of our students.

In ELA, we are **working to find texts** with characters from a wide variety of cultures, races, abilities, and backgrounds to ensure students are able to see their own identities, experiences, and motivations (mirrors) in the texts they read, while also allowing students to gain insight into the identities, experiences, and motivations of others (windows). Of course, choosing diverse texts is only part of the challenge of creating a culturally responsive curriculum. The curriculum must also help teachers internalize those texts and consider how their own background and the backgrounds

of their students will shape how they deliver the lessons. Our unit launches and other teacher resources are designed to help teachers do this important thinking.

In math, we aim to center students by valuing the process of learning over getting the right answer. Throughout the curriculum, students have opportunities to discuss what they notice and observe, they build toolkits of various strategies, they acknowledge that there is often more than one way to arrive at an answer, and they view mistakes as opportunities for learning. Through a focus on communicating their math understanding, students build confidence in their ability to engage with others around complex ideas. Our math team, after completing a course focused on racial equity, is actively planning for ways to make the curriculum more culturally relevant by expanding on the cultural and identity contexts in our problems, and by incorporating additional ways students can see and apply math in real life.

A key element of this core value is the *striving*. We know that there is much ground to cover in our pursuit of these goals, and we know that we need to keep listening, learning and continuously iterating to get this work right. Which brings us to the fourth core value.

We listen, learn, and adapt.

We continually improve and refine our resources and experiment to find new and better ways to support teachers and students.

In our early days of creating curriculum for Match Charter Schools, we benefited from close contact with teachers using our materials. We observed classrooms and partnered with teachers to gather feedback and consider new ways to better support learning. For example, if a teacher commented that students found a specific assessment prompt confusing, we would review and revise it to clarify the question. Or if a teacher flagged a lesson students found challenging, we would brainstorm ways to layer in additional supports to make the topic more accessible. These nuggets of feedback allowed us to engage in rapid cycles of improvement and fostered our commitment to continuously upgrading the curriculum.

Even now that we are writing curriculum for teachers in thousands of schools across the country, we prioritize efforts to gather feedback from our users and we immerse ourselves in the latest research on curriculum and instruction.

Over the past several years, our focus on continuous improvement led us to **update the core texts** of many of our early elementary ELA units to ensure we were including the widest range of voices, experience and authors and including texts and topics that all students could find engaging and relatable. In a similar vein, we embarked on a **major revision of our High School ELA curriculum** last year.

In math, we spend a lot of time trying to get **our math problems just right**. One of our curriculum writers came up with her own twist on Michael Crichton's quote about writing: "Math problems are not written, they are rewritten" as a way of explaining the importance of testing, reviewing and revising math problems so that they are asking the right questions and yielding the right information about student understanding.

Across Fishtank Math and ELA, we use the feedback we get from teachers to help us develop new features and functionality, like our Student Handout editor which allows teachers to customize and adapt student handouts, and **our integration with Google Drive** that allows teachers to send problems sets and discussion questions to students via Google Classroom.

Our goal is that Fishtank materials remain on a path of constant improvement. Of course, we will always work hard not to disrupt teachers' work when we make changes, but we firmly believe that our materials will never be finished. They can always be improved to better meet the needs of teachers and students and better respond to emerging research.

You, our users, are our greatest resource in this pursuit. Whenever you offer feedback, ask tough questions, or share your experience of bringing the curriculum to life with your students, we are incredibly grateful.

Thank you for choosing to use Fishtank with your students. We can't wait to hear how things are going in your classroom.

Claire Kaplan is the CEO of Fishtank Learning. Prior to joining Fishtank Learning, Claire was a Vice President at the National Center on Time and Learning where she led the organization's knowledge management and dissemination work and developed materials and tools to support effective school redesign. She has produced numerous reports and videos on effective school practices. Claire holds a BA in Comparative Literature from Princeton University and a Master's in Public Policy from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.