What is BT?

As Vail moved from a district of 500 students to a district of more than 13,000 students, we labored and at times struggled to pull together and articulate all the necessary resources to implement the mandated standards-based curriculum.

Thousands of hours have been spent by our staff unwrapping, prioritizing and calendaring standards, and developing delivery and assessment strategies. The sum of this work is a district-wide instructional program we call Beyond Textbooks (see below for a detailed description). It helped us receive “Excelling” and “A” school labels across our district.

Now it is available to you.

-Calvin Baker, Superintendent

Over the past decade, educators in Vail have and continue to develop a philosophy of teaching and learning that transcends textbooks and state standards to strengthen support for communities of teachers, facilitate teaching and learning, and improve student achievement. In practice, Beyond Textbooks, a comprehensive program of curriculum development, instructional improvement, student assessment, and multi-level interventions, is the result of this philosophy of planning, teaching, and sharing.

Facing the challenges associated with an increase in student population from 3,600 in 2001 to over 13,000 in 2018, Vail has used the Beyond Textbooks approach to increase student achievement in math and reading from levels near or below state averages prior to the advent of the program to pass rates that are now consistently 20% or more above state averages.

Beyond Textbooks is not only a feasible, effective approach for improving student achievement in Vail, but it is also noteworthy that Vail is now partnering with over 100 school districts and charter schools across Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, and New Mexico who are currently implementing the Beyond Textbooks program to move the needle on student achievement for its own students.

The name Beyond Textbooks does not refer to an abandonment of traditional textbooks, but rather refers to a philosophy of teaching and learning that transcends textbooks and state standards to strengthen support for communities of teachers, facilitate teaching and learning, and improve student growth and achievement. This comprehensive approach begins with a “shoulder to shoulder” rather than “top down” curriculum development process.
First, Vail teachers and the Curriculum Department collaboratively review state content standards to identify core sets of essential standards that establish what students must learn in each content area at each grade level. These are the standards that will provide students with knowledge beyond just a test date.

Teachers within a grade level and subject then collaborate to “unwrap” the standards to determine big ideas, key vocabulary, student-friendly language, essential questions, and performance tasks that prove mastery. The documents produced in this process form the foundation of the core subject curriculums at each grade level and establish district-wide expectations for what teachers should teach and what students should learn and be able to do in relation to a specific standard.

The teachers and Curriculum Department next work together to develop curriculum calendars, facilitate the administration of common curriculum-aligned assessments, and encourage collaboration among teachers at the same grade level.

Faculty and administrators then collaborate to identify, acquire, and develop the specific materials needed to implement the curriculum effectively.

The capstone of the curriculum framework is an electronic delivery system, Beyond Textbooks – a web-based tool that allows for the collection of digital curriculum materials, support materials, and other digital resources accessible to all faculty. Teachers use the website to review the curriculum and calendars, locate and/or share resource materials, and to communicate and collaborate with peers across the District and State who use the same curriculum but who would not otherwise be available to share resources and provide other support.

It is a time-honored teaching tradition to beg, borrow, and steal ideas from one another. Beyond Textbooks takes sharing to a whole new level.

While Beyond Textbooks began as a Vail initiative, over the past nine years it has evolved into a program that has created partnerships with over 100 other diverse districts and charter schools in Arizona, and out of state partners in Alaska, Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, and New Mexico.

Beyond Textbooks now reaches over 9,000 teachers and 146,000 students who have adopted it as a framework to increase student achievement. With the help of Vail’s ongoing professional development, Beyond Textbooks partners are trained on: the philosophy and practices of the Beyond Textbooks framework; effective implementation strategies; and the technical facilitation of the Beyond Textbooks electronic delivery system (including how to access all of Vail’s digital curriculum calendars, unwrapped documents, formative assessments, and teacher created resources that are congruent to selected essential standards, as well as how to contribute to the digital resources that are accessible to all Vail and Beyond Textbooks partner teachers).

David Woodall, Superintendent of partner district, Morenci Unified School District, states, “When I saw the amount of time Vail had spent unwrapping, prioritizing, and calendaring standards, and the amount of resources they had generated, I knew that it was something that would be very difficult for us to ever produce, and if we could tap into what they’ve created it would be very exciting. In the long run, this could really reshape instruction. It’s the ultimate tool for linking instruction and teacher creativity.”