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People's Choice Spotlight: LearningList Is Consumer Reports for Educators

April 10, 2015



[Danica Smithwick](#)



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Jackie Lain started [LearningList](#) with a passion for helping schools function more effectively.

Having a background working with school administrators and education policy programs, she developed the idea for an instructional-material review service so educators know what to expect from products before they invest funds in them.

Yesterday, the Texas-based company became one of four People's Choice Award winners, earning a chance to pitch as a Challenge Festival education semifinalist. Lain, founder and president of LearningList, talked to 1776 about why she decided to create Learning List and what she hopes to get out of her trip to D.C. next month.

Tell me about your background in education and what inspired you to create LearningList.

I'm a school attorney by training, and I practiced for districts in Texas for many years, but I've also worked on education policy at both the state and federal government level, including a stint as a White House Fellow. I then went to work for [Standard and Poor's](#), where I was a director of public affairs for an education focus division. In that capacity, I really learned the value of having a transparent source of high-quality information to make a marketplace work effectively.

When I came back to Texas, I was the associate executive director of the [Texas Association of School Boards](#). In that capacity, I kept hearing from school administrators who complained that they were tired of purchasing instructional materials that failed to live up to the publisher's claims. They didn't align to as many standards as the publisher said they would, and they didn't have the features and functionalities that they said they would.

Having worked at Standards and Poor's, I realized there was no high-quality source of objective information about instructional materials to help school districts make better, informed choices about which materials teachers and students need to be successful. So that's what led me to start LearningList: It was another way for me to continue my life's mission of helping school districts function more effectively to help students fulfill their potential.

What exactly does LearningList do, and what problems is it solving?

LearningList is an instructional materials review service for schools and districts. Like Consumer Reports, we're a subscription-based service. We provide three different types of reviews for each instructional material to give educators three different perspectives before they decide which ones they want to purchase for their district. We hopefully are helping to educate educators about the products available in the marketplace.

We increase their selection of materials and give them a solid basis from which to review materials themselves. We don't take the place of any local or state level process; we just empower educators to make better-informed decisions for themselves. We hope that ultimately we are helping publishers improve the alignment of their materials so that students get instructional materials that truly teach them the knowledge and skills that state standards require.

We hope that we are giving educators peace of mind that they are selecting the best possible materials for their students and helping districts save money by making it easy to comparison shop and find materials that provide the best features and the best value. Those are the problems we are trying to solve—helping students by helping teachers and helping taxpayers make sure that districts are using their money most effectively.

What sets LearningList apart from its competitors?

There are lots of different organizations that now provide reviews of instructional materials, and everybody reviews them from a slightly different perspective. What makes us unique is that we really look at materials' alignment to the standards. Teachers rely on instructional materials for about 80 percent of their curriculum, studies have shown. If the materials are not deeply aligned to the standards, and teachers don't know where the defects are, then they don't know how to adjust their instruction to make sure they're teaching students everything they need to know in order to do well on the test.

So we take the publisher's correlation, and we verify it from an educator's perspective, having multiple certified educators review the product's correlation to make sure that the citations are deeply aligned to each standard. We also provide an editorial review of the instructional content and design that takes into consideration educators' perspectives who have used the product, as well as our own subject-matter experts who are certified educators in the grade and subject of the product they review.

Then we allow our subscribers to rate and review materials themselves to share their own experience. So the three different kinds of reviews we provide are slightly different from any other reviews out there.

The other thing that sets us apart is that we not only allow our subscribers to access all of the reviews we've done, but they can request reviews of additional materials so that we become an extension of their curriculum team. Our reviews are designed not only to help them select materials, but then also use those materials more effectively.

For example, they can use our detailed alignment reports to incorporate their instructional materials more effectively into their curriculum maps and into lesson plans. They can also use them to analyze test performance to see whether the performance may be attributable in part to the alignment of their instructional materials.

How big is your team, and what roles do they play?

My role is to hire really talented people to do everything that we do here, and I have a gold standard team. We have six people who do the work of 600 people. I have a director of alignment reviews, director of editorial reviews, director of marketing, director of publisher relations, director of customer relations and a couple of developers.

Then we hire 60 certified educators all over the country to do reviews for us. Our reviewers are teachers who have at least five years of teaching experience—although on average, they have 17 years of teaching experience. They have to be certified in the grade and subject of the products they review, and over 70 percent of them have a Masters of Doctorate in education. Almost half of them are ESL certified, so they can review in both English and Spanish.

They can't have worked with our publisher within two years of joining our team—just to make sure that they are completely independent from the publishers whose products we review. So it's a really highly qualified group of educators who are reviewing the materials from an educator's perspective under the direction of supremely qualified educators on our team.

What are you hoping to get out of Challenge Festival next month? How does it feel to have been a People's Choice Award winner?

We couldn't be more excited. I'm looking forward to meeting others who are going through the process of disrupting an industry and changing the mindset. I'm sure that I can learn from their experiences and incorporate synergies that they have implemented in their companies.

We also want to raise awareness of the service we provide because the more publishers who hear about us, the more likely publishers will know that we are out there, and they're going to have to submit their materials for an independent review in order for the marketplace to be willing to buy them. I think the transparency our company provides is an important piece to making this market function effectively for districts.

I'm so gratified by this opportunity. When we decided to put our name in the hat as a People's Choice Award winner, I had no idea about the outpouring of support we'd get from our subscribers. The notes I've received from individual educators who use our service have been the most incredible experience since starting this service. And that's why we did this. That has been the most gratifying part of that whole process.

What's next for LearningList, and what are your hopes for the long term?

We started our company reviewing materials that are aligned to the Texas standards and to Common Core. We've expanded now to Advanced Placement standards, and we are moving into other states. That's been a great advancement for us in terms of moving our model to benefit districts in other states. We have districts in three different states subscribing to our services at the present time, and we're hoping to get many more states on board because this service is completely scalable—we are able to do reviews for as many state standards as we need to.

In terms of long-term, I don't know why this service should just be confined to America. Other countries have learning standards, and their students and teachers deserve materials to support their learning of the standards, the knowledge and skills that their country wants them to know as well. I think this could be both national in the short term, and then international in the long term.



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As a member of 1776's editorial team, Danica Smithwick spends her time telling stories and communicating with others. She is a Union University and Washington Journalism Center student who loves...

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