



Foreword and Executive Summary

By Amber M. Northern and Michael J. Petrilli

Eight years ago, the vast majority of states adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Not long after, for reasons that nobody needs us to rehash, a political maelstrom erupted in many of those same states that had little to do with the quality of the standards.

Meanwhile, we at Fordham tried to separate the substance from the silliness. That meant debating the merits of ELA and math standards rather than the politics, and acknowledging that, while the CCSS weren't perfect, most American schoolchildren would be vastly better off if we moved away from theatrics and toward faithful implementation.

In that spirit, in 2013 we published *Common Core in the Schools: A First Look at Reading Assignments* by Tim Shanahan and Ann Duffett, which highlighted the results of a first-of-its-kind survey of ELA teachers in grades 4-10. We wanted to know how classroom implementation was progressing and where educators might need support in teaching these more rigorous expectations. Overall, the results suggested broad support among teachers for the Common Core standards. But they also highlighted several areas of concern. Most notably, many teachers said they organized their instruction around discrete skills rather than texts, and that they assigned texts based on students' reading levels rather than their grade levels—the opposite of what the standards encourage.

Since that survey, we've seen tentative signs of progress, at least when it comes to content coverage and instructional materials. For example, a 2017 C-SAIL report found that teachers generally cover the content that is emphasized in the standards regardless of their state, grade level, and subject.¹ Also last year, EdReports reviewed six ELA curricula and found that half of them fully met rigorous criteria for overall alignment and usability.²

Yet the concerns that surfaced in our initial survey have not disappeared, and additional hurdles have emerged. There's evidence that implementation of CCSS-ELA has been uneven, which is understandable



since states have employed a number of changes to the CCSS-ELA—some more consequential than others. Further, many teachers have received little training or support when it comes to certain topics, and at least some educators still have misconceptions about what the standards actually expect.³

All of these studies and others are useful for identifying broad implementation issues. Yet they fall short when it comes to informing professional practice. We know that bridging the divide between research and practice is a critical need. (Books have been written and centers funded to cope with that challenge.) We simply must do a better job of designing studies that speak to the needs of teachers.

This nationally representative survey of over 1,200 ELA teachers attempts to do just that. In it, we not only diagnose the implementation challenges in classrooms but also identify practical implications for instruction (we call them “Literacy Lifelines”). We target several under-examined topics that matter to practitioners, such as how teachers approach creative and personal writing, whether building students’ content and background knowledge is a priority, and how educators engage in “close reading” with their students. We also provide fresh insights on how teachers approach grade-level texts, balance fiction and nonfiction, and teach vocabulary.

We collaborated with the nonpartisan FDR Group to craft the survey and with the RAND Corporation to administer it. Fordham’s own David Griffith, senior research and policy associate, authored the report with assistance from FDR Group co-founder Ann Duffett.

The topics we examined are at the heart of the three instructional shifts that are core elements of CCSS-ELA and similar state standards—each of which is meant to address widely recognized and longstanding weaknesses in ELA instruction. The first shift calls for “regular practice with complex texts and their academic language”; the second for “reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts”; and the third for “building knowledge through content-rich curriculum.”

The survey asked whether these shifts are actually occurring in ELA classrooms. How are teachers interpreting them? Most importantly, how can we support teachers’ efforts in implementing instructional change?

Here we summarize the survey’s key results, organized by instructional shift, and followed by takeaways and implications for practice.

Shift 1: Regular practice with complex texts and their academic language

Finding 1: Teachers are using a variety of tools to gauge text complexity.

To implement the first instructional shift, teachers must be able to gauge text complexity—ideally in ways that take into account their instructional goals and the specific challenges their students face. Consistent with that ideal, most teachers’ responses suggest that they are using appropriate tools to gauge text complexity, including formal measures (such as Lexile and Flesch-Kincaid) and key aspects of the text (such as structure and purpose).

Finding 2: More teachers are choosing texts based on students' reading level—instead of their grade level—even though the standards encourage the opposite.

Unfortunately, many teachers seem still to be headed in the wrong direction when it comes to assigning appropriately complex texts. In particular, middle and high school teachers were 19 percentage points *more likely* to report choosing texts based on students' reading levels in 2017 than they were in 2012. Similarly, the percentage of teachers who said they were more likely to base their choices on students' reading level increased from 39 to 57 percent.

Finding 3: Teachers are (rightly) teaching vocabulary in context.

As the first shift suggests, effective vocabulary instruction gives students opportunities to see and hear new words in context. It's good news that most teachers report teaching new words when students encounter them in their texts.

Shift 2: Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts, both literary and informational

Finding 4: Teachers are emphasizing "close reading" by asking more text-dependent questions and spending more time on word choice and connotation.

To develop the analytic capacity envisioned by the second shift, students must practice reading closely, and teachers must provide them with the guidance and direction that such practice requires. Although the skills required to lead a successful "close reading" exercise cannot be rigorously assessed in a survey, teachers' responses suggest that most are on the right track. For example, 75 percent say they are asking more questions whose answers require evidence from the text, and almost half say they're placing more emphasis on word choice and connotation.

Finding 5: Teachers are still prioritizing creative expression and personal experience over evidence-based writing.

Although teachers say they're assigning a bit more expository and persuasive writing than a few years ago, and a bit less narrative and/or creative writing, it's not clear that this shift has led to more text-based or evidence-based writing. For example, 58 percent of teachers (and three-quarters of those with remedial or below-grade-level classes) say that they are more likely to give students a writing prompt "designed to spark their interest and creativity based on their own knowledge and experience," as opposed to a text-based prompt.

Shift 3: Building knowledge through content-rich curriculum

Finding 6: Teachers are assigning less fiction and more informational texts.

Between 2012 and 2017, the percentage of time that teachers reported devoting to fiction decreased (from 54 percent to 41 percent) as they moved toward some combination of literary nonfiction and informational texts—especially at the middle and high school levels. In general, the trend toward more informational texts

is consistent with the third shift. However, teachers also report that they are assigning fewer “classic works of literature”—a concerning development.

Finding 7: Most teachers say content knowledge is getting slighted.

Overall, 56 percent of ELA teachers say that “not enough” attention has been paid to “building students’ general knowledge,” 46 percent say their curricular materials “do a poor job of building students’ general knowledge,” and almost one-third report that students’ general knowledge has gotten worse in recent years. These results are particularly troubling given that teachers also report moving away from fiction and toward more informational texts. What sort of information is in those texts, if they aren’t making students more knowledgeable?



These findings suggest at least four takeaways for classroom teachers:

First, teachers should take another look at their ELA curriculum to make sure they aren’t overlooking “classic works of literature.”

Although it’s encouraging that ELA teachers are assigning more informational texts and literary nonfiction, as the third shift suggests, it’s worrying that they seem to be doing so at the expense of classic works of literature. At some level, this sort of tradeoff may be unavoidable. But it’s also possible that teachers have gone too far in their attempts to include more nonfiction.

Consequently, it’s worth emphasizing two points: First, literature should remain the cornerstone of English courses in middle school and high school, so teachers of history, science, and other content-based courses need to do their part to help students analyze informational texts.

Second, let’s not forget that “classic works of literature” should include literary nonfiction and fiction. In other words, the reading list should include not only *The Great Gatsby* and *Lord of the Flies*, but also works such as “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” The Emancipation Proclamation, the *Republic*, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, “A Room of One’s Own,” and so on. (Recall that the CCSS says in grades 6-12, that there should be “much greater attention on the specific category of literary nonfiction.”)

Second, writing instruction needs serious attention.

There’s a place for creative and narrative writing, but high school students in particular need to know how to construct a coherent argument based on their analysis of one or more texts. So it’s worrying that more teachers say students’ ability to “write well-developed paragraphs or essays” has worsened (36 percent) than say it has improved (27 percent) compared to a few years ago. Similarly, 46 percent say students’ ability to “use correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling” has declined in recent years, while just 14 percent say it has improved.

Instructional time is a precious commodity, but one way or another teachers need to incorporate more high-quality writing instruction. (For additional resources, see [“Tips for ELA Teachers”](#) in the Report Materials on our website.)

Third, teachers should tackle the content knowledge deficit.

Teachers seem oddly unaware of how they contribute to the content knowledge deficit they identify. Notably, between 2012 and 2017, the proportion of teachers who said they organized their instruction around “reading skills” increased from 56 to 62 percent, while the proportion who said they organized their instruction around “specific texts” declined from 37 to 30 percent. That’s no way to systematically build students’ content knowledge. It’s high time that teachers (and preferably schools) adopt content-rich curricula and make use of well-constructed text sets. (See *Literacy Lifelines*.)

Finally, if we want teachers to assign texts based on students’ grade level—rather than their reading level—we need to do more to help them bridge the gap between the two.

Increasing the complexity of the texts to which all students are exposed is a hallmark of the new standards, yet we’ve seen backsliding in this area. One potential explanation: Nearly half of teachers say “not enough” attention has been paid to “diagnosing and addressing the challenges posed by a text.” Helping struggling readers access grade-level texts can be difficult, so perhaps teachers simply *don’t know* how to scaffold their instruction so struggling readers can master such texts.

Curriculum designers, professional development coaches, and instructional leaders: are you listening?

Literacy Lifelines

In the spirit of informing professional practice, we offer five instructional tips for teachers:⁴

1. Determine the instructional purposes for which a text is suited.

When selecting reading materials, teachers should supplement quantitative measures of text complexity (such as Lexile and Flesch-Kincaid) with qualitative measures (such as vocabulary and subject-knowledge requirements) and then use their professional judgment to determine the instructional purposes for which a text is suited.

2. Make a conscious effort to spotlight new “Tier 2” words as students encounter them.

To understand complex texts, students must be familiar with both general academic vocabulary (“Tier 2” words) and domain-specific vocabulary (“Tier 3” words). Of the two, the former are easier to overlook.

3. Use questions as “bread crumbs” that lead students toward a deeper understanding of the text.

In an effective close reading, the teacher anticipates the aspects of a text that students will find challenging and plans his or her questions accordingly so that students have a trail to follow.

4. Use more text-based writing prompts to strengthen students’ capacity for analysis.

Though there is obviously a place for creative writing in English class, colleges and employers are more likely to ask for a memo than a memoir—and the skills required for practical forms of writing are difficult, so students need to practice them.

5. Organize your lessons around “text sets.”

By systematically building students’ content knowledge, dramatically accelerating the rate at which they learn new words, and effectively scaffolding instruction for struggling readers, a well-constructed text set—such as those published by Newsela, Readworks, and Achieve the Core—addresses several challenges simultaneously.

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