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Reading and Writing Instruction in America's Schools

THOMAS B. **FORDHAM** INSTITUTE
ADVANCING EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

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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*, 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.

Acknowledgments

Despite the pushback they initially generated, the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy (CCSS-ELA) were ultimately adopted by approximately forty states (though in some cases, with significant revisions).[5] Yet eight years later, researchers are still trying to understand how teachers are implementing the CCSS-ELA at the ground level—that is, in actual ELA classrooms.

The CCSS-ELA call for three big "instructional shifts" that are intended to address widely recognized and longstanding weaknesses in ELA instruction: First, they challenge teachers to engage students in "regular practice with complex texts and their academic language." Second, they urge them to sharpen their focus on "reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts, both literary and informational." Finally, they encourage teachers to devote more attention to "building knowledge through content-rich curriculum."[6]

These are major changes to deep-seated and widespread practices, so nobody should assume that their implementation will be easy or automatic. Accordingly, this report seeks answers to three questions:

1 How are teachers interpreting the instructional shifts?

2 Are these shifts actually occurring?

3 Where do teachers need more support to implement the shifts faithfully?

To answer these questions, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute partnered with the nonpartisan FDR Group and the RAND Corporation to craft a nationally representative survey of public school English language arts and reading teachers that focused on the challenges of CCSS-ELA implementation. Fielded in the fall of 2017, this survey shares some themes with our 2012 baseline survey, *Common Core in the Schools: A First Look at Reading Assignments*, which focused predominantly on the types of texts that elementary and middle school teachers were assigning to students. However, although several questions are repeated for trend

purposes (and highlighted accordingly), most are new, focusing on aspects of the shifts that received scant attention in previous surveys, ours included.

For example, how are teachers actually gauging text complexity? How do they decide which texts to teach? Which strategies do they employ to help struggling readers? What types of words are they teaching as vocabulary? What kinds of prompts are they using for writing assignments? And what proactive steps (if any) are they taking to build students' content knowledge?

We begin with a summary of the study's methods and sample, followed by a closer examination of the three shifts, our key findings for each shift, and implications for educators and policymakers. To assist teachers going forward, we supplement our findings with "Literacy Lifelines" that focus on particularly challenging aspects of implementation and feature expert advice on overcoming those challenges.

II. Methods

This report is based on the results of an online survey of 1,237 public school instructors of English language arts and reading, which was fielded between September 20 and October 20, 2017.[7] The survey was preceded by a focus group with ELA teachers from Maryland, as well as interviews with several nationally recognized ELA experts.[8] The full survey sample is nationally representative when appropriate weights are applied.[9] (See Table 1 for a summary of respondents' demographic characteristics.) However, for a handful of repeated questions, teachers from the four non-Common Core states that were not included in the 2012 baseline survey are excluded.[10]

The full sample includes 417 elementary teachers (fourth and fifth grades), 407 middle school teachers (sixth, seventh, and eighth grades), and 413 high school teachers (ninth and tenth grades). As part of our analysis, we tested for differences among these grade bands, between high- and low-poverty schools, and among classrooms where most students were reading on, above, or below grade level (as reported by teachers). However, due in part to the nature

TABLE 1: Demographics of Survey Participants (Unweighted)

Grade Levels	
Elementary	34%
Middle	33%
High	33%
Gender	
Male	13%
Female	87%
Years of Teaching Experience	
5 years or fewer	18%
6–10 years	23%
11–20 years	38%
More than 20 years	21%
Student Reading Level	
Below grade level	39%
On grade level	40%
Above grade level	21%

Continued…

of the sample and the structure of certain questions, there were few statistically significant differences between these groups. In most cases, these differences are highlighted in the narrative that follows. The complete survey results are available upon request.

TABLE 1: Demographics of Survey Participants (Unweighted), Continued

Percentage of Students Provided Free or Reduced-Priced Lunch	
Less than 50%	48%
More than 50%	52%
Percentage of African American Students	
Less than 50%	91%
More than 50%	10%
Percentage of Hispanic Students	
Less than 50%	84%
More than 50%	16%
Region	
Northeast	16%
Midwest	14%
South	50%
West	16%

Note: Percentages may not total to 100 percent due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

III. The Instructional Shifts

The fundamental goals of the CCSS-ELA are eloquently reflected in the three "instructional shifts" described in the supporting materials section on the Common Core website.[11] Below is the text from the website plus a short description of its importance (largely repurposed from our 2012 baseline report).[12]

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

"Rather than focusing solely on the skills of reading and writing, the ELA/literacy standards highlight the growing complexity of the texts students must read to be ready for the demands of college, career, and life. The standards call for a staircase of increasing complexity so that all students are ready for the demands of college- and career-level reading no later than the end of high school. The standards also outline a progressive development of reading comprehension so that students advancing through the grades are able to gain more from what they read.

Closely related to text complexity and inextricably connected to reading comprehension is a focus on academic vocabulary: words that appear in a variety of content areas (such as ignite and commit). The standards call for students to grow their vocabularies through a mix of conversation, direct instruction, and reading. They ask students to determine word meanings, appreciate the nuances of words, and steadily expand their range of words and phrases."

American schools have long attempted to differentiate reading instruction by selecting texts based on students' individual reading levels. Yet research suggests that teachers can't pinpoint students' reading levels precisely. And even if they could, giving them a steady diet of relatively easy texts doesn't support learning effectively.

In fact, students *can* learn effectively by engaging with a broad range of text levels, and some studies have actually reported greater learning gains when students are taught with more challenging texts. Consequently, the CCSS-ELA demand regular practice with grade-appropriate texts, regardless of the

reading level of the student. The idea is that teacher support and explanation, not text difficulty, is what should be differentiated. Otherwise, struggling readers may never catch up.

As the second paragraph of the shift implies, effective vocabulary instruction is also critical to its implementation. In particular, research shows that learning the "academic words" referenced in the shift is likely to have a particularly significant impact on students. So it's essential that teachers not overlook these words. In practice, they usually accomplish this goal by paying careful attention to textual occurrences and intentionally spotlighting high-leverage words.

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

"The Common Core emphasizes using evidence from texts to present careful analyses, well-defended claims, and clear information. Rather than asking students questions they can answer solely from their prior knowledge and experience, the standards call for students to answer questions that depend on their having read the texts with care.

The reading standards focus on students' ability to read carefully and grasp information, arguments, ideas, and details based on evidence in the text. Students should be able to answer a range of text-dependent questions, whose answers require inferences based on careful attention to the text.

Frequently, forms of writing in K–12 have drawn heavily from student experience and opinion, which alone will not prepare students for the demands of college, career, and life. Though the standards still expect narrative writing throughout the grades, they also expect a command of sequence and detail that are essential for effective argumentative and informative writing. The standards' focus on evidence-based writing along with the ability to inform and persuade is a significant shift from current practice."

Numerous studies have found that persuasive and informational writing are important in postsecondary settings. For example, a 2009 American College Testing survey found that college professors considered writing to "persuade readers" and/or to "convey information" to be among the most crucial capacities for incoming freshman.[13] Similarly, in a 2002 survey, postsecondary faculty in California reported that writing assignments typically asked students to critically analyze the ideas or arguments of others, summarize the ideas or information contained in a text, and synthesize ideas from several sources.[14] Consequently, students needed to be able to "generate an effective thesis" and "develop it convincingly with well-chosen examples, good reasons, and logical arguments."

All of this should sound familiar to anyone who has taken a college-level course. Yet as the final paragraph of the shift suggests, historically, K–12 writing instruction in the United States has put a great deal of emphasis on personal narrative and creative expression.[15] For example, a 2008 survey of elementary teachers found that 96 percent asked their students to write stories, while just 59 percent asked them to "write to inform."[16] Similarly, as recently as 2007, almost two-thirds of thirteen-year-old students and almost half of seventeen-year-olds reported that they had written a story for their English class in the last week (though many also

reported having written an essay).[17] In contrast, the writing framework for the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) assumes that 65 percent of fourth-grade writing and 80 percent of twelfth-grade writing will be persuasive or explanatory.[18]

Shift 3: Building knowledge through content-rich curriculum

"Students must be immersed in information about the world around them if they are to develop the strong general knowledge and vocabulary they need to become successful readers and be prepared for college, career, and life. Informational texts play an important part in building students' content knowledge. Further, it is vital for students to have extensive opportunities to build knowledge through texts so they can learn independently.

In K–5, fulfilling the standards requires a 50–50 balance between informational and literary reading. Informational reading includes content-rich nonfiction in history/social studies, sciences, technical studies, and the arts. The K–5 standards strongly recommend that texts—both within and across grades—be selected to support students in systematically developing knowledge about the world.

In grades 6–12, there is much greater attention on the specific category of literary nonfiction, which is a shift from traditional standards. To be clear, the standards pay substantial attention to literature throughout K–12, as it constitutes half of the reading in K–5 and is the core of the work of 6–12 ELA teachers. Also in grades 6–12, the standards for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects ensure that students can independently build knowledge in these disciplines through reading and writing. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening should span the school day from K–12 as integral parts of every subject."

Research suggests that, prior to the CCSS-ELA, elementary students in particular had limited experience with informational texts, and that such limited exposure may have contributed to an imbalance in their reading proficiency. Consequently, as noted in the text of the third shift, the CCSS-ELA go further than previous standards by recommending that teachers accord equal attention to literary and informational texts in grades K–5 (a "50–50" split), with a "70–30" division of attention (favoring informational texts) by Grade 12.

Many critics of the Common Core have failed—perhaps deliberately—to note that CCSS set forth these proportions not for English language arts classes but for students' entire curriculum. In other words, the standards do *not* suggest that 70 percent of Grade 12 English be devoted to such informational texts. Rather, 70 percent of high school seniors' *aggregate* reading in history, science, mathematics, English, and other subjects should be apportioned in this manner.

By emphasizing the importance of informational text throughout the curriculum, the CCSS-ELA seek to boost students' command of civics, economics, geography, history, and science—where studies have revealed sizable gaps in students' knowledge. Such knowledge is essential to students' vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension because it allows them to infer the meaning of new words and ideas. And it is critical to their future success in college and in the world of work.

IV. Findings

The purpose of our survey was to gauge how well schools are implementing the three instructional shifts in the CCSS-ELA in America's English language arts and reading classrooms, with the goal of improving such implementation. Accordingly, we present our findings in the order that they appear in the shifts, along with a corresponding set of "Literacy Lifelines" that address particularly challenging aspects of implementation. For readers interested in skipping ahead to particular findings and associated lifelines, see page number references below.

Shift 1

Regular practice with complex texts and their academic language

"Rather than focusing solely on the skills of reading and writing, the ELA/literacy standards highlight the growing complexity of the texts students must read to be ready for the demands of college, career, and life...."

FINDING 1 | Teachers are using a variety of tools to gauge text complexity.

Thirty-five percent of ELA teachers say they rely *most* on formal (or quantitative) measures to determine text complexity (e.g., Lexile, Flesch-Kincaid, and ATOS). Another 25 percent say they rely on the fact that texts in their grade-level curriculum have already been vetted (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Which of the following do you rely on most for determining text complexity?

- Formal measures of text complexity (e.g., Lexile, Flesch-Kincaid, and ATOS)
- The fact that a text was included in the grade-level curriculum, because it had already been vetted
- Key aspects of the text (e.g., structure, clarity, and purpose)
- The vocabulary level, based on your professional opinion
- Students' background knowledge
- Something else

Total

Elementary School

Middle School

High School
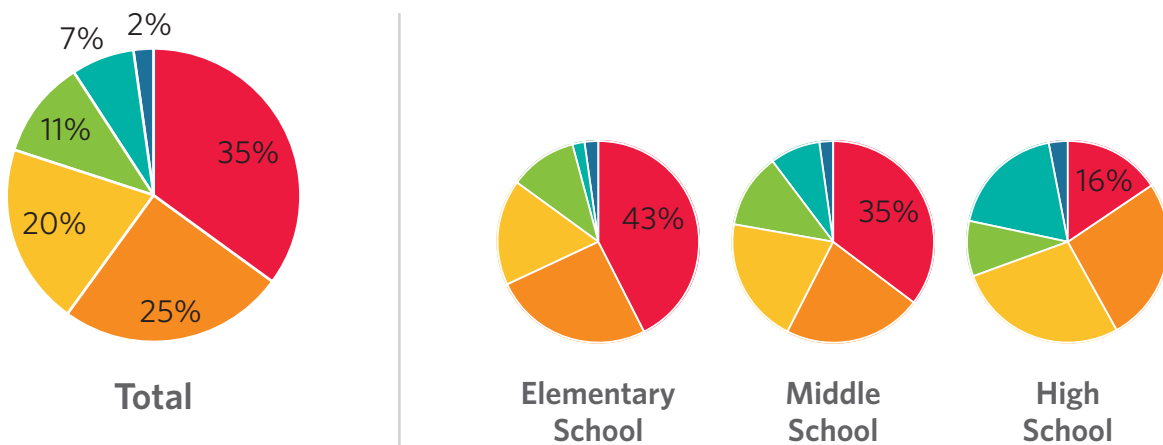
At the same time, many teachers report using their professional judgment to supplement these tools and judgments. For example, about half say they "typically" use the vocabulary level (52 percent) and other "key aspects of the text" (49 percent) to gauge its complexity (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: Methods "typically" used to determine the complexity of a text:

Method	Percent
Formal measures of text complexity (e.g., Lexile, Flesch-Kincaid, and ATOS)	61%
The fact that a text was included in the grade-level curriculum	54%
The vocabulary level, based on your professional opinion	52%
Key aspects of the text (e.g., structure, clarity, and purpose)	49%
Students' background knowledge	43%
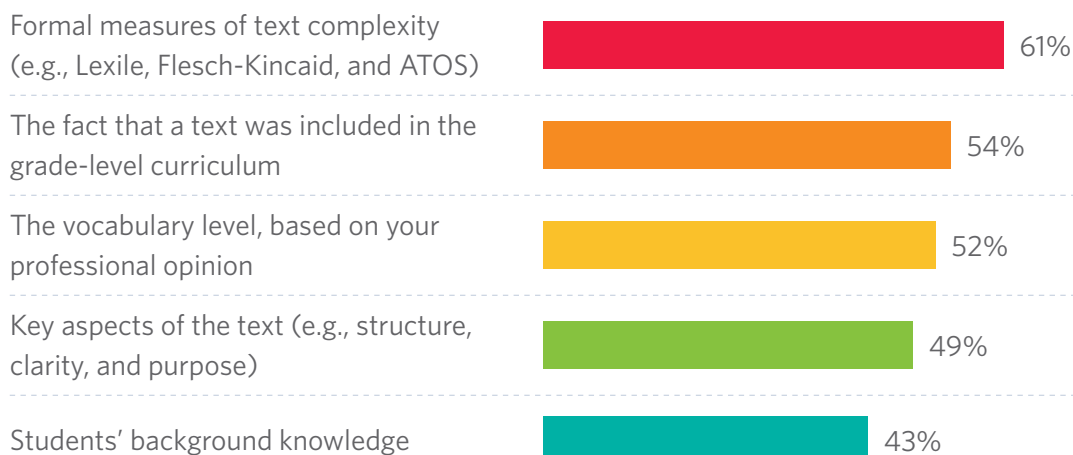
Per the grade band in Figure 1, there is suggestive evidence that high school ELA teachers are less likely to rely "most" on (16 percent) or "typically" use (37 percent) formal measures. Since such measures are less reliable and useful in higher grade levels, these results make sense.

When asked to consider the implementation of their state's current ELA standards at their school, 55 percent of ELA teachers say "selecting the correct level of text for a student or class" has received the "right amount" of attention, although 36 percent report that this hasn't received enough attention (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3: When you think about your state's current ELA standards and how they have been implemented at your school, would you say that "selecting the correct level of text for a student or class" has gotten not enough, the right amount, or too much attention?

Not enough (36%)	Right amount (55%)	Too much (4%)

NOTES ON FIGURES 1–3
Total Answering: Elementary School (417) | Middle School (407) | High School (413) | Total (1,237)
In some cases, the total answering may be slightly lower. Some survey questions have been edited for space and clarity. Percentages may not total to 100 percent due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories. Complete survey results are available upon request.

THE BOTTOM LINE

To implement the first instructional shift effectively, teachers must be able to gauge text complexity—ideally in a way that takes into account their instructional goals and the specific challenges their students face. (See *How should teachers select appropriately complex texts?*) Consistent with that ideal, teachers' responses suggest they are using an appropriate variety of tools to gauge text complexity.

Literacy Lifeline | **How should teachers select appropriately complex texts?**

Consistent with teachers' responses, most ELA experts now endorse the use of "formal" or "quantitative" measures of text complexity, such as Lexile and Flesch-Kincaid. However, it remains important for teachers to supplement these tools with qualitative measures, and to use their professional judgment to decide which texts are suitable for which students and for which purposes. The importance of incorporating these additional measures and factors is illustrated by the "text complexity triangle," which appears below and in *Appendix A* of the CCSS-ELA.[19] Consistent with this approach, Student Achievement Partners—a nonprofit that was founded by the primary authors of the CCSS-ELA—suggests that teachers use a three-step process to select appropriately complex texts.

1 Use quantitative measures to assign a text to a grade band (Lexile or Flesch-Kincaid).

2 Use qualitative measures to locate a text within a specific grade including:

   - text structure,
   - language clarity and conventions,
   - knowledge demands, and
   - levels of meaning/purpose.

3 Use professional judgment to decide how suited a text is for a specific instructional purpose with a particular set of students.

The Text Complexity Triangle

"The standards call for a staircase of increasing complexity so that all students are ready for the demands of college- and career-level reading no later than the end of high school. The standards also outline a progressive development of reading comprehension so that students advancing through the grades are able to gain more from what they read."

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

Between 2012 and 2017, the percentage of teachers who said they were more likely to choose texts based on students' grade level decreased from 38 percent to 26 percent. Conversely, the percentage who said they were more likely to base their choices on students' reading level increased from 39 percent to 57 percent (Figure 4).

This movement toward choosing texts based on students' reading level was driven by middle and high school teachers. There was little change for elementary teachers.

FIGURE 4: When it comes to choosing reading materials, are you more likely to choose texts:

- Based on students' reading levels
- Based on grade level
- Something else

	Total		Elementary School		Middle School		High School	
	2012	2017	2012	2017	2012	2017	2012	2017
Something else	23%	17%	11%	12%	24%	19%	29%	26%
Based on grade level	38%	26%	24%	26%	37%	23%	47%	31%
Based on students' reading levels	39%	57%	64%	62%	38%	58%	24%	42%

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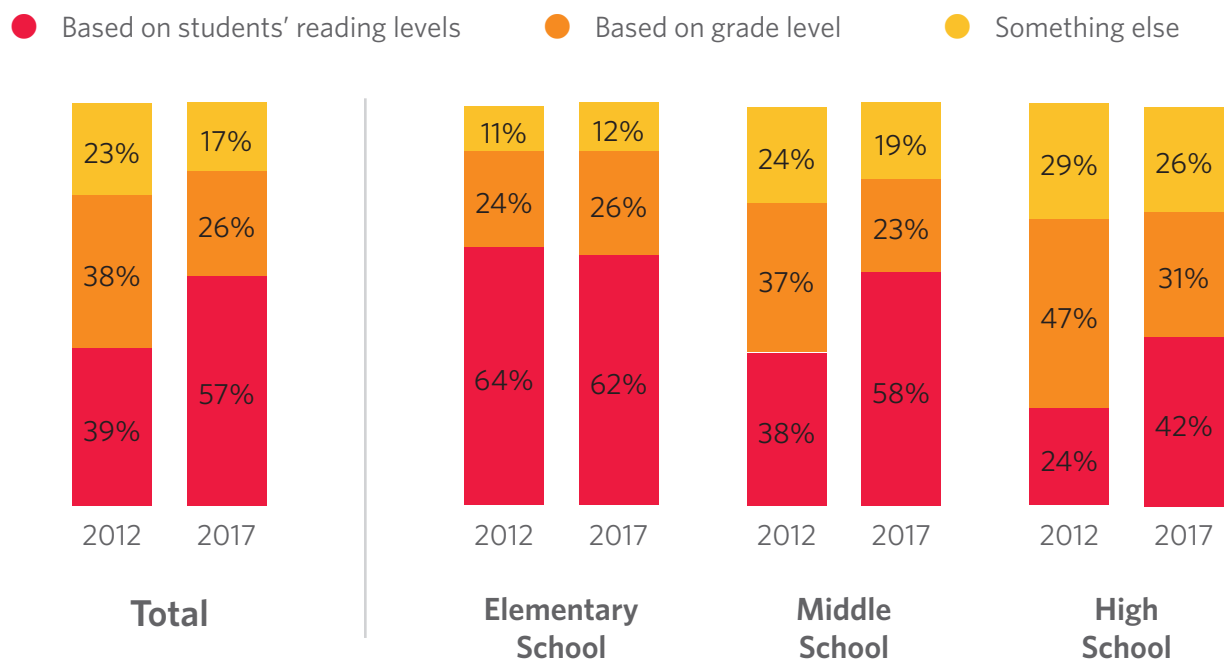
In a similar vein, 54 percent of ELA teachers say that "below-level readers should be assigned texts that they can read successfully," as opposed to grade-level texts (Figure 5). However, 53 percent of teachers also say that they are assigning more "challenging texts to strengthen students' reading skills" than a few years ago (Figure 6).

FIGURE 5: Which comes closer to your view of whole class reading instruction?

- 4%
- 42%
- 54%

- Below-level readers should be assigned grade-level texts and get extra help to read them; otherwise they won't make progress
- Below-level readers should be assigned texts that they can read successfully; otherwise they will get discouraged
- I don't know
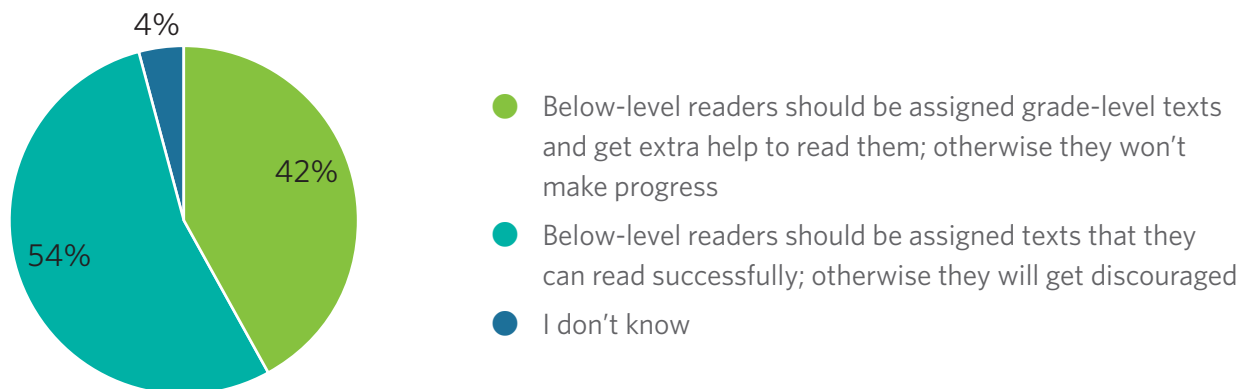
FIGURE 6: Compared to [a few years ago/when you first became a classroom teacher] would you say that last school year you were doing less, about the same, or more of the following?

Assigning challenging texts to strengthen students' reading skills?

Less (4%)	About the same (43%)	More (53%)

The most common approach to helping struggling readers understand challenging texts is to frontload background information and vocabulary (Figure 7). Fifty-one percent of teachers say they "provide students with relevant facts and information before they read the text." Similarly, 45 percent say they "define difficult words for students before they read the text." Elementary teachers are more likely to define difficult words for students beforehand than teachers at other grade levels.

FIGURE 7: Which of the following strategies did you rely on most to help struggling readers understand challenging reading materials? (Select up to two.)

- 🔴 Provide students with relevant facts and information before they read the text
- 🟠 Define difficult words for students before they read the text
- 🟡 Focus on the central text (or anchor text) in small group instruction
- 🟢 Have students read portions of the text aloud
- 🔵 Use an abridged or adapted version of the text
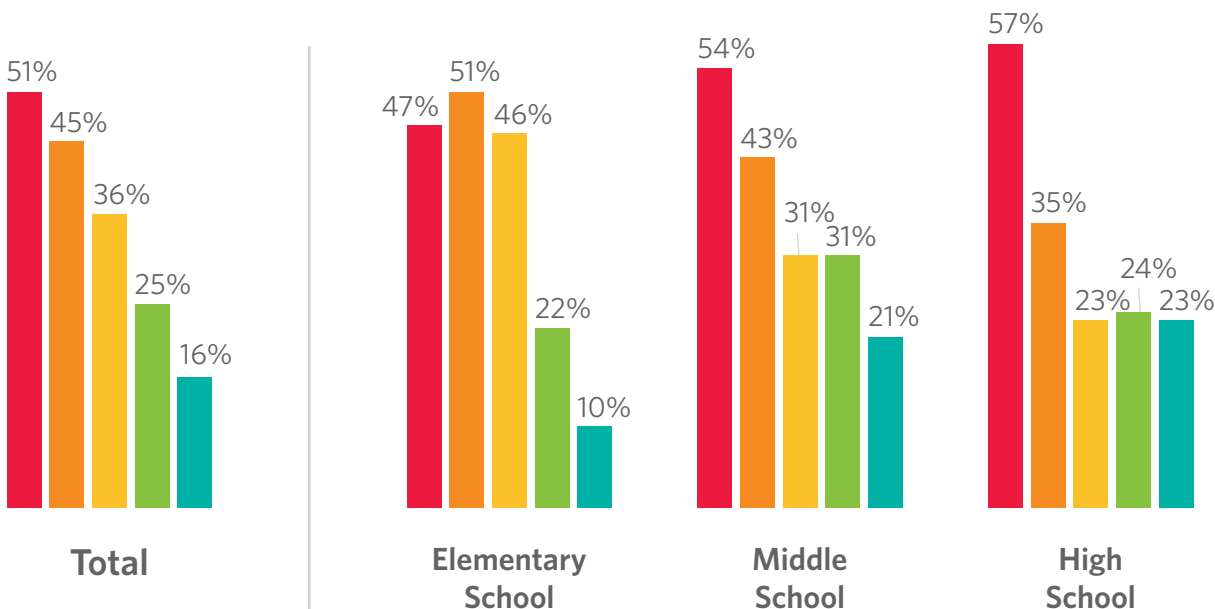
Overall, 49 percent of teachers say "not enough" attention has been paid to "diagnosing and addressing the challenges posted by a text" (Figure 8).

FIGURE 8: When you think about your state's current ELA standards and how they have been implemented at your school, would you say that "diagnosing and addressing the challenges posed by a text" has gotten not enough, the right amount, or too much attention?

Not enough (49%)   Right amount (39%)   Too much (3%)

NOTES ON FIGURES 4–8
Total Answering: Elementary School (417) | Middle School (407) | High School (413) | Total (1,237)
In some cases, the total answering may be slightly lower. Some survey questions have been edited for space and clarity. Percentages may not total to 100 percent due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories. Complete survey results are available upon request.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Perhaps the biggest challenge to effectively implementing the first shift is resolving the tension between teaching more challenging grade level texts and effectively intervening with students who are reading below grade level. (See *How should teachers help struggling readers understand challenging texts?*) Given the scale of this challenge, it's not surprising that many ELA teachers are struggling to meet it. But what *is* surprising is the apparent direction of the trend, which suggests that teachers are implicitly or explicitly *rejecting* this aspect of the shift.

Literacy Lifeline | **How should teachers help struggling readers understand challenging texts?**

Ninety-seven percent of teachers report having at least some struggling readers in their classroom. Yet only 16 percent say they rely on "abridged or adapted versions" of challenging texts to help those students—an approach that ELA experts frown upon. So how are the many teachers who *don't* use abridged or adapted texts with their struggling readers bridging—or attempting to bridge—the gap between student and text? And are they succeeding?

According to our survey, the most common approach to helping struggling readers understand challenging texts is to "frontload" background information and vocabulary (Figure 7). This strategy can make sense in some circumstances. However, it can also be problematic if it results in teachers doing work that students should be doing for themselves.

So what do ELA experts recommend?

In nearly every case, the first step is reading the text carefully to identify where a lack of background knowledge or vocabulary might cause some students to struggle. However, once these challenges have been diagnosed, the next step is to address them in a way that still requires students to engage with the text. For example, one alternative that is often preferable to frontloading is to ask text-dependent questions that serve as "bread crumbs" for students. (For more, see page 30, *How can teachers help students engage in close reading?*)

Another essential form of scaffolding is the use of "text sets" that are organized around a particular topic, such as westward expansion or the solar system. (For more, see page 41, *How can teachers help students build content knowledge?*) By moving from less-rigorous to more-rigorous texts within the same unit of content, teachers can help students accumulate necessary background knowledge and vocabulary prior to encountering the most challenging texts within that unit. This simultaneously increases their odds of understanding those texts and inferring the meaning of any new words that they may contain. In other words, text sets allow students to do their *own* frontloading.

"Closely related to text complexity and inextricably connected to reading comprehension is a focus on academic vocabulary: words that appear in a variety of content areas (such as ignite *and* commit*). The standards call for students to grow their vocabularies through a mix of conversation, direct instruction, and reading. They ask students to determine word meanings, appreciate the nuances of words, and steadily expand their range of words and phrases."*

FINDING 3 │ Teachers are (rightly) teaching vocabulary in context.

Seventy-three percent of teachers say they mainly focus on "words in the assigned text," while just 20 percent say they focus on "words from a list of common vocabulary words" (Figure 9).

Fifty-six percent of teachers say they mainly teach new vocabulary "during reading and discussion," while 40 percent say they mainly do so before students read a text.

Fifty-three percent of teachers say they mainly emphasize words "related to the specific content being covered," while 42 percent say they emphasize words that students are "likely to encounter when reading."

FIGURE 9: Which best describes your approach to teaching vocabulary last school year?

When it came to choosing which words to teach, did you:
- Mainly teach words from a list of common vocabulary words
- Mainly focus on the words in the assigned text
- Neither

7%
20%
73%
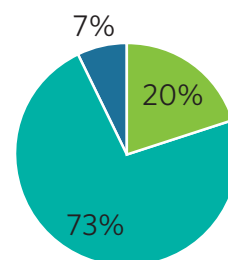
When it came to the timing of vocabulary instruction, did you:
- Mainly teach vocabulary before a text was read
- Mainly teach vocabulary during reading and discussion
- Neither

5%
40%
56%
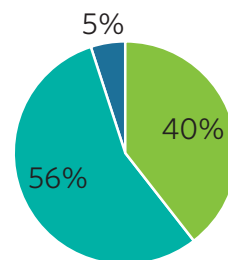
When it came to the type of words to emphasize, did you:
- Mainly teach words that were related to the specific content being covered (e.g., teaching "magma" when learning about volcanoes)
- Mainly teach words that students were likely to encounter when reading that weren't related to any specific content area (e.g., "establish" and "verify")
- Neither

5%
53%
42%
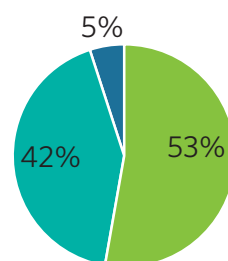
Overall, 48 percent of the teachers say "not enough" attention has been paid to "helping students build their vocabularies" (Figure 10).

FIGURE 10: When you think about your state's current ELA standards and how they have been implemented at your school, would you say that "helping students build their vocabularies" has gotten not enough, the right amount, or too much attention?

Not enough (48%)   Right amount (44%)   Too much (5%)

NOTES ON FIGURES 9–10
Total Answering: Elementary School (417) | Middle School (407) | High School (413) | Total (1,237)
In some cases, the total answering may be slightly lower. Some survey questions have been edited for space and clarity. Percentages may not total to 100 percent due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories. Complete survey results are available upon request.

THE BOTTOM LINE

As the first shift suggests, effective vocabulary instruction gives students opportunities to see and hear new words in context. So it's encouraging that teachers' responses suggest they are teaching new words if and when students encounter them in their texts. Unfortunately, without more information, it's difficult to say teachers are paying more attention to general "academic vocabulary" as the shift recommends. (See *How should ELA teachers think about vocabulary?*)

Literacy Lifeline | How should ELA teachers think about vocabulary?

Though the exact number is impossible to pin down, there are probably about 750,000 words in the English language (assuming that each meaning or "sense" of every word is counted separately). No teacher on the planet can come close to teaching that many words. So how should teachers decide which words to focus on?

Although there is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question, vocabulary experts agree that teachers should emphasize "high-leverage" words that will have the biggest positive impact on students. For example, because most students learn basic Tier 1 words such as "cat" on their own, few teachers need to devote class time to them. And in general, learning Tier 2 words that are likely to appear in multiple contexts—that is, learning academic vocabulary such as "analyze"

and "derive," as suggested by the shift—is likely to have a bigger impact on students than learning "domain specific" or Tier 3 words, especially if the domain in question is narrow. (For example, the word "cloture" is used exclusively in discussions of legislative procedure.)

To be clear, it is perfectly appropriate for teachers to teach Tier 3 words as vocabulary. And ELA experts do not agree on the extent to which teachers should *prioritize* Tier 2 words over Tier 3 words. Consequently, teachers must use their professional judgment to determine which words are "high-leverage."

In general, research suggests that teachers should focus on words that are:[20]

1 needed to fully comprehend the text,

2 likely to appear in future texts from any discipline, and

3 part of a word family or semantic network.

Obviously, in addition to fulfilling one or more of these criteria, the words that a teacher decides to focus on should also be *new* to most of the students in his or her class. According to vocabulary experts Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey, grade-level lists of vocabulary words and phrases can help with this sort of calibration.

In general, teaching vocabulary effectively means attending to new words as they occur in a text and intentionally spotlighting high-leverage words. As part of this instruction, teachers may wish to model "word solving" so that students can learn how to infer the meaning of unknown words from their context. Or they may wish to engage students in collaborative conversations so they can practice using academic language. Finally, in addition to these explicit vocabulary techniques, research suggests that students acquire new vocabulary significantly faster when they read a series of related texts (or text set) due to the reciprocal relationship between vocabulary and content knowledge.[21] (For more on text sets, see page 41, *How can teachers help students build content knowledge?*)

"The Common Core emphasizes using evidence from texts to present careful analyses, well-defended claims, and clear information. Rather than asking students questions they can answer solely from their prior knowledge and experience, the standards call for students to answer questions that depend on their having read the texts with care.

The reading standards focus on students' ability to read carefully and grasp information, arguments, ideas, and details based on evidence in the text. Students should be able to answer a range of text-dependent questions, whose answers require inferences based on careful attention to the text."

FINDING 4 | **Teachers are emphasizing "close reading" by asking more text-dependent questions and spending more time discussing word choice and connotation.**

Three-quarters of ELA teachers say they are asking more questions that "require evidence from the text" than they were a few years ago (Figure 11).

Forty-eight percent of ELA teachers also say they are spending more time "discussing an author's choice of words and their connotations" than they were a few years ago.

FIGURE 11: Compared to [when you first became a classroom teacher/a few years ago] would you say that last school year you were doing less, about the same, or more of the following in your classroom?

Asking questions whose answers require evidence from the text

Less (1%)

About the same (24%)   More (75%)

Discussing an author's choice of words and their connotations

Less (10%)   About the same (41%)   More (48%)

Overall, 92 percent of ELA teachers say requiring students to "use evidence from the text to support their answers" is a "must-have" element of close reading (Figure 12).

Sixty-two percent of ELA teachers say focusing on "the author's choice of words" is a "must-have" element of close reading.

FIGURE 12: Which of the following would you say are must-haves in a high-quality "close reading" lesson? (Check all that apply.)

- The teacher requires students to use evidence from the text to support their answers
- The teacher provides students with relevant vocabulary and/or background information before they read the text
- The teacher encourages students to discuss the strategies they used to understand the text
- The teacher asks students to summarize the text
- The teacher asks students to recall specific details from the text after they have read it
- The teacher focuses on the author's choice of words and how these contribute to the meaning of the text

Overall, 53 percent of ELA teachers say that "students' ability to use evidence from the text accurately in response to questions or prompts" has improved compared to a few years ago (Figure 13).

FIGURE 13: Compared to [when you first became a teacher/a few years ago] would you say that "students ability to use evidence from the text accurately in response to questions or prompts" has gotten worse, stayed about the same, or improved?

Gotten worse (19%) Stayed about the same (28%)   Improved (53%)
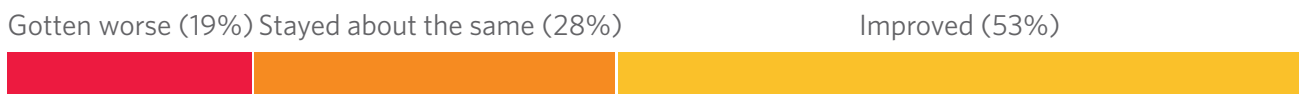
Fifty-two percent of ELA teachers say that "helping students engage in close reading" has received the "right amount" of attention at their school (Figure 14).

FIGURE 14: When you think about your state's current ELA standards and how they have been implemented at your school, would you say that "helping students engage in close reading" has gotten not enough, the right amount, or too much attention?

Not enough (34%)	Right amount (52%)	Too much (10%)

NOTES ON FIGURES 11–14
Total Answering: Elementary School (417) | Middle School (407) | High School (413) | Total (1,237)
In some cases, the total answering may be slightly lower. Some survey questions have been edited for space and clarity. Percentages may not total to 100 percent due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories. Complete survey results are available upon request.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Grasping the subtleties of complex texts can be difficult, so students must practice reading closely if they are to develop the analytic capacity envisioned by the second shift. And teachers must provide them with the guidance and direction that such practice requires. Leading a successful "close reading" requires teachers to master—and successfully integrate—a number of difficult skills. (See *How can teachers help students engage in close reading*?) Although these skills cannot be rigorously assessed in a survey, teachers' responses suggest that most are on the right track.

Literacy Lifeline | How can teachers help students engage in close reading?

Every close reading starts with the identification of a passage that is worth reading multiple times—first for basic understanding and then for a deeper appreciation of craft and style. Typically, the teacher asks a carefully planned set of text-specific questions designed to highlight elements that illuminate the text's complexity. According to ELA expert Tim Shanahan, these questions should serve as "bread crumbs" that help students a) *establish* the meaning of a text so that they can summarize it, and b) *analyze* how that meaning is achieved through word choice, symbols, allusions, and other structural elements. By choosing a specific *focus* for their questions (and then moving from basic to advanced questions with that focus in mind), well-prepared teachers can provide students with effective "scaffolding" that allows them to gain a deeper understanding of the text.

According to Shanahan, teachers leading close readings often go wrong by:

- Asking questions as a *check* for understanding, rather than as "bread crumbs" designed to *promote* understanding;

- Asking lots of low-level questions but never getting to high-level questions about the author's choice of words, motivation, or argument;

- Skipping straight to high-level questions that require students to *analyze* a text without first helping them *establish* its basic meaning; and

- Failing to choose a *focus* for their questions that leads students toward a deeper understanding of a *particular* aspect of the text.

As this list illustrates, leading a strong close reading requires intentionality and skill. So like most aspects of teaching, it takes time and practice to master.

"Frequently, forms of writing in K–12 have drawn heavily from student experience and opinion, which alone will not prepare students for the demands of college, career, and life. Though the standards still expect narrative writing throughout the grades, they also expect a command of sequence and detail that are essential for effective argumentative and informative writing. The standards' focus on evidence-based writing along with the ability to inform and persuade is a significant shift from current practice."

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

On average, ELA teachers estimate that they spend 35 percent of their time on expository writing, 30 percent of their time on narrative writing, 27 percent of their time on persuasive writing, and 7 percent of their time on "other" forms of writing (see Figure 15). Of the teachers who chose "other" as an option, about half reported devoting this time to some form of creative writing (e.g., poetry, plays, letters, journals, or free writing).

FIGURE 15: What percentage of time would you say went to each of the following types of writing?

- Expository
- Narrative
- Persuasive
- Other

35%
30%
27%
7%
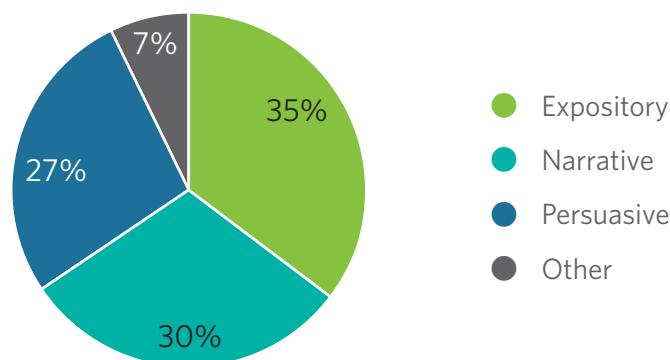
Thirty-three percent of ELA teachers say they are doing less narrative or creative writing than a few years ago, while 29 percent say they doing more (Figure 16). Yet 58 percent of teachers (and three-quarters of those with below-grade-level classes) still say that they are more likely to give students a writing prompt "designed to spark their interest and creativity based on their own knowledge and experience," as opposed to a text-based prompt (Figure 17).

FIGURE 16: Compared to [when you first became a classroom teacher/a few years ago] would you say that last school year you were doing less, about the same, or more of the following in your classroom?

Teaching narrative or creative writing

Less (33%)	About the same (38%)	More (29%)
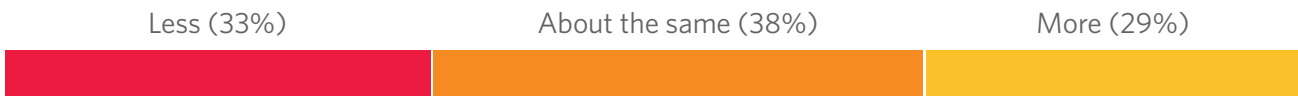
FIGURE 17: When giving writing assignments last school year, were you more likely to:

- 🟢 Assign a text (e.g., book, short story, essay, or poem) and ask students questions that required them to write about what they had read
- 🟢 Provide students with a writing prompt or question designed to spark their interest and creativity based on their own knowledge and experience
- 🔵 Neither

Total

- 4%
- 58%
- 38%

Below Grade Level

- 3%
- 75%
- 22%

On Grade Level

- 4%
- 57%
- 39%

Above Grade Level

- 2%
- 39%
- 60%
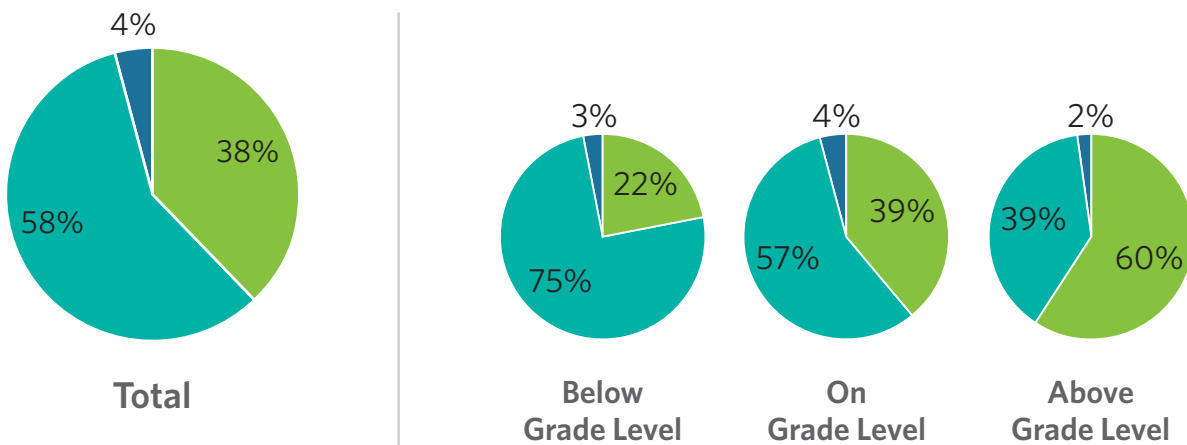
Forty-six percent of teachers say students' ability to "use correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling" has gotten worse in recent years, while just 14 percent say it has improved (Figure 18). Along the same lines, teachers are also somewhat more likely to say students' ability to "write well-developed paragraphs or essays" has gotten worse (36 percent) than say it has improved (27 percent).

FIGURE 18: Compared to [when you first became a teacher/a few years ago] would you say that each of the following has gotten worse, stayed about the same, or improved?

Students' ability to consistently use correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling

Gotten worse (46%)	Stayed about the same (40%)	Improved (14%)

Students' ability to consistently write well-developed paragraphs or essays

Gotten worse (36%)	Stayed about the same (36%)	Improved (27%)

Overall, 54 percent of teachers say "not enough" attention has been paid to "helping students become better writers," while just 3 percent say this has received "too much" attention (Figure 19).

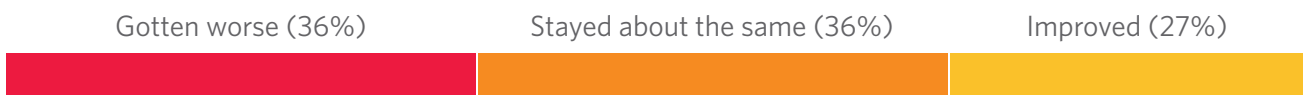**FIGURE 19: When you think about your state's current ELA standards and how they have been implemented at your school, would you say that "helping students become better writers" has gotten not enough, the right amount, or too much attention?**

Not enough (54%)	Right amount (40%)	Too much (3%)

NOTES ON FIGURES 15–19
Total Answering: Elementary School (417) | Middle School (407) | High School (413) | Total (1,237)
In some cases, the total answering may be slightly lower. Some survey questions have been edited for space and clarity. Percentages may not total to 100 percent due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories. Complete survey results are available upon request.

THE BOTTOM LINE

As noted in the second shift, to succeed in college—and many workplaces—students must be able to construct a coherent argument based on their analysis of one or more texts (or other sources of information). Encouragingly, teachers' responses suggest they are assigning a bit more expository and persuasive writing than a few years ago and a bit less narrative and/or creative writing. However, it's not clear that this shift has led to more text- or evidence-based writing. (See *How can teachers better emphasize evidence-based writing*?) In other words, some teachers may simply be asking students to write persuasive essays based on their personal experiences, instead of asking them to summarize, synthesize, analyze, or argue from evidence.

Literacy Lifeline | How can teachers better emphasize evidence-based writing?

The ability to inform and persuade based on a cogent analysis of the evidence is a critical skillset for K–12 students. Yet historically, many ELA teachers have devoted more energy and class time to nurturing students' creative writing skills. Hence, the CCSS-ELA call for a shift in focus, though they do not call for evidence-based writing to replace narrative writing.

So how can teachers accustomed to teaching creative or narrative writing incorporate more evidence-based writing activities into their curricula?

Literacy expert Tim Shanahan suggests writing activities that are grounded in reading such as:[22]

- *Text modeling*, in which students identify key features of a text and then write their own texts, imitating the structure and language of the original but varying the key features (e.g., by writing a five-paragraph essay or a Socratic dialogue).

- *Analysis and critique*, in which students look for relationships and patterns in a text, such as cause and effect, problem and solution, or comparison and contrast, or evaluate a text through reasoning (e.g., "Why was there an American Civil War? Compare the causes of the Civil War from the perspectives of the North and South.").

- *Synthesis*, in which students write their own text but rely on evidence from multiple sources, combining, evaluating, and resolving conflicting information (i..e., research writing).

- *Summarization*, in which students identify key ideas and details of text and then paraphrase or translate them into their own words. (This is particularly appropriate for elementary students.)

In addition to developing students' capacity for evidence-based writing, text-based prompts also greatly benefit students' reading comprehension by encouraging them to review what they have read, reflect on any new information or ideas they may have encountered, and then collect their thoughts in writing. Put another way, teachers would do well to think of reading and writing as complementary activities, rather than as separate subjects.

DRAFT—Embargoed for release until July 19, 2018, 12:01am ET

Building knowledge through content-rich curriculum

"In K–5, fulfilling the standards requires a 50–50 balance between informational and literary reading. Informational reading includes content-rich nonfiction in history/social studies, sciences, technical studies, and the arts. The K–5 standards strongly recommend that texts—both within and across grades—be selected to support students in systematically developing knowledge about the world.

In grades 6–12, there is much greater attention on the specific category of literary nonfiction, which is a shift from traditional standards. To be clear, the standards pay substantial attention to literature throughout K–12, as it constitutes half of the reading in K–5 and is the core of the work of 6–12 ELA teachers. Also in grades 6–12, the standards for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects ensure that students can independently build knowledge in these disciplines through reading and writing. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening should span the school day from K–12 as integral parts of every subject."

FINDING 6 | Teachers are assigning less fiction and more informational texts

Teachers' responses to questions that were repeated from the 2012 survey suggest that between 2012 and 2017 there was a significant move away from fiction (from 54 percent to 41 percent) and toward some combination of literary nonfiction and informational texts—especially at the middle and high school levels (Figure 20).

Consistent with that result, 65 percent of teachers say they assign more "informational texts" than a few years ago, though high school teachers are less likely to say this than elementary and middle school teachers (Figure 21).

FIGURE 20: Think about the different types of reading materials that you taught last school year. What percentage of time would you say went to fiction, literary nonfiction, and informational text?

● Fiction   ● Literary nonfiction   ● Informational text

Total

	2012	2017
Informational text	26%	35%
Literary nonfiction	21%	24%
Fiction	54%	41%

Elementary School

	2012	2017
Informational text	32%	38%
Literary nonfiction	21%	22%
Fiction	47%	40%

Middle School

	2012	2017
Informational text	28%	36%
Literary nonfiction	22%	25%
Fiction	51%	39%

High School

	2012	2017
Informational text	20%	26%
Literary nonfiction	20%	28%
Fiction	61%	47%

FIGURE 21: Compared to [when you first became a classroom teacher/a few years ago] would you say that last school year you were doing more, about the same, or less of the following in your classroom?

Using informational texts for English or reading instruction

● More   ● About the same   ● Less

	More	About the same	Less
Total	65%	30%	5%
Elementary School	71%	25%	3%
Middle School	68%	28%	4%
High School	43%	45%	13%

Conversely, seven in ten teachers agree that they "teach fewer classic works of literature"—though again, high school teachers are less likely to agree with this statement than teachers in lower grades (Figure 22).

FIGURE 22: How much do you agree or disagree? I teach fewer classic works of literature because there is no longer room for them in the curriculum.

● Strongly agree   ● Somewhat agree   ● Somewhat disagree   ● Strongly disagree

Total
30% | 39% | 18% | 7%

Elementary School
31% | 42% | 17% | 3%

Middle School
35% | 39% | 12% | 8%

High School
20% | 33% | 33% | 12%

In a similar vein, 40 percent of teachers say they are assigning fewer "classical texts" while just 9 percent say they are assigning more (Figure 23). Conversely, 37 percent of teachers say they are teaching more texts that "reflect students' cultures or backgrounds," while just 9 percent say they are teaching fewer.
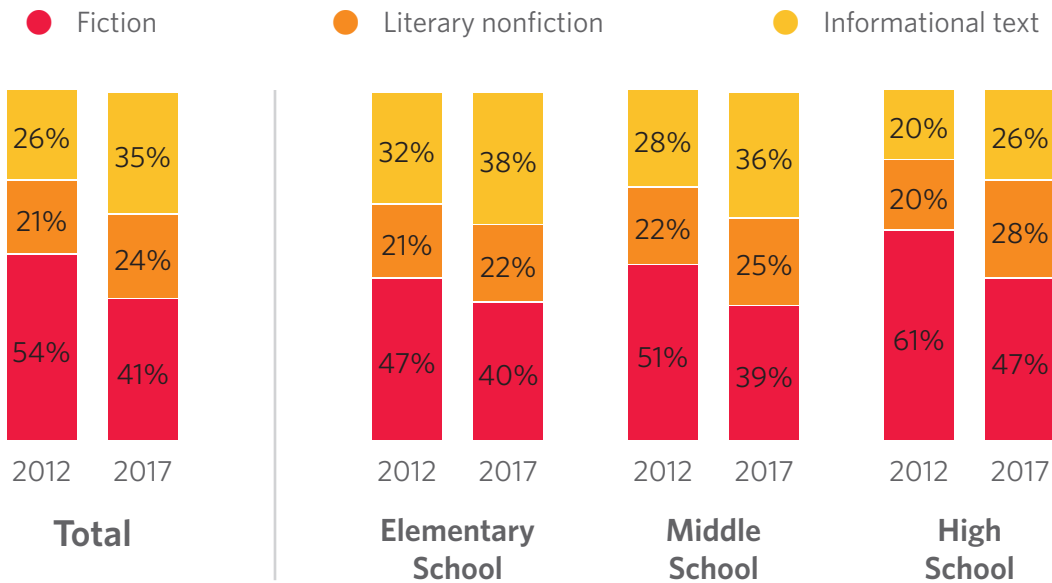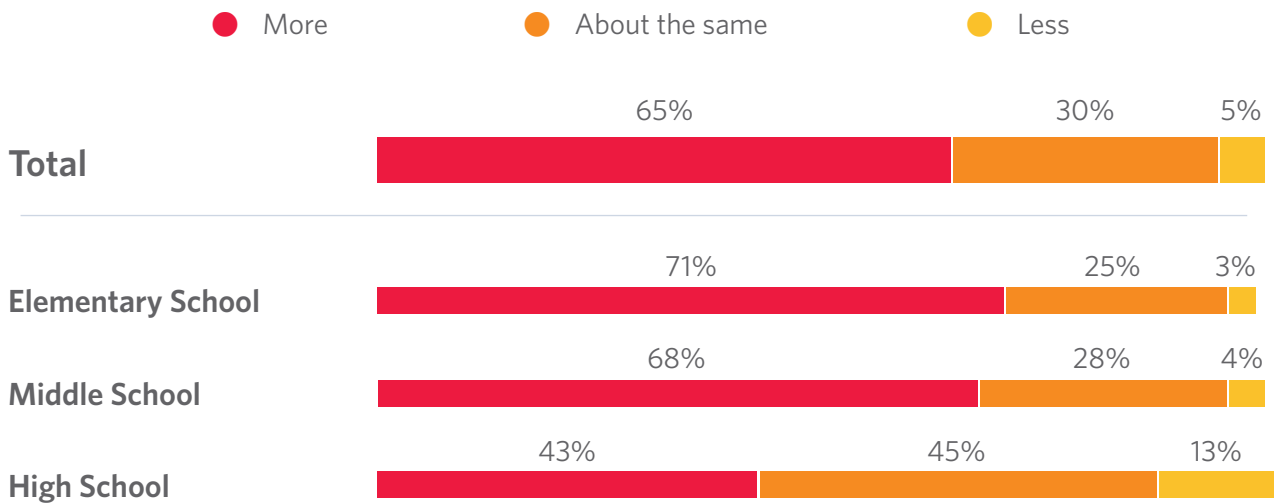
FIGURE 23: Compared to [a few years ago/when you first became a classroom teacher] would you say that last school year you were doing more, about the same, or less of the following?
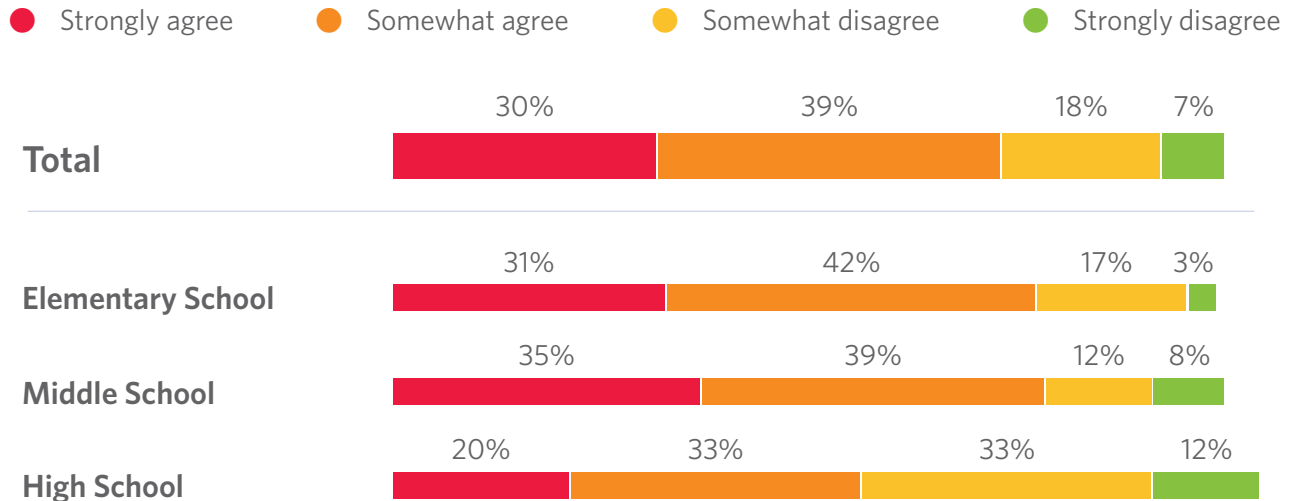
Assigning classical texts or teaching the literary canon

More (9%) | About the same (43%) | Less (40%)

Teaching texts that reflect students' cultures or backgrounds

More (37%) | About the same (52%) | Less (9%)

NOTES ON FIGURES 20–23
Total Answering: Elementary School (417) | Middle School (407) | High School (413) | Total (1,237)
In some cases, the total answering may be slightly lower. Some survey questions have been edited for space and clarity. Percentages may not total to 100 percent due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories. Complete survey results are available upon request.

THE BOTTOM LINE

It's encouraging that teachers are assigning more informational texts and literary nonfiction, as the third shift requires. However, it's concerning 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 (see *How can teachers strike a balance between cultural literacy and cultural responsiveness?*). But it's also possible that teachers have gone too far in their attempts to include more nonfiction. So perhaps some additional calibration with the 50–50 and 70–30 literary/informational splits is needed (see page 14, *The Instructional Shifts*).

Literacy Lifeline | How can teachers strike a balance between cultural literacy and cultural responsiveness?

In addition to shifting away from fiction and toward informational texts, teachers' responses suggest that they are shifting away from "classical texts" and the "literary canon" and toward texts that reflect students' increasingly diverse backgrounds and cultures (Figure 23). These results highlight one of the difficult (but exciting) challenges facing teachers in the twenty-first century: striking a satisfactory balance between what is sometimes referred to as "cultural responsiveness" and what E. D. Hirsch referred to as "cultural literacy," which requires "participation in…a shared body of knowledge, a knowledge of the culture of the country" that is "assumed by writers of everything from training manuals to newspapers."[23]

Clearly, students should read *some* texts that were written by individuals who share their background, so they understand that—in the words of Langston Hughes—"they, too, are America." Yet as that reference implies, insofar as the canon itself has become increasingly diverse—and most present-day literary anthologies suggest that it has—the choice between cultural literacy and cultural responsiveness may be a false one. So perhaps the challenge lies not in striking a balance between the two, but in recognizing the knowledge that we, as citizens of an increasingly diverse America, already share.

"Students must be immersed in information about the world around them if they are to develop the strong general knowledge and vocabulary they need to become successful readers and be prepared for college, career, and life. Informational texts play an important part in building students' content knowledge. Further, it is vital for students to have extensive opportunities to build knowledge through texts so they can learn independently."

FINDING 7 │ Most teachers say content knowledge is getting slighted.

Fifty-six percent of ELA teachers say not enough attention has been paid to "building students' general knowledge," while just 4 percent say this has received too much attention (Figure 24).

FIGURE 24: When you think about your state's current ELA standards and how they have been implemented at your school, would you say that "building students' general knowledge (i.e., their familiarity with basic facts or truths, such as the law of gravity or who Shakespeare was)" has gotten not enough, the right amount, or too much attention?

Not enough (56%)	Right amount (34%)	Too much (4%)

Forty-six percent of ELA teachers agree or strongly agree that their curriculum and/or materials "do a poor job of building students' general knowledge" (Figure 25).

FIGURE 25: How much do you agree or disagree? The ELA curriculum and/or materials available to me do a poor job of building students' general knowledge about a variety of topics.

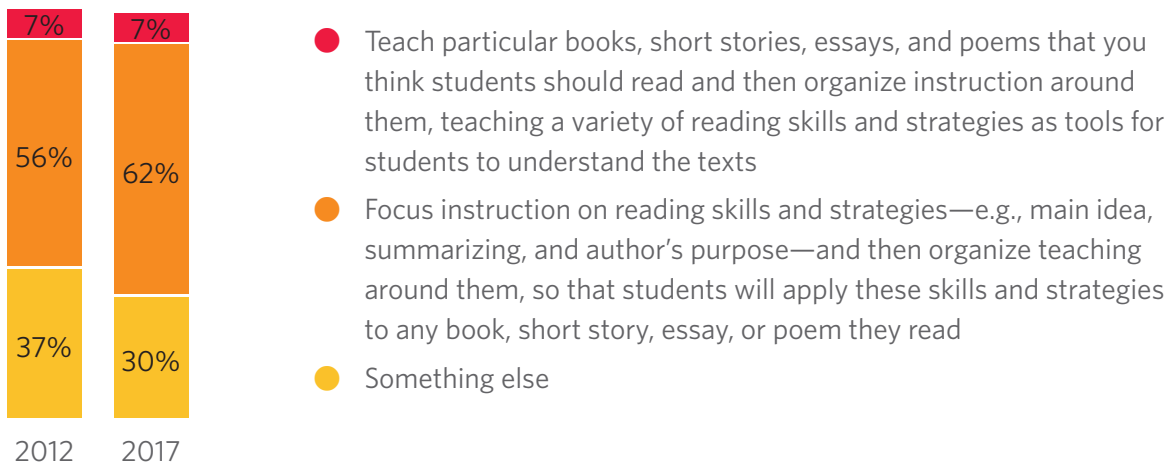| Strongly agree (14%)	Somewhat agree (32%)	Somewhat disagree (37%)	Strongly disagree (14%)

Thirty-two percent of ELA teachers say students' general knowledge has gotten worse in recent years, while just 26 percent say it has improved (Figure 26).

FIGURE 26: Compared to [when you first became a teacher/a few years ago] would you say that "the number of students who have the general knowledge (or 'background knowledge') required to understand the texts they read in class" has gotten worse, stayed about the same, or improved?
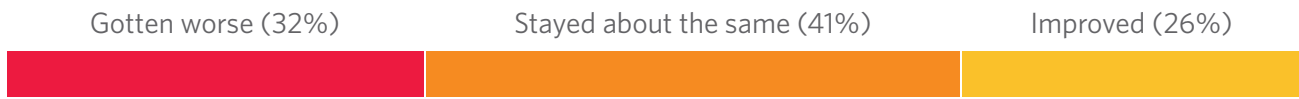
Gotten worse (32%)	Stayed about the same (41%)	Improved (26%)

Between 2012 and 2017, the proportion of teachers who said they organized their instruction around "reading skills" increased from 56 percent to 62 percent, while the proportion who said they organized their instruction around specific texts declined from 37 percent to 30 percent (Figure 27).

FIGURE 27: Here are two common approaches to teaching English language arts and reading. Which comes closer to describing your approach?

- 🔴 Teach particular books, short stories, essays, and poems that you think students should read and then organize instruction around them, teaching a variety of reading skills and strategies as tools for students to understand the texts
- 🟠 Focus instruction on reading skills and strategies—e.g., main idea, summarizing, and author's purpose—and then organize teaching around them, so that students will apply these skills and strategies to any book, short story, essay, or poem they read
- 🟡 Something else

Bar chart values: 2012 — 7%, 56%, 37%; 2017 — 7%, 62%, 30%

NOTE ON FIGURES 24–27

In some cases, the total answering may be slightly lower. Some survey questions have been edited for space and clarity. Percentages may not total to 100 percent due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories. Complete survey results are available upon request.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Building students' content knowledge is a central goal of the third shift. Yet teachers' responses suggest that this topic—perhaps more than any other in the survey—has been given short shrift. That's particularly troubling given that teachers also report shifting away from fiction and toward more informational texts. What sort of information is in those texts, if they aren't making students more knowledgeable? How can teachers possibly build students' content knowledge without a content-rich curriculum? And how successful will they be in that endeavor if they are still organizing their instruction around skills, rather than the texts themselves? If there's any silver lining here, it's that so many teachers seem to recognize the problem—and may therefore be open to new solutions. (See *How can teachers help students build content knowledge?*)

Literacy Lifeline | How can teachers help students build content knowledge?

Content knowledge is essential to a good education for at least three reasons:

1 It is critical to reading comprehension.

2 It is critical to vocabulary acquisition (because students must understand the context in which they encounter new words to infer their meaning).

3 It is inherently useful (e.g., the difference between Fahrenheit and Celsius).

To promote a more content-rich curriculum, the third shift calls for more informational texts. However, as Fordham's Robert Pondiscio observes, "Common Core asks not just for more nonfiction, but for a *coherent*, knowledge-rich curriculum in English language arts."[24]

Ideally, a school or district would make such a curriculum available to teachers. However, in the event it does not, one critical step that teachers can take in that direction is to *start* with content knowledge—that is, start by choosing which books or other texts students ought to read for knowledge-building purposes—and then decide how to use those texts to teach the skills and strategies that kids need to learn.

Specifically, Student Achievement Partners suggests that teachers construct "text sets" that:

■ Center on a single topic (e.g., insects or entrepreneurship) and contain a variety of resources (e.g., books, articles, videos, websites, and infographics).

■ Purposely order resources to support students in building vocabulary and knowledge.

■ Include suggested activities to be completed after each resource to demonstrate comprehension and students' building knowledge and/or vocabulary.

■ Are designed to be completed with increasing independence by students.

In addition to building content knowledge, research shows that students acquire new vocabulary up to *four times faster* when they read a series of related texts.[25] As E. D. Hirsch puts it, "The best way to expand students' language is to expand their understanding of what language refers to."[26]

V. Implications

Overall, teachers' responses to the survey paint a mixed picture of CCSS-ELA implementation. On the one hand, it's clear that teachers have indeed shifted their instruction—or at least, attempted to do so—when it comes to practices such as close reading (Shift 2) and balancing assignments between fiction and nonfiction (Shift 3). For example, it's clear that teachers are asking more text-dependent questions, and that they think students' ability to accurately cite evidence from the text has improved. Similarly, it's clear that teachers have adjusted their reading lists to incorporate more informational texts and literary nonfiction (at the expense of fiction).

These are important results, which suggest that the CCSS-ELA have succeeded in changing certain practices. Yet in other areas, the verdict is murky. For example, despite a modest shift away from narrative and creative writing assignments, it's not at all clear that teachers have replaced such assignments with text-based prompts that require students to summarize, analyze, and argue from evidence (as described in Shift 2).

Worse, the shift away from fiction and toward informational texts doesn't seem to be linked to the kind of systematic effort to build students' content knowledge that Shift 3 describes. In fact, one-third of teachers report that *fewer* students have the general knowledge they need to understand the texts they read in class. What sort of information do those informational texts contain if reading them isn't making students more knowledgeable about the world around them? And how can they be well sequenced from a content standpoint if teachers are still organizing their instruction around skills—instead of the texts themselves?

Finally, there is one area where teachers' responses are *clearly* inconsistent with the expectations embodied in the shifts: Since the baseline survey was administered in 2012, middle and high school teachers have actually become *more* likely to assign texts based on students' reading levels—as opposed to their grade level—contrary to the spirit of Shift 1. It's not clear from teachers' responses if they have consciously rejected these aspects of the shifts, or if they are overlooking or misinterpreting them. And the answer may vary depending on the topic. For example, when it comes to writing prompts, we believe that teachers can and should take a more evidence- and text-based approach. However, when it comes to teaching

grade-level texts to struggling readers, we recognize that many teachers may need more support than they are getting. And when it comes to building students' content knowledge, teachers, administrators, and curriculum developers could all be doing more.

Practical tips for teachers can be found in the "Literacy Lifelines" that accompany the findings, but we summarize them here for practitioners looking to improve instructional practice:

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 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.[27]

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 addresses several challenges simultaneously.
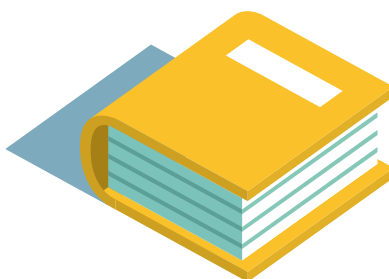
Thanks to the Common Core, most states now have a strong set of ELA standards.[28] Yet eight years after the original CCSS-ELA were first adopted, many schools have only just begun to implement their "new" state standards in earnest. For those of us outside the classroom, that's hard to understand. But it shouldn't be, given the innumerable facets of education that standards touch—from state assessments and accountability systems, to teacher preparation, licensure, and professional development, to textbooks, software programs, and other curricular materials—and the varied pace at which change occurs in over 14,000 largely bureaucratic school districts across the country.

Overall, the results of this survey suggest real progress in implementing state ELA standards as well as real cause for concern. So we hope that practitioners will take the report's recommendations seriously and incorporate them into their personal pedagogies to the best of their ability.

Ultimately, we know that high-quality implementation is a well-run marathon, not a sloppy sprint. So here's to setting another personal record in every ELA classroom.

Background

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute (TBFI) contracted with the RAND Corporation to field a survey to the RAND American Teacher Panel (ATP) in September 2017. The RAND ATP is a nationally representative panel of K–12 public school teachers who have agreed to participate in online surveys several times each school year. The ATP includes teachers in every state to provide national estimates, as well as oversamples in twenty-two states to provide state-level estimates in these states. More information about the ATP is available at https://www.rand.org/education/projects/atp-aslp.html.

The TBFI survey was targeted to a national sample of fourth- through tenth-grade English language arts and reading teachers in general education classrooms (i.e., not resource room or special education classrooms). TBFI requested a completed sample of 1,200 teachers with 400 teachers in each of three grade bands: fourth- and fifth-grade teachers, sixth- through eighth-grade teachers, and ninth- and tenth-grade teachers. The RAND ATP team invited a sample of teachers to complete the TBFI survey based on grade level and subject taught.

RAND does not, however, maintain information on general, resource room, and special-education teachers. As teaching assignments change over time, teachers invited to participate in the TBFI survey based on prior information may no longer have been eligible to participate based on grade level, subject matter, and general education classroom assignment. The initial questions in the survey confirmed eligibility based on these factors; 184 teachers who began the survey were determined to be ineligible and were eliminated from the final data file. RAND initially invited 2,000 ATP members to take the survey. Based on completion rates and screening, an additional sample of 450 ATP members was released about three weeks after the first sample release. A total of 417 fourth- and fifth-grade teachers, 407 sixth- through eighth-grade teachers, and 413 ninth- and tenth-grade teachers completed the survey. The completion rate for the September 2017 TBFI survey was 51 percent (1,237 cases/2,450).

Survey Schedule

Dates	Activity
September 20, 2017	Field start date (initial sample)
October 4, 2017	Field start date (additional sample)
September 27, October 3, October 10, and October 18	Reminder email dates (initial sample)
October 10 and October 18	Reminder email dates (additional sample)

Sampling Weights

Sampling weights were generated for the TBFI survey; these weights are provided in the data file. There are two primary reasons to weight the RAND ATP data. First, the weights help to adjust for nonresponse (at both the recruitment and survey stages). So if, for example, we had relatively fewer seventh-grade teachers respond than eighth-grade teachers, the weights will reconcile this response differential.

Second, TBFI's interest is in a nationally representative sample of teachers. The ATP sample includes teachers from every state, but the panel oversampled teachers in twenty-two states. The weights adjust for the differential sampling rates used to generate the TBFI sample. The TBFI sample was drawn from the panel in such a manner to limit the effect of state-level oversampling, but the ATP does not include enough panelists in non-oversampled states to entirely remove that effect. Application of the weights is important for interpreting estimates generated with the data file of survey responses.

The first step to weighting the survey data is to assign a weight to each teacher in the ATP (i.e., panel weights). Panel weights are calculated by first determining initial weights, which (briefly speaking) are based on sampling and enrollment/response probabilities. These initial weights are then calibrated so that the weighted panel matches the national population of teachers based on several school-level (e.g., school size, level, urbanicity, and socio-demographics) and individual-level (e.g., gender, education, and experience) characteristics. Weights are calibrated to match known national-level totals for these characteristics that are found using the National Center for Education Statistic's Common Core of Data and Schools and Staffing Survey reports.

Since the entire panel was not sampled for this survey, each teacher in the panel was assigned a sampling probability. These probabilities range from 0 to 1 (where teachers that are not eligible for this survey are assigned a sampling probability of zero). Sampled teachers were selected at random in accordance with these probabilities. Not all sampled teachers responded to the survey, and response propensities may differ across various types of teachers (e.g., female teachers may be more likely to respond than male teachers). Therefore, a sampled teacher's probability of response was estimated using a response model that accounts for the school- and individual-level characteristics noted earlier. A responding teacher's final weight for

this survey is calculated as the product of his or her panel weight, the inverse of his or her survey-specific sampling probability, and the inverse of his or her survey-specific estimated response probability.

To facilitate estimation of uncertainty levels (e.g., standard errors) replication weights were calculated. The entire ATP was segmented into eighty replication groups. Each group has 1/80 of the panel excluded, and each panelist is excluded from one (and only one) group. A separate set of weights is calculated for each replication group by applying the weighted processes above to the respective group (while ignoring any panelist excluded for the respective group). Therefore, there are eighty sets of replication weights. Note that panelists excluded from a replication group receive a weight of zero for the respective set of replication weights.

Endnotes

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4   For additional resources, see "Tips for ELA Teachers" in the Report Materials on our website: https://edexcellence.net/publications/reading-and-writing-instruction-in-americas-schools.

5   Achieve, *Strong Standards: A Review of Changes to State Standards Since the Common Core* (Washington, D.C.: Achieve, November 2017), https://www.achieve.org/files/StrongStandards.pdf.

6   Common Core State Standards (CCSS), "Key Shifts in English Language Arts," www.corestandards.org/other-resources/key-shifts-in-english-language-arts/.

7   Construction of the survey instrument was a joint effort between the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the FDR Group. The survey instrument was programmed, fielded, and data tabulated by the RAND Corporation. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute is responsible for the interpretation of the survey results.

8   In no particular order, these experts include: Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher of San Diego State University, Darion Griffin of the American Federation of Teachers, Timothy Shanahan of the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Carey Swanson of Student Achievement Partners.

9   For an overview of the survey's methodology, see the *Appendix*.

10   The four states that were excluded for these questions are Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia.

11   Common Core State Standards (CCSS), "Key Shifts in English Language Arts."

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14   Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates (ICAS), *A Statement of Competencies Expected of Students Entering California's Public Colleges and Universities* (Sacramento, CA: ICAS, 2002), http://icas-ca.org/Websites/icasca/Images/Competency/AcademicLiteracy2002.pdf.

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17   A. Applebee and J. Langer, "EJ Extra: What is Happening in the Teaching of Writing?" *English Journal* 98, no. 5 (2009), 18–28.

18   National Assessment Governing Board, *Writing Framework for the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress*, pre-publication edition (Iowa City, IA: ACT, Inc., 2007), https://www.nagb.gov/content/nagb/assets/documents/publications/frameworks/writing/2011-writing-framework.pdf.

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25 G. Cervetti, et al. (2016); T. Landauer and S. Dumais (1996)

26 E. Hirsch, "Reading comprehension requires knowledge—of words and the world," *American Educator* 27.1 (2003): 10-13, https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/Hirsch.pdf

27 Or, as College Board president David Coleman once quipped, "Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday, but before that, I need a compelling account of your childhood."

28 See Fordham's forthcoming report on the state of state standards (to be released later in the summer of 2018).