Common Core in the Schools: A First Look at Reading Assignments

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Foreword and Summary by Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Kathleen Porter-Magee

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Foreword and Summary

by Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Kathleen Porter-Magee

For more than two decades, states have been working to delineate what students should know and be able to do in English language arts (ELA) and math across grades K-12. Beginning in 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) demanded that each state assess student reading and math achievement annually in grades 3-8 and at least once in high school. Schools and districts were to be held to account for ensuring that students met or exceeded state proficiency goals in those two subjects.

These efforts seem to have made an impact in math, where achievement in the earlier grades rose between 2001 and 2012. In reading, however, scores have barely budged. At the same time, the federal government pushed its Reading First initiative, which aimed to ensure that all schools based their reading instruction in grades K-3 on reading science, particularly as delineated by the National Reading Panel, and including a full dose of phonics and phonemic awareness.

How can it be that a nationwide push to improve reading has had only a negligible impact on overall reading achievement, even among our nation's highest-performing districts and schools? How can it be that a country that has been working so hard to boost its students' prowess in this key subject—arguably since Rudolf Flesch first raised awareness of the problem in 1955 with his much-discussed book, *Why Johnny Can't Read: And What You Can Do About It*—has made such paltry gains? Why are other countries surpassing us on international gauges of student reading performance such as PIRLS and PISA? Why are SAT and ACT English scores also flat (or worse)?

Background

Note to reader: This section supplies history and context for the analysis and findings offered below; if you want to skip to a summary of the present study, please turn to page 8.

Part of the answer, of course, can be found in the fiercely fought "reading wars" over such issues as "phonics versus 'whole language.'" Never mind that thirteen years ago the National Reading Panel—following and improving upon a path first marked by Jeanne Chall back in 1967—produced solid proof that a strong early-reading program, the kind that works for the vast majority of children, rests on five instructional "pillars." The "reading wars" continued regardless. So did commercial rivalries and professional jealousies in this crowded field.

We suspected that there might still be more to this complicated and rather depressing picture—and to investigate that possibility we at the Fordham Institute resolved to probe into several possible contributing factors.

First, while No Child Left Behind compelled each state to set ELA (as well as math) standards, their quality and rigor varied wildly. Our most recent review of state ELA standards found that only fourteen states earned an A or B for the quality, content, and rigor of their K-12 ELA standards. Twenty-one states earned a D or an F. This means that, while states may have set standards, the expectations guiding teaching and learning did little to advance quality curriculum and instruction.

Even more troubling, states set their "proficiency" bars at very different levels. That meant a student who was judged "proficient" in reading in one state could be deemed "below basic" in another.

Second, one of the most-discussed (and unintended) side effects of the NCLB era has been that, in an effort to improve reading and math achievement, schools have sidelined other vital subjects such as history and science. This might seem logical from a school perspective—after all, it's difficult to understand those meaty subjects until students can read. Yet reading comprehension itself depends on content knowledge and vocabulary, not just successfully "decoding" groups of letters and words. As E.D. Hirsch, Jr. eloquently explained in a 2003 article, when NCLB implementation was barely underway:

> after several decades of researching this difficult subject of reading comprehension from varied angles in the humanities and sciences, I can report that although what we don't know still far exceeds what we do, there is current scientific agreement on at least three principles that have useful implications for improving students' reading comprehension. The three principles (which subsume a number of others) are these:
>
> 1. Fluency allows the mind to concentrate on comprehension;
> 2. Breadth of vocabulary increases comprehension and facilitates further learning; and
> 3. Domain knowledge, the most recently understood principle, increases fluency, broadens vocabulary, and enables deeper comprehension.[1]

Tons of research underline the links among vocabulary, background knowledge, and reading comprehension. And NAEP results show a strong correlation between reading achievement and vocabulary. Specifically, results show that:

- Fourth-grade students performing above the 75th percentile in reading comprehension in 2011 also had the cohort's highest average vocabulary scores.
- Lower-performing fourth graders (at or below the 25th percentile in reading comprehension) had the lowest average vocabulary scores.

Similar patterns were evident for grade 8 in 2011 and for grade 12 in 2009. (Grade 12 was not assessed in 2011.)

This makes sense when you consider that it is knowledge and vocabulary, not skills mastery, which helps students improve comprehension once they've learned how to decode. This is something that cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham has studied extensively. "Teaching reading strategies is a low-cost way to give developing readers a boost," Willingham explains in a 2006 *American Educator* article, “but it should be a small part of a teacher’s job. Acquiring a broad vocabulary and a rich base of background knowledge will yield more substantial and longer-term benefits.”[2]

Yet in trying to improve reading comprehension, schools made a tragic mistake: they took time away from knowledge-building courses such as science and history to clear the decks for more time on reading skills and strategies.[3] And the impact, particularly on our most disadvantaged students whose content and vocabulary gap is so great, has been devastating.

Third, while teachers shifted time away from content to devote more to reading skills and strategies, the complexity of the texts they assigned in class was actually declining. A host of factors contributed to this decline. Too many people believe—incorrectly—that the best way to encourage students to read is to feed them a steady diet of “relevant” and easily digested books. As a result, classic literature has, in many classrooms, been replaced by popular teen novels (often made into movies) such as *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight*. Indeed, the former, according to Renaissance Learning (more below), became the most widely read book in grades 9-12 following its theatrical release in 2012. Yet it is pegged at a fifth-grade reading level. Worse, a number of popular reading curricula, such as the Teachers College Reading and Writing Workshop, actually discourage teachers from assigning texts thought to be challenging for students. These programs encourage teachers to assess student reading levels regularly and then assign texts that are “just right”—i.e., at the individual student’s “instructional” or “individual” reading level. Texts that are more difficult—and might fall into a student’s “frustration” level—are deemed simply too difficult and therefore to be shunned.

Evidence of the decline in text complexity can be found in many places. In 2010, for instance, *The Forum*, a journal of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers, published the results of a national survey of high school teachers led by Dr. Sandra Stotsky. She had undertaken to “find out what works of literature teachers in grades 9, 10, and 11 in public schools assign in standard and honors classes, and what approaches they use for teaching students how to understand imaginative fiction and literary non-fiction.” The results of Stotsky’s research were startling. She found:

- The works of literature and literary nonfiction assigned across grades 9, 10, and 11 did not increase in difficulty.
- “Teachers of standard and honors course [did] not regularly engage students in close analytical reading of assigned works. They [did] draw on a variety of approaches for literary study, including close reading, but they [were] more likely to use a non-analytical approach to interpret a work (e.g., a personal response or a focus on a work’s historical, cultural, or biographical context) than to undertake a careful analysis of the work itself.”[4]

Similarly, research published in 2009 by Renaissance Learning (the company that produces the “Accelerated Reader” program) found that “Ten of the top 16 most frequently read books by the 1,500 students in the top ten percent of reading achievement in grades 9-12 in the database for the 2008-2009 academic year were contemporary young adult fantasies.” Even more alarming, the report showed that a majority of the most-read books in high school were only at the middle school level in terms of text complexity. That study also showed that students read few nonfiction titles, and that most of the nonfiction was autobiographical.

Besides assigning "easy stuff" to kids to read, and then not expecting them to read closely or analytically, plenty else was afoot in the education world that turned out to be damaging to students' reading prowess.

In the minds of many educators, an absurd yet enduring distinction was drawn between "skills" and "content"—which proved bad for both. Although the folly of this was made clear in 1987, both by Hirsch's celebrated *Cultural Literacy* and by Diane Ravitch and one of the present authors (Chester E. Finn, Jr.) in *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?*, actual knowledge was sent to the back of the classroom.

Pedagogy suffered, too, as teachers were admonished to function as "guides on the side" rather than "sages on the stage." They were told to concentrate on self-esteem building rather than honest feedback to students of the sort that might lead them to do something different and better next time. Both texts and tests were scrutinized for possible "bias," and over-caution and hypersensitivity on this front led to both becoming banal. This had the effect of making many of them boring and dull, hence not really worth reading—and certainly not worth reading deeply.

Put all of the malign influences together and it's no surprise that American students were not being challenged to read appropriately complex books, to do high-level analytical work, or to steep themselves in the kinds of literary nonfiction or informational texts that might help them make significant gains in reading comprehension.

The Common Core

Less than a decade into NCLB implementation, state leaders recognized that their efforts to improve reading achievement were falling short. Many were aware of the varying quality of state standards and assessments and, brought together by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State Schools Officers, they set out to draft a set of clearer and more rigorous K-12 standards for English language arts (and for mathematics).

That work culminated in the June 2010 release of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, & Technical Subjects (CCSS). These new K-12 expectations were different in several ways. They were the first viable set of "common" standards. More than that, they were better—clearer, more rigorous, and more focused on the essential work students should be doing—than the vast majority of state standards they hoped to replace.

We reviewed the final Common Core ELA standards in 2010 and found that their expectations were "clearly superior" to the standards that were in use in thirty-seven states and that it was "too close to call" for another eleven states. More specifically, our expert reviewers found that the CCSS

> are particularly strong when it comes to providing useful and explicit guidance about the quality and complexity of reading and writing that should be expected of students each year, including providing annotated samples of student writing.

The Common Core also shows clear progressions of learning from grade to grade. For instance, Reading Standard 3 asks students, by the time they graduate from high school, to be able to "Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text." The standards then provide grade-specific expectations that show how this sequence might build from grade to grade. In Kindergarten, for example, the corresponding Reading Standard 3 explains that students should "identify characters, settings, and main events in a story." By first grade, they are asked to "describe characters, settings, and main events." By fifth grade, this standard has evolved and asks students to:

> Explain the relationships or interactions between two or more individuals, events, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text based on specific information in the text.

And by the end of high school, it becomes:

> Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

How, exactly, do these Common Core expectations differ from the state standards they replaced? The most important differences can be summarized by three "instructional shifts." In short, the CCSS aim to:

1. Build knowledge through content-rich nonfiction and informational texts.
2. Focus student work on reading and writing grounded in evidence from text.
3. Encourage regular practice with complex text and its academic vocabulary.

These shifts have profound implications for ELA curriculum and instruction. The Common Core State Standards are among the first standards to stress the crucial link between knowledge and reading comprehension—something that will, if faithfully implemented, force many teachers to rethink whether their preferred reading programs meet the content and rigor demands of the CCSS. And this important shift serves to correct the fact that, for too many years, students have had little access to the kinds of literary nonfiction and informational texts they need to prepare them for the rigor of advanced coursework in college and beyond.

The Common Core unambiguously expects "regular practice" with suitably complex texts. In the past, state ELA standards tacitly called for students to be able to read and understand grade-appropriate text by year's end. The Common Core, by contrast, recognizes that the only way to achieve that goal is to expose students to complex texts throughout the year.

What's more, the Common Core emphasizes reading (and writing) "grounded in evidence from the text." Whereas students in the past may have read something, then moved immediately to write personal responses and narratives, the Common Core pushes them and their teachers to stay with the text—to use the author's words and other evidence within the text to answer questions and to support analysis. This is precisely the kind of close reading and analytical practice that students need to push comprehension and deepen “critical thinking” skills.

But will these shifts make their way into American classrooms? That is the question we sought to examine through the present study.

Findings

Within months of the release of the final draft of the Common Core State Standards, forty-six states and the District of Columbia had adopted the CCSS standards for English language arts. Soon thereafter, districts and schools across most of the land began the hard work of implementing those standards. As part of our efforts to monitor CCSS implementation, we undertook a survey of ELA teachers from Common Core states, asking them to answer questions about the texts their students read and the instructional techniques they used in the classroom. This year’s data are meant to serve as a “baseline” that shows where we were in the very early stages of CCSS implementation. We plan to do a follow-up study in 2015 whereupon we will comment on whether the instructional shifts have taken hold.

Even today, we found some hopeful signs. Most teachers believe that the new standards promise better learning for their students, and a majority say that their schools have already made progress toward implementing the standards, including relevant curriculum changes and professional development. Some teachers say that they are already teaching with grade-level-appropriate texts, and that they already include at least some informational texts in their English language arts curriculum.

But findings from this survey also showed that the heavy lifting of aligning curriculum and instruction to the rigor of the CCSS mostly still lies ahead. Specifically:

- The CCSS emphasize the centrality of text in the English language arts curriculum. Yet the majority of teachers still say their lessons are dominated by skills; they are more likely to try to fit texts to skills than to ground their skills instruction in what is appropriate to the texts they are teaching. Indeed, an astonishing 73 percent of elementary and 56 percent of middle school teachers place greater emphasis on reading skills than the text; high school teachers are more divided, with roughly equal portions prioritizing either skills or texts.

- The Common Core asks teachers to assign texts that provide language complexity appropriate to the grade level, but significant proportions of teachers—particularly in the elementary grades—are still assigning texts based on students’ present reading prowess. Specifically, the majority of elementary teachers (64 percent) choose to match students with books presumed to align with their instructional reading levels. This happens less often in middle and high school, with approximately two in five middle school teachers selecting texts this way. This means that many youngsters are not yet working with appropriately complex language in their schoolbooks.

- The CCSS call for students to have substantial experience reading informational texts (including literary nonfiction such as speeches and essays). Despite some public controversy over this, teachers indicated that they are already devoting significant proportions of time to teaching such texts in their classrooms. Nevertheless, many English language arts teachers (including 56 percent at the middle school level) assign none of the literary or informational texts listed in the survey, which represented both CCSS exemplars and other high-quality texts.[5]

- The vast majority of teachers appear cautiously optimistic about the Common Core. Most (62 percent) indicated that, when surveyed in 2012, they thought the standards would have at least some positive learning benefits for their students (from a little bit to a great deal), while 11 percent thought that no learning gains would result and 18 percent said it was "too soon to tell." These responses were consistent across the grades; elementary, middle school, and high school teachers characterized the standards similarly.

Conclusions

The promise and potential of standards- and accountability-driven reform is that, by setting clear and rigorous expectations for what students should know and be able to do, teachers can better prepare students for the more advanced work that they will be asked to do in later grades, in college, and beyond. In order for standards to have any impact, however, they must change classroom practice. In Common Core states, the shifts that these new expectations demand are based on the best research and information we have about how to boost students' reading comprehension and analysis and thereby prepare them more successfully for college and careers. Whether those shifts will truly transform classroom practice, however, remains to be seen. Please stay tuned.

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Introduction

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for the English language arts (ELA), now adopted by forty-six states and the District of Columbia, detail what students should know and be able to do in reading, writing, listening, and speaking across grades K-12.[6] The standards differ in two significant ways from the state standards that they replace. First, they're anchored by end-of-high-school "college- and career-readiness" expectations that articulate the skills that students should have mastered by the time they graduate high school, if they're truly to be ready for college-level work.

Second, CCSS go beyond familiar skills to emphasize the nature, complexity, and rigor of the literary and informational texts that students should read at each grade level. In the past, standards have stressed the skills and strategies that students use as they read but have paid scant attention to *what* they're actually reading. The Common Core takes the texts themselves seriously, specifying readability levels and the proportions of classroom time (across the curriculum, not just in English courses) to be devoted to "informational" and "literary" texts, and offering for educators' consideration a worthy array of exemplary classic works, both fiction and nonfiction. (Appendix B of CCSS offers a terrific reading list, albeit one that is meant to be illustrative rather than prescriptive and is not part of the standards proper.) The standards also devote much attention to "close reading," i.e., intense emphasis on the text itself rather than on, say, one's opinions or feelings about what one is reading. In fact, the Common Core standards are the first state standards to "place equal emphasis on the *sophistication* of what students read and the skill with which they read" [emphasis added].[7]

But what about classroom realities and teacher practices? It's easy to spot key changes in emphasis in the standards themselves—essentially they represent a shift from *skills alone* to *skills implemented in the context of complex texts*. But what will teachers do to alter their traditional practices? Will they deploy different texts than in the past? Will the texts be more challenging?

We resolved to find out, over the course of three years, just what is and isn't changing when it comes to the texts that teachers assign to students and how they teach the English language arts. We commissioned the FDR Group to conduct a nationwide survey of public school English, language arts, and reading teachers in an effort to determine what texts are being assigned to students, some of the ways teachers teach the English language arts, and whether the complexity of assignments changes as Common Core implementation ramps up. This is the first of two surveys, intended to establish a baseline in 2012 that can be compared with the findings of a similar survey to be undertaken in 2015. Together these surveys will provide a timely description of the effects of implementing the CCSS standards, at least as it relates to the quality and complexity of texts that teachers use to drive instruction during the early years of Common Core implementation.

Specifically, this survey addressed four basic issues: 1) the extent to which teachers assign sufficiently complex texts to their students; 2) the mix of informational and literary texts that teachers use for instruction, including how current choices align with the exemplar texts presented by the Common Core; 3) how instructional texts are selected and the role they play in instructional planning; and 4) teachers' opinions of and familiarity with the CCSS, as well as their school's efforts to implement the standards. We begin with a summary of the study's methods and sample, followed by a discussion of what changes in instruction the CCSS portend, key findings relative to the four issues noted above, and implications for educators.

Methodology

This report is based on a survey of 1,154 public school instructors of English, language arts, or reading, including 300 elementary teachers (fourth and fifth grade), 370 middle school teachers (sixth, seventh, and eighth grade), and 484 high school teachers (ninth and tenth grade). It includes teachers from the forty-six states and the District of Columbia that had adopted the Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts as of February 2012; the four excluded states are Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia. The survey was fielded between February 9 and March 22, 2012. Table 1 shows the respondents' demographics. As shown, roughly one-quarter of them teach elementary school, one-third teach middle school, and the remainder teach high school. The vast majority (76 percent) teach classes that are "on grade level."

Table 2 (see page 14) compares the demographics of the survey sample and the national teacher population, showing how well the former represents the latter. We see, for instance, that 17 percent of the teachers in the sample teach in urban locales compared to 26 percent of teachers nationally (further explanation of the survey methodology is included in the appendix).

Table 1. Demographics of survey participants

Grade Levels	
Elementary	26%
Middle School	32%
High School	42%
Type of Class (Middle & High School)	
Regular/on-grade level	76%
Remedial/SPED/ELL	15%
Honors/AP/IB	9%
Gender	
Male	14%
Female	86%
Years of Teaching Experience	
5 years or fewer	11%
6-10 years	22%
11-20 years	39%
More than 20 years	28%
School Made AYP Last Year	
Yes	63%
No	31%
Percentage of Students Provided Free/Reduced Lunch	
Less than 50%	40%
More than 50%	49%
Percentage of Minority Students (African American, Hispanic)	
Less than 50%	71%
More than 50%	24%
Urbanicity	
Urban	17%
Suburban	34%
Small town	26%
Rural	23%
Region	
Northeast	18%
Midwest	26%
South	32%
West	25%

Note: SPED=special education; ELL=English language learners; AP=Advanced Placement; IN= International Baccalaureate; AYP=Adequate Yearly Progress

Table 2. Population of U.S. teachers vs. teachers in the survey sample[8]

	National	Sample Total (n=1,154)	Elem (n=300)	Middle (n=370)	High (n=484)
Urbanicity[9]					
Urban	26%	17%	17%	18%	17%
Suburban/Small Town	49	59	63	61	56
Rural	25	23	21	21	27
Region[10]					
Northeast	20%	18%	23%	18%	15%
Midwest	23	26	24	27	26
South	38	32	29	34	32
West	19	25	24	22	28
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch[11]					
0-49%	60%	40%	38%	46%	37%
50-74%	22	25	25	20	30
75-100%	16	24	28	26	20
Gender[12]					
Male	24%	14%	11%	8%	20%
Female	76	86	89	92	80

What Changes in Instruction Do the CCSS Demand?

The CCSS English language arts standards differ from most existing state standards in three key areas: 1) they demand regular practice with appropriately complex texts; 2) they seek to challenge students with texts that are grade-appropriate (on a K-12 trajectory to college- and career-readiness), rather than those that are only as challenging as students can read on their own; and 3) they recommend that teachers increase the amount of attention paid to informational texts across the curriculum. We'll discuss each of these in turn.

1. The CCSS demand regular practice with appropriately complex texts.

Texts vary in the sophistication of their language and ideas.[13] This naturally makes some texts easy to understand and others less accessible, even when their content is much the same. Further, studies show that text complexity influences reading comprehension and how well students learn from text.[14] They also show that the language complexity of school textbooks has declined or gotten easier over the past several decades and that, as the "challenge levels" of textbooks have declined, so have students' verbal skills; though a historical study completed since the inception of the CCSS challenges these findings.[15]

Various measures can be used to estimate the complexity or readability of texts and, though not perfect,[16] most do a pretty good job of estimating how well readers at particular grade levels are likely to understand particular texts. The CCSS establish grade-level "readability bands" that specify the range of text complexity levels required for each grade. These bands assign text complexity ranges that are somewhat more difficult than the ranges of texts currently assigned to grade levels. Thus, a text that formerly may have been assigned to fifth graders will now end up in fourth-grade classrooms. Establishing text-complexity levels in this way has not been usual practice in state educational standards; typically standards have prescribed the cognitive skills that students must demonstrate during reading (e.g., identify the main idea, compare information, draw conclusions), but they've ignored the challenge level of the texts to which students are supposed to apply these skills. This has been the case, despite the fact that text complexity—not mastery of cognitive skills—significantly influences reading comprehension.[17]

2. The CCSS seek to challenge students with texts that are grade-appropriate (on a K-12 trajectory to college- and career-readiness), rather than those that are only as challenging as students can read on their own.

American schools have long attempted to differentiate instruction to meet individual students' learning needs. In reading, this has often meant selecting texts not according to whether they are appropriately rigorous for the grade, in terms of both content and complexity, but rather according to how well a student could read the text by himself at that point in time. In many classrooms and for many students, this has meant assigning texts to struggling readers, the content and complexity of which are more appropriate to lower grade levels. Done this way, the goal is to assign books that students will be able to read with high degrees of both accuracy (recognizing 95 percent of the words) and comprehension (answering 75-90 percent of the questions). Materials that students can read this well are said to be at their "instructional level," and materials that are harder are deemed to be at a "frustration level."

But the Common Core discourages teachers from doing this out-of-level teaching. Instead, the standards demand regular practice with grade-appropriate texts, regardless of the independent or instructional reading level of the student. The idea is that teacher support and explanation, not text difficulty, is what should be differentiated to meet the needs of struggling readers.

Some may question the wisdom of teaching students with texts that they're unlikely to understand without help. But research suggests teachers can't pinpoint students' reading levels with great precision.[18] Even if they could, students can learn effectively from a broad range of text levels and giving them a steady diet of relatively easy texts doesn't support learning effectively.[19] In fact, some studies have reported greater learning gains when students were taught with markedly more challenging texts.[20] Still, there is a long history of encouraging instructional-level teaching in U.S. schools.[21]

Shifting from assigning books that students can read independently to works that require more deliberate teacher guidance and support changes the instructional focus of reading class. The time that teachers once spent trying to pinpoint individual student reading levels and match books to them should instead now be focused on providing greater support for students who are struggling to read these texts, including more explanations and rereading.

3. The CCSS recommend that teachers increase the attention paid to informational texts across the curriculum.

Another educational shift heralded by the Common Core relates to the relative emphasis on literary versus informational texts. In the past, state standards usually made clear that students should be able to read both literary and informational texts, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress has long evaluated student reading in both of these domains.[22] However, the CCSS have gone further by recommending specifically 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) for grades 6-12. Many commentators on the Common Core have failed—perhaps deliberately—to note that CCSS set forth these proportions not for English language arts classes per se but for students' entire school days. It is appropriate for students to read and analyze the language and rhetoric of essays, speeches, journalistic writing, and other literary nonfiction in their English classes.[23] But the standards are not suggesting that 70 percent of the English class is supposed to be devoted to such informational texts; rather, 70 percent of the aggregate reading in history, science, mathematics, English, and other subjects should be apportioned in this manner.[24]

Evidence suggests that elementary students, up to this point in time, have had very limited experience with informational texts,[25] and that such limited exposure may be leading to an imbalance in reading proficiency.[26] Basically, American students appear to do a bit better at reading stories than at reading the kinds of expository or argumentative materials that they should confront in a science or history class—and will eventually face in the workplace. (Less is known about how reading is distributed in the secondary grades or how well secondary students currently read such materials.) The Common Core has established standards that are intended to ensure that students gain sufficient experience with a wide range of both literary and informational texts.

Finally, it is worth noting that the specialized reading of social studies and science texts has not been emphasized much in past ELA standards. CCSS, by emphasizing the importance of informational text throughout the curriculum, promotes the development of rich and extensive content knowledge and academic vocabulary. Such knowledge provides an important basis for success in college and the world of work,[27] and studies have revealed sizable gaps in the knowledge of U. S. students about civics, economics, geography, history, and science.[28]


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Findings

This section discusses survey findings on four key issues: 1) the extent to which teachers assign sufficiently complex texts to their students; 2) the mix of informational and literary texts that they use for instruction, including how current choices align with the exemplar texts presented by the Common Core; 3) how instructional texts are selected and the role they play in instructional planning; and 4) teachers' opinions of and familiarity with the CCSS as well as their school's efforts to implement the standards.

Are Teachers Currently Assigning Sufficiently Complex Texts?

We asked a series of questions about the texts that teachers assign and how they choose them. Table 3 summarizes their responses.

Table 3. Teacher choices and text complexity

When it comes to choosing reading materials for this class, are you MORE likely to:				
	Total	**Elem**	**Middle**	**High**
Choose most texts based on grade level	38%	24%	37%	47%
Choose most texts based on students' reading levels	39	64	38	24
Something else (e.g., both, student interest, availability, standards, district requirements)	23	11	24	29
Not sure	<.5	1	1	<.5
For this class, do you assign any novels that all students in the class are required to read, yes or no?				
	Total	**Elem**	**Middle**	**High**
Yes	77%	60%	77%	88%
No	20	35	21	11
Something else	1	2	1	1
Not sure	1	2	1	1
About how many complete novels will you assign in this class that all students in the class will be required to read? *(Limited base: Asked of those who assign complete, required novels.)*				
	Total	**Elem**	**Middle**	**High**
	(908)	(187)	(291)	(430)
1	12%	6%	13%	14%
2-5	72	68	68	76
6+	16	26	19	10

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Table 3. Teacher choices and text complexity (continued)

Which of these are you more likely to consider when choosing a novel that all students in the class will read? *(Asked of those who assign complete, required novels.)*				
	Total	**Elem**	**Middle**	**High**
	(898)	(186)	(283)	(429)
Average class reading level (regardless of grade)	36%	51%	40%	28%
Grade level of class	33	22	26	43
Something else (e.g., both, student interest, district mandates)	29	25	33	28
Not sure	1	2	1	1

Do you use abridged or adapted versions of these novels for struggling readers, or do all students read the same version of the text? *(Asked of those who assign complete, required novels.)*				
	Total	**Elem**	**Middle**	**High**
	(898)	(184)	(285)	(429)
Use abridged or adapted versions for struggling readers	23%	20%	21%	27%
All students read the same version	67	71	70	63
There are no struggling readers in this class	8	7	8	9
Not sure	2	3	1	1

When you help individual students in this class pick a novel to read, which of these are you more likely to consider? *(Asked of those who do NOT assign complete, required novels.)*				
	Total	**Elem**	**Middle**	**High**
	(434)	(158)	(155)	(121)
Student's reading level	61%	83%	57%	36%
Grade level of the class	4	4	3	7
Students in this class don't read novels	4	1	4	7
Something else (e.g., both, student interest, theme)	30	11	35	46
Not sure	2	1	1	3

Do you use abridged or adapted versions of novels for the struggling readers in this class? *(Asked of those who do not assign complete, required novels.)*				
	Total	**Elem**	**Middle**	**High**
	(328)	(142)	(108)	(78)
Yes	41%	39%	41%	44%
No	54	57	54	47
There are no struggling readers in this class	2	1	3	5
Not sure	3	3	3	4

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Table 3. Teacher choices and text complexity (continued)

What percentages of students in this class are currently reading on-grade level, above-grade level, and below-grade level?				
	Total	**Elem**	**Middle**	**High**
On-grade level	49%	48%	48%	49%
Above-grade level	24	24	23	24
Below-grade level	31	28	33	31

Teachers were first asked how they selected texts. Specifically, we asked whether they made selections on the basis of grade level, students' reading levels (e.g., "instructional levels"), or some other criteria, such as student interest or text availability. Responses show that the majority of elementary teachers (64 percent) make a substantial effort to match students with books presumed to align with their instructional reading levels. This happens less often in middle school and high school, with approximately two in five middle school teachers and one-quarter of high school teachers selecting texts in this way. Roughly two years after their states adopted the Common Core, many U.S. teachers were still not following one of its fundamental tenets, meaning that they had not yet faced the challenge of teaching with more challenging texts.

Different kinds of texts may pose different selection problems or possibilities for teachers. For example, assigning instructional-level texts to students may be easier when teachers are using textbook anthologies or so-called "leveled books" that provide many shorter stories or articles, than when they are teaching longer works such as complete novels. Accordingly, the survey asked teachers if they assigned novels for instruction, and if so, how many, and whether they relied on grade level or student reading levels in selecting such materials (see Table 3). The survey showed that 77 percent of teachers do assign novels to the class as a whole. When such longer works are the focus of instruction, usually all students are asked to read the same book—but if everyone in a class reads the same book, do teachers still adjust for student reading levels? The survey data suggest that when teaching novels and the like, more than one-third of the respondents select texts matched to the "average reading level of the class," while another third stick to grade-level materials. The research literature shows that teachers are much more likely to adjust text selection to present students with easier texts than harder ones.[29] On average, teachers report that about one-third of the students in their class[30] are reading below grade level. This suggests that, in these classrooms, when a single text (such as a novel) is used with all students, they may be asked to read easier-than-grade-level texts, no matter what their individual reading proficiencies, since teachers would aim for a classroom average reading level.

The Common Core is challenging this approach, encouraging teachers to teach students with texts that would be relatively more challenging. Among those who assigned complete novels, fewer elementary and middle school teachers paid heed to the grade level of their class when selecting whole-class novels; rather, the majority considered the average reading level of the class. Most high school teachers responded just the opposite: Nearly half of them chose whole-class novels based on the grade level of their class (just 28 percent prioritized the average reading level). Thus substantial numbers of students—especially younger ones—are currently being taught from texts that teachers see as an average reading level for the class.

When teachers recommend books to students for individual reading, they appear to be even more mindful of pupils' different reading levels. Among those who report not assigning complete novels, the vast majority of elementary teachers (83 percent) indicate that when recommending books for independent reading, they are more likely to suggest texts that accord with student reading levels; more than half the middle school teachers report likewise. High school teachers (46 percent) gave higher priority to "something else," which may have included recommending books based on both reading and grade level, as well as student interest or attention to a particular theme.

It appears, then, that teachers are even more attentive to student reading levels when encouraging out-of-class reading than when selecting instructional materials for classroom use. This seems commonsensical: assign students to relatively harder texts for in-class work with a teacher present and recommend somewhat easier materials when students will be on their own. However, research shows that students can often read challenging books they are interested in at higher levels of comprehension than comparably challenging materials that don't interest them.[31] That students can comprehend harder materials that match their interests underlines both the importance of motivation and knowledge (people are usually more interested in topics that they know and care a lot about) in text assignment.

In summary, these results reveal that many teachers have not yet confronted the new text complexity demands of the Common Core. Elementary teachers were particularly wary of assigning books that exceeded their students' current reading levels. Though this wariness seems to diminish as grade levels rise, even in high school relatively large proportions of students were assigned texts based mainly on their current reading levels. This was true both when teachers were assigning a single text to a class and when they were making independent reading recommendations. Huge shifts in these practices may lie ahead.

Do teachers assign an appropriate mix of informational and literary texts? And do these choices reflect any of the CCSS exemplar texts?

Next we examine the relative attention currently devoted to literary and informational texts. Whether the CCSS represent a major shift in this aspect of English instruction will depend on the degree to which reading and English programs currently emphasize texts other than literature. (As indicated, these data will provide a baseline for monitoring such changes going forward.)

Table 4 summarizes responses to how much class time English teachers devote to the reading of fiction, literary nonfiction, and informational text.

Table 4. Use of fiction, literary nonfiction, and informational text

Think about the different types of reading materials you teach in this class. What percentage of time would you say goes to fiction, to literary nonfiction, and to informational text?				
	Total	Elem	Middle	High
Fiction	54%	47%	51%	61%
Literary nonfiction	21	21	22	20
Informational text	26	32	28	20

The amount of fiction read in English classes increases as students progress through the grades; almost half (47 percent) of the reading in the elementary grades is fiction according to their teachers, but this increases to 61 percent by high school. If literary nonfiction is thrown into the mix on the literature side, the increase is still evident, and literary text, in all its diversity, would make up the vast majority of what students are now asked to read in ELA classes: 68 percent of the reading in the upper elementary grades, 73 percent in middle school, and 81 percent in high school language arts programs.

Informational text clearly does not dominate today's English classes but neither is it altogether absent from them, an inconvenient fact for some critics of the Common Core. Elementary reading teachers indicate that coverage of informational texts comprises about 32 percent of their time in class; while in high school English classes such texts comprise 20 percent of class time.

Survey respondents were also provided lists of specific reading materials and asked to check those that they "will teach in this class this school year." The Common Core provides lists of exemplar texts in Appendix B, illustrating the kinds of literary and informational texts that would represent appropriate complexity levels and content. The lists explicitly were not meant as canonical and schools are under no obligation to use them in conjunction with the Common Core.

We included all exemplar texts listed in Appendix B for grades 4-10 in ELA.[32] Then we supplemented them with other high-quality texts from currently popular textbooks to present teachers with lists of up to four categories that mimic those used in the CCSS: stories (a broad heading, which actually includes books), drama, poetry, and informational text. Here the lists are reported separately for the elementary (grades 4-5), middle (grades 6-8), and high school (grades 9-10) levels. In the survey, the lists were presented to teachers in alphabetical order to facilitate easy location. In the tables summarizing these data (Tables 5, 6, and 7), the texts are listed in the order of their likelihood of use in the respondents' classrooms; those texts assigned in the largest percentage of classes are listed first and then in declining order. Finally, since the list of stories was much longer than the other categories, we have broken them up and included some in the drama category.

This information will serve as a useful baseline for gauging the degree to which the CCSS alter what texts teachers assign in the future. Although the CCSS exemplars are not meant as a required or canonical reading list, it is possible that schools will focus on these because of their inclusion in the

CCSS documents. By including other comparable texts in our survey, we can determine to what extent the CCSS have such influence in the future. Note that statistical analysis (independent sample t-tests) showed no significant differences in current usage between the CCSS exemplars and the other texts. The tables also include an estimate of the complexity of the texts, when a measure of this was available.[33] Specifically, we include Lexile (L) measures, which range from below 200L to over 1600L; the higher the Lexile estimate, the more complex the text. Similar to usage, there were no statistically significant differences in text complexity between the CCSS exemplars and other selections, except for the high school literary story lists (where the latter were more complex than the former). (See the appendix for more information on how readability estimates were assigned.)

Elementary School

The responses of the elementary school teachers are summarized in Table 5. Their responses make clear that the literary stories that we listed (including some of the CCSS Appendix B exemplars) are in wide—though not universal—use in American classrooms. Of the twenty-five literary stories in the survey, seventeen were used by 5 percent or more of the elementary teachers who responded. Furthermore, only 18 percent of respondents failed to check any of these stories, and the average book on the list was being used by almost 13 percent of the teachers. Specifically, *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo (one of the titles we added) was assigned by the largest percentage of elementary teachers (39 percent); *Sarah, Plain and Tall* by Patricia MacLachlan (an Appendix B exemplar) followed behind at 29 percent of teachers. Not surprisingly, short stories—which take less time and energy for both students and teachers—are assigned more often than full-length books.[34]

Compared to stories, markedly less agreement exists among teachers when it comes to assigning poetry in the elementary grades. The majority of teachers (54 percent) admitted that they assigned none of the texts in our list. But, of the fifteen poems, about half were assigned by 5 percent or more of the elementary teachers. The average poem on the list was taught by about 6 percent of elementary teachers, considerably less than with the stories at these grade levels.

The use of informational text choices, at least those represented in our lists, was even more fragmented than the use of poetry. Despite many elementary teachers indicating that they teach informational text (roughly one-third), 46 percent of those surveyed failed to select *any* of the informational selections that we included in the survey. Moreover, the use of any of the specific informational texts was significantly less than that of either stories or poems. The average informational text in the list was used by fewer than 6 percent of teachers, and only ten of the twenty-five selections were assigned by as many as 5 percent of respondents. This suggests that well-known stories are widely used in U.S. elementary classrooms but the same cannot be said about informational texts; in other words, there is much more agreement on the value of particular literary works than there is about informational texts at these same grade levels. With the exception of two informational selections (*Volcanoes* by Seymour Simon and “Underground Railroad” by Henrietta Buckmaster, both CCSS exemplars), few teachers used any of the specific texts included in the survey. Given the previously documented inattention to informational texts in U.S. elementary schools, it should not be surprising that there is less consensus among teachers as to which informational texts to teach. At the same time, we might expect that many of these informational texts would be covered in science or social studies class (recall we surveyed ELA teachers only). Yet most elementary classrooms are

Table 5. Specific reading materials for elementary grades (4-5)

STORIES (includes books)	% teachers who taught this text	Lexiles
Because of Winn-Dixie (Kate DiCamillo)	39	610
**Sarah, Plain and Tall* (Patricia MacLachlan)	29	560
Bridge to Terabithia (Katherine Paterson)	25	810
**Bud, Not Buddy* (Christopher Paul Curtis)	22	950
Maniac Magee (Jerry Spinelli)	22	820
Stone Fox (John Reynolds Gardiner)	19	550
**Tuck Everlasting* (Natalie Babbitt)	19	770
**The Cricket in Times Square* (George Selden)	18	780
None of these	18	
James and the Giant Peach (Roald Dahl)	17	870
The Stranger (Chris Van Allsburg)	17	640
**Charlotte's Web* (E. B. White)	16	950
The Chronicles of Narnia (C. S. Lewis)	14	870
**Mr. Popper's Penguins* (Richard and Florence Atwater)	13	910
On the Banks of Plum Creek (Laura Ingalls Wilder)	7	720
**The Black Stallion* (Walter Farley)	5	680
Fire Storm (Jean Craighead George)	5	650
**The Secret Garden* (Frances Hodgson Burnett)	5	500
My Diary from Here to There (Amada Irma Perez)	3	720
Anne of Green Gables (Lucy Maud Montgomery)	2	970
**The Birchbark House* (Louise Erdrich)	2	970
**M.C. Higgins, the Great* (Virginia Hamilton)	2	630
Where the Mountain Meets the Moon (Grace Lin)	2	820
**Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Lewis Carroll)	1	890
**The Little Prince* (Antoine de Saint-Exupery)	1	710
*"Zlateh the Goat" (Isaac Bashevis Singer)	1	850

Note: Asterisks indicate Common Core (Appendix B) exemplars.

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Table 5. Specific reading materials for elementary grades (4-5) (continued)

POETRY	% teachers who taught this text	Lexiles
None of these	54	
*“Casey at the Bat” (Ernest Lawrence Thayer)	22	+
*“Fog” (Carl Sandburg)	18	+
“A River Ran Wild” (Lynne Cherry)	10	+
“The California Gold Rush” (Elizabeth Van Steenwyk)	8	+
*“Dust of Snow” (Robert Frost)	8	+
*“Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf” (Roald Dahl)	6	+
“Danitra Brown Leaves Town” (Nikki Grimes)	5	+
“Be Kind to Your Mother (Earth)” (Douglas Love)	4	+
*“A Bird Came Down the Walk” (Emily Dickinson)	4	+
“The Skirt” (Gary Soto)	3	+
*“They Were My People” (Grace Nichols)	3	+
*“The New Colossus” (Emma Lazarus)	2	+
*“The Echoing Green” (William Blake)	1	+
*“Words Free as Confetti” (Pat Mora)	<.5	+
“The Almond Orchard” (Laura Jane Coats)	0	+

Note: Asterisks indicate Common Core (Appendix B) exemplars.
Note: Plus sign indicates Lexile score is unavailable.

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Table 5. Specific reading materials for elementary grades (4-5) (continued)

INFORMATIONAL TEXTS	% teachers who taught this text	Lexiles
None of these	46	
**Volcanoes* (Seymour Simon)	24	880
*"Underground Railroad" (Henrietta Buckmaster)	22	+
**Hurricanes: Earth's Mightiest Storms* (Patricia Lauber)	13	930
Mighty Jackie: The Strike-Out Queen (Marissa Moss)	9	770
Mountains (Seymour Simon)	8	1080
*"Ancient Mound Builders" (E. Barrie Kavash)	7	+
**Discovering Mars: The Amazing Story of the Red Planet* (Melvin Berger)	7	670
Mimicry and Camouflage (Mary Hoff)	7	+
Grand Canyon: A Trail Through Time (Linda Vieira)	6	+
**A History of US* (Joy Hakim)	6	810
Mangrove Wilderness: Nature's Nursery (Bianca Lavies)	4	990
**Horses* (Seymour Simon)	3	930
The Kid's Guide to Money: Earning It, Saving It, Spending It, Growing It, Sharing It (Steve Oftinoski)	3	970
**Toys!: Amazing Stories Behind Some Great Inventions* (Don L. Wulffson)	3	920
**We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball* (Kadir Nelson)	3	900
Weaving a California Tradition (Linda Yamane)	3	960
*"Seeing Eye to Eye" (Leslie Hall)	2	+
*"Telescopes" (Colin A. Ronan)	2	+
*"Good Pet, Bad Pet" (Elizabeth Schleichert)	1	+
**Let's Investigate Marvelously Meaningful Maps* (Madelyn Wood Carlisle)	1	990
**England the Land* (Erinn Banting)	<.5	1150
**My Librarian is a Camel: How Books are Brought to Children Around the World* (Margriet Ruurs)	<.5	980
Quest for the Tree Kangaroo: An Expedition to the Cloud Forest of New Guinea (Sy Montgomery)	<.5	830
**About Time: A First Look at Time and Clocks* (Bruce Koscielniak)	0	1200
*"Kenya's Long Dry Season" (Nellie Gonzalez Cutler)	0	+

Note: Asterisks indicate Common Core (Appendix B) exemplars.
Note: Plus sign indicates Lexile score is unavailable.

self-contained, so chances are that the ELA teacher is also covering those subjects (unless she has a math/science partner). The same cannot be said of high school teachers, though as we'll see later, they follow a similar pattern.

An analysis of the readability data suggests that elementary teachers were inclined to select slightly easier works from the lists, but these differences are small and statistically non-significant for both the literary and informational texts. Although the majority of elementary teachers said they try to match texts to student reading levels, this evidently did not lead them to assign the easier texts from these lists more frequently. There was no difference evident in the pattern of use of complex texts between literary and informational in the elementary grades.

Middle School

Table 6 (see page 30) summarizes the responses concerning the use of specific literary and informational texts in middle school English language arts classrooms. Middle school teachers were queried about four text categories: stories/books, short stories/drama, poetry, and informational text. As with the elementary level, we see that many of the literary stories are already in widespread use in U.S. classrooms, while there is, once again, relatively less consensus about which informational texts to assign in English classes.

Of the forty-two selections in both of the story lists (first two categories), the average text was assigned by 14 percent of the teachers, and thirty-nine of the forty-two texts were taught by at least some respondents. Additionally, the average poem in the list was taught by about 11 percent of the teachers and all of the poems were being taught by at least some respondents. Even with such broad use, however, relatively large numbers of teachers were not teaching *any* of these works (39 percent were not teaching any of the stories/books, 28 percent none of the short stories/drama, and 29 percent none of the poems).

That said, some of the literary selections *are* in wide use in American middle school ELA classrooms. For example, Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" and Frost's "The Road Not Taken" (the latter an Appendix B exemplar) are already being taught by nearly half of the teachers (44 percent). Of the two lists of stories (which includes anything *not* a poem or informational text), twenty-two texts are already being taught by 5 percent or more of middle school teachers. The average selection was in use by about 9 percent of the teachers.

That such a large number of these stories and poems are already in wide use by middle school teachers is not surprising given how these lists were assembled. (CCSS architects paid some attention to what is currently available in schools and we added the supplementary items based on their appearance in widely used textbooks.) This may suggest that the CCSS standards will not exert much influence over teachers' literary choices. And, yet, we think that would be the wrong conclusion. Recall that more than one-quarter of the random sample of middle school teachers who took part in this survey were not teaching any of these works. So while many middle school teachers are already on board with CCSS expectations relative to literary choices, large numbers of them are not yet teaching the kinds of literary materials envisioned by CCSS. For those teachers, major shifts still lie ahead.

Use of informational text at the middle school level was more fragmented, as in the elementary schools. Again, there is clearly less agreement on the value or appropriateness of particular informational texts for the English language arts class. As previously indicated, some of the disparity also might be due to the specialization that begins to take place in middle schools; students, at these grade levels, are often assigned to separate science and social studies classes, and it is possible that some of these selections might be appearing in those classrooms, rather than in the English classes. Nevertheless, more than half of the teachers (56 percent) were not using any of the informational texts in our survey, though all the entries were taught by at least some teachers. However, the average use of these informational selections by middle school teachers was less than 6 percent. So while middle school ELA teachers indicate that they spend considerable time teaching informational texts, there is not much agreement on what those texts should comprise. (Only one informational text, *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railway*, by Ann Petry—also an exemplar—was used by more than 20 percent of the middle school teachers).

Middle school teachers also appeared to be more likely to assign slightly easier literary texts from these lists, though once again these differences are small and not statistically significant. (We had readability information for too few of the informational texts in these lists to make a similar comparison.)

Table 6. Specific reading materials for middle school grades (6-8)

STORIES (includes books)	% teachers who taught this text	Lexiles
None of these	39	
**Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (Anne Frank)	31	1080
**Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Mildred D. Taylor)	14	920
The Cay (Theodore Taylor)	11	860
Among the Hidden (Margaret Peterson Haddix)	9	800
The Pearl (John Steinbeck)	9	610
**A Wrinkle in Time* (Madeleine L'Engle)	9	740
**The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Mark Twain)	8	970
The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)	7	1080
*"The People Could Fly" (Virginia Hamilton)	7	660
Johnny Tremain (Esther Forbes)	6	840
**Dragonwings* (Laurence Yep)	5	870
Let the Circle Be Unbroken (Mildred Taylor)	5	850
Dicey's Song (Cynthia Voigt)	2	710
The Golden Compass (Philip Pullman)	2	930
A Separate Peace (John Knowles)	2	1110
Summer of My German Soldier (Bette Greene)	2	800
**Black Ships Before Troy: The Story of the Iliad* (Rosemary Sutcliff)	1	1300
**The Dark is Rising* (Susan Cooper)	1	920
Gutsy Girls: Young Women Who Dare (Tina Schwager and Michele Schuerger)	1	1120
**Little Women* (Louisa May Alcott)	1	1230
The Prince and the Pauper (Mark Twain)	1	1170
The Sign of the Chrysanthemum (Katherine Paterson)	1	870
Mrs. Mike (Benedict and Nancy Friedman)	0	710
**The Tale of the Mandarin Ducks* (Katherine Paterson)	0	930
Troubling a Star (Madeleine L'Engle)	0	850

Note: Asterisks indicate Common Core (Appendix B) exemplars.

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Table 6. Specific reading materials for middle school grades (6-8) (continued)

MORE SHORT STORIES/DRAMA	% teachers who taught this text	Lexiles
"The Tell-Tale Heart" (Edgar Allan Poe)	44	1350
"Thank You, Ma'am" (Langston Hughes)	36	+
None of these	28	
**The Diary of Anne Frank: A Play* (F. E. Goodrich and A. F. Hackett)	27	550
"Flowers for Algernon" (Daniel Keyes)	26	910
"Raymond's Run" (Toni Cade Bambara)	22	+
"Charles" (Shirley Jackson)	19	+
*"Eleven" (Sandra Cisneros)	17	+
"A Retrieved Reformation" (O. Henry)	14	+
"The Medicine Bag" (Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve)	8	+
"Paul Bunyan of the North Woods" (Carl Sandburg)	7	+
Anne Frank and Me (Cherie Bennett)	4	+
"The Storyteller" (Saki)	4	+
"The White Umbrella" (Gish Jen)	4	+
**Sorry, Wrong Number* (Louise Fletcher)	2	+
The Governess (Neil Simon)	1	+
"The Ninny" (Anton Chekhov)	<.5	+
"Water Names" (Lan Samantha Chang)	<.5	+

Note: Asterisks indicate Common Core (Appendix B) exemplars.
Note: Plus sign indicates Lexile score is unavailable.

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Table 6. Specific reading materials for middle school grades (6-8) (continued)

POETRY	% teachers who taught this text	Lexiles
*"The Road Not Taken" (Robert Frost)	44	+
*"Paul Revere's Ride" (Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)	30	+
*"Jabberwocky" (Lewis Carroll)	29	+
None of these	29	
*"I, Too, Sing America" (Langston Hughes)	28	+
*"O Captain! My Captain!" (Walt Whitman)	27	+
*"Oranges" (Gary Soto)	18	+
"Harlem Night Song" (Langston Hughes)	15	+
*"Chicago" (Carl Sandburg)	8	+
"The Drum (for Martin Luther King, Jr.)" (Nikki Giovanni)	7	+
"Silver" (Walter de la Mare)	7	+
*"The New Colossus" (Emma Lazarus)	6	+
"Blow, Blow, Thou Winter Wind" (William Shakespeare)	5	+
"Cat!" (Eleanor Farjeon)	4	+
"For My Sister Molly Who in the Fifties" (Alice Walker)	4	+
"Ring Out, Wild Bells" (Alfred, Lord Tennyson)	4	+
"The Sky is Low, the Clouds are Mean" (Emily Dickinson)	4	+
"The City is So Big" (Richard Garcia)	3	+
"Almost a Summer Sky" (Jacqueline Woodson)	2	+
*"Ode to Enchanted Light" (Pablo Neruda)	2	+
*"The Railway Train" (Emily Dickinson)	2	+
*"The Book of Questions" (Pablo Neruda)	1	+
*"A Poem for My Librarian, Mrs. Long" (Nikki Giovanni)	1	+
*"The Song of Wandering Aengus" (William Butler Yeats)	1	+
*"Twelfth Song of Thunder" (Navajo tradition)	1	+
*"Your World" (Georgia Douglas Johnson)	1	+

Note: Asterisks indicate Common Core (Appendix B) exemplars.
Note: Plus sign indicates Lexile score is unavailable.

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Table 6. Specific reading materials for middle school grades (6-8) (continued)

INFORMATIONAL TEXTS	% teachers who taught this text	Lexiles
None of these	56	
**Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railway* (Ann Petry)	21	1000
"The American Dream" (Martin Luther King, Jr.)	19	+
Brown v. Board of Education (Walter Dean Myers)	10	+
**Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Frederick Douglass)	10	1030
"Harriet Tubman: Guide to Freedom" (Ann Petry)	8	+
**Lincoln: A Photobiography* (Russell Freedman)	8	1040
"The Trouble with Television" (Robert MacNeil)	6	+
"Baseball" (Lionel G. Garcia)	5	+
"On Women's Right to Suffrage" (Susan B. Anthony)	5	+
**Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (John Steinbeck)	5	1010
"Why Leaves Turn Color in the Fall" (Diane Ackerman)	5	+
*"Letter on Thomas Jefferson" (John Adams)	3	+
"Achieving the American Dream" (Mario Cuomo)	2	+
*"Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat: Address to Parliament on May 13, 1940" (Winston Churchill)	2	+
"Making Tracks on Mars" (Andrew Mishkin)	2	+
"Saving the Wetlands" (Barbara A. Lewis)	2	1130
"Sharing in the American Dream" (Colin Powell)	2	+
"Animal Craftsmen" (Bruce Brooks)	1	+
"Forest Fire" (Anäis Nin)	1	+
"Science and the Sense of Wonder" (Isaac Asimov)	1	+

Note: Asterisks indicate Common Core (Appendix B) exemplars.
Note: Plus sign indicates Lexile score is unavailable.

High School

The responses from high school teachers are summarized in Table 7. The data suggest that text selections at these grades are even less standardized than those at the elementary or middle school. The same patterns revealed in the analyses of elementary and middle school teachers' responses are also evident here for the most part, but because of the greater diversity of text use, they are not as clear cut or systematic. There was greater consistency, for example, in the choice of short stories/drama than for stories/books, and there was greater unanimity when it came to literary texts than informational ones. However, the average story (with the first two categories combined) is taught by approximately 8 percent of high school teachers, as is the average poem (both statistics are lower than for elementary or middle school teachers). As noted earlier, the CCSS standards do not specify a curriculum or reading canon; the exemplar texts are just that. Further, teachers are surely assigning many selections that our lists do not capture. Still, the fact that 30 percent and 24 percent of high school teachers said that they never assign any of the high-quality texts in the two story categories and 44 percent never assign any of the poems does suggest they could do a better job challenging their students with suitably complex selections.

Despite the fact that high school teachers report less teaching of informational text overall, their responses reflect a greater consensus as to which informational texts or literary nonfiction texts to teach. For instance, the average informational text included in our survey was taught on average by more than 6 percent of the teachers. There were also some texts that were taught by a relatively large number of high school teachers (for example, 38 percent taught Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech). No informational texts at the other grade levels achieved such wide use. Nine of the twenty-four informational text selections are being taught by at least 5 percent of these high school teachers, several of them with reasonably high frequencies of use. In fact, all but one of the informational texts were being taught by at least some of the high school English teachers.

Table 7. Specific reading materials for high school grades (9-10)

STORIES (includes books)	% teachers who taught this text	Lexiles
**To Kill a Mockingbird* (Harper Lee)	35	870
None of these	30	
**The Odyssey* (Homer)	27	1130
**Fahrenheit 451* (Ray Bradbury)	14	890
**Things Fall Apart* (Chinua Achebe)	9	890
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Mark Twain)	7	990
The Crucible (Arthur Miller)^	7	1320
1984 (George Orwell)	5	1090
**The Metamorphosis* (Franz Kafka)	5	1340
**The Book Thief* (Markus Zusak)	4	730
Brave New World (Aldous Huxley)	4	1360
**The Grapes of Wrath* (John Steinbeck)	3	+
**The Joy Luck Club* (Amy Tan)	3	930
Gulliver's Travels (Jonathan Swift)	2	1330
**In the Time of the Butterflies* (Julia Alvarez)	2	910
**Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Bronte)	2	890
**Candide, or the Optimist* (F. A. M. De Voltaire)	1	1110
**Pride and Prejudice* (Jane Austen)	1	1100
Robinson Crusoe (Daniel Defoe)	1	1360
Silas Marner (George Eliot)	1	1330
A Tale of Two Cities (Charles Dickens)	1	990
The Fellowship of the Ring (J. R. R. Tolkien)	<.5	860
**The Killer Angels* (Michael Shaara)	<.5	610
The Princess Bride (William Goldman)	<.5	870
**Fathers and Sons* (Ivan Turgenev)	0	980
Lost Horizon (James Hilton)	0	1060

Note: Asterisks indicate Common Core (Appendix B) exemplars.
Note: Plus sign indicates Lexile score is unavailable.

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Table 7. Specific reading materials for high school grades (9-10) (continued)

SHORT STORIES/DRAMA	% teachers who taught this text	Lexiles
The Tragedy of Julius Caesar (William Shakespeare)	32	+
*"The Gift of the Magi" (O. Henry)	29	+
"The Masque of the Red Death" (Edgar Allan Poe)	25	+
None of these	24	
"The Monkey's Paw" (W. W. Jacobs)	22	+
Antigone (Sophocles)	20	+
"Contents of the Dead Man's Pocket" (Jack Finney)	16	+
**Oedipus Rex* (Sophocles)	11	+
A Raisin in the Sun (Lorraine Hansbury)	10	+
"How Much Land Does a Man Need?" (Leo Tolstoy)	7	+
**The Tragedy of Macbeth* (William Shakespeare)	7	+
**A Doll's House* (Henrik Ibsen)	5	+
**The Glass Menagerie* (Tennessee Williams)	5	+
"A Visit to Grandmother" (William Melvin Kelley)	4	+
"Damon and Pythias" (Classic Greek Myth)	3	+
*"I Stand Here Ironing" (Tillie Olsen)	3	+
"Like the Sun" (R. K. Narayan)	3	+
"Hearts and Hands" (O. Henry)	1	+
*"Master Harold and the Boys" (Athol Fugard)	1	+
*"The Nose" (Nikolai Gogol)	1	+
"The Threads of Time" (C. J. Cherryh)	1	+
An Enemy of the People (Henrik Ibsen)	<.5	+
**Rhinoceros* (Eugene Ionesco)	<.5	+
Tibet Through the Red Box (David Henry Hwang)	<.5	+

Note: Asterisks indicate Common Core (Appendix B) exemplars.
Note: Plus sign indicates Lexile score is unavailable.

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Table 7. Specific reading materials for high school grades (9-10) (continued)

POETRY	% teachers who taught this text	Lexiles
None of these	44	
*"The Raven" (Edgar Allan Poe)	28	+
*"Sonnet 73" (William Shakespeare)	22	+
"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" (Dylan Thomas)	16	+
*"Ozymandias" (Percy Bysshe Shelley)	9	+
"Women" (Alice Walker)	9	+
"The Fish" (Elizabeth Bishop)	8	+
*"I Am Offering this Poem to You" (Jimmy Santiago Baca)	8	+
"Making a Fist" (Naomi Shihab Nye)	7	+
*"Mowing" (Robert Frost)	6	+
*"Loveliest of Trees" (A. E. Housman)	5	+
*"We Grow Accustomed to the Dark" (Emily Dickinson)	5	+
"The Bridegroom" (Alexander Pushkin)	4	+
"Fear" (Gabriela Mistral)	4	+
"The Guitar" (Federico Garcia Lorca)	4	+
*"Yet Do I Marvel" (Countee Cullen)	4	+
"Danny Deever" (Rudyard Kipling)	3	+
"Lift Every Voice and Sing" (James Weldon Johnson)	3	+
*"Musée des Beaux Arts" (Wystan Hugh Auden)	3	+
"Spring and All" (William Carlos Williams)	3	+
*"Song" (John Donne)	2	+
"The Street" (Octavio Paz)	1	+
"A Tree Telling of Orpheus" (Denise Levertov)	1	+

Note: Asterisks indicate Common Core (Appendix B) exemplars.
Note: Plus sign indicates Lexile score is unavailable.

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Table 7. Specific reading materials for high school grades (9-10) (continued)

INFORMATIONAL TEXTS	% teachers who taught this text	Lexiles
None of these	44	
*"I Have a Dream" (Martin Luther King)	38	1130
**I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Maya Angelou)~	23	1330
*"Letter from Birmingham Jail" (Martin Luther King, Jr.)	20	+
*"Gettysburg Address" (Abraham Lincoln)	16	1340
"Keep Memory Alive" (Elie Wiesel)	7	+
*"Hope, Despair and Memory" (Elie Wiesel)	6	+
*"Second Inaugural Address" (Abraham Lincoln)	5	+
*"Speech to the Second Virginia Convention" (Patrick Henry)	5	+
The Way to Rainy Mountain (N. Scott Momaday)	5	890
*"Farewell Address" (George Washington)	4	+
*"State of the Union Address" (1941) (Franklin Delano Roosevelt)	4	+
"Speech on Japanese American Internment" (Gerald Ford)	3	+
"The Marginal World" (Rachel Carson)	2	+
"Marian Anderson: Famous Concert Singer" (Langston Hughes)	2	+
Nobel Lecture (Alexander Solzhenitsyn)	2	+
Swimming to Antarctica (Lynne Cox)	2	940
What Makes a Degas a Degas? (Richard Muhlberger)	2	+
"The American Idea" (T. H. White)	1	+
"How to React to Familiar Faces" (Umberto Eco)	1	+
*"'I Am an American Day' Address" (Learned Hand)	1	+
*"A Quilt of a Country" (Anna Quindlen)	1	+
*"Address to Students at Moscow State University" (Ronald Reagan)	<.5	+
*"Remarks to the Senate in Support of a Declaration of Conscience" (Margaret Chase Smith)	<.5	+
"Speech During the Invasion of Constantinople" (Empress Theodora)	0	+

Note: Asterisks indicate Common Core (Appendix B) exemplars.

Note: Plus sign indicates Lexile score is unavailable.

Note: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was inadvertently dropped from the list that was included on the survey. We regret the error.

^ Miller's *The Crucible* is a drama; it was inaccurately listed in the stories category in the survey.

~ Angelou's selection is autobiographical and is listed in Appendix B of the Common Core State Standards, and here, as informational.

Although some consensus is evident, note, too, that 44 percent of these high school teachers didn't teach *any* of the informational texts on our list. Even those selected by relatively large percentages of high school English teachers were still only taught by few teachers overall. For example, just 15 percent of English teachers said they teach the "Gettysburg Address," and even fewer included speeches like Lincoln's "Second Inaugural Address," Patrick Henry's "Speech to the Second Virginia Convention," or Washington's "Farewell Address." Of course, these documents could be presented to students in history or social studies courses, though it is unlikely that they would analyze the language or rhetorical features of these founding documents in a non-ELA class.

Again, there was a slight preference for assigning the easier texts in these lists, though as with the elementary and middle school teachers, these differences were not statistically significant.

How consistent are high school reading assignments?

Researchers have long wondered about which texts high school English teachers teach.[35] Unfortunately, those past studies are not strictly comparable with the results found here because of methodological or reporting differences. For example, Applebee (1992) reported which titles were most frequently required in Grades 9 through 12 and his results differ from ours relative to percentages assigned to particular texts. For instance, *Macbeth, Huckleberry Finn, Julius Caesar,* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* were assigned frequently in high schools according to Applebee; these same titles appear somewhat less often in our survey. However, the difference in these estimates is likely due to what was asked: students are very likely to read a text like *Macbeth* sometime during high school, but may not be reading it in tenth grade (the last high school grade covered in our survey). In any event, the evidence shows that high school students are often assigned literary readings that are consistent with the CCSS exemplar texts.

Summary of text selection

In summary, English language arts teachers at all of the grades surveyed here (4-10) indicate that they currently teach a mix of literary and informational texts. They also report already teaching many of the texts that illustrate the level, depth, and complexity of reading that will be expected of them under the Common Core State Standards (though there was less consensus relative to informational texts than literary texts). At the same time, many of the texts are *not* being used in very many classrooms, and startlingly large percentages of teachers don't teach *any* of these selections. For instance, as many as 56 percent of middle school teachers report not teaching any of the informational texts listed in the survey. Of course, it is possible that these teachers were assigning *other* books of equal merit and complexity or that the selections were being taught by other English, science, or history teachers in the school. Still, these particular works reflect outstanding artistic merit and have shaped our national heritage; it is surprising that an ELA teacher would teach none of them. Whether this indicates a lack of response to the demands of new educational standards remains to be seen; our follow-up survey in 2015 will tackle this question.

How are instructional texts selected and what is their role in instructional planning?

The act of reading always involves both the reading process and the text. Readers have to decode words, grasp meanings, interpret grammatical structures, and think about the ideas expressed by the word combinations. Successful readers must develop a number of skills and strategies that allow them to do all of this efficiently and coherently—and then do it again with other texts. Further, some texts play an important role in our cultural lives—texts that are worth knowing because they allow us to share a heritage, a culture, and a history.

In the past, state academic standards have placed greater emphasis on the skills and strategies entailed in the reading process than on the texts themselves. The Common Core, by contrast, emphasizes the importance of text to a much greater extent. It does so by specifying text readability levels; suggesting proportions of time to be devoted to informational and literary texts; and including exemplar texts that illustrate the various text features, characteristics, or content that students should be exposed to at various grade levels. It also places heavy emphasis on the "close reading" of those texts.

How central is text in the current teaching of America's English language arts classes? And how do texts find their way into the classroom and curriculum? Table 8 summarizes teachers' responses to questions about these aspects of ELA instruction.

Table 8. Selection and centrality of classroom texts

How often, if at all, do you use a textbook or literature anthology in this class?				
	Total	Elem	Middle	High
Use it regularly as primary teaching tool	35%	43%	29%	34%
Use it occasionally as a resource	39	29	45	40
Use it rarely	12	12	14	11
Never use it but there is one for this class	5	7	3	5
Do not have a textbook or anthology	10	9	10	10
Not sure	<.5	1	<.5	<.5
How much influence does each of the following have when it comes to deciding which authors and/or titles will be covered in this class? % saying "a great deal" of influence				
	Total	Elem	Middle	High
Availability of materials	60%	60%	60%	60%
Teacher choice	57	59	60	54
School district	28	29	30	26
Department	24	12	23	31
And which of these has the MOST influence when it comes to deciding which authors and/or titles will be covered in this class? (Choose one.)				
	Total	Elem	Middle	High
Availability of materials	33%	37%	35%	30%
School district	15	17	15	14
Department	10	3	10	15
Teacher choice	36	37	36	37
Something else (e.g., combination, student interest, standards)	5	6	5	4
Not sure	1	<.5	0	1

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Table 8. Selection and centrality of classroom texts (continued)

Here are two common approaches to teaching English language arts and reading. Which comes closer to describing your own approach in this class?				
	Total	Elem	Middle	High
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	37%	22%	36%	47%
OR				
Focus instruction on reading skills and strategies first, e.g., main idea, summarizing, 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	56	73	56	46
Something else or both	7	5	8	8
Not sure	<.5	0	0	<.5

The majority of elementary and middle school teachers currently place greater emphasis on reading skills than on the text, while high school teachers are evenly divided. In other words, teachers, overall, say that reading skills and strategies are currently their instructional focus and students are expected to apply those skills to whatever texts happen to be used in the classroom. Unlike previous questions that address reading assignments, this one gets at the heart of how ELA teachers conceptualize their role and that of the texts they select and assign. Clearly, these teachers will need to alter their fundamental instructional emphasis—and the way they view the purpose of texts—to fulfill the promise of CCSS.

Because many curricular decisions are outside the control of teachers, our survey also asked whether textbooks or literature anthologies are used in the classroom and who makes these choices. The data show that textbooks currently play an important, though not dominant, role in English language arts teaching.[36] More than one-third of the teachers surveyed report that they regularly use textbooks as their primary teaching tool, but a plurality (39 percent) said that they use textbooks "occasionally as a resource," and the remainder said they never or rarely use a textbook (or that they do not have one available). Elementary teachers are more likely to use textbooks regularly as a primary teaching tool than are middle or high school teachers.

The survey also probed the complex process by which texts are selected for classroom use, inquiring about the availability of materials, district and departmental policies, and teacher choices. Majorities of teachers at all grade levels report that the availability of materials and teachers own choices have "a great deal" of influence when deciding which authors or titles will be covered in their classrooms. The numbers were considerably smaller when it came to the influence of the district or department. When asked to choose which of the four had the most influence on determining the works to be covered, teacher choice and availability of materials were essentially tied across grade levels.

The survey did not ask specifically about the role of states in the text selection process, though there was a category that indicated that "something else" influenced their decision. Still, just 5 percent of teachers overall chose this response.[37]

How familiar are teachers with CCSS and how far along is their school in implementing the standards?

Teachers were queried about their attitude toward the Common Core standards, and their familiarity with and preparation for implementing them. They were also asked to estimate their school's progress in implementing the Common Core at that point in time (2012). Table 9 summarizes their responses. The vast majority of English teachers (90 percent) in 2012 claimed to be at least somewhat familiar with the standards, and most (65 percent) reported that they had, at that time, already received some professional development with regard to them. Generally, their opinions about Common Core appear cautiously optimistic; most (62 percent) indicated that, of as 2012, they thought the standards would have at least some positive learning benefits for their students (from *a little bit* to *a great deal*), while 11 percent thought that no learning gains would result and 18 percent said it was "too soon to tell." These responses were consistent across the grades; elementary, middle school, and high school teachers characterized the standards similarly.

Table 9. Implementation progress with Common Core State Standards

How familiar are you with the Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts?				
	Total	**Elem**	**Middle**	**High**
Combination of very and somewhat familiar	90%	85%	93%	91%
Very familiar	39	23	47	43
Somewhat familiar	51	62	46	48
Not too familiar	7	12	5	6
Not at all familiar	3	3	2	3
Not sure	<.5	<.5	<.5	<.5

Have you had professional development or other training to prepare you for teaching the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts? *(Asked of those who are very, somewhat, or not too familiar with CCSS/ELA.)*				
	Total	**Elem**	**Middle**	**High**
Number of respondents	1119	291	361	467
Yes	65%	56%	71%	66%
No	33	42	27	32
Not sure	2	3	1	2

To what extent have the Common Core State Standards been implemented at your school? *(Asked of those who are very, somewhat, or not too familiar with CCSS/ELA.)*				
	Total	**Elem**	**Middle**	**High**
Number of respondents	1119	291	361	467
Fully implemented	12%	8%	18%	11%
Not quite fully implemented; well on their way	32	29	30	35
Partially implemented, but with a lot more to do	25	27	24	26
Barely implemented, if at all	29	34	27	27
Not sure	2	3	2	2

How much has the English Language Arts curriculum at your school changed as a result of the Common Core State Standards? *(Asked of those who are very, somewhat, or not too familiar with CCSS/ELA.)*				
	Total	**Elem**	**Middle**	**High**
Number of respondents	1117	290	361	466
A great deal	13%	8%	18%	12%
Somewhat	35	30	37	36
A little bit	24	28	20	24
No change	21	24	18	20
Not sure	8	9	7	8

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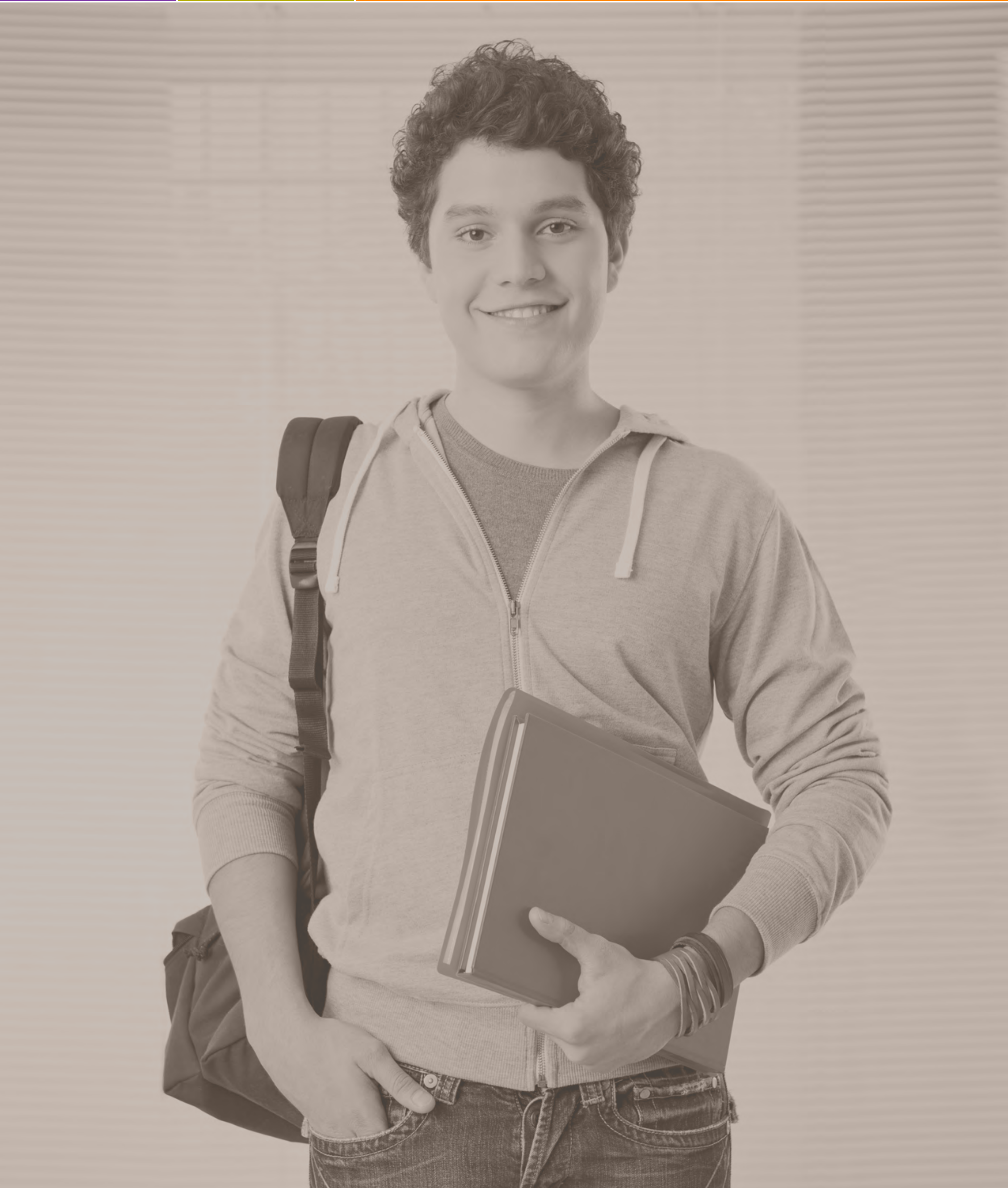
Table 9. Implementation progress with Common Core State Standards (continued)

Thinking about the current school year, how much have you changed the way you teach English Language Arts as a result of the Common Core State Standards? *(Asked of those who are very, somewhat, or not too familiar with CCSS/ELA.)*				
	Total	**Elem**	**Middle**	**High**
Number of respondents	1117	290	361	466
A great deal	10%	5%	14%	9%
Somewhat	36	36	36	37
A little bit	25	24	25	25
No change	26	31	22	26
Not sure	4	5	3	3

How much do you think student learning in the English Language Arts will improve as a result of the Common Core State Standards? *(Asked of those who are very, somewhat, or not too familiar with CCSS/ELA.)*				
	Total	**Elem**	**Middle**	**High**
Number of respondents	1099	286	355	458
A great deal	13%	13%	13%	13%
Somewhat	35	34	39	34
A little bit	14	12	13	15
Not at all	11	8	6	16
It's too soon to tell	18	21	20	15
Not sure	10	12	10	8

Despite these teachers' familiarity with and generally positive opinions of the standards, implementation was far from finished in their schools in 2012 when they completed this survey. Only about one in ten teachers reported fully implementing the standards so far. However, most teachers saw progress. Sixty-nine percent thought the standards were either well on their way or partially in place at their schools in 2012, and 72 percent believe the standards had influenced their school's curriculum already. Still, 29 percent said the standards had been "barely implemented, if at all." Teacher responses claimed greater progress in implementation at the secondary level than in the elementary grades.

Clearly, even early in the winter of 2012, considerable progress had been made in the implementation of the Common Core. Most teachers had received some professional development or training and sizeable numbers reported changes at their school and in their own teaching practice as a result. Still, full implementation and impact will take time.



Conclusion

Common Core is a work in progress in American schools. Schools at the time of this survey had a long way to go to fully realize the promises of these new standards, and so far as we can determine (from other sources) many schools still do have a vast distance remaining to be covered. Most teachers believe the standards promise better learning for their students, and the majority say that their schools have already made progress toward implementing the standards, including relevant curriculum changes and professional development. Also, some teachers report that they are already teaching with grade-level-appropriate texts, and the majority of respondents already say that they include at least some informational texts in their English language arts curriculum. Schools now need to build on these early foundations to make the Common Core a reality for American students.

Although many teachers believe that much progress has been made already, their answers show important gaps in meeting many of the Common Core requirements. Teachers recognize the potential value of the standards, but they may be underestimating the amount of change that still will be required to reach these outcomes. Their answers, though hopeful, suggest that major changes still need to be made if these ambitious educational goals are to be realized.

Appendix

Methodology and participant characteristics

This report is based on a survey of 1,154 public school teachers who teach English, language arts, or reading, including 300 elementary teachers (fourth and fifth grade), 370 middle school teachers (sixth, seventh, and eighth grade), and 484 high school teachers (ninth and tenth grade). It includes teachers from the forty-six states and the District of Columbia that had adopted the Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts as of February 2012; the four excluded states are Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia. The survey was fielded via Internet and mail between February 9 and March 22, 2012. The margin of error for the overall sample is plus or minus 3 percentage points; it is plus or minus 6 for elementary, 5 for middle, and 4 for high school teachers. The survey was preceded by three focus groups. Both the survey and focus groups were conducted by the Farkas Duffett Research Group (FDR Group) for The Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

Research goals

The goal for this research was twofold:

1. To learn more about teachers' experiences and what they report is being assigned in English classrooms today—what is being taught as well as how it is being taught—to establish a baseline for comparison. The survey is to be repeated in three years' time to measure the impact of the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts in the nation's classrooms.
1. To ascertain titles and authors that public school teachers of English, language arts, and reading report using in their classrooms to allow the text complexity and rigor to be analyzed.

Sampling, access to participants, and survey

Names were randomly drawn from a comprehensive national database of approximately 3.5 million K-12 educators maintained by Agile Education Marketing in Denver, CO. Approximately 79 percent of the database includes records with e-mail addresses, and 21 percent includes records with mailing addresses only (no e-mail contact information). The process for selecting names was as follows:

1. To ensure that those with and without e-mail addresses would have an equal opportunity to participate, the database was divided into two distinct groups: one with e-mail addresses and one with mailing addresses only.
2. All records form Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia were excluded.
3. Representative samples of public school teachers were drawn based on grade level and subject:
    a. For elementary school, all fourth- and fifth-grade public school teachers were included, and a total of 8,700 names were drawn: 8,000 with e-mail addresses and 700 without. The number of completed surveys by elementary school teachers is 300.

b. For middle school, all teachers who teach English, language arts, literature, or reading were included (this includes sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade teachers), and a total of 8,700 names were drawn: 8,000 with e-mail addresses and 700 without. The number of completed surveys with middle school teachers is 370.

c. For high school, all teachers who teach English, language arts, literature, or reading were included. Because high school teachers in the database are identified by subject matter and not by individual grade, this included all ninth-, tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-grade teachers; in the end, only those who identified themselves as ninth- or tenth-grade teachers were permitted to complete the survey. A total of 14,700 names were drawn: 14,000 with e-mail addresses and 700 without. The number of completed interviews with high school teachers is 484.

4. A multi-mode approach was used; the survey instrument was designed, tested, and tailored for use both online and on paper. Potential respondents were invited to participate in one of two ways:

   a. Teachers with e-mail addresses were sent invitations explaining the research and asked to complete the survey online; a link to the survey was embedded in the invitation. An original message was sent on February 28-29, 2011, and a follow-up to non-respondents was sent on March 3-5. A total of 30,000 e-mail messages were sent. Of these, 28,011 were delivered; 3,889 were opened; and in 1,872 cases the survey link was clicked. In total, 881 completed interviews were obtained from this approach.

   b. Teachers with mailing addresses only were sent letters via U.S. Priority Mail explaining the research; they were asked to complete a paper version of the questionnaire and return it in an enclosed postage-paid envelope. They also received a telephone call alerting them to expect the Priority Mail. The letter was posted February 9-10, 2012, and questionnaires completed and received by March 22 were included. Priority Mail is more expensive than First Class, but it has the advantage of a special envelope—large, thick stock paper, colored red, white, and blue—so it is more likely to be noticed by its recipient. Also, it is guaranteed to arrive at its destination within two or three business days. A total of 2,100 Priority Mail letters were sent and 273 completed paper surveys were received and data entered.

An analysis of the data comparing responses from those who completed the survey online versus on paper showed no substantive differences. There are two minor differences that are demographic in nature. For example, although majorities at each grade level completed the survey online, the proportion of high school teachers is higher than the others (elementary: 65 percent, middle: 76 percent, high: 83 percent). Similarly, suburban teachers were more likely to complete the survey online, although majorities from each of the urbanicity sub-groups did so (urban: 77 percent, suburban: 87 percent, small town: 70 percent, rural: 68 percent). Table 1 includes a demographic breakdown of the sample.

As with all surveys, the risk of non-response is that the pool of survey respondents could differ from the true population of teachers, decreasing the ability to draw inferences from the data. Table 2 provides a comparison between the data for the national teacher population and the sample based on key demographic variables. The population and sample data are not exactly the same: the national data included teachers from all fifty states, all K-12 grades, and all subjects; the sample data excluded four states, and included only teachers from certain grades and from one subject area. Results also can be affected by non-sampling sources of bias, such as question wording. Steps were taken to minimize these wording issues, including pre-testing the survey instrument.

All surveys were programmed, fielded, and tabulated by Clark Research, of Sioux Falls, SD. The questionnaire was crafted by the FDR Group in conjunction with The Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

Focus groups

To help develop the questionnaire, three focus groups with public school teachers who taught English, language arts, or reading were conducted during the summer of 2011, one each in Connecticut, North Carolina, and Ohio. The purpose of the focus groups was to gain firsthand understanding of the views of English teachers, to develop new hypotheses based on their input, and to design the survey items using language and terms that teachers are comfortable with. Participants were recruited to ensure an appropriate demographic mix of teachers by grade, socio-economic status of schools, and urbanicity. All focus groups were moderated by Ann Duffett of the FDR Group.

Readabilities of exemplar texts

The MetaMetrics website was used as the source of readabilities for the various texts included in the exemplar lists. Lexiles cannot be used to measure the difficulty of poetry, so there are no readability estimates for those texts. If MetaMetrics did not report a Lexile level for a given entry, then it is not reported in these tables. As noted earlier, teachers sometimes assign abridged or amended versions of texts to facilitate student reading. Accordingly, MetaMetrics often reports multiple Lexile levels for certain texts, reflecting the availability of easier versions. For the purposes of these analyses, the Lexiles for the original or unabridged versions of the texts are included, though this could reflect an overestimate of the difficulty levels of the texts actually being used in these classrooms. Similarly, it is possible teachers would assign only portions of a text, such as when selections appear in anthology. Again, in such cases, the readability estimate in the tables may represent an overestimate of how widely used the actual texts are.

Endnotes

1. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., “Reading Comprehension Requires Knowledge—of Words and the World,” *American Educator,* Spring 2003, http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/spring2003/AE_SPRNG.pdf.

2. Daniel T. Willingham, “How we Learn: Ask the Cognitive Scientist,” *American Educator,* Winter 2006/2007, http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter0607/CogSci.pdf.

3. Martin West, Testing, Learning, and Teaching: The Effects of Test-based Accountability on Student Achievement and Instructional Time in Core Academic Subjects,” in *Beyond the Basics: Achieving a Liberal Education for All Children*, Thomas B. Fordham Institute (Washington, D.C., 2007), 45-61.

4. Sandra Stotsky, Joan Traffas, James Woodworth, *Literary Study in Grades 9, 10, and 11: A National Survey* (Boston, MA: Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers, Spring 2010).

5. That said, we cannot know from these survey results how many teachers may be assigning other high-quality informational texts of suitable difficulty. Some undoubtedly are doing so.

6. While a number of states have considered pulling out of the CCSS, any implementation “pauses” have occurred solely in the statehouses. The CCSS for English language arts are still the standards guiding curriculum and instruction in forty-six states and D.C.

7. “Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects,” Common Core State Standards Initiative, page 8, accessed October 11, 2013, http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf.

8. National data include the four states excluded from this sample (Alaska, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia).

9. US Dept of Ed, NCES, Schools and Staffing Survey, “Public School Teacher Data File,” 2007-08.

10. Ibid, includes full- and part-time teachers.

11. Ibid, percentage of teachers approved for free or reduced-price lunch.

12. Ibid.

13. G. R. Klare, “Readability,” in *Handbook of Reading Research,* ed. P. D. Pearson (New York: Longman, 1984), 681-744.

14. J. S. Chall and S. S. Conrad, *Should Textbooks Challenge students? The Case for Easier or Harder Books* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991); A. Morgan, B. R. Wilcox, and J. L. Eldredge, “Effect of Difficulty Levels on Second-grade Delayed Readers Using Dyad Reading,” *Journal of Educational Research* 94 (2000), 113-119.

15. J. S. Chall, S. S. Conrad, and S. H. Harris, *An Analysis of Textbooks in Relation to Declining SAT Scores* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1977); D. A. Gamson, X. Lu, & S. A. Eckert, “Challenging the Research Base of the Common Core State Standards: A Historical Reanalysis of Text Complexity,” *Educational Researcher,* 42(7) (2013), 381-391; D. P. Hayes, L. T. Wolfer, and M. F. Wolfe, “Schoolbook Simplification and its Relations to SAT-verbal Scores,” *American Educational Research Journal* 33 (1996), 489-508.

16. Because readability measures are imperfect, CCSS offer extensive advice on supplementary qualitative criteria that can be used to adjust the placement of individual texts. This means teachers might decide to place a book a bit higher or lower in the curriculum than the quantitative readability estimates alone would suggest. They might do this, for instance, when a text's complexity is inconsistent, such as when it uses plain language, but conveys sophisticated information (e.g., *To Kill a Mockingbird*). Nevertheless, even with such qualitative adjustments, it is expected that students will be taught with more challenging books than they have been in the recent past.

17. American College Testing, *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading* (Iowa City, IO: ACT, 2006).

18. J. Hasbrouck, and G. A. Tindal, "Oral Reading Fluency Norms: A Valuable Assessment Tool for Reading Teachers," *The Reading Teacher* 59 (2006), 636-644.

19. A. Morgan et al., "Effect of Difficulty Levels on Second-grade Delayed Readers Using Dyad Reading" *The Journal of Educational Research* 94(2000), 113-119; R. E. O'Connor, H. L. Swanson, and C. Geraghty, "Improvement in Reading Rate under Independent and Difficult Text Levels: Influences on Word and Comprehension Skills, *Journal of Educational Psychology* 102 (2010), 1-19; W. R. Powell, "Reappraising the Criteria for Interpreting Informal Inventories," in *Reading Diagnoses and Education,* ed. J. DeBoer (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1970); T. Shanahan, "The Informal Reading Inventory and the Instructional Level: The Study That Never Took Place," in *Reading Research Revisited,* eds. L. Gentile, M. L. Kamil, and J. Blanchard (Columbus, OH: Merrill, 1983), 577-580.

20. A. Morgan, et al., "Effect of Difficulty Levels on Second-grade Delayed Readers Using Dyad Reading."

21. E. A. Betts, *Foundations of Reading Instruction* (New York: American Book Company, 1946); I. C. Fountas and G. S. Pinnell, *Guided Reading* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996).

22. National Assessment Governing Board, *Reading Framework for the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

23. Literary nonfiction refers to texts that present arguments or factual information but using language and literary techniques usually associated with fiction or poetry.

24. Further, some critics have also charged that English teachers will no longer be allowed to teach poetry or short stories because the English class now must be devoted to informational text instead. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Typically, an English class makes up only one-sixth (17 percent) of students' high school schedules, but according to CCSS, literary text is to make up fully 30 percent of students' academic reading time—meaning that, depending on how much students read in their other classes, English classes could in some cases deal with nothing but literature. However, restricting English classes to novels, short stories, plays, and poetry alone would not be a good choice. Language arts teachers bring much to the table in terms of the analysis of language and rhetoric, and students could benefit greatly from the guidance of these teachers when reading forms such as essays or criticism or speeches (forms often referred to as "literary nonfiction," a category usually relegated to informational text). These kinds of texts have not been stressed much in previous state standards, but they are by CCSS.

25. N. K. Duke, "3.6 Minutes Per Day: The Scarcity of Informational Texts in First Grade," *Reading Research Quarterly* 35 (2000), 202-224; J. V. Hoffman, S. J. McCarthey, J. Abbott, C. Christian, L. Corman, C. Curry, M. Dressman, B. Elliott, D. Matherne, and D. Stahle, "So What's New in the New Basals? A Focus on First Grade," *Journal of Literacy Behavior* 26 (1994), 47-73; B. Moss, and E. Newton, "An Examination of the Informational Text Genre in Basal Readers, *Reading Psychology* 23 (2002), 1-13; R. L. Venezky, "The Origins of the Present Day Chasm Between Adult Literacy Needs and School Literacy Instruction," *Visible Language* 16 (1982), 113-136.

26. I. V. S. Mullis, M. O. Martin, A. M. Kennedy, and P. Foy, *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2006 International Report* (Boston: Boston College, 2007), http://timss.bc.edu/PDF/PIRLS2006_international_report.pdf; L. M. Sáenz, and L. S. Fuchs, "Examining the Reading Difficulty of Secondary Students with Learning Disabilities: Expository Versus Narrative Text," *Remedial and Special Education* 23 (2002), 31-41.

27. P. L. Ackerman and M. E. Beier, "Determinants of Domain Knowledge and Independent Study Learning in an Adult Sample," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 98 (2006), 366-381; E. D. Hirsch, "A Wealth of Words," *City Journal* 23, no. 1, 2013, http://www.city-journal.org/2013/23_1_vocabulary.html.

28. National Center for Educational Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: Economics 2006* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Education Science, U.S. Department of Education, 2007); National Center for Educational Statistics, The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2010 (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Education Science, U.S. Department of Education, 2011); National Center for Educational Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: Geography 2010* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Education Science, U.S. Department of Education, 2011); National Center for Educational Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: History 2010* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Education Science, U.S. Department of Education, 2011); National Center for Educational Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: Science 2011* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Education Science, U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

29. R. Barr and R. Dreeben, *How Schools Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

30. Teachers were asked to respond about one particular class of their choosing.

31. S. R. Asher, S. Hymel, and A. Wigfield, "Influence of Topic Interest on Children's Reading Comprehension," *Journal of Reading Behavior* 10 (1978), 35-47.

32. Recall that we surveyed ELA teachers in grades 4-10 only.

33. There are many measures of readability and there are many such measures that CCSS acknowledges and uses. However, initially CCSS only relied upon a single, widely used readability measure known as Lexiles. Because at the time this survey was conducted, only Lexiles had been approved for use by CCSS, this is the measure used here.

34. It is common practice for teachers to teach selections of full-length books and not the entire text; though we referenced full-length books in the survey, it is possible that teachers who marked books were only teaching book *selections*.

35. A. Applebee, *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: A History* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1974); A. Applebee, "Stability and Change in the High School Canon, *English Journal* 81, no. 5 (1992), 27-32; J. Lynch, and B. Evans, *High School English Textbooks: A Critical Examination* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963).

36. Textbooks in ELA classrooms are typically literary anthologies that organize selections by genre, author, or theme and include some informational or literary nonfiction texts.

37. Although some states have textbook approval processes, they typically do not select textbooks for school districts. These processes may limit the number of approved textbook choices, but local districts and schools (and even individual teachers) play a greater role than the state in deciding the instructional materials used in a given classroom.