



While most ELA teachers have not been aligning class materials to state standards, Louisiana teachers are outliers.

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Equipping Teachers to Align ELA Instruction to Standards

Current state standards set an ambitious vision for English language arts (ELA) and demand much of teachers: They are expected to engage students in close readings of complex, grade-level

texts, which in turn requires students to comprehend texts, follow authors' development of ideas, interpret words and phrases, and analyze structure. Yet most teachers do not know much about

the standards, and they often lack standards-aligned instructional materials to help students meet them.

Through the RAND American Teacher Panel—a nationally representative, longitudinal panel of teachers—we surveyed a randomly selected sample of K-12 public teachers in the U.S. in 2015, 2016, and 2017. The panel included representative samples of teachers for several states. Our study asked two main questions about ELA teachers’ responses: Do teachers know key aspects of their state standards for ELA? Do teachers have access to high-quality ELA instructional materials that can help them address those standards in the classroom?

The bottom line: Most ELA teachers do not know what their standards promote, much less use instructional materials that would allow them to address their standards. These findings changed very little over the three years. That is, most teachers did not gain knowledge about their standards over time. In fact, they appear to know less about their state ELA standards now than they did three years ago. Further, they are not using more standards-aligned published materials, although they may yet turn to standards-aligned textbooks as more high-quality materials enter the market and are adopted by districts.

Yet responses of teachers from one state—Louisiana—were somewhat of an outlier. Compared with other U.S. teachers, Louisiana teachers appeared to know more about their state ELA standards, use more standards-aligned materials, and report more standards-aligned instruction.

To get a handle on how well teachers know their ELA standards, the RAND survey asked them which of the following approaches for selecting texts were most aligned with their state standards:

- selecting texts for individual students based on their reading level;
- using abridged or adapted versions of complex texts for struggling readers;
- assigning complex texts that all students in a class are required to read; or
- selecting texts for a class based on qualitative factors like knowledge demands, as well as qualitative factors like word and sentence length.

The third and fourth approaches on this list align with most current college- and career-ready standards. Nearly all states have standards for text complexity, and many promote methods for determining text complexity.¹

The survey also asked teachers which reading approach was most aligned with their standards:

- teach particular novels, books, short stories, essays, and poems that students should read and then organize instruction around them, teaching a variety of reading skills and strategies as tools for students to understand texts; or
- focus on reading skills and strategies first (e.g., main ideas, summarization, author’s purpose), and then organize teaching around those skills and strategies so students can apply them to any book, short story, essay, or poem they read.

Most state standards emphasize text-focused instruction (i.e., using evidence from texts to make justifications and conclusions),² and when their standards mention comprehension skills like finding a main idea or the author’s purpose, they call for applying these skills in relation to texts and do not advocate for teaching them in isolation.

What Teachers Know about Standards

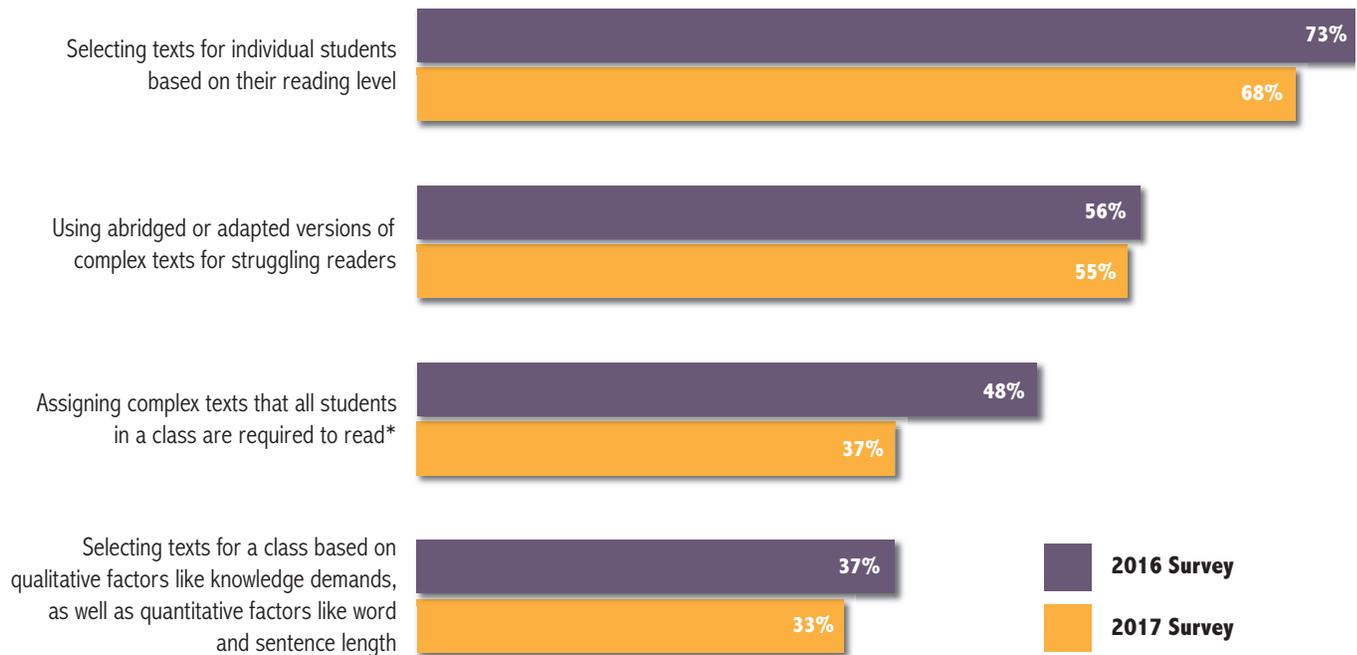
In response to our annual surveys, the majority of U.S. teachers tended to choose the approaches that were less aligned with standards rather than the more aligned ones. Less than half of teachers thought that “assigning complex texts that all students were required to read” and “selecting texts [based on qualitative and quantitative factors]” were aligned with their standards (figure 1). Similarly, lower percentages of teachers chose “assigning complex texts that all students are required to read” in 2017 compared with 2016. In response to each survey, over 70 percent of teachers reported that a “focus on reading skills and strategies first” was most aligned with their standards, despite the fact that no ELA and literacy standards explicitly advocate for teaching skills in isolation of texts.

What explains this gap between what most state standards for ELA and literacy actually say and what teachers think they say? The obvious explanation is that teachers are not exposed to

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Figure 1. ELA Teachers Indicating Approach Aligns with State Standards, 2016 and 2017 (percent)

English Language Arts Teachers Indicating Each Approach Was Aligned with Their Standards in 2016 and 2017 (N=434)



NOTE: Asterisk indicates significant difference between the same teachers' responses in 2016 and 2017, * $p < 0.05$.

Source: Julia H. Kaufman et al. *Changes in What Teachers Know and Do in the Common Core Era: American Teacher Panel Findings from 2015 to 2017*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018.

enough information about the content of their state standards. Or teachers may be receiving many conflicting messages about what is “standards-aligned” within the instructional materials they use, as well as the training and support they receive.

By far, the most commonly reported ELA materials used at the elementary and secondary level were leveled readers and tools that differentiate the difficulty of reading materials for students at different reading levels (e.g., Accelerated Reader, Reading A-Z, and RAZ-Kids). In addition, some of the most widely used ELA textbooks (e.g., Journeys, Reading Street, and Holt McDougal Literature) have been rated by EdReports.org—an independent organization that reviews instructional materials—as

not meeting the expectations of college- and career-ready standards.

Use of leveled readers is not necessarily misaligned with the college- and career-ready standards in place in most states. Teachers could provide students with “just-right” (i.e., leveled) texts during independent reading time while helping them access complex texts during whole-class instruction. Some reading experts encourage this, finding it appropriate and aligned with the college- and career-ready standards.³ That said, around one-third of elementary teachers in the survey indicated they use leveled readers during half or more of whole-class time, which implies that many students are not exposed to challenging texts at all.

Reading series that include leveled readers

can deepen teachers' confusion about what is aligned with their standards. Nearly every current textbook series publisher, including many with leveled readers, markets its alignment or "correlation" with the Common Core and college- and career-ready standards.⁴ Also, many professional development resources that market themselves as standards-aligned provide very different messages about what this instruction should look like.⁵

Whether leveled readers do or do not help students learn to read is a separate question that we did not address in this research. While several studies have suggested that students' reading improves when they are taught using challenging texts at or above their grade level, researchers have often emphasized the need for more studies on this issue.⁶ Our point is simply that teachers do not appear to know that their state standards generally emphasize use of complex texts and say nothing about use of leveled readers.

It falls to state education agencies and school systems to give teachers clear messages about what their ELA standards emphasize and which instructional materials could help teachers address those standards. Historically, school systems have taken on the brunt of this obligation, despite not always having the expertise and capacity. School systems also vary considerably in both the demographics and needs of students they serve and the resources they receive to support those students.⁷

Despite their potential role in providing more equitable supports across districts, state education agencies and state boards of education have generally not been regarded as a major player in guiding instruction. Instead, they traditionally adopt standards and approve lists of instructional materials. However, most research suggests that the myriad ways teachers try to make sense of standards guidance lead to large variations in the quality of classroom instruction.⁸

Given the immense burdens teachers face in aligning their instruction with learning standards, policymakers must consider two foundational needs to help cultivate and support that instruction. First, teachers need clear explanation of the standards. Communicating the goal of the standards is vital if teachers are to implement the ambitious, text-focused instruction as intended. Second, teachers require

instructional materials that are closely aligned with standards. If this alignment does not exist, teachers will lack the tools—and the guidance—to consistently address the standards in their instruction.

State Strategies in Louisiana

Can state leadership make a difference? Using American Teacher Panel data to compare reports from state-representative samples of teachers to reports from the national sample, we found that Louisiana teachers appeared to know more about their state ELA standards than teachers elsewhere.⁹ Specifically, while 70 percent of ELA teachers in states with college- and career-ready standards indicated that "selecting texts for individual students based on their reading levels" aligns with their state standards, only 47 percent of Louisiana teachers gave this response. And while 75 percent of surveyed ELA teachers indicated that a "focus on reading skills first" most aligns with their state standards, only 49 percent of Louisiana teachers said so. Almost half of Louisiana teachers still chose approaches not aligned with their standards, yet the percentage of those responses were much smaller than in other states.

Louisiana teachers were also significantly more likely to use ELA instructional materials that send clearer messages about what approaches are most aligned with their standards, including EngageNY.org materials—which have been reviewed by EdReports.org as meeting expectations for college and career readiness—their state education agency website, and Corestandards.org. Higher percentages of Louisiana ELA teachers also reported that their students engaged in some standards-aligned practices daily compared with teachers elsewhere, including the use of evidence from a text to make inferences or support conclusions and analysis of the structure of texts.

These findings suggest that state education agencies can help teachers gain clearer knowledge about their standards and align their instruction to them. Our current work explores how Louisiana state policies could be doing so. One of our early reports shows three strategies the Louisiana Department of Education employs: "(1) a coherent academic

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strategy focused on integration, alignment and quality among systems supporting standards; (2) transparent and regular communication about academics within the state department of education and across layers of the education system; and (3) strong support for local decision making and ownership of change by districts and teachers.”¹⁰

In regard to the first strategy, Louisiana has posted public, online reviews that identify curricula closely aligned with standards for ELA and mathematics. These reviews rate materials as tier 1 (exemplifying quality), tier 2 (approaching quality), and tier 3 (not representing quality). They have posted reviews for over 50 commonly used textbooks for ELA alone, and they have partnered with LearnZillion to develop their own free, online standards-aligned ELA units for grades K-12, the Louisiana English Language Arts Guidebooks. In addition to state contracts incentivizing the purchase of tier 1 materials, the department provides free trainings that focus considerable attention on tier 1 materials, as well as a professional development catalog that prioritizes inclusion of vendors closely aligned with tier 1 curricula and formative assessments. The state has thus designed a coherent system for using tier 1 curricula and the standards-aligned messages within those curricula.

To implement the second strategy, state officials integrate topics on the centrality of academics and subject-area content into all their internal discussions, as well as paying attention to making whatever messages they send to educators and other stakeholders consistent. The department also communicates regularly and consistently with various levels in school systems through many mechanisms. For example, officials regularly schedule phone calls and webinars with superintendents and hold separate meetings with assistant superintendents or central office/curriculum supervisors and school principals. They establish these scheduled interactions well in advance and include them on an annual calendar. Louisiana cultivates teacher leadership and expertise through Teacher Leader Collaboratives, which include regional meetings throughout the year and an annual teacher summit. In addition, the department recently began training some teachers to be “content leaders” through intensive, multiday trainings designed to

support standards-aligned instruction.

The third strategy emphasizes tools to help districts, schools, and teachers make informed decisions about curricula, assessments, professional development, and instruction. Although the department provides lots of information and incentives for use of the materials, assessments, and training designated as high-quality, it does not require their use.

Louisiana is not the only state encouraging use of high-quality materials and professional development. In 2017, the Council of Chief State School Officers formed a High Quality Instructional Materials and Professional Development Network of eight states— Delaware, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Wisconsin—that are seeking to increase the capacity of school systems to provide teachers with high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials. These states aim to clearly inform teachers and districts about materials and encourage their effective use through professional development and other tools and supports. Our forthcoming work already indicates that teachers in those states use more ELA and mathematics materials that “meet expectations,” according to EdReports.org reviews, than teachers in other states.

The work of these states is important because, while most states require teachers to acquire a certain number of professional development credits to maintain their certification, states generally do not have clear standards by which to judge the quality of teachers' professional development. Fewer than 15 states hold professional development providers accountable to provide high-quality, standards-aligned professional development.¹¹ Similarly, only a handful of states had adopted research-based standards for professional development by 2009.¹²

All states can play a discernible role in steering teachers toward high-quality materials that are aligned with ELA standards. In Louisiana—as well as other states—evidence suggests that state policies make a difference in encouraging teachers' use of high-quality instructional materials. In addition, Louisiana teachers showed a much better understanding about standards-aligned approaches compared with teachers elsewhere. These differences could stem from greater use of high-quality materials among

Louisiana teachers, in addition to other state strategies such as alignment among curriculum, professional development, and assessments; good communication between the state education agency and educators; and the state's support for informed, local decision making.

To encourage use of high-quality materials and better teacher knowledge about standards, state boards of education could ask their state agencies how they plan to ensure coherence across the instructional system. Do administrators and teachers get clear messages from the state about which instructional materials are most aligned with their state standards? What evidence does the state provide on that alignment? Does your state agency have regular mechanisms for providing that information not only to administrators but also to teachers? Does your state have standards for professional development and mechanisms for ensuring standards alignment and quality? How is your state incentivizing use of high-quality materials and professional development?

Much work remains to ensure that ELA teachers can deliver strong, standards-aligned instruction in their classrooms. Yet before teachers can even get to that point, they must learn what their standards say. High-quality instructional materials is one path to getting teachers better information, as well as supporting students to master state standards. Ensuring that all available messages, materials, trainings, and tools provide clear, consistent information will also equip teachers to explore and pursue standards-aligned instruction. ■

¹Julia H. Kaufman et al., *Changes in What Teachers Know and Do in the Common Core Era: American Teacher Panel Findings from 2015 to 2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018); Achieve, "Strong Standards: A Review of Changes to State Standards Since the Common Core" (Washington, DC, 2017).

²Ibid.

³Douglas Fisher et al., *Text Complexity: Raising Rigor in Reading* (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2012); David Liben and Meredith Liben, "Both and' Literacy Instruction K-5: A Proposed Paradigm Shift for the Common Core State Standards ELA Classroom" (Washington, DC: Achieve the Core, 2013).

⁴Fountas & Pinnell Literacy, "Alignment of Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and *The Fountas & Pinnell Literacy Continuum*, Expanded Edition" (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Publishing, 2017), https://www.fountasandpinnell.com/shared/resources/Alignment_CCSS_ELA_and_FPLcontinuum_09-2017_web.pdf; Renaissance Learning, "Accelerated Reader, ATOS, and the Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts" (Wisconsin Rapids, WI, 2012), http://www.mentorschools.net/Downloads/Text_Complexity_for_AR.pdf.

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⁵Emily Hodge and Susanna Benko, "A 'Common' Vision of Instruction? An Analysis of English/Language Arts Professional Development Materials Related to the Common Core State Standards," *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* 13, no. 1 (May 2014): 169–96.

⁶Melanie R. Kuhn and Steven A. Stahl, "Fluency: A Review of Developmental and Remedial Practices," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 95, no. 1 (2003): 3–21; Donald L. Compton et al., "Exploring the Relationship between Text-Leveling Systems and Reading Accuracy and Fluency in Second-Grade Students Who Are Average and Poor Decoders," *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice* 19, no. 3 (2004): 176–84; Rollanda E. O'Connor et al., "Improvement in Reading Rate under Independent and Difficult Text Levels: Influences on Word and Comprehension Skills," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 102, no. 1 (2010): 1–19.

⁷Bruce Baker et al., "Is School Funding Fair? A National Report Card, Sixth Edition" (Newark, NJ: Education Law Center, 2017); Diana Epstein, "Measuring Inequity in School Funding" (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, August 2011); Linda Hertert et al., "School Financing Inequities among the States: The Problem from a National Perspective," *Journal of Education Finance* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994): 231–55.

⁸Cynthia E. Coburn, "Collective Sensemaking about Reading: How Teachers Mediate Reading Policy in Their Professional Communities," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 23, no. 2 (2001): 145–70; Cynthia E. Coburn, "Beyond Decoupling: Rethinking the Relationship between the Institutional Environment and the Classroom," *Sociology of Education* 77, no. 3 (2004): 211–44; David K. Cohen and Deborah L. Ball, "Policy and Practice: An Overview," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 12, no. 3 (1990): 233–39; James P. Spillane and John S. Zeuli, "Reform and Teaching: Exploring Patterns of Practice in the Context of National and State Mathematics Reforms," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 21, no. 1 (1999), 1–27.

⁹Julia H. Kaufman et al., "Creating a Coherent System to Support Instruction Aligned with State Standards: Promising Practices of the Louisiana Department of Education" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Stephanie Aragon, "Policy Snapshot: Teacher Development and Advancement" (Denver: Education Commission of the States, March 2018).

¹²National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, "State Policies to Improve Teacher Professional Development," issue brief (Washington, DC, 2009).

How is your state incentivizing use of high-quality materials and professional development?

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