K-12
PRACTICE

EQUITY IN MOTION SERIES

CHECKING IN: DO CLASSROOM ASSIGNMENTS REFLECT TODAY'S HIGHER STANDARDS?

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The Education Trust

TO THE POINT

- Nearly every state has adopted new, more rigorous standards for college and career readiness. And by looking closely at student assignments, we can track where teachers are in their own understanding of these standards.
- Fewer than 4 in 10 middle grades assignments were aligned with a grade-appropriate standard, with only 1 in 20 matching most or all of our criteria for a high-quality, Common Core-aligned assignment.
- It's time for an honest conversation about where we are in implementing the standards. Stakeholders can begin by questioning and analyzing the tasks, texts, rigor, and engagement of the classroom assignments in their schools.

EQUITY IN MOTION: SUPPORTING THE DAILY WORK OF EDUCATORS

No matter how long I work in education, I still mark the success of any initiative, policy, or leadership action by its impact on what young people experience in classrooms every day. And, as an educator, mother, and former school district leader, I know the connections between what we intend to accomplish at a systems level and meaningful teaching and learning in schools can be weak.

Still, all children deserve enriching opportunities to stretch their thinking, expand their content knowledge, build and refine their academic skills, and maximize their talents. Few would disagree that what students learn in school is tied to the work they are asked to engage in on a regular basis. Discussing compelling readings, providing knowledgeable feedback on essay drafts, tackling challenging math and science applications, and creating expressive art portfolios all exemplify the "work" of school. Unfortunately, for low-income students and students of color, I have witnessed firsthand how much of what we hail as monumental advances or promising reforms do not go far enough to improve their learning experiences.

Bridging this gap means recommitting to examining and adjusting our district, state, and federal actions based on feedback and information anchored in ground-level realities. The launch of this new series, *Equity in Motion*, is our effort to bring a closer look to how issues of equity are playing out in the daily motions of schools. We also return to The Education Trust's earlier days in both stretching and supporting the work of practitioners. While serving as an educator in Boston Public Schools, I remember how Ed Trust's *Standards in Practice* project resonated with me and my colleagues, supporting our efforts to have meaningful and action-based conversations that actually informed and moved our own practice and our students' learning.

Now, as we delve more deeply into looking at the work young people do every day — specifically their assignments — we seek to refresh and update these early efforts. In this first report, targeted for state and district education leaders, we consider how assignments reflect the high-level goals set by new, more rigorous college- and career-ready standards. We also examine the way policies and district practices shape how teachers and school leaders understand and implement these new standards in schools.

Future work in this series will expand on findings from more schools and introduce tools and processes to assist educators and leaders in using this information to better inform us on our progress in implementing high-level learning standards. Most important, we will continue to ask how we can adjust our practices, systems, and policies so that low-income students and students of color are actually benefiting from these efforts.

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CHECKING IN: DO CLASSROOM ASSIGNMENTS REFLECT TODAY'S HIGHER STANDARDS?

BY SONJA BROOKINS SANTELISES AND JOAN DABROWSKI

INTRODUCTION

It has now been five years since most states adopted more rigorous college- and career-ready learning standards. And results from the first fully aligned assessments are beginning to roll out. Given that these standards are considerably more challenging than the standards they replaced, it is hardly surprising that student proficiency rates are declining in most states, and most severely for students — especially low-income students and students of color — who were still struggling to master the last set of standards.

But what do these new proficiency rates actually represent? What is happening in our classrooms, and how have instruction or assignments changed in the era of the new standards? Are our students truly being taught to the standards, yet struggling — and failing — to master them? Do those from low-income families, in particular, simply lack the foundation to approach the required levels?

Or is there a bigger problem we have to solve first: that the systems and routines within our schools make it challenging for school leaders and teachers to match their instruction with the demands of more rigorous standards such as the Common Core State Standards?

Judging from how confidently leaders in states and school districts talk about the hours of Common Core training their teachers have received and how their districts have updated their classroom observation protocols, one might assume that teachers and school leaders have had the opportunity to learn and practice the instructional shifts required by the more challenging standards, and, therefore, it must be the students. Right?

Not so fast.

Years of experience with previous standards told us as an organization that the best way to check on the progress of implementation isn't to count hours of training, but to look instead at the actual work students are asked to do on a day-to-day basis — that is, their classroom assignments — and to compare those assignments with the demands of the standards themselves.[1] After all, students can rise no higher than the assignments they are given and instruction they receive. *(See sidebar: Why Assignments?)*

So, we decided to take a closer look: We recruited six middle schools from two districts serving different student populations, invited their participation in an assignment analysis project, got scoring help from a group of exemplary teachers and content area experts (all of whom had extensive training and experience with the Common Core and other college- and career-ready standards), and shared with each school their individual results. Initially, we thought of this as simply a pilot for a larger study of several whole districts. And, we are still planning to do that fuller study. But what we learned in this small study concerned us so much that we decided to share these initial results now.

So far we've scored the assignments from 92 English language arts, science, and social studies teachers in grades six to eight. In just those six schools, we analyzed ***a lot*** of assignments, more than 1,500 to date. *(See sidebar: A Deeper Look at What We Did.)* Our analysis used a framework driven by four domains that make up a rigorous literacy assignment: alignment to CCSS, text centrality, cognitive challenge, and the potential for motivation and engagement. Each of the four domains consisted of two indicators. *(See sidebar: Literacy Assignment Analysis Framework.)*

Our initial analysis raises a number of warning signals for state, district, and school leaders as they move into the next stages of implementation. Like others who have been involved with the Common Core, we think these new standards have enormous potential to focus teaching and learning on what is most important, and to also be a powerful tool in the effort to close longstanding opportunity and achievement gaps. But, as our analysis makes clear, that potential remains unrealized, and there is much work to do.

We and others surely need to conduct a broader examination of assignment patterns to confirm these preliminary findings, but we believe they merit a deeper look at the implementation of college- and career-ready standards and the necessary next steps to produce the results we all want to see. At the very least, those leaders charged with implementing Common Core at scale need to ask — as our team did — whether our most common approaches to support might actually be contributing to the problems we see.

Why Assignments?

Historically, assignment analysis has been a powerful lens for viewing the day-to-day experiences of students.[2] Assignments:

- are a clear window into classroom practice
- represent what teachers know and understand about the college- and career-ready standards
- give insight into the school leader's and/or district's expectations for what and how to teach
- reflect what teachers believe students can do independently as a result of their teaching
- show how students interact with the curriculum

Key Findings

1. Overall, only about 5 percent of assignments fell into the high range on our assignment analysis framework (met 6-8 indicators).
2. Fewer than 4 in 10 assignments (or 38 percent) were aligned with a grade-appropriate standard. Moreover, rates in high-poverty schools were considerably lower, at roughly one-third of all assignments.
3. Fifty-five percent of assignments were connected to a text. However, overall, only 16 percent of assignments required students to use a text for citing evidence as support for a position or a claim.
4. Only 4 percent of all assignments reviewed pushed student thinking to higher levels. About 85 percent of assignments asked students to either recall information or apply basic skills and concepts as opposed to prompting for inferences or structural analysis, or requiring author critiques. Many assignments show an attempt at rigor, but these are largely surface level.
5. Relevance and choice — powerful levers to engage early adolescents — are mostly missing in action. Only 2 percent of assignments meet both indicators for engagement.

WHAT WE FOUND

1. **Overall, only about 5 percent of assignments fell into the high range on our assignment analysis framework (met 6-8 indicators).** Another 35 percent scored in the medium range (met 3-5 indicators), and 60 percent fell in the low range (met 0-2 indicators). English language arts (ELA) assignments were more likely to fall in the high range (10 percent) as were eighth-grade assignments (7 percent). And while no assignment met all eight points on the framework, most teachers, regardless of subject taught, submitted at least one assignment that met six or more indicators. And there was no difference between high-poverty and low-poverty schools on the percentage of assignments that were rated high.

2. **Fewer than 4 in 10 assignments (or 38 percent) were aligned with a grade-appropriate standard. Moreover, rates in high-poverty schools were considerably lower, at roughly one-third of all assignments.** While we certainly did not expect to see 100 percent of assignments fully aligned, that number is far lower than we would have hoped in year five of implementation. Even in low-poverty schools, only about half (48 percent) of the assignments were Common Core-aligned, with rates in high-poverty schools considerably lower, at roughly one-third of all assignments (31 percent). There were exceptions to this, however, with one of the high-poverty schools in the sample demonstrating alignment rates similar to their lower poverty counterparts.

3. **Fifty-five percent of assignments were connected to a text. However, overall, only 16 percent of assignments required students to use a text for citing evidence as support for a position or a claim.** While it was encouraging to see that more than half the assignments included texts, there were too many assignments that used texts in simplistic ways. For example, text-based questions often asked for recalling or retelling of basic facts rather than prompting for inferences, structural analysis, or author critiques. Moreover, in order to be college and career ready, students need to learn and practice how to cite specific textual evidence as they build and develop claims and arguments.

4. **Only 4 percent of all assignments reviewed pushed student thinking to higher levels. About 85 percent of assignments asked students to either recall information or apply basic skills and concepts as opposed to prompting for inferences or structural analysis, or requiring author critiques. Many assignments show an attempt at rigor, but these are largely surface level.**

   - *Many — if not most — assignments were over-scaffolded.* Instead of encouraging students to struggle with big ideas, everything was broken down into bite-size chunks, and much of the work was actually done for the students rather than by them. In many cases, assignments involving close reading and text annotation were so tightly scripted they actually appeared to interfere with the deep understanding of complex text, which is the ultimate goal of these new standards.

   - *Half of the assignments we reviewed (51 percent) lasted just 15 minutes or less; and of these short assignments, about 2 percent required students to practice higher level thinking skills, compared with 26 percent of longer assignments.* Short assignments typically involved the reinforcement of basic skills, brief reviews of previous lessons, quick writes, grammar practice, or short answer responses. While each of these experiences may have merit, the predominance of these types of assignments raises a caution flag. Additionally, the cumulative effect of these types of assignments across ELA, science, and history — knowing that they rarely involve cognitive challenge — is troubling.

5. **Relevance and choice — powerful levers to engage early adolescents — are rarely present. Only 2 percent of assignments meet both indicators for engagement.**

   - *Attempts to motivate and engage students were simplistic.* The "relevance" we saw (primarily superficial references to pop culture or presentation assignments that involved art activities) lacked rigor and complexity. We argue, instead, that middle school students deserve opportunities to consider the relevancy of rigorous content in ELA, history, and the sciences. For this to happen, teachers must identify the poignant big ideas and themes — that speak across cultures and generations — within their disciplines and use these points to pull their students into new or unfamiliar content.

   - *Opportunities for students to engage in relevant academic discussions rarely appeared.* Most of the discussions were brief activities that partially aligned with the Common Core's speaking and listening standards. While these opportunities for student talk did promote cooperative conversations, they fell short of their potential to honor and expand student perspectives, to teach and refine the elements of argumentation, and to lay the groundwork for written work.

A DEEPER LOOK AT WHAT WE DID

School Sites and Participants

Six middle schools from two large, urban school districts in two states

Five of the six schools were traditional middle schools (grades six-eight), one was a K-8. Free and reduced lunch (FRL) ranged from 25-99 percent across the schools. We classified four schools with >65 percent FRL as high poverty in our data analysis. Student racial/ethnic populations were also different; students of color (African American and Hispanic students) ranged from 18-93 percent. The percent of English language learner students also varied across schools (5-51 percent).

92 Teachers

Sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade teachers teaching courses in the subject areas of English language arts, humanities, history/social studies, science.

Most eligible teachers agreed to participate (88 percent).

Average number of assignments submitted per teacher = 17. The median number of assignments submitted per teacher = 13.

Assignment Collection

Assignments were defined as any in-school or out-of-school task that a student completed independently or with a group of peers. Assignments completed during teacher-led practice or assignments given by substitute teachers were not collected.

A two-week assignment collection window between late February and early March 2015 was established. This method allowed us to see the full range of assignments students received (e.g., brief tasks like "exit tickets" to extended writing or research projects) and provided evidence of student opportunity to learn and the competencies they are typically asked to demonstrate.

All assignments were given a unique identification number to ensure teacher confidentiality.

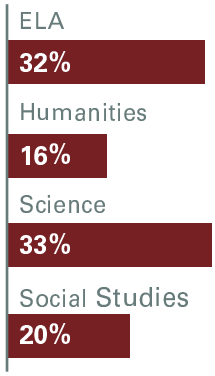
Assignments Scored by the Numbers

Total number of assignments submitted **1,876**

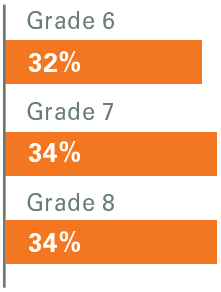
Total number of assignments scored **1,591** (85%)

Assignments were not scored if they were incomplete or if directions were not included. Additionally, lesson plans or other curriculum documents were not scored.

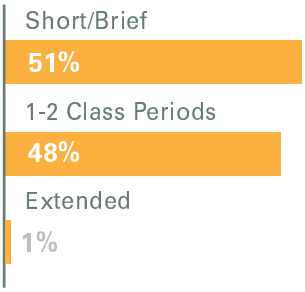
Assignments by Subject Area



Assignments by Grade



Type of Assignments



LITERACY ASSIGNMENT ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

1. Alignment With the Common Core

A Common Core-aligned assignment for ELA/literacy has essential features. First, and foremost, it must be aligned to the appropriate grade-level standard. The standard(s) then set the frame for instructional goals and the assignment's content and tasks. Alignment also means that the assignment embraces the instructional shifts articulated by the Common Core. In ELA/literacy these shifts require students to have regular practice with complex texts and their academic language; read, write, and speak using evidence from texts, both literary and informational; and build knowledge through content information. Finally, an aligned assignment is clearly articulated so that students can fully understand what is expected of them.

Indicator	Percent Meeting One	Percent Meeting Both
The assignment aligns to the appropriate grade-level standard.*	39%	38%
The assignment clearly articulates the task.	95%	

2. Centrality of Text

Texts hold a fundamental place in the area of literacy. In an assignment, the centrality of text permits students to grapple with key ideas, larger meanings, and author's craft and intent. Students must have the opportunity to: 1) display increasing expertise in interpreting and responding to a text and 2) draw evidence from a text to justify their responses and thinking. Such skills are essential to postsecondary success and undergird the pedagogical shifts. Specifically, an assignment fully reflects this centrality of text when students are required to cite evidence (e.g., paraphrasing, direct citation) to support a position or claim.

Indicator	Percent Meeting One	Percent Meeting Both
The assignment solicits text-based responses. Student use of the text is vital to successfully complete the assignment.	52%	15%
The assignment requires students to cite evidence from the text.	15%	

DOMAINS OF RIGOROUS STUDENT ASSIGNMENTS

3. Cognitive Challenge

The cognitive work required to retell a story, identify facts from a text, analyze a character using textual evidence, or apply knowledge gained from multiple texts to form a new idea ranges from simple to complex. Generally, the cognitive challenge increases through text-dependent questions and assignments that require student documentation of their deep analysis or the construction of new knowledge. Our framework utilizes Norman L. Webb's Depth of Knowledge Levels. Additionally, as students grapple with complex subject matter, we believe the expectation of an extended written response (multiple paragraphs), which is governed by the accepted practices of the discipline, most strongly supports such thinking.

Indicator	Percent Meeting One	Percent Meeting Both
The assignment requires high levels of cognitive demand.	13%	4%
The assignment is linked to the creation of a piece of extended writing.	9%	

4. Motivation and Engagement

For adolescent learners to thrive and achieve at high levels, educators must embrace both the content of the curriculum and the design of instruction. Each of these elements impact student attention, interest, motivation, and cognitive effort and must be considered in the design of assignments. Specifically, we prioritized two key areas: choice and relevancy. Students must be given some level of autonomy and independence in their tasks — with rigor maintained across all options. And the tasks must be relevant as they focus on poignant topics, use real-world materials and experiences, and give students the opportunity to make connections with their goals, interests, and values.

Indicator	Percent Meeting One	Percent Meeting Both
Students have choice in the assignment in one of the following areas: task, product, content, process, or text. Rigor is maintained across all options.	9%	2%
The task is relevant; it focuses on a poignant topic, uses real world materials, and/or gives students the freedom to make connections to their experiences, goals, interests, and values.	11%	

*To meet this indicator, an assignment was aligned with at least one specific grade-level standard aside from R.10 or W.10 in the ELA and literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects.

LITERACY ASSIGNMENT ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

ADDITIONAL FEATURES ANALYZED

Texts

Assignments were analyzed to determine whether or not a text was required. Additionally, we captured:

- Text type: (e.g., literature, informational, visual text, multiple texts, websites, etc.)
- Text length: (e.g., full-length text, text excerpt, chapter, etc.)

Writing Output

Assignments were analyzed to determine the amount of writing required. Writing output was defined as:

- No writing
- Note-taking
- One to two sentences
- Multiple short responses (e.g., an assignment that requires a student to answer three questions and each question requires 1-2 sentences for it to be answered)
- One paragraph
- Multiple paragraphs

Length of Assignment

Assignments were analyzed to determine how long students were given to complete. They were categorized in the following time increments:

- 15 minutes or less
- 1-2 class periods
- Long-term assignment (multiple weeks)
- An assignment linked with an ongoing project

Student Thinking

Assignments were categorized based on the level of student thinking required as defined by Norman L. Webb's Depth of Knowledge Levels. These levels are:

- Recall and Reproduction
- Basic Application of Skills/Concepts
- Strategic Thinking
- Extended Thinking

A DEEPER LOOK AT WHAT WE FOUND

As we analyzed the assignments across our four domains, a series of common themes emerged that span across our five key findings and connect them to the realities of everyday life in classrooms and schools. These six themes deepen our analysis as they reflect trends in teaching and learning that we believe impact the long-term success of college- and career-ready standards.

Window Dressing the Common Core highlights findings that suggest a need to move from promoting a small set of teaching actions as Common Core-aligned to furthering understanding of the deeper intent of the instructional shifts. ***Reading Interrupted*** and ***Writing Without Composing*** point to students' truncated experiences in reading and writing, despite the standards' emphasis of extended practice in both areas. ***Support or Spoon-Feeding? Short Assignments, Heavy Scaffolding, Rare Independence*** poses questions about the prevalence of short, less challenging assignments coupled with heavy doses of teacher support. ***Discussions: Few and Far Between*** and ***Relevancy and Choice: Missing Levers*** consider the implications of the absence of meaningful student discussion and relevancy in assignments for engaging early adolescents in more demanding academic work.

WINDOW DRESSING THE COMMON CORE

Over the past four years, there has been considerable attention to the instructional shifts required for CCSS implementation in English language arts and for literacy in history/social studies, science, and the technical subjects. But there has been less guidance for teachers on *how* to make these instructional shifts real.

The assignments we reviewed reflected this dilemma. Many of them included some version of an instructional shift but only hinted at the deeper cognitive work demanded in the speaking, listening, reading, and writing standards. For example, in more than half of the assignments, students worked with some type of text or multiple texts (55 percent). And, in those assignments that used a text, 71 percent used informational texts or literary nonfiction. These findings signal that educators are recognizing the Common Core recommendations on the importance of text and the need to increase informational texts.[3] However, in a closer analysis we found that only 15 percent of the assignments using texts required students to cite textual evidence in support of a position or claim, which is also stated in the Common Core standards.

The same pattern existed in the writing tasks. Some assignments did ask students to make a claim and provide evidence for it. But rarely did these tasks progress beyond a superficial level of implementation. There were *very few* assignments, for example, that pushed students to "assert and defend a claim, show what they know about a subject, or convey what they experienced, imagined, thought and felt" through "complex and nuanced writing."[4]

The majority of assignments included keywords and phrases found in the Common Core standards, fostering a comforting sense that "we are aligned." Unfortunately, this is not the case — much of this is window dressing. In many ways, this isn't surprising. In the absence of detailed guidance, districts, schools, and teachers are replicating what they hear at workshops or conferences promising "Common Core-aligned" resources. In classrooms across the country, lessons from the Internet labeled as aligned are being taught again and again, whether or not they are really worthy. Many districts order the exemplar texts listed in the appendices of the Common Core standards, without fitting them into an instructional plan.

"In the absence of detailed guidance, districts, schools, and teachers are replicating what they hear at workshops or conferences promising 'Common Core-aligned' resources. In classrooms across the country, lessons from the Internet labeled as aligned are being taught again and again, whether or not they are really worthy."

So yes, the concrete application of discrete literacy standards found in many assignments signals for us an initial transition to the Common Core. These are a well-intentioned, yet reductive, attempt to do what is necessary. This window dressing may also suggest misperceptions of what the Common Core truly requires of students. Reading, writing, and discussion are intricately intertwined. Assignments must reflect these interdependent relationships in order for students to repeatedly practice these cycles of strategic thinking.

As former district leaders, we understand how the need for fast-paced decisions can lead to minimal reflection on why, how, or if the texts or lessons make sense for students. But the consequences for students are clear: daily work for students that still falls too far short of our goal. The honest reality is that deeper work around lesson planning and pedagogy is desperately needed.

READING INTERRUPTED

In many districts and states, leaders talk about how their students must grapple with challenging texts and how they must engage in "close reading." While this is certainly true, the underlying spirit of the Common Core is that students must read and think critically about a range of texts across content, cultures, and centuries.[5] As they do so, they must consider the central themes and ideas while simultaneously recognizing and critiquing the craft and structure elements authors use. With this knowledge in hand, students must synthesize something new as they speak and ultimately write about their reading. This is imperative if we are to prepare our middle school students for the high school literacy challenges they will soon face.

"Texts were utilized in over half of the assignments we reviewed. And, when a text was used, nearly 64 percent of the time it was a full text."

Fortunately, we again saw evidence of *initial* transition toward this ideal. As noted above, texts were utilized in over half of the assignments we reviewed. And, when a text was used, nearly 64 percent of the time it was a full text. Many social studies and science assignments relied on textbook chapters or short articles.

We also noticed that students, in most cases, read short chunks of the text and were asked to annotate or to take notes as they read. *(See Example 1: Grade 8 — ELA "Steps.")* Some compelling research supports the use of graphic organizers and note-taking devices for preparing and planning for writing.[6] And clearly, the teachers in our sample were acting on this knowledge: There were often specific directives for taking and organizing notes (e.g., Cornell notes, double-entry journals, or other graphic organizers) along with specific coding systems for marking up text. These structures appeared to be highly valued by teachers across all schools, grade levels, and content areas.

These initial transitions toward Common Core, however, may be fueling unintended consequences worth noting.

First, the standards call for the "wide and deep reading of literature and literary nonfiction."[7] However, the predominance of brief reading assignments means there is less time for this type of sustained task. With early efforts to build student comfort with complex language structure, we wondered if we are abandoning the need for students to engage over longer periods of time with whole novels and extended non-fiction? This might have particularly negative consequences in high-poverty schools where already the absence of school libraries and the paltry supply of classroom books for middle grades means students are less likely to engage in more extended reading.

"The frequent 'stop and go' nature of reading assignments, requiring the whole class to mechanically annotate or take notes, may actually interrupt a more fluid and autonomous process that many young adolescent readers need to develop as they read for longer periods of time and self-monitor their comprehension."

Moreover, the frequent "stop and go" nature of reading assignments, requiring the whole class to mechanically annotate or take notes, may actually interrupt a more fluid and autonomous process that many young adolescent readers need to develop as they read for longer periods of time and self-monitor their comprehension. We wondered if these assignments may have been part of a strategy to ensure that all students were understanding the text, or perhaps they were an interpretation of what it means to read closely. However, the profusion of assignments that supported this fragmented approach made us wonder: When do students have time for sustained, fluent reading of complex texts? Adolescent readers need to build their reading stamina to develop and refine their comprehension, and yet, the majority of reading assignments we reviewed involved short passages with many stopping points.

Finally, we questioned what genuine purpose the note-taking and annotations held. For example, directions typically asked students to annotate a text but did not say why annotations were needed. Further, only rarely did a writing assignment require students to employ their previous notes or annotations. Instead, it seemed that the annotations and note-taking were an end rather than a means to an end (e.g., a written response, analysis, or essay). For us, it appeared that many of these annotation assignments served as additional interruptions of the reading process rather than as tools to support future *discussion* or *written* work.

EXAMPLE 1

GRADE 8 ELA – "STEPS"

Step 1: Number the paragraphs

Step 2: Read and "chunk" the text into smaller sections

Step 3: Circle key terms and underline or highlight the claim(s) and central ideas in the chunked sections.

Step 4: In the left margin next to each chunk: In 10 words or less, write what the "text is saying."

Step 5: In the right margin next to each chunk: Use powerverbs to state what the author is doing. For example- Comparing: studying dogs to studying monkeys.

Step 6: Write a 10-15 word sentence of the entire article that captures the central idea.

Some POWERVERB examples:

Compare, Describe, Explain, Contrast, Argue, Persuade, Illustrate, Analyze, Classify, Justify, Differentiate, Conclude, Summarize

EXAMPLE 1
Text Annotations

The example above represents a pattern found in many of the assignments we analyzed. It fell within the middle range (met 3-5 indicators) on our framework. In this assignment, students read two informational articles presenting different positions on a topic. The articles were four pages in total and were straightforward and simplistic. Students were required to follow the steps for reading in lockstep fashion described above. At the end of each article, they wrote a 10-15 word summary sentence that captured the central idea.

The text holds a central place in this assignment, and the teacher's push for succinct comprehension is noted. However, the teacher's heavy scaffolding of text chunking, circling, highlighting, and margin notes — and simultaneously requiring students to consider both the central ideas and author's craft — may be a hindrance for students looking to read and consider the article's key points and messages in their entirety in order to formulate their own understanding. The final writing output — a single sentence of 10-15 words — holds eighth-grade student thinking to summarization, and therefore, is not aligned with the appropriate grade level Common Core standards. There is no choice for students in this assignment. All students are expected to read in small chunks and to use the annotations.

We wonder where flexibility and differentiation can be offered. For some students, these "stop and go" techniques may actually interrupt or interfere with comprehension. Additionally, asking readers to read and code for central ideas and themes while simultaneously asking them to consider and code the writing techniques the authors use may cause confusion. Instead, we recommend setting a clear, singular purpose for reading that allows students to flexibly use their reading skills and strategies. If the assignment's final output is a written response, it must align to the grade level expectations. Then students can be supported, as needed, to gather and organize notes for this.

WRITING WITHOUT COMPOSING

In more than 80 percent of the assignments, some type of writing output was required (*see Figure 1*). In most cases, students were taking and organizing notes (16 percent), responding in one or two sentences (17 percent) to text-based questions, or providing multiple short responses (27 percent) such as labeling diagrams and maps. Collectively, these types of assignments can best be described as "writing without composing."[8]

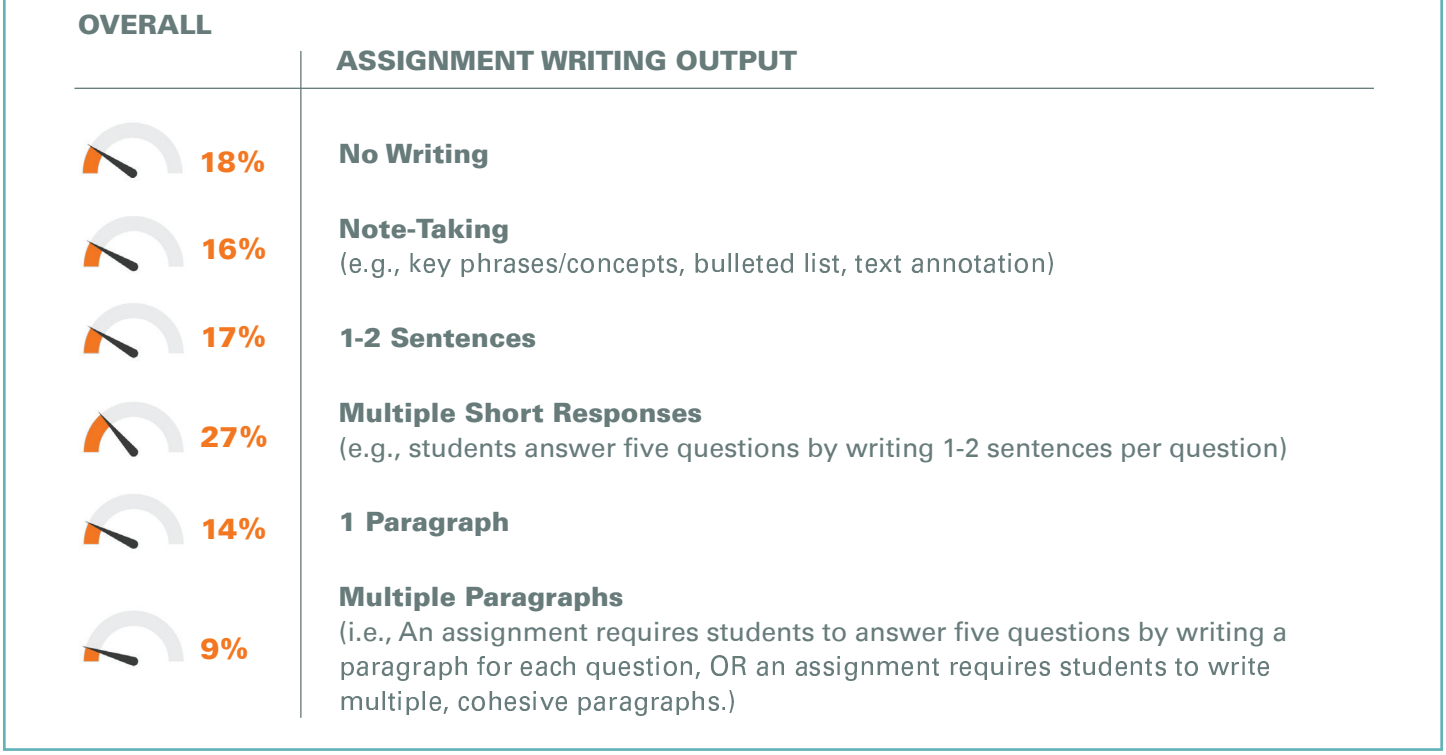
Far fewer of the assignments asked students to bring these discrete tasks together and do the heavier lift of composing original text to express their own thinking and analysis in multiple paragraphs (9 percent), much less multiple pages. We *did* see some assignments that asked students to draft, revise, or edit original shorter pieces. *(See Example 2: Grade 8 ELA – Planning for the Literary Essay.)* Yet, in most of the assignments we reviewed, composing a coherent piece of extended writing was simply not a goal.

We recognize that our two-week collection window is a limitation: We surely did *not* expect to see this type of writing every day. However, in an era of college- and career-ready standards, we would expect to see in *any* two-week instructional period some evidence of work toward a cohesive essay. And, yes, we recognize that the required length of a written piece is an imperfect indicator of a critical-thinking activity. We think most educators would agree, however, that if middle school students are spending 90 percent of their writing time on short one- and two-sentence responses rather than composing longer pieces, these students are far less likely to be prepared for college- and career-ready writing.

English language arts assignments were more likely to have extended writing opportunities (15 percent). Science and social studies assignments lagged behind with only 3 percent and 8 percent, respectively, requiring multiple paragraphs. Most often in these content areas, students were asked to summarize reading from a textbook or label diagrams and maps. There were only a handful of assignments that asked students to use writing to convey understanding of rich content knowledge from any of the sciences, or defend their analysis of a particular historical event. When opportunities did arise for composing, teachers often provided sentence frames or keywords and phrases, keeping students from having to do the strategic work of composing.

As noted above, our middle school writers need opportunities to write arguments, informative texts, and narratives. In *all* content areas, they need to build and develop their fluency by writing pieces that evolve over longer periods of time (e.g., five to10 days, two to three weeks) as they plan, revise, and edit their ideas. The authentic composing that students do in this scenario is the heart of analytic and strategic thinking. They generate their own points and perspectives and cite relevant evidence in accordance with the final piece to be written. And, in grades six to eight, we must see *extended* writing — multiple cohesive paragraphs that clearly reflect strong organization and style. This work cannot be left to ELA classrooms. Science and social studies assignments must embrace these shifts as well.

Figure 1: Writing Demand of Assignments



EXAMPLE 2

GRADE 8 ELA – PLANNING FOR THE LITERARY ESSAY

Directions to the student:

1. You will have two class periods to complete this task. It will be done only during class.
2. Read the story (Gift of the Magi) and poem (How do I Love Thee?).
3. Using the attached chart, employ the Notice and Note Signpost strategies you've learned over the past month. Be sure to identify the signpost or signposts you believe are in the story and poem.
4. Determine the theme for both the story and poem.

Prompt: In a multi-paragraph literary essay, connect the theme of the two stories and support your analysis with well-chosen facts and details from the texts to support your theme (thesis/claim). Be sure to cite your evidence.

Planning for the Literary Essay: The six sign posts we studied are "Aha Moment, Contrasts and Contradictions, Tough Questions, Words of the Wiser, Again and Again, and Memory Moment." As you read Gift of the Magi and How do I Love Thee? identify the sign posts in each selection and track them in the table below.

Sign Post	What Did I Notice	What Inferences can you make about why the message is important?

EXAMPLE 2
Literary Essay

This type of assignment appeared infrequently in our analysis and falls into the high range on our framework (met 6-8 indicators). Notice that it:

- required students to write a multi-paragraph literary essay connecting the ideas and themes from two texts: a short story and a poem
- explicitly called for students to support their claim using "well-chosen" facts and details from the texts
- prompted students to gather textual evidence for their essay using a note-taking strategy learned over the past month; a graphic organizer was provided to support essay planning

While there are ways to strengthen this assignment (e.g., offering choices within the assignment, using real world materials, connecting it with student experiences), it does align with the standards and reflects the spirit of the Common Core as students read and think about multiple texts, gather their evidence, generate a claim, and write extensively about their own ideas. While not every assignment students undertake can address these elements in such fashion, the question our participating schools are asking is: Why are only a very small percentage of our assignments asking middle school students to do this level of academic work if we want them prepared to meet the demands of college- and career-ready standards?"

SUPPORT OR SPOON-FEEDING? SHORT ASSIGNMENTS, HEAVY SCAFFOLDING, RARE INDEPENDENCE

Grappling with complex texts and topics requires ample time and space for student thinking. Yet, 51 percent of the assignments we analyzed lasted only 15 minutes or less. And, 86 percent of the assignments limited student thinking to recall, reproduction, or basic application of content. Fewer than 20 percent required students to reason, develop a plan, justify their thinking or consider more than one possible response. *(See Figure 2.)* When we saw this, it was more likely in ELA and in eighth-grade assignments.

In many of the submitted assignments it appeared that teachers often did more of the work than students. For example, teachers frequently guided their class through lectures with brief moments for students to talk together in "pair shares" or "turn and talks." Or as students read (or were read to), teachers paused in order for students to take quick notes or make annotations. And, when independent tasks were assigned, teachers often articulated how much to write (in most cases one to two sentences), or in some cases, included paragraph frames for students to complete by inserting keywords or phrases. These structures can be appropriate when used to help build student skill and understanding to connect to deeper analysis and independence. But students must eventually leave these structures if they are to grow and engage deeper, independent academic work. *(See Example 3: Diagram, Information Board, and Entrance Ticket.)*

We consider "over-scaffolding" in two ways. The first is the absence of the long, uninterrupted blocks of time that allow students to apply the skills they are learning as readers and writers, independently or with their peers. To be sure, all students, particularly at the start of the school year or at the beginning of a new unit, benefit from teacher modeling and from their specific, detailed feedback. Students, however, must have an opportunity for independent practice. We cannot keep students tightly tethered to discrete teacher moves and prompts. This approach has existed in high-poverty schools for many years. Unfortunately, as seen in our analysis, it continues today. Rarely did we see assignments that allowed early adolescents to construct their own claim statements or work through their thoughts to construct a cohesive flow of ideas. Rather, the teacher kept students "with her" instead of releasing them to wrestle with their ideas or with the ideas of others.

Second, over-scaffolding reduces or eliminates any opportunity for students to experience the nuances that complex texts provide. There is little time for students to elicit complex themes or struggle with expressing their own analysis of the text. Instead, the key ideas have already been outlined in larger group discussion or through sentence starters so that the most interesting and challenging parts of the text have already been unpacked prior to students being asked to make sense of it themselves.

Figure 2: Cognitive Demand of Assignments

	COGNITIVE DEMAND*
 41%	**Recall and Reproduction** Recall a fact, term, principle, concept, or perform a routine procedure
 45%	**Basic Application of Skills/ Concepts** Use of information, conceptual knowledge, select appropriate procedures for a task, two or more steps with decision points along the way, routine problems, organize/display data, interpret/use sample data
 14%	**Strategic Thinking** Requires reasoning, developing a plan or sequence of steps to approach problem; requires some decision-making and justification; abstract, complex, or non-routine; often more than one possible answer
>1%	**Extended Thinking** An investigation or application to real world; requires time to research, problem solve, and process multiple conditions of the problem or task; non-routine manipulations across disciplines/content areas/multiple sources

**Based on Norman L. Webb's Depth of Knowledge Levels*

EXAMPLE 3

GRADE 6 SCIENCE — CURRENTS DIAGRAM

Create a visual representation of how deep ocean currents, surface currents and air currents all interact.

1. **Use arrows to represent the movement of the water or air.**
2. **Color the arrows RED for warm air/water and BLUE for cold water/air.**
3. **Must show all three currents at once and include these labels:**

- More dense air
- Less dense air
- More dense water
- Less dense water
- Warm air
- Cold air
- Warm water
- Cold Water
- Low salinity
- High salinity
- Equator
- Pole
- Surface Current
- Deep Ocean Current
- Air Current

GRADE 7 SOCIAL STUDIES — COUNT DRACULA INFORMATION BOARD

Using the three sources available to you, design your own information board regarding Count Dracula (Vlad III). The information board must have:

- **Title** – catchy phrase
- **Picture** (stick figure, hand drawn, Photoshop, etc.)
- **Our Study** – Paragraph
- **The Myth**
- **The Reality** – 5 facts about his life
- **Opinion** – How Should Count Dracula Be Remembered?

4x6 Card, P.S.A. Commercial Narrative Script, 60 Seconds on the Biography of Count Dracula

Include: Childhood Drama and Trauma, His rule and his reign of Walachia, As a Christian Knight fighting Islam (Battle against Ottomans), How should he be remembered?

GRADE 8 ELA — ENTRANCE TICKET

Paraphrase the following lines:

"You are the thunder and I am the lightening."
– Selena Gomez

"I need you like a heart needs a beat."
– One Republic

"Standing on my monopoly board, that means I'm on top of my game."
– Eminem

EXAMPLE 3
Diagram, Information Board, and Entrance Ticket

The three examples above represent what many assignments looked like in our analysis. They fall within the low range on our framework (met 0-2 indicators). Notice that these assignments:

- can be completed within 1-2 class periods or less
- hold student thinking to a recall of basic facts, reproduction of common knowledge (e.g., air, surface, and ocean currents; facts about Count Dracula) or basic application of ideas (e.g., How should Dracula be remembered?)
- layout out very specifically what students must do; over-scaffold what is expected of students
- require limited writing output (e.g., labeling, 1-2 sentences, or single paragraphs)
- offer very few choices for students
- engage students superficially (e.g., poster board activity, song lyrics)

We recognize that at times teachers need to focus on particular fundamental skills. We also know that entry tasks are meant to be brief and can serve as a quick reviews or warm ups for the lesson. However, if students spend an overwhelming majority of their time on these types of assignments across multiple subject areas, we question whether or not the tasks are truly aligned with the rigor demanded from the Common Core. Our focus here is dosage. How many assignments like these do students receive across their days, weeks, and years in ELA, science, and social studies? When and where do students engage in the deeper cognitive work referenced in the Common Core?

We believe brief assignments for middle school students (such as those used for entry tasks) can and should push a higher level of cognitive demand. We also believe that short assignments must be coupled with longer ones that require students to write more than a single paragraph.

"This just confirms what I see. Why will we not believe that our lower income students of color are capable of this deeper level of thinking and work? We are spoon-feeding them because we do not believe they can do it."

—School Principal

"Over-scaffolding" may be a rational, but misguided, response by those who fear that students cannot meet the increased demands of the Common Core standards. Thus, providing many scaffolds protects students from struggling or, even worse, failing. Taken further, if teachers do not trust that their students can manage and work through these challenging experiences, it is far safer to stay in a place of teacher-directed learning. As one principal noted in response to seeing her school results, "This just confirms what I see. Why will we not believe that our lower income students of color are capable of this deeper level of thinking and work? We are spoon-feeding them because we do not believe they can do it."

Interestingly, the over-scaffolded assignments often appeared to align with several teaching structures we noticed repeatedly in our analysis. Some of these structures (e.g., "do nows," "entry tasks," "exit slips") were short in duration and supported abbreviated tasks with limited writing. Used to build classroom routines or perhaps to prime and reinforce learning, these practices can have great value. However, an over-reliance on these structures suggests that they may be endorsed by state or district leaders or may even be required as part of mandated curriculum or professional development initiatives. Even more pressing, teachers may be held accountable for rigidly adhering to these structures when observed by administrators armed with evaluation checklists calling for discrete teaching moves and actions. Yet, if these structures support an over-scaffolded learning experience for students, they may be misused or incompatible with aspects of the complex work demanded by the Common Core (e.g., extended reading and writing tasks). Since only 2 percent of short assignments involved higher levels of student thinking, we may need to refine these teaching structures or exercise caution and flexibility in how often we use them. And, instructional leaders may need to consider how and when to include other types of teaching structures that will propel our students into the realm of strategic and extended literacy learning.

DISCUSSIONS: FEW AND FAR BETWEEN

The Common Core standards are clear about the importance of discussion. They state:

> *To become college and career ready, students must have ample opportunity to take part in a variety of rich, structured conversations — as part of a whole class, in small groups, and with partners — built around important content in various domains. They must be able to contribute appropriately to these conversations, to make comparisons and contrasts, and to analyze and synthesize a multitude of ideas in accordance with the standards of evidence appropriate to a particular discipline.*[9]

When students engage in these rich discussions, they are pushed to comprehend more deeply, collaborate with others, and practice what it means to present knowledge and ideas with both credibility and conviction. By the time students reach middle school, the standards expect that they "come to discussions prepared, having read or researched material under study."[10] Discussions should have norms for participation and clear goals.

Moreover, students must develop both speaking *and* listening skills. This means that as they present their own claims and findings, they must also listen to the arguments of others and respond to their peers with thoughtful acknowledgements and questions. In our view, such discussions serve as a powerful springboard toward future written tasks and analyses — and they are especially powerful tools for reluctant learners who may benefit from hearing the ideas of others. Discussions can be a powerful tool for equity as student thinking is shared and considered by all.

In our sample of assignments, student discussions appeared inconsistently. When they did appear, they were linked to the lesson or to the content being studied, but were typically shorter in duration. These assignments promoted important moments for student talk and peer collaboration. For example, in some instances, a group task was assigned and the discussion centered on how the task would be completed (e.g., "Work with your group members to …" or "Talk in your groups about ….). In other instances discussions were used to summarize learning or reflect on an activity.

Rarely, however, did we find assignments like the one shown here that required students to prepare text-based notes ahead of time for a discussion, to present claims and findings aloud, or to consider the argument of a peer. *(See Example 4: Grade 8 ELA Discussion.)* Nor did we see the discussions linked to follow-up reading or writing. Instead, the discussions were stand-alone experiences. And, very few showed evidence of discussion norms or structures for participation, even though the assignments we collected were from the spring semester when such routines would have been well established.

EXAMPLE 4

GRADE 8 ELA DISCUSSION ASSIGNMENT

Directions: We will participate in a discussion focused on *All the Right Stuff*. You will discuss the question below.

Question #1 Preparation: What does it mean to use power responsibly?

Essential Questions and other guiding questions:

What does it mean to use power responsibly?

- Is there a difference between power and intimidation (that's not a contract...p.46)?
- Who has the power in the social contract (p.64-70)?
- Do you agree with what Sly thinks about crime?
- How does Sly's argument on p.170-171 fit into the theme of power?
- How does Paul's track example to Keisha illustrate the social contract? Who makes the rules? Does Paul think the contract is fair? Does he buy it?
- When is it ok to break rules (think back to John Sunday and CRI)?
- What do you think of Sly's business that claims to help people start their own business?

Claims (or new ideas not stated directly in the text - it's all about the inference, 'bout that inference, - no treble):

Best evidence from the book that supports my claim (use your evidence log!):

Pg. #	The part from this page that supports your claim (either in your own words or "quoted" word for word)

Meaningful things I want to say during the discussion in relation to the question (these might come from your write logs):

Meaningful Author and Me and/or On My Own Questions that will spark further discussion in relation to the EQ:

Reflections and Goal Setting

Place a plus next to discussion skills where you show strength. Place a delta next to discussion skills where you need to improve.

Discussion Skill	
	Participation (do you speak too much, too little, or just right? Are you animated, sincere, and helpful?) (SL 8.1a,b)
	Active listening (focus is on the speaker, you add on to or question what the speaker says) (SL 8.1d)
	Staying on topic (focus is on one relevant issue at a time, you try to resolve questions and issues before moving to new ones) (SL 8.1c)
	You explore new ideas (you take risks and dig for new meanings) (SL 8.3)
	Preparation (you come prepared with materials and notes) (SL 8.1a)
	Text is referenced (text mentioned often and in specific examples and/or quotations) (SL 8.4)

EXAMPLE 4
Planning and Preparing for Discussion

This type of assignment was rare. It scored within the high range on the framework (met 6-8 indicators). Notice that it required students to prepare for a text-based discussion by:

- considering an essential question and a series of related questions
- digging deeply into the text for evidence,
- generating possible claims to discuss,
- jotting down claims, evidence, and follow-up questions onto a graphic organizer

Notice also the genuine ways that students were engaged to grapple with a relevant question on a poignant topic: "What does it mean to use power responsibly?" Students were brought into the rigorous content by being prompted to consider their own ideas and connections to these questions and to consider their thoughts about characters and events from the text.

There is a healthy balance of reader and text in this work that allows the assignment to feel relevant for students. Moreover, students were supported in their developing autonomy by being prompted to jot down their unique "meaningful" ideas and questions that they brought to the discussion. Finally, the assignment required students to reflect on their performance afterwards. This required them to consider their own strengths and areas for growth in the areas of speaking and of listening.

In our view, the cycle of strategic literacy work includes reading, thinking, discussion, and writing. This assignment comes very close to embracing this approach and would be strengthened further if the discussion were linked with an extended writing assignment.

In many ways, these findings point to some of what we already hear from educators about the lack of student discussion. Some teachers feel their middle school schedule does not allow them enough time for this type of assignment, while others simply see little value in it. In debriefing these results with participating school leaders, many confessed that pockets of staff were actually afraid of providing students with this level of autonomy and independence. And yet, the discussion assignment shown here is a reminder of how important it is that we help teachers overcome these doubts. Although some teachers are asking their students to think and discuss at strategic levels, we need to find ways to support more teachers to approach assignments in this way.

RELEVANCY & CHOICE: A MISSING LEVER

A large body of research in the area of adolescent development supports the idea that assignments relevant to student experiences promote sustained attention.[11] So if we want our students to stay engaged, we must choose materials that give them an appropriate level of challenge and design learning experiences that provide meaningful ways for them to explore and think critically about interesting content. Middle school students also need opportunities to assert their interests and develop their strengths as they work independently and with their peers. Without these considerations, learning becomes — in their eyes — irrelevant.[12]

For low-income students and students of color, these developmentally appropriate choices are often layered within the larger context of social, racial, cultural, or economic inequity. If we are honest about the work of what it means to implement the Common Core or other rigorous college- and career-ready learning standards for these students in these communities, we must address issues of student agency, motivation, and their relationship with academic success. We must further recognize that curricula representing their voices, images, and historical experiences is also important and has often been absent from schools.[13]

Our findings in this dimension are troubling. About 2 percent of the assignments included both choices for students and indicators of relevancy. It was more likely that either choice *or* relevancy appeared, but even these findings were low (about 10 percent). And, as noted above, assignments often kept students together in lockstep fashion rather than allowing them to experience autonomy or independence.

A closer look at how engagement played out in the assignments is revealing. We noticed a pattern within some assignments that attempted to "hook" students by using examples from pop culture (e.g., song lyrics from popular artists became the text for analysis). We also saw many assignments that asked students to make posters or displays using colorful enhancements and images. While the argument might be that students "enjoy" these types of activities, the use of superficial techniques such as these often failed to promote the deeper push needed in the area of cognitive demand.

Rather than relying on gimmicks or low-level materials, we can and must engage our young adolescents using challenging content. Only a handful of higher level assignments in our study reflected this approach. As we teach the important topics found in literature, history, and science, we must search for and identify the broader themes that are relevant for our students. For example, characteristics such as perseverance, determination, and ingenuity can be powerful "hooks" for students preparing to study historical figures and events. And allowing students to read and discuss how science influences our daily lives can open their mind to its importance. Relevancy becomes the pathway from the known to the unknown; from the simple to the complex. It enlarges their understanding as they see why it matters for themselves and for their world.

Further, engagement and relevancy hold a particularly powerful role when we consider the texts we ask our students to read. We embrace the powerful metaphor of texts as "mirrors and windows."[14] At times a student must see himself reflected in the text being read or discussed and, at other moments, the reading or discussion must offer a "window" into a place or situation far different than his. In both scenarios, powerful comprehension occurs as students evaluate and integrate new content knowledge and ideas. Particularly for low-income students, the opportunity to engage with important historical or scientific content in school is one of the ways they access information that their wealthier peers often experience outside of school. The breadth and depth of this type of learning requires that students spend sustained time reading, thinking, talking, and writing about the texts they read. The absence of this kind of teaching further hinders reading development as students become detached from a critical process that relies equally on texts and the reader's interaction with them.

WHERE DO WE GO NEXT?

It is time for honest conversation about where and how we are in implementing higher level college- and career-ready standards.

Clearly, as practitioners, we are all wrestling with how to bring these standards to life in classrooms and how to expand our efforts across schools and districts. But this analysis suggests that some of our choices around bringing Common Core, and other college- and career-ready practices to scale, may have put us right where we are: far short, even five years in, of the quality and rigor we desire.

Perhaps the implementation approaches we have chosen are overly mechanical, denying the dynamic nature of teaching needed for strategic thinking. Perhaps our efforts to build "aligned" evaluation systems push teachers to include pedagogical moves regardless of whether they fit with the context and students in their classrooms. Perhaps we have reduced classroom implementation to a list of discrete standards or keywords and phrases to be included in lesson plans or jotted down on whiteboards so that they parse work out to students in small bits with heavy teacher guidance.

States and districts cannot use professional development as their safety net, nor as their proxy for Common Core support. Neither can they rely solely on annual standardized assessment results as their compass for implementation. This is not enough.

These messages need to be recalled and refined. More nuanced understanding of these standards are urgently needed. We recommend two starting points.

1. **Dig deeper through questions.** Our key findings have limitations given the scope of our analysis. Thus, we cannot offer guaranteed answers and solutions. Instead, it has cued for us important questions that all stakeholders should be asking about tasks, texts, rigor, and engagement in middle schools in the era of college- and career-ready learning standards. Now, more than ever, we wonder:

   - *What does deep and impactful standards implementation look like? What indicators should education and community leaders be monitoring regularly to assess the progress of this work and our impact on student learning?*
   - *How and when do students read, discuss, and write about texts in their classrooms? Do we require students to cite textual evidence in order to support or develop a claim or do we only ask general text-based questions?*
   - *When and how often do students read without interruptions? What choices do **they** make about their note-taking or annotations?*
   - *When and how often do students experience extended writing?*
   - *How do school and district leaders ensure that science and social studies assignments reflect the literacy standards?*
   - *How might leaders and teachers work together across grade levels and content areas to develop responsive, coherent systems that ensure students are writing extended pieces with enthusiasm, conviction, and authority?*
   - *How adaptive are our instructional routines? Are teachers held to teaching structures and parameters that inhibit their ability to fully align with Common Core demands?*
   - *What level of cognitive demand are we asking of our students in ELA, history, and science? Are we pushing students, particularly low-income students and students of color, to think strategically as speakers, listeners, readers, and writers? When and how often?*
   - *How do we support autonomy and transition our young adolescents to academic independence? What role does student choice play?*
   - *Do we offer opportunities for students to bring their own ideas, experiences, and opinions into the work they do? Do academically rigorous discussions, as described in the Common Core, occur in our classrooms?*
   - *How can we analyze student work in order to identify and showcase the qualities of strategic thinking that is both rich in content and relevant for students?*

2. **Begin with assignments.** Leaders need to track what their students are being asked to do on a daily basis in their classrooms. Analyzing the texts and tasks their students experience provides the necessary insight to gauge the quality of Common Core implementation. It illuminates how the standards have been actualized in classrooms. And, it prompts us to question whether or not the status quo structures and approaches support or inhibit the true spirit of college and career readiness. Moreover, by looking closely at student assignments across grades and in all content areas, we can track where teachers are in their own understanding of more rigorous standards. This is the data we need in order to support teachers as they make their way through this complex transition and ensure greater and more sustained student learning outcomes.

As we push for the next iteration of Common Core implementation, we stand ready to support the efforts of both leaders and teachers. As we said at the outset, our analysis of assignments is in the earliest stages. Yet these initial findings represent both a troubling snapshot of the current realities and need for deeper examination and questioning of our implementation. Standards alone cannot ensure that all students are college and career ready. For young people of color and low-income students in particular, classroom assignments must reflect the deeper thinking and sophisticated application of skills that have been missing from

so much of their schooling. This early and emerging analysis points to a deeper application of standards required to ensure the educational equity our young people need to experience.

In the coming months, we will share additional findings along with appropriate tools for districts and schools to use that will both identify the current status of their own student assignments and support the change we are calling for in this report. And our work in this area will expand as we partner with additional schools and districts to analyze more assignments and more grade levels at an even deeper level. Additionally, we will share our findings in mathematics. There is clearly important work ahead for those of us who are committed and determined to strengthen the implementation of these demanding standards. Our nation's students deserve no less.

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ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST

The Education Trust promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels — pre-kindergarten through college. We work alongside parents, educators, and community and business leaders across the country in transforming schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. Lessons learned in these efforts, together with unflinching data analyses, shape our state and national policy agendas.

Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people — especially those who are black, Latino, American Indian, or from low-income families — to lives on the margins of the American mainstream.

EQUITY IN MOTION

ABOUT THIS SERIES

In this series, we will take a close look at how issues of equity are playing out in the daily activities of schools and educators. We aim to advance the work of practitioners and connect district, state, and federal actions aimed at improving education for low-income students with meaningful teaching and learning in schools. This first report in this series examines middle school classroom assignments to determine how well we are implementing more rigorous standards for college and career readiness. Future work in this series will expand on findings from more schools and introduce tools and processes for educators to use as they work to implement high-level standards. Most importantly, however, work in this series will continue to ask how we can adjust our practices, systems, and policies so that low-income students and students of color are actually benefitting from these efforts.

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