EQUITY IN MOTION SERIES

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

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Introduction to Equity in Motion

- Our Equity in Motion series will take a close look at how issues of equity are playing out in the daily activities of schools and educators.

- This first report examines middle-school classroom assignments to determine how well we are implementing more rigorous standards for college and career readiness.

- Future work will expand on findings from more schools and introduce tools and processes for educators.

- 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.

Why Assignments?

- Assignment Analysis is a powerful lens for viewing the day-to-day experiences of students
- Particularly, 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**

A Deeper Look at What We Did

Collected over 1,800 assignments from 92 sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade teachers teaching courses in English language arts, humanities, history/social studies, and science.

- Assignments were collected within a two-week collection window between late February and early March 2015 from six middle schools in two large, urban school districts in two states.

- Assignments were defined as any in-school or out-of-school task that a student completed independently or with a group of peers.

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

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

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

92 Teachers

A Deeper Look at What We Did

Analyzed and scored 1,591 assignments using our Literacy Assignment Analysis Framework.

Alignment With the Common Core

Centrality of Text

Domains of Rigorous Student Assignments

Cognitive Challenge

Motivation and Engagement

Additional Features Analyzed

- Text Type and Length
- Writing Output
- Length of Assignment
- Student Thinking

What We Found: 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 doing 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.

A Deeper Look at What We Found: Common Themes

As we analyzed the assignments, six common themes emerged that span across our key findings:

Window Dressing the Common Core	*Reading Interrupted*	*Writing Without Composing*
Support or Spoon-Feeding? Short Assignments, Heavy Scaffolding, Rare Independence	*Discussions: Few and Far Between*	*Relevancy and Choice: Missing Levers*

A Deeper Look at What We Found: Common Themes

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

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Writing Without Composing

- Point to **truncated experiences in reading and writing** students', **despite the standards' emphasis of extended practice** in both areas.

A Deeper Look at What We Found: Common Themes

Support or Spoon-Feeding?

- Poses questions about the **prevalence of short, less challenging assignments** coupled with **heavy doses of teacher support and rare independence.**

Discussions: Few and Far Between

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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.

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.

- 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.

  - Are the **implementation approaches we have chosen overly mechanical**, denying the dynamic nature of teaching needed for strategic thinking?

  - Have our **efforts to build "aligned" evaluation systems** pushed teachers to include **pedagogical moves regardless of whether they fit** with the context of students in their classrooms?

  - Have we **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?

Where Do We Go Next?

Recommended Starting Points:

1. *Dig deeper through questions*

- All stakeholders should be asking important questions about tasks, texts, rigor, and engagement in the era of college- and career-ready learning standards.

2. *Begin with assignments*

- Provides the necessary insight to gauge the quality of Common Core implementation.
- Illuminates how the standards have been actualized in classrooms.
- Prompts us to question whether or not the status quo structures and approaches support or inhibit the true spirit of college and career readiness.

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APPENDIX

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%	16%
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%	

*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.

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%	

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.)

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

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

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

Assignments Scored by the Numbers
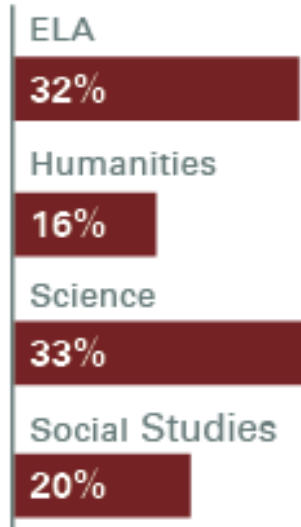
Total number of assignments submitted	**1,876**

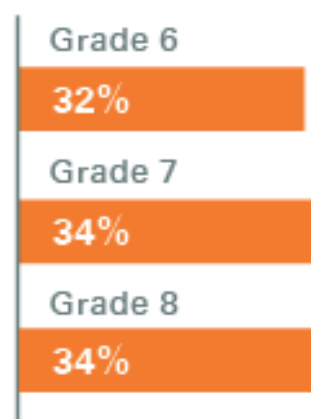| Total number of assignments scored	**1,591** (85%)

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

ELA
32%

Humanities
16%

Science
33%

Social Studies
20%

Assignments by Grade

Grade 6
32%

Grade 7
34%

Grade 8
34%

Type of Assignments

Short/Brief
51%

1-2 Class Periods
48%

Extended
1%
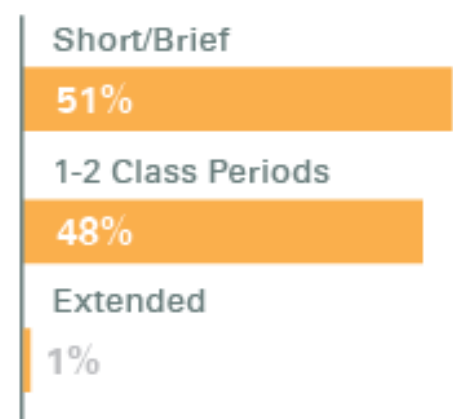
Figure 1: Writing Demand of Assignments

OVERALL | **ASSIGNMENT WRITING OUTPUT**

18% — **No Writing**

16% — **Note-Taking**
(e.g., key phrases/concepts, bulleted list, text annotation)

17% — **1-2 Sentences**

27% — **Multiple Short Responses**
(e.g., students answer five questions by writing 1-2 sentences per question)

14% — **1 Paragraph**

9% — **Multiple Paragraphs**
(i.e., An assignment requires students to answer five questions by writing a paragraph for each question, OR an assignment requires students to write multiple, cohesive paragraphs.)
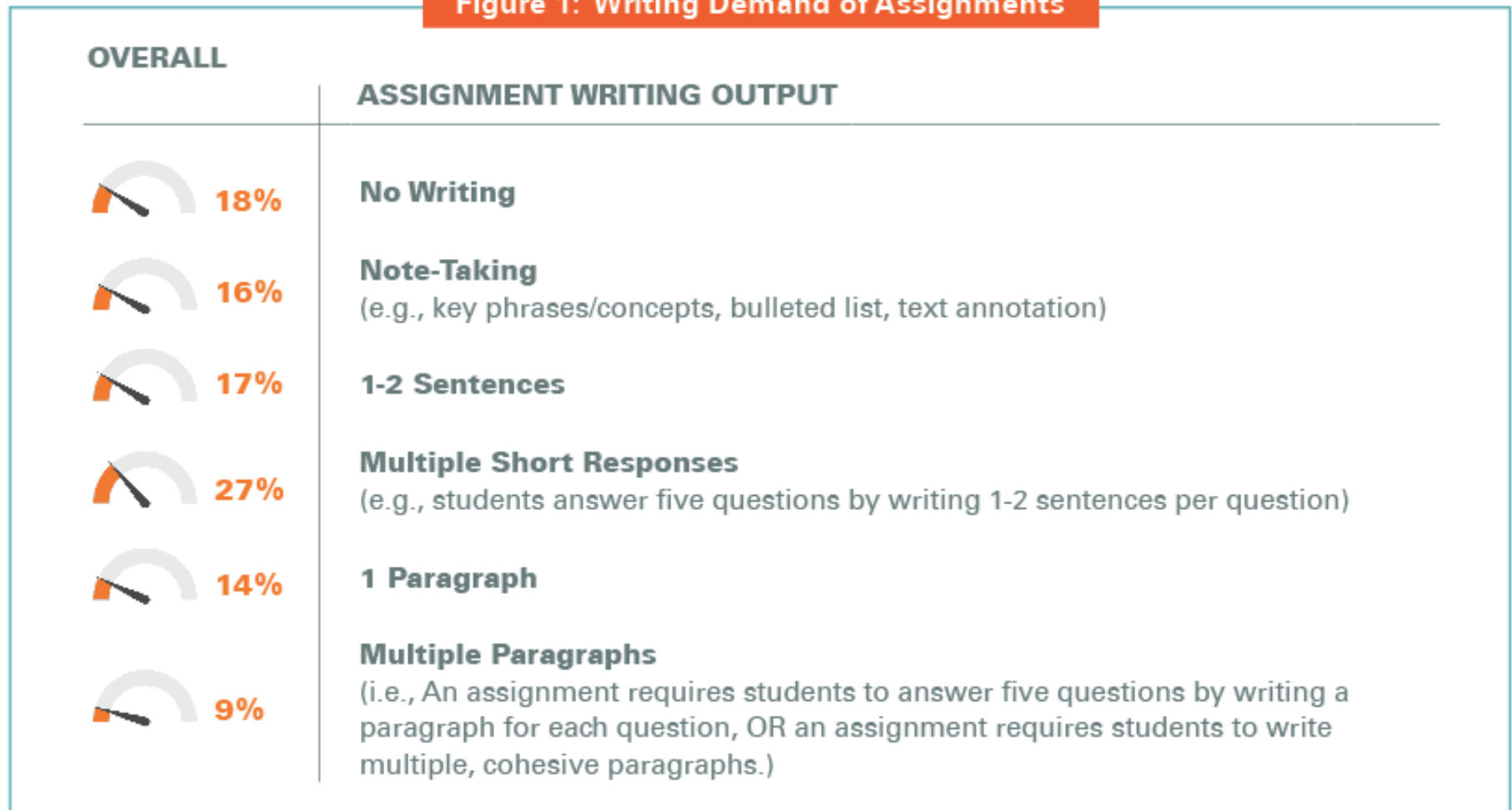
Figure 2: Cognitive Demand of Assignments

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 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.