

# Connecting What Teachers Know About State English Language Arts Standards for Reading and What They Do in Their Classrooms

## Findings from the American Teacher Panel

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### Key findings

- The majority of teachers did not have a clear understanding of the reading instruction approaches most aligned with their state standards.
- Specifically, most teachers thought standards emphasized use of texts written at students' individual reading levels and organizing instruction around reading skills, despite the fact that most state standards emphasize using grade-level texts of appropriate complexity and organizing instruction around texts.
- Teachers' beliefs about which approaches were aligned with their standards were significantly related to the approaches and reading materials they used in the classroom.
- Teachers' policy environment and demographics of the students they taught also played a role in the instructional approaches they used in the classroom.

**SUMMARY** ■ In a 2016 report—*Implementation of K–12 State Standards for Mathematics and English Language Arts and Literacy*—we explored English language arts (ELA) teachers' implementation of their state standards, with a specific focus on three key aspects: teachers' instructional materials, their knowledge about their standards, and their instructional practices. This report provides an update based on data from a spring 2016 survey of the RAND American Teacher Panel (ATP). In particular, we connect teachers' understanding of two ideas aligned with most state standards related to reading—use of complex texts and close reading of texts—to the approaches to reading instruction they take with their students.

Panel members were sampled randomly from across the United States. The population for this sample included full-time, public school teachers in grades K–12 in all subjects, including teachers of special education students and English language learners.

The findings imply that ELA teachers need clearer messages about the reading instruction approaches and practices aligned with their state standards, as well as better supports and curriculum resources to engage in those approaches. In particular, teachers need guidance on the use of leveled readers—or texts written at students' individual reading levels—and how to address reading skills through texts.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, most states have adopted new K–12 standards for English language arts (ELA) intended to improve students’ college and career readiness, and some are considering further iterations of their current standards. While states have engaged in much debate on the adoption of Common Core State Standards for ELA, most current state ELA standards have considerable similarities to the reading standards of the Common Core. In particular, most current state ELA standards emphasize the following two key ideas for reading, in some shape or form (see Box 1):

- **Students should read complex texts written at or above their grade level.** Many state standards include lists of fiction and nonfiction texts of appropriate complexity at each grade level and/or detailed guidance on how teachers can measure text complexity and choose texts of appropriate complexity.
- **Students should engage in close reading of complex texts.** For example, key ELA standards in most states require students to read texts closely to determine their explicit messages, as well as cite evidence from texts when drawing conclusions from them.

While these ideas are embedded within most state standards, they do represent a departure from previous standards and from traditional reading approaches. For example, Common Core State Standards note research that students—particularly at earlier grade levels—may not typically have been exposed to challenging texts at or above their grade level.<sup>1</sup> The Common Core also includes guidance on how to select texts of appropriate complexity along with text exemplars at various grade levels.<sup>2</sup> This guidance moves beyond traditional definitions of text complexity, such as the use of Lexile measures (numeric measures of text difficulty) to also include levels of meaning and purpose, structure, language conventionality and clarity, as well as knowledge demands for students.

In addition to this expanded definition of text complexity, the focus on the use of complex, grade-level texts represents a departure from the decades-old practice of teaching reading based on instructional level theory, which encourages use of “leveled readers”—sometimes also called “just-right” texts—that are written at students’ individual reading level.<sup>3</sup> Opfer, Kaufman, and Thompson (2016) have noted that high percentages of ELA teachers across the United States use leveled readers daily. Yet, a recent review of research on leveled readers

concluded, “We could not find any compelling studies suggesting that leveled texts beyond the primary years resulted in significant gains in achievement.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast, several studies have demonstrated improvement in reading achievement when students are taught using texts significantly above their instructional level,<sup>5</sup> although researchers have also emphasized that more studies are needed to assess the effects of text difficulty on reading improvement.<sup>6</sup>

Liben and Liben (2016) have provided guidance to teachers on use of leveled readers within the Common Core framework. They have suggested that teachers focus instructional time on “shared reading of grade-level complex text,” but provide students opportunities to engage in guided or independent reading with texts of their choice—including, potentially, texts at their individual reading level—during a block of time separate from reading and writing instructional time. However, most state standards do not mention leveled readers at all, which does not send a clear message to teachers about whether leveled readers should be used to any extent and—if so—how.

Close reading of complex texts is also an idea that may not be fully understood by teachers. The “Anchor Standards for Reading” within the Common Core note that students should “read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it,” “analyze how and why individuals, events, or ideas develop and interact over the course of a text,” “analyze the structure of texts,” and “interpret words and phrases as they are used in the text.”<sup>7</sup> These standards suggest both careful reading and rereading of texts, as well as continual reflection on specific elements of a text and their overall meaning. Yet, as noted by Boyles (2012) and Shanahan (2013), teachers may engage students in discussion that is far removed from the text itself, both giving too much background and context and moving too quickly from a text to random questions and musings that may not be tied to the text.

Most state standards also ask students to closely read and analyze a range of different kinds of texts—both fiction and nonfiction—to gain the literacy skills and concepts required for life outside of school. While phonics and reading-fluency skills are addressed in state standards at elementary grade levels, they are not intended to be an end in themselves but rather a means to becoming a more proficient reader of texts.<sup>8</sup>

Research provides mixed evidence that teachers are thinking and teaching in ways reflected by newer state standards. According to Kane (2015), teachers in several states have reported making major changes to their lesson plans and materials to meet new standards. Yet, in our prior RAND work,

## Box 1. States' Emphasis on Use of Complex Texts and Text-Focused Instruction Within Their Standards for English Language Arts

Our research suggests that nearly all states have embraced these two key ideas—use of complex texts and text-focused instruction—in some form as part of their standards. At the time of our survey, 35 states referenced or acknowledged the Common Core directly as the foundation of their standards on the state department of education website, signifying attention to both text complexity and close reading of texts. ELA and literacy standards in most other states prominently addressed text complexity and close reading of texts in some way. For example, Pennsylvania Core Standards for ELA noted key “instructional shifts” that are similar to the “Key Shifts in English Language Arts” in Common Core documentation.<sup>9</sup> These shifts are intended to capture key differences between current state standards and previous standards.<sup>10</sup> Shifts in the Pennsylvania Core Standards and also reflected in Common Core documentation included “[b]uilding a staircase of complexity (i.e., each grade level requires a ‘step’ of growth on the staircase)” and “[f]ocusing on close and careful reading of text so that students are learning from the text” “so that students graduate college or career ready.”<sup>11</sup> Louisiana also acknowledged similar shifts in guidebooks sent to ELA teachers around the state.<sup>12</sup> Thus, even in states that do not explicitly note that their standards are Common Core, there is agreement about the importance of engaging students with complex texts and in close reading of texts.

Achieve, a nonprofit education organization created in 1996 by a bipartisan group of governors and business leaders, recently conducted a thorough review of standards in states that have changed their standards from the Common Core in some way since the Common Core was developed and adopted.<sup>13</sup> In that review, they noted that all states that had changed their standards emphasized using evidence from texts to make justifications or conclusions, although standards in Oklahoma and Missouri included some unclear guidance on critical skills to apply to reading of those texts. In addition, Achieve found that nearly all those states had standards for text complexity, with the exception of South Carolina, Missouri, and Oklahoma (although, at the time of this survey, Missouri had not yet implemented the new standards that were the focus of Achieve’s review). While most states had standards on text complexity, Achieve noted that not all states that had changed their standards from Common Core offered clear guidance on selecting texts of appropriate complexity, including Arizona, Georgia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia.

In our informal review of all states, we only found one state—Virginia—that discussed use of texts at students’ individual reading levels. One document we found on the state’s website noted that the Common Core “may promote placing students in reading texts that are beyond the students’ instructional reading levels” and that—according to reading research—students are best taught at their “instructional reading level.”<sup>14</sup> This idea that students are best taught at their individual instructional levels could stand in contrast to the emphasis within most state standards that students should read texts at or above their own grade level.

we found that most U.S. teachers were unable to identify key topics and approaches aligned with their ELA and mathematics standards.<sup>15</sup> In another example, Santelises and Dabrowski’s (2015) research suggested that very few homework assignments they examined in a small set of middle schools were aligned with newer state standards.

As in our prior work, in this report, we focus on three primary factors reflecting teachers’ implementation of state standards: their instructional materials, their knowledge—or understanding—of approaches aligned with their standards, and their self-reported teaching practices. We chose those factors based on the rationale that teachers’ ability to engage

in standards-aligned approaches and practices is primarily dependent on whether they, first, understand the standards and, second, have access to instructional materials that support the standards.

While we focus on three key factors that reflect teachers’ implementation of state standards, we also recognize that multiple additional factors could inform teachers’ implementation of state standards, including their policy environment, messages from their school district and their own experiences. For example, we expect that teachers in states that have formally adopted the Common Core are likely receiving messages and materials more consistent with these standards than teachers

who are not in Common Core states. These messages could get reinforced via professional development offerings, assessments, and curriculum materials. Thus, a teacher's state policy context should be related to their knowledge of their standards and associated classroom practices.

In this report, we have specifically attempted to understand the connection between teachers' understanding of two ideas aligned with most state reading standards—use of complex texts and close reading of texts—and their self-reported reading instructional approaches. The reading instructional approaches we examine include both teachers' selection of reading instructional materials and teachers' instructional practices. In our spring 2016 survey, we asked teachers about a range of standards-aligned practices in which they may engage students, including those that come directly from most state standards and may reflect students' engagement in close reading. For example, we asked teachers about the percentage of a typical lesson that students are in groups discussing a text or writing in response to texts. We also asked teachers the extent to which they have asked students to use evidence from texts, read nonfiction texts, analyze the structure of texts, and analyze how two or more texts address similar themes. Some of these activities may not be regarded as practices by researchers and educators in the same ways as, for example, the Standards for Mathematical Practice within the Common Core. Shulman, for example, refers to similar activities as "processes" in which teachers engage students based on their own knowledge of pedagogy and content.<sup>16</sup>

Our findings indicate some clear associations between what approaches teachers understood to be aligned with their state policies and their approaches to reading instruction. At the same time, the data indicate that teachers' classroom approaches and practices were also related to the demographics of students the teachers serve, irrespective of their state policy environment. These findings imply that teachers working to support struggling students will need more tools and guidance to address standards in their classrooms.

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## METHODS

The data presented in this report came from a web-based survey administered by RAND Education to the American Teacher Panel (ATP) in spring 2016. The ATP is a randomly selected, nationally representative panel of full-time U.S. K–12 public school teachers. For the spring 2016 survey, teachers were asked questions about their main instructional materials,

as well as their perceptions about the approaches and content aligned with their states' standards. Several of the questions about ELA and literacy state standards were adapted from other surveys, including one from Shanahan and Duffett (2013) and another developed by Student Achievement Partners.

The spring 2016 ATP included 3,524 teachers who were asked to complete the survey that is the focus of this report. Of those, approximately 49 percent, or 1,718, responded and completed the survey. Respondents were paid an incentive of \$25 for every 30 minutes of survey time. For this report, we focus only on data from the 1,089 ELA teachers who responded to our survey. Table 1 highlights background characteristics of responding ELA teachers, including demographic characteristics and grade range for responding teachers' students.<sup>17</sup> The characteristics included in Table 1 are also those we accounted for in our analyses for variables that might be related to teachers' beliefs and practices. The student demographics we accounted for in these analyses were at the school- or classroom-level, including the percentages of students in a teacher's school receiving free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) and the percentages of students in a teacher's classroom who were English language learners (ELL) or had an individualized education program (IEP).<sup>18</sup> For the purposes of our analyses, we also designated a teacher as serving a high-vulnerability student population (i.e., students at higher risk to struggle in school compared to other students) if the teacher's students were in the top quartile for at least two of the following: school percentage FRL, classroom percentage ELL, and/or classroom percentage IEP.

One additional variable included in Table 1 is whether the responding ELA teacher came from a state that is formally on record as adopting the Common Core State Standards. State adoption of new standards could send signals to teachers about what they should be teaching, the materials they should use, and the instructional practices they implement in their classrooms. States that passed legislation clearly noting that their standards for the 2015–2016 year (the year in which teachers responded to our survey) were a departure from the Common Core included Alaska, Indiana, Minnesota (for mathematics only), Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia.<sup>19</sup>

The survey data were weighted to account for differential sampling and nonresponse. Weighting involved both modeling selection probabilities (i.e., what was the chance that a particular individual was contacted for inclusion into the Panel?) and response probabilities (i.e., given that they were selected, what was the probability that they responded to our survey?). Variables taken into account in the weighting included teacher

**Table 1. Characteristics of ELA Respondents for May 2016 ATP Survey**

	Percentage of All ELA Teachers (n = 1,089)	Standard Error
Teacher for grades K–2	29.0	2.2
Teacher for grades 3–5	17.8	1.8
Teacher for grades 6–8	22.3	2.0
Teacher for grades 9–12	30.9	2.2
Teachers in schools in the top quartile for percentage of FRL	26.8	1.7
Teachers in schools in the top quartile for percentage of students who are ELL	22.8	1.6
Teachers in schools in the top quartile for percentage of students with IEP	24.6	1.7
Teachers of high vulnerability populations (i.e., teachers who are in the top quartile for at least two of the following: percentage of FRL, percentage of ELL, or percentage of IEP)	15.4	1.7
Teachers of medium vulnerability populations (i.e., teachers who are in the top quartile for one of the following: percentage of FRL, percentage of ELL, or percentage of IEP)	42.3	2.4
Teachers of low vulnerability populations (i.e., teachers who are not in the top quartile for percentage of FRL, percentage of ELL, or percentage of IEP)	42.3	2.4
Teachers in rural areas	16.8	1.7
Teachers in cities, suburbs, or towns	83.2	1.7
Teachers in states that did not formally adopt Common Core as of spring 2016	16.5	1.9
Teachers in states that formally adopted Common Core as of spring 2016	83.5	1.9

background (e.g., gender, professional experience) and school-level characteristics (e.g., school size, level, urbanicity, socioeconomic status) characteristics.<sup>20</sup> While our response rates include potential bias, they are consistent with or higher than those typically achieved in surveys of this size.<sup>21</sup>

This report presents descriptive differences among subgroups for particular outcomes related to teachers' use of instructional materials, their knowledge about approaches aligned with their ELA standards, and their self-reported approaches to reading instruction and practices in which they reported engaging their students. In addition, we conducted linear and/or logistic regressions to examine relationships among teachers' policy environment (a Common Core state versus a non-Common Core state), knowledge, and teaching approaches and practices, when accounting for other factors. Variables included in our regressions included our marker for vulnerability of teachers' students; grade band of students

taught; school-level urbanicity for respondents; and if the teacher came from a state that is on record as adopting the Common Core. Analyses were conducted in R, which is open statistical analysis software. We specifically used R version 3.4.1 and the standard errors were adjusted for weighting using the R survey package.<sup>22</sup>

The findings that follow are separated into two sections. The first section explores what U.S. ELA teachers know and report doing in the classroom in regard to selection of complex, grade-level texts. The second section explores what those teachers know and report doing in the classroom for close reading of complex, grade-level texts. In addition, we examine the relationship between teachers' knowledge of standards and their instructional approaches and practices. We conclude with a brief summary of our findings and implications for those who support teachers' work in schools.

## FINDINGS

### Teachers' Knowledge and Practice Related to Complex, Grade-Level Texts

In the introduction to this report, we discussed the lack of evidence linking use of leveled readers to reading improvement, compared with use of complex, grade-level texts. We also noted that nearly all state standards include some guidance encouraging teachers to use grade-level texts of appropriate complexity with students, although most all state standards provide no guidance on use of leveled readers. Yet, as documented in this section, leveled readers were the predominant instructional material used in ELA classrooms at the elementary level across the United States in spring 2016, according to teachers' reports to our survey. Further, more teachers reported that use of leveled readers was aligned with their standards compared with teachers who reported that use of complex texts was aligned with their standards.

### Over Three-Quarters of Elementary ELA Teachers Thought That Selecting Texts at Students' Individual Reading Level Was Aligned with Their State Standards for ELA

In the spring 2016 survey, ATP teachers were asked to indicate which approaches for selecting texts were aligned with their state standards. About three-quarters of elementary ELA teachers and 45 percent of secondary ELA teachers across the United States who responded to our survey indicated that "selecting texts for individual students based on their reading level" was an approach aligned with their state standards (see Figure 1).

In contrast, a little less than one-third of elementary ELA teachers and nearly one-half of secondary ELA teachers indicated that "assigning complex texts that all students in a class are required to read" was aligned with their standards. We are not implying that teachers were "wrong" if they indicated that selecting texts for individual students based on their reading level or using abridged texts for struggling readers were aligned with their standards. As pointed out in the introduction, most state standards do not mention leveled readers at all. However, as we also discussed, most states do include standards for selection of complex texts. Yet, a minority of teachers regarded that approach as standards-aligned.

### Teachers Were More Likely to Indicate That Assigning Complex Texts Was Aligned with Their Standards if They Were from a Common Core State

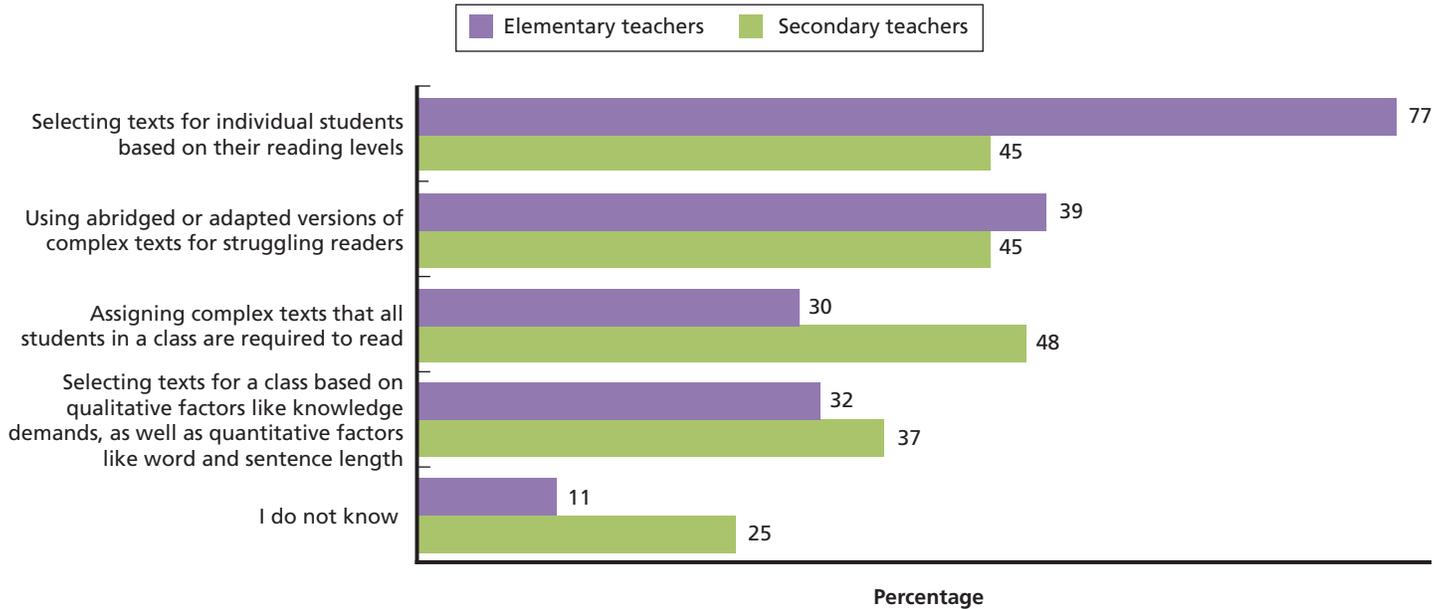
We found that teachers from Common Core states were more than twice as likely as their counterparts in states that had not formally adopted the Common Core to indicate that assignment of complex texts was aligned with their standards. This evidence suggests that teachers' state policy context matters for what they know about their standards and, in particular, that being in a state that is on record as adopting the Common Core may influence whether teachers understand that they are expected to assign complex texts that all students are required to read. In addition, elementary teachers and those from rural regions were less likely than their secondary and nonrural counterparts to indicate that the assignment of complex texts was aligned with their standards. No other factors appeared to be related to which approaches teachers regarded as aligned with their standards. For more findings from the regression analyses, see Table A.2 in the Appendix of this report.

### Teachers Reported Using a Large Number of Materials to Teach ELA, but Leveled Readers Were High on the List of What They Used

ELA teachers were asked to indicate the frequency with which they drew on a large variety of published textbooks for their ELA classroom instruction over the course of the 2015–2016 year. On average, teachers reported using between five and six of the texts they were asked about in our survey at least once that year. As seen in Figure 2, leveled readers (i.e., texts written at individual student reading levels) topped the list of what teachers reported using. Nearly all elementary teachers and over three-quarters of secondary teachers reported using leveled readers for their instruction. Teachers also reported using a number of text series that feature leveled readers, including *Reading A–Z*, *Raz-Kids*, and *Accelerated Reader*.

Teachers' reports of using leveled readers may not be problematic in itself. Teachers could occasionally be assigning leveled reading to students apart from classroom instructional time and be emphasizing use of complex, grade-level texts during instructional time. We therefore tried to dig deeper into how teachers reported using leveled readers in their classrooms. Specifically, teachers were asked about the portion of a "typical lesson" in which they used a single grade-level text for whole-class reading, writing, or discussion, as well as the portion of a typical lesson in which they used leveled readers for similarity in-class reading groups or to support struggling students

**Figure 1. ELA Teachers' Responses Regarding Which Approaches for Selecting Texts Aligned with Their Standards**



NOTE: Survey question was, "Which of the following approaches for selecting texts for reading aligned with your state's English language arts and literacy standards? Check all that apply."

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in place of the grade-level text other students were reading. Figure 3 shows the percentages of teachers who indicated engaging in each practice for one-half or more of a typical lesson.

About 30 percent of elementary ELA teachers and 40 percent of secondary ELA teachers indicated using a single-grade level text for whole-class reading, writing, or discussion for one-half or more of a typical lesson (see Figure 3). However, close to 40 percent of elementary ELA teachers reported using leveled readers for one-half or more of a typical lesson, while just less than 15 percent of secondary ELA teachers reported doing the same. This evidence suggests that, at least at the elementary level, ELA teachers are using leveled readers for more instructional time than grade-level texts, and a substantial percentage of teachers also use leveled readers with struggling students for at least some portion of classroom time.

### **Teachers Who Thought Complex Texts Were Aligned with Their Standards Reported Using Leveled Readers Less**

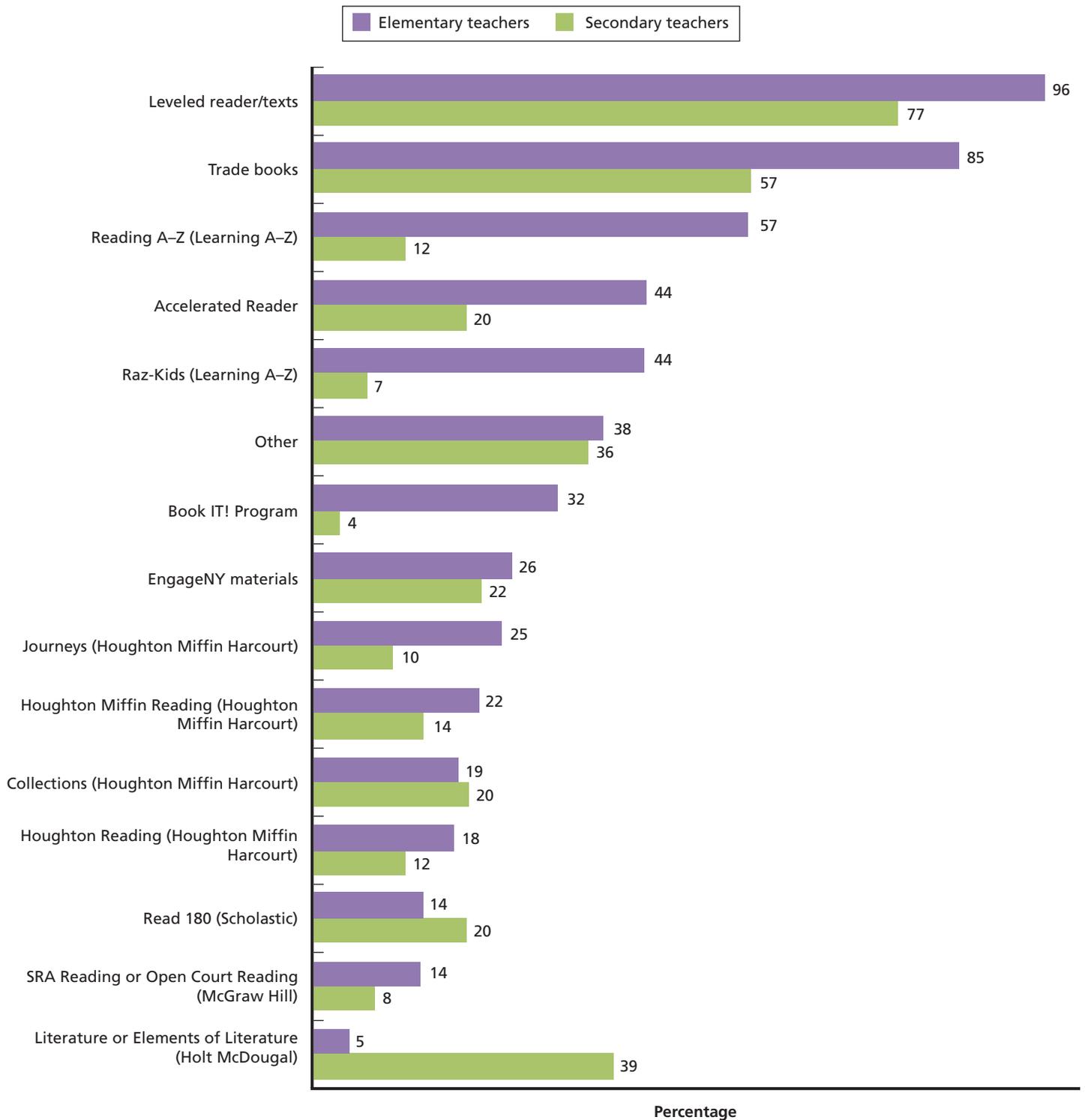
We examined associations between teachers' beliefs about their standards and their use of leveled readers, accounting for multiple other variables in logistic regression models. These

analyses identified consistent and significant relationships between teachers' understanding of their standards and what they reported doing in the classroom. Specifically, we found significant relationships between teachers' understanding that assigning complex texts was aligned with their state standards (as noted in Figure 1) and

- lower reports of using leveled readers for similar ability in-class reading groups for one-half or more of a typical lesson
- higher reports of use of a single, grade-level text for whole-class reading, writing, or discussion for one-half or more of a typical lesson.

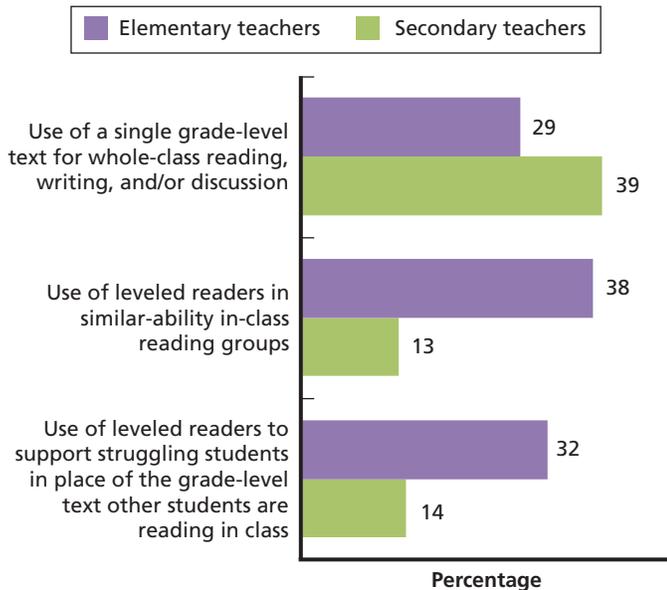
The only other significant predictors of less-frequent leveled reader practices in the models were working with less vulnerable student populations (i.e., higher-income students and fewer ELLs or students with IEPs) and being a secondary teacher. That is, elementary teachers and those with more vulnerable students indicated higher in-class leveled reader use regardless of their beliefs about the approaches most aligned with their state standards. Table A.3 in the Appendix provides more details on our regression models.

**Figure 2. ELA Teachers' Responses Regarding the Instructional Materials Used in Their Classroom Lessons in 2015–2016**



NOTE: Survey question asked, "Please indicate the frequency with which you draw upon the following instructional materials for your English language arts (ELA) classroom lessons this year (2015–16), including those you or your district developed or selected." The figure takes into account any reported use of instructional materials.

**Figure 3. ELA Teachers' Responses Regarding Students' Use of Texts for One-Half or More of a Typical Lesson**



NOTE: Survey question asked, "In a typical lesson, please respond about the percentage of your time you are engaging students in the following activities during class." Response scale: Never use/1–25 percent of a typical lesson/26–50 percent of a typical lesson/51–75 percent of a typical lesson/76–100 percent of a typical lesson.

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### Teachers' Knowledge and Practice Related to Close Reading of Grade-Level Texts

In spring 2016, we asked teachers questions to gauge their knowledge about text-based approaches aligned with their state standards, as well as questions about the extent to which they engaged in text-based instructional practices.

#### *Most Teachers Reported That a Focus on Reading Skills Was More Aligned with Their State Standards than a Focus on Texts*

In spring 2016, we asked teachers which reading instructional approach was more aligned with their standards: (1) teaching texts students should read and organizing instruction around them and teaching reading skills as tools to understand a text or (2) teaching reading skills first so that students can apply these skills to any text. Overall, only 21 percent of teachers indicated that teaching particular texts and organizing instruction around them was aligned with their standards. The majority (64 percent) indicated that they should focus on reading skills first and then ask students to apply these skills to their reading. As Figure 4 indicates, more elementary teachers than secondary teachers indicated that teaching skills first was the

practice most aligned with their standards and were also less likely to choose teaching through texts as the aligned practice.

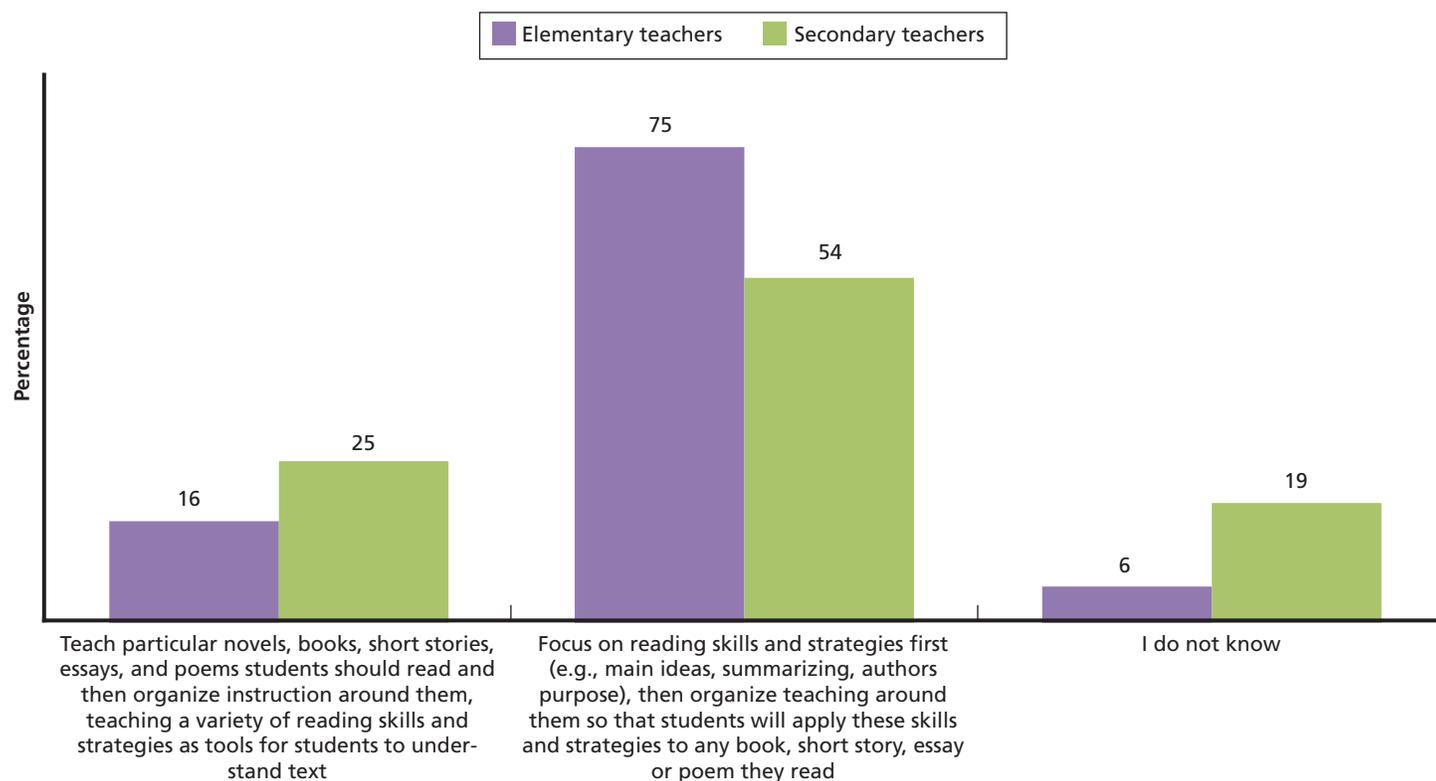
Regression analyses of these findings revealed, once again, that the policy context mattered for what teachers understood to be aligned with their standards. Teachers in states formally on record as adopting the Common Core were more than twice as likely as teachers in non–Common Core states to indicate that teaching through texts was aligned with their standards. Secondary teachers were also more than twice as likely to indicate that teaching through texts was aligned with their standards. Teachers' responses to the reading approach aligned with their standards did not differ significantly by school urbanicity or the demographics of students that teachers taught. For more details on this regression analysis, see Table A.4 in the Appendix.

#### *Majorities of ELA Teachers Identified Text-Dependent Questions as More Aligned with Their Standards than Questions That Would Not Require a Student to Consult a Text*

Because state standards for ELA emphasize having students consult texts to draw conclusions or make justifications in response to teacher questions, we asked ATP respondents in the spring 2016 survey to identify which question, of a pair of questions, would be more aligned with the instructional focus of their standards. Teachers were provided with four pairs of questions. Each pair included one text-dependent question that would require students to go back to the text to respond and one question that did not require students to consult with the text. Teachers chose from questions related to a short article or reading intended for students in the grade span they taught. So, teachers of students in different grade spans (K–2, 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12) received questions referencing different readings. However, the questions were written to be parallel to one another in focus. For example, for the first pair of questions at each grade span, one question (intended to be the more text-dependent question) prompted the student to find the detail from the article that explained or supported a particular point, whereas the other question asked for the student's opinion about something that did not require the student to consult the article. For the set of question pairs, see Table A.5 in the Appendix.

As noted in Figure 5, more than 70 percent of K–2, 3–5, and 6–8 grade teachers chose the more text-dependent question for at least three out of four question pairs. In regression analyses, teachers' grade level was the only factor differentiating those who chose the more text-based question in a pair. Specifi-

**Figure 4. ELA Teachers' Responses Regarding Which Reading Instruction Approach Aligns Best with Their Standards**



NOTE: Survey question was, "Which best describes the approach of your state's English language arts and literacy standards for teaching English language arts?" [Teachers could only choose one approach.]

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cally, 9–12 teachers were somewhat less likely than teachers at other grade spans to identify the text-dependent question. That said, the text to which 9–12 grade teachers were asked to respond in the survey was more complex than the readings at other grade spans. Furthermore, high school teachers may have multiple goals for their questions for students about a text, and these goals may have diverted them from choosing the question in a teacher pair that was more text-dependent. Thus, we cannot draw any clear conclusions about whether teachers' grade level is connected with teachers' tendency to choose a more text-dependent question as the one aligned with their standards.

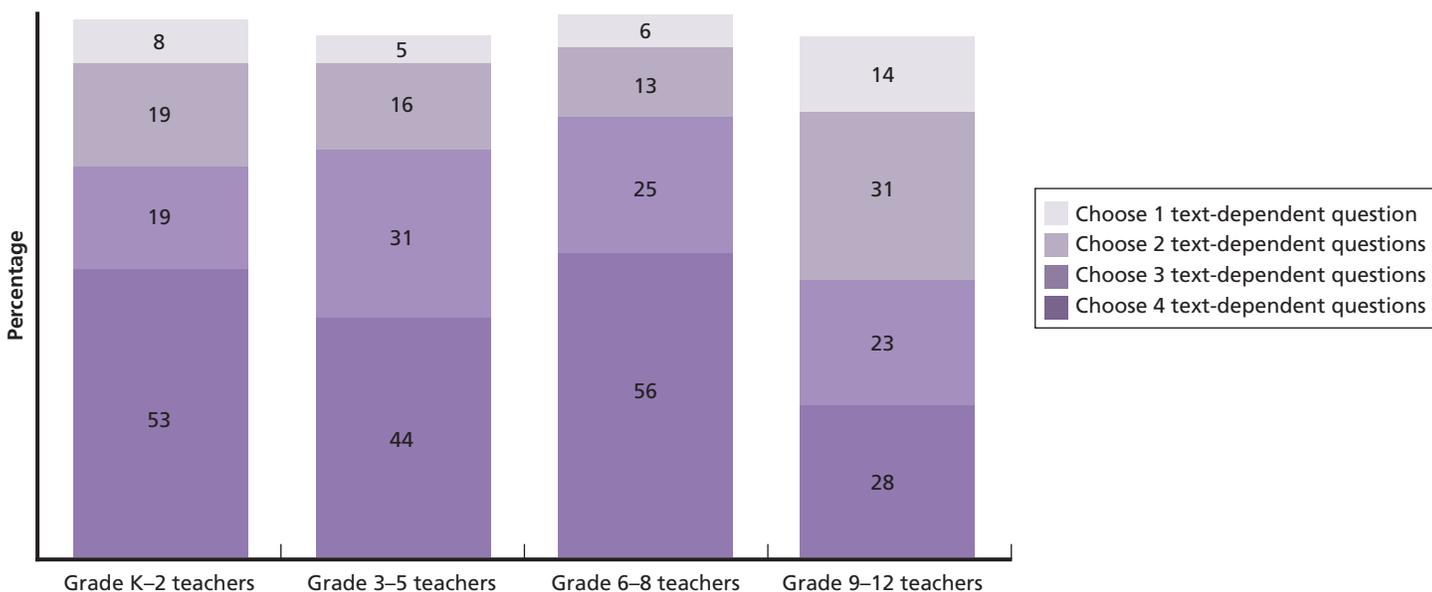
### ***Despite Inconsistency in Teachers' Ability to Identify Text-Focused Practices as Aligned with Their Standards, Teachers Reported Asking Students to Engage with Texts for a Large Percentage of Instructional Time***

Teachers were asked about their focus on texts during classroom instruction through two different types of survey items.

First, teachers were asked about the extent to which their students engaged in a set of text-focused practices in a typical lesson on a four-point scale from "not at all" to "to a great extent." Figure 6 shows the percentage of ELA teachers indicating that students engaged in a particular practice "to a great extent." As can be seen, close to one-half of teachers at the elementary and secondary levels indicated that their students used evidence from texts to make inferences or draw conclusions. Teachers reported students engaging in more complex text-based activities like analyzing the structure of texts and analyzing multiple texts together to a lesser extent.

Teachers were also asked to indicate the percentage of time, in a typical lesson, that they engaged their students in tasks that involved responding to a text in discussion or writing. Between 30 and 40 percent indicated that students spent one-half or more of a typical lesson discussing a text or writing about a text (see Figure 7). Only 15 percent of teachers indicated that students spent time on writing assignments not related to texts for one-half or more of a lesson. This evidence suggests that teachers asked students to work with texts in class

**Figure 5. Percentages of ELA Teachers Choosing the More Text-Dependent Question in Each of Four Pairs of Questions**



NOTE: Survey question asked, “The following are pairs of questions a teacher might ask about [text]. For each pair, please indicate which teacher question is more aligned with the focus of your state standards for ELA/literacy.” For the text and pairs asked at each grade span, see Table A.5.

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fairly frequently, although it does not shed light on the quality of teachers’ text-based discussion.

### ***Teacher Reports About Their Text-Based Instructional Practices Were Related to Both Their Beliefs About Practices Aligned with Their Standards and Their Policy Environment***

We also examined the relationship between teachers’ reports about their text-based practices and their understanding that a focus on texts (and not on reading skills) was more aligned with their standards. The relationship between teachers’ reports of their practices and their beliefs was complicated: teachers’ beliefs mattered for what they did, but the extent to which beliefs mattered for instruction depended on whether teachers were in a Common Core state. For example, among teachers who reported that organizing instruction around texts was aligned with state standards, those in Common Core states were significantly more likely to ask students to do the following in comparison to their peers in non-Common Core states:

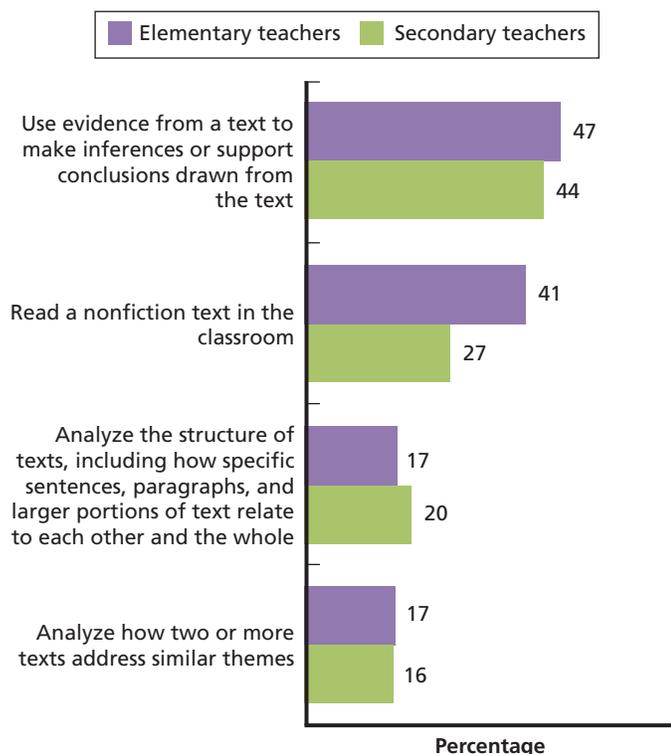
- read nonfiction texts

- analyze the structure of texts
- work on in-class writing assignments in response to texts for more than one-half of a typical lesson.

Thus, teachers’ beliefs about their standards appeared to be related to higher teacher reports about students’ engagement in text-based practices, but that relationship between understanding and reports of students’ practices appeared much stronger in Common Core states compared with non-Common Core states. Tables A.6 and A.7 in the Appendix provide additional information from the regression analysis.

In addition, our analyses suggested that teachers with high percentages of vulnerable students were more likely than teachers with lower percentages of these students to indicate that their students engaged in text-based practices, such as discussing a text or writing about a text for greater proportions of a lesson. Elementary teachers were more likely than secondary teachers to engage their students for at least 50 percent of the lesson in these practices as well. These findings were counter to our expectations. Specifically, we expected that elementary

**Figure 6. ELA Teachers' Responses Regarding Students' Engagement in Each Practice "to a Great Extent" in a Typical Lesson**



NOTE: Survey question asked, "Think about a lesson you taught this past week that is typical of or similar to most lessons you teach over the course of the year. In that lesson, how often did your students engage in the following practices during class?" Response scale: Not at all/to a slight extent/to a moderate extent/to a great extent.

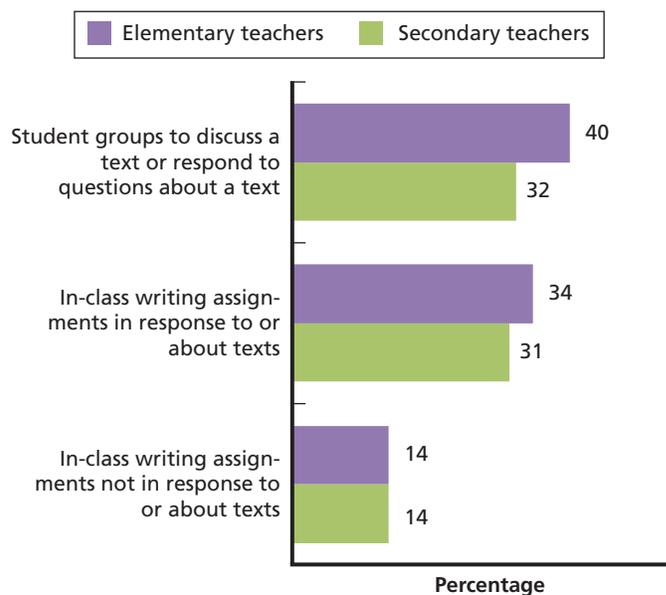
RAND RR2258-6

school teachers and those with more vulnerable students might report lower student engagement in text-based practices because they would work with students on reading skills more often and perhaps independent of texts. Although the analysis did not bear that out, it may be that low subgroup sample sizes played a role in these findings.

### **Teachers' Beliefs and Instructional Practices Were Not Closely Related to Their Reports About Their Use of Particular Instructional Materials**

We also examined whether teachers' use of particular instructional materials was related to their reports about students' engagement in close reading practices, when accounting for the demographics of teachers' students and whether teachers came from a Common Core state. First, we examined whether teachers' use of a particular material was related to their reports about whether their students engaged in discussing texts or

**Figure 7. ELA Teachers' Responses Regarding Students' Engagement in Particular Activities for at Least 50 Percent of a Typical Lesson**



NOTE: Survey question asked, "In a typical lesson, please respond about the percentage of your time you are engaging students in the following activities during class." Response scale: Never use/1–25 percent of a typical lesson/26–50 percent of a typical lesson/51–75 percent of a typical lesson; 76–100 percent of a typical lesson.

RAND RR2258-7

writing about texts. We also created a composite measure of teachers' reports of student engagement in text-based practices, including use of evidence to draw conclusions about texts, reading a nonfiction text, analyzing the structure of texts, and analyzing how two or more texts examined similar themes. We then examined whether teachers' reports of students' engagement in those text-based practices was related to the materials that teachers reported using.

We found very few strong relationships between teachers' reports regarding the curriculum materials they used and student practices, when accounting for the range of other factors that might be related to instructional practices. Specifically, teachers who reported using *Elements of Literature* reported more text-based practices, and those using *Raz-Kids* reported spending more lesson time engaging students in groups to discuss a text or do in-class writing assignments in response to texts. These findings do not tell us the extent to which teachers

According to our findings, most teachers did not see the use of complex, grade-level texts as aligned with their standards. In addition, teachers predominantly reported relying on leveled readers (rather than grade-level texts) to support students' reading.

engaged students in rich and thoughtful discussion of challenging texts. For example, *Raz-Kids* provides leveled books based on students' reading level. If teachers are using leveled readers within *Raz-Kids* to engage with texts, and those texts are written below students' grade level, students may not be engaging in rich, sophisticated discussion of those texts.

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## CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Through surveys to the ATP, we set out to investigate teacher understanding and practices related to two key reading instructional approaches addressed in nearly all state ELA and literacy standards: use of complex, grade-level texts and close reading of complex texts. According to our findings, most teachers did not see the use of complex, grade-level texts as aligned with their standards. In addition, teachers predominantly reported relying on leveled readers (rather than grade-level texts) to support students' reading. Teachers also did not identify a focus on texts first (versus a focus on reading skills first) as aligned with their standards. However, even while teachers identified a focus on reading skills as more aligned with their standards than text-based approaches, they also reported frequently engag-

ing students in close reading of texts and using texts to guide discussion and writing.

Teachers' reports of their approaches to reading instruction were related to their understanding of the reading instructional approaches aligned with their standards. Specifically, when teachers thought complex texts were aligned with their standards, they reported less use of leveled readers. And, teachers who thought a text-based approach was more aligned with their standards than a skills-based approach were more likely to report more text-focused practices, although—in this case—the relationship between teachers' understanding and approaches were much stronger if teachers were in a Common Core state. In addition, teachers were much more likely to report engaging in standards-aligned practices if they were in a Common Core state. Thus, policy environment—specifically, the messages that states send to teachers about which standards they have adopted and are accountable for addressing—may be an important factor in both what teachers believe about their standards and what they do in the classroom.

Lastly, although student demographics appeared closely related to teachers' approaches to reading instruction, those relationships sometimes worked in ways we did not expect. Specifically, teachers of more vulnerable students—teachers working with higher percentages of ELL students, more students with IEPs, and more students receiving FRL—were both more likely to report using leveled readers (which is not necessarily aligned with standards) and more likely to report engaging students in text-based practices (a more standards-aligned practice), regardless of their beliefs about approaches most aligned with their standards. That teachers with more vulnerable students report more use of leveled readers is not necessarily a surprise given that more vulnerable students may be struggling with complex, grade-level texts. That teachers with more vulnerable students report more text-based practices than those with lower percentages of vulnerable students is somewhat surprising, given that we might expect teachers of more vulnerable students to focus more on skills instruction and less on texts. We also have no evidence that teachers of more vulnerable students think that their standards emphasize a focus on reading skills more than a focus on texts.

Despite the interesting connections we have identified among teachers' knowledge, their approaches to reading instruction, and their policy environment, our findings are limited by the nature of our data. Because these findings are based on survey data, we do not know if our findings on teacher practice accurately reflect the actual reading approaches

That teachers with more vulnerable students report more use of leveled readers is not necessarily a surprise given that more vulnerable students may be struggling with complex, grade-level texts.

teachers are using with their students every day. Some research suggests that teachers may tend to overreport sophisticated approaches and practices such as those captured in our survey.<sup>23</sup> In particular, teachers' reports about the extent to which students use evidence from texts or engage with texts in student groups or within writing assignments do not provide any information about the depth to which students are being asked to engage with texts and read closely. As noted by Santelises and Dabrowski (2015), teachers' assignments often do not reflect the higher cognitive demands of the standards. Thus, teachers may engage students in some text-focused approaches but may not be doing so deeply or thoughtfully. This point is raised by our finding that the majority of teachers identified a focus on reading skills as more aligned with their standards than a text-focused approach and yet reported their students working with texts for large percentages of instructional time. These teachers might be engaging students with texts but also engaging students in a large amount of skills instruction isolated from work with texts. More in-depth classroom research might shed more light on that issue.

In addition, these data do not provide clear insights on the mechanisms that might explain the relationships we have observed. For example, we hypothesize that teachers from states that have formally adopted the Common Core can identify more standards-aligned practices because their state may provide them with less ambiguous messages about the approaches embraced by their standards. However, we do not know if that is the case, or if teachers in states that have formally adopted the Common Core can better identify standards-aligned practices for some other reason, including messages about accountability sent to teachers through tests administered in those districts, political context, culture, or other issues within Common Core states. As another example, our data suggest that teachers who think use of complex texts and text-based approaches are more aligned with their standards are more likely to engage in more standards-aligned approaches to reading instruction. However, there could be many additional reasons why teachers

cannot always engage in standards-aligned approaches despite what they know about those approaches, including district requirements, lack of access to standards-aligned resources, and teachers' uncertainty about how to engage in approaches that they think are more aligned with their standards.

Despite the limitations of our data, our findings nonetheless represent perceptions of teachers across the United States and identify some relationships among policy, teacher knowledge, and reading approaches that have not been identified through other research. As such, our work has some important implications for policymakers and practitioners who wish to support teachers in the classroom to engage students in activities aligned with their ELA and literacy state standards.

### *Teachers Would Benefit from Clearer State and/or School District Messages About the Instructional Practices Most Aligned with Their State Standards*

According to our findings, teachers' practices were related to what they understood about their standards. But often what teachers understood about the standards was inconsistent with what the standards actually emphasized. Teachers' potential misunderstandings about the standards calls to question whether there are more effective channels and networks for states to share information with teachers about their standards. States may rely on a cascading approach to disseminate information, sending information first to district administrators who they expect will communicate the information to school principals and then teachers. The information may be misinterpreted, incomplete, or not communicated at all to teachers as it works its way through so many levels and people.

States should consider developing more direct communication channels with teachers. Louisiana provides one example of such communication: It promotes direct communication with teachers through in-person meetings, newsletters, and regular emails. In a prior RAND report about Louisiana (Opfer, Kaufman, and Thompson, 2016), we found evidence that

higher percentages of ELA teachers understood the approaches aligned with their ELA standards compared with ELA teachers in the rest of the United States, which could be linked with Louisiana’s communication strategies to teachers. In addition, school districts should ensure they share clear information with teachers about the messages that states provide to them so that all educators within the district are on the same page about state policies and how districts are disseminating and supporting those policies.

### ***Teachers Need Clearer Guidance from States, Districts, and the Research Community Concerning How and When They Should Be Using Leveled Readers (If at All)***

Use of leveled readers appears to be a deeply entrenched practice among ELA teachers. Our findings indicate that most teachers identify use of leveled readers or texts that are written at individual grade levels as aligned with their standards, despite almost no state standards or state department of education websites making any statements at all about whether, when, or how teachers should use leveled readers. Given our finding that leveled readers play a large role in the instruction in ELA classrooms, those who support teachers—including states, districts, school leaders, and coaches—should emphasize state standards’ guidance that students read complex, grade-level texts during instructional time in the classroom. In addition, states and districts should work together to develop clear recommendations about the use of leveled readers during and apart from classroom instructional time. Without this clear guidance, teachers may continue to believe that leveled readers are an important element of reading instruction that is also aligned with state standards despite almost no evidence in this regard.

### ***States and Districts Need to Provide Teachers with a Range of Supports to Help Them Engage All Students in Working with Complex, Grade-Level Texts***

Teachers with more vulnerable students (i.e., more English language learners, students with IEPs, and low-income students), in particular, appear to use leveled readers more, regardless of what they understand about their state standards. This evidence suggests that teachers may not have the resources they need to engage all students with complex, grade-level texts. If we want these teachers to focus their instruction on complex texts (and decrease their use of leveled readers), they likely need more

resources and tools to differentiate instruction while challenging all students.

Hiebert (2017) emphasizes the importance of supporting and guiding teachers on how to choose rich, complex texts that provide students with meaningful reading opportunities. Districts and schools should consider offering some training in that regard. But after teachers have chosen texts at the appropriate level of complexity, how can they support all students to read those texts? Research can provide some useful guidance here: Studies have observed that struggling young readers can experience reading improvements when engaging with texts up to four grades above their own reading level through use of such oral reading strategies as “dyad” or pair reading, echo reading, repeated reading, and listening to an audio recording.<sup>24</sup> Districts and educators should also explore the growing number of text-to-speech reading applications that could support students to access and read complex texts. Use of these and additional reading strategies, along with professional development opportunities to support their use, could reduce teachers’ dependence on leveled readers.

### ***Individuals and Organizations That Support Teachers Should More Closely Examine Teachers’ Text-Based Practices to Ensure That Teachers Are Not Teaching Reading Skills in Isolation***

While our findings suggest that teachers are asking students to engage in close reading of texts on a regular basis, the majority of teachers also thought that teaching reading skills first, then applying them to texts later, was a reading approach most aligned with their standards. This evidence suggests that teachers could be providing reading skill instruction and text-based instruction independently from one another. Those who support teachers in schools—including coaches, school leaders, and teaching peers—should take a closer look at the text-based activities in which students are engaged in the classroom to consider whether students are learning reading skills apart from texts, and, thus, may not be given enough opportunity to apply those reading skills with and through their close reading.

### ***States, Districts, and Publishers Should Be Working to Provide Teachers with Comprehensive Curriculum Resources That Support Students’ Engagement with, and Close Reading of, Complex Texts***

States and districts may be able to increase teachers’ use of text-based instructional practices by clearly identifying and providing them with curriculum materials that encourage those

If we want teachers to increase their use of more complex, text-based practices, then they need clearer guidance from states and districts about those expectations along with the resources needed to implement them.

practices. There are a growing number of resources available to support students' focus on texts and integrate reading skill instruction with that text-based focus. EdReports, for example, has reviewed many popular ELA curricula that are available in K–12 grades.<sup>25</sup> Some states, including Louisiana and New York, have also built their own open-curriculum resources that emphasize close reading and use of complex, grade-level texts; such resources are freely available to anyone.<sup>26</sup> Taken together, these resources provide opportunities for teachers to engage in the practices that are being promoted by states as the high-quality standard for reading instruction.

Teachers implement practices in their classroom that they understand to be aligned with their standards. If we want teachers to increase their use of more complex, text-based practices, then they need clearer guidance from states and districts about those expectations along with the resources needed to implement them.

## APPENDIX

We use the following labels for each of our subgroups in the following regressions.

**Table A.1. Subgroup Labels for Regression Tables**

Label	Subgroup
Common Core (versus non–Common Core)	Teachers in states that formally adopted Common Core (versus teachers in states that did not formally adopt Common Core)
Medium vulnerability (versus high vulnerability)	Teachers of medium vulnerability populations (versus high vulnerability)
Low vulnerability (versus high vulnerability)	Teachers of low vulnerability populations (versus high vulnerability)
Secondary (versus elementary)	Secondary teachers (versus elementary teachers)
Cities, suburbs, or towns (versus rural)	Teachers in cities, suburbs, or towns (versus teachers in rural areas)

**Table A.2. Adjusted Odds Ratios for Teachers' Assignment of Complex Texts**

	Assigning Complex Texts That All Students in a Class Are Required to Read
Common Core (versus non–Common Core)	2.56**
Medium vulnerability (versus high vulnerability)	1.13
Low vulnerability (versus high vulnerability)	1.20
Secondary (versus elementary)	2.11***
Cities, suburbs, or towns (versus rural)	1.77*

NOTE: Odds ratios of less than 1.00 indicate lower odds of engaging in the practice named at the top of the column, and odds ratios of higher than 1.00 indicate higher odds of engaging in that practice. An asterisk indicates a significant  $p$  value: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table A.3. Adjusted Odds Ratios for Teachers' Use of Leveled Readers and Leveled Reader Practices, Taking into Account Understanding About Complex Texts**

	Use of Leveled Readers Often or Daily	Use of a Single Grade- Level Text for Whole-Class Reading, Writing, and/ or Discussion	Use of Leveled Readers in Similar-Ability in-Class Reading Groups	Use of Leveled Readers to Support Struggling Students in Place of the Grade-Level Text Other Students Are Reading in Class
For 50% or More of a Typical Lesson				
Teachers that understand "Assigning complex texts that all students in a class are required to read" was aligned with their state standards (versus those who did not)	0.59	2.31***	0.41**	0.76
Common Core (versus non–Common Core)	1.67	0.99	1.15	1.07
Medium vulnerability (versus high vulnerability)	0.72	1.04	0.81	0.60
Low vulnerability (versus high vulnerability)	0.38*	1.06	0.42*	0.32**
Secondary (versus elementary)	0.22***	1.43	0.28***	0.38***
Cities, suburbs, or towns (versus rural)	1.42	0.65	1.82	1.01

NOTE: Odds ratios of less than 1.00 indicate lower odds of engaging in the practice named at the top of the column, and odds ratios of higher than 1.00 indicate higher odds of engaging in that practice. P-values were adjusted for multiple comparisons. An asterisk indicates a significant  $p$  value: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table A.4. Regression Results Around Teachers' Strategies for Teaching Reading**

	<b>Teach Particular Novels, Books, Short Stories, Essays, and Poems Students Should Read and Then Organize Instruction Around Them, Teaching a Variety of Reading Skills and Strategies as Tools for Students to Understand Text</b>
Common Core (versus non-Common Core)	2.63*
Medium vulnerability (versus high vulnerability)	0.95
Low vulnerability (versus high vulnerability)	0.95
Secondary (versus elementary)	2.16***
Cities, suburbs, or towns (versus rural)	1.23

NOTE: Odds ratios of less than 1.00 indicate lower odds of engaging in the practice named at the top of each column, and odds ratios of higher than 1.00 indicate higher odds of engaging in that practice. An asterisk indicates a significant  $p$  value: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table A.5. Text-Dependent Question Pairs**

	<b>Pair</b>	<b>More Text-Dependent Option</b>	<b>Less Text-Dependent Option</b>
Teachers of grades K–2	1	What detail from the article best explains how people should approach a penguin?	What would you do if you discovered a lost animal?
	2	What is the author's tone in this article? Find some evidence from the text to justify your response.	What lesson did you learn from reading this article?
	3	What is the main idea of this article? Find key details to support your claims.	What would you do if you discovered a lost animal?
	4	What phrases or sentences in the text help the reader understand what the word "habitat" means?	Have you ever felt like you were out of your natural habitat?
Teachers of grades 3–5	1	What detail from the article best supports the idea that archaeologists can learn from people's trash?	What might a future archaeologist find in the midden of your life?
	2	What is the author's tone in this article? Find some evidence from the text to justify your response.	What lesson did you learn from reading this article?
	3	What is the main idea of this article?	Why is the study of archaeology important to our lives today?
	4	What phrases or sentences in the text help the reader understand what the word "midden" means?	Can you think of an example from your life about how "one person's trash could be another person's treasure"?
Teachers of grades 6–8	1	In which paragraph does the author provide information that helps explain why farmers embraced the use of chemical fertilizer?	Do you think that corn has pushed out other foods in our food chain?
	2	What is the author's tone in this article? Find some evidence from the text to justify your response.	What lesson did you learn from reading this article?
	3	What is the main idea of this article?	Can you think of ways that businesses have determined what we eat?
Teachers of grades 9–12	1	The shortest sentence in the speech is the one that ends the third paragraph, "I trust not." What is it that Jefferson trusts will not happen in the United States?	Do you agree with Jefferson that differences in opinion are not always differences in principle?
	2	What is the author's tone in this article? Find some evidence from the text to justify your response.	What lesson did you learn from reading Jefferson's speech?
	3	What is the main idea of Jefferson's speech?	Do you think it is possible for citizens of a country to "unite with one heart and one mind"?
	4	What phrases or sentences in the text help the reader understand what Jefferson means by "Republican" in this speech?	What role should government play in people's lives, in your opinion?

**Table A.6. Adjusted Odds Ratios for Teachers' Use of Leveled Readers and Leveled Reader Practices, Taking into Account Understanding About Complex Texts**

	<b>Read a Nonfiction Text in the Classroom</b>	<b>Use Evidence from a Text to Make Inferences or Support Conclusions Drawn from the Text</b>	<b>Analyze the Structure of Texts, Including How Specific Sentences, Paragraphs, and Larger Portions of Text Relate to One Another and the Whole</b>	<b>Analyze How Two or More Texts Address Similar Themes</b>
	<b>To a Great Extent</b>			
Teachers' belief: organizing instruction around texts aligned with state standards (versus those who did not)	0.03**	1.27	0.07*	1.34
Common Core (versus non-Common Core)	0.65	1.18	0.69	0.75
Medium vulnerability (versus high vulnerability)	0.39**	0.95	0.49	0.58
Low vulnerability (versus high vulnerability)	0.40**	0.69	0.41*	0.48*
Secondary (versus elementary)	0.59*	0.90	1.36	1.00
Cities, suburbs, or towns (versus rural)	1.02	0.85	1.42	1.05
Within Common Core teachers: those who understand that organizing instruction around texts is aligned with state standards (versus those who do not)	1.57		1.52	
Within those who understand organizing instruction around texts is aligned with state standards: those in Common Core states (versus non-Common Core states)	29.05**		15.46*	

NOTE: Odds ratios of less than 1.00 indicate lower odds of engaging in the practice named at the top of each column, and odds ratios of higher than 1.00 indicate higher odds of engaging in that practice. P values were adjusted for multiple comparisons. An asterisk indicates a significant p value: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table A.7. Adjusted Odds Ratios for Teachers' Use of Leveled Readers and Leveled Reader Practices, Taking into Account Understanding About Complex Texts**

	<b>Student Groups to Discuss a Text or Respond to Questions About a Text</b>	<b>In-Class Writing Assignments in Response to or About Texts</b>	<b>In-Class Writing Assignments Not in Response to or About Texts</b>
	<b>For 50% or More of a Typical Lesson</b>		
Teachers' understanding: organizing instruction around texts was aligned with their state standards (versus those who did not)	1.92**	0.07*	1.16
Common Core (versus non-Common Core)	1.33	1.75	2.48
Medium vulnerability (versus high vulnerability)	0.30***	0.31***	1.13
Low vulnerability (versus high vulnerability)	0.36***	0.38**	0.88
Secondary (versus elementary)	0.69	0.88	0.96
Cities, suburbs, or towns (versus rural)	0.75	1.05	0.82
Within Common Core teachers: those who understand that organizing instruction texts is aligned with state standards (versus those who do not)		1.63*	
Within those who understand organizing instruction around texts is aligned with state standards: those in Common Core states (versus non-Common Core states)		38.10**	

NOTE: Odds ratios of less than 1.00 indicate lower odds of engaging in the practice named at the top of each column, and odds ratios of higher than 1.00 indicate higher odds of engaging in that practice. P values were adjusted for multiple comparisons. An asterisk indicates a significant p value: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017b, cites research from Chall, Conrad, and Harris (1977), and Hayes, Wolfer, and Wolfe (1996) on declines in text difficulty at specific grade levels since the 1940s.

<sup>2</sup> See Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017c, and Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017e.

<sup>3</sup> “Instructional level theory” was popularized in a textbook on reading instruction written in the 1940s by Emmett Betts (1946). According to Timothy Shanahan (2011), the study on which leveled reading theory was based did not include any empirical evidence.

<sup>4</sup> See Fisher and Frey, 2014, p. 348.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Morgan, Wilcox, and Eldredge, 2000; Stahl and Heubach, 2005; and Vitale and Romance, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> For example, Kuhn and Stahl, 2003; Compton, Appleton, and Hosp, 2004; and O’Connor, Swanson, and Geraghty, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017f.

<sup>8</sup> See Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017d.

<sup>9</sup> See Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017a.

<sup>10</sup> See Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017a.

<sup>11</sup> See Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Louisiana Department of Education, undated(b).

<sup>13</sup> See Achieve, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Virginia Department of Education, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> See Opfer, Kaufman, and Thompson, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> See Shulman, 1986.

<sup>17</sup> Teachers were placed in a particular grade band based on the band that represented the majority of grades that they taught. If a teacher taught an equal number of grades in more than one grade band, they were placed in a particular grade band based on random assignment.

<sup>18</sup> For the spring 2016 survey, Panel teachers of core subjects (mathematics, ELA, science, and social studies) responded at higher rates than teachers of other subjects; teachers from the Midwest region of the United States responded at higher rates than teachers from other regions; and teachers from the Northeast region of the United States responded at lower rates than teachers from other regions. No other major subgroup differences were observed or accounted for through additional weighting.

<sup>19</sup> The percentage of ELL and IEP students in teachers’ classes—as well as their status as an elementary or secondary teacher and their years of teaching experience—was based on teachers’ self-reports. Data regarding FRL was from the National Center of Education Statistics Common Core of Data (National Center for Education Statistics, undated).

<sup>20</sup> These states were excluded based on documented state adoption of Common Core (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017a). In addition, while Missouri officially dropped Common Core State Standards in spring 2016, new standards were not implemented at the time of this survey. Thus, we considered them a Common Core state for the purposes of this report.

<sup>21</sup> Response rates for large national surveys have been in decline, and this tendency accelerated after the emergence of web-based questionnaires. A metastudy of 68 surveys in 49 studies by Cook, Heath, and Thompson (2000) found an average 40-percent response rate among national survey studies. Similarly, Nulty (2008) found that responses to web-based surveys ranged between 20 percent and 47 percent.

<sup>22</sup> See Lumley, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Kaufman, Stein, and Junker, 2016; Spillane and Zeuli, 1999; and Mayer, 1999.

<sup>24</sup> See Brown et al., 2017; Morgan, 1997; and Shanahan, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> For more information, see [edreports.org](http://edreports.org), undated.

<sup>26</sup> See Louisiana Department of Education, undated(a), for the ELA Guidebooks, or New York State Education Department, undated, for these ELA curriculum resources.

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