



ELAINE LIN WANG, DANIEL SILVER, MORGAN POLIKOFF, ASHLEY WOO, JULIA H. KAUFMAN,  
ALLYSON D. GITTENS, ISABEL CLAY

# English Language Arts Instructional Systems in the First Full Year of COVID-19



Since March 2020, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has placed unprecedented stresses on the public education system in the United States. At every level, from the U.S. Department of Education down through local districts and individual schools, the pandemic has presented formidable challenges. Many of these challenges have been operational in nature—whether and how to keep schools open, how to serve students who cannot or choose not to attend in person, and what policies to require for protecting students and teachers during in-person instruction.

But there have also been substantial instructional challenges during the pandemic (Grossman et al., 2021). Early insight into the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on public schooling identified the challenges that schools faced in the pivot to online learning in spring 2020. For example, about 80 percent of principals reported in the RAND American School Leader Panel, a nationally representative survey, that their schools had not made any plans to deal with prolonged school closures prior to the pandemic. Furthermore, large proportions of teachers reported through the RAND American Teacher Panel (ATP)

that they had not received adequate guidance from their school systems to serve particular populations of students, such as students with disabilities (SWDs), homeless students, and English learners (ELs) (Hamilton et al., 2020). Teachers reported high levels of student absences and low levels of assignment completion (Kaufman and Diliberti, 2021). Accordingly, a majority of teachers—about 80 percent—reported in spring 2021 that they were not able to cover all of the curriculum they would have covered in a typical school year.

These pandemic-era instructional challenges compound existing barriers to quality instruction. In 2019, we used the ATP to examine teachers' access to and use of standards-aligned curriculum materials. We also assessed teachers' access to coherent instructional systems during that time. Coherent instructional systems provide teachers with *reinforcing*—rather than *dissimilar* or *conflicting*—messages about what and how to teach and support them to provide high-quality instruction. These reinforcing messages should be reflected in multiple system components (e.g., curriculum, professional learning opportunities, assessments). We also examined teachers' access to key conditions that foster or enable coherence,

## KEY FINDINGS

- During the 2020–2021 school year, K–12 public school teachers across the country reported receiving more guidance on what English language arts (ELA) content to emphasize than how to address diversity and equity in ELA.
- The instructional system components from which teachers reported receiving guidance narrowed during the pandemic. In general, guidance was provided through curriculum—not through teacher evaluation criteria or summative assessments.
- Small proportions of teachers reported that the guidance from instructional system components provided “a lot of support” to help them address the needs of traditionally underserved students.
- Most teachers indicated that instructional system components provided similar, but not reinforcing, messages. Moreover, most teachers reported that overall instructional system coherence had decreased from the previous school year.
- High school teachers and those providing remote or simultaneous hybrid instruction report less guidance on multiple aspects of their systems and less coherence.
- Reported instructional system coherence correlates positively with hypothesized conditions that support development of coherence.

such as schools having “a small number of goals that are tied to ELA [English language arts] student learning.” Analysis of our prior surveys indicated that few ELA teachers in 2019 reported using provided curriculum materials, whether standards-aligned or not (Kaufman et al., 2020; Polikoff et al., 2020). Overall, we found that just 14 percent of ELA teachers had access to coherent instructional systems, and the results were even worse in some states (Polikoff et al., 2020). Teachers also reported low levels of access to the enabling conditions, described later in this report.

Although developing a coherent, standards-aligned instructional system is challenging for education leaders and teachers even in the best of times, it may be especially difficult to achieve as the pandemic continues to affect public schooling. To this end, this report examines issues of instructional system coherence during the 2020–2021 school year. Specifically, we investigate teachers’ perceptions of the (1) guidance they received about ELA instruction, (2) guidance around addressing the needs of traditionally underserved students, (3) coherence of their ELA instructional system, and (4) presence of contextual conditions identified through literature as supporting coherence. We also explore variation in these findings across grade spans, instructional modes (in-person, remote, hybrid), focal states (Louisiana, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Tennessee), and the extent to which teachers reported changes from previous years. Our primary data sources were a survey administered to a nationally representative sample of K–12 ELA teachers and state-representative samples of ELA teachers in the four focal states. We also conducted case studies of selected schools.

## What Does a Standards-Aligned Coherent Instructional System Look Like?

Figure 1 illustrates our refined conceptualization of a standards-aligned coherent instructional system at the school level, which we described in a previous report (Polikoff et al., 2020). Our conceptualization is informed by Smith and O’Day (1991) and elaborates on prior research about system coherence

and the link to instructional quality and student achievement (e.g., Kaufman, Thompson, and Opfer, 2016; Kaufman et al., 2020; Leo and Coggshall, 2013; Porter, 2002). Furthermore, it draws on work identifying conditions that enable coherence (e.g., Fullan and Quinn, 2016; Honig and Hatch, 2004; Newmann et al., 2001).

Essentially, an instructional system is made up of seven key components (see Table 1). When these key components are mutually reinforcing (i.e., when there is system coherence), teachers gain clarity about what to focus on in their instruction, instead of having to navigate contradictory messages. This clarity, in turn, results in teachers’ more consistent use of high-quality ELA instructional materials and practices. As a result of such high-quality instruction, students are more likely to experience achievement gains.

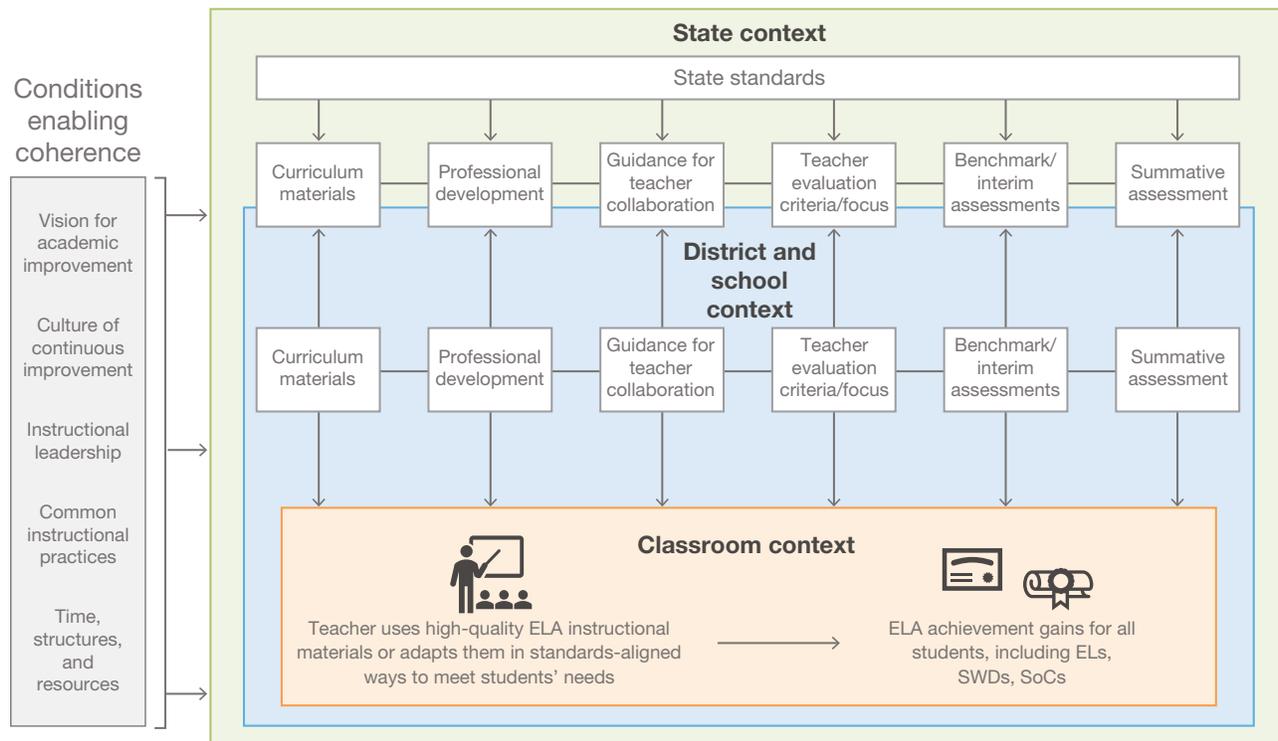
In our conceptualization, K–12 ELA academic content *standards* are the anchor of the instructional system. High-quality, standards-aligned *curriculum materials* are essential for providing consistent messages to teachers about how to implement the standards. Our conceptualization also considers the professional learning experiences available to teachers through the system to be a key aspect of a standards-aligned coherent instructional system. Such experiences include both formal professional development (PD) and opportunities for teacher col-

### Abbreviations

AEP	American Educator Panels
ATP	American Teacher Panel
CMO	charter management organization
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
EL	English learner
ELA	English language arts
IEP	Individualized Education Program
PD	professional development
SoC	student of color
SWD	student with disabilities

FIGURE 1

Hypothesized Components of a Standards-Aligned Coherent ELA Instructional System and Theory of Action Leading to Student Learning



SOURCE: Figure is adapted from Polikoff et al., 2020.

NOTE: SoCs = students of color.

TABLE 1

Components in our Conceptualization of a Coherent Instructional System for ELA

Instructional System Component	Definition
State standards	The state <b>standards for K-12 ELA</b> instruction.
Curriculum materials	The <b>instructional materials</b> —in print or digital format—intended to constitute a full, comprehensive course of study for ELA at a particular grade level.
PD	<b>Formal school- or district-offered PD sessions.</b> These could be general in nature or focused on ELA in particular. These sessions tend to be delivered or facilitated by an expert (from the school, district, or external organization).
Guidance for teacher collaboration	Guidance the school or district provides around <b>what to focus on or how to use any peer collaboration time</b> , such as professional learning community or common planning time.
Teacher evaluation criteria or focus	The <b>criteria by which ELA instructional performance is evaluated</b> by the school or district.
Benchmark or interim assessments	The <b>school- or district-required or recommended interim assessments</b> (e.g., quarterly, end-of-unit of ELA) that students take (e.g., MAP, STAR tests, school or district-wide end-of-unit assessments).
State-mandated summative assessment	The <b>state-mandated standardized test</b> of ELA that students take.

NOTE: MAP = Measure of Academic Success; STAR = Standardized Testing and Reporting.

laboration, such as a professional learning community or common planning time. These mechanisms can support teachers to understand and undertake desired practices that support implementation of standards-aligned materials. Teacher evaluation criteria and systems also have potential to convey messages about what teachers should emphasize and how to teach ELA. Finally, assessments—both summative and district-wide benchmarks (i.e., interim assessments)—should align with the standards and the curriculum that students are taught and with each other. Table 1 summarizes and defines the components in our conceptualized instructional system.

In addition, we identified five critical contextual conditions as necessary to support or drive the development of coherence among the instructional system components described above by drawing on literature (e.g., Fullan and Quinn, 2016; Honig and Hatch, 2004; Newmann et al., 2001; Srinivasan and Archer, 2018). The conditions are a vision for academic improvement; a culture of continuous improvement; the presence of instructional leadership; the use of common instructional practices; and time, structures and resources, including how they are allocated to support curricular and instructional frameworks (for more details, see Polikoff et al., 2020).

## Instructional System Coherence During the Pandemic

A focus on instructional system coherence requires substantial planning and adequate material resources. The pandemic may have presented multiple barriers to system coherence, including the following:

- The transition to online learning may have affected the kinds of curriculum materials teachers and students had access to, the expectations for using those materials, and the supports teachers had to understand and implement those materials.
- Summative and interim assessments were disrupted during the 2019–2020 school year, and this may have affected teachers’ abilities to diagnose areas of student need to guide instruction.

- Teacher professional learning opportunities were necessarily shifted to online and may also have needed to be focused away from instruction and toward the more pressing day-to-day issues that arose during the pandemic, such as how to deliver instruction remotely.

Existing research on COVID-19 and teaching has largely focused on teachers’ practices and experiences—what they have done or what they have observed about their students (e.g., Diliberti and Kaufman, 2020; Hamilton and Ercikan, 2022; Jelinska and Paradowski, 2021). What has not been examined in the same depth is the guidance teachers received about instruction during the pandemic and the ways guidance changed from before the pandemic. This work is important for several reasons, not the least of which is that the pandemic continues to affect the provision of in-person learning in the 2021–2022 school year. It is also important to understand how state and district efforts to improve instruction have fared during this unprecedented educational disruption.

## Study Goals, Contexts, and Methods

This study is situated within a larger project exploring coherence in ELA instructional systems. The goal of the larger project is to understand how districts and schools are activating various policy levers (i.e., instructional system components) to drive instructional coherence and student learning in ELA in the Common Core era.

## Research Questions

In this report, we focus on teachers’ perceptions of the guidance they received on ELA instruction and the coherence of their ELA instructional system during the first full year of COVID-19 (2020–2021), and how teachers’ perceptions during 2020–2021 compared with the prior school year. The report addresses the following research questions:

1. What **guidance** about ELA instruction did teachers report receiving in the first full year of COVID-19?

- a. How did it compare with the guidance they reported receiving in the 2019–2020 school year?
2. To what extent did teachers perceive that guidance from instructional system components supported them to address the needs of students—in particular, **traditionally underserved student populations**, such as students performing below grade level, ELs, SWDs, and SoCs?
3. What were teachers’ perceptions of the **coherence** of their schools’ ELA instructional system in the first full year of COVID-19?
  - a. How did it compare with the coherence teachers perceived in 2019–2020?
4. How were teachers’ perceptions of ELA instructional system coherence **associated with conditions** identified through literature as related to the development of coherence?

For all questions, we consider the extent to which the responses differ according to instructional modality (i.e., in-person, remote, hybrid, or some combination). We also examine differences across grade bands and with a focus on the four partner states.

## National and Focal State Contexts

Our primary data collection occurred March 2021. During this time, states—as well as districts and schools—experienced fluctuations in the instructional mode at different times depending on the risk level and status of COVID-19 in their communities. One study found that in March 2021, across states, the majority of students (57 percent) were receiving in-person instruction, while roughly 20 percent of students were learning in a hybrid model, and nearly 11 percent of students were doing remote learning. Instructional mode varied for about 11 percent of students based on grade band or school (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2021). More generally, when teachers responded about the mode of instruction that they provided to the majority of their students during the majority of the 2020–2021 school year, about one-half indicated using the

hybrid model, about one-quarter of teachers taught in person, and another one-quarter taught fully remotely (Kaufman et al., 2021).

Teacher evaluations and summative assessments were instructional system components considerably disrupted during the first and second years of COVID-19. During the 2019–2020 school year, the first partial academic year affected by COVID-19, states took a variety of approaches to teacher evaluations. According to a scan conducted in spring 2020, seven states issued broad waivers of state requirements around evaluation, five issued guidance to waive specific components, and eight issued guidance to districts, in some cases offering flexibility (Education Commission of the States, 2020). During the 2020–2021 school year, some states opted to require evaluations for teachers, but with modified requirements around the use of student growth measures for evaluation purposes (Holston, 2020). Also, during the 2019–2020 school year, all states received waivers allowing them to cancel the state summative assessments (Gewertz, 2020). In 2020–2021, according to a scan conducted in spring 2021, 12 states and the District of Columbia requested assessment waivers (Education Commission of the States, 2021).

## Four Focal States

For our study of instructional system coherence, we partnered with four states: Louisiana, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Tennessee. This study has been ongoing since the 2018–2019 school year. We selected these states because they have been focused on standards-aligned curriculum for ELA as a lever for instructional reform (Polikoff, et al., 2020). Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Tennessee have been participating in the High Quality Instructional Materials and Professional Development (IMPD) Network through the Council of Chief State School Officers, which drew lessons from Louisiana’s early and successful work in the area. In addition, all these states have districts with high percentages of minority and/or low-income student populations,<sup>1</sup> which are among our populations of interest. Finally, all four states were willing to work closely with us and helped us recruit districts for the case study component of the project. Given our partner states’ participation in

the IMPD Network, we hypothesize that teachers in these states may be more likely to report some coherence among various aspects of their instructional systems compared with those in other states. Readers should keep in mind for the findings we report.

The state policy context and state-level guidance are critical to district- and school-level decisions in typical academic years. We believe this is no different, and perhaps more the case, during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, for which there is no modern precedent. Districts may have made localized decisions about modes of instruction given the rates of infection in their region and provided essential guidance to teachers in light of this (e.g., using technology for remote or hybrid instruction). However, they also looked to states for reinforcements or shifts in policy and guidance around key instructional system components to help them navigate a COVID-19-disrupted school year.<sup>2</sup> These components include use of curriculum materials, professional learning, teacher evaluation, and use of summative and formative assessments.

Table 2 presents an overview of the state policy landscape for each of these components as pertains to ELA instruction for our four focal states (for more details, see Appendix A). In brief, although all four states were focused on promoting the use of standards-aligned curricula, states were in different stages of progress in regard to encouraging uptake. For example, although Louisiana officials have reported high uptake of standards-aligned curricula throughout the state, Massachusetts officials described greater difficulty in raising demand for standards-aligned materials in districts despite state-level efforts to encourage adoption of standards-aligned materials. This challenge is potentially attributable to the culture around the valuing of teacher autonomy and teacher-created materials. In Rhode Island and Tennessee, standards-aligned materials are or will be required; meanwhile, in Tennessee, officials reported an especially successful curriculum adoption cycle in spring 2020.

Overall, state officials felt that the adoption of standards-aligned materials helped districts and schools take a more intentional approach to instruction, especially in the midst of the evolving conditions spurred by the pandemic. In addition,

experiences across states suggest that the widespread adoption of standards-aligned materials is a critical first step to achieving instructional coherence throughout the state, as states are then able to build structures of support tightly linked to the use of those materials. Where states and districts were previously engaged in the implementation of standards-aligned materials and provision of a coherent set of supports around their implementation prior to the pandemic, state officials reported that they were also in a better position to weather the challenges wrought by the pandemic. Although states leveraged existing supports around some instructional system components where possible, such as PD, the pandemic also necessitated that states take a flexible approach to some of their instructional system components, such as teacher evaluation. For example, Louisiana suspended teacher evaluations for the 2019–2020 school year but enacted them in 2020–2021. In Tennessee, evaluations were still required in both school years, but student assessment scores could be excluded. All four focal states suspended the statewide summative assessments in spring 2020 but administered them as scheduled in spring 2021.

## Methods

### ATP Survey Samples

In spring 2021, we administered the survey for this project to a nationally representative sample of K–12 public school ELA teachers across the country, as well as state-representative samples of ELA teachers in the four focal states. The survey sample was drawn from RAND’s ATP, which includes K–12 public school teachers who were randomly chosen from a list of teachers to participate in periodic surveys on education issues of national import. The ATP includes nationally representative samples of teachers and state-representative samples in 25 states. The ATP consists of more than 24,000 teachers, which allows for data collection from large teacher subsamples and for analysis of teachers’ responses according to key subgroups, such as teachers in higher- and lower-poverty schools or teachers of different grade levels. All data presented in this report are weighted

TABLE 2

## Highlights of State Policy Context with Respect to ELA Instruction During the 2020–2021 School Year (Unless Otherwise Specified)

Policy Area	Louisiana	Massachusetts	Rhode Island	Tennessee
Identified high-quality instructional materials (e.g., through a state review process or state-approved list of curriculum materials)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Required adoption of high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials throughout the state in the 2019–2020 school year	Yes	No	Yes	No
Required adoption of high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials throughout the state in the 2020–2021 school year	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Provided curriculum-specific professional learning at a statewide level	Yes	No	No	Yes
Required teacher evaluation in the 2019–2020 school year	No	Yes, modified	Yes, modified	Yes, modified
Required teacher evaluation in the 2020–2021 school year	Yes, modified	Yes, modified	Yes, modified	Yes, modified
Used teacher evaluation criteria that are curriculum- or content-specific	No	No	No	No
Offered resources for providing content-specific feedback to teacher	Yes	Yes <sup>a</sup>	No	Yes
Administered state summative assessments in the 2019–2020 school year	No	No	No	No
Administered state summative assessments in the 2020–2021 school year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Provided a statewide formative assessment system	Yes	No	No <sup>b</sup>	Yes

NOTES: Information in this table drew on interviews conducted with leaders in each state in fall 2020. In total, across the four states, we spoke with 15 officials. We also drew on publicly available information. Sources included available state-issued guidance memos (e.g., Louisiana Department of Education, 2020; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021; and Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2020).

<sup>a</sup> In our 2019 interviews, state officials reported that they were piloting content-specific feedback observation forms.

<sup>b</sup> Although no statewide formative assessment was provided, the Rhode Island Department of Education provided and funded statewide interim assessment options for districts.

to provide nationally representative and state-representative estimates of ELA teachers' responses.<sup>3</sup>

Table 3 summarizes the completion rates for the survey we administered to our overall ATP and state-representative ATP samples. The rates are comparable or higher than rates obtained for other ATP and other large-scale surveys.

## Survey Content

In addition to some demographic information about teachers themselves and their students, opening survey items addressed the mode by which teachers provided instruction to their students during the 2020–2021 school year and whether they taught at the same school they taught at during the prior school year (2019–2020). More substantively, we

asked about the different topics for which teachers received information or guidance related to ELA instruction (i.e., content to emphasize, instructional strategies, pacing/sequencing, rigor, addressing diversity and equity) via the seven components we identified as comprising an instructional system (i.e., standards, curriculum, formal PD, teacher collaboration, teacher evaluation, benchmark/interim assessments, and state-mandated summative assessments); and perceived coherence among these components. We provided definitions for the system components (see Table 1).

## Survey Analysis

For the most part, we calculated simple means representing the average proportion of teachers who provided a certain response (e.g., receiving guidance on a particular topic from a particular instructional system component). In some instances, we also report the average proportion of teachers who reported receiving guidance about a topic across *all seven components*. In these cases, we calculate and present a simple mean (e.g., see the “Average” row in Table 5).

We analyzed our data overall and for each of several different subgroups of responding teachers. Specifically, we examined three contrasts:

- **grade band, as obtained from the ATP survey:** elementary, middle, and high (with elementary as the reference category). We examined comparisons among the three grade bands.
- **mode of instruction, as obtained from the ATP survey:** in-person, remote, simultaneous hybrid (in-person instruction to some students and remote instruction to some students simultaneously, in the same class), and nonsimultaneous hybrid (in-person instruction to some students and remote instruction to some students, but not at the same time).<sup>4</sup> Teachers were asked to indicate the response that best describes how they were delivering instruction during the 2020–2021 school year. Again, the comparisons are among the modes of instruction.

TABLE 3  
ATP Survey Completion Rates

	Invited	Completed	Completion Rate (%)
Overall	5,105	1,890	37
Louisiana	658	323	49
Massachusetts	657	304	46
Rhode Island	737	318	43
Tennessee	688	334	49

NOTES: Panelists were recruited simultaneously for this survey on ELA instruction and a parallel survey focused on math. The numbers in the “Invited” column include all invited teachers. Teachers were not pre-identified as ELA teacher or not until they answered a screener question about subject taught. Therefore, we cannot provide an ELA-only sample or completion rate. Given this, we expect that the actual completion rates are much higher.

- **state, as obtained from administrative data:** Louisiana, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Tennessee. Specifically, we compared each focal state with the national average. When doing so, we excluded the focal state data from the national data.

Table 4 shows descriptive statistics for our sample on these contrasts. In this report, results are weighted to match the state averages for ELA teachers. Unless otherwise noted, all findings in this report are statistically significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level, although given the descriptive nature of this report, we did not introduce adjustments for multiple comparisons in these analyses. For comparisons between the current (2020–2021) school year and the prior year (2019–2020), we analyzed only data for teachers that indicated teaching at the same school both years.<sup>5</sup>

## Case Study Data Collection and Analysis

With state partners’ support, we recruited four districts in three states for additional data collection—one in Louisiana, two in Rhode Island, and one in Tennessee.<sup>6</sup> The districts met the criteria of using standards-aligned ELA materials,<sup>7</sup> serving a large population of traditionally underserved students (i.e., low-income students, SoCs, ELs, SWDs, and/or students performing below grade level), and being amenable to our data collection. In each district, we con-

TABLE 4  
Descriptive Statistics of the Samples

Variable	Count	Weighted Percentage
Overall	1,890	100
<b>State</b>		
Louisiana	323	—
Massachusetts	304	—
Rhode Island	318	—
Tennessee	334	—
<b>Grade band</b>		
Elementary	1,128	63
Middle	383	20
High	378	17
<b>Mode of instruction<sup>a</sup></b>		
In-person	505	24
Simultaneous hybrid	654	34
Nonsimultaneous hybrid	418	20
Remote	259	17
Teachers serving high EL population (i.e., in classrooms with more than 10% ELs)	540	31
Teachers serving high population of SWDs (i.e., in classrooms with more than 10% SWDs)	965	50
Teachers serving majority non-White students (i.e., in classrooms with more than 50% SoCs)	524	32
Teachers serving majority below-grade-level students (i.e., in classroom with more than 50% students below grade level)	598	33

NOTES: Percentages might not add to 100 because of rounding and survey weighting. All variables except state obtained from survey responses of teachers.

<sup>a</sup> Greater proportions of ELA teachers in Louisiana and Tennessee reported in-person instruction (49 and 36 percent, respectively); smaller proportion in Massachusetts (13 percent). Also, smaller proportions of teachers in Louisiana, Rhode Island, and Tennessee reported remote instruction (4, 10, and 11 percent, respectively). Finally, greater proportions of teachers in Massachusetts and Rhode Island reported simultaneous hybrid instruction (40 percent and 45 percent, respectively), but a smaller proportion in Louisiana and Tennessee (27 percent each).

ducted interviews with district leaders knowledgeable about ELA instruction, with a focus on middle schools (i.e., grades 6 through 8). We also interviewed the principal, ELA instructional coach/lead (if available), and a group of teachers in select middle schools that district leaders suggested as case sites based on likelihood of staff participation. In total, the four districts identified five schools. The interviews elicited guidance that districts and schools provided to teachers to guide on their ELA instruction, and any changes perceived as attributable to COVID-19. Two experienced qualitative analysts coded and synthesized interview data, generating a school-by-school summary for each instructional system component of interest. Additional information on case study school context can be found in Appendix B.

## Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the ATP survey measures are self-reported by teachers and thus may have been subject to social desirability or other response biases (although the fact that the data were for research use and not accountability purposes might limit the level of this threat). Second, although our survey response rates for the teacher survey were in line with other ATP surveys, results may have differed for teachers who chose not to respond (e.g., if their schools had more COVID-19-related difficulties that interfered with their abilities to respond). Third, our study is descriptive and not causal. Results based on a comparison of 2019–2020 to 2020–2021 survey data are only suggestive of any possible effects of COVID-19 on teachers’ instructional systems. Any reported changes *in the time of COVID-19* do not necessarily mean that these changes are *directly because of COVID-19*. Conceivably, districts and schools were in the midst of reforms or changes that were not due to or in response to COVID-19-induced circumstances. And we cannot know which pre-COVID reforms were continued and which were paused or abandoned by the districts. Finally, readers should keep in mind that teachers’ perceptions might not always or necessarily reflect district or school intentions.

As for the qualitative data, the case study snapshots featured this report are drawn from a small

sample of schools in Louisiana, Rhode Island, and Tennessee. These districts were selected based on recommendations from state partners, and the schools were suggested by district leaders; there is the potential for selection bias. For the purpose of this report, schools featured in the case study snapshots are meant to be illustrative of survey findings and not representative of all schools within these states.

## Findings

In this section, we present key findings for each research question. We prioritize ATP survey findings. The yellow text boxes present the survey question that teachers responded to and that we analyzed for each research question. Note that the survey item may have appeared differently to teachers; in the interest of space, we did not preserve the formatting of the item for this report. The blue text boxes present brief snapshots from case study data to offer qualitative insights.

## Research Question 1: What Guidance About ELA Instruction Did Teachers Report Receiving in the First Full Year of COVID-19?

For four of the seven instructional system components linked to coherence, about one-quarter of teachers indicated receiving no guidance from that component during the first full year of COVID-19, or that the component was not present or used. On average, only a little more than one-half of ELA teachers agreed that their instructional system components gave guidance on content to emphasize during the 2020–2021 school year, and less than one-half reported receiving guidance on rigor. Only about one-quarter of teachers reported receiving guidance on equity and diversity in regard to their ELA instruction. High school teachers and those providing simultaneous hybrid instruction tended to report less guidance from various components of their instructional systems than teachers in other grade levels and of other instructional modes. Compared with the national average, Louisiana and Tennessee teachers reported more guidance from certain aspects of their systems, while Massachusetts and Rhode Island teachers reported less. We elaborate on these findings next.

### Survey Question: Guidance in 2020–2021

Thinking about this school year (2020–2021), what guidance does each instructional component provide about teaching ELA, regardless of whether or not you agree with and use that guidance? [Select all that apply]

#### Components

- State standards
- Curriculum materials
- PD trainings
- Guidance around teacher collaboration
- Teacher evaluation criteria/focus
- Benchmark/interim assessments
- State-mandated summative (end-of-year) assessment

#### Guidance Topics

- The ELA content to emphasize (knowledge and skills students should learn)
- The rigor or level of difficulty of what students are expected to do for ELA
- The ELA instructional strategies to use
- The pacing or sequencing
- How to address diversity and equity in ELA class
- The component is present in my school, but it does not provide any of these types of information/guidance
- N/A: The component is not present or used in my school at all this school year (2020–2021)

**Guidance from teacher evaluations and summative assessments were among the top components many teachers perceived as lacking in the 2020–2021 school year.** First, we examined the guidance that teachers reported receiving from various components of their instructional systems in the 2020–2021 school year. As shown in Table 5, 20 percent of all respondents nationally indicated receiving no guidance about ELA instruction from their teacher evaluation systems, and 14 percent reported receiving no guidance from the summative assessments, although they reported that these components were present in their school systems at the time of the survey. A further 9 percent reported that each of these two components were not present or used at all. About one-quarter of teachers also reported formal PD and teacher collaboration as not providing guidance or not present altogether during the 2020–2021 school year.

Teachers received the most guidance on ELA content emphasis and the least on addressing equity. Looking down the columns of Table 5, we see that during the first full year of COVID-19, majorities of teachers (53 percent to 81 percent) reported receiving guidance on ELA content to emphasize from five of the seven instructional system components,

the exceptions being formal PD and the teacher evaluation criteria. Guidance from the instructional system components we examined was reportedly weaker on other topics. Curriculum materials and teacher collaboration provided a majority of teachers with guidance on instructional strategies and pacing, while standards and benchmark assessments provided guidance with respect to the rigor or level of difficulty of what students are expected to do. On average, only about one-quarter of teachers indicated receiving guidance from any component on how to address equity and diversity in an ELA class; formal PD seemed to provide such guidance for the most teachers (41 percent).

These findings likely reflect that some components are more conducive to particular types of guidance in their very nature. By design, standards provide information about what content to emphasize, as do benchmark and summative assessments. Still, the numbers in Table 5 suggest that a fair proportion of teachers nationwide are receiving guidance from each component about each topic we surveyed about. So conceivably, there may be ways for more states and districts to activate certain policy levers not traditionally associated with certain guidance to help reinforce how teachers are to engage in effective

TABLE 5  
Proportion of ELA Teachers in National Sample Indicating the Topics (Columns) That Each Instructional System Component (Rows) Provided Guidance on in the 2020–2021 School Year (*N* = 1,864)

	Content to Emphasize	Rigor or Difficulty	Instructional Strategies	Pacing or Sequencing	Addressing Equity and Diversity	No Guidance	N/A—Component Not Present
Standards	81	54	33	35	13	5	1
Curriculum	58	49	60	63	29	5	3
Formal PD	36	34	47	31	41	12	12
Teacher collaboration	53	48	54	53	34	12	9
Evaluation	41	41	41	28	25	20	9
Benchmarks	65	54	34	43	12	7	6
Summative	59	49	25	27	10	14	9
Average	56	47	42	40	24	11	7

NOTES: The number in the cell represents the percentage of teachers nationally that reported the instructional system component (row) provided guidance about the topic (column). For example, 81 percent of teachers nationally reported that their state standards provided guidance about the ELA content they should emphasize in their instruction.

ELA instruction. Particularly on the issue of equity and diversity, although PD may be the obvious component to leverage, messaging through other components should be explored.

**Type of received guidance varied according to grade level and instructional mode.** High school teachers typically reported receiving less guidance compared with their elementary and middle school counterparts. In particular, guidance on rigor, instructional strategies, and pacing were largely neglected by five instructional system components. Moreover, high school teachers reported receiving less guidance on all topics via benchmark assessments, and all topics except content via summative assessments.

Differences by instructional mode were driven by teachers in the simultaneous hybrid context. Among other differences, they reported less guidance on instructional strategies and pacing on average, across the seven components. However, teachers enacting instruction remotely in the first full year of COVID-19 appeared to have received more guidance on addressing issues of equity through formal PD. Equity considerations may include students' access to technology and broadband needed for remote learning. There is also the matter of students' living circumstances and their ability to engage fully in lessons delivered remotely (e.g., some students may have to look after younger siblings).

**The four focal states differed from the national average and each other with respect to topic-related guidance and by instructional system components.** Figure 2 shows on which instructional topics and components each focal states differed from the national average.

- **Louisiana.** More teachers reported guidance from curriculum materials for all aspects of ELA teaching compared with national averages. Correspondingly, fewer teachers than the national average reported no guidance from curriculum. We cannot definitively determine the causes for these state differences. However, they could be attributable to the widespread usage of standards-aligned materials (especially the Louisiana Guidebooks) in the state and the inclusion of diverse learner supports

embedded within the Guidebooks, a focus on fidelity of implementation, and state-level professional learning supports designed to support teachers' understanding of how to use the curricula. More Louisiana teachers also reported guidance from the teacher evaluation criteria on content, rigor, and pacing. This could be attributed to the state's development of content-specific observation tools designed to support school leaders' evaluation of ELA classrooms or state officials' guidance on using curriculum-embedded assessments to write student learning targets for teachers' evaluations (see Appendix A). Finally, more teachers than the national average reported no guidance from interim assessments, although such assessments were present in their schools.

- **Massachusetts.** Far greater proportions of teachers than the national average reported receiving no guidance from four components: teacher collaboration, evaluation, interim assessments, and the summative assessment. These four components were consistently lower than the national average on multiple topics. For example, fewer teachers reported that teacher collaboration provided guidance on instructional strategies and pacing; fewer teachers reported that the teacher evaluation criteria provided guidance on all topics except equity. And state summative assessments provided little guidance on all five topics. One bright spot is that more teachers in Massachusetts perceived their PD as providing guidance on how to address equity.
- **Rhode Island.** Survey results from this state resembled those of nearby Massachusetts in several respects. For the same four components—teacher collaboration, evaluation, interim and summative assessments—smaller proportions of Rhode Island teachers than the national average reported that the component provided guidance across multiple (for teacher collaboration and evaluation) topics. In addition, a smaller proportion of teachers than the national average perceived curriculum materials as providing guidance on rigor, strategies, and equity.

FIGURE 2

Profiles of Focal States, Showing Differences from National Average in Guidance Provided on Various ELA Instructional Topics (Columns) by Instructional System Components (Rows) in 2020–2021

**Louisiana (N = 318)**

	Content	Rigor	Strategies	Pacing	Equity	No guidance
Standards						
Curriculum	Green hatched	Yellow				
Formal PD						
Teacher collaboration						
Evaluation	Green hatched	Green hatched		Green hatched	Green hatched	
Benchmarks						Yellow
Summative						

**Massachusetts (N = 300)**

	Content	Rigor	Strategies	Pacing	Equity	No guidance
Standards						
Curriculum						
Formal PD					Green hatched	
Teacher collaboration			Yellow	Yellow		Green hatched
Evaluation	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow		Green hatched
Benchmarks				Yellow		
Summative	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Green hatched

**Rhode Island (N = 309)**

	Content	Rigor	Strategies	Pacing	Equity	No guidance
Standards						
Curriculum		Yellow	Yellow		Yellow	Green hatched
Formal PD	Yellow					
Teacher collaboration	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	
Evaluation	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	
Benchmarks	Yellow	Yellow		Yellow		
Summative	Yellow	Yellow				

**Tennessee (N = 332)**

	Content	Rigor	Strategies	Pacing	Equity	No guidance
Standards						
Curriculum					Green hatched	
Formal PD		Green hatched		Green hatched		
Teacher collaboration						
Evaluation		Green hatched				
Benchmarks						
Summative						

NOTES: Green hatched shading indicates a larger proportion of teachers, compared with the national average, reported receiving guidance; yellow shading indicates a smaller proportion. White cells indicate no difference from the national average. Differences are significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

- **Tennessee.** This state’s results were the most similar to the national average. Teachers perceived some components as conveying more guidance on a few select topics, but no one component was particularly comprehensive. For example, more teachers than the national average reported that curriculum materials provided information on equity, and some reported that PD provided more information on pacing and rigor.

### Research Question 1a: How Did the Guidance Teachers Reported Receiving in 2020–2021 Compare with What They Reported Receiving in 2019–2020

Certain groups of teachers reported receiving less guidance on multiple topics and components in 2020–2021 than in previous years. These include high school teachers, those teaching remotely, and teachers in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Nationally, although almost all teachers reported that their school systems required or recommended that they use specific curriculum materials for ELA, most of those required or recommended materials were not standards-aligned. There was no change nation-

ally between years, but middle school teachers and teachers in Rhode Island and Tennessee indicated an increase in the requirement or recommendation to use standards-aligned materials. We detail these findings below.

**Most teachers reported a change in the amount of guidance they received on ELA topic instruction between 2019–2020 and 2020–2021, with a near-even split between teachers reporting receiving more guidance and those reporting less guidance.** On the question of change, we asked teachers whether they received more or less guidance on five topics related to ELA instruction (content to emphasize, instructional strategies, pacing/sequencing, rigor, addressing diversity and equity) in the 2020–2021 school year compared with the 2019–2020 school year. As Table 6 shows, considerable proportions of teachers—about one-quarter to one-third—indicated that they received more or less guidance during the COVID-19 year. For example, an almost equal proportion of teachers indicated receiving less guidance as those given more guidance in 2020–2021 compared with the previous year with respect to content (29 percent less guidance versus 26 percent more guidance), strategies (33 percent versus 28 percent), and pacing (27 percent versus 28 percent). However, teachers reported receiving less guidance in 2020–2021 compared with 2019–2020 with respect to rigor and equity.

### Survey Question: Guidance Compared with 2019–2020

**This school year (2020–2021), I received more guidance compared to previous school year (2019–2020) for my ELA teaching on each of the following topics. [Select all that apply]**

- Content to emphasize (knowledge and skills students should learn)
- The instructional strategies to use
- The pacing or sequencing
- The rigor or level of difficulty of what students are expected to do
- How to address diversity and equity
- None of the above

**This school year (2020–2021), I received less guidance compared to previous school year (2019–2020) for my ELA teaching on each of the following topics. [Select all that apply]**

- Content to emphasize (knowledge and skills students should learn)
- The instructional strategies to use
- The pacing or sequencing
- The rigor or level of difficulty of what students are expected to do
- How to address diversity and equity
- None of the above

TABLE 6

Proportion of ELA Teachers in National Sample Indicating That Less or More Guidance Was Provided on Each Topic in 2020–2021 Than in 2019–2020

	Overall (N = 1,600)	
	Less Guidance Than in 2019–2020	More Guidance Than in 2019–2020
Content	29	26
Rigor	33	20
Strategies	33	28
Pacing	27	28
Equity	32	25

Instructional mode may be one driver of this pattern. Controlling for state- and standards-alignment of curriculum, we found that greater proportions of teachers in fully remote settings reported lower guidance in the 2020–2021 school year compared with the 2019–2020 year, on average, compared with teachers in fully in-person or hybrid settings. However, this study was not designed to uncover causal mechanisms behind the patterns we describe, so this result should be interpreted cautiously.

**High school teachers, those teaching remotely, and those in Louisiana reported receiving less guidance in the 2020–2021 school year compared with 2019–2020 year on certain instructional topics.**

A greater proportion of high school teachers reported receiving much less guidance on pacing and content in 2020–2021 (compared with 2019–2020) than their elementary or middle school counterparts across all components. Guidance on pacing also differed by mode of

instruction, with remote teachers reporting less guidance. Only two differences emerged in the focal states, compared with the national average. According to surveyed teachers, Louisiana schools offered less guidance addressing equity in 2020–2021 compared with 2019–2020. Meanwhile, Rhode Island schools seemed to have offered more content guidance.

**About one-third of all teachers reported receiving less guidance about ELA instruction from all system components, but about a quarter reported receiving more guidance from formal PD and curriculum.** We also asked teachers whether they received more or less guidance from each of the seven instructional system components in the 2020–2021 school year compared with the 2019–2020 school year. As Table 7 shows, more than one-third of teachers nationally reported receiving less guidance via evaluation criteria (35 percent) and state summative assessments (36 percent). Meanwhile, in comparison with other components, curriculum and PD provided more guidance. This suggests that during the first full year of COVID-19, teachers found greater guidance from locally flexible components (e.g., curriculum, PD) compared with instructional system components that supported accountability (e.g., teacher evaluation criteria, summative assessments). This may be due, in part, to some states suspending teacher evaluation and/or state summative assessments in the 2020–2021 school year. Also, states that did not eschew evaluation and testing offered some flexibilities that might have diminished the perceived influence of these components.

**High school teachers and those teaching remotely or in simultaneous hybrid mode reported**

### Case Study Snapshot 1: Priorities Shifted Away from Ensuring Rigor in Instruction

One leader of a charter management organization (CMO) described that the pandemic made it more difficult for the school to focus on maintaining rigorous instruction. The pandemic posed numerous challenges—the community that the school served was hit hard by COVID-19, many parents were frontline workers who could not work from home and provide guidance to their students engaging in remote learning, and the school struggled to maintain consistent attendance from students. During the pandemic, teachers instead had to shift their priorities toward ensuring that families’ basic needs, such as food, were met, and instructional conversations centered more on how to provide instruction virtually rather than ELA content. As the CMO leader said, “That all weighed really heavy on teachers, and so I think that we lost a little bit of rigor, to be honest, . . . I feel like that did fall off a little bit.”

TABLE 7

Proportion of ELA Teachers in National Sample Indicating That Each Instructional System Component Provided Less or More Guidance in 2020–2021 Than in 2019–2020, and Focal State Differences

Component	Overall (N = 1,606)		LA (N = 274)		MA (N = 265)		RI (N = 275)		TN (N = 285)	
	Less Guidance Than in 2019–2020	More Guidance Than in 2019–2020	Less	More	Less	More	Less	More	Less	More
Standards	27	14	—	—	33	6	31	7	—	—
Curriculum	29	24	—	—	—	—	22	39	24	45
Formal PD	32	30	—	—	—	—	14	50	—	—
Teacher collaboration	29	20	38	14	—	—	33	12	—	—
Evaluation	35	10	—	—	45	5	—	—	—	—
Benchmarks	31	14	—	—	—	—	—	—	24	22
Summative	36	10	—	—	46	2	—	—	—	—

NOTES: A dash (—) indicates no statistically significant difference (at  $p < 0.05$  from national average). Green shading indicates a larger proportion of teachers, compared with the national average, reported receiving guidance. Yellow shading indicates a smaller proportion. Differences are significant at  $p < 0.05$ . LA = Louisiana; MA = Massachusetts; RI = Rhode Island; TN = Tennessee.

### Case Study Snapshot 2: Assessments and Teacher Evaluation Were Reduced Because of COVID-19

Interviewees at two of the five case study sites reported a reduction in the amount of assessment data to which they had access. One district leader stated that, although assessment data are crucial for keeping a “pulse” on students and identifying students who need additional support, the district superintendent made interim assessments optional during the 2020–2021 school year. Typically, instructional coaches will convene to analyze assessment data. However, this school year, they lacked interim data. A leader from a CMO in Rhode Island similarly reported a lack of assessment data. The CMO had no state summative assessment data from the previous year (e.g., 2019–2020) because of COVID-19, although they were able to have all students participate in the state summative assessment in the 2020–2021 school year and would likely have access to those data in fall 2021.

Teachers at some case study schools received fewer or no evaluations because of the pandemic. According to one Louisiana district leader, teachers only had to be evaluated one time if they were rated as effective or highly effective, whereas in a typical year, the evaluation consists of both an announced and unannounced component. Only teachers who were rated as emerging or ineffective received a second evaluation. Administrators were preoccupied with managing COVID-19 mitigation measures, such as contact tracing and managing quarantines, and the district leader stated that leadership did not want to overwhelm teachers. Overall, these changes may have reduced the effectiveness of evaluation as a lever for messaging about effective instruction.

**decreased guidance between the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years, particularly from assessments.** We observed differences by grade band in reported change in amount of guidance provided by standards and interim assessments between 2019–2020 and 2020–2021. Specifically, high school teachers reported receiving much less guidance from these two components, compared with middle and elementary teachers. Also, significantly greater proportions of middle school and high school teachers reported decreased guidance between the two years from summative assessments compared with elementary teachers. By instructional mode, significantly greater proportions of teachers who taught in remote or simultaneous hybrid modes reported decreased guidance from summative assessments compared with teachers who taught in person or in nonsimultaneous hybrid mode.

**Teachers in Massachusetts and Rhode Island reported receiving less guidance between the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years from multiple system components, while Tennessee teachers reported more guidance from curriculum and interim assessments.** There were notable deviations from the national averages in the four focal states, summarized in Table 7. Louisiana teachers reported receiving less guidance than the national average from teacher collaboration during the first full year of COVID-19 than the previous year. In Massachusetts, teachers reported less guidance from standards, teacher evaluation criteria, and summative assessments than teachers nationally in 2020–2021 compared with 2019–2020. In Rhode Island, more teachers than the national average perceived more guidance from curriculum materials and formal PD from one year to the next. In 2019, Rhode Island

passed legislation requiring all districts to adopt high-quality instructional materials by no later than 2023, which could explain why teachers were increasingly perceiving more guidance from curriculum materials. In addition, Rhode Island has continued to lead cohorts of districts through the curriculum selection process in partnership with EdReports. The state is also using its comprehensive state literacy development grant to incentivize districts to purchase high-quality curricula and provide professional learning (see Appendix A).

On the other hand, fewer Rhode Island teachers thought standards and teacher collaboration components provided increased guidance. Like Rhode Island, Tennessee teachers perceived more guidance from curriculum in the 2020–2021 school year compared with 2019–2020. This could be attributed to a particularly successful curriculum adoption cycle in 2020. State leaders in Tennessee reported that, as a result of this adoption cycle, the use of high-quality instructional materials has become much more widespread throughout the state. Tennessee is the only state where a greater proportion of teachers than the national average reported receiving more guidance from interim assessments during the first full year of COVID-19 than the previous year. This is likely due the state department’s development of a new interim assessment aligned to the summative assessment and other widely used formative assessments (see Table 2).

**Nearly all teachers reported being required or recommended to use a particular curriculum material, but fewer than a quarter were to use a standards-aligned material.** Curriculum materials send a strong message about what to teach. Therefore, it is important that teachers have access to high-quality, standards-aligned materials. Given this factor,

## Survey Question: Guidance on Curriculum Materials

**Please indicate the ELA curriculum materials that your school or district requires or recommends that you use for your typical ELA class this school year (2020–2021) and previous school year (2019–2020).**

[Teachers selected from a list of commonly used ELA curriculum materials, or could select “Curriculum materials I create myself,” “Curriculum materials my school or district created,” “Other curriculum materials not listed,” or “N/A—my school/district does not require or recommend that I use a curriculum material regularly.”]

we took a closer look at what districts and schools messaged to teachers with respect to curriculum materials.

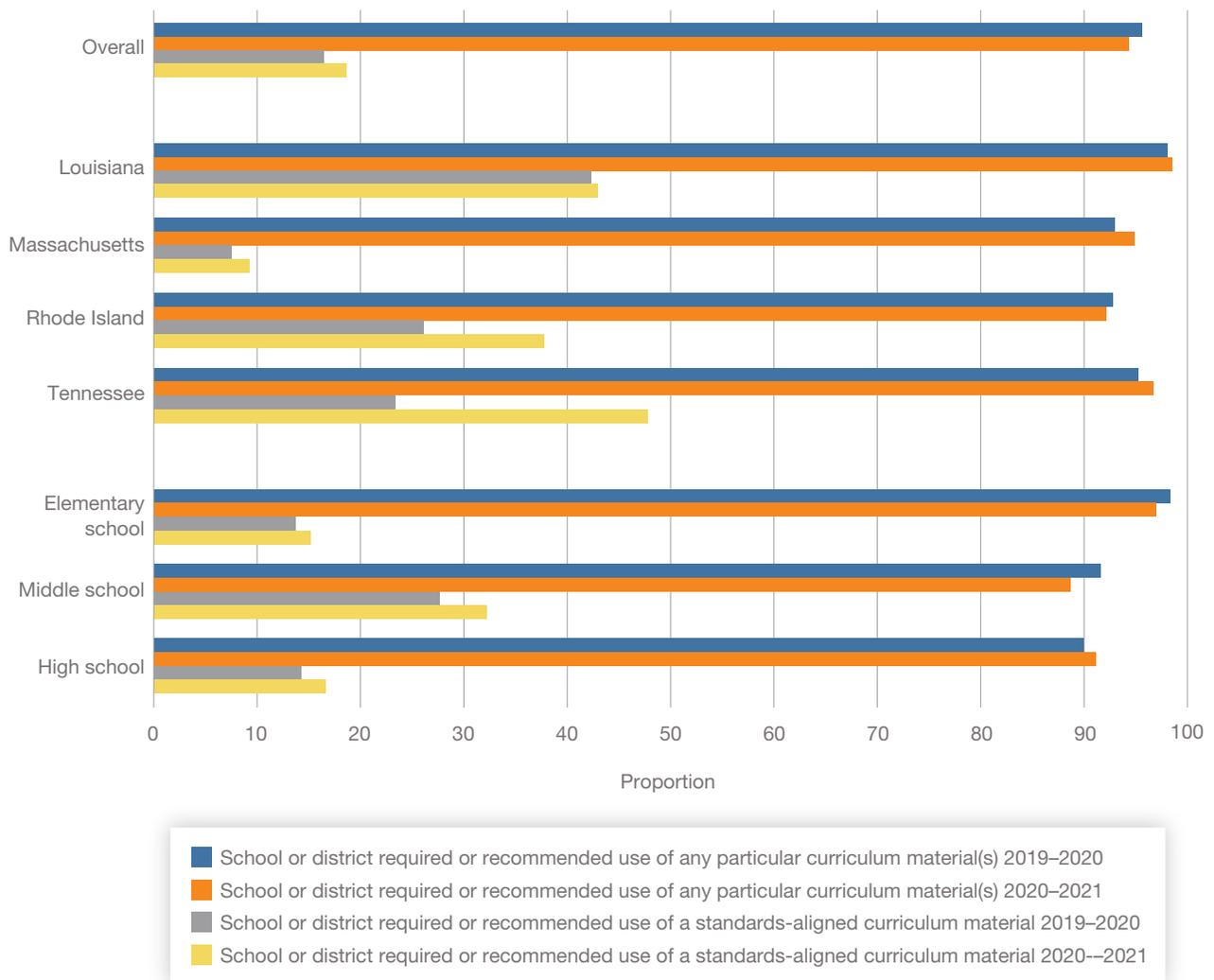
Ninety-four percent of teachers reported that their schools required or recommended the use of any particular curriculum material during the 2020–2021 school year, as shown in Figure 3. However, the proportion of teachers reporting required or recommended use of a *standards-aligned* material was only 19 percent nationally in 2020–2021.<sup>8</sup>

Averages were higher in three focal states (Louisiana, Rhode Island, and Tennessee). This was already the case in the 2019–2020 school year, but Rhode Island and Tennessee teachers indicated a

substantial increase (11 and 23 percentage points, respectively) in the required or recommended use of standards-aligned materials in 2020–2021. This is likely unattributable to COVID-19 circumstances; rather, during or shortly before 2020–2021, Rhode Island and Tennessee required districts to adopt state-approved curricula materials.

In 2020–2021, more middle school teachers than elementary or high school teachers reported being required or recommended to use a standards-aligned curriculum, a trend that was present in the 2019–2020 school year. There was no difference by instructional mode in either year, keeping in mind

FIGURE 3  
Proportion of ELA Teachers Indicating Guidance on Curriculum Materials to Use During 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 (N overall = 1,864; N per state = 300–332)



that the instructional mode referred to teachers' main instructional mode in the 2020–2021 school year.

## Research Question 2: To What Extent Did the Teachers Perceive That Guidance from Instructional System Components Supported Them to Address the Needs of Students, Particularly Traditionally Underserved Student Populations?

Following the survey questions about guidance provided by various instructional system components, we asked teachers to indicate the extent to which the guidance provided by each instructional system component supported them to teach various groups of students during 2020–2021.

**Small proportions of teachers reported that the guidance from instructional system components provided “a lot of support” to help them address the needs of traditionally underserved students.** Nationally, teachers identified curriculum materials

and guidance around teacher collaboration as the most-supportive system components overall, regardless of the needs of particular groups of students. Consistent with our findings, teachers indicated that the teacher evaluation criteria and state summative assessments offered little to no support on addressing specific students' needs. We offered a response option of “N/A = the element . . . is not applicable to me” and expected teachers to select this if they considered a component as not present during the 2020–2021 school year. Therefore, we are inclined to interpret the findings as signaling that teacher evaluation and summative assessments offered limited support rather than that these factors were suspended during the year. It is conceivable, however, that the low ratings reflect that some states did not require teacher evaluations or administration of summative assessments in 2020–2021.

Only about one-third of teachers nationally indicated that the guidance encoded in the seven instructional system components provided them “a lot of support” to address the needs of all students (see Figure 4).<sup>9</sup> Still, this is more than twice the proportion of teachers indicating that the guidance provided “a lot of support” to meet the needs of ELs, SWDs, or SoCs (14 percent to 16 percent). The perceived

### Survey Question: Addressing Needs of Traditionally Underserved Students in 2020–2021

Select a rating from 0–2 (or N/A) to indicate how much the information/guidance provided by each instructional component supports you to teach ELA to each group of students this school year (2020–2021)?

- 0 = provides little to no support
- 1 = provides some but not enough support
- 2 = provides a lot of support
- N/A = the element or group of students is not applicable to me

#### Components

- State standards
- Curriculum materials
- PD trainings
- Guidance around teacher collaboration
- Teacher evaluation criteria/focus
- Benchmark/interim assessments
- State-mandated summative (end-of-year) assessment

#### Student Groups

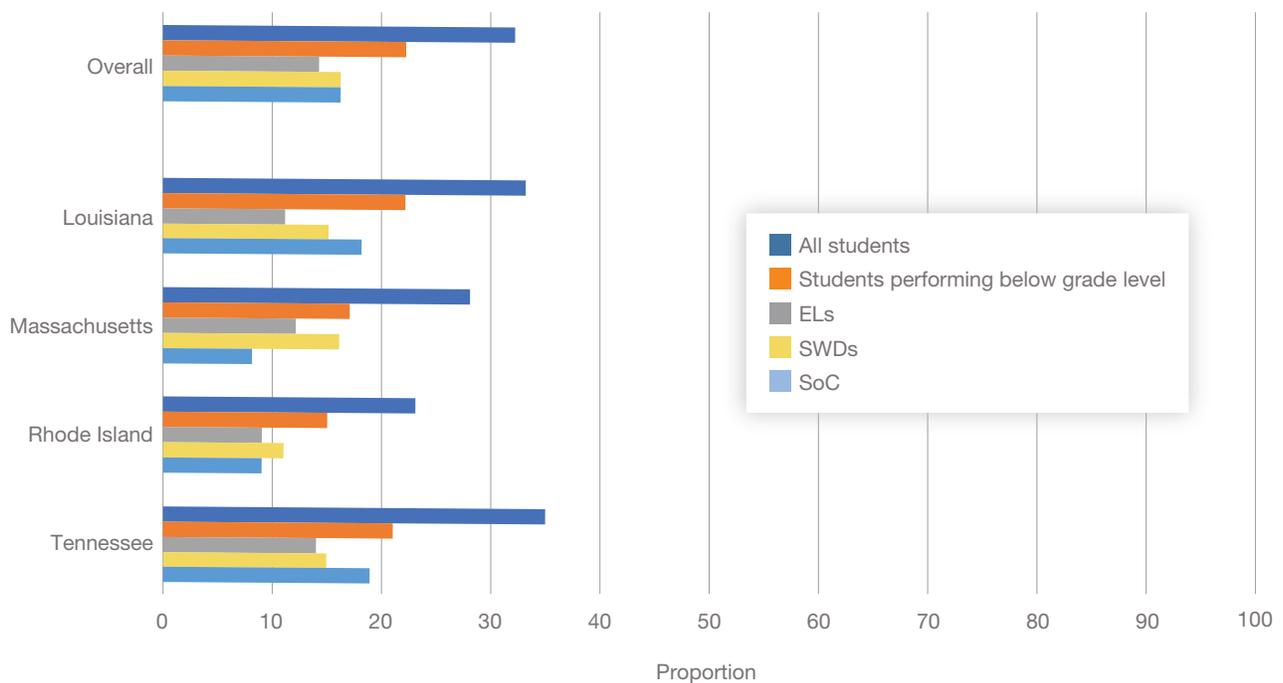
- All students in general
- Students performing below grade level
- The ELA instructional strategies to use
- English language learners
- Special education students
- Black or Hispanic students

### Case Study Snapshot 3: Teachers Desired More Support to Address the Needs of Traditionally Underserved Students

When asked about the messages that they received from their schools or districts about how to support Black, Latinx, low-income learners, and ELs, teachers at one Rhode Island school reported that they did not receive any particular messages about how to support these groups. Teachers felt that they received encouragement to be culturally responsive and could elect to take optional professional learning on cultural responsiveness; however, cultural responsiveness in instruction was not an explicit focus articulated by district leadership.

A teacher at another case study school in Louisiana echoed the sentiment that teachers did not receive explicit guidance around supports for these particular student groups; the focus was more on supporting the student population as a whole. As one teacher said, “Because our student body is roughly 80 percent Black and 20 percent Latinx, a lot of the messages are more just for the general curriculum and instruction.” The teacher did note that students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or 504 plans received special education services that were clearly defined and support to help make lessons accessible. However, this teacher received very little guidance regarding how to support ELs. The teacher reported, “There isn’t really a structure of support for EL students. So it’s a lot of like, sort of me doing the best that I can. . . . It’s very much like we as teachers are kind of trying to figure out the best practices in real-time.”

FIGURE 4  
Proportion of ELA Teachers Indicating That the Guidance Provided by the Average of Seven Instructional System Components Provides “a Lot of Support” to Teach Particular Groups of Students (*N* overall = 1,890; *N* per state = 304–334)



NOTES: The difference in perceived support to teach to all students and to each traditionally underserved student group is significant overall and in all four states,  $p < .001$ .

support for each traditionally underserved student group is significantly lower than the perceived support for all students nationally and in all four states ( $p < 0.001$ ). There were no significant differences by grade band or mode of instruction.

In our focal states, state officials reported some challenges to providing guidance around supporting these student populations. Leaders in one state perceived a lack of high-quality instructional materials that are also culturally relevant, while leaders in another state reported that the sensitivity of race as a topic made it difficult to emphasize culturally relevant materials. In some cases, state supports were targeted more toward addressing specific academic skill deficits (e.g., vocabulary, background knowledge, fluency) rather than specific populations of students. Therefore, strategies that are intended to help struggling students were also expected to reach and support these student populations.

### **Research Question 3: What Were Teachers' Perceptions of the Coherence of Their School's ELA Instructional System in the First Full Year of COVID-19?**

Instructional system components may each provide some information or guidance on what to teach and how to teach ELA, but whether the messages are reinforcing is important and central. When system components convey mixed messages, teachers are

left trying to decipher on their own what content and skills to emphasize, to what depth, and what instructional strategies to use. In response to our third research question, we characterized instructional system coherence in the first full year of COVID-19 and explored changes in teachers' perception of coherence between 2019–2020 and 2020–2021.

In general, in the first full year of COVID-19, majorities of teachers perceived their instructional system components as conveying similar, but not reinforcing, messages about what and how to teach ELA. When asked about whether various aspects of their instructional systems provided them with congruent messages in 2020–2021, teachers tended to rate their standards and their ELA curriculum as most similar to one another and other components of their system. High school teachers and those teaching remotely tended to provide lower ratings of similarity. When comparing reports of teachers from our focal states with the national average, teachers from Rhode Island and Tennessee tended to report less system coherence. Overall, teachers perceived their instructional systems as less coherent in 2020–2021 than in 2019–2020. We elaborate on these findings as follows.

**Most teachers indicated that various components of their instructional system provided similar, but not reinforcing, messages in 2020–2021.** We asked teachers to rate the extent to which each possible pair of the seven instructional system components supported each other and provided similar

#### **Survey Question: Coherence in 2020–2021**

Note: Teachers who had indicated on a prior question that a particular component “is not present or used in my school at all this school year (2020–2021)” were not asked to rate that component.

**[For each instructional system component pair,] provide a rating from 1–4 of how coherent the two components are, in other words how well they support each other and provide similar messages about ELA teaching. Think about this school year (2020–2021).**

- 1 = provide conflicting messages about ELA teaching
- 2 = provide somewhat dissimilar messages about ELA teaching
- 3 = provide somewhat similar messages about ELA teaching
- 4 = provide reinforcing messages about ELA teaching

messages about ELA instruction. (See Table 8 for the 21 component pairs on which we focused. Responses are on a 1–4 scale, in which 1 = provide conflicting messages; 2 = provide somewhat dissimilar messages; 3 = provide somewhat similar messages; 4 = provide reinforcing messages.)

Nationally, teachers rated the standards-curriculum pair highest—meaning that, in general, teachers viewed their state standards and curriculum materials as conveying the most similar messages about ELA instruction (see Table 8). Curriculum and formal PD trainings and PD and teacher collaboration were also rated relatively highly (i.e., 3 or higher, indicating that they provide somewhat similar messages). Relatively speaking, the guidance provided by state summative assessments were rated as the most dissimilar to that provided by other instructional system components, although these differences are small (i.e., the range of ratings was 2.7 to 3.1).<sup>10</sup>

**High school teachers and remote-only teachers reported that certain instructional system components were less similar than elementary school teachers and in-person teachers, respectively.**

There were differences by grade band and instructional mode in ratings of similarity for a few pairs of instructional system components (see Figure 5). All differences by grade band were driven by greater proportions of elementary teachers rating the pairs as reinforcing, and greater proportions of high school teachers rating the pairs as dissimilar or conflicting. By instructional mode, in-person teachers tended to

rate pairs as more similar or reinforcing, and remote-only teachers tended to rate pairs as more dissimilar or conflicting. Hybrid teachers tended to be in the middle, although, in some cases, they provided ratings as low as the remote teachers.

**Louisiana and Massachusetts largely resembled the national average, while Rhode Island and Tennessee teachers differed.** Among the four focal states, Louisiana and Massachusetts resembled each other and the national average with respect to ratings of similarity in messaging among pairs of instructional system components (see Figure 6). Meanwhile, Rhode Island and Tennessee differed from the national profile. Specifically, in Rhode Island and Tennessee, teachers rated almost half of all possible pairs lower than the national average. Evaluation and summative assessments accounted for many of the lower ratings. Some pairings involving standards and curriculum were also lower in Rhode Island and Tennessee. As mentioned in an earlier section, despite teacher evaluation and summative assessments being required in the 2020–2021 school year, some flexibilities to the requirements were allowed. For example, student assessment scores could be excluded from teacher evaluation scores. This might explain, in part, why assessment and evaluation were less effective, or at least less clear, as a lever and perceived as less aligned to other components. It is possible too that teachers perceived the state assessment as altogether misaligned—not addressing standards or matching curriculum focus.

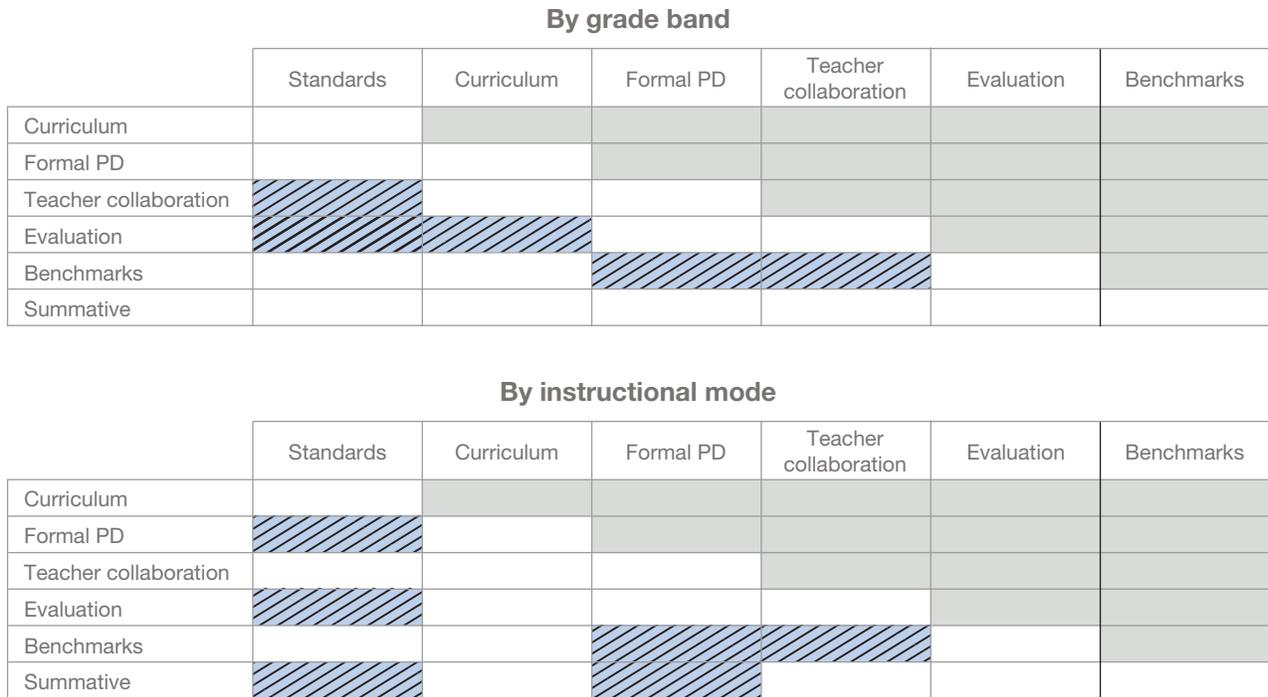
TABLE 8  
Average Rating of Similarity Between Pairs of Instructional System Components by ELA Teachers Nationally (*N* = 1,700)

	State Standards	Curriculum Materials	Formal PD	Teacher Collaboration Guidance	Evaluation Criteria	Benchmark or Interim Assessments
Curriculum materials	3.1					
Formal PD	3.0	3.0				
Teacher collaboration	2.9	3.0	3.0			
Evaluation criteria	2.9	2.8	2.9	2.9		
Benchmarks	3.0	2.9	2.9	2.8	2.8	
Summative	3.0	2.9	2.7	2.7	2.7	2.9

NOTES: Values on 1–4 (conflicting messages to reinforcing messages) scale. All differences of 0.1 or greater are significant at  $p < 0.01$ .

FIGURE 5

Summaries of Differences in Ratings of Similarity Between Pairs of ELA Instructional System Components by Grade Band and Instructional Mode (N = 1,699)



NOTES: Blue hatched shading indicates a difference among grade bands or instructional modes. White cells indicate no difference. Gray shading indicates not-applicable cells. Differences are significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

**Overall instructional system coherence was moderate in 2020–2021.** Analysis of the similarity between pairs of instructional system components gives a piece-by-piece sense of instructional system coherence, but it might also be useful to summarize instructional system coherence into a single metric for a more-streamlined analysis. We developed a measure of system coherence defined by the proportion of component pairs (out of 21 total possible pairs) that teachers reported as providing reinforcing messages about what to teach and/or how to teach ELA. As shown in Figure 7, nationally, teachers reported that fewer than one-quarter of component pairs (roughly five out of 21) provided reinforcing messages about ELA instruction. Teachers rated another 50 percent of component pairs as providing similar messages. In all then, averaged across the nation, teachers rated about 70 percent of the component pairs in their ELA instructional systems as providing at least similar—but not necessarily

reinforcing—guidance. In this respect, we can consider the average system to be moderately coherent.

Louisiana teachers reported a similar proportion as the national average, while Massachusetts and Rhode Island teachers reported a significantly lower proportion of pairs rated as reinforcing than the national average. Rhode Island does have a significantly higher proportion of pairs rated as similar than the national average. There were no significant differences among grade bands or by mode of instruction. These findings suggest that all systems have room to improve—i.e., about five pairs of components are perceived as sending dissimilar or conflicting messages. Furthermore, if reinforcing pairs—not just similar ones—are desired, states have a ways to go; some states, such as Rhode Island, more than others.

FIGURE 6

Profiles of Focal States, Showing Differences from National Average in Similarity Between Pairs of ELA Instructional System Components

**Louisiana (N = 294)**

	Standards	Curriculum	Formal PD	Teacher collaboration	Evaluation	Benchmarks
Curriculum		Gray	Gray	Gray	Gray	Gray
Formal PD	Yellow hatched		Gray	Gray	Gray	Gray
Teacher collaboration				Gray	Gray	Gray
Evaluation					Gray	Gray
Benchmarks						Gray
Summative						

**Massachusetts (N = 266)**

	Standards	Curriculum	Formal PD	Teacher collaboration	Evaluation	Benchmarks
Curriculum		Gray	Gray	Gray	Gray	Gray
Formal PD			Gray	Gray	Gray	Gray
Teacher collaboration				Gray	Gray	Gray
Evaluation					Gray	Gray
Benchmarks				Yellow hatched		Gray
Summative				Yellow hatched		

**Rhode Island (N = 277)**

	Standards	Curriculum	Formal PD	Teacher collaboration	Evaluation	Benchmarks
Curriculum	Yellow hatched	Gray	Gray	Gray	Gray	Gray
Formal PD			Gray	Gray	Gray	Gray
Teacher collaboration	Yellow hatched	Yellow hatched		Gray	Gray	Gray
Evaluation	Yellow hatched	Yellow hatched	Yellow hatched	Yellow hatched	Gray	Gray
Benchmarks						Gray
Summative				Yellow hatched		Yellow hatched

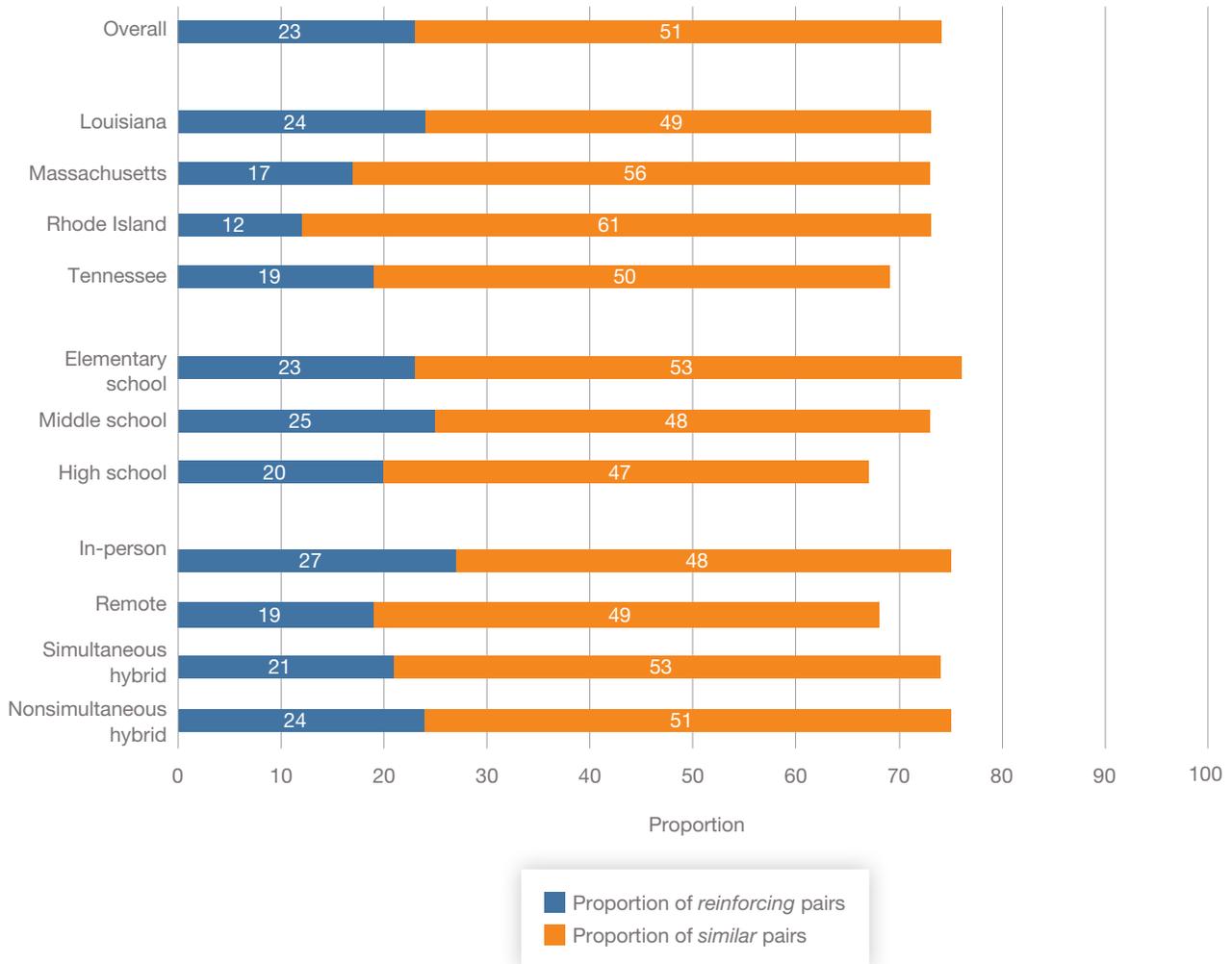
**Tennessee (N = 311)**

	Standards	Curriculum	Formal PD	Teacher collaboration	Evaluation	Benchmarks
Curriculum	Yellow hatched	Gray	Gray	Gray	Gray	Gray
Formal PD			Gray	Gray	Gray	Gray
Teacher collaboration				Gray	Gray	Gray
Evaluation	Yellow hatched	Yellow hatched	Yellow hatched	Yellow hatched	Gray	Gray
Benchmarks		Yellow hatched			Yellow hatched	Gray
Summative	Yellow hatched	Yellow hatched			Yellow hatched	

NOTES: Yellow hatched shading indicates a lower rating from the national average. White cells indicate no difference from the national average. Gray shading indicates not-applicable cells. Differences range in magnitude from about 0.15 to 0.25 on the four-point response scale. All differences are significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

FIGURE 7

Proportion of ELA Instructional System Component Pairs (out of 21) Reported as Similar or Reinforcing (*N* overall = 1774; *N* per state = 281–319)



### Research Question 3a: How Did the Coherence Teachers Perceived in 2020–2021 Compare with What They Perceived in 2019–2020?

**Nationally, teachers perceived their instructional system as less coherent in 2020–2021 than in 2019–2020.** Most teachers (56 percent) indicated that their instructional systems felt less coherent in the 2020–2021 school year than in the 2019–2020 school year. About one-third of teachers indicated the coherence remained about the same, while 13 percent reported that coherence increased. The trend was similar in

each focal state, with Louisiana, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island reflecting closely the national average. However, in Tennessee, almost a quarter of teachers indicated that their ELA instructional systems were more coherent during 2020–2021 than 2019–2020. The state policy context, rather than COVID-19 context, may explain this finding. That is, as mentioned in an earlier section, in 2020–2021, Tennessee required districts to adopt state-approved curriculum materials. A finding to research question 1 confirmed that larger proportions of teachers in the state were required or recommended to use standards-aligned materials in 2020–2021 compared with 2019–2020. Such materials likely provided a clear instructional

## Survey Question: Coherence Compared with 2019–2020

- My instructional system feels less coherent this year
- The coherence of my instructional system has not changed
- My instructional system feels more coherent this year

### Case Study Snapshot 4: Instructional System Coherence Was Difficult to Achieve

Coherence among instructional system components—such as curriculum materials, PD, and assessments—can be difficult to achieve in a typical year. It was found to be even more challenging as the 2020–2021 school year was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators at one Rhode Island middle school cited a lack of coherence between the PD they participated in and the curriculum, stating that although PD sent messages about using “manipulatives” to keep kids engaged, the curriculum was already too packed to allow for much modification. The mixed messages about how to modify the curriculum reportedly posed challenges for educators, especially those teaching in a hybrid setting, because they already spent most of their time planning for different students being in the classroom on varying days. Even more, educators indicated that they often had to teach the same lesson twice, which slowed down the pace at which they were able to cover the curriculum. Although educators reported less coherence overall, there was some coherence among a few components that facilitated more effective ELA instruction. For example, educators reported strong alignment between their district-adopted benchmark assessments and the state summative assessment, which helped to drive their instructional decisionmaking. In this school, while some elements of coherence remained intact during the pandemic, educators and school administrators faced significant obstacles with maintaining instructional system coherence.

focus for teachers. Presumably teachers also received PD and other support aligned with the materials. Altogether this likely provided teachers an increased sense of coherence.

The differences by grade band are attributable to a greater proportion of high school teachers reporting that the system felt less coherent. As for instructional mode, teachers teaching in-person were more likely to report the system felt similar in coherence, while those teaching remotely were more likely to report that coherence decreased from 2019–2020 to 2020–2021. A range of reasons could account for these patterns. Drawing on the findings to the first research question, we note that high school and remote teachers reported receiving less guidance on ELA teaching–related topics (particularly pacing and

content) and from system components (particularly from assessments, both interim and summative). It is possible that before the pandemic, high school teachers—more so than their elementary or middle counterparts—looked to assessments to anchor their instruction, and in the absence of (or given less clear) guidance around assessments, they felt the system was not held together as tightly. For remote teachers, it is likely that during the pandemic, guidance focused more on navigating new processes (e.g., using technology, monitoring engagement online) rather than on curriculum use and other aspects of instruction. As a result, teachers felt messages were less similar to each other than in past years.

## Research Question 4: How Were Teachers' Perceptions of ELA Instructional System Coherence Associated with Conditions Identified Through Literature as Related to the Development of Coherence?

The final survey question asked teachers to consider the relationship between coherence and the set of five conditions we identified as critical for the development and maintenance of coherence.

**Teachers' reports of ELA instructional system coherence correlated positively with conditions that can support development of coherence.** From 15 survey items, we derived five subscales (each consisting of two to four items) that correspond to the five conditions: vision for academic improvement, culture of continuous improvement, instructional leadership, common instructional practices, and time and supporting structures and resources. Each scale has high internal reliability (between 0.79 and 0.83, with one of the two-item scales having an alpha of 0.87). Each of the five scales correlates significantly and positively with the overall coherence measure—that is, the proportion of component pairs that teachers reported as providing reinforcing messages about

what to teach and/or how to teach ELA ( $r$ 's between 0.42 and 0.48, all  $p < .01$ ; see Table 9).

Together, these findings provide support for the likelihood that there are certain contextual conditions that may enable instructional coherence. The analysis also provides validity evidence of our coherence measure—the proportion of component pairs that teachers reported as providing reinforcing messages about what to teach and/or how to teach ELA. That is, the findings demonstrate that the measure correlates moderately well with what we expect it to correlate with in theory (i.e., conditions presumed to relate to coherence), lending credence to its use in future studies.

## Summary

In Table 10, we summarize our key findings based on national results. Nationally, there was disparity in reported change in guidance from the 2019–2020 to 2020–2021 school years. Some teachers reported receiving more guidance in 2020–2021, while others reported receiving less. What is clear is that a substantial proportion of teachers (about one-quarter) indicated that one or more system components—particularly teacher evaluation and summative assessments—provided no guidance or was not

### Survey Question: Conditions Supporting Coherence

**To what extent are the following present in your school this school year (2020–2021) to support your ELA instruction?**

- 1 = Not present
- 2 = Present to a slight extent
- 3 = Present to a moderate extent
- 4 = Present to a considerable extent

Condition	Sample Item
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vision for academic improvement</li> <li>• Culture of continuous improvement</li> <li>• Instructional leadership</li> <li>• Common instructional practices</li> <li>• Time, structure, and resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A small number of goals that are tied to ELA student learning</li> <li>• A culture focused on continually improving teaching and learning</li> <li>• Leaders who make quality instruction a priority</li> <li>• A set of teaching practices that are used by all</li> <li>• Structures and processes that support educator collaboration</li> </ul>

TABLE 9

Correlation Between ELA Instructional System Coherence and Five Contextual Conditions That May Support the Development of Coherence ( $N = 1,783$ )

Contextual Condition	Coefficient	95% CI
Vision for academic improvement	0.43	[0.39, 0.47]
Culture of continuous improvement	0.45	[0.42, 0.49]
Instructional leadership	0.42	[0.38, 0.46]
Common instructional practices	0.45	[0.41, 0.48]
Time, structure, and resources	0.49	[0.45, 0.52]

NOTES: All coefficients significant at  $p < 0.01$ . CI = confidence interval

present at all during the first full year of COVID-19. Meanwhile, guidance about which curriculum teachers should use appeared to be consistent across the country; nearly all teachers reported that their districts or schools required or recommended use of particular curriculum materials, although a much smaller proportion reported being required or recommended to use a standards-aligned material.

The theme of disparity or inequity continued in our findings. Not only did teachers nationally report little guidance on how to address issues of equity and diversity in their ELA instruction, but only a small proportion of teachers reported that the guidance from instructional system components provided them “a lot of support” to address the needs of traditionally underserved students. Curriculum was the most helpful among the system components in providing support.

In terms of overall *system coherence*—which we defined as the proportion of total possible pairs of components conveying similar or reinforcing messages about what and how to teach ELA—teachers nationally rated the majority of pairs of instructional system components as conveying similar messages (51 percent), but a greater share of component pairs were rated as conveying conflicting or dissimilar messages (26 percent) than were rated as reinforcing each other (23 percent). Component pairs involving curriculum and PD, as well as standards and teacher collaboration, appeared the most reinforcing. Meanwhile, the summative assessment was rated as most dissimilar to other components. Majorities of

teachers indicated that coherence had been higher the previous year.

The main finding by grade band is that high school teachers reported less guidance and less coherence than their elementary or middle school counterparts. Notably, 2020–2021 necessitated delivery of instruction via modes other than in-person. Our findings also reflect concerns raised in communities throughout the country and in early reports on instruction during COVID-19 about inequity and differential experiences. Prior research found that schools serving large proportions of SoCs and students experiencing poverty were more likely to still be in remote learning, and this instructional mode is associated with fewer instructional opportunities compared with in-person schooling (Kaufman and Diliberti, 2021). Our findings in this report suggest that in-person teachers were more likely to report that their system coherence felt at similar levels between years, and they used materials required or recommended by the school or district more regularly. On the other hand, teachers teaching remotely or in the simultaneous hybrid mode reported less guidance on some topics (e.g., pacing, instructional strategies), and remote teachers were more likely to indicate that coherence decreased between 2019–2020 and 2020–2021. Perhaps one positive finding is that remote teachers reported more guidance on how to address equity and diversity in their instruction than teachers of other modes. This finding suggests that districts and schools were aware of the need to ensure

TABLE 10

Summary of National Findings, Differences by Grade Band and Instructional Mode, and Differences Between Focal States and National Averages

Research Question	National Findings	Differences Among Grade Bands	Differences Among Instructional Modes	Differences Between Focal States and National Average
1. Guidance provided on various topics by instructional system components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For multiple components, one-quarter of teachers indicated no guidance from, or absence of, the component in the 2020–2021 school year</li> <li>Guidance related to content was prevalent; guidance on equity was not prevalent</li> <li>Nearly all teachers reported being required or recommended to use a specific curriculum. A much smaller proportion were required or recommended to use standards-aligned material</li> </ul> <p><i>Change between 2019–2020 and 2020–2021</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Majorities of teachers reported changes in guidance on topics, with near-even split reporting more and less guidance</li> <li>One-third of teachers reported less guidance from all components, particularly evaluation and summative assessments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High school teachers reported less guidance particularly on strategies and pacing and from interim and summative assessments</li> </ul> <p><i>Change between years</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High school teachers reported less guidance on pacing and content and from assessments</li> <li>More middle school teachers reported being required or recommended to use a standards-aligned material</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Simultaneous hybrid teachers reported less guidance on strategies and pacing</li> <li>Remote teachers reported more guidance on equity</li> </ul> <p><i>Change between years</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remote and simultaneous hybrid teachers reported less guidance on some topics and components</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Louisiana and Tennessee teachers reported more guidance on certain topics and components</li> <li>Massachusetts and Rhode Island teachers generally reported less guidance</li> </ul> <p><i>Change between years</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Massachusetts and Rhode Island teachers reported decreased guidance from multiple components</li> <li>Tennessee teachers reported more guidance from curriculum and interim assessments</li> <li>Rhode Island and Tennessee teachers indicated substantial increase in requirement or recommendation to use standards-aligned materials</li> </ul>
2. Support to address needs of traditionally underserved students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guidance did not provide teachers “a lot of support” to teach ELs, SWDs, SoCs</li> <li>Curriculum was most helpful for providing support to address the needs of traditionally underserved student populations</li> <li>Teacher evaluation and summative assessments offered little to no support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>None</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>None</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Smaller proportions of teachers reported “a lot of support” to teach to particular students: SoCs in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, ELs in Louisiana, Rhode Island, and Tennessee, and SWDs in Tennessee</li> </ul>

Table 10—Continued

Research Question	National Findings	Differences Among Grade Bands	Differences Among Instructional Modes	Differences Between Focal States and National Average
3. Instructional system coherence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most teachers indicated that various components of their system provided similar (but not reinforcing) messages</li> <li>Standards-curriculum pair was most reinforcing; curriculum-PD and PD-teacher collaboration were similar</li> <li>Summative assessment was most dissimilar to other components</li> </ul> <p><i>Change between 2019–2020 and 2020–2021</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Majority indicated system felt less coherent; another one-third of teachers felt it remained the same</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High school teachers provided lower ratings of coherence between pairs of components</li> </ul> <p><i>Change between years</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High school teachers reported less system coherence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Remote teachers provided lower ratings of coherence between pairs of components</li> </ul> <p><i>Change between years</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In-person teachers who were more likely to report system coherence felt similar levels between years</li> <li>Remote teachers felt coherence decreased</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rhode Island and Tennessee teachers rated the coherence between some pairs of components lower</li> </ul> <p><i>Change between years</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>About one-quarter of Tennessee teachers indicated increase in system coherence</li> </ul>

that all students had access to quality instruction despite not being physically inside classrooms.

Finally, we also examined relationships between coherence and factors that we identified through literature as supporting the development of coherence. We indeed found positive, significant, and relatively strong relationships between coherence and a set of school-level contextual factors. Given this, districts and schools seeking to strengthen instructional system coherence should perhaps self-assess for the presence of these conditions and prioritize fostering these conditions.

## Implications

Our results show that **there is less coherence in teachers’ instructional systems than is likely necessary to drive high-quality, standards-aligned instruction.** This was certainly true prior to COVID-19 (Polikoff et al., 2020), and our findings indicate that circumstances were no better during the tumultuous 2020–2021 school year. Clearly, there is a need to better align system components to state

standards and moreover to each other. During the first full school year of the pandemic, our results suggest that curriculum materials and professional learning play an important role in conveying guidance on what and how to teach, whereas assessments provide less support (perhaps because they did not happen, though we do not have a comparison to a regular year). **States should consider focusing on curriculum and professional learning as supports,** perhaps following the lead of such states as Louisiana in encouraging districts to adopt standards-aligned curriculum materials and supporting them with state-provided aligned professional learning (Kaufman et al., 2016). As assessment systems return to normal, our results also suggest that **states might benefit from examining how accountability policies (i.e., assessment systems and teacher evaluations) can reinforce the standards.** This might be achieved by ensuring that assessment results are reported in ways that are more useful to educators or that teacher evaluation criteria are more attentive to ELA-specific and perhaps even curriculum-aligned practices.

Our results also **raise concerns about the degree to which teachers receive instructional supports targeted at better serving historically marginalized student groups**. Teachers in our surveys clearly reported less guidance around how to address issues of diversity and equity in their instruction. Moreover, only very small proportions of teachers felt that they received sufficient guidance to teach to students in these groups, especially SoCs, ELs, and SWDs. Despite the fraught politics around teaching about racial issues or systemic roots of inequities in public schools (e.g., Ray and Gibbons, 2021; Sawchuck, 2021), these results imply that instruction to support traditionally underserved students may not change in meaningful ways if teachers are not better equipped with materials and training, or if other system components do not reinforce the necessity to focus on systemic inequity in instruction and message specific instructional approaches. Leaving the task of figuring out how to provide culturally relevant instruction to diverse student groups up to individual teachers is a recipe for ensuring those students remain underserved.

Our results also imply that **high schools may be a particular area of need in terms of supporting teachers through coherent instructional systems**, at least as a result of the pandemic, given that high schools typically remained in remote instruction longer than elementary and middle schools (Burbio Inc., 2021). High school is often overlooked in standards and curriculum policy—for instance, some states recommend aligned curriculum materials in K–8 but not high school—but this must change if the vision of ambitious standards is to have any hope of being fulfilled. Recommending curriculum materials and supporting teachers with aligned quality assessments and complementary professional learning must become part of the policy agenda at the high school level if the goal is to drive standards-aligned instruction and student learning.

As of October 2021, many schools were open for in-person instruction but still struggling to provide consistent, coherent instruction to students under quarantine. It will be a continuing challenge for our education systems and structures to support local educators to emerge from the pandemic stronger and better prepared to support students (including any negative consequences of the pandemic that students

have experienced). Our results suggest that progress toward coherent instructional systems was understandably set back by the pandemic and remains fitful; many teachers are not operating in coherent systems as they return to a more typical school year. State departments of education can use this opportunity, and the substantial funds that have been allocated under recent federal spending bills, to draw on the lessons of the past several decades of standards implementation efforts to better support standards-aligned policy systems moving forward. Meanwhile, districts and schools can reflect on lessons and successes to carry forward. For example, our results suggest that teachers providing remote instruction experienced more guidance on considerations of equity and diversity than did teachers of other modes, perhaps because differential access to technology and educational resources was particularly acute for these teachers. As schools return to in-person-only instruction, it will be important not to lose sight of these important issues and, in fact, to find ways to shine a brighter and steadier light on them.

## Future Research

Finally, we consider an agenda for future research on instructional system coherence that builds on the present study. First, although survey research, particularly of a nationally representative sample, is illuminating, qualitative data, such as in the few snapshots we provided, can provide deeper insights into teachers' experiences in and perceptions of their systems. In future reports, we plan to feature richer qualitative narratives that better explicate, among other topics, what reinforcing or conflicting messages and guidance teachers in fact receive from various system components. A second area we would like to explore concerns a methodological consideration: Our measure of coherence assessed whether pairs of system components provided teachers with reinforcing messages. More-complex analyses could be conducted wherein all system components are considered simultaneously, or specific clusters hypothesized to be important for guiding teachers' instructional practices (e.g., standards, curriculum, PD) are examined and used to derive a measure of coherence. Third,

although we have established a relationship between coherence and certain school-level conditions that support its development, we cannot ascertain the direction of the association. Future research could be designed to examine this question. Additionally,

future research should explore relationships between a measure of coherence and hypothesized outcomes, such as use of curriculum, instructional quality, and, ultimately, student achievement.

APPENDIX A

**Focal State Contexts**

TABLE A.1

State Policy Context with Respect to ELA Instruction During the 2020–2021 School Year

Policy Area	Louisiana	Massachusetts	Rhode Island	Tennessee
Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued to use Instructional Materials Review process, ELA Guidebooks, and incentives to induce districts to adopt HQIM</li> <li>Provided guidance to support the implementation of ELA Guidebooks and other Tier 1 curricula during remote teaching</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued to use CURATE (the state’s curriculum review process) to signal curriculum quality</li> <li>Convened 14 districts in the process of selecting HQIM</li> <li>Engaged in conversations with leaders of large districts to message the state’s goals and supports for HQIM</li> <li>Received a CLSD grant; participating districts must purchase an HQIM</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summer 2019, passed policy requiring districts to adopt HQIM by no later than 2023</li> <li>Received a CLSD grant; participating districts must purchase an HQIM</li> <li>Through Re-think grant, RIDE incentivized use of digital HQIM and supported implementation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Required districts to adopt state-approved curricula</li> <li>Created video lessons based in HQIM to support remote teaching and reviewed districts’ reopening plans to ensure districts were providing supports on virtual implementation of HQIM</li> </ul>
Professional learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provided continued support for content leaders and mentor teachers, and guidance on selecting PD vendors</li> <li>Held virtual summit to discuss distance learning guidance developed for ELA Guidebooks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Received grant to fund HQIM support</li> <li>Provided guidance to districts on professional learning vendors to support HQIM implementation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued to provide guidance to districts on vendors that can support HQIM implementation</li> <li>Required districts participating in CLSD grant to provide PD supporting HQIM implementation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offered various PD grounded in HQIM, including a series for district and school leaders, training on scaffolding for struggling students, and HQIM implementation support for networks of districts</li> </ul>
Teacher evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued to require teacher evaluations; evaluations are not content- or curriculum-specific, but state provided content-specific observation tools</li> <li>Provided guidance to use curriculum-embedded (rather than standardized) assessments, to write student learning targets for the teacher evaluations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued to require teacher evaluations; such evaluations are not content- or curriculum-specific</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued to require teacher evaluations; such evaluations are not content- or curriculum-specific</li> <li>Provided options to districts on how to conduct evaluations (as usual, modified, or solely for novice teachers and teachers who did not score “effective” or “highly effective” during previous evaluation)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued to require teacher evaluations; such evaluations are not content- or curriculum-specific</li> <li>Issued optional content-specific instructional practice guides to support walkthroughs aligned to state’s vision of ELA instruction</li> </ul>

Table A.1—Continued

Policy Area	Louisiana	Massachusetts	Rhode Island	Tennessee
Assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued to use LEAP 360 (optional state formative assessment system)</li> <li>State summative assessments were canceled for the 2019–2020 school year, but they were administered in the 2020–2021 school year. However, scores will not be used for accountability designations for schools, unless superintendents opt in to receiving status as a school requiring urgent intervention or comprehensive intervention.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provided little state-level guidance in use of formative assessments</li> <li>State summative assessments were canceled for the 2019–2020 school year, but they were administered in the 2020–2021 school year. However, scores will not be used for accountability designations for schools and districts.</li> <li>Released list of state-approved early literacy screening assessments and provided funds to districts to implement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Apportioned CARES Act funding for districts to purchase formative assessments</li> <li>State summative assessments were canceled for the 2019–2020 school year, but they were administered in the 2020–2021 school year</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developed an interim assessment aligned to the summative, and standards-aligned formative assessments</li> <li>State summative assessments were canceled for the 2019–2020 school year. However, scores will not be used for accountability designations for schools and districts.</li> </ul>

NOTE: CLSD = comprehensive literacy state development; HQIM = high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials.

APPENDIX B

**Case Study Profiles**

TABLE B.1  
 Characteristics of Case Study Districts Where Case Study Schools Are Situated

State	District	District-Level Data					
		Number of Schools Participating in Case Study (teaching any of grades 6–8)	Number of Schools in District Teaching Any of Grades 6–8	Number of Students	Student Racial/Ethnic Demographics	Percentage of Students in Families Receiving SNAP Benefits	Percentage of Students with IEPs
1	D1	1	2	5,000–10,000	Black: 10% Latinx: 20% Asian: 5% White: 65%	45	30
1	D2 <sup>a</sup>	2	2	5,000–10,000	Black: 5% Latinx: 5% Asian: 5% White: 80 %	20	20
2	D3	1	5	< 5,000	Black: 35% Latinx: 5% Asian: 0% White: 60%	35	10
3	D4	1	18	> 20,000	Black: 10% Latinx: 5% Asian: 5% White: 80%	20	10

NOTES: Data retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics, 2021. Numbers have been rounded, and a range given to protect confidentiality.

<sup>a</sup> Data collection for this district involved one focus group discussion with teachers from two different schools.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All four states have districts with high percentages of minority and/or low-income populations. Louisiana is second in the nation in the percentage of Black students (44 percent), and Rhode Island is 11th in the nation in the percentage of Latinx students (25 percent). Massachusetts has the tenth-highest proportion of ELs (10 percent), and Tennessee has the 11th-highest proportion of students eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch. All data are from the most recent Digest of Education Statistics (see National Center for Education Statistics, undated).

<sup>2</sup> See Reich et al., 2020, for an example of state agency guidance to districts during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>3</sup> Weights were constructed using a calibration method and included a model for nonresponse. The weights are calculated by first modeling response probabilities of teachers across a wide variety of teacher characteristics. The main weight is then calibrated so that the weighted sample matches the known teacher population across these characteristics in each state. For more information, see Robbins and Grant, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> We examined the relationship between instructional mode and grade level since guidance around reopening during the 2020–2021 school year often depended on grade level. A cross-tabulation indicated that a greater proportion of elementary teachers were fully in-person at the time of survey administration than high school teachers (approximately 30 percent versus 15 percent), whereas a greater proportion of high school teachers were hybrid (simultaneous or not) compared with elementary teachers (approximately 65 percent versus 45 percent). Middle school teachers fell in between. The share of teachers who were fully remote was similar for elementary and high school teachers (18 percent), but slightly lower for middle school teachers (12 percent). In sum, grade band and instructional mode were not highly correlated.

<sup>5</sup> This comprises 86 percent (Tennessee), 88 percent (Louisiana), and 93 percent (Massachusetts and Rhode Island) of the respondents.

<sup>6</sup> We were unable to recruit districts in Massachusetts meeting our criteria.

<sup>7</sup> For this report, we identify high-quality standards-aligned materials using information from EdReports, an independent organization that reviews commonly used curricula for alignment with college- and career-ready standards. We recognize that EdReports reviews may not align perfectly with the nuances of all state standards. At the same time, most aspects of states' current college- and career-ready standards are relatively similar (Achieve, 2017), and those similarities across state standards—in terms of challenging, grade-level content and agreed-upon best practices for mathematics and ELA—are the focus of EdReports reviews. For more on the focus on EdReports reviews, see EdReports, undated.

<sup>8</sup> As previously noted, we define standards-alignment of materials using information from EdReports. We counted a teacher as using standards-aligned materials if at least one of the materials the teacher reported using was rated as “Meets Expectations” for that instructor’s grade-level by EdReports. Materials rated as “Partially Meets Expectations” or “Does Not Meet Expectations” are not considered standards-aligned. District- or teacher-created materials that were not rated by EdReports were not included.

<sup>9</sup> A further one-third to 40 percent of teachers indicated receiving “some but not enough” support.

<sup>10</sup> Given the novelty of our measure of similarity between instructional system components as an indicator of coherence, we are unable to interpret the extent to which the differences are practically meaningful. There are few other quantitative measures of education system coherence against which we can benchmark our measure. One way to get a sense of a 0.1 difference in average rating (e.g., curriculum standards at 3.1 versus PD standards at 3.0) is that such a difference could arise if 10 percent of teachers rated curriculum-standards one point higher on our four-point scale.

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## About This Report

The RAND American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country. Since March 2020, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has placed unprecedented stresses on the public education system in the United States. Developing a coherent, standards-aligned instructional system is challenging even in the best of times; it may be especially difficult to achieve as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect public schooling. In this report, the authors focus on teachers' perceptions of the guidance received on English language arts instruction and instructional system coherence in the first full year of COVID-19 (2020–2021), and how teachers' perceptions compared with the 2019–2020 school year.

### RAND Education and Labor

This study was undertaken by RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. This report is based on research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions we present are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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