



LIFT EDUCATION
LEADING INNOVATION FOR TENNESSEE

Early Literacy Implementation Work Annual Report

September 2017

Introduction

Leading Innovation for Tennessee Education (LIFT) is a small group of superintendents working together to explore innovative approaches and share best practices that benefit students, other superintendents, and other school districts. First convened in 2012 to support high academic standards in Tennessee, the network broadened its work in 2014 to focus on directly improving student outcomes.

Since that time, one of LIFT's primary areas of focus has been to improve the quality of instruction and professional learning in its member districts. After examining their existing literacy program, classroom practices, and student results, LIFT directors came together in March of 2016 to adopt a shared problem of practice:

K-2 students are not yet accessing a high-quality literacy program that lays the foundation for meeting rigorous standards. District teachers and leaders have not yet fully made the shifts that ensure implementation of those standards.

The LIFT network's focus on early literacy followed a larger early literacy effort by the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE). In early 2016, TDOE published *Setting the Foundation: A Report on Elementary Grades Reading in Tennessee*, outlining several state-level initiatives, including a statewide model for literacy coaching, a strong focus on literacy instruction across educator preparation programs, new assessments for K-2 ELA teachers, and additional collaboration with districts on RTI and ELA research. Participation in these initiatives has strengthened our work as a network.

Over the past 18 months, LIFT has made significant progress:

- A third of literacy classrooms **now show some or full alignment to the Tennessee ELA standards**, compared to less than 10% during diagnostics.
- Almost nine in ten **teachers feel "more supported"** because of this work.
- More than nine in ten **teachers believe this work "benefits the students"** in their districts.

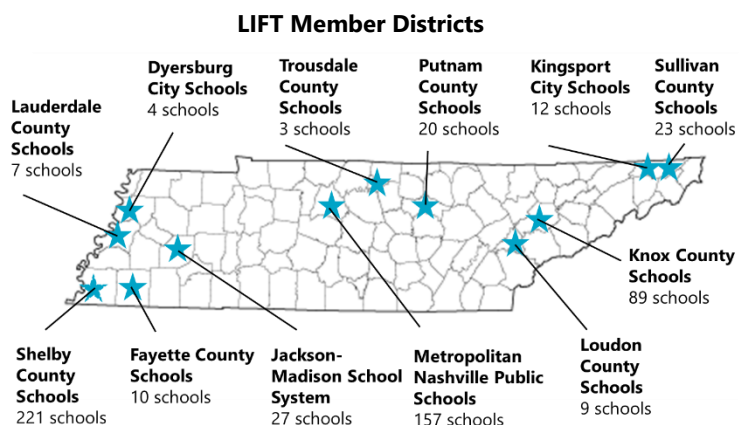
This report outlines the work to date and shares four major learnings for policymakers and practitioners interested in our work:

1. Strong instructional materials are an essential tool in improving early literacy instruction.
2. Content-area knowledge is essential for both district- and building-level leaders to improve instruction.
3. Change management is critical to systems-level course adjustment.
4. Teachers must engage in resource-specific, job-embedded professional learning experiences to improve practice.

This report contains a brief overview of how our work is structured and an in-depth look at each of these four learnings, including a review of data and evidence, implications for our and others' work, and a vignette sharing the experience of one of our member districts. The conclusion outlines upcoming changes and next steps as a network. We invite readers to contact us with questions, suggestions, and thoughts using the contact information provided at the end of the report.

LIFT Structure & Our Early Literacy Work

LIFT consists of 12 member districts, ranging from Tennessee's largest to its smallest. The State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE), a nonprofit and nonpartisan advocacy and research institution based in Nashville, formally convenes the network. TNTP, a national nonprofit focused on supporting states and districts to end educational inequities, serves as a content partner for the early literacy work. This partnership—combining knowledge of Tennessee's context and people with a nationally recognized partner for academic success—has been key for our work.



Over the past 18 months, LIFT districts have engaged in a rigorous effort to improve early literacy outcomes. In nine of 12 districts, TNTP performed an instructional review in spring and summer of 2015 alongside district leaders. This review included knowledge-building sessions about early literacy for district staff, visits to 20-30 K-2 ELA classrooms, and debrief sessions to plan next steps. The network then came together to identify common trends across the district instructional reviews.

A common theme emerged during these reviews: while most K-2 ELA classrooms were teaching foundational skills (including phonics, phonemic awareness, concepts of print, etc.), few were systematically building students' vocabulary and knowledge of the world through engagement with rich, complex text appropriate to their grade level. Improvement in this area became the goal for the first year and a half of the work.

To drive this improvement, the network also adopted a clear theory of change: **Strong instructional materials that reflect the demands of the Tennessee standards will drive significant improvements in classroom instruction.** In the past, many of our districts had teachers create or compile ELA instructional materials; the Tennessee Educator Survey reveals a similar finding, "The average K-3 reading teacher spends 4.5 hours per week creating or sourcing materials for daily reading blocks."¹ But when we went into classrooms, we found inconsistencies in the strength of these materials. Given the work we knew was ahead of us in improving ELA outcomes, we wanted all teachers to have a foundation for their practice. While teachers can create strong instructional materials on their own, their time is limited and valuable—and we believe planning for strong implementation is a better use of that time than searching for and compiling resources. Again, educators agree: "Almost half of instructional coaches help teacher obtain resources and materials on a daily basis though few coaches deem this one of the most effective uses of their time."²

During the 2016-2017 school year, LIFT districts piloted several sets of instructional materials in a subset of classrooms:

- [Core Knowledge Language Arts](#) (CKLA), a full preK-5 curriculum created by the Core Knowledge Foundation and based on significant research by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., CKLA contains a "Knowledge" strand focused on complex text, ideas, and vocabulary, often presented through read-alouds, and a "Skills" strand focused on foundational skills. (Note that most districts only piloted the Knowledge strand.)
- [Wit & Wisdom](#) (W&W), a K-8 ELA curriculum from Great Minds (also the authors of the popular Eureka Math curriculum). W&W presents a knowledge-building curriculum based on trade books, often focusing on the fine arts.
- The [Read-Aloud Project](#) is an initiative of Student Achievement Partners, a nonprofit organization focused on improving practice under rigorous standards. The Project provides model units centered on knowledge-building, high-quality texts, although it is not a comprehensive curriculum.

In each district, the materials, pilot program, and supports looked slightly different, creating a natural experiment and allowing for network members to learn from each other's choices and decisions. (See table below for a summary of district-level decisions.)

District	Instructional Materials Piloted	Pilot Model
Dyersburg City	Read-Aloud Project	All K-2 classrooms
Fayette County	Wit & Wisdom; CKLA	Two schools piloted W&W K-2; two piloted CKLA K-2
Jackson-Madison County	CKLA	Select K-2 teachers across all elementary schools
Kingsport City	Teacher-curated program with Read-Aloud Project and other resources	All K-5 classrooms
Lauderdale County	Wit & Wisdom	All K-1 classrooms
Loudon County	Wit & Wisdom; CKLA	Select K-2 teachers across all elementary schools piloted both curricula
Putnam County	CKLA	Select K-2 teachers across all elementary schools
Trousdale County	CKLA	All K-2 teachers
Sullivan County	CKLA (including Skills strand)	All K-2 teachers in 3 of 12 elementary schools

¹ Educator Insights: Takeaways from the 2017 Tennessee Educator Survey. Available https://tn.gov/assets/entities/education/attachments/data_survey_report_2017.pdf.

² Ibid.

As districts piloted these materials, TNTP, our technical assistance provider, supported implementation in several ways:

- Knowledge-building sessions for district leaders, beginning during instructional reviews and continuing throughout pilot programs
- Monthly visits to districts to observe instruction, discuss key trends with district leaders, and occasionally lead curriculum-specific professional learning sessions for leaders and teachers
- Virtual cross-district and cross-network PLCs for district leaders focused on specific instructional materials and general knowledge-building
- Regional and statewide convenings of districts leaders to norm on high-quality practices and discuss common challenges and solutions
- Ongoing strategic support around instructional, logistical, and change management decisions.

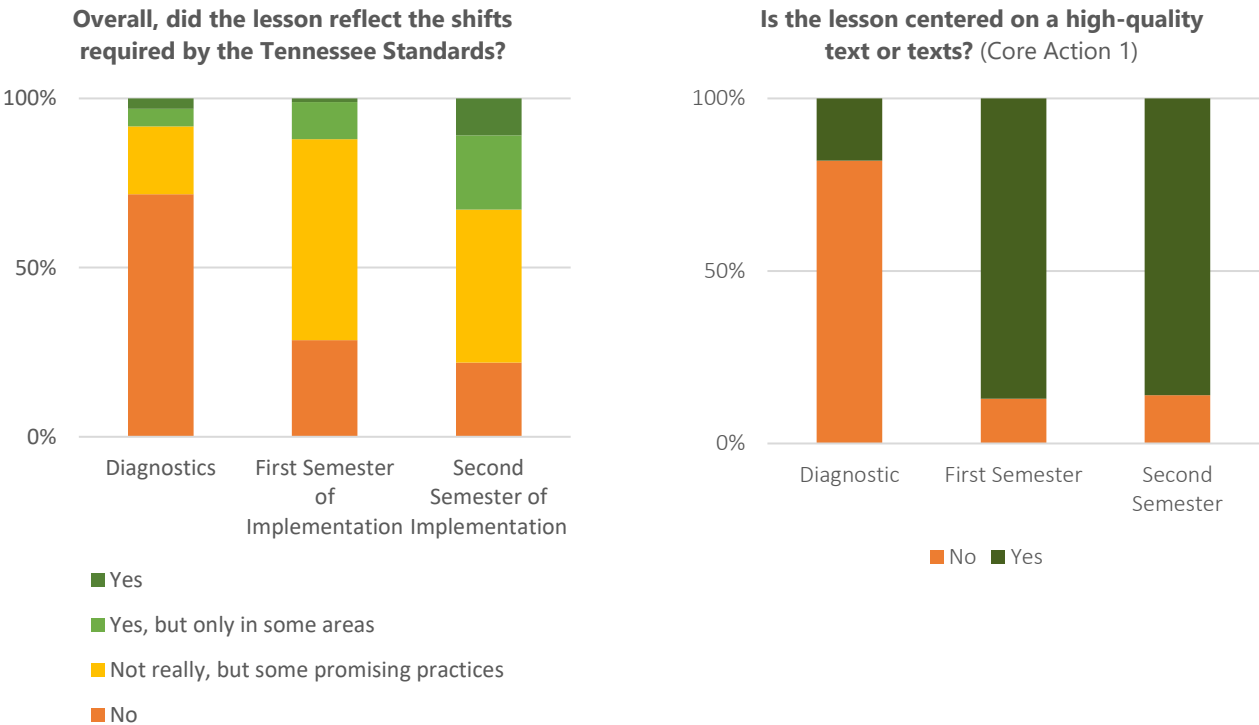
We are tremendously excited about our results to date. While it is still too early to see the effect on student outcome data (e.g., state test scores in third grade and beyond), evidence on key leading indicators demonstrates progress. Below, we present four key learnings from our work to date, including a discussion of those leading indicators.

Key Learning 1: Strong instructional materials are an essential tool in improving early literacy instruction.

As the LIFT network developed a theory of action, we looked to recent research from across the country. Academic studies show growing evidence that curriculum matters as much as great teaching.³ The Louisiana Department of Education, in cooperation with the RAND Corporation, also published a 2016 report outlining the importance of instructional materials in their recent successes. Research and best practices show us that what we put in front of students is just as important as who is standing in front of them.⁴

To this end, LIFT districts decided that a pilot of instructional materials for K-2 read-alouds/knowledge-building lessons was a strong way to anchor the work. Read-alouds in the early grades help students build knowledge of the world, vocabulary, and speaking and listening skills before they are able to read complex text on their own.

The results from the first year of pilots are compelling. In diagnostic visits before the launch of pilots, three-quarters of classrooms showed no evidence of the shifts required by the Tennessee ELA standards; **by the second semester of implementation, more than a third of classrooms showed some or full alignment to the standards**, and fewer than a quarter of them showed no evidence. District leaders report anecdotally that classrooms that did not participate in the pilots did not see the same degree of change, indicating that the shift toward reflecting the standards was driven by the implementation of strong instructional materials.



Of particular importance was a shift in the quality of texts in classrooms. In diagnostic visits, only 21 percent of lessons were centered on a high-quality, complex text. By the end of the first semester of implementation in districts piloting strong

³ See Steiner, David. *Curriculum Research: What We Know and Where We Need to Go*. Available <https://standardswork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/sw-curriculum-research-report-fnl.pdf>.

⁴ See Boser, U., Chingos, M., & Stratus, C.: *The Hidden Value of Curriculum Reform: Do States and Their Districts Receive the Biggest Bang for Their Buck?* <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/06111518/CurriculumMatters-report.pdf>

instructional materials, a staggering 86 percent of lessons were centered on high-quality, complex texts. This translates into significantly more time for students to interact with complex text, high-quality vocabulary, and complex ideas in early grade classrooms.

Teachers also indicated that they **like the instructional materials**. In a February 2017 survey of 241 teachers piloting strong materials across the nine districts, teachers indicated that the instructional materials support their practice:

- 97 percent said the materials were “easy to use”
- 84 percent said they felt “more supported as a result of the materials”
- 87 percent said the materials “allowed them to deliver higher-quality lessons than before”

“The outcome with these materials is AMAZING. My students’ vocabulary has grown tremendously and they are really digging deep into these books.”

And **teachers believe that the materials are good for students**:

- 84 percent said that their students were “more engaged with these materials”
- 96 percent said their students’ “vocabulary is growing noticeably” with these materials
- 92 percent said “overall, these materials benefit the students of my district”

In open-response questions, teachers noted that materials “didn’t involve a lot of work for the teacher. [They were] laid out well and I liked the flow of it.” Teachers also saw the benefits for students: “The outcome with these materials is AMAZING. My students’ vocabulary has grown tremendously and they are really digging deep into these books. I hear them having conversations that I haven’t heard them have before.” Teachers found the **materials were particularly beneficial for struggling students**: “I also love the confidence [these materials have] given my lower [performing] students!”

Based on these results, as well as ongoing collaboration between teachers and administrators in instructional materials pilots, these instructional materials are creating a paradigm shift for teachers. Instead of focusing on finding a great text or texts, identifying the critical messages or content in that text, and then creating questions and tasks for students around that text, **teachers are able to focus much more time on tweaking questions and tasks and planning for implementation to meet the needs of their students**. As one teacher put it, “I like that I am not having to search for high-quality text for my classroom and that all types of questions are embedded into the lesson.” Teachers now use collaboration time to identify which questions to spend more or less time on during discussion with students, decide how to supplement or improve the rigor in classroom activities, and plan for differentiation for students with disabilities, English language learners, and students significantly above or below grade level.

We also find that these strong instructional materials are **building teacher knowledge of the Tennessee ELA standards** and the shifts in instruction that they require. Another teacher noted, “I like the depth of knowledge the materials provide.” Rather than sitting in professional development sessions with a presentation on the standards, teachers are using materials that incorporate the standards and research-based best practices; they are organically learning these techniques by doing them every day.

There are two key factors related to this finding. First, the selection process for high-quality materials is incredibly important. Our districts went through a comprehensive review process with multiple sets of high-quality materials, including reviews by administrators, building leaders, teachers, and, occasionally, community members. We used a version of the [Instructional Materials Evaluation Tool](#) to investigate whether materials were aligned to the Tennessee ELA standards, along with outside reviews of materials from [EdReports](#) and the [Louisiana Department of Education](#). It is worth noting that none of the materials our districts ultimately selected were available in their current form the last time that the Tennessee Department of Education reviewed ELA materials and, therefore, were not on the state-approved list. Going forward, we believe districts across the state would benefit from a strong state-level review of materials that uses alignment to the standards and shifts as its primary review criteria.

Second, we caution that materials are not a panacea; they must be embraced as a change effort and implemented well, including careful building of leader capacity, teacher knowledge, and aligning initiatives and support structures across the school system. We address these critical components in the next three learnings.

District Vignette: Instructional Materials Pilots in Loudon County

After a review of K-2 instructional practices in the fall of 2016, Loudon County began to look closely at K-2 instructional materials. District leaders initiated a process to engage both teachers and school-level administration, convening focus groups to evaluate materials and discuss implications, before deciding to pilot both Wit & Wisdom and Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) in 12 K-2 classrooms. Teachers in these classrooms spent approximately six weeks teaching from each set of materials, covering two units or topical domains from each. The instructional review revealed that many of the approved, adopted resources being used in classrooms were not the high-quality, appropriately complex texts students should be engaged with on a daily basis.

During the diagnostic visits, 27 percent of classrooms had lessons centered on high-quality texts. During the pilot of instructional materials, classrooms using high-quality texts in instruction increased to 83 percent. Even in these limited pilots, teachers saw an increase in student interest, expanded vocabulary, and improved written expression. At the end of the spring semester, teachers, school leaders, and district staff came together to debrief their learnings. There was strong agreement that the materials, along with other measures, such as focused professional development, job-embedded coaching, and reflective collaboration, significantly strengthened instruction and supported teachers in their practice. With significant input from teachers and school-based staff, Loudon County evaluated the benefits and challenges of both sets of materials. CKLA was chosen as the most flexible option to provide access to high-quality curriculum while preserving the opportunity for teacher choice.

In fall 2017, Loudon County rolled out CKLA to all K-2 teachers with strong support and was already beginning to see positive results across K-2 classrooms.



"To be great, one has to constantly reflect on best practices. In Loudon County, we are not afraid to evaluate our strengths and weaknesses to develop plans to support all students. Thoughtful planning, honest feedback, and implementation with fidelity support our vision of all students being college and career ready."

- Jason Vance, Director of Schools, Loudon County

Key Learning 2: Content-area knowledge is essential for both district- and building-level leaders to improve instruction.

District and building leaders have directly led this change effort in their districts over the past year. To do this effectively, they've needed strong knowledge, particularly around the nuances of the standards, shifts, early literacy instruction, and instructional materials. This is especially true for district leaders, who are regularly required to make decisions about resource allocation, schedules, budgets, timelines, and other key items.

Over the past year and a half, district leaders (including superintendents, curriculum and instruction department district staff, and school-based leaders like principals and coaches) have been part of a myriad of activities and practices to build their content knowledge. District leaders took part in the initial diagnostic visits with TNTP, which included three days of knowledge-building sessions on the principles of early literacy instruction, the Instructional Practice Guide (a walkthrough tool), and discussion of high-quality instructional materials. Since that time, instructional leaders have also taken part in ongoing virtual professional learning communities (PLCs) centered on specific instructional materials, regional convenings on key topics, such as student work analysis, and statewide LIFT meetings, where the network normed on high-quality practices through videos and discussed key implementation tactics and plans. In several districts, TNTP and district staff have put on "literacy summits" to further train district leaders new to the instructional materials.

In addition to LIFT-only activities, 10 of the districts are a part of the Tennessee Department of Education's suite of early literacy programs, called [Read to Be Ready](#). These initiatives have consistently built knowledge of coaches and leaders throughout the state, focusing on similar topics as the LIFT work.

As a result of these efforts, district leaders have a solid understanding of high-quality early literacy practices.

As a result of these efforts, district leaders have an improved understanding of high-quality early literacy practices. On a knowledge survey administered in February 2017, district leaders correctly answered nearly three-quarters of questions about the nuances of the Tennessee ELA standards and strong ELA instruction.

There are three key takeaways in this area. First, this work is incredibly complicated and requires leaders to make **well-informed decisions around resources and staffing** on a regular basis. For example, leaders in Sullivan County adjusted second-grade schedules to include paraprofessionals to push in and support small group fluency practice; leaders in Kingsport City Schools tweaked literacy block guidance to better reflect the demands of the standards; and leaders in Loudon County rearranged their entire literacy block, creating a model that focuses on student engagement with complex text, foundational skills, a volume of reading, and writing, rather than classroom structures such as small-group time. Deep leader knowledge was critical in making all of these decisions.

Second, the **cross-district cohort learning experience** is essential to building knowledge in leaders. District leaders, when observing instruction in their own districts and classrooms, sometimes have trouble building their own knowledge because they are focused on the multitude of things they know about a given teacher or classroom. (E.g., "The teacher is doing a great job of keeping this student with a track record of disrupting class on-task today.") By observing and discussing instruction in classrooms outside of their districts, leaders can focus on teaching and learning without being influenced by existing interpersonal relationships. This same principle applies for building leaders visiting schools within their district; by removing some familiarity, we've seen that leaders can focus on key moments in classroom instruction, often bringing back "aha!" moments that help them drive strong instruction in their own classrooms. Cross-district learning experiences also open leaders' eyes to what is possible in classrooms and help build a sense of trust within the network when discussing common challenges.

Finally, strong leader knowledge is critical in **supporting teachers**. Research has shown that teachers make more daily decisions than people in other professions, and this is likely even more true when implementing new instructional materials. In order to make the multitude of daily decisions as new materials are implemented, teacher knowledge needs to be strong. Given that our technical assistance provider, TNTP, is only on site in each district approximately once a month, training for teachers often falls to leaders in the district. We explore this topic more in the fourth key learning in this paper.

District Vignette: Building Leader Content Knowledge in Trousdale County

One of the most successful elements of the K-2 CKLA Knowledge Strand materials pilot in Trousdale County was the constant connection school leaders made between the materials and the ELA instructional shifts. The goal of the materials adoption was to improve the quality of K-2 reading comprehension instruction and align instruction to the shifts and standards. To make this happen, teachers need to see how the shifts and standards live within the materials. Last year, Trousdale County focused on having leaders support two major types of inquiry for teachers.

The first was grade-level PLCs. During these weekly meetings, instructional leaders guided teachers to discuss key questions designed to help them internalize the unit and lesson materials and get at a deeper, richer discussion of the text. For example, leaders would guide teachers to determine essential ideas and understandings of the unit, design end-of-unit tasks, analyze texts for connections to those big ideas, and also select (and sometimes revise or create) a scaffold of questions that led students toward building key understandings of the text and topics.

Leaders also held frequent coaching conversations with teachers, always centered on a key question: "Tell me what your goal was for this lesson." Leaders would then discuss how the elements of the lesson led up to that key understanding, again talking about texts, discussion questions, end-of-unit tasks, and other activities.

To effectively lead these discussions, district leaders needed a strong conceptual understanding of the Tennessee ELA standards and the shifts they require, as well as a comprehensive knowledge of the instructional materials. Leaders in the district built their own content knowledge in several ways, including monthly classroom walkthroughs and debriefs with TNTP staff, consistent attendance at LIFT PLCs, and digging into the materials on their own to do question and task analysis.



"The selection of CKLA materials has taken a lot of work and time off of our teachers, who previously searched for and built their own curricular materials. Teachers are now able to use the extra time to better prepare lessons and to improve instructional practice. The time saved has allowed our teachers to improve content knowledge and to collaboratively plan with other teachers."

- Clint Satterfield, Director of Schools, Trousdale County

Key Learning 3: Change management is critical to systems-level course adjustment.

While strong instructional materials and leader knowledge are important, our third major learning this year is that they aren't the only things that matter: sustained, thoughtful change management is critical to short-term and long-term success of improved early literacy instruction.

By change management, we mean a consciously planned set of activities that engages stakeholders in decision-making, communicates rationale and direction, and continuously gathers feedback throughout the change process. In the first year of the early literacy work, LIFT districts engaged in several key components of change management:

- **Pilot models:** Rather than simply adopting a new curriculum, districts engaged in a pilot of materials in a subset of classrooms. Pilots looked different in each district (e.g., all teachers in a few schools or a few teachers in all schools), but all districts tried to figure out whether the materials were strong—and worked for them—before expanding the work. Districts also thought carefully about how they could best provide support for different pilot models and how teachers would provide strong feedback on a regular basis.
- **Teacher engagement:** Many districts engaged teachers before the pilots even began, holding teacher focus groups to look at various sets of instructional materials and understanding why practitioners liked or disliked components of those materials. Teacher engagement continued through pilot programs; teachers were engaged in learning about the standards, shifts, and early literacy instruction best practices and gave feedback through focus groups, Google discussion boards, and teacher surveys.
- **Community engagement:** Choosing a new curriculum is a major decision, and some LIFT districts started engaging the larger community in this process early on. In some districts, teachers or school leaders reached out to parents to explain the structure and merits of piloted curricula, sharing the research and rationale behind them. In other districts, teachers led discussions with school board members as they deliberated expanding instructional materials pilots, showing videos of classroom practice and examples of student work. Many districts also engaged with local media and on social media, sharing the early successes from their work and encouraging literacy best practices in the community.

All LIFT districts engaged in some combination of these activities, and the results speak for themselves. Eight of nine LIFT districts involved in pilot programs are expanding the work this year to additional classrooms, schools, or grade levels; in some districts, school boards have already formally approved materials. Perhaps most critically, however, teacher buy-in to the work is strong: 92 percent of teachers that piloted instructional materials said, "Overall, these instructional materials benefit the students of my district."

Ninety-two percent of teachers that piloted instructional materials said, "overall, these instructional materials benefit the students of my district."

We developed several key takeaways from this change management work. First, **planning for change management is critical.** This is not a task that will simply take care of itself; planning must be deliberate, ongoing, and include evaluations of efficacy. In Fayette County, the superintendent and his cabinet stepped back on a regular basis last year to evaluate the progress of the pilot program, identifying key areas for support and discussing teacher sentiment and buy-in. In Loudon County, administrators laid out a clear plan for teacher and school leader input from the beginning of the year, held a focus group on materials, allowed teachers to select two sets of materials to pilot, and convened a comprehensive debrief conversation with principals and teachers at the end of the year to decide on a path forward.

Second, we found that it is critical to **"go slow to go fast."** Instructional materials pilots allowed for experimentation and time to sort out the nuances of new curricula without committing extensive resources and time at the outset and led to organic buy-in. Within pilot programs, district leaders made it clear teachers were not expected to master new instructional materials in the first few weeks; instead, they allowed for "messiness" and gave teachers time to really understand the materials before being held accountable for results. We saw real returns in certain districts that piloted in a subset of schools or classrooms; as non-pilot teachers heard about and saw the materials in action, they became excited about trying them themselves. Pilot teacher voice was also key in this effort—teachers heard from their peers that these materials supported them to teach great lessons for their kids.

Third, it is essential to **consider affected components of the school system** when implementing change. Without attention to related systems, structures, and expectations, strong instructional materials will face challenges and roadblocks that can undermine implementation success. For example:

- Because of Tennessee’s strong emphasis on teacher evaluation, teachers involved in pilot programs were concerned about whether the observation rubric would capture the depth of the instructional shifts required by the higher quality materials
- In many districts, schools used standards-based report cards aligned with curriculum-at-a-glance documents that were different than piloted materials
- Different curricula require different structures and amounts of time in dedicated literacy blocks; when piloting materials, not all districts had a literacy block that worked for those materials
- Some schools revised PLC expectations, ensuring that grade-level peers had dedicated time to dig into the curriculum together to prepare for and reflect on instruction

Districts approached these challenges head on, acknowledging that all components of an academic system might not align at first and working proactively to address them. In the cases above, districts worked with teachers to crosswalk the new materials to the TEAM rubric and realigned report cards and literacy blocks (if needed) before the end of the first marking period.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we found that **celebrating early wins and recognizing the incredible work of teachers** was pivotal in making this work a success. In many districts, teachers engaged in pilot programs were celebrated as on the forefront of the work or as “game changers.” District administrators framed the introduction of new curricula positively by telling teachers that these materials would allow them to spend extra time planning to meet the needs of their students rather than finding instructional materials. District leaders also celebrated examples of improved instruction, shared data with teachers, highlighted exciting classroom visits, and shared funny and touching anecdotes that demonstrated student growth.

District Vignette: “Game Changers” in Sullivan County

At the beginning of the 2016-17 school year, teachers and leaders in Sullivan County decided they wanted to try Core Knowledge Language Arts as a potential curriculum for their elementary schools. They selected three of 12 elementary schools to pilot both strands of the materials (the “Skills” strand, focusing on foundational skills, and the “Knowledge” strand, focusing on read-alouds and discussion of complex, knowledge-building text).

Critical to this effort were the teachers in each of these three pilot schools. Brought together in the weeks leading up to the start of school, district leaders framed these teachers as the “Game Changers” in the district. They were given significant autonomy and tasked with leading the work and truly changing the game for students. They were asked to use the new materials and provide careful and critical feedback on them throughout the year. These teachers had the right to veto the work long-term—if they tried the materials for the year and didn’t think they were right for students, they had the final say.

The game changers met once a month throughout the school year, coming together for half-day sessions to discuss implementation, challenges, and successes. The first few sessions focused on logistics and early concerns, including the availability of materials and the layout of the literacy block and scheduling. These conversations evolved to focus on the theory and approach of the materials including concerns about the slow pace of the Skills strand in Kindergarten and the lack of fluency practice in second grade.

The most important part of the work was that these concerns were acted upon. District leaders made these teachers the center of the work, taking their concerns and working to fix them quickly, and praising the hard work that they were doing early and frequently.

These teachers bonded as a group and took on the mantle of the work. In May, Sullivan County decided to adopt both strands of the CKLA materials for all of their elementary schools, and the 20 “Game Changers” will serve as leaders and mentors as almost 200 teachers take on the materials this coming school year.



“Having spent time during the past year in our K-2 CKLA pilot classrooms, I have witnessed engagement and excitement from both our students and teachers. The listening and learning strand ignites curiosity and builds background knowledge. Our students experience a depth of learning that they had not experienced before. I continually witness our students use and transfer topic-specific vocabulary that they can already apply to broader contexts. The listening and learning component, coupled with the foundational skills component, levels the classroom for all learners.

Our students are learning social studies and science content that is above grade level, increasing their vocabulary, and becoming effective writers. I love visiting our K-2 classrooms where I observe the lesson content and watch students’ responsiveness and ability to discuss topics at a high level and comprehend complex text in the early grades. ”

- Evelyn Rafalowski, Director of Schools, Sullivan County

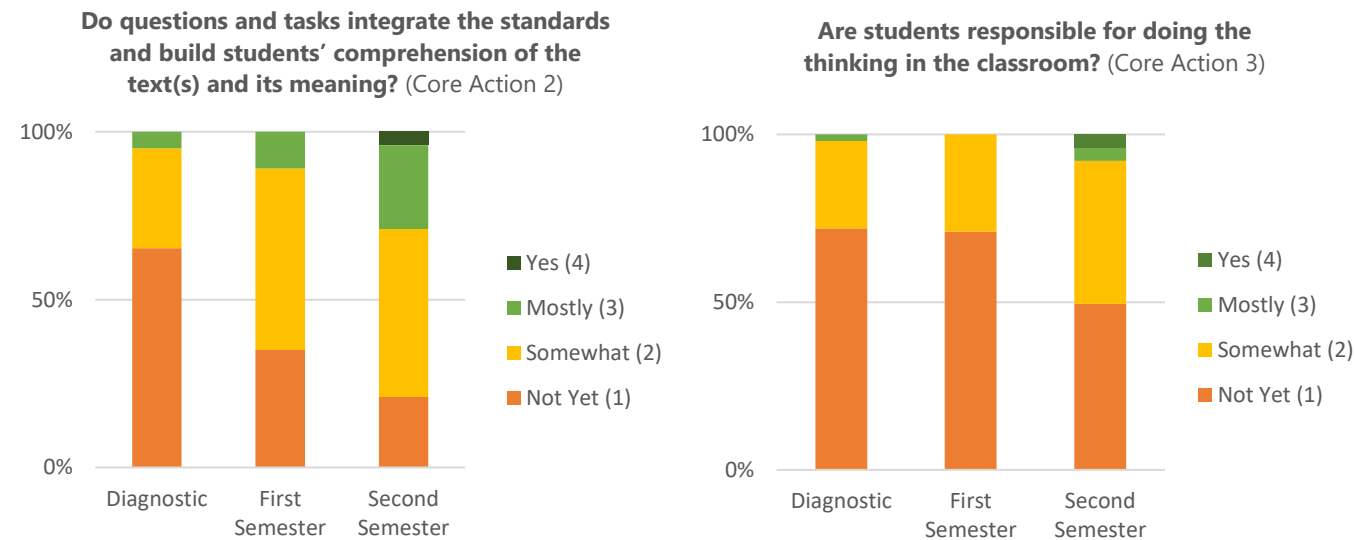
Key Learning 4: Teachers must engage in resource-specific, job-embedded professional learning experiences to improve practice.

Materials alone aren’t a route to universally strong early literacy instruction. Sustained, resource-specific, and job-embedded support is needed to help teachers implement the materials well. While we knew this was the case when we set out to do this work, we now know more about what that help should look like.

Over the past year and a half, we tried several curriculum-specific teacher professional learning structures, including introductory sessions for teachers to train them on new instructional materials, ongoing teacher-leader meetings to discuss successes and challenges of materials implementation, weekly PLCs for teachers and leaders to refine implementation, and one-on-one coaching by building leaders and coaches.

Our results to date are impressive; as noted in previous sections, most lessons in our pilot classrooms are centered on high-quality texts. We’re also seeing improvement on the quality of questions and tasks, which we measure by looking at whether they integrate the standards to build comprehension and meaning from text. By the second semester of implementation, more than a quarter of lessons included questions and tasks that at least partially reflected the demands of the standards.

We also looked at whether students are responsible for “doing the thinking” in the classroom. At their best, teachers are facilitators for content discovery and discussion, rather than deliverers of knowledge. We have not yet seen meaningful increases in this indicator; we believe that teachers must first focus on strong questions and tasks that allow for that content discovery and discussion. Once those questions and tasks are in place, teachers can begin passing the work of the lesson to students.



While this progress is exciting, we are still a long way from our goal. Even if we continue on the current pace of change, we are still more than two years away from universal, high-quality early literacy instruction.

Continued teacher learning is critical in driving these indicators, and that this learning will occur best through careful study and refined use of the district’s specific curriculum during job-embedded professional development opportunities. While this will be a major area of focus for the LIFT network in the coming year, we see two major takeaways from our work this year.

First, additional implementation support is critical; **materials alone won’t make for great, engaging lessons that require students to think deeply** about complex text and ideas. Strong materials are a tool to provide texts and suggestions on how to ensure students are engaging and thinking critically, but teachers can’t simply read a script to make this happen; they must

be critical consumers of instructional materials and make decisions on where to adapt or adjust a lesson based on their students' knowledge and understanding. Our system of professional learning experiences for teachers should continue to build, but we recognize that this work couldn't happen without at least some structured learning around the materials.

Second, teachers need dedicated time for discussing implementation, especially **deep discussion and analysis of the materials being implemented**. This year, all LIFT teachers using new instructional materials will take part in a cycle of continuous improvement centered at the unit level for those materials. This planning and discussion usually takes place during an existing professional learning structure (i.e. grade-level PLCs, in-service days, etc.), emphasizing that this type of curriculum analysis is the core work of the teaching team, rather than a one-off professional learning experience. These cycles will consist of three major components:

1. Teachers prepare carefully for the unit by reading all texts and considering the vocabulary, concepts, and big ideas, ensuring that the end-of-unit culminating task allows and requires students to demonstrate the enduring understanding of the unit, and planning individual lessons with those larger, enduring understandings in mind.
2. Teachers implement this planning and teach the unit, bringing this rich preparation to life for students. Teachers in the LIFT network will continue to work with each other throughout implementation, discussing what went well and where to fine-tune their planning.
3. Teachers reflect and debrief after the completion of a unit, looking first at student work on the culminating task. Did students demonstrate the enduring understandings? What areas did they comprehend better than others? Are students making progress towards grade-level standards? How does this inform how the unit will be taught in the following year, and how should instruction change for the next unit?

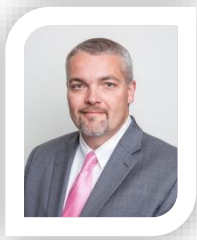
District Vignette: Teacher Professional Learning in Lauderdale County

Lauderdale County teachers care deeply about student learning. When kindergarten and first-grade teachers were presented with the opportunity to opt in to a pilot of new instructional materials last December, every single teacher in the district said they wanted to participate. They knew it wasn't going to be easy, especially because they would be starting a new curriculum in the middle of the school year, but they jumped at the chance to make sure instruction met the demands of the Tennessee Standards. As the district launched the new Wit & Wisdom curriculum, professional learning was a key component of their pilot.

The pilot started with professional learning about the shifts and the standards, the research behind them, and understanding how the design of Wit & Wisdom materials meets the shifts. Walking out of the first day of training, teachers had a sense of how the materials worked and were cautiously optimistic to try out the lessons.

Throughout the semester, there was a steep learning curve, and teachers weren't always sure about the new materials. Lauderdale County set aside time each month for teachers to come together to collaborate and problem-solve. In monthly PLCs and weekly planning meetings, school and district leaders convened teachers to troubleshoot. The groups focused on how to prepare lessons around strong materials, how to approach assessment and grades, and how to stay on pace with the new materials, a common challenge across classrooms. Teachers traded success and best practices ("The materials are forcing kids to think more about each text in depth and everyone has to write. I used to always run out of time for writing, but now I can think about the best ways to scaffold the writing prompts."), asked questions of each other ("How did the story stones retelling go today? My students are having a hard time with this protocol—what is working for you?") and shared recommendations ("Second grade teachers need to hear about this work!"). In end-of-year focus groups, teachers reinforced the importance of the professional learning and asked school leaders for even more time for learning in the upcoming school year so that they could plan and learn together as well as set aside time to analyze and discuss student work.

As the district launches into the second year of implementation and brings in two more grades, the experienced teachers share their wisdom with new colleagues. They've reinforced the importance of coming together as a grade-level team to read ahead in the materials, prepare lessons together, and figure out how the materials and assessments work. Kindergarten and first-grade teachers' advice is to "trust the process" and "read through all of the lessons ahead of time so that you know the outcomes." As the work expands across the district, school and district leaders are setting aside even more dedicated time for professional learning and lesson preparation and planning for opportunities to give teachers specific feedback on implementation to keep the momentum and learning moving forward.



"We can all agree that we want our children to grow up and have opportunities for success in college and career. Without a strong foundation in literacy, many doors are closed and opportunities are limited. I am proud of our teachers and administrators for their dedicated work to expand their teaching beyond foundational reading skills. Through the implementation of new curricular materials, students are receiving rigorous and engaging instruction."

- Shawn Kimble, Director of Schools, Lauderdale County

Conclusions & Next Steps for LIFT

Given the successes of the past 18 months, LIFT districts will continue to work together on literacy efforts in the future, with the goal of ensuring that all students have the literacy skills necessary to tackle rigorous text and write persuasively and articulately in high school, college, and their careers.

In the 2017-18 school year, our early literacy work will expand beyond pilot classrooms to continue in two major strands across most or all K-2 classrooms in each district.

The first strand of our work this year is a **deep focus on continued improvement of knowledge-building (read-aloud) instruction in K-2 classrooms**. In particular, we will continue to build teacher and leader knowledge of instructional materials, the Tennessee ELA standards, and high-quality early literacy instruction, with the goal of improving the quality of questions being asked of students and the tasks they are asked to complete, as well as ensuring that students take on the majority of the thinking in each lesson.

The second major strand of our work in the 2017-18 school year will be to **expand the breadth of the work in several ways**. First, we will expand our pilots of knowledge-building ELA instructional materials to additional K-2 classrooms in each district; most districts will begin using the materials in all K-2 classrooms.

Second, we will begin looking at the entire K-2 literacy block, including foundational skills and writing instruction and time for a volume of reading by students. Districts will consider instructional materials pilots or implementation efforts for foundational skills instruction, and district leaders will continue to build their knowledge around key practices and components of the early literacy block.

Finally, we will begin thinking about expanding this work to additional grade levels. Some districts will begin expanding instructional materials to grades 3-5, while others will pilot materials in those grades. TNTP and SCORE will continue to provide strategic support for this work, with the goal of eventually expanding it through middle and high school.

Questions? Comments? Suggestions? Please contact us or visit our website!

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