



LIFT EDUCATION
LEADING INNOVATION FOR TENNESSEE

Going Deeper with Early Literacy Implementation

Annual Report

September 2018

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 the work of directly improving student outcomes.

Since that time, LIFT's primary area of focus has been improving early literacy instruction in its member districts. Supported by SCORE and TNTP, the LIFT districts have engaged in cycles of continuous improvement grounded in a common problem of practice:

K-5 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). The common dedication to improving early literacy across the state has strengthened the efforts of the LIFT network.

While approaches vary across districts, most LIFT districts began by building a shared vision for excellent literacy instruction within the district, including training and development for district staff, school leaders, and teacher leaders during the 2016-17 school year. LIFT districts also piloted strong instructional materials to support teachers in reaching the shared vision for excellent instruction.

"We've been asking teachers to mine for gems, which is hard, back-breaking work that they were doing in the dark with little guidance. Now we're giving them the gems (strong materials), and simply asking them to polish the gems, which honors their unique skill and talent as educators."
-Deanna Zarichansky, Trousdale County Schools Assistant Principal

As the pilots progressed, the LIFT districts carefully studied their implementation¹. Based on early successes and lessons learned, LIFT districts expanded access to strong materials during the 2017-18 school year, introducing strong materials into additional classrooms, grade-levels, and/or components of the literacy block. This expansion was paired with professional learning grounded in the materials.

The results from the LIFT districts' second year of work are promising. **More than half of lessons observed during spring 2018 showed some or full alignment to the Tennessee ELA standards**, compared to about 10 percent of lessons during initial diagnostic visits.

This report provides an update on LIFT's work through our second full year of implementation and shares four new learnings for policymakers and practitioners interested in undertaking similar work:

1. Materials-specific professional learning experiences should be strategically sequenced.
2. Conditions for success should be identified and created *prior* to implementation at scale.
3. Strong implementation at scale requires attention to each layer of the "vertical spine."
4. Creating and sustaining momentum requires focused and relentless district leadership.

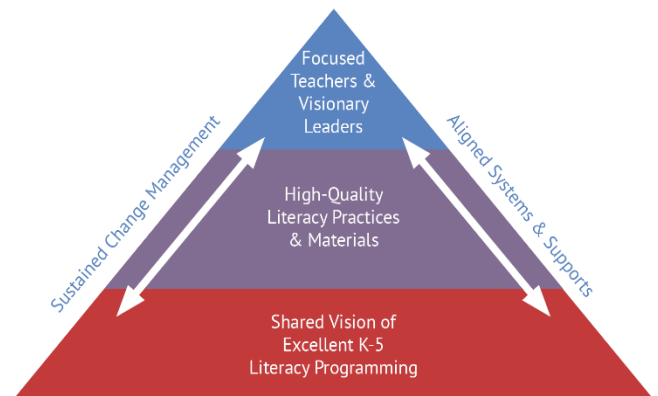
As indicated by the lessons above, the focus of this year's annual report is **"Going Deeper with Implementation."** The lessons shared in our [first Annual Report](#) set the foundation for our work; the 2018 lessons reflect the nuance and perseverance required to ensure the changes we've implemented result in sustained improvements in student learning.

¹ Please read the Summer 2017 LIFT annual report to learn more about the network and the lessons learned in our first year of implementation: https://lifteducationtn.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/LIFT-Education-Annual-Report-2017_FINAL.pdf

Update on LIFT's Work in Early Literacy

The work of the LIFT network is guided by a shared theory of action, at right. The theory calls out three central elements needed to improve early literacy: 1) focused teachers and visionary leaders, 2) high-quality literacy practices and materials, and 3) a shared vision for excellent instruction. The theory also hypothesizes that ongoing change management and attention to aligning systems are essential across each element.

Each LIFT district has attempted to attend to each component of the theory of action in outlining and implementing their specific strategy for improving literacy. During the 2016-17 school year, the districts established a common focus on early literacy, worked to build a shared vision of strong literacy instruction, and introduced aligned instructional materials in grades K-2 through materials pilots.



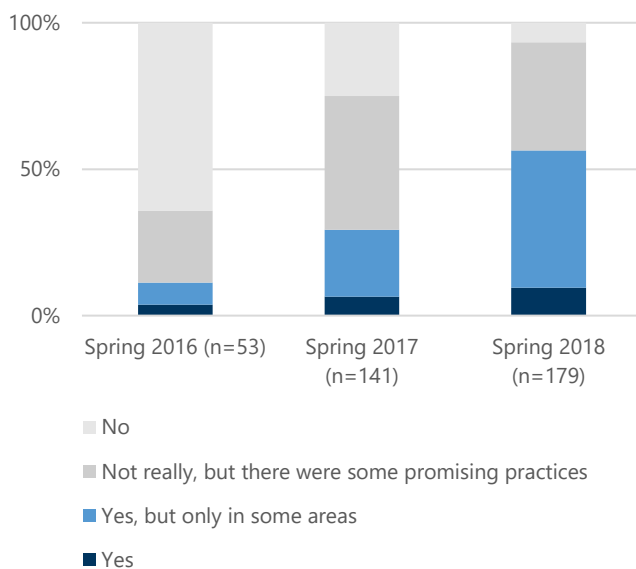
Given the promising results of the materials pilots, in the 2017-18 school year the LIFT districts continued the work by seeking breadth and depth in implementation:

- **Breadth:** The LIFT districts expanded the focus of their work to include grades 3-5. Many districts also expanded focus to include the full literacy block, adding a focus on foundational skills.
- **Depth:** The LIFT districts also sought to strengthen instructional practice in the original pilot classrooms, hoping to reach a depth of instructional change that could support all students in reaching the standards.

In seeking both breadth and depth, the LIFT districts invested in professional learning and support grounded in the materials, along with sustained change management and attention to systems. In this second year of implementation **we continue to see strong evidence that instructional materials, paired with support and strong leadership, are a powerful tool for improving the quality of students' daily academic experiences.**

Overall, did the lesson reflect the shifts required by the TN Standards?

All lessons observed SY 16-17 and SY 17-18



- As shown at left, **more than half of observed LIFT classroom lessons demonstrated full or partial alignment to the standards and shifts**, compared to about 10 percent of lessons in the initial diagnostic reviews in spring 2016 and about a third of lessons in spring 2017 (after one year of piloting materials).
- In reading comprehension lessons, teachers *new* to the materials in the 2017-18 school year demonstrated **stronger instruction after one year of use** than the original pilot teachers achieved in their first year using materials, a trend explored throughout this report.
- We also observed improvement in foundational skills instruction when strong instructional materials were piloted. **Nearly 70 percent of lessons in those classrooms provided students opportunities to master grade-level skills**, compared to only 35 percent of lessons in the initial diagnostic visits.
- As LIFT districts move further into implementation, we have also seen improvement in the quality of classroom assignments. **63 percent of assignments collected in spring 2018 demonstrated strong or excellent alignment to standards**, compared to fewer than 10 percent in the initial diagnostic review.

- Teachers and leaders demonstrate enthusiasm about the new instructional materials. **Nearly 80 percent of LIFT teachers reported “having a strong understanding of the materials,”** and **90 percent of LIFT teachers reported using them consistently throughout the year.** In an open-response on the LIFT survey one teacher reflected; *“I was not happy about making a shift in the middle of the year to the [new materials]. I now proudly say, and have said, I do not ever want to go back to what we had, and I am so thankful that we made the transition. This shift has been mindset, classroom, and student changing for the absolute best!”*
- Parents of students working with new materials are also seeing benefits. In a LIFT survey, nearly 8 in 10 parents agreed that their child is a better reader due to the instruction s/he is receiving in school².

“These kids have learned so much more than I expected. The reading program seems like it will produce a more well-rounded student.”

-LIFT parent

While we are encouraged by these results, we are still early in our journey to ensure all students reach the goals of more rigorous standards. Like all education reform efforts, **instructional materials alone are not a silver bullet.** Even when paired with aligned support, systems, and accountability, the transformation in instruction we are seeking will still require long-term capacity building and change management.

For example, while teachers are using the materials consistently, we continue to see variation across lessons, with very few lessons fully supporting *all* students in reaching grade-level standards. Fewer than 10 percent of lessons observed during the 2017-18 school year ensured all students owned the thinking of the lesson, and only 32 percent of students met grade-level expectations on classroom assignments. While providing strong instructional resources and supports is a critical start in approaching our shared problem of practice, as a network, we believe that support and sustained focus are needed to build on our positive momentum and ensure all students are on track for success in early literacy and beyond.

In brief, LIFT’s second year working with strong materials built on the success and lessons of our first year as we pushed further into implementation. The lessons that follow stem from the successes and challenges of the second year of work and guide our thinking for the years ahead.

*“The focused work that our teachers and district specialists have engaged in around the coherent use of high-quality instructional materials to strengthen our students’ literacy skills and background knowledge will change the trajectory of our students’ future academic growth. Through powerful collaboration of many—from the classroom to our statewide learning network of districts—we have come to recognize that great teaching is simply not enough to reach our goal of all students reading on grade level. **The synergy of great teaching, high quality curricula, and intentional professional learning is what will drive our students toward the success we seek collectively.**”*

-Jerry Boyd, Putnam County Superintendent

² The LIFT network piloted a parent/family survey in two districts this year (n=178 responses).

Lesson 1: Materials-specific professional learning experiences should be strategically sequenced.

In the [2017 annual report](#), we shared lessons about the critical importance of leader content knowledge and the need for [resource-specific professional learning](#) for teachers. While the experience of the LIFT districts continues to reinforce the importance of these elements³, after a second year of implementation, LIFT districts reflect that professional learning experiences must also be **strategically sequenced** to reach the depth on instructional change we are seeking.

To this end, the LIFT network started grounding ongoing capacity building in the [“Concerns-Based Adoption Model \(CBAM\)”](#) – a change management framework that emphasizes a predictable progression to implementing changes that result in improvements.

Based on the CBAM thinking, districts planned for teachers to move through specified [“levels of use”](#) as they worked with new resources and the vision for instruction they are designed to support. Many districts also worked with school leaders to use this framework to frame thinking and plan for differentiated teacher support. Attending to the range of needs of educators at varying stages has improved the quality of professional learning efforts.

Broadly speaking, the trajectory of support for reading comprehension lessons in LIFT districts has included three phases:

	<i>If we support teachers to ...</i>	<i>Then teachers will ...</i>	<i>And students will ...</i>
PHASE 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish regular routines and engage in consistent protocols for unit and lesson preparation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deliver units and lessons with fidelity – as written and intended by the materials. Build trust and confidence in the unit and lesson materials. Begin to identify what works and what doesn't for them and their students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage with rigorous texts and tasks.
PHASE 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deepen and refine their unit and lesson preparation with a focus on the desired results for learners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deliver units and lessons with integrity – maintaining the intent of the materials but making strategic adjustments and decisions to improve the impact on students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build deeper meaning of rigorous texts and tasks.
PHASE 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish regular routines and engage in consistent protocols for reflection on student learning; and Employ instructional strategies that give <i>all</i> students the chance to do the cognitive work and deeply engage in their learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empower students to own their learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Process and practice with rigorous texts and tasks and own the rigorous thinking this requires. Achieve the desired results for learners intended by the materials.

³ To learn more about how several LIFT districts have structured resource-specific professional learning, please see the “Tennessee” profile in this report from Learning Forward: <https://learningforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/curriculaPLEquity.pdf>

The initial pilot year (2016-17) focused on Phase 1. Most districts focused support in their second year of implementation on Phase 2. As we move into our third year of implementation, some teachers and districts are ready to move to Phase 3, while others are continuing to strengthen the learnings of Phase 2, and new teachers will begin with the learnings of Phase 1.

While outlining the phases helps clarify the *general* trajectory of learning and support, LIFT districts are quick to clarify that learning is iterative. For example, when teachers learn about a new approach for supporting student thinking (in Phase 3), they may need to return to the protocols and routines for lesson preparation (Phase 1) to ensure those student thinking supports are integrated into ongoing planning and collaboration.

The LIFT districts have also been careful to build routines for ongoing reflection within each cycle. LIFT leaders are frequently in classrooms and working with teachers during collaborative planning sessions, grounding visits and PLCs in an analysis of current practice and narrowing in on the most beneficial next steps for students. These reflective cycles identify a next step, plan for when and how to implement that step, when and how to reflect on how the step went, and then adjust based on what was observed and learned.

We believe that the strategic sequencing of professional learning experiences, paired with other factors aligned to the theory of change, led to the strong start of teachers *new* to the materials and to the ongoing improvement of the original pilot teachers last school year. As mentioned in the summary of LIFT's results, teachers new to the instructional materials in 2017-18 improved instruction *faster* compared to the initial pilot teachers. One theory for their accelerated improvement is that LIFT districts were **more strategic** in their professional learning efforts in the second year, building off lessons learned in the first year working with strong materials.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Sullivan County Schools

During the 2016-17 school year, Sullivan County piloted instructional materials in grades K-2 in three of the eleven elementary schools in the district. District and school leaders worked together to provide pilot teachers with intentional and intensive support to build understanding of the design of the instructional materials, implement the materials with fidelity, and identify what worked and what didn't work for Sullivan County teachers and students. Specifically, their support focused on establishing regular routines and consistent protocols for unit and lesson preparation so that teachers felt confident implementing the curriculum as written and intended.

Based on the successes and learnings of this pilot work, Sullivan County expanded the use of these instructional materials to grades K-2 in all eleven elementary schools the following year. The school leaders and teachers who piloted the materials the year before were given clearly defined leadership responsibilities to replicate the unit and lesson preparation support that had been provided to them in the pilot year. All K-2 teachers came together four times across the year to engage in new learning lead by original pilot teachers.

The original pilot teachers also came together for four additional professional learning opportunities across the year to continue their own learning and accelerate their progress. With deep familiarity of the instructional materials, the support provided to the pilot teachers went further by focusing on deepening and refining their unit and lesson preparation with a focus on supporting all learners in reaching the goals of the lessons.

Dr. Evelyn Rafalowski, director of schools, reflected: *"Building teacher efficacy through learning, empowerment, and the opportunity to collaborate has been foundational to the success of the implementation of CKLA. Our students, teachers, and leaders have risen to the challenge of strong curricula. Building ownership and shared leadership have been pivotal in the work."*

In the 2018-19 school year, pilot teachers and leaders will continue to lead their peers in the work. Sullivan County plans to continue to differentiate professional learning efforts so that the pilot teachers are pushed in the areas where *they* need support while they also support *their peers* in earlier phases of professional learning.

Lenoir City Schools

Over the past several years, the leadership team at Lenoir City Elementary has worked hard to build a shared vision for what excellent literacy teaching and learning should look like in their building. Their work to articulate clear, content-specific expectations for teaching and then support teachers to realize this vision led to early successes in terms of teachers' knowledge and understanding of the standards.

In fall 2017, the leadership team at Lenoir City Elementary reflected on their literacy strategy. They realized that comprehension instruction across classrooms was consistently focused on texts, but students did not yet have the opportunity to build knowledge or deep understanding of these texts through skillfully crafted and sequenced questions and tasks. Lenoir City's excellent teachers needed quality instructional materials to support them in realizing the shared vision.

The team decided to pilot standards-aligned instructional materials with strong questions and tasks in grades 2 and 3. They anticipated that teachers would need support to deeply understand the design of these materials, internalize the content, and build trust in the materials during the first few months of use.

So, each month, pilot teachers came together for a grade-level PLC where they experienced a bite-sized chunk of learning about the curriculum and prepared to apply it to their planning and instruction. When they came back together the following month, they reflected on how these shifts in practice affected student learning and planned to refine or extend their practice.

The results have been promising. Teachers report that the actions they have taken as a result of these PLCs have positively impacted student learning. One teacher stated: *"I can tell a big difference in student thinking – they are really grappling with new knowledge and applying it to multiple lessons and assignments."* Another reflected: *"I feel that my students are much more confident with their writing because I have committed to more time on my part studying the curriculum and working on my questioning."*

Dr. Jeanne Barker, director of schools, reflected: *"Our literacy leaders have provided professional learning to lay the foundation for strong reading instruction. The opportunity we found through the curriculum to marry the theory with practice for the benefit of students has been a difference-maker in the achievement of our students, and the strong instructional materials are building the capacity of all our teachers to affect children for years to come."*

Lesson 2: Conditions for success should be identified and created *prior* to implementation at scale.

In our [first annual report](#), we highlighted the need for thoughtful change management. This year the LIFT network observed the critical importance of one specific lesson within change management: **the need to identify and create conditions for success *prior* to implementation of strong instructional materials at scale.**

Identifying and creating conditions for success means laying the groundwork so that strong materials can flourish when they are introduced across the district. As examples, creating conditions for success could include building a shared vision of excellent instruction so that teachers and leaders understand how the materials match the vision for literacy, creating or improving support structures so that teachers have regular opportunities to collaborate and have access to expertise when they encounter challenges, engaging stakeholders early and often to create a shared commitment to the district’s literacy strategy, or refreshing local assessment procedures to ensure alignment between instructional materials and district assessments.

To create these conditions, LIFT districts routinely speak to the benefit of “going slow to go fast.” Most LIFT districts have learned about what conditions are needed and created such conditions by piloting instructional materials on a small scale. Instructional materials can be a powerful lever for change across the district, but LIFT districts have learned that the surest path

for materials to reach their potential impact is by creating the right conditions *before rolling out materials at scale*. Rolling out materials at scale generally requires a large financial investment and fewer opportunities to adjust course. LIFT districts benefitted by learning from pilot experiences when they were able to be nimbler and make mistakes in a controlled environment.

As shared in the introduction, instruction improved in the network overall during the 2017-18 school year, including impressive improvements by teachers who were new users of strong instructional materials. One hypothesis for this accelerated improvement is that *the pilot experience created favorable conditions* within the LIFT districts:

“Teachers are excited about literacy instruction. This excitement is contagious and diffuses throughout our student body and into the homes, influencing fundamental cultural change.”

*-Neel Durbin, Dyersburg City
Director of Schools*

- **District leaders became wiser about how to roll out materials through the experience of piloting materials on a smaller scale.** The pilot experience surfaced obstacles districts could attend to on a manageable scale. During the pilot year, teachers encountered and surfaced pain points, and the district teams could adjust quickly given the scale of the pilot. For example, some pilot teachers surfaced that the new materials required changes to school schedules. Districts could work with leaders to adjust scheduling for the pilot classrooms – so that when all teachers started using the materials, the schedules would be tailored to match the materials in use. In addition, district leaders learned from the pilot teachers about what support was needed during the initial months of using the materials, allowing districts to improve the content and sequence of support when rolling out the materials to all teachers (as described in Lesson 1).
- **The learnings of the pilot teachers transferred to teachers new to using the materials.** The original pilot teachers became a critical element of the change management strategy in LIFT districts, as these teachers were able to coach and mentor their peers. Mirroring national trends, LIFT teachers frequently commented that the best source of support was other teachers. One LIFT district described the original pilot teachers as pioneers who went in search of gold. When they found it, they communicated to others that they struck gold, but also communicated lessons learned from the journey (i.e. don’t try this route! Or avoid this pitfall!). The emerging expertise and enthusiasm of pilot teachers boosted the initial implementation quality for teachers new to the materials.

- **Pilots created a space for risk taking, mistakes, and quick learning.** LIFT districts structured pilots to encourage teachers and leaders to step out of their comfort zones and try something new, with a high degree of support and a shared commitment to learn from mistakes. As one district reflected, the pilot materials created an environment to “fail forward,” allowing the district to map out potential hot spots and proactively plan to avoid those mistakes at scale. Learning also extended beyond the teachers selected to pilot materials: many other teachers heard positive stories about the materials and started introducing them in their classrooms, allowing them to try out the content at their own pace.

While these theories speak to the benefits of piloting strong materials, piloting instructional materials is not the only way to create conditions for success. For example, Lenoir City Elementary School began piloting instructional materials later than other districts but invested deeply in building teacher knowledge and a shared vision for instruction prior to implementing new instructional resources. These investments created a local demand for strong materials that matched the shared vision for instruction. Once materials were introduced, instruction improved rapidly, and teachers were very invested in the resources.

Regardless of approach, the experience of the LIFT network speaks to the importance of creating strong conditions for success. Furthermore, the lessons of the network suggest these conditions are best created *prior* to introducing new instructional materials at scale – when the stakes are higher and the margin for error is thinner. As captured in the book *Learning to Improve*, “we consistently fail to appreciate what it actually takes to make some promising idea work reliably in practice.” The LIFT districts have heeded that lesson and used pilots to deeply study “what it actually takes” to do this work well.

This lesson is particularly timely for the state of Tennessee as we prepare for our next ELA adoption in 2020. The state emphasis on early literacy through Read to be Ready sets districts and schools up to reconsider instruction in early literacy, and to do so as part of a larger strategy for reading – including capacity building, materials, assessment, parent engagement, teacher professional learning, and other mechanisms for change. Districts would benefit from **building the conditions for a successful adoption process and materials roll out now**, so that new resources have the best chance for improving instruction when they are implemented at scale in SY 2020-2021.

“Utilizing the weekly PLCs and teachers’ collaborative planning sessions, we have been able to provide differentiated support for our teachers. The building and district leaders have joined in as learners and facilitators as we have refined our practices over the past three years. This work is challenging, but having a framework for collaboration, maintaining high expectations, and celebrating successes along the way has helped keep focus on providing a better future for the students of Lauderdale County.

-Jennifer Jordan, Lauderdale County Schools Director of Literacy

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Putnam County Schools

Putnam County began piloting strong instructional resources in grades K-2 during the 2016-17 school year. Teachers were chosen strategically across the district to participate in the pilot, so that at least one teacher in each elementary school participated.

The pilot teachers were supported by the district’s reading coaches. The three reading coaches supported different schools but began collaborating closely to learn as quickly as possible about the new materials and to develop common solutions to obstacles their teachers were encountering. The three reading coaches joined one another to walk classrooms about once a month, along with the supervisor of elementary instruction. Following the walkthroughs, the team debriefed trends in instruction and determined the best next steps to support the district as they prepared to scale up the materials to all elementary teachers. These collaborative planning sessions allowed the district to identify conditions that would promote success with the materials and to actively create such conditions in schools.

As the pilot progressed, the Putnam County team received questions about the longevity of the materials, as previous “pilots” in the district often came and went within a year or so without reaching all teachers. Once the district decided to gradually roll out the materials to all K-4 teachers, they began referring to the pilot teachers as “pioneers.” This name change signaled the district’s intention – that the pilot was an opportunity for teachers and the district staff to learn and adjust as they prepared for using the materials at scale, rather than a trial period for the materials. In fact, the piloting process with the “pioneers” created buzz and momentum and other teachers joined voluntarily – accessing the materials on their own. Investment was a natural outcome of the strategic pilot process. Rather than testing the materials, the “pioneering” teachers were paving the path by creating strong conditions that would benefit others when the materials were rolled out to the full district.

Dyersburg City Schools

Dyersburg City Schools started their work piloting aligned instructional materials in the 2016-17 school year at Dyersburg Primary School, the pre-K through second grade campus in the district. The work in the district focused on building the capacity of K-2 teachers to improve literacy instruction through read alouds of high-quality, complex texts that would build student knowledge of the world, using the [Read Aloud Project](#) resources.

After the initial launch of the K-2 pilot, the district quickly realized the importance of bringing third grade teachers along in this early literacy work. At the end of the first year, the administrators from both schools discussed and worked out a plan to have third grade teachers attend professional development opportunities with the K-2 teachers. With the support of the Curriculum Coordinators, the third-grade teachers transferred the learning from their work with K-2 colleagues to their own classrooms, referencing a unit based on “Of Thee I Sing”. They worked collaboratively to choose texts for knowledge-building read alouds and design and deliver instruction to deepen student understanding of those texts.

Throughout this work, teacher support was an essential condition for success. The district worked closely not only with supports in the LIFT network, but also with a Read to Be Ready consultant focused on teacher professional learning. Furthermore, the principals and curriculum coordinators at both schools worked together, collaboratively attending professional development and the LIFT network meetings to maximize learning at the leadership level.

In the 2017-18 school year, after a successful pilot experience, Dyersburg City decided to scale the early literacy work to Dyersburg Intermediate School, implementing the [EL Education literacy materials](#) in all classrooms grades three through five. The third-grade teachers rose as leaders for the rest of the school during the roll out of the new materials. Because of the learning and work they engaged in during the 2016-17 year, they were already deeply familiar with the ELA instructional shifts called for in the Tennessee Academic Standards and knew what it would take to bring high-quality texts and aligned instructional practice to their students. The quality of instruction in the third-grade classrooms was stronger than their peers who were brand new to the work and the materials. The third-grade teachers were also more invested in using the EL Education materials because they knew what instruction aligned to the shifts and standards required and how challenging and time-consuming it was to develop these lessons on their own.

Moving forward, Dyersburg will continue to work strategically with all teachers in grades K-5. At the start of the 2018-19 school year, they made strategic staffing decisions, bringing a third-grade teacher to second grade to support with an EL Education pilot in grade two, and then looping back to third grade. They are also pleased that this year’s third grade initial STAR scores are much higher than in the past several years. The district is being thoughtful to continue to build capacity prior to the upcoming statewide ELA adoption so that all teachers are confident in the standards and shifts prior to working with materials that align closely to their vision for instruction.

Lesson 3: Strong implementation at scale requires attention to each layer of the “vertical spine.”

As we examine what it will take to reach the intended depth of instructional change we are seeking and to sustain that change, the LIFT districts continually reflect on the need for leaders at all levels of the organization to stay focused and to act strategically.

Within the network, we often speak about strengthening the “vertical spine,” or strengthening each layer of the organization from classroom teachers to superintendents so that leadership is not only distributed, but each level of the organization is

meaningfully contributing to the success of the system. The quote at the left resonates with the work of the LIFT districts: where we have seen movement in instruction, we can point to evidence of “thorough and widespread capacity building,” so that each level of the vertical spine is stronger, supported, and acting as part of a larger collective capacity. Furthermore, those capacity efforts are strategic and focused – so that the new skills, resources, and motivations all move toward the shared goal of improving early literacy results.

“The centerpiece of all successful whole system reform cases is capacity building – the development of individual and group efficacy when it comes to new skills, resources, and motivation. Put another way, all failures we observed had a weak capacity-building core. In fact, governments tend to underestimate the need for capacity building or try to address it in weak, individualist ways.

The bottom line for those engaged in whole-system reform is that the core strategy must focus on thorough and widespread capacity building, especially the collective capacity of groups.”

-Michael Fullan, Transforming Schools an Entire System at a Time

For example, in Sullivan County, teacher leaders, school leaders, and district staff are all focused on a common goal to revolutionize local literacy instruction. The elementary principals meet monthly with a singular focus: to build their own understanding of excellent literacy instruction and to strategize to best support teachers. Rather than meeting in the central office, the elementary schools rotate hosting the meetings, and each meeting begins with the principals walking classrooms together. As the leaders walk classrooms, they discuss what they observe to sharpen their shared vision for strong instructional practice. They then think together about how to best move forward and analyze student work, discuss articles and research, or examine common problems of practice to deepen their own understanding of instruction to better lead change in their buildings.

While Sullivan County’s intentional capacity building for school leaders is impressive on its own, the district has equally specific plans for each layer of the system, or the “vertical spine.” By routinely building capacity and reflecting on progress at each layer of the vertical spine, the district has maintained focus on the work, empowered leadership throughout the system, and adjusted strategically to the needs of teachers and students.

In addition to having widespread capacity along the “vertical spine,” the LIFT districts also recommend having one person specifically responsible for leading the work. In the LIFT network we refer to these individuals as “strategy leads”—the people primarily responsible for early literacy in the district.

To select a “strategy lead” districts considered:

- Who has the knowledge needed to do the work? Or, who can learn quickly to be a local expert in early literacy and the specific instructional materials we are using and/or piloting?
- Who would be able to effectively lead the work? Who could rally the “vertical spine” to action? Who would openly share their knowledge to build a broader coalition supporting the work? Who has the authority to make decisions?

The strategy leads are usually responsible for setting and implementing the local strategy – including managing, with their director of schools, how to build capacity and investment throughout the vertical spine. The leads are also often responsible

for looking for and creating alignment throughout the system. For example, in one district, teachers reflected that new instructional materials did not fully align with the district’s approach to assessment. The strategy lead began an effort to reconsider and recommend changes to the district interim assessment approach. In another district, teachers expressed concerns about how they would be evaluated when using the new materials. The strategy lead worked with evaluators to ensure that local expectations were clear and that evaluators were normed in their expectations for excellent instruction.

In each example, the district depended on both **sustained focus and a deliberate strategy that involved multiple layers of the system**. Regarding focus: the feedback raised by teachers about assessments or evaluation might be set aside in many districts due to the landscape of infinite competing priorities. But, when the district is clear with every level in the vertical spine that improving early literacy is a top priority, these obstacles are addressed rather than lost in the shuffle. Furthermore, even within early literacy work, the example issues are far from the only areas demanding attention. The district, and particularly the strategy lead, must act with intention – outlining a deliberate strategy around the *immediate priorities* and the *long-term priorities*. These priorities should be grounded in an understanding of what problems the district is attempting to solve and what actions the district believes will best address those specific problems.

When asked what helps maintain focus and build the capacity of each layer of the system, LIFT districts are quick to point to the value of networking with others in similar roles. Just as teachers appreciate learning from other teachers, district “strategy leads” often find the greatest source of learning is connecting with others in similar roles across districts.

“As a central office, we determined that we were working more with teachers and were not helping administrators keep pace with the improved practices of teachers. We wanted them to see the connections and ways that they could help to continue strengthening reading practices with feedback and strong resources.”

*-Maria Warren, Loudon County Schools
Elementary and RTI Supervisor*

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Jackson-Madison County Schools

During the 2017-18 school year Jackson-Madison County began investing stakeholders in a key component of the local strategy for improving instruction by repeating a simple phrase: *materials matter*.

This common mantra picked up steam with district leadership, principals, and teachers as the district launched a commitment to ensure that all teachers and students would have access to strong content and resources. The district team framed this strategy as being owned by the full district, rather than as one department’s initiative. Teachers engaged in professional learning grounded in the materials, leaders discussed research for excellent literacy instruction to further their own understanding of how the materials represent best practices, and district staff actively looked for opportunities to streamline district initiatives to maintain focus on using strong materials to reach goals for students. The district also sought to bring in other stakeholders to the work, including communicating early in the summer about which topics and texts students would study in the school year ahead so that families could support their children by extending learning at home.

The district team worked to ensure each layer of the “vertical spine” was not only informed and invested in the strategy but was receiving support and guidance specific to their role. For example, pilot teachers reflected that the best source of support was fellow teachers; thus, the district worked with select teachers to pilot each new component of the K-5 ELA resources before rolling them out to the full district. Piloting the resources became a capacity building strategy—not only for the participating teachers, but for all teachers in the district.

Lesson 4: Creating and sustaining momentum requires focused and relentless district leadership.

In addition to having widespread leadership (as articulated in the third lesson), the LIFT districts reflected that as they move further into implementation, there is no substitute for focused and relentless leadership at the top—particularly from the superintendents.

While strategy leads, teachers, school leaders, and educators throughout the system each have critical roles to play in achieving results for students, the superintendent sets the direction of the work and clears obstacles along the way so that the work can move forward and achieve results for students. Strategy leads reflect that having steady, focused leadership from superintendents is critical for the work.

For example, LIFT directors of schools have:

- Convened sensitive budget conversations, including engaging schools in making tough choices about which resources and programs are most needed to support students and should continue to be funded.
- Thought creatively about sources of funding, including pooling Title I funds centrally or reconsidering how funds are allocated within the system.
- Protected key staff members and teachers from “initiative overload,” by saying “no” to opportunities that do not align with the local strategy and/or reconsidering engagement in past initiatives if they no longer effectively serve the district.
- Communicated district priorities to a range of audiences, including ensuring the local school board is informed, that principals are clear on the direction, and that parents are considered partners in the work.
- Modeled reflective practice by engaging in data step backs, including fully owning results that do not meet goals and productively probing to identify the root causes of challenges.
- Pulled together teams that may otherwise operate in silos – such as elementary and secondary staff for vertical strategy setting or encouraging curriculum and instruction teams to collaborate with peers in special education.

Many of these actions were not taken on by the superintendent alone, but they depended on the support and attention of the superintendent to move forward successfully—particularly in maintaining district focus on the work and removing barriers.

“We learned a lot of words, like anaphora... Learning is more fun and more challenging this year. Now we learn AND have fun.”

-LIFT 4th graders reflecting on their literacy work this year

LIFT superintendents cite staying actively engaged in early literacy work as a key component of their ability to effectively lead the district toward improved early literacy results. For example, many LIFT superintendents join classroom walkthroughs with their school and district team members at least once per quarter. During walkthroughs, superintendents have a chance to see the work in action and to hear from their teams about successes and challenges. Many LIFT superintendents also join professional learning opportunities for teachers and leaders to better understand the change the district is seeking. Participating in these opportunities allows the superintendents to gather information that is critical for decision making and communication.

In addition to this work within their own districts, LIFT superintendents rely on support and thought partnership from peers leading similar initiatives across the state. About 3-4 times per year, LIFT superintendents meet in a LIFT district to walk classrooms as a

group and reflect on the instruction they see. This gives them the opportunity to see classrooms outside their own district and reflect on how the progress there could be emulated, accelerated, or duplicated in their own district. This cross-district partnership gives superintendents, who often operate in isolation, the opportunity to prioritize their own learning and push their thinking with like-minded peers.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Fayette County Schools

Fayette County began their pilot with aligned instructional materials in the spring of 2016. The district was both thoughtful and strategic from the outset of the pilot, designing a model in which two schools would pilot the [Wit & Wisdom](#) materials and two schools would pilot the [CKLA](#) materials. Dr. Marlon King, superintendent, engaged school leadership at a very early stage, bringing the principals, called Chiefs of Schools, in as the leaders of the pilot work.

During the pilot semester, Fayette County was intentional about providing training and support for the pilot teachers and, importantly, gathering their feedback about what was working and what was challenging in each pilot. District leadership made sure to have their ears to the ground to listen to a variety of stakeholders and ultimately worked with teachers and leaders to choose [CKLA](#) as the instructional materials for all K-3 classrooms.

In 2017-18, after a carefully designed and executed pilot, Fayette County accelerated their work with strong materials. They began by establishing a clear vision around literacy, using the [LIFT Instructional Practice Guide](#) to define excellence in all literacy classrooms across the district. They then began aligning other parts of the system around this vision, emphasizing a focus on the right people. The Chief Academic Officer (CAO) was established as a new role who would provide direction and leadership in all academic work, but especially elementary literacy. Dr. King and the CAO created the School Teams—members of central office staff dedicated to supporting teachers and providing them with feedback on the Instructional Practice Guide.

Fayette County also focused on the right conditions for teachers to be successful with the materials. They committed to purchasing both the CKLA Listening & Learning and Skills materials so that *all* teachers in K-3 would have the full suite of resources in the program. They gained approval from the school board to adjust the calendar to prioritize monthly professional learning opportunities for teachers, so they would have protected time to grow as educators.

As the 2018-19 school year approached, district leadership carefully analyzed the results and reviewed the available data to determine next steps in early literacy. This analysis reinforced the commitment to Fayette County's vision for literacy and use of strong instructional materials and compelled Dr. King to very quickly seek board approval for an expansion of CKLA into fourth grade. This also required a very fast budget allocation to make sure the fourth-grade teachers and students could start the year off strong with their materials.

The success and sustainability of this work in early literacy would not have been possible without the focus and commitment from the superintendent. Dr. King led the charge—setting vision, listening, and ensuring everyone in the system had the support they needed to develop students who are strong readers, writers, thinkers, and communicators.

"I'm completely convinced that district leadership coupled with school-level leadership creates a win-win learning environment for both teachers and students. In a short period of time, we have found that by putting the right instructional materials in the hands of our teachers and by providing ongoing content support—tied to both standards and pedagogy—we increased our students' success rate significantly."

-Dr. Marlon King, Fayette County Superintendent

Conclusion & Next Steps for LIFT

As we begin our third year of implementation, SCORE and TNTP will continue to provide strategic support to LIFT districts for achieving both *depth* and *breadth* in our shared work to improve early literacy, with a specific focus on strategic change management to ensure sustainability.

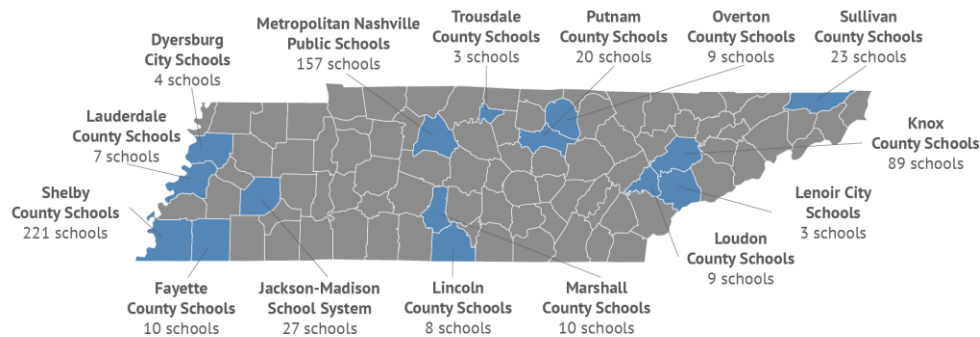
As we enter the 2018-19 school year, we will focus our work on three specific questions:

1. What are the necessary preconditions to **successfully sustain progress** in early literacy in LIFT districts?
2. How do we continue to build the capacity of school systems, leaders, and teachers to ensure **students are doing the cognitive work** of making and demonstrating meaning of quality texts?
3. Building on our vision of excellent literacy, how can we build teacher and system capacity to leverage strong instructional materials to **support all students** in reaching the standards?

These questions are designed to tackle the most pressing common challenges across the network, grounded in the evidence we've collected, and the lessons shared in this annual report. We will continue to share our learnings, lessons, and resources as we test new ideas and study their impact on students.

As part of our effort to share our learnings with the field, we've created an [Instructional Materials Implementation Guidebook](#). The Guidebook explores the specific actions of the LIFT districts in greater detail, including links to resources the districts have used along the way.

We are also proud to have launched a new branch of LIFT, called the "LIFT Learning Network." This network consists of three new districts (Lincoln County, Marshall County, and Overton County), each of whom were independently working to improve early literacy instruction and expressed an interest in learning from the work of LIFT.



The LIFT Learning districts will receive a light amount of direct technical assistance from TNTP, in addition to working with the Guidebook and resources LIFT has shared digitally. We will work with these districts to study how they use the lessons and resources so that we can improve our knowledge-sharing efforts to best serve districts across the state. As we refine our tools and resources, we hope that others will provide us with feedback as well; please use the information below to share ideas with our team.

Questions? Comments? Suggestions? Please contact us!

Dr. Sharon Roberts

Chief Strategy Officer, SCORE
sharon@tnscore.org

Courtney Bell

Director of Educator Engagement, SCORE
courtney@tnscore.org