

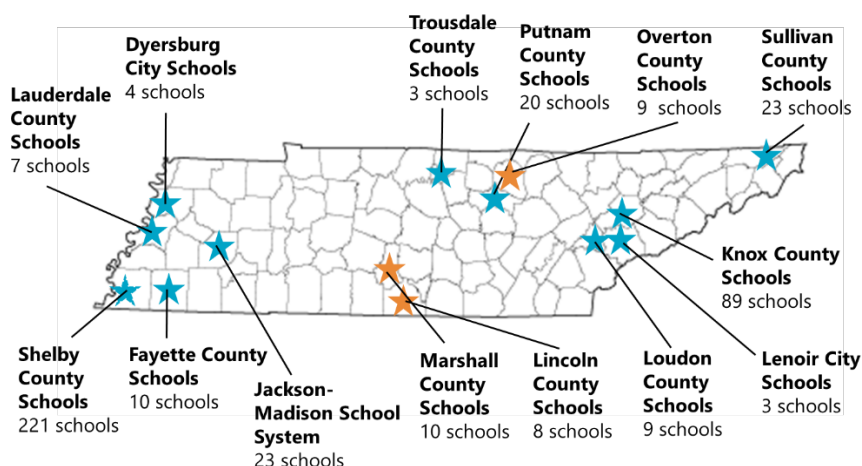


LIFT EDUCATION
LEADING INNOVATION FOR TENNESSEE

Realizing Impact In Early Literacy Annual Report

August 2020

Leading Innovation for Tennessee Education (LIFT) is a small group of Tennessee school districts working together to explore innovative approaches and share best practices that benefit students and other districts.



In spring 2016, the districts in the LIFT network examined their existing literacy programs and classroom practices and identified a shared problem of practice: **K–5 students were not yet accessing a high-quality literacy program that supported them to meet the demands of Tennessee’s rigorous academic standards. Teachers and leaders had not yet made the instructional shifts that would support students to become proficient readers, writers, and thinkers.**

Since then, the districts in the LIFT network have worked to address this problem of practice by expanding and supporting the use of high-quality instructional materials and building the capacity of teachers and leaders to deliver standards-aligned literacy instruction. Over the past four years, the network has made significant progress:

- **Improvements in classroom instruction:** This year, 58 percent of observed lessons reflected the demands of Tennessee’s rigorous standards, compared with only 6 percent during initial reviews.
- **Improvements in classroom assignments:** This year, 76 percent of sampled assignments were grade-appropriate, compared with only 8 percent during initial reviews.
- **Improvements in student learning:** This year, 62 percent of students met the demands of grade-level standards on assignments, compared with 5 percent during initial reviews. While TNReady testing was canceled in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are confident these results would have translated into real changes in assessment results building on the successes of last year.¹

This report outlines lessons learned from the 2019-20 school year, our most challenging year to date. This year, districts in the network faced the unprecedented challenge of sustaining progress in literacy during a health emergency and extended school closures. We hope our learnings will be valuable to policymakers and practitioners broadly, and particularly those in Tennessee who, despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, remain committed to implementing and supporting new high-quality instructional materials for English Language Arts because of their promise and potential for students.

Those seeking to learn from LIFT’s work may also be interested in our previous reports and published resources.²

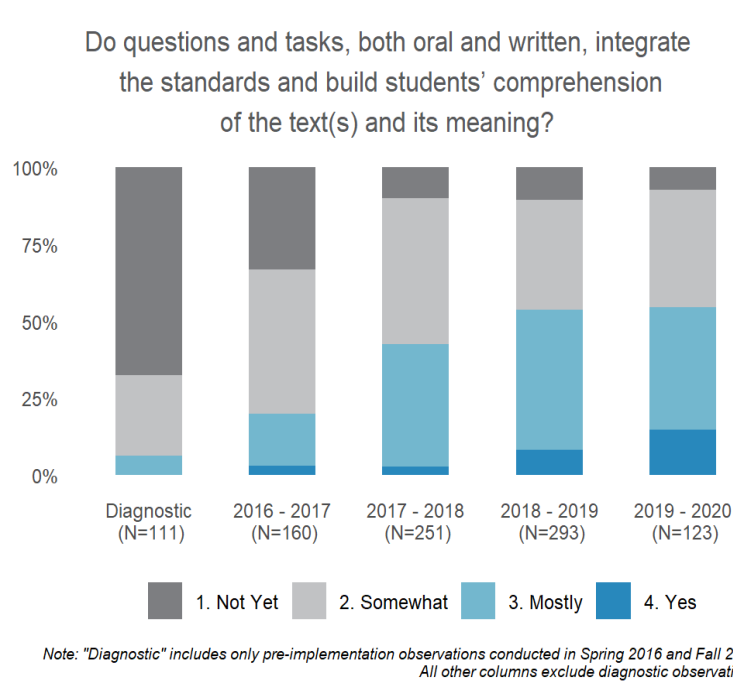
¹ On 2019 TNReady assessments, comparing the one-year growth of students in third-grade ELA classrooms in LIFT districts to the state, students in LIFT districts grew at a rate 25 times more than students across the state as a whole.

² Please read the 2017, 2018, and 2019 LIFT annual reports to learn more about the network and the lessons learned in our first three years of implementation and the Instructional Materials Implementation Guidebook to see a comprehensive description of the innovative approaches and best practices from the network: <https://lifteducationtn.com/resources/>

Key Learning 1: High-quality instructional materials are a foundation for deep instructional change, but teachers need sustained and targeted support, development, and feedback over several years to realize that change.

Over the past four years, the districts in the LIFT network have engaged in deep exploration of the research on best practice in literacy to build and champion shared expectations for excellence. In our fourth year of implementation, we have learned that there is still a lot of work to be done to fully realize this vision, including pursuing differentiated strategies that are more responsive to the particular context and needs of our school communities.

Based on reading research, the network prioritized instruction that prepares students to examine arguments and information critically. All districts in the network selected instructional materials with rigorous texts, questions, and tasks that have helped us make steady progress toward this priority.



We have learned that, in addition to high-quality materials, **teachers need protected time and sustained support to internalize the questions and tasks** in their materials to translate them into deep changes in practice. Early on, districts in the LIFT network leveraged professional learning communities (PLC) or grade-level planning structures to establish regular routines and consistent protocols for unit and lesson preparation.³ Those with the most success in this priority area have sustained the support for intellectual preparation over several years with a continuous focus on refinement.

This year, 57 percent⁴ of observed lessons featured strong questions, compared with just 7 percent in initial reviews. The progress we made last year was sustained, despite expansion of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) to additional grade levels and scaled back support from our technical assistance partner, TNTP.

District Case Study: Sustained Support For Unit And Lesson Preparation In Trousdale County

Since the rollout of the Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) curriculum, Trousdale County has purposefully set aside and protected time for teachers to engage in collaborative unit and lesson preparation to strengthen their implementation and understanding of CKLA materials. Teachers engage in weekly PLC meetings, led by school-based instructional coaches and school leadership focused on lesson preparation. These “Power Fridays” give teachers the opportunity to collaborate on upcoming units and analyze data from previous units using planning protocols focused on common prioritized areas for improvement. They also meet once a month for a half-day of unit planning and preparation. Elementary school leadership in the district has been committed to giving teachers the time and space for these collaborative planning structures for the past three years; this has allowed teachers not only ample time to plan but has also allowed them to see the value in collaborative planning when using high-quality instructional materials.

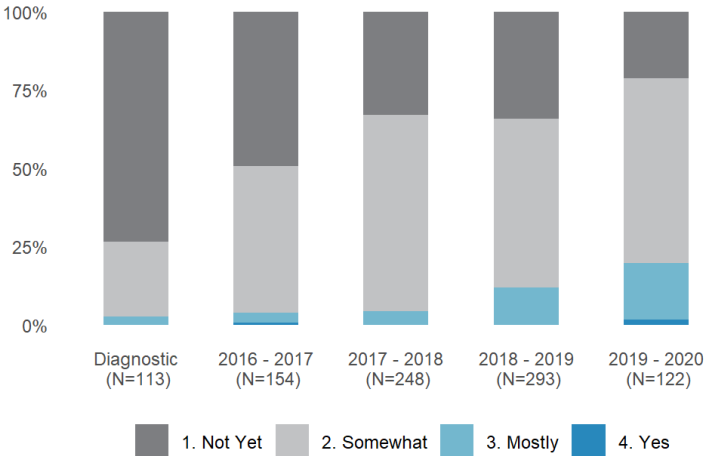
³ Examples of our Unit and Lesson Preparation Protocols are found on page 7 of our [Instructional Materials Implementation Guidebook](https://lifteducationtn.com/resources/). The Guidebook can be accessed on the LIFT website: <https://lifteducationtn.com/resources/>.
⁴ Our technical assistance partner, TNTP, conducts these classroom observations and trained reviewers hold a consistently high bar for instruction across classrooms, school, and districts.

Based on reading research, the network also prioritized rigorous discourse and student ownership in our English language arts (ELA) classrooms. All districts in the network selected instructional materials with compelling, worthwhile texts that give students something rich to discuss and write about, and nearly all lessons (90 percent) are now focused on these rich texts.

We have learned that, in addition to high-quality materials, **teachers need ongoing opportunities to practice and reflect** on how to effectively facilitate academic discourse and collaboration as well as **frequent feedback** to hone their skills over several years. The LIFT districts with the most success in this priority area provided teachers with those structured opportunities to practice and supported leaders to provide specific, bite-sized feedback to support skill building.

Progress toward our vision for rigorous, evidence-based discussion and writing about these texts has been slow but steady. This year students were responsible for rigorous thinking in 21 percent of observed lessons, compared with just 3 percent during initial reviews. We anticipate that it may take several more years to fully realize our vision for excellence and learn more about what works to drive improvements.

Are students responsible for doing the thinking in the classroom?

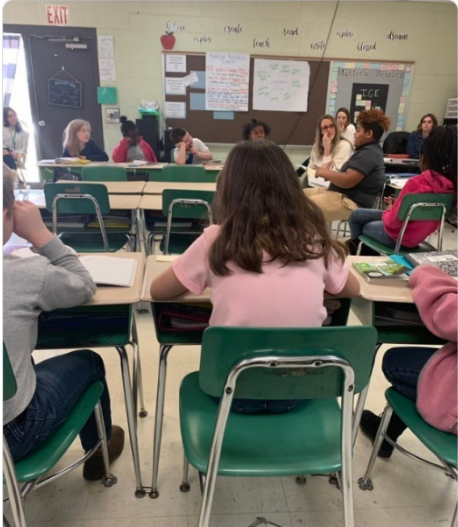


Note: "Diagnostic" includes only pre-implementation observations conducted in Spring 2016 and Fall 2017. All other columns exclude diagnostic observations.

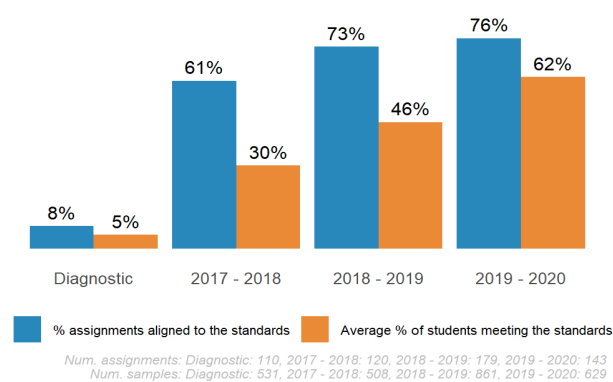
District Case Study: Reflective Coaching Cycles Focused On Student Ownership In Lauderdale County

This year Lauderdale County implemented a district-wide Reflective Coaching Cycle designed to increase the student ownership and knowledge required by the *Wit & Wisdom* curriculum. In the coaching cycle, school-based coaches work with small groups of teachers to prepare for an upcoming lesson by internalizing the materials, planning for the writing task, and practicing the use of instructional strategies that support student ownership. To accelerate results, the coaches help teachers enhance their implementation of techniques from the materials such as discussion protocols like “Socratic Seminars” or “Mix and Mingle,” writing activities such as using graphic organizers and analyzing models, or feedback techniques like improving writing through revision or using the “Praise, Question, Suggestion” protocol. After the group preparation and practice, the teacher implements and takes video of the lesson, reflecting first on her individual practice. Teachers then come together with coaches to collaboratively analyze the student work from the lesson and receive feedback from their coach before completing a final reflection to improve their practice moving forward.

Grade 4 students discussing philosophical reasons for why Brian of Hatchet is a changed person.
@WitWisdomELA @ClassroomWonder
#lauderdaleleads #TNBestforALL



Assignment alignment and Student performance



In addition to these research-based priorities, several districts in the LIFT network identified additional priorities for instruction that were specific to their context and progress. For example, districts with large percentages of students with disabilities or English Learner (EL) students prioritized instruction that was responsive to the diverse needs of students.

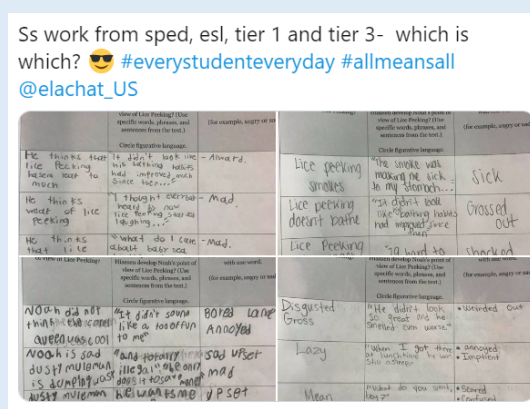
All districts in the network selected instructional materials with embedded suggestions for targeted supports and scaffolds, supporting our progress on toward goals for student learning. This year 62 percent of students met the demands of Tennessee's rigorous standards on their assignments, compared with just 5 percent in initial reviews.

Num. samples: Diagnostic: 531, 2017 - 2018: 508, 2018 - 2019: 861, 2019 - 2020: 629

We have learned that, in addition to high-quality materials, **ELA, EL, and special education teachers need structured opportunities to collaborate around the materials** to appropriately plan to meet student needs. Those with the most success in this priority area included EL and special education teachers in all curriculum-focused professional learning and created structured opportunities for these teachers to collaborate on unit and lesson preparation.

District Case Study: Supporting English Learners And Students With Disabilities In Lenoir City

Three years into their literacy improvement work, Lenoir City Schools had a lot to celebrate. They had achieved meaningful improvements in instruction and significantly increased percentages of students on track/mastered in ELA. But they were still a long way from their goal of ensuring all students, including the large number of English Learner students in the district, can read, understand, and express their understanding of grade-level text. To accelerate progress toward that goal in 2019-20, the district doubled down on deepening understanding of the supports and scaffolding suggestions embedded in the curriculum and facilitating collaboration between ELA, EL, and special education teachers to plan the lesson experience with targeted supports to meet students' individual needs.



Nationally, the majority of ELs (between 45 and 60 percent) achieve intermediate to high-intermediate levels of English language proficiency (“expanding” or “bridging” WIDA levels). Most students stall at this level for a few years, and often for their lifetime. To address this challenge, Lenoir City ELA, EL, and special education teachers engaged in professional learning together focused on understanding the design features of the curriculum that support students at intermediate to high-intermediate levels of language proficiency in their acquisition critical academic English skills. Teachers explored why it is critical that all students, even EL students, engage with the complex, grade-level text; engage in multiple reads of the text; capture and organize their thinking in anchor charts and graphic organizers; orally process and rehearse before writing; and receive implicit, embedded, and explicit vocabulary instruction.

In addition to deepening understanding of how their instructional materials were inherently supportive of English Learners, ELA, EL, and special education teachers also engaged in learning focused on the specific scaffolding suggestions for meeting the needs of groups or individual students at lower and higher levels of language proficiency. Teachers explored strategies like using home language translations and cognates; strategic grouping; and the use of sentence frames or starters. Teachers then worked in grade-level teams to consider the sequence of instruction for the upcoming week and plan the lesson experience with targeted supports to meet students' individual needs. Lenoir City Schools continues to prioritize collaboration between ELA, EL, and special education teachers on an ongoing basis to support this thoughtful preparation and maximize impact on students.

Key Learning 2: A relentless focus on measuring progress and a commitment to continuous improvement are key to achieving deep instructional change with high-quality instructional materials.

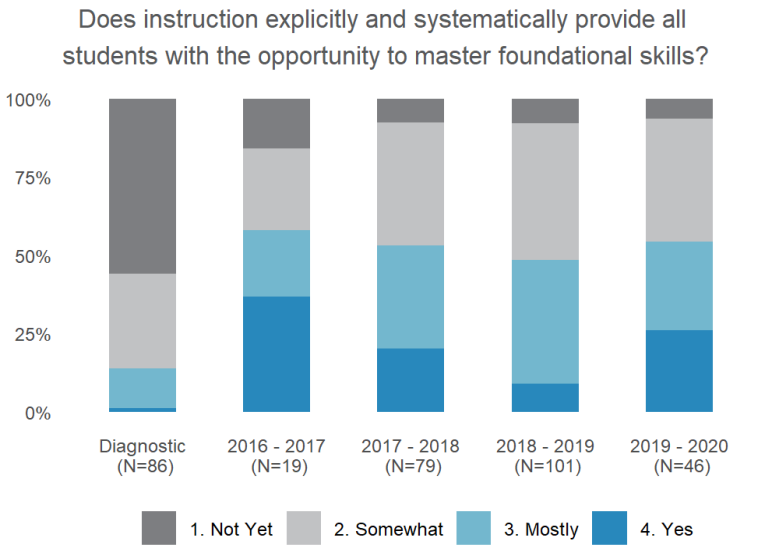
Grounded in a shared vision for excellence, districts in the LIFT network have systematically gathered quantitative and qualitative data on stakeholder perceptions and changes in instruction over the past four years. Monitoring changes in the day-to-day experiences of students, in addition to lagging indicators like state test scores, has supported reflection on the impact of the materials, supports, and development provided and adjustments to the course of action.

In 2016-17, a few districts in the LIFT network piloted instructional materials that support systematic and explicit daily instruction in phonological awareness and phonics in a small number of classrooms. Initially these districts saw a huge increase in the quality of foundational skills instruction after the introduction of these instructional materials. In 2017-18, these districts maintained their progress even as they expanded materials to more classrooms: 58 percent of observed lessons reflected the vision for systematic and explicit foundational skills instruction, compared with just 13 percent in our initial instructional review.

However, as we noted in our [2019 Annual Report](#), without a consistent focus on this area of instruction, teachers reverted to old practices and were not consistently implementing the skills materials with integrity in 2018-19.

This year, LIFT leaders reflected on progress monitoring outcomes, refocused on training, and recommitted to support for foundational skills instruction, putting us back on track. As a result, 59 percent of observed lessons reflected the vision for systematic and explicit foundational skills instruction, compared with just 13 percent in our initial instructional reviews.

The LIFT districts with the most success in this priority area **provided teachers with dedicated time and training to analyze assessment data and plan for targeted instruction**. Districts in the LIFT network leveraged PLC or grade-level planning structures to establish regular routines and consistent protocols for assessment analysis and action planning.



District Case Study: Skills Assessment Analysis And Action In Sullivan County

To address the dip in the quality of foundational skills instruction, this year Sullivan County leaders refocused on training and support for foundational skills instruction. They identified a teacher leader (“anchor teacher”) in each building to build the capacity of their peers to deliver skills instruction that is data-driven, systematic, and flexible to meet the varied needs of students. These anchor teachers received training on how to analyze the results from CKLA Unit Assessments and leverage resources from the curriculum to plan targeted small-group instruction during Pausing Point days. These teachers were charged with leading grade-level teams through two PLC cycles for each CKLA unit back in their schools. In PLC A, teachers work to identify the priority skills for the unit, “test drive” the unit assessment, and prepare to support student mastery during instruction. In PLC B, teachers work to analyze the results from the unit assessment, develop their data-driven instructional plan for Pausing Point days, and prepare to monitor progress. Sullivan County school leaders worked to schedule and protect time for this important work, and the district ELA instructional coach pushed into school-based PLCs to provide job-embedded support and coaching.

Key Findings 3: During extended school closures in response to the COVID-19 crisis, high-quality instructional materials supported the transition to rigorous and meaningful at-home learning.

When Tennessee Governor Bill Lee first announced temporary school closures in response to the coronavirus health emergency, districts across the state worked incredibly hard to offer stability for students and families by providing meals and immediate at-home learning resources.

After a few weeks, the governor revised his recommendation and encouraged all Tennessee schools to close for the remainder of the school year. Research suggests that such major disruptions to a student's education lead to wide-ranging and significant learning loss.⁵ Districts in the LIFT network used this as an opportunity to reflect on their crisis strategy and the realities of an extended school closure, and refine their approach moving forward. Many districts shifted from sharing immediate resources with families to executing a clear vision and plan for curriculum-based distance learning designed to minimize any negative impact on students' experiences and learning. These districts found creative ways to engage students in the rigorous texts and tasks in their high-quality instructional materials and ensure students were still engaged in robust and rigorous distance learning opportunities from home.

As in the regular classroom setting, a commitment to leveraging high-quality instructional materials freed up teachers' valuable time to focus on how to deliver instruction instead of what instruction to deliver. Teachers across the network collaborated on how best to translate rich instruction to the virtual setting, how to authentically engage families, and how to support students' social-emotional needs during the crisis.

Teacher Spotlight: Wendy Jones, First-Grade Teacher, Lenoir City Elementary

"During our school closure in March, I was able to use the high-quality instructional materials from our EL Skills Block curriculum to maintain continuity with my students during our online classes twice a week. Teaching virtually was a new adventure for all of us, but being able to use the protocols and decodable texts that we had been using in the classroom gave me more time to figure out how to get students online and involved in the lesson. After the first couple of online classes, students fell right back into the routines of chaining, phoneme blending/segmenting, and interactive writing. I was able to use my class document camera at home and share the screen so students could see the decodable text. We could read the text and locate sight words just like we would do on a regular Tuesday at school. Being able to teach with familiar high-quality materials brought a lot of comfort to me and my students during a difficult time."

Our curriculum partners worked quickly to ensure access to texts and tasks digitally and provide other distance learning resources for students and teachers:

Wit & Wisdom: Great Minds created [Knowledge on the Go materials](#) to provide coherent materials and recorded lessons from experienced teachers. Students can access the *Wit & Wisdom* Module 4 videos and activities for their grade via a device or PBS stations across the country.

Amplify CKLA: Amplify provided parent log-ins to the teacher resource site to give parents access to e-books, audiobooks, and knowledge builders. They created an editable parent/guardian letter and made the Student Activity Book pages printable. They also offered free access to a remote learning version of Amplify Reading — their personalized, digital literacy program aligned to the foundational skills in Amplify CKLA.

Core Knowledge Foundation: The comprehensive grade-level materials (including texts) were already open access on their website. In addition, the Foundation collected and organized [YouTube videos](#) of CKLA Read-Alouds by grade level.

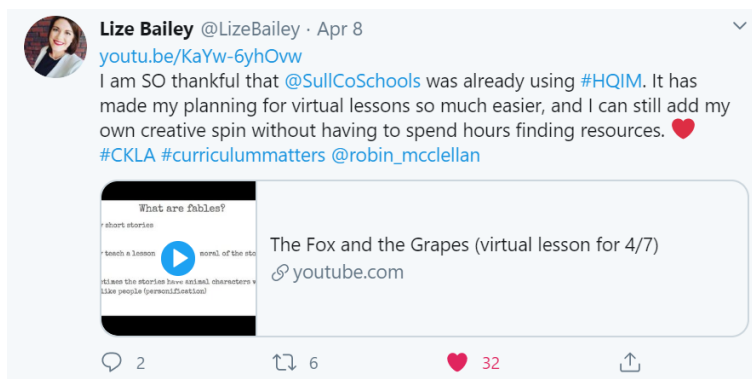
LearnZillion: LearnZillion allowed free access to the K-5 EL Language Arts Curriculum.

EL Education: EL Education created Remote Learning Guides for K-2 and Reading Guides for 3-8, incorporating elements of the Read-Think-Talk-Write Cycle using texts from the curriculum.

⁵ https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2020/05/Collaborative-Brief_Covid19-Slide-APR20.pdf

Teacher Spotlight: Lize Bailey, First-Grade Teacher, Rock Springs Elementary

“Thankfully, our district was already using high-quality instructional materials (CKLA), and that was also another factor that made the transition to distance learning a smooth one. We weren’t spending hours searching for materials, and we also didn’t have to bring half of our classroom home with us. Students were already used to formatting and expectations, and they just picked up and carried on from home as they would in our classroom. We even had parents say that they didn’t need to help their child as much as they had expected because the students took ownership of their learning and had clear directions and expectations.”



In districts where many families had limited access to devices and high-speed internet, our high-quality instructional materials also supported rigorous paper-based options with copies of the rich texts, rigorous text-dependent questions and tasks, and foundational skills practice activities. With consistent materials across schools and common pacing guidance, it was easy to centralize the printing and distribution of high-quality learning materials, ensuring that all students had a consistent, rigorous distance learning experience.

Example: At-Home Learning Packet (Grade 1)

CKLA DISTANCE LEARNING PLAN (GRADE 1)			
WEEK 1 (APRIL 20-24)			
Monday	Read-Aloud (20 mins) Work with your child to: • Listen to the recording of Domain 10 Lesson 1 Read Aloud: The New World OR • Read Domain 10 Lesson 1: The New World aloud to your child.	Discussion (10 mins) After the read-aloud, discuss the following question with your child: If you could travel back in time, would you rather be one of the Native Americans, one of the sailors who traveled with Columbus, or one of the English colonists? Why? Talk to your child about the word of the day: Freedoms: Freedoms are rights to decide what you want to do or how you want to live.	Reading (Optional) Choice Reading on MyGo .
Tuesday	Writing (15 mins) Ask your child to draw and write in response to today's Writing Journal Prompt: What were some of the early English settlements in North America?	Skills (15 mins) Work with your child to complete the activities on the following activity pages from the Skills 5 packet: • Activity Page 1.1 • Activity Page 3.3	Reading (Optional) Have your child read American Symbols (Reading A-2).
Wednesday	Read-Aloud (20 mins) Work with your child to: • Listen to the recording of Domain 10 Lesson 2 Read Aloud: A Tasting Time: The Boston Tea Party OR • Read Domain 10 Lesson 2: A Tasting Time: The Boston Tea Party aloud to your child.	Discussion (10 mins) After the read-aloud, discuss the following question with your child: What was the colonists' next plan for solving the problem with the British king? Did everyone agree on what should be done? Talk to your student about the word of the day: Harbor: A harbor is a protected body of water that is deep enough for ships to set anchor; a harbor has port facilities where ships load and unload goods.	Reading (Optional) Choice Reading on MyGo .
Thursday	Writing (15 mins) Ask your child to draw and write in response to today's Writing Journal Prompt: Why did the colonists want to make their own rules and not follow the king of Great Britain?	Skills (15 mins) Work with your child to complete the activities on the following activity pages from the Skills 5 packet: • Activity Page 7.3 • Activity Page 8.3	Reading (Optional) Choice Reading on MyGo .
Friday	Check-in with your teacher to share what you learned this week! Your child's teacher will reach out about Zoom or phone office hours.	Skills (15 mins) Work with your child to complete the activities on the following activity pages from the Skills 5 packet: • Activity Page 9.3 • Activity Page 14.4	Reading (Optional) Choice Reading on MyGo .

Name _____

7.3

Dear Family Member,

Your child has been learning to read words with the spellings 'ch' (chin) and 'ch' (itch) for the sound /ch/. The words below contain these spellings. Ask your child to cut out the word cards. Show the cards to your child to read aloud and use in a sentence. Your child can sort the words into piles according to which spelling is used for /ch/. There are also 'Tricky Words' which are marked with an *.

kitch-en	catch-er	chips	should*
stretch	chin	batch	stitch-es
hatch	march	how*	fetch-ed
much	be-cause*	scratch-ing	chant

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Key Finding 4: Looking forward, high-quality instructional materials and efforts to engage families in our literacy improvement work will be instrumental in our crisis recovery.

We know that despite our efforts to provide high-quality distance instruction during school closures, many of our students will enter the next grade in the fall with unfinished learning. Addressing this unfinished learning will require intensive recovery planning, and it will be more important than ever to accelerate access to grade-level content instead of delaying it. We also know that students in LIFT districts will have much less unfinished learning than many others due to the purposeful spiraling of standards in our high-quality instructional materials that allows for review at both the end of the year and the beginning of the next year.

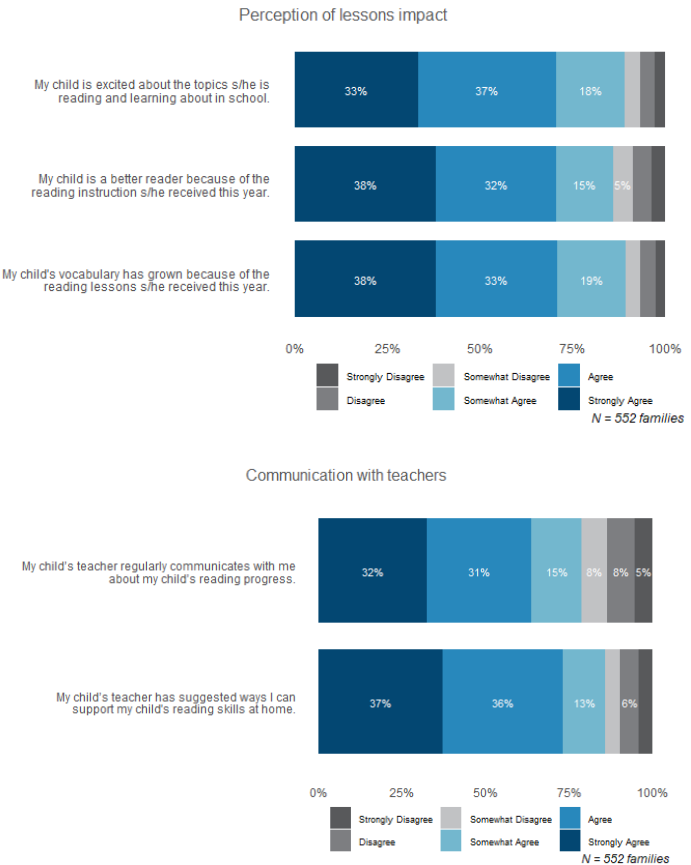
Over the last month, we have explored how our high-quality instructional materials will support us in this effort:

- Our high-quality instructional materials are built around a coherent scope and sequence that will allow us to pinpoint exactly what instruction was missed and forecast gaps.
- Reflecting the research on best practice, our foundational skills materials have an intentional preview and review of skills at the beginning and end of each school year. For example, many of our exiting kindergarteners may have missed explicit instruction on the double-letter spellings for consonant sounds (e.g., ‘bb’, ‘dd’, ‘ff’, ‘gg’, ‘cc’, ‘ll’), but these skills will be intensively reviewed again at the beginning of the first-grade curriculum.
- Reflecting the research on best practice, our materials reflect deep integration of the standards and spiraled opportunities to practice and apply them throughout the year. This means we can push forward with grade-level materials, tasks, and assignments and support teachers to provide appropriate scaffolds that make the work accessible. Instead of sending students backward to fill in all the potential gaps, we will focus on filling in only the most critical gaps — and not in isolation, but at the moment they’re needed.
- Our high-quality instructional materials feature strong assessment and remediation resources and flex days/time for targeted instruction that will allow us to identify and address gaps quickly, putting students back on track to grade-level content.

In addition to planning to address unfinished learning and accelerate access to grade-level materials, it will also be important to prepare for the possibility of future periods of remote learning. When schools close, families are left to care for their children’s physical, emotional, and educational needs in unprecedented ways. With the likelihood that students may engage in some or all of their learning at home next year, it is more important than ever to strengthen relationships with families and understand their needs.

Over the past four years, districts in the LIFT network have worked to build strong relationships and regular communication with families; empower families with suggestions for how they can support reading skills at home; and provide families with opportunities to share feedback and elevate concerns. This spring, 90 percent of parents responding to our family survey reported that their child is a better reader because of the reading instruction s/he received this year and 86 percent reported that their child’s teacher has suggested ways they can support at home. This work will be an important foundation for authentic family engagement if future periods of remote learning are required.

We are confident that our focus on high-quality instructional materials and authentic family engagement will support and accelerate our students’ recovery from the current crisis.



Closing

After four years, the work of the LIFT network has produced compelling evidence that working with high-quality instructional materials can improve both instructional quality and student outcomes. But this work takes time, sustained support for educators, and a relentless focus on and response to leading indicators of progress.

In the year ahead, the LIFT districts will maintain their commitment to a research-based vision of literacy, data-informed priorities, and rigorous instructional materials. Our efforts to improve literacy across the network with innovative solutions will likely center on two main priorities:

- Priority 1: How to transfer the thinking load to students
- Priority 2: How to address unfinished learning and accelerate progress as we start to recover from a global health crisis

We will continue to share our learnings, outcomes, and resources as we test new ideas and study their impact on students.

The State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE), a nonprofit and nonpartisan research and advocacy organization 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 rigorous academics. This partnership — combining knowledge of Tennessee’s context with a nationally recognized partner for academic success — has been key for our network.

Questions? Comments? Suggestions? Please contact us!

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