



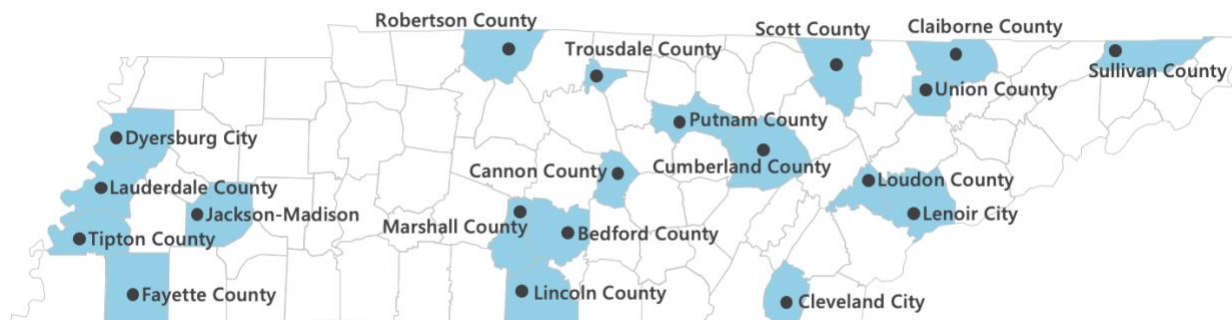
LIFT EDUCATION
LEADING INNOVATION FOR TENNESSEE

Expanding Early Literacy Implementation

October 2021

INTRODUCTION

Leading Innovation for Tennessee Education (LIFT) is a group of Tennessee districts working together to explore innovative approaches and share best practices that benefit students and other school 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 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. Additionally, the network has added twelve new districts who are similarly invested in driving forward outcomes in early literacy and who have worked to implement high-quality instructional materials using lessons learned from the original LIFT districts.

Over the past five years, the network has made significant progress:

- **Improvements in classroom instruction:** This year, 64 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, 85 percent of sampled assignments were grade-appropriate, compared with only 8 percent during initial reviews.
- **Improvements in student learning:** This year, 67 percent of students met the demands of grade-level standards on assignments, compared with 5 percent during initial reviews. Although COVID disruptions negatively affected test scores across the state, preliminary analyses conducted by SCORE show that the decrease was less pronounced in LIFT districts, with LIFT districts demonstrating an average 12.1 percent drop on 3rd grade TCAP scores from 2019 to 2021, compared to an average 16.8 percent drop in non-LIFT districts. Additionally, over one-quarter of LIFT districts avoided the drop in average test scores observed across the state.

This report outlines lessons learned from the 2020-2021 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 global pandemic while integrating virtual learning structures, managing teacher and student quarantines, and for our new districts, implementing a new curriculum. 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.

Data in this report look at leading indicators of instruction based around the Instructional Practice Guide, student work, and teacher and leader resources, in line with the methodology used in TNTP's national report *The Opportunity Myth*. Those seeking to learn from LIFT's work may also be interested in our previous reports and published resources.¹

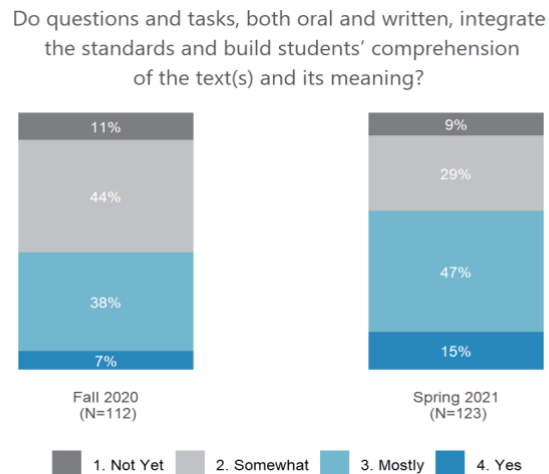
¹ Please read the 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020 LIFT annual reports to learn more about the network and the lessons learned in our first three years of implementation and the Instructional Materials Implementation Guidebook to see a comprehensive description of the innovative approaches and best practices from the network: <https://lifteducationtn.com/resources/>

KEY LEARNING 1

High-quality instructional materials provide a strong foundation for improvement in student outcomes; however, after initial improvement in the first years of implementation, continued sustained growth takes concentrated focus and the ability to pinpoint specific subgroups of students for continued support and development.

During the first four years of LIFT’s work with the implementation of high-quality instructional materials, it became clear that providing teachers with a high-quality literacy curriculum is critically important to ensure that students have access to rigorous, standards-aligned literacy instruction. During the 2019-2020 school year, districts across Tennessee underwent a formal adoption process to select, adopt, and begin the process of implementing high-quality instructional materials aligned to [the science of reading](#).

In 2020, LIFT invited an additional twelve districts to join the network with the goal of accelerating teacher development in their implementation of high-quality instructional materials. In spite of the enormous challenges of the 2020-2021 school year posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, LIFT districts saw rapid growth in Core Actions 1 and 2 as measured by the Instructional Practice Guide.



The LIFT districts were coached to implement their high-quality instructional materials with fidelity in the first year of implementation, **as implementing the materials as written is an important first step in both understanding the design and intent of the materials and in creating rapid growth in the Core Actions over the course of the first school year of implementation.** This lesson is directly informed from LIFT’s earlier work, which found that simply teaching the texts, questions, and tasks as written in the materials is a necessary first step in improving the quality of literacy instruction in early literacy classrooms. However, implementation with fidelity requires a shift for teachers who have previously been taught to use curricular materials as an adaptable resource rather than a primary tool to ensure high-quality instruction. This year, LIFT districts saw 85% of percent of reading comprehension lessons utilize a high-quality text from their instructional materials and saw a 17-point increase in the percentage of lessons utilizing high-quality questions and tasks² (from Fall 2020 to Spring 2021), likely due to increased professional learning and intellectual preparation with high-quality instructional materials.³

² New-adopting LIFT districts did not receive a diagnostic observation prior to implementing high-quality instructional materials; as a result all data from the 2020-2021 school year reflects observations conducted after teachers implemented their materials and received initial professional learning on their high-quality instructional materials.

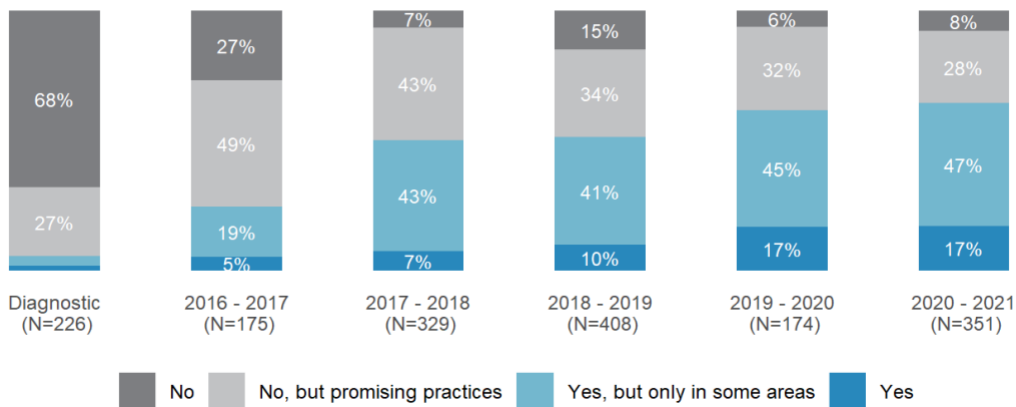
³ Our technical assistance provider, TNTP, conducts these classroom observations and trained reviewers hold a consistently high bar for instruction across classrooms, schools, and districts.

District Case Study: Rapid Instructional Progress In Reading Comprehension Lessons In Cleveland City

Cleveland City “hit the ground running” during their first year in the LIFT Network and demonstrated that great progress can be made with focus and determination. Cleveland City saw tremendous growth from Fall 2020 to Spring 2021, with 60 percent of observed classrooms meeting the demands of the Tennessee standards by Spring 2021. This was achieved through intentional planning of strategic initiatives and execution of those initiatives across the district. They were deliberate in building out a vision of strong literacy with school leadership teams and instructional facilitators to ensure that all key players were aligned in the literacy work. This cohesion and alignment amongst leaders allowed for a clear and concise execution of their plan to take place in their schools. They then followed this up with strong systems for teachers to receive coaching and support around their literacy vision. Lastly, they couldn’t have accomplished this progress without the amazing efforts by their teachers. With great mindsets in place, a thirst for learning and a commitment to improving their instruction for their students, their teachers flourished!

While new districts saw impressive literacy progress in their first year of implementation, LIFT’s original districts did not see substantial growth, with data plateauing since the 2019-2020 school year. This trend is likely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic — district and school leaders in original districts were not able to give the implementation of high-quality instructional materials the same time and attention that they had in early years of implementation — and is likely also informed by some of the instructional modifications required by districts implementing virtual learning and imposing social distancing measures in classrooms.

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



However, **in early-adopting districts with strategies that targeted specific student subgroups or had specific, targeted areas of instructional improvement, growth in the quality of instruction occurred.** At the start of the 2020-2021 school year, early-adopting districts worked to define their instructional priorities and strategies based on data from the 2019-2020 school year and zeroed in on specific areas for improvement. While the 2020-2021 school year presented many challenges, the districts that were able to stay focused on their instructional priorities and the strategic action steps aligned to those priorities saw the quality of instruction continue to improve.

For example, in Trousdale County, district leaders focused on ensuring that K-2 students would have access to the complete CKLA Foundational Skills program despite students only being in-person at school two days a week by building a school day schedule that allowed for double ELA blocks. In Dyersburg City, the district prioritized building administrator knowledge about Core Action 2 and ensured that teachers were regularly receiving actionable feedback on their literacy practice. These districts did not see the same plateau or decline in instructional walkthrough data that other districts saw, largely due to their ability to remain focused on a specific strategy for improvement.

District Case Study: Supporting English Language Learners In Lenoir City

Entering the 2020-2021 school year, Lenoir City articulated a clear priority around supporting English Language Learners (ELL) to access grade-level appropriate literacy content:

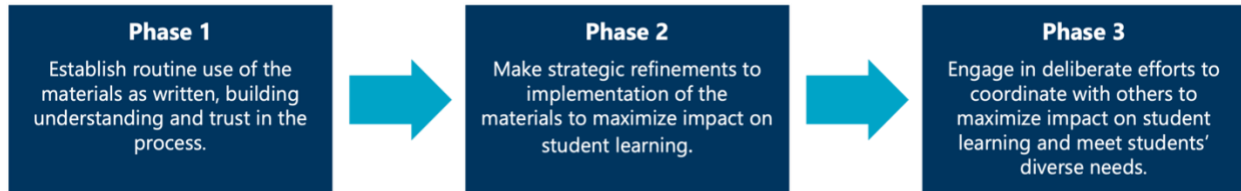
- Support teachers to provide targeted instruction to meet students' diverse needs by...
 - Supporting K-2 teachers to use benchmark assessment data to group students, prepare targeted instruction and materials, and foster students' self-management during differentiated small group time.
 - Supporting Grade 3 ELA and ELL teacher collaboration to ensure ELL students meet content objectives and develop English language skills.

In order to work toward this strategic priority, Lenoir City took several critical action steps to ensure ongoing progress, including:

- Developing a process, protocol, and strong example of how Grade 3 ELA and ELL teachers could collaborate and co-plan to ensure ELL students' success on content and language objectives. I.e.,
 - ELL teachers bring expertise around language levels and language objectives
 - ELA teachers bring expertise around content objectives and lesson plan/flow.
 - Example included clear illustrations of how both teachers bring expertise that ensures ELL student success.
- Engaging the ELL teacher team in PLCs focused on understanding and internalizing the design and intent of the Expeditionary Learning Module and Skills block materials.
- Designing and engaging ELA and ELL teachers in a four-part hybrid Canvas Course focused on supporting access to rigorous content for multilingual learners, with monthly reflection deliverables and bridge to practice opportunities, with the following objectives:
 - Deepen our knowledge of how additional language develops over time and what factors impact language learning.
 - Explore the linguistic demands of lessons in the Expeditionary Learning Language Arts curriculum and the suggested supports for multilingual learners.
 - Prepare strategic supports and scaffolds that will support access and develop language skills for an upcoming Expeditionary Learning Language Arts lesson.
- Observing classroom instruction on an ongoing basis to purposefully observe ELA/ELL teachers co-teaching to monitor impact.

KEY LEARNING 2

Districts with strong systems in place are able to set clear and ambitious instructional priorities and see more movement in their first year of implementation.



Over the course of the last five years, the LIFT network has learned that having strong systems for professional learning and teacher collaboration is a critical tool for rapidly improving literacy instruction. As reported in our [2018 Annual Report](#), teachers need access to ongoing, strategically sequenced professional learning that is grounded in their high-quality instructional materials in order to successfully implement the materials in their classrooms. Additionally, [as we reported in 2019](#), professional learning needs to occur both before the implementation of new materials, and continue through the school year, providing teachers with additional opportunities to learn and collaborate as they become excellent instructors with their materials. The original LIFT districts worked to create these systems of professional learning and collaboration as they moved further through the process of materials implementation.

With the expansion of LIFT in 2020 to include twelve additional districts, it quickly became apparent **that districts with preexisting systems for professional learning, alongside cultures of collaboration, were able to see faster progress with their high-quality instructional materials than those attempting to create professional learning communities, culture, and structures at the same time they were implementing CKLA for the first time.** Creating strong systems of professional learning – by which we mean, protected time for learning, alongside strong scopes and sequences for professional learning content and clearly defined roles for facilitation and participation — takes time, effort, and resources, and intentional planning for staffing. When districts already have these systems in place prior to adopting new instructional materials, they are able to make more rapid instructional improvement, thus improving the student experience.

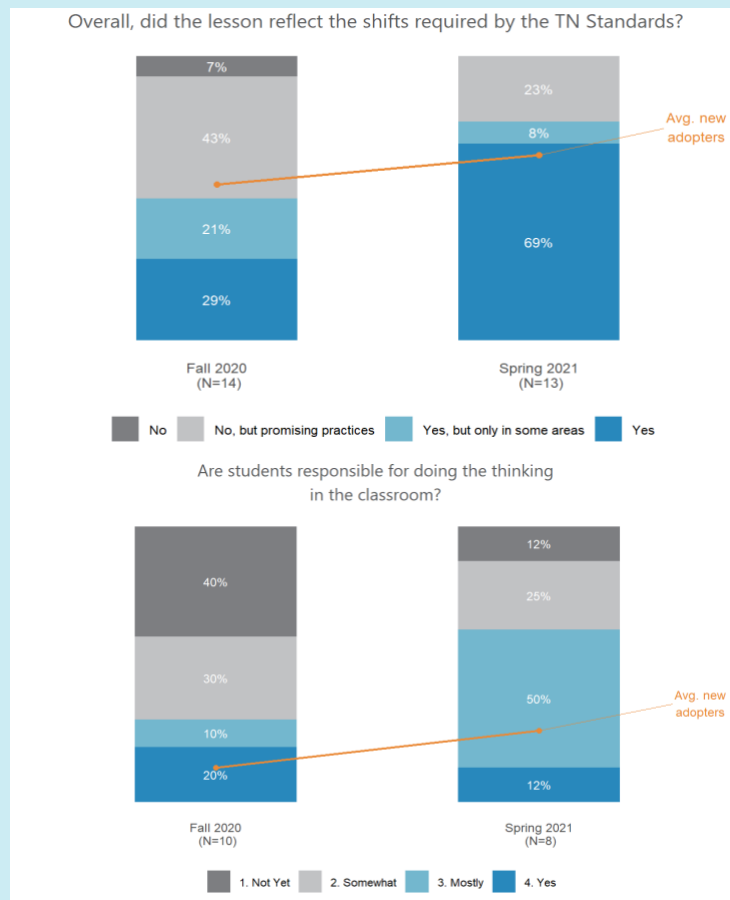
District Case Study: Using Professional Learning To Rapidly Improve Instruction In Robertson County

In Fall, 2020, Robertson district leaders recognized that their school leaders and teachers would need targeted, sustained professional learning in order to meet the demands of the literacy standards with their new materials, CKLA. With intentional planning and a long-term focus, they outlined a professional learning series centered on high expectations for students. The series included:

- an introduction to the IPG
- deep dives into Core Actions 2 & 3 and how the CKLA materials support teachers to deliver strong questions and tasks and improve student ownership
- Learning and practice on how to leverage CKLA materials to regularly infuse writing and academic discussion into daily instruction

Beginning in Winter 2020, school-based Academic Coaches and Literacy Leaders (teacher leaders who receive stipends to support their peers) participated in this professional learning series, identifying ways they would immediately apply the learning to support their campuses' teachers through coaching and PLCs. However, the intentional learning and development did not stop there: Coaches and literacy leaders redelivered the sessions directly to all literacy teachers during Summer 2021 in-service, with support from district leaders. This multi-layered approach to PD ensured Robertson's campus-based leaders are aligned on the importance of high expectations and can support their teachers to uphold them and has provided teachers in Robinson County with access to coaches and leaders who can provide them with day-to-day support on the successful implementation of CKLA in their literacy classrooms.

Robertson County Year 1 Growth as compared to the average Year 1 Growth by other LIFT districts in their first year of implementation:



KEY LEARNING 3

Providing teachers with high-quality instructional materials cannot be a stand-alone strategy for improvement; a targeted strategy for teacher investment in their materials is critical for improving literacy outcomes.

During the 2019-2020 school year, districts across the state of Tennessee underwent their regular adoption cycle to select new instructional materials. This rigorous process ensured that districts had the opportunity to select materials from a list of high-quality instruction materials, with districts getting teacher input on their final decisions. As such, districts in LIFT were adopting materials that were assured to be high quality, with the hope that the majority of teachers within the districts would be enthusiastic about their new materials.

“Even teachers using excellent newly aligned programs are sometimes reverting to a strategies/skills-first use of those materials; they are struggling to implement the lessons as designed because it requires them to unlearn what they have learned over the years.”

Meredith Liben & Susan Pimental, *Placing Text at the Center of the Standards-Aligned ELA Classroom*

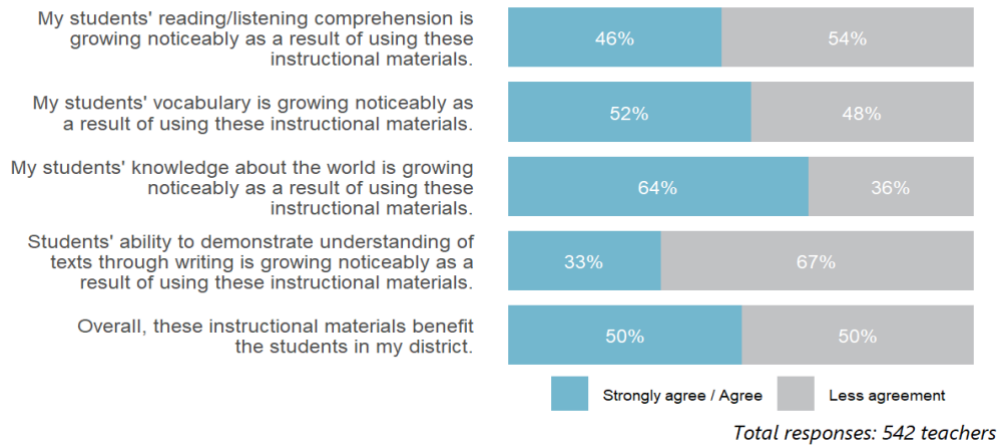
Despite the strength of the materials and the input from teachers in the selection process, teacher investment in the materials is not a given and implementing a new curriculum without growing investment can lead to a compliance orientation, which will likely stymie the long-term potential of high-quality instructional materials. Survey data⁴ indicate that while teachers are getting increasingly comfortable using their high-quality instructional materials on a daily basis, they are not yet convinced of the potential impact of materials as a lever to improve student outcomes. There are many possible reasons why this could be true:

- The Tennessee State Standards, adopted in 2017, require substantial shifts in literacy teaching practice, including the consistent grounding of questions and tasks requiring evidence in rigorous, complex texts. For many teachers, this is a shift from their traditional teaching methods, and if teachers haven't received ongoing support and development around the instructional shifts, the content and methodology of their high-quality instructional materials can appear to be averse to what they think they know about teaching literacy.⁵
- Additionally, due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, many districts were unable to provide teachers with in-depth professional learning to orient them to their new materials prior to implementing the materials in the 2020-2021 school year. Limited opportunities for these in-person, initial trainings on the materials likely led to gaps in teacher understanding about the design, intent, and pedagogy informing the materials, along with WHY they are beneficial to student learning.

⁴ Detailed information about the methodology behind TNTP's survey measures can be found at [https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP-
OppMyth_TechAppx_FINAL.pdf](https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP-OppMyth_TechAppx_FINAL.pdf).

⁵ See <https://achievethecore.org/content/upload/Text-at-the-Center-Report-V5.pdf>.

Perceived impact of the materials
Spring 2021



When LIFT surveyed teachers across the twenty member districts in Spring 2021, only 50 percent of teachers agreed with the statement “Overall, these instructional materials benefit the students in my district.” When broken down further, the survey data demonstrate that teachers likely do not understand how a knowledge-based approach to literacy instruction develops students’ reading comprehension (see graph).

In districts where teachers are more invested in their instructional materials, there was greater instructional growth as measured by classroom observations using the IPG. For example, in Scott County, where 76 percent of teachers agreed with the statement “Overall, these instructional materials benefit the students in my district,” the overall quality of instruction jumped from 29 percent of lessons meeting the demands of the instructional shifts and standards in Fall 2020 to 78 percent in the Spring of 2021. This 49-point increase greatly outpaced other districts where teachers demonstrated less investment in their materials.

District Case Study: Leveraging Teacher Investment In HQIM In Scott County

At Fairview Elementary School in Scott County, over 75 percent of teachers agree with the statement “Overall, these instructional materials benefit the students in my district.” This level of investment in the first year of implementation is remarkable, and a direct result of the concerted effort of school leaders to ensure teachers had the support they needed to implement CKLA during the 2020-2021 school year.

Scott Cash, the principal of Fairview ES, ensured that his teachers had a strong CKLA orientation in August 2020, which — though presented virtually — provided teachers with critical information about the design of CKLA, as well as providing them with recommendations about structured protocols for domain, unit, and lesson preparation. Additionally, Scott took several additional steps to ensure that teachers had the structural conditions in place they needed to feel successful with CKLA:

- Fairview’s school day was structured to give teachers hour-long blocks for both Reading Comprehension and Foundational Skills so that teachers had plenty of time each day to implement the materials as intended with their students.
- Teachers had common planning time and clear expectations for common planning to internalize their units and daily lessons.
- Teachers received consistent support and feedback from their school leader and instructional coach to help improve their execution of CKLA lessons.

Additional evidence for the importance of teacher investment in their instructional materials is demonstrated by districts who started the year with forward momentum and strong initial classroom observations. For example, Union County began the year with 58 percent of classrooms meeting the demands of the shifts and standards, well above the majority of new districts in the LIFT network. They ended the year with 74 percent of classrooms meeting these demands. While Union County saw growth, this 16-point increase does not represent the same rapid pace of growth that other districts experienced. This correlates with their relatively low teacher investment in their materials: Only 44 percent of Union County teachers agreed that their instructional materials benefit students when surveyed in the Spring of 2021.

Moving into the 2021-2022 school year, LIFT districts will place increased emphasis on investing teachers in their high-quality instructional materials and will work to find replicable strategies to increase teacher investment. Part of this work will focus on continuing to increase school leader and teacher knowledge and understanding of how their instructional materials support excellent literacy instruction, while also ensuring teachers are getting the support they need to implement materials effectively, as we believe that investment in materials will increase as teachers see increased success in their classrooms when implementing their HQIM.

District Case Study: Increasing Teacher Investment In HQIM In Union County

Union County had a strong start to 2020-2021 school year, with teachers receiving high-quality training focused on their new instructional materials. However, the unique demands of the school year — including having to simultaneously provide both virtual and in-person learning for students, and only being in front of students four days a week — impacted teachers' ability to effectively implement their new materials. Additionally, the added demands of the year specific to COVID protocols prevented school leaders and coaches from being able to implement all of the teachers' supports that would have been ideal during a normal school year. As a result, Union County teachers did not report strong investment in their materials, and while some growth was made on instructional indicators, the growth was not as dramatic as hoped.

In response to this, Union County is pursuing several specific strategic actions in the 2021-2022 school year aimed at increasing teacher investment in their high-quality instructional materials:

- Support coaches and school leaders to use feedback opportunities with teachers to communicate the importance their high-quality instructional materials through modeling and professional learning opportunities
- Support coaches and school leaders to create clear expectations for how common planning time should be used to effectively prepare for lessons utilizing high-quality instructional materials
- Use PLCs and professional learning opportunities to help teachers understand research, design, and intent of their high-quality instructional materials

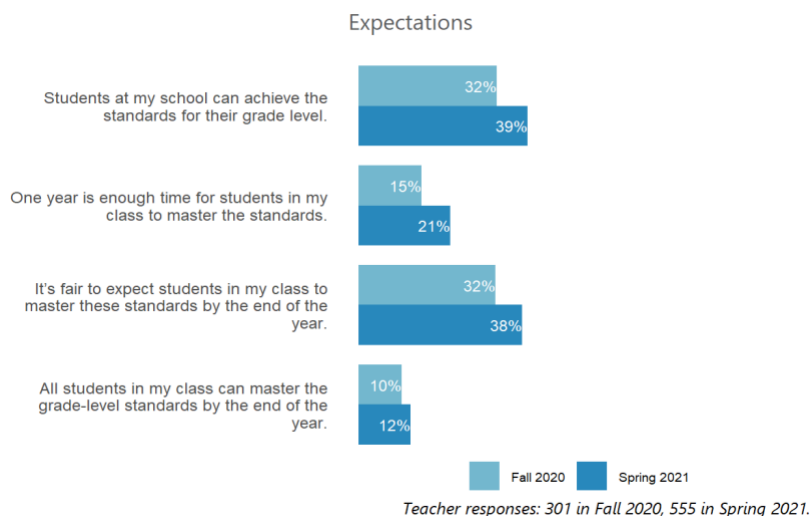
By carrying out these priorities, and monitoring teacher investment in their materials over the course of the school year, Union County hopes increase teacher investment in their materials, and as a result, to see improvement in classroom instruction using high-quality instructional materials.

KEY LEARNING 4

The pandemic may have affected teacher and leader expectations for what students can learn and do in a school year; a clear focus on accelerating access to grade-level content can improve teacher expectations.

In their 2018 national report *The Opportunity Myth*, TNTP found that teacher expectations are among the most important factors in determining student access to a rigorous education. Teachers with high expectations are defined as teachers who report that they believe their individual students can meet the demands of rigorous standards and do grade-level work.

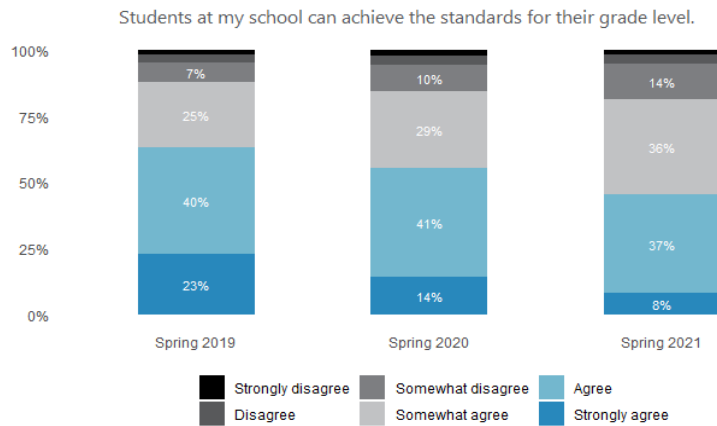
The Opportunity Myth found that teachers mostly supported the content of grade-level standards — but oftentimes, those same teachers did not believe that their particular students could be successful against the demands of rigorous standards.⁶ The low expectations TNTP uncovered also seem to contribute to a mismatch between the grades students receive and how prepared they are to demonstrate the skills they'd need to reach the goals they've set for themselves — which consistently include college.



When surveyed in Spring 2021, LIFT found that teachers reported a sharp decrease in expectations, with only 39 percent of teachers surveyed agreeing with the statement “students at my school can achieve the standards for their grade level” and only 12 percent of teachers agreeing that “all students in my class can master the grade-level standards by the end of the school year.” All students deserve teachers who believe that they can achieve, and this data is concerning as LIFT moves forward into the coming school year.

⁶ It's worth noting that in *The Opportunity Myth* TNTP only surveyed teachers on their expectations, so this may not be strictly a teacher problem. It is very possible, even likely, that others in the education system across roles and organizations have similarly low expectations for students.

It is likely that the disrupted 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, interrupted by the school closures, quarantines, and virtual structures required by the COVID-19 pandemic, are affecting teacher expectations. Additionally, the roll out of new materials and support provided to teachers during these years was often muddled by the pandemic, given that many teachers only received minimal virtual training on their materials. When teachers were surveyed in Fall 2019, just over 50 percent agreed with the statement “the standards are too difficult for students at my school.” While this is still lower than students deserve, it does demonstrate the sharp decrease in expectations experienced over the course of the semesters impacted by COVID-19.



There were a small number of districts that did not see a decrease in teacher expectations; these districts also had strategies in place to ensure student access to grade-level content. In Trousdale County, for example, district leadership focused on putting systems in place to ensure that K-2 students would get their full scope and sequence of Foundational Skills, ensuring that students would be on track for reading success in the upper grades. And in Lenoir City, leadership worked to make sure that students would have access to both Tier 1, grade-level appropriate content, while also creating structures for targeted Tier 2 instruction to target student gaps occurring from missing much of Spring 2020. **Given the lessons of *The Opportunity Myth*, finding replicable strategies to increase teacher expectations, through attention to learning acceleration, will be a primary focus on the 2021-2022 school year.**

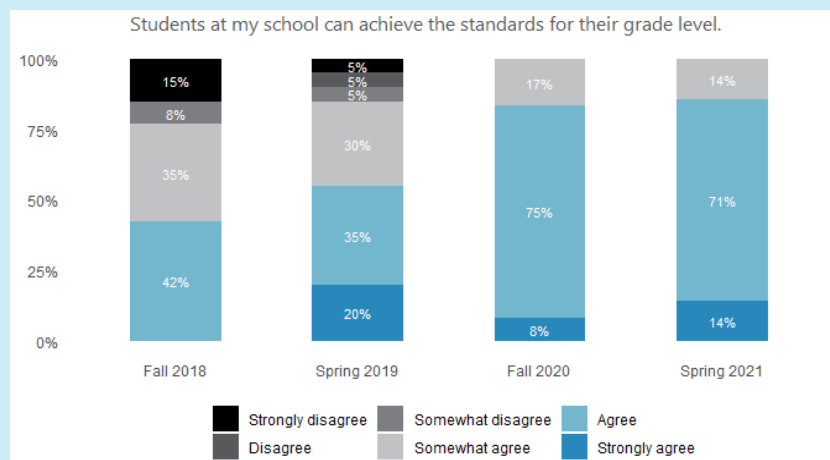
District Case Study: Ensuring Access To Grade-Level Content In Trousdale County

When it became apparent that the 2020-2021 school year would likely require a modified school schedule to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, district and school leaders in Trousdale County created an innovative solution where students attended school on alternating days, thus allowing teachers regular face-to-face time with all of their students while being able to provide a safe, socially distanced learning environment for kids.

Once this schedule was decided upon and approved, the administration at Trousdale Elementary School began planning to ensure that their K-2 students would have access to the most important grade-level content. Because Foundational Skills to learn to decode and read fluently are so critical in the early grades, it was determined that students would receive a full year's worth of Foundational Skills content — two skills lesson a day — on their "Learn at School" days, so that teachers could monitor progress and ensure that students were mastering critical foundational literacy skills. On their "Learn at Home" days, students watched videos of their Read Aloud knowledge-building lessons, which they then discussed during morning meeting when they returned to school the following day. As a result, students received a full year's worth of content in both Reading Comprehension and Foundational Skills despite the fact that they were only attending school in-person two days a week.

This focus on access to grade-level content not only benefited students academically; it also helped increase teacher belief that all students can achieve the standards for their grade level, as indicated in the graph below. In fact, Trousdale County was one of the only LIFT districts to see an increase in teacher expectations during the 2020-2021 school year, a reflection of the districts' commitment to increasing access to grade-level content for all students.

Trousdale County teacher expectations over time:



CLOSING

After several years of work in districts across the state of Tennessee, 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, a relentless focus on strategic priorities, and intentional systems to invest teachers in their materials to both improve instruction and increase teacher expectations.

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 four learning priorities:

- **Learning Acceleration:** How can we use HQIM to move student performance on literacy assessments (both materials-embedded and standardized) in a way that increases student access to grade-level content while providing “just in time” support to target gaps in student knowledge and skills?
- **Teacher Expectations:** How can we increase teacher expectations for students in literacy classrooms in the midst of COVID, and what replicable action steps can help us increase teacher expectations?
- **Core Actions 2 & 3:** How do we continue to build capacity of school systems, leaders, and teachers to ensure teachers are using strong questions and tasks to provide opportunities for students to own the cognitive work of each lesson?
- **Balancing Systems & Instruction:** How do we achieve coherence across all strategic initiatives and priorities designed to support improvements in teacher practice and student learning while balancing the need for both systems-level change, development of school-based leadership, and instructional priorities?

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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