

Building the

FRAMEWORK

A Report on
Elementary Grades
Reading in Tennessee

FEBRUARY 2017

For detailed information about district reading programs in Tennessee, see the appendix associated with this report, located on the department's Research and Policy Briefs web page and at tn.gov/assets/entities/education/attachments/rpt_bldg_the_framework_appendix.pdf.

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This report was written by the Tennessee Department of Education’s Office of Research and Strategy and designed by Brad Walker.

Introduction

In a third grade classroom, a teacher and an RTI² interventionist watch a student read aloud, and then they complete a shared observation protocol that helps them understand the student's struggle to make sense of sight words. Halfway across the state, two kindergarten teachers and a literacy coach return to an extended discussion about when vocabulary instruction should be explicit and when and how it can be embedded within other lessons. In another classroom, a previously struggling second grader responds to his teacher's questions about connections between the day's read-aloud text and a text they had read the previous day, demonstrating the confidence and knowledge he gained by participating in the school's summer reading camp.

These moments, with their intense focus on the fine-grained elements of instruction, capture the essence of an ambitious statewide endeavor to unify and align practice around a deep and nuanced view of what it means to teach students to read.

One year ago, teachers, school leaders, community members, and state policymakers came together and launched the Read to be Ready campaign to transform Tennessee students' reading abilities in the early grades. The mission to dramatically improve reading proficiency was called out in the department's *Setting the Foundation* report:

“By reading, we mean more than just decoding the letters on a page—although that is critically important. We want readers who draw meaning from text and make connections to the outside world.”

The goal of the campaign is that, by 2025, at least 75 percent of Tennessee students will be proficient readers by the end of third grade.

Read to be Ready emerged from the startling reality of Tennessee's reading achievement data. Only one-third of Tennessee fourth graders scored proficient in the last administration of National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in 2015. Equally concerning, students who fell behind in the early years almost never caught up in later grades, and many who appeared to be proficient readers at the end of third grade were no longer proficient at the end of fifth grade. When we tracked instruction in elementary classrooms, we saw a nearly exclusive focus on building students' foundational reading skills—like phonics and word recognition—and little time spent on equally necessary knowledge-based competencies, such as vocabulary and comprehension.

What we find now—from observing more than 150 classrooms this fall—is simultaneously encouraging and sobering about the degree of work that lies ahead.

Structural features of classrooms are changing.

High-quality texts that meet grade-level expectations are increasingly making their way into classrooms and lessons. Students are spending more time reading and more time listening to texts that have the potential to build both knowledge and foundational skills.

However, this progress is not yet accompanied by deeper instructional shifts. In particular, we find that students rarely engage in lesson sequences or classroom activities that intentionally build knowledge-based competencies. As a result, students who are meeting the expectations of classroom assignments are still not attaining the level of rigor demanded by Tennessee's academic standards.

We understand that these types of deep and meaningful instructional shifts take time. As we move forward, it is critically important that we coordinate support from all levels of the education system and focus attention on building knowledge and infrastructure in this area. This brings us back to the moments described at the beginning of this section: each represents a snapshot from a different district participating in a Read to be Ready initiative. While individual district approaches vary, each approach combines a targeted focus on key elements of instruction, a coordinated district-wide strategy for building teacher capability to deliver quality instruction, and a shared vision for success. We offer case studies of this work both as an indication of what it will take to improve and as guidance for other districts engaging in similar efforts.

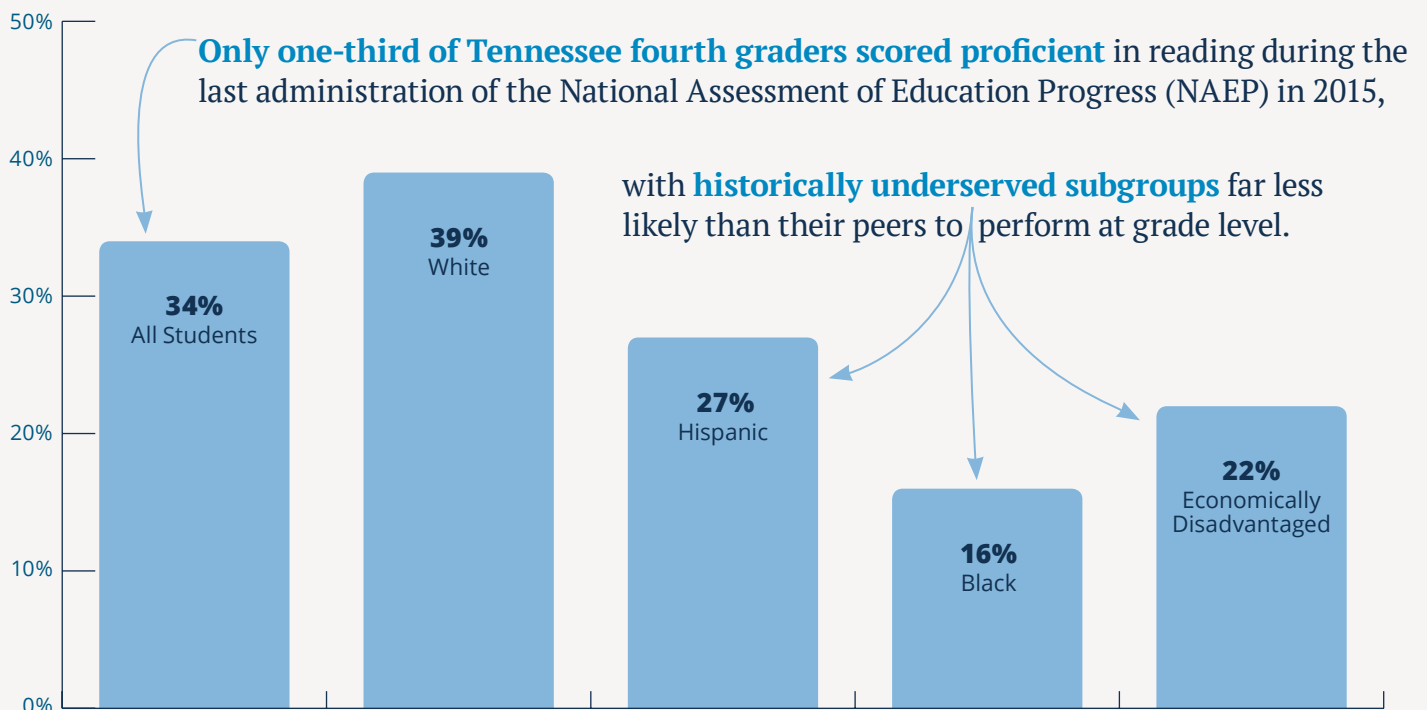
A Shared Vision of Reading Proficiency

To craft a shared vision of reading proficiency, the department convened an Early Literacy Council composed of educators from across the state representing diverse points of view, including teachers, instructional coaches, principals, district leaders, and university professors. The group put forward this definition:

Proficient reading is all about making meaning from text. To do this, readers must accurately, fluently, and independently read a wide range of appropriately complex texts; strategically employ comprehension strategies to analyze key ideas and information; construct interpretations and arguments through speaking and writing; develop vocabulary; and build knowledge about the world.

Building proficient readers is not easy work. The type of instruction it takes to achieve this vision of reading proficiency requires well-planned lessons that skillfully integrate high-quality texts with instruction that builds both skills- and knowledge-based competencies. In classrooms that build readers, we would expect to see:

- **A positive culture of learning** where students follow behavioral expectations and are engaged in the work;
- **A daily literacy block** that includes regular and purposeful opportunities for students to listen to, read, discuss, and write about authentic texts and media;
- Explicit instruction in appropriate foundational skills with sufficient **opportunity to master the skills** through reading and writing;
- Comprehension instruction using **high-quality texts or sets of texts** for read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading;
- **Questions and tasks** that integrate the standards and build students' comprehension of the text and its meaning; and
- **Students responsible** for an appropriate amount of the cognitive work in the lesson: grappling with challenging texts, tasks, and ideas, providing evidence from the text to support their answers, discussing their ideas with peers, and receiving feedback to reach an increasingly precise understanding and analysis of the text(s).



Classroom Instructional Practices

What We Know and Where We Can Grow

In the fall of 2015, a team of researchers at TNTP conducted observations across 100 elementary classrooms and found that reading classes in the early grades in Tennessee tended to unfold as a progression of lessons in isolated skills that infrequently asked students to make sense of what they were reading or to understand and express complex ideas through knowledge of concepts, vocabulary, and reasoning. A key pillar of the Read to be Ready campaign has been spreading the message that being a “reader” means being able to decode and pronounce words AND being able to make meaning from text. As stated in *Setting the Foundation*, “both skills- and knowledge-based competencies are vitally important, and neither serves as the foundation for the other.”

Where are we now?

This fall, the department again commissioned TNTP to observe literacy instructional practices across the state. TNTP worked with department staff to craft a literacy observation tool that assessed reading instruction against the vision of instructional practice outlined in the previous section. The group conducted observations in 163 classrooms in 18 schools participating in the Read to be Ready Coaching Network.¹

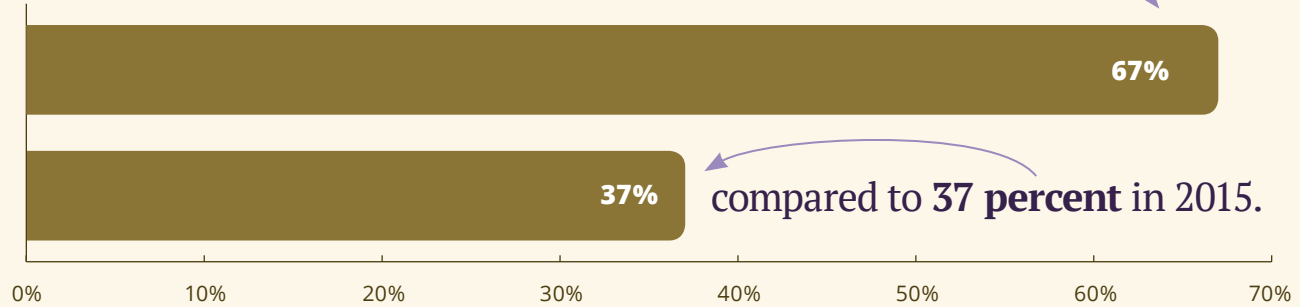
What the researchers saw was encouraging. Just months after launching Read to be Ready, changes to instructional practice were already happening. Tennessee’s early grades teachers were implementing more instruction using high-quality texts and emphasizing comprehension skills. Our early grades classrooms generally had the right foundations in terms of positive culture, daily literacy blocks that gave students opportunities to interact with rich texts, and grade-level foundational skills instruction. But there is still considerable work to be done. Students often lack opportunities to practice their newly acquired foundational skills in authentic reading and writing experiences. Additionally, students lack exposure to question sequencing and oral and written tasks that build their comprehension.

The groundwork is in place to allow for the types of improvements we are aiming to achieve. In 85 percent of K-3 classrooms visited, students were engaged in the work of the lesson;

executed transitions, routines, and procedures in an orderly and efficient manner; and demonstrated a joy for learning. Students were focused and on task, listening attentively, and following behavioral expectations. Additionally, teacher-student relationships were described as strong and warm. Statewide Tennessee teacher evaluation data tell the same story. Most early elementary teachers in 2015-16 (97 percent) scored at or above expectations on the environment rubric that assesses teachers on setting expectations, managing student behavior, and generating a respectful classroom culture.

Teachers are increasingly focused on building students’ reading and listening comprehension alongside their foundational skills. Students in Tennessee are spending more time reading, listening to, and making sense of text. In 2016, 67 percent of observed K-2 lessons focused on comprehension compared to 37 percent in 2015. During these comprehension lessons, 40 percent of students’ time was spent reading or listening to texts, compared to 29 percent in 2015. Additionally, teachers are generally implementing interactive read alouds and shared reading lessons focused on adequately complex and worthwhile texts. In 72 percent of classrooms, the texts were at or above the complexity level expected for the grade for the time in the school year; in 66 percent of classrooms, the texts were classified as worthy of student time and attention. At the same time, we see considerable variation in the use of complex texts that

In 2016, **67 percent** of observed K–2 lessons *focused on comprehension,*



compared to **37 percent** in 2015.

communicate knowledge or demonstrate craft in writing both within and across schools. Three schools had a vast majority of observed teachers using quality texts in their comprehension lessons, six schools had around half of their observed teachers using quality texts, and three schools had no teachers doing so.²

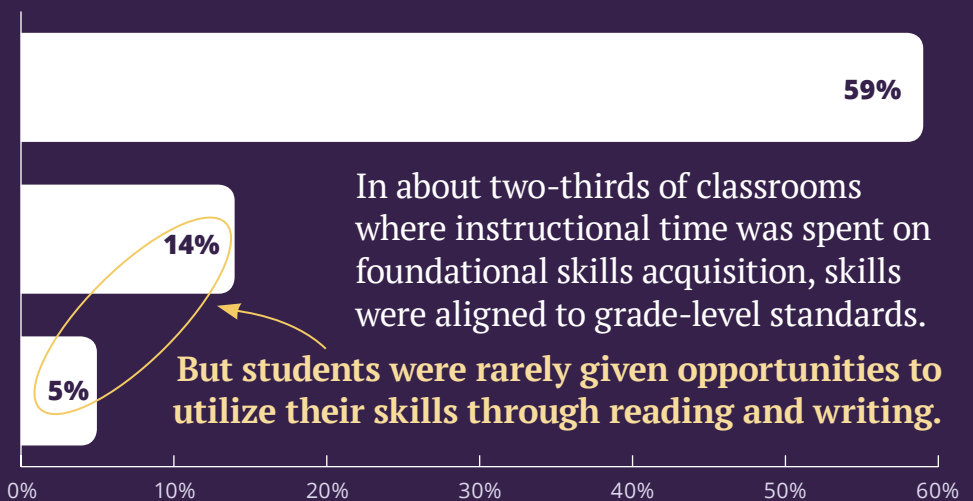
Teachers are providing foundational skills instruction aligned to grade-level standards, but students continue to have very limited opportunities to practice these newly acquired skills within authentic reading and writing opportunities. Students solidify their learning at a much faster rate when a greater share of instructional time is spent applying new skills rather than on isolated skill-and-drill work.³ In about two-thirds of the

classrooms where TNTP observed lessons focused on foundational skills acquisition, the skills were aligned to grade-level standards. However, as we found last year, students had very limited opportunities to practice these newly-acquired skills. Students in only 14 percent of lessons were given opportunities to practice the skills through authentic reading and writing experiences, and their activities only connected the acquisition of these skills to making meaning from connected text(s) in 5 percent of classrooms. The skills-focused lessons that the team observed tended to culminate with flashcards of sound combinations or drills of high-frequency words rather than with text-based activities that required students to practice the skills as part of the act of reading actual text.

The foundational skills being taught are aligned to the standards for the grade.

Students have sufficient opportunities to practice their newly acquired foundational skills with authentic reading and writing experiences.

Students connect acquisition of foundational skills to making meaning from connected text(s).

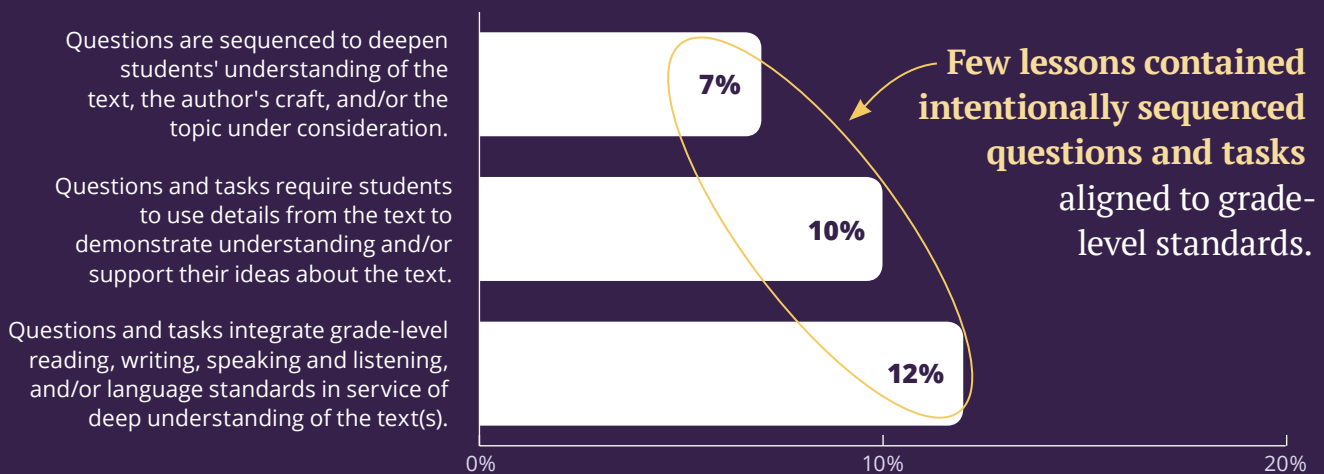


In about two-thirds of classrooms where instructional time was spent on foundational skills acquisition, skills were aligned to grade-level standards.

But students were rarely given opportunities to utilize their skills through reading and writing.

Most teachers are not intentionally selecting texts around topics to build students' knowledge and vocabulary, nor are they clearly sequencing texts within and across grades to increase complexity and purposefully build knowledge over time. Students' knowledge about a particular topic has as much impact on their ability to comprehend a text as their reading ability.⁴ Rich topical units of study can expose students to ideas and vocabulary that will help them better understand different perspectives and build knowledge in particular content areas. But observers saw little evidence that most of the texts that students were using in their reading classrooms had been thoughtfully selected around a topic to build the knowledge and vocabulary needed to comprehend increasingly complex texts. Most frequently, text selection was tied to particular holidays and seasons of the year. For example, books like "The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything" and "There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Bat," seemed to have been selected because of proximity to Halloween rather than being intentionally selected or ordered to deepen knowledge. Furthermore, the same texts were often read across multiple grade levels, missing the opportunity to expose students to a variety of texts that would purposefully build students' knowledge across grades. "Stellaluna," a high quality read-aloud text for kindergarten and first grade, was also being used for read aloud in grades 2 and 3 in the same school.

Teachers are generally not using strong question sequences or asking students to complete rigorous tasks that integrate the state standards and build students' comprehension. Thoughtfully sequenced questions and oral and written tasks can provide students with an instructional pathway to demonstrate deep understanding and analysis of high-quality texts.⁵ However, the questions in observed lessons predominantly focused on text-to-self connections, vocabulary in isolation, or recall of basic information, instead of diving deeper into the topic or the author's craft (as in the "Contrasting Classrooms" vignette). Only 12 percent of observed lessons included genuine textual analysis that was carried out in the service of deep understanding of texts and topics. Ten percent required students to use details from the text to demonstrate understanding or support their ideas about the text, and only seven percent followed a progression of questions that sequentially deepened students' understanding of the text, the writing, or the topic under consideration. The lack of opportunities for students to dive deeply into meaning means that classroom assignments aren't reaching the level of rigor required by our state standards. As a result, we see a host of classrooms where students are working hard to meet the expectations of their assignments and achieving success by this measure, but the students are not getting the chance to demonstrate proficiency in meeting the full expectations for their grade.



Overall, there seems to still be a disconnect between classroom norms and highly effective instructional practices. Teachers are getting the message that they need to use rich texts and build comprehension instruction into their lessons, but this alone is not enough. Our observations suggest that teachers are on target when it comes to the structural features of instruction, such as the amount of interactive read aloud, but not yet achieving the instructional goal of building systematic knowledge of the world and

associated vocabulary by way of appropriate structures like interactive read aloud. Teaching this way is complex work and requires a number of intentional decisions made both ahead of and during the lessons. The vignette in the next section and the case studies that follow describe the kinds of intense support needed to help teachers implement the kinds of instruction that are necessary to truly deepen student knowledge and understanding.



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Contrasting Classrooms

How Strategic Differences in Instruction Can Make a Big Difference for Student Learning

The following section tells a story of two teachers, **Ms. Novak** and **Ms. Wilson**, who use a read aloud of “Stellaluna” to address the kindergarten English Language Arts standard—“Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on kindergarten reading and content.” Read on to see how key differences in their instruction lead to different learning outcomes for students.

It is a brisk day toward the end of October.

Students file into a school building and walk at varying paces down concrete-tiled hallways to classroom doors surrounded by student work samples. After her kindergarten students have settled in for the day, Ms. Novak calls them from their brightly-colored plastic chairs to a rug where she sits in a wooden rocking chair holding the book “Stellaluna,”—a story about a young bat separated from her mother and taken in by a family of birds. To fit in with her new bird family, Stellaluna must learn how birds live differently than bats. The book features a complex plot, engaging illustrations, and rich vocabulary with words like *clutched*, *gracefully*, *clumsy*, and *anxious*. It also contains supplemental pages with facts about bats. Ms. Novak has selected “Stellaluna” for read aloud because it is nearing Halloween.

Once the students are gathered, Ms. Novak smiles and begins reading. After she reads, “Mother Bat would carry Stellaluna clutched to her breast as she flew out to search for food,” she asks her students, “What do you think *clutched* means?”

Greeted with blank stares, she explains that *clutched* means to hold tightly. She then has her students say the word *clutched* while pretending to hold something in their hands tightly to their chests. She asks the students to turn to a partner and use the word *clutched* in a sentence. Students talk about clutching their favorite toys to keep them out of the hands of their siblings and clutching their parents as they get shots at the doctor’s office. Ms. Novak calls on a few students to share their sentences.

She then continues reading, pausing only as she encounters her previously-determined targeted

vocabulary words, going through the same routine of asking what the word means, providing a definition, having students say the word while making a physical motion, and sharing sentences with each other. For *gracefully*, students stand and twirl like ballerinas. For *clumsy*, they hold their out hands out to their sides and shake them as if trying to reclaim their balance.

After finishing the story, Ms. Novak asks a few final questions.

“Who in the story was clumsy?”

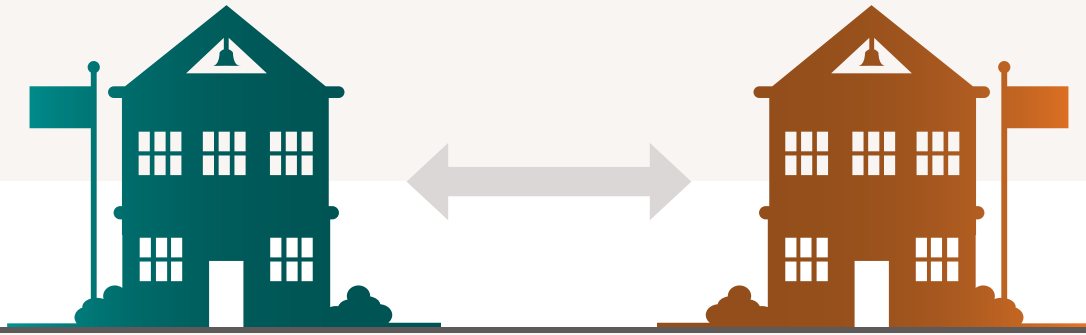
“Stellaluna!” the students call out in unison.

“What did the birds do that was graceful?”

“Fly!” “Land on a branch!” respond the students.

After a few more recall questions, Ms. Novak directs students to their desks where there is a worksheet with four boxes waiting for them. The worksheet prompts them to draw pictures of each of the words that they have learned during the lesson. Ms. Novak’s students draw pictures of themselves clumsily breaking dishes and falling down and of situations that make them anxious like big dogs and going to the doctor.

In another kindergarten classroom, Ms. Wilson’s students are also listening to a read aloud of “Stellaluna.” The class is in the middle of a unit on comparing animals, and “Stellaluna” is one of several books Ms. Wilson has selected to read aloud because of the rich vocabulary and repeated exposure to scientific ideas about animals. As Ms. Wilson reads, she pauses to ask a question.



“How does the picture help you understand what *clutched* means?”

“It means that the mommy bat is holding on to her baby,” one student responds.

“How do you know that?” Ms. Wilson presses.

“Because it talks about how she loved her baby and carried her,” the student answers.

“And the picture shows them close together,” chimes in another student.

Ms. Wilson continues reading, occasionally stopping to build students’ vocabulary, but also asking questions about other aspects of the text.

“How does the picture on page eight help you to understand what is happening in the story?”

“It shows us that Stellaluna is in the birds’ nest. And her mother is lost,” one student eagerly responds.

“What are some things Stellaluna learns to do after she falls into the birds’ nest?” Ms. Wilson asks next.

Her students recall key details that will be critical to understanding how Stellaluna’s new habits are different than her typical bat ways. They call out:

“She learns to sleep at night instead of in the day.” “She has to sit upright instead of hanging upside down like bats do.” “She has to eat worms, yuck!”

“And what is one of the bat ways that Stellaluna did not change?” Ms. Wilson asks.

Her students struggle to respond to this question so she rereads a key section of the text in which the baby birds try to emulate Stellaluna.

“Consider what the baby birds learn from Stellaluna,” she prompts. She also points them to the illustration that might help.

“What is happening here?” she asks.

“Oh yeah, she can’t land on the branches like the birds,” Lincoln explains.

“And, how did the author describe Stellaluna not being able to land like the birds?”

“It says she is clumsy.”

“Right, and what from the book helps you know what clumsy means?”

Her next question, “How does she find out what bats are supposed to do?” pushes her students to compare Stellaluna’s actions in the birds’ nest with her actions when she is reunited with her bat family. At the conclusion of the book, Ms. Wilson instructs her students to turn to their partners and respond to the question.

“What did Stellaluna and the birds learn about each other’s habits?”

Her question sequence during the read aloud was carefully planned to prepare her students for this task. Ms. Wilson calls on a few students to share their answers.

“Well, the birds learned that bats can see in the dark,” one student says.

“And the birds are clumsy when they try to fly at night because they can’t see,” another student adds.

“You’re right; I like how you used the word clumsy to describe the difference between bats and birds. When is the bat clumsy?” Ms. Wilson responds.

Finally, Ms. Wilson asks her students to return to their seats, pull out their reading notebooks, and draw and label one thing the bats learned about the birds and one thing the birds learned about the bats. While students are working, she circulates asking students to explain their pictures.

Key Differences in Instruction

While both teachers engaged their students in an interactive read aloud, Ms. Wilson had a larger goal for her lesson: that students deeply understood the text and how it illustrated key differences between bats and birds. Rather than selecting one isolated standard for instruction, she integrated a range of ELA and content standards, including a science standard about comparing basic features of animals. Key differences

in their text selection, question sequencing, and culminating tasks lead to different outcomes for students. Ms. Novak’s students learned some new vocabulary words, but not in a way that advanced their meaning of the text or built their knowledge about the world. In contrast, Ms. Wilson’s kindergarteners spent time making sense of the words in the text and building critical content knowledge.

	Ms. Novak	Ms. Wilson
Text Selection	Selected based on text quality and complexity and proximity to Halloween	Selected based on text quality and complexity as part of a set of texts chosen and sequenced to purposefully build knowledge about the basic features of animals
Question Sequencing	Focused on vocabulary in isolation, text-to-self connections, and recall of basic information from the story	Focused on key events, details, ideas and words that are critical to comprehension of the story and topic. Questions model the habits of proficient readers and prompt students to think deeply about the text in preparation for a culminating task in which students demonstrate an understanding of the text and the knowledge they gained from reading
Culminating Task	Opportunity for vocabulary practice in isolation	Opportunity to demonstrate understanding of the different features of birds and bats learned through comprehension of the text

Lenoir City

Coffee County

Lauderdale County

Three Districts, Three Approaches

*What does it take to **transform** reading practices across a district?*

There is no single answer. But within the variety of efforts across Tennessee districts, we see a **common set of ingredients** among districts at the forefront of the movement.

FIRST

A district-wide commitment to the work that includes whole-hearted support from district leadership, resources and funding to ensure long-term support, and the development of a unified vision of success

SECOND

A focus on specific elements of instruction in order to continuously improve teachers' abilities to make the complex, day-to-day classroom decisions that lead directly to student learning

THIRD

The infusion of new and additional expertise into the district by way of strategic partnerships and alliances with the growing menu of state-level initiatives that bring research-based techniques and methods into the classroom

FOURTH

Alignment and integration across multiple efforts so that the work becomes an element of the district's long-term strategy with ownership and capability developing within the district in order to carry on the work over time

How this unfolds depends on the district and its context. Read on to see what this looks like in three Tennessee districts where we find promising practices. The stories offer a glimpse at how educators across the state are tackling our early reading challenge through their daily efforts by taking strategic steps in the direction of the long term change we envision.

A Process for Instructional Progress

Just one-third of Lenoir City’s third graders were proficient in reading on both the 2014 and 2015 statewide exams. Like many other districts, despite a flurry of efforts to improve early literacy, they weren’t seeing any progress. So district and school leaders decided they needed a new approach. The newly formed Tennessee Early Literacy Network (TELN) seemed like the perfect opportunity to help them systematically identify weaknesses and scalable bright spots, with the encouragement of a collaborative peer group, called a “networked improvement community.”

In this case study, we see how a process for “getting better at getting better” led to improved RTI² implementation for a struggling student. Small changes to practice, such as using a common language to assess student learning, allowed for greater alignment between educators. This resulted in the creation of a

coordinated instructional sequence narrowly focused on the student’s specific needs. The work is part of a wider networked improvement community, where districts also use a common language to share what works to move the needle on early literacy.

The Tennessee Early Literacy Network

Led by Centers of Regional Excellence (CORE), seven districts from the East and Upper Cumberland regions have formed the inaugural Tennessee Early Literacy Network (TELN) to pioneer a new way of learning and improving. TELN joins the discipline of improvement science with the capacities of networks to foster innovation and social learning in an effort to better support our state’s early readers. The network provides a content focus on improving early literacy and a sustainable process for enacting and sharing practices across the network. With the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, TELN is facilitating an investigative process that allows districts to understand the system that is leading to current K–3 reading achievement and use “Plan-Do-Study-Act” cycles to rapidly test ideas for change and measure progress to constantly improve. Building district capacity is squarely in focus—TELN supports districts to problem solve, find better solutions to challenges, and improve student achievement in their own unique, local context.



Elizabeth Vineyard and students

Third grade students at Lenoir City Elementary School spend their morning in teacher Elizabeth Vineyard’s classroom, and some move to RTI² interventionist Sonya Hatcher’s Tier III working group in the afternoon if they need extra support. However, their varying schedules mean that Vineyard and Hatcher have difficulty finding the space to collaborate around their shared students. Even as they try to communicate regularly and keep each other updated on the needs of individual students, their separate work cycles mean that they struggle to create common understandings that link instruction across their classrooms.

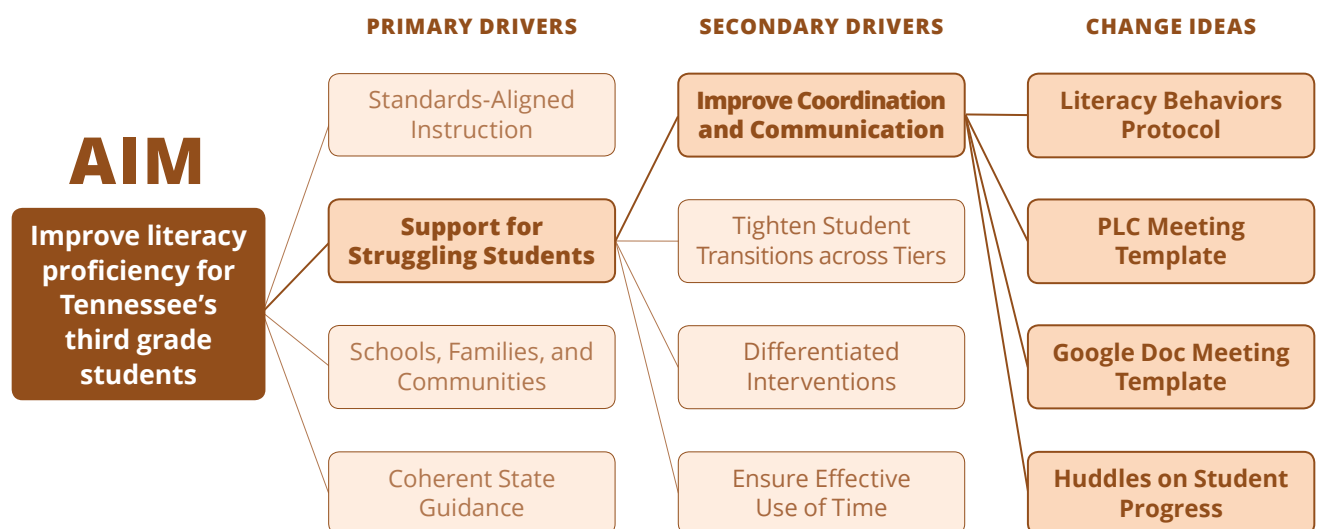
Recently, Vineyard and Hatcher made a small but novel tweak to their practice that attempted to create greater alignment across their instructional periods. They worked together through a “Shared Literacy Behavior Protocol,” a tool that guides teachers and interventionists to observe and describe a struggling student’s literacy behavior using a common language in an effort to allow teachers to thoughtfully coordinate high-quality instruction. The two teachers tested out the protocol by jointly observing Student A, a third grader who was struggling to make adequate progress in his reading skills. In his classroom small group with Vineyard, Student A’s performance on sight words was far better than what Hatcher observed in her Tier III group with him. Something wasn’t lining up.

The tool that Vineyard and Hatcher used to develop greater alignment and improve instruction is part of an experiment in progress in Lenoir City. It emerged from Lenoir City’s participation in TELN, which aims to help districts systematically identify weaknesses and to structure improvements with the encouragement of a networked improvement community. In Lenoir City, K-3 Literacy Coach Margaret Bright is leading the process to help the district’s schools identify promising areas for change.

What makes TELN’s approach unique is that it both focuses on a particular content (early literacy) AND it provides a process known as improvement science for enacting, improving, and sharing practices across the network. The networked improvement community is an effort led by CORE in partnership with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to “get better at getting better.” Districts first target changes in small venues designed to make a big impact on outcomes, and then work through cycles of trial-and-error, learning and sharing along the way, until it becomes a useful routine.

Over a several month period, the network—with the help of state and national early literacy experts—had developed a “driver diagram” outlining the series of interconnected areas that were most likely to yield major

TELN Driver Diagram Excerpt



improvements in reading proficiency. Now, beginning in the area of supporting struggling students through improved coordination and communication, individual schools are testing small-scale change ideas—like shared Google documents to track student progress and quick, planned huddles across groups of classroom teachers and interventionists—to determine how to create greater alignment.

For Vineyard and Hatcher, this led directly to their joint observation of Student A. Each noted what they saw the student do, what skills and strategies he had command of and which he struggled with, what letter sounds he reliably knew, and his reading speed and method. After consolidating their observations, the plan was to leave their protocols in the other teacher's mailbox, reflect on them individually, and then discuss them together. But as soon as Vineyard set her protocol in Hatcher's mailbox, they couldn't help but have an instant conversation. By noting the student's behavior and what their exact instruction was in the same format, they could immediately be on the same page. Hatcher describes their "ah-ha" moment:

"He seemed to do much better with Elizabeth in her classroom the way she was doing it, but then when I got him, that afternoon, it was like he didn't remember those words. I was having him do sight words embedded in a text, whereas his teacher was having him practice them with flashcards. It was definitely an insight for us, to go, 'Whoa, wait a minute! We can recall them from a list, but we can't use them in text.' We need to work together to build his fluency in context. This was definitely an insight for us."

Having the shared protocol really helped clarify what the teachers were seeing and made the path toward how they can best support the student together much more clear. Once they identified the student's deficit of decoding within the context of broader comprehension, Vineyard and Hatcher worked together to plan instruction providing opportunities to practice sight word decoding and fluency through reading and writing. The pair picked a story together and kept their focus on particular sight words. Student A now sees the story in the morning with his classroom small group, and then he sees the story again in the afternoon in intervention.

Over the course of their shared time, they do different activities, such as having him write sight words in new sentences, find the word in a passage, and talk about what the word means in the context of the text. "Now when he comes to a word he's read before, he says, 'Oh I should know that word!' He KNEW he should know that word, whereas he didn't before. His fluency is getting stronger and so is his confidence," Hatcher reported.

In an effort to ensure continuous improvement of the process, Hatcher and Vineyard each met with K-3 Literacy Coach Bright to discuss the trial and plan how to make it even more effective for coordinating instruction. Over time, TELN is developing a series of common measures that will be used to determine whether the changes in practice are leading to genuine classroom improvements. In the first trial, both Hatcher and Vineyard liked how the protocol ensured that students were getting the instruction and intervention services they needed by precisely focusing attention on the students' deficits. The process made it clear that they would need to have targeted conversations around specific reading behaviors, and that they would need a process to share this information quickly and easily. As Hatcher said, "Using the protocol gets you to think about the student in a different way. Putting something down on a piece of paper to hand to someone else helps you think about the student differently, and forces you to clarify your thinking, and really make sure the other person can understand exactly what it is you're seeing the student do."

In their next trial, they used the protocol with a few students at a time and created an electronic version of the protocol for easier sharing. As they refine and expand their use of the protocol, Bright hopes teachers will be able to coordinate on what reading behaviors they are seeing and align their instruction just like Hatcher and Vineyard did. She also believes the quality of their RTI² data meetings will improve by having a common language to describe students. Bright has reached out to other districts in the network to find out what's worked for them and share ideas about what to try next. This cycle of continuous improvement will persist until they feel the protocol has been optimally integrated into their school routine. They will then take on a new change idea to improve early literacy and let the cycle repeat.

Improving Instruction Through Focused Coaching

With 10 schools and 5,000 students, the majority of whom come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, Coffee County in central Tennessee fits the profile of the median Tennessee district. In 2015, Coffee County students' reading growth looked similar to the state as a whole, but 60 percent of the district's third graders were scoring below proficient on state English language arts exams. As a result, district leadership went all in on state reading initiatives. Every K-3 teacher has taken part in state K-3 reading courses, and the district is now fully engaged in the Read to be Ready Coaching initiative.

In this case study, we see how structured coaching meetings provide educators with an opportunity to think deeply and intentionally about their instructional practices, and make informed decisions about their teaching in order to support student learning. These focused, individualized sessions, led by an experienced and knowledgeable coach, help to both expand Coffee County's knowledge base and refine the district's

integrated approach to literacy. With a clear investment from district leadership and a strong, district-wide understanding of the program's goals, Coffee County's Read to be Ready Coaching Network has served as a valuable tool for aligning and strengthening instructional practices while also increasing instructional rigor in a way that benefits all learners.

The Read to be Ready Coaching Network

The Read to be Ready Coaching Network is a new state-district partnership that focuses on improving K-3 reading instruction. District coaches are being provided with training to equip them with a deep knowledge of reading instruction as well as specific strategies to assist them in effectively leading professional learning opportunities and coaching of teachers in their district. Additionally, 15 regional coach consultants are serving as "coach coaches," providing district coaches with differentiated ongoing support. Each semester, the Coaching Network focuses on a new instructional area, including accessing complex text through interactive read aloud, accessing on-grade-level texts through shared reading, responding to texts through interactive speaking and writing activities, teaching foundational skills through reading and writing, guided reading and instructional-level texts, and independent reading and reading conferences. Over 200 district coaches are working with 2,500+ teachers in 83 districts across the state.



HEAR THE CONVERSATION

Listen in as Coach Robin Watkins discusses vocabulary instruction with teachers in Coffee County. [Go to k-12.education.tn.gov/videos/bldg_the_framework_coaching_conversation.mp3](https://k-12.education.tn.gov/videos/bldg_the_framework_coaching_conversation.mp3).

Robin Watkins, one of Coffee County’s district Read to be Ready coaches, sits at the edge of a u-shaped table in the back of an empty kindergarten classroom. The walls are decorated with various charts related to stories the students are currently reading, including a fresh Venn diagram comparing and contrasting two different gingerbread stories created during that day’s interactive read aloud of “Gingerbread Baby” by Jan Brett. Watkins’ gaze turns toward two of the teachers to whom she provides regular, individualized coaching. Each is waiting quietly, notebook open, ready to immerse themselves in the next discussion topic. “We’ve been working on deciding which vocabulary words to do explicit, which ones to do implicit, and which ones to do embedded,” Watkins says. “Do you think you made the right instructional choices regarding vocabulary during today’s read aloud? Why do you think you were better able to do it this time?”

One of the teachers, in her second year, is confident about the words they selected during their previous meeting. She explains that having detailed, specific conversations about students’ existing knowledge and contemplating questions like “Is this a word my students hear every day?” helped them make informed, appropriate decisions about their instruction. The teacher grins: “I think we made the right choices,” highlighting the pictures and real-world examples they used to help students demonstrate understanding during discussion breaks in the read aloud. She added, “The students were really picking up on the vocabulary. I think they did really well with it.” Watkins agrees, praising their efforts, and moves on

Robin Watkins (left) and two kindergarten teachers plan for interactive read aloud during a coaching session



to another focus area related to interactive read aloud: building knowledge for the purpose of comparing and contrasting. The two teachers assess their classes’ progress in this area, providing illustrative anecdotes and describing what did and did not go well during that day’s lesson. For example, one teacher explained that even though her students were able to identify and articulate the problem and solution in “Gingerbread Baby,” they didn’t have a strong understanding of how the parts of the story were similar to or different from the previous text they read. After several minutes of additional discussion, Watkins reminds the two teachers that they will soon be introducing a third text into this activity, and that students will need additional support making meaning between books.

Deliberately focused planning sessions like these are an important part of Coffee County’s engagement in the Read to be Ready Coaching Network, which connects two coaches to 40 teachers in six different elementary schools. Since deciding to participate, the district has emphasized a truly collaborative approach, working closely with elementary school administrators to plan, reflect, and build knowledge around Read to be Ready’s core components. These efforts, in turn, have had a direct impact on their understanding of and encouragement for the Coaching Network. Brenda Brown, Coffee County’s elementary school supervisor, underlined the importance of an “all in” mentality, “We feel that if a program is needed and beneficial for our teachers, then our principals and administration need to hear about it so they can really support what’s going on.”



Robin Watkins models an interactive read aloud lesson

With content strongly aligned to past district literacy initiatives such as the department’s K-3 reading course, the Coaching Network is an important step toward “extending what the district is already doing and refining practice.” Although teachers have only been participating in Read to be Ready coaching for a short period of time, Brown says she has already noticed a difference in how they are approaching instruction:

“When I’m doing walk-throughs in classrooms, I’m seeing more of a focus on tying everything together. In the past we’ve had problems with ‘okay, this is our phonics block. Now we do spelling.’ And everything was separate and independent of each other. Now, we’re seeing more of that integrative work. They’re putting it together.”

Importantly, this shift to integrating standards and contextualizing instruction will support students in utilizing newly learned skills as they build knowledge that can be applied across texts.

Coffee County’s commitment to fostering strong knowledge of the Read to be Ready campaign extends beyond participation in the Coaching Network, with all K-3 teachers, principals, instructional coordinators, interventionists, and librarians receiving training along with the teachers targeted for coaching. This approach has increased district-wide investment, facilitated the sharing of ideas, and strengthened administrative support for and relationships with teachers. In addition, the structure of the Read to be Ready Coaching Network, which highlights one instructional component per semester, has given Coffee County a “very singular focus” that “allows everyone in the district to be talking about the same thing at the same time.” Watkins added, “This has given us so much better traction than anything we’ve done in the past.”

Back in the classroom, the two kindergarten teachers and Watkins have finished reflecting on that day’s interactive read aloud and are busy analyzing words from their next anchor text, “Charlie the Ranch Dog” by Ree Drummond. They thoughtfully examine each page together, carefully picking out words that may hinder students’ understanding of the story and discussing strategies they might use to overcome these barriers. This intensive process, while time consuming, provides these teachers with a valuable, and often uncommon, opportunity to gain a deep knowledge of both the content of the texts they use and their own instructional practices in a way that meaningfully connects to their students’ needs. As the period ends and student voices begin to emanate from the hallway, Watkins summarizes their progress and outlines their future work: “Last time we met, we went through this book’s lexile, we looked at its complexity. This time, we’ve worked through vocabulary, and we’ve started brainstorming how we’re going to instruct and how to use this anchor text.” Reinforcing the importance of their efforts, she adds: “Everything we’re doing will help you be leaders within your grade level as you begin to talk about this read aloud and continue this work.” As the meeting concludes, Robin finds an open slot in her busy schedule for their next planning session. In the coming months, she will spend most of her time engaging teachers in structured conversations similar to the one described above, observing teachers and providing feedback, and modeling lessons, with the ultimate goal of establishing and maintaining the instructional rigor necessary to improve student performance.

Coffee County first grade teachers meet to plan their next interactive read aloud



Nurturing a Love of Reading Through Summer Reading Grants

Lauderdale County is a rural district in southwestern Tennessee. The district's seven schools serve more than 4,000 students from diverse racial and economic backgrounds. In 2012, only 35 percent of third graders in Lauderdale County were proficient or advanced on the state's reading and language arts assessment. As a result, Superintendent Shawn Kimble decided to focus the district's efforts on the critical period of reading development from kindergarten through third grade.

When they first heard about the Read to be Ready Summer Grant program, Kimble and Director of Literacy Jennifer Jordan saw it as a way to extend their recent focus on early grades literacy into the summer. The following case study illustrates how Lauderdale County successfully implemented a summer program that

strategically supports the district's literacy efforts. Lauderdale County's summer program demonstrates how quality reading instruction can be delivered in fun ways that build student motivation and confidence and how student gains can be measured in a way that informs instruction for the following school year.

Summer Reading Grants

The Dollar General Literacy Foundation provided a \$1 million gift to the department to fund the Read to be Ready Summer Grant Program for three years. The grant funds summer instructional programs that provide rich reading and writing opportunities for rising first, second, and third grade students who live in low-income areas across the state. Last year, in addition to the Dollar General funding, the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development provided funding for program sites in Tennessee's economically distressed counties. As a result, the 2016 summer grant programs served almost 600 students across 20 program sites and provided almost 12,000 books to students to stock their at-home libraries. In 2017, with an investment from the Tennessee Department of Human Services, the department plans to fund more than 300 programs.



Students, teachers, and volunteers enjoy the safari park after reading "What If You Had Animal Teeth?"

In the 2012-13 school year, Lauderdale County launched a series of efforts dubbed the “Extended Literacy Initiative” to combat their students’ stagnant comprehension abilities. They doubled the amount of time K-3 students spent in front of texts with daily time for interactive read aloud, shared reading, and guided reading with integrated phonics instruction and extension lab time differentiated by student need. They also moved away from basal readers and superficial thematic units, in favor of vertically aligned text sets designed to build knowledge. Grades K-3 teachers attended the department’s reading course and received training in facilitating deep dives into appropriately complex text while addressing foundational skills. Teachers were also trained to use running records, including measures of comprehension, to identify students’ instructional reading levels and use that information to group students and differentiate instruction.

To build on these efforts, they set two goals for the summer program: 1) support growth in essential reading skills for students who would be most impacted by “summer slide” and 2) nurture students’ love of reading by engaging them in deep dives into text. To support these goals they made two strategic decisions. First, they purchased a curriculum that included 20 rich, appropriately complex read-aloud texts (one for each day of camp) with recommended vocabulary for each grade level. Second, they decided to track students’ instructional reading levels using running records at the start and conclusion of camp, instead of using a skills-based measure. Both choices allowed camp teachers to focus on delivering engaging read-aloud sessions and guiding students through creative culminating tasks, rather than spend their time selecting texts and vocabulary and testing students.

The program was also structured with these goals in mind. After breakfast each day, students would race to their grade-level campsites for “campfire time.” Individual campsites came up with their own ways of simulating the camp experience, but the source of excitement for these kids was not the singing of classic camp songs nor the “roasting” of marshmallows around a red and orange construction-paper fire; it was the anticipation of a brand new book. During campfire time, students would experience an interactive read aloud of authentic children’s literature.

After the students had thoroughly discussed and reflected on their campfire book of the day, they

A student journals during bunk time



retreated to their own cozy spot for “bunk time.” This was their chance to write in their journals, conference with a teacher for one-on-one help, independently read new books of their own choosing, or reread their own copy of the campfire book—which was theirs to keep. Students were free to select texts based on their interests, rather than being limited to a certain level of text. The key to bunk time was allowing children to find their own ways to engage with text. Director of Literacy Jordan’s guidance to camp teachers was, “Make it fun. I don’t care if they want to swing on the monkey-bars and read, let them do it. We want them to read.”

After bunk time students came together again to “bring the text to life.” This was when the students would revisit the book of the day and bring it to life through performance art and interactive games. These daily activities were carefully designed to bring even the most reluctant or shy student out of his shell. All readers, including those struggling the most, were given opportunities to excel in these activities designed to extend students’ experiences with the texts. On each Friday, all campsites came together for a communal campfire read aloud followed by a culminating field trip that connected the text to the real world.

Their strategy seems to have paid off. Five months after the conclusion of the program, participating students gleefully recount their trips to the library or the safari park—which for many students was their first trip out of the county. When asked about the books that prompted these trips, students launched into vivid retellings of “Library Lion,” “What If You Had Animal Teeth?,” and “Big Al.” Students talked about how much they loved the camp and hoped to come back next summer. Many also expressed pride at the gains they made in being able to read more challenging books. As one student commented, “When I read, it helps me get better.” Some students even proudly reported on their instructional reading level growth. The students’ families also noted changes in their children throughout the summer camp and beyond. One grandparent recalled that his grandson, who had never been interested in books before, came home excited about a book about butterflies, so the two took a trip to the library and found more butterfly books to read together.

Lauderdale approached the summer program as a way to engage their families and community members in supporting students most in need of positive reading experiences. They targeted students and invited parents to a meeting before the end of the school year. They

stayed in touch with parents throughout the summer and held parent sessions where they shared a variety of literacy resources and taught interactive read aloud strategies. They committed substantial district resources so they could provide transportation and meals as well as a commercial curriculum that included high-quality books for students to keep for their home libraries. They also solicited community members to read with students, donate incentives for participation, or help out in other ways.

District and school leaders strategically linked the summer program to other district initiatives as well as the larger state-wide effort to improve literacy in early grades. They recruited teachers who they knew would commit to their vision for engaging interactive read-aloud sessions that built knowledge about interesting topics and ideas and supported students in developing the associated vocabulary. Those teachers now have a supply of books, resources, and experiences that they can build on and share throughout the school year. Students grew in both their reading fluency and comprehension. Above all, students grew in their motivation and confidence to become life-long readers and thinkers.



Students learn about animals at the safari park



Students write about the campfire book of the day

Suggested Next Steps

Elevating Instructional Practice to Go Further

Over the past year, we have seen a tremendous commitment across the state to the goals of Read to be Ready. Tennessee educators have embraced the vision and undertaken a great deal of work to determine how to radically change the landscape of early reading in Tennessee. The district examples highlighted in the report are only a few of the promising initiatives gaining momentum across the state.

Will this be enough?

Our observations in Tennessee early grades classrooms identified a handful of classrooms achieving the level of instructional practice needed to realize our vision of reading proficiency, but the vast majority are not yet delivering instruction that will sufficiently develop students' skills-based competencies or build students' knowledge-based competencies. Classroom structures

are changing, but the majority of teachers have not yet achieved the deep instructional shifts that will help our students reach new heights.

To go further, we must continue to develop the capabilities throughout our state to identify and carry out excellent literacy instruction. **We identify four elements of instructional practice that must improve if we are to achieve our goals.**



Students need more opportunities to practice reading foundational skills within authentic reading and writing experiences.

Many teachers were explicitly teaching skills-based competencies and giving students opportunities to practice sound-spelling correspondences and high-frequency words. But students rarely had the needed opportunities to practice these newly acquired skills in authentic reading and writing experiences.



Texts should be intentionally selected and sequenced to build students' knowledge and vocabulary.

Rather than selecting texts independently or purely based on narrow criteria such as season or time of year, teachers should be intentionally selecting texts around topics aligned with the Tennessee academic standards and that promote knowledge of literacy, science, social studies, and fine arts. Furthermore, texts should be sequenced across grades to dive deeper into topics and increase complexity in meaningful ways.



Students need to be assigned standards-aligned, challenging tasks that ask them to demonstrate understanding of complex and interesting texts, analysis of the author's craft, and/or the knowledge they gained from the content of those texts.

Putting a great text in front of students is not enough; students need to demonstrate their comprehension and analysis of the text and its content. Very few of the observed classrooms included students engaging in tasks that reflect the demands of our state's academic standards. As a result, students do not have opportunities to develop and demonstrate their thinking and lessons are not designed with a clear, rigorous outcome in mind.



Teachers should make use of strong question sequences that support student understanding and analysis of complex, high-quality texts.

While isolated questions about vocabulary and recall of basic information serve a purpose, student understanding will not deepen without strategically sequenced questions that build toward deeper levels of comprehension. Instruction should build strategically toward the rigorous culminating task.

This kind of deep instructional change is difficult. It is far easier to simply add minutes to a literacy block or to purchase a new basal reader than it is to provide all teachers with the knowledge and ability to strategically plan opportunities for appropriate skills-based practice or to prepare questions and tasks that guide students to draw meaning from texts and build knowledge of the world around them.

Our state’s challenge is for leadership at all levels— school, district, and state—to continue to improve our support for elementary literacy instruction aligned with the vision for success outlined by the Tennessee state standards. This means providing early grades teachers with tools and training aligned with our standards and ensuring they have access to feedback and support through administrators, coaches, and collaborative peer groups. It also means ensuring access to high-quality instructional materials. Standards and expectations have changed since the state’s last ELA textbook adoption cycle and many strong resources exist, including foundational skills programs that provide a research-based scope and sequence of phonics skills and opportunities for authentic practice in texts. Likewise,

there are several open source resources for reading and listening comprehension that provide sequenced texts to build students’ knowledge, aligned tasks, and question sequences that support students in meeting those tasks.

We are exploring the department’s possible role in providing additional resources for teachers and districts that reflect the demands of the Tennessee state standards and the instructional shifts they require. These resources may include sequenced text sets and lesson progressions that are tightly aligned around meaningful topics and scaffolded to deepen all students’ content knowledge, academic vocabulary, and comprehension. In the coming months, we will further build out our current literacy initiatives in ways that increasingly promote alignment of materials, assessment, and professional learning opportunities.

Nevertheless, the most difficult work will still take place in individual classrooms and schools. **Based on our case studies of districts experiencing initial success, we offer a few takeaways for districts to consider as they continue on this journey.**



1 System-level change is most likely to occur when there is a district-wide commitment to the work.

This commitment should include whole-hearted support from district leadership, resources and funding to ensure long-term support, and the development of a unified vision of success. In Lauderdale County, the district’s efforts to improve early literacy extended beyond the classroom to include reviews of curriculum, professional learning opportunities, and student schedules. District- and school-level staff arrived at a jointly-shared vision that developed naturally into the design for a summer reading program.



2 Instructional improvement benefits from a specific focus and a commitment to iterative learning.

Programs and initiatives should align to continuously improve teachers’ abilities to make the complex, day-to-day classroom decisions that lead directly to student learning. In Coffee County, teachers are participating in focused, individualized coaching sessions that target specific elements of instruction such as interactive read aloud. In Lenoir City, the changes that teachers are making to protocols and routines are tracked through the processes of improvement science to ensure that they are contributing to better outcomes over time.



3 District ownership and external expertise are not mutually exclusive.

While our case study districts are developing initiatives in ways that draw on their own unique assets and build ownership across staff, they are not doing it alone. Each district has pulled in expertise from outside organizations or coaches and has found ways to construct its own strategies with help from the growing portfolio of state-level initiatives in early literacy.



4 Individual programs should be aligned in support of the broader district improvement efforts.

Educational reforms often tend to reach districts in the form of a scattered set of programs or initiatives that take on particular problems even though the problems often derive from an overlapping set of systemic issues. The teachers described in the Lenoir City case study are developing a very specific set of changes to the RTI² process, but they are doing so within a framework known as a “driver diagram” that allows them to think through the ways that this particular issue interacts with other work in other areas. Over time, the improvement science approach is meant to promote improvement to the system of literacy instruction within their district rather than to only a single policy or program.

We offer these suggestions in an effort to accelerate the progress we have already seen. It goes without saying that this work will take time. Turning our early grades students into “readers” is not a process that happens overnight—or even over the course of a single year. But giving all of our students the opportunity to engage with texts in meaningful ways is critical work that will have a major impact on their futures and on the future of our state.

FIELD NOTES

Students are working on the right foundational skills for the grade level, and they are applying those skills to a text. In addition, as she is guiding students through the skills game and the first section of the text (before they practice independently), the teacher consistently asks students to explain their thinking (for example, one student is singing the alphabet as she goes through the letters on the linking chart to find the correct letter) and to look at the illustrations in the text to help them make meaning of the words on the page. Students are doing the thinking in this classroom and applying emerging reading skills to making meaning from text.

—Kindergarten Classroom in East Tennessee

TNTP observed 163 classrooms this fall, taking notes on teachers’ specific instructional strategies and interactions with students. These excerpts from their field notes spotlight the high-quality instruction that our Tennessee teachers are already putting into practice.

FIELD NOTES

Overall, the teacher was making good use of a nonfiction text to build students’ content knowledge about an important dinosaur discovery in advance of expository writing on the topic. Every student had a chance to discuss problems and solutions in the reading and identify main ideas. The text was appropriate, and students were also “free reading” from books on the same topic that the teacher had gathered for this unit of study.

—Third Grade Classroom in Southeast Tennessee

FIELD NOTES

The teacher did a wonderful job of leading students through the text with questions that unpacked meaning for them. For example, there is a line in the story about the brown ghosts in the garden which are old leaves and vines from the pumpkin plants. The teacher asked students, “What does the author mean when he says brown ghosts? What is he talking about?” Students answered with a variety of answers like leaves, vines, pumpkins, rotting pumpkins. Students used accountable talk stems such as “I’d like to add on to that” or “I’m thinking differently.” After this, the teacher asked students why the author might have used the phrase brown ghosts to describe the vines. Each time she asked a question to help students unpack a phrase or word, she always brought them back to the text to ensure that students were building a deeper understand of the text.

—Kindergarten Classroom in West Tennessee

Additional State Initiatives Tied to Read to be Ready

In addition to the **Tennessee Early Literacy Network**, the **Coaching Network**, and the **Summer Reading Grants**, there are a number of other coordinated state efforts aimed at supporting districts and schools in taking our students' reading proficiency to the next level. A few highlights are listed below:

- **The updated Tennessee Academic Standards** provide a common set of expectations for what students will know and be able to do at the end of a grade. This spring and summer, the department is offering training on the revised academic standards for English language arts and math to district teams, school leaders, and teachers.
- **Revised and new state assessments** include rigorous questions that measure students' writing, critical thinking, and problem solving skills.
- **An optional second grade assessment** that measures students' mastery of foundational literacy skills and reading comprehension. About two-thirds of districts are planning to participate in spring 2017.
- **The Kindergarten Entry Inventory (KEI)** will be administered by kindergarten teachers during the first eight weeks of school and will provide a comprehensive developmental profile for every child focused on five essential developmental domains: language and literacy, mathematics, social and personal development, physical development, and approaches to learning. The KEI will replace the first screening for RTI².
- **Educator preparation standards in literacy** are now aligned with the Tennessee Academic Standards, reflect nationally recognized best practices and are differentiated by role types (e.g., special education educators, secondary teachers, instructional leaders).
- Starting this fall, all districts receiving state funding for voluntary pre-kindergarten (VPK) will use the state board-approved **student growth portfolio model** to evaluate their pre-K and kindergarten teachers.

Notes

1. Observations were conducted in districts participating in the Read to be Ready Coaching Network as part of an effort to track progress of the network over time. The fall 2016 observations are meant to capture baseline data. TNTP and CORE staff will conduct follow-up observations in the same schools over the next three years. The 18 schools represented 17 districts from all eight CORE regions and a variety of school sizes, demographics, and prior achievement results. Observations were based on a 30 minute snapshot of literacy instruction.
2. Six schools had fewer than two observed lessons where the majority of the lesson was targeted at reading or listening comprehension.
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