

# FIRST STEPS

A Report on  
Elementary Grades  
Reading in Tennessee

APRIL 2018

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 <https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/reports/reading-report-2018-appendix.pdf>.

# Contents

**Executive Summary ..... 2**

**A More Accurate Picture of Student Progress ..... 5**

**Classrooms Observations Across the State ..... 10**

**Sourcing Materials to Teach in This New Way ..... 15**

**Stories of Our Work ..... 17**

**A Reason for Hope  
and a Call to Action ..... 19**

**Notes ..... 21**

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# Executive Summary

In February 2016, the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) pulled together stakeholders from across the state and set an ambitious goal—that at least 75 percent of third graders would be proficient readers by 2025. The goal originated from both stagnant third grade reading scores in the state and national research indicating that third grade reading is a key predictor of later life outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Following the public commitment to the goal, the state embarked upon a campaign called Read to be Ready aimed at helping us meet this ambitious target.

It has now been two years since the original call to action. The children who will be third graders in 2025 are infants taking their first steps. We know that systematic change takes time, but we also recognize the urgency of this work. **So we ask, where have we seen progress and where are our continued areas of challenge?**



From the baseline year of our **redesigned state assessments** that provide a more accurate picture of student progress toward more ambitious standards:

We see that only about one-third of Tennessee third graders are achieving at a proficient level. Data from our optional grade 2 assessment tells a similar story. **Students perform relatively well in the areas of listening comprehension, vocabulary, and language, but struggle with reading comprehension, foundational skills, fluency, and writing.**



From **observations in 162 classrooms** across the state:

We see that teachers are implementing the new standards and incorporating crucial strategies such as interactive read aloud and shared reading. However, while students are successfully completing classroom tasks, the tasks rarely reflect the demands of the standards. **Findings point to three key areas for instructional improvement in the coming year: 1) higher-quality and appropriately complex texts selected to build conceptual knowledge; 2) question sequences and tasks that build critical thinking skills and meet the demands of the standards; and 3) systematic and explicit foundational skills instruction with opportunities to practice through reading and writing.**



From **survey data** collected through the department's annual educator survey and **progress monitoring** efforts around the Read to be Ready Coaching Network:

We hear that Tennessee teachers are spending a significant amount of time sourcing materials to teach in this new way. The department recently released “unit starters” anchored in concepts from the content area standards. In 50 pilot classrooms, we have seen a significant increase in the quality of texts, question sequences, and tasks in classrooms. Materials have challenged

teachers' expectations for what their students can accomplish. As one teacher said, "I've been teaching third grade a long time. This is the first year my kids will walk away with a clear understanding of the solar system." **But reaching a point where higher-quality instructional materials are both available and used across all classrooms feels like a difficult hill to climb for many districts.**



#### From Read to be Ready **summer grant programs:**

We see that students attending one of the camps spent around 8 hours writing, 8 hours engaged in text-related activities, and around 25 hours reading. On average, students saw **improvements in their grade-level reading accuracy and comprehension**, as well as on a measure of their motivation to read. Qualitative data also points to **increased engagement from teachers and students and their families.**



#### From **anecdotal stories** of our work and **open-ended responses** to the annual educator survey:

**We hear shouts of joy for this new way of teaching.** One teacher wrote, "I am over-the-moon in love with our Read to be Ready initiative and the way that it has transformed my teaching." **And we also hear uneasiness.** Another teacher said: "My main concern is still the amount of time it takes to do this job well."

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This report presents a detailed analysis of our progress including findings both from the 2016–17 state assessment and from classroom observations that we are using to guide the department's work across the next year. Key next steps for the department are supporting teachers in foundational skills instruction and in the selection of strategic texts, questions, and tasks to build student knowledge. This support will include working with district and school leaders on quality materials selection and strengthening professional learning efforts (including coaching) designed to help teachers improve their instruction. It will also include the release of additional supports, such as more unit starters, and supporting alignment of expectations with elementary school principals and educator preparation providers.

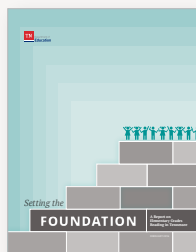
Though we are still in the initial phases of this work, we are encouraged by the progress we have seen, especially the "aha" moments from our educators. For example, district leaders guided by department regional content experts have been surprised by the lack of quality texts used in their classrooms, and upon realizing this, have expressed determination to help teachers shift to more worthwhile texts. We have also seen teachers realizing that if they ask higher-order thinking questions, their students will meet the challenge. As you read this report, we hope you will have your own "aha" moments like those we have seen across the state and will feel both the excitement and the importance of this work.

## What is Read to be Ready?

### A series of state initiatives including...

- A network of about 250 district coaches training together on common literacy needs and coaching practices.
- District-led summer reading programs that served approximately 8,000 students in the summer of 2017.
- A group of 22 districts working through the Tennessee Early Literacy Network to improve early literacy through continuous improvement cycles.
- New standards and training for educator preparation programs to ensure that new teachers enter the classroom with a strong knowledge of promising literacy strategies.
- New assessments in kindergarten and grade 2 as well as a model for evaluating and developing early grades teachers using student growth portfolios.
- A group of almost 200 childcare centers that have joined the Early Literacy Matters pilot to test a series of online training modules paired with classroom text sets designed to encourage age-appropriate literacy practices.
- The release of *Teaching Literacy in Tennessee*, a resource that supports “the how” for early grades literacy instruction, as well as a [companion guide for English learners](#) and a set of [literacy unit starter materials for grades K–3](#).

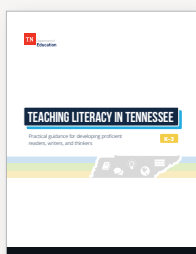
## Previous Reading Reports and *Teaching Literacy in Tennessee*



The department’s first reading report *Setting the Foundation*, which was released at the launch of Read to be Ready (R2BR), reported on trends from visits to 100 K–3 classrooms in the fall of 2015. The observations showed that teachers were overemphasizing skills-based competencies like phonics and word recognition and that less than one-third of lessons focused on reading comprehension.



The second reading report *Building the Framework* explained that, just months following the R2BR kick-off, early grades teachers were using more high-quality texts and placing more emphasis on comprehension skills. Observations also revealed that early grades classrooms had strong fundamentals in terms of positive culture, daily literacy blocks, and grade-level foundational skills instruction. Yet students lacked opportunities to practice their newly acquired foundational skills in authentic reading and writing experiences and were not exposed to questions and tasks that were intentionally sequenced to build their comprehension.



Findings from the two reading reports prompted the release of *Teaching Literacy in Tennessee* in May 2017. The document is grounded in the theory that we will meet or exceed our goal of having 75 percent of third graders reading on grade level by 2025 if teachers provide daily opportunities for students to build skills-based and knowledge-based competencies by: a) engaging in a high volume of reading; b) reading and listening to complex texts that are on or beyond grade level; c) thinking deeply about and responding to text through speaking and writing; d) developing the skill and craft of a writer; and e) practicing foundational skills that have been taught explicitly and systematically, and are applied through reading and writing.

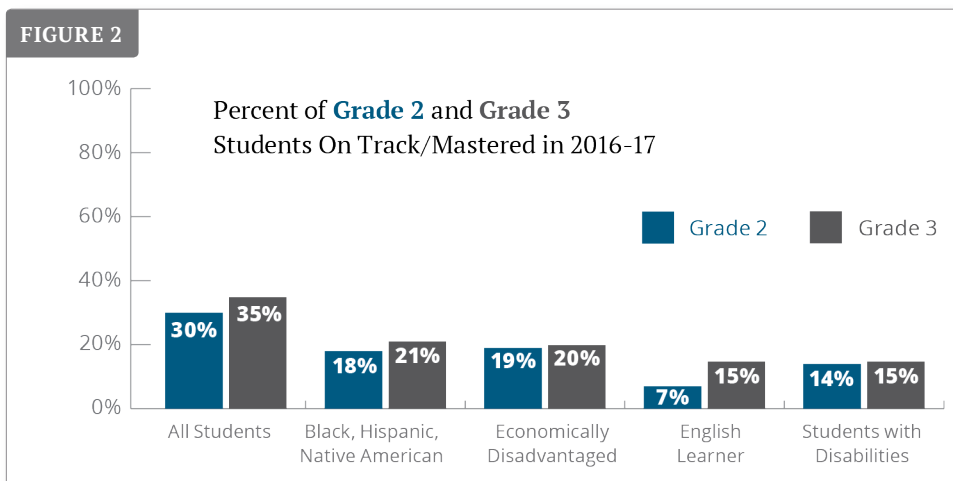
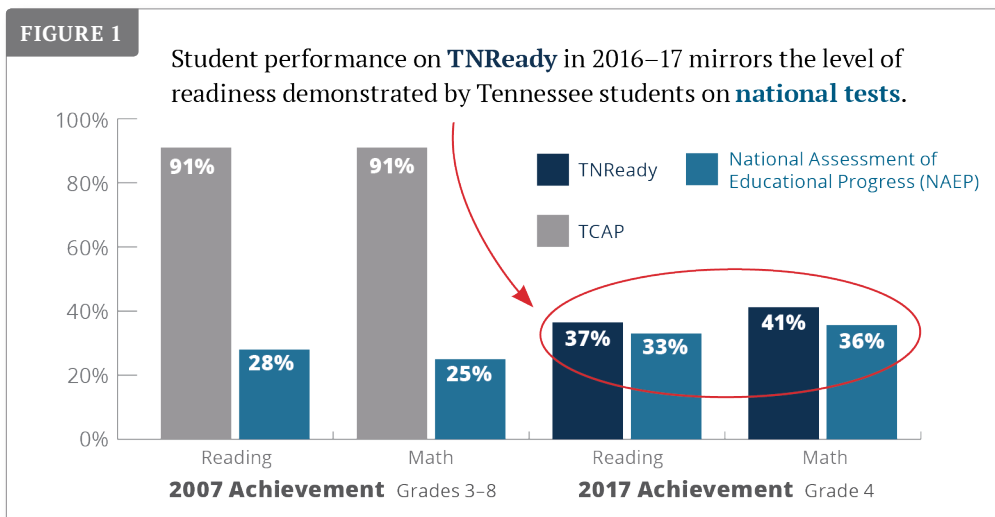
# A More Accurate Picture of Student Progress



For the past several years, our evaluation of early grades reading in Tennessee has been based on dated state assessments and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) from 2015. We now have results from a new state test—the TNReady assessment—designed with more challenging questions based on new academic standards developed by Tennessee’s educators. Alongside TNReady, 100 districts also administered the state’s new optional grade 2 assessment, which gauges students’ reading comprehension in an integrated manner with all items (except fluency) connected to reading passages.

These rigorous new assessments offer a better reflection of our students’ literacy abilities and allow us to more accurately pinpoint student strengths and weaknesses.

Overall, student performance on TNReady in 2016-17 mirrors the level of readiness demonstrated by Tennessee students on national tests like the NAEP—known as the Nation’s Report Card and a gold standard for assessments (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> However, **results from the new assessments in grades 2 and 3 indicate that we must make significant progress if we are to achieve our goal of 75 percent of third graders reading proficiently by 2025.** In the spring of 2017, about one-third of second and third graders scored on track or mastered with especially low proficiency levels for our historically disadvantaged subgroups (see Figure 2).



## What is TNReady?

- Because it was the first year of TNReady for elementary and middle school students, results set a new baseline for future growth, and achievement results cannot be compared to past TCAP assessments.
- Students in third through eighth grade take TNReady assessments in English language arts, math, science, and social studies at the end of each school year. High school students take the following assessments at the end of each course: English I, II, and III; Algebra I, II, and Geometry or Integrated Math I, II, and III; Biology and Chemistry; and U.S. History.
- TNReady scores are categorized into one of four new achievement levels, which were created through public feedback: mastered (level 4), on track (level 3), approaching (level 2), and below (level 1). Prior terminology was advanced, proficient, basic, and below basic.
- The assessment includes different types of questions, including short response and fill in the blank, as well as a writing component for the ELA assessment.
- For more information about the grade 2 and 3 ELA assessments visit: [https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/testing/Grades\\_2-8\\_ELA\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/testing/Grades_2-8_ELA_Fact_Sheet.pdf)

### So what is it that we are actually asking our students to do?

To understand what the new standards expect in terms of student performance, let's take a look at the last year's grade 2 assessment.<sup>3</sup> Figures 3 and 4 show one of the passages included on the assessment along with the items that accompanied the passage. The items assess five different comprehension standards

and four foundational literacy and language standards. On average:

- 19 percent of students got all four foundational and language items correct, 10 percent got all five comprehension items correct, but just five percent of students got all nine items correct,
- 27 percent of students got seven or more items correct, and
- 20 percent of students got two or fewer items correct.

FIGURE 3

*Excerpt from "A Visitor for Bear"<sup>4</sup> by Bonny Becker*

This time, before he went back to the business of making his breakfast, Bear shut the door very, VERY, VERY firmly, locked it, boarded the windows shut, stopped up the chimney, and even plugged the drain in the bathtub.

Carefully, Bear set about the business of making his breakfast. He opened the cupboard. No mouse. Ahhh. He opened the bread drawer. Nothing. Whew! He opened the fridge. Mouse free. Yes, indeed! He lifted the lid to the teakettle.

There was the mouse!

"So sorry," said the mouse. "But perhaps if I could have just a bit of cheese and a cup of tea, and do you think we could unstopper the chimney and have a nice fire?"

Bear blew his nose with a loud honk. "But then you must go," he sniffled. "No visitors allowed."

"You have my word," said the mouse.

Bear unshuttered and unboarded the windows, unlocked the door, unstoppered the chimney, and unplugged the drain. He

brought out two plates of cheese and two teacups, and he made a crackling fire in the fireplace for two sets of toes. Bear cleared his throat. The mouse looked most attentive. No one had ever been most attentive to Bear.

"The fire is nice," Bear announced.

"Lovely," said the mouse.

No one had ever said Bear's fires were lovely. Bear told a joke. The mouse laughed heartily. No one had ever laughed at Bear's jokes before. The mouse set down his teacup. Bear quickly lifted the teapot. "There's plenty more," he said.

"So sorry," said the mouse. "Most kind, but I must be on my way."

"Really, you needn't go," said Bear.

"But I gave you my word," said the mouse, pointing at the "No Visitors" sign.

"Oh, that!" cried Bear, pulling down the sign and tearing it up. "That's for salesmen. Not for friends."



FIGURE 4

1. Where does Bear find the mouse?
  - a. in the cupboard (20%)
  - b. in the teakettle (43%)**
  - c. in the bread drawer (11%)
  - d. in the fridge (26%)
  
2. How does Bear feel when the mouse asks for a bit of cheese?
  - a. hungry (35%)
  - b. lonely (13%)
  - c. bothered (35%)**
  - d. foolish (17%)
  
3. Read this sentence from the passage. "You have my word," said the mouse. What does this sentence help the reader understand about the mouse?
  - a. The mouse talks a lot. (14%)
  - b. The mouse gives Bear a nice gift. (10%)
  - c. The mouse thinks Bear took something. (7%)
  - d. The mouse keeps promises. (69%)**
  
4. What do Bear and the mouse feel differently about at the beginning of the passage?
  - a. whether the mouse should be in the house (42%)**
  - b. where the mouse should hide in the house (12%)
  - c. what Bear should serve to eat and drink (17%)
  - d. whether Bear should put up his sign (29%)
  
5. Which lesson does Bear learn in the passage?
  - a. It is nice to have guests who enjoy your company. (72%)**
  - b. Guests will always laugh if you tell a joke well. (10%)
  - c. Some guests are good at hiding in small places. (7%)
  - d. It is good to have a fire for guests to warm themselves. (11%)
  
6. Based on the meaning of the word lock and the prefix un, what does unlocked mean in paragraph 8?
  - a. changed (12%)
  - b. held (5%)
  - c. tied (6%)
  - d. opened (77%)**
  
7. Read this sentence about the passage. Many \_\_\_\_\_ may visit Bear tomorrow. Which word makes this sentence correct?
  - a. mouse (18%)
  - b. mice (66%)**
  - c. mouses (11%)
  - d. mices (5%)
  
8. Read these sentences about the story. Bear told a joke. The mouse laughed. Which is the best way to combine these sentences?
  - a. Bear told a joke, and the mouse laughed. (57%)**
  - b. Bear told a joke the mouse laughed. (14%)
  - c. Bear told a joke to the mouse, the mouse laughed. (19%)
  - d. Bear told to the mouse a joke the mouse laughed. (10%)
  
9. Which two words from the passage make new words when the prefix re- is added? Choose two correct answers.
  - a. made (38%)**
  - b. brought
  - c. told (38%)**
  - d. laughed
  - e. said

**Reading Literacy Standard 1:** Ask and answer such questions as who, what, where, when, why, and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.

**Reading Literacy Standard 3:** Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges.

**Reading Literacy Standard 4:** Describe how words and phrases (e.g., regular beats, alliteration, rhymes, repeated lines) supply rhythm and meaning in a story, poem, or song.

**Reading Literacy Standard 6:** Acknowledge differences in the points of view of characters, including by speaking in a different voice for each character when reading dialogue aloud.

**Reading Literacy Standard 2:** Recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral.

**Language—2.L.4.b:** Determine the meaning of the new word formed when a known prefix is added to a known word (e.g., happy/unhappy, tell/retell).

**Language—2.L.1.b:** Form and use frequently occurring irregular plural nouns (e.g., feet, children, teeth, mice, fish).

**Language—2.L.1.f:** Produce, expand, and rearrange complete simple and compound sentences.

**Foundational RF.3.d:** Decode words with common prefixes and suffixes.

While the view of the assessment in Figure 4 illustrates how students are assessed on multiple standards after reading a single text, other items (evidence based selected response and multiple select items) and the writing assessment assess multiple standards within the same item. Further, in a classroom setting, teachers have assessment options available to them that are more extensive than what is possible through a state assessment. Questions and tasks in classrooms should assess student learning across ELA standards and content areas. Additional items from last year's grade 2 and 3 assessments are available on the department's website.

### **What can we learn from our most recent early grades literacy assessments?**

Grade 2 and 3 reading assessments are best at capturing overall proficiency, but they also offer information on how students are performing on certain broad competencies compared to others, which can guide instructional improvements. **Overall, early grades students performed relatively well at listening comprehension, vocabulary, and language, but struggled with reading comprehension, foundational skills, fluency, and writing (see Figures 5 and 6).**

“Overall, early grades students performed relatively well at listening comprehension, vocabulary, and language, but struggled with reading comprehension, foundational skills, fluency, and writing.”

On the grade 2 assessment, students performed comparatively well at **listening comprehension** both for literary and informational texts with 65 percent of second graders getting 16 or more of 20 items correct (80 percent of total items). In contrast, on **reading comprehension** just one-third of grade 2 students got 80 percent of total items. Third graders similarly struggled with reading comprehension with less than one-quarter of students getting 80 percent of the informational and literary text comprehension items correct. Student performance on comprehension items did not vary across literary or informational texts.

Grade 2 students also struggled with **foundational skills** like phonics and word recognition and on the **fluency** assessment, which measures a student's ability to read fluently with comprehension through a series of appropriately complex sentences followed by yes or no responses. But grades 2 and 3 students both did relatively well on determining the meaning of unknown words, indicating success at building their vocabulary. Students also did comparatively well on **language** conventions, with third graders demonstrating greater proficiency on the writing components of language and style and conventions than on development and focus/organization.

The *A Visitor for Bear* example in Figures 3 and 4 illustrates that students struggled more with the comprehension items than the language items. Second graders who took the assessment got an average of 2.5 of the 5 comprehension items correct and an average of 2 of the 3 language items correct (32 percent got all three language items correct and just 10 percent got all five comprehension items correct).

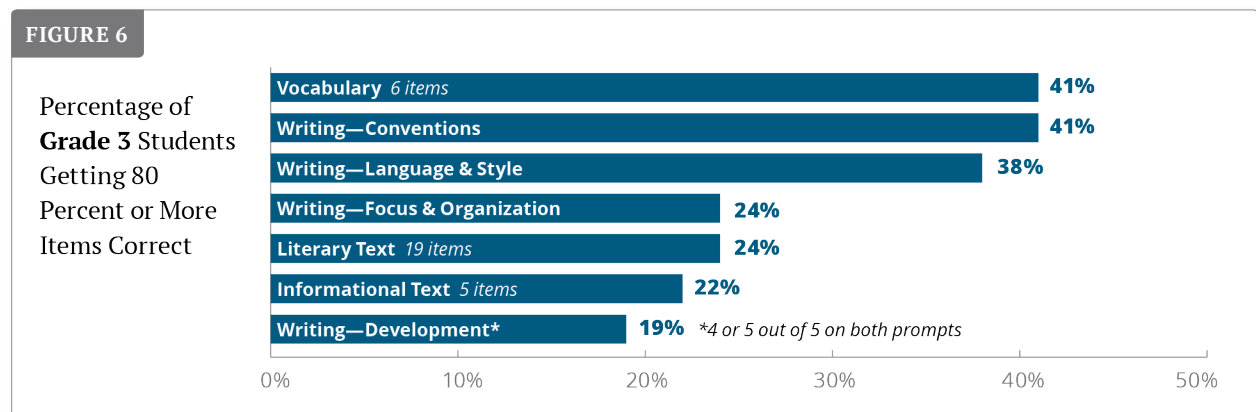
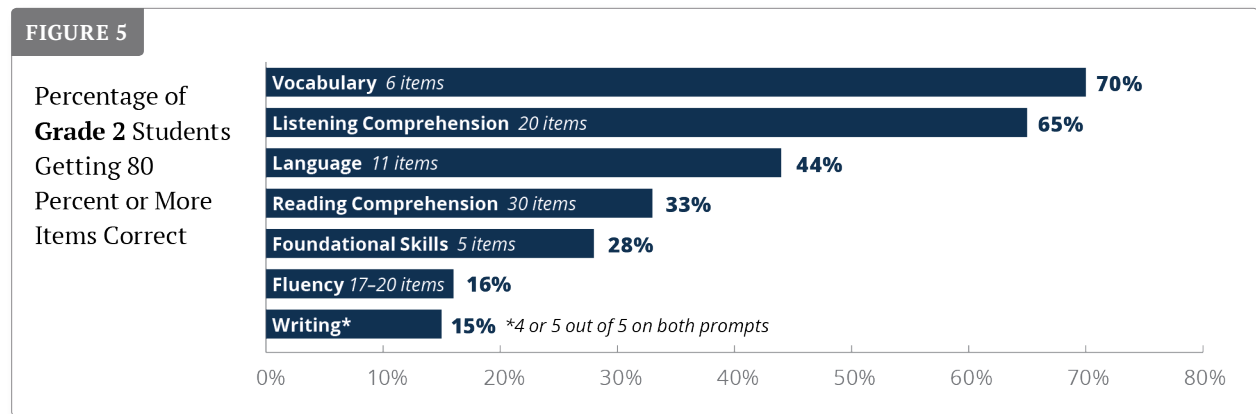
Like comprehension and foundational skills, **writing in response to text** is another area for improvement for most early grades students. The grade 2 assessment contained two writing prompts in response to text. Most students wrote two complete sentences that either generally or partially responded to the prompt with few details and without evidence from the passage (which corresponds with a 3 on the 5-point rubric). Around 43 percent of second grad-

ers included enough text evidence to score a 4 or 5 on either the literary or informational passage, with only 15 percent of students scoring a 4 or 5 on both. For grade 3 students, most students scored a 1 or 2 indicating that they tended to partially address the prompt and often lacked adequate supporting details or evidence.<sup>5</sup> Deeper dives into the grade 3 writing assessment found that students struggled to write informational essays that demonstrated understanding of the stimulus texts. Students often just summarized or restated facts from the text rather than interpreting and adding their perspective as they were drawing on evidence.

Tennessee’s new assessments measure student reading and writing proficiency by assessing skills and comprehension in an integrated manner. This approach aligns with the new standards, which aim to build reading and critical thinking skills.

One indication of the need for a more comprehensive approach that focuses on overall comprehension rather than individual student skills is that students on the grade 2 assessment tended to perform better on items within the same passage than they did on items that assessed the same standard across different passages. In other words, a student’s ability to answer a comprehension question on a particular passage was more related to whether the student was able to answer the other questions correctly than the student’s understanding of single tested standard (like main idea).

With an assessment designed to capture students’ overall reading proficiency rather than isolated language or comprehension skills, we must ensure that we are teaching students in ways that reflect the demands of reading and critical thinking in the real world. Our classroom observations offer a window into how this actually looks in Tennessee and suggest some critical areas for improvement.



# Classrooms Observations Across the State



This past fall, trained observers returned to the same 18 schools that were visited in fall 2016 at the launch of the Read to be Ready (R2BR) Coaching Network. They observed 162 classrooms in grades K–3 and analyzed almost 800 student work samples to see how instruction aligns with *Teaching Literacy in Tennessee* (see Figure 7). Additionally, the department’s English language arts (ELA) consultants observed 215 classrooms in 46 schools the following winter, between November 2017 and January 2018. Findings from both sets of these observations point to three key areas of instructional improvement:

1. high-quality texts selected to build conceptual knowledge;
2. question sequences and tasks that build critical thinking skills and meet the demands of the standards; and
3. explicit and sequential foundational skills instruction with opportunities to practice with connected text in reading and writing.

FIGURE 7 A Framework for *Teaching Literacy in Tennessee*

## Teachers should...



**STEP 1 IDENTIFY CONCEPT(S)** that will become the foundation of the unit. This should be guided by an integration of the Tennessee Academic Standards including ELA, science, social studies, and fine arts.



**STEP 4 DEVELOP END-OF-UNIT TASKS**, which should allow students opportunities to apply what they have read, heard, and seen during the unit in an authentic and meaningful way.



**STEP 2 DETERMINE ENDURING UNDERSTANDING(S) AND GENERATE ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS** that prioritize the learning around the concept(s).



**STEP 5 DESIGN LESSON SEQUENCES** that build in complexity over time and support students in gaining the enduring understandings.



**STEP 3 SELECT MULTIPLE TEXTS** that reflect the expectations of grade-level standards and support the enduring understandings.



**STEP 6 CREATE DAILY TASKS** that allow students to incrementally show their knowledge and skills until they are able to fully demonstrate their learning through the more comprehensive end-of-unit task.

“ Teachers do not always seem to be intentionally selecting texts as part of a set to build knowledge of a concept.

## High-Quality Texts

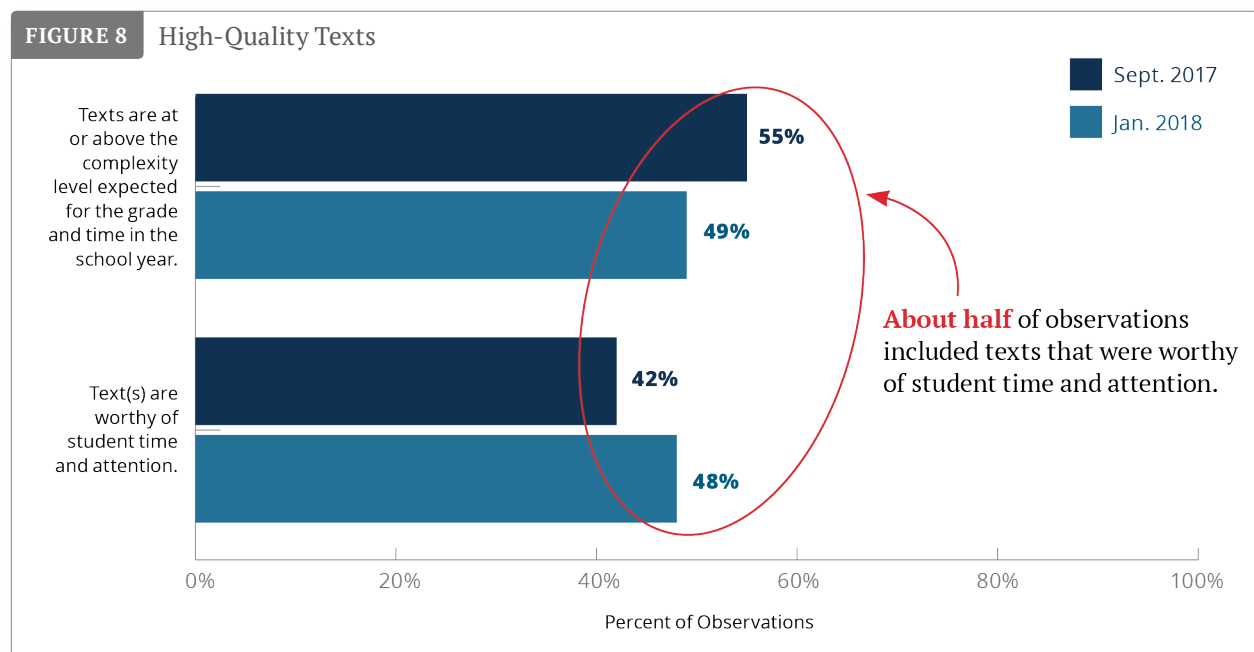
Time with texts is most valuable when those texts provoke a deep level of thinking. In 2016, teachers struggled to select books that were both quantitatively and qualitatively complex. Observers often saw the same book being read aloud at grades K–3, even within the same building. During observations this school year, texts were more often appropriately quantitatively complex (as measured by Lexile level), but they often lacked the qualitative complexity that make them worthy of a student’s time and attention (e.g., structure, levels of meaning, and knowledge demands). Figure 8 shows that just about half of observations included texts that were worthy of student time and attention.

Additionally, teachers do not always seem to be intentionally selecting texts as part of a set to build knowledge of a concept. Instead of using the content standards and conceptual knowledge goals to select texts, teachers appeared to often select texts to target specific standards or surface-level topics. For example, observed texts last fall included things like *Curious George Goes to School* and *How Do Dinosaurs Go to School*, which were selected based on proximity to the

beginning of the school year. Educator survey data also offers evidence that **teachers are not yet strategically selecting texts to build conceptual knowledge**. On the department’s Tennessee Educator Survey in spring 2017, less than half of grades K–3 teachers reported selecting texts for an instructional unit based on a particular content or concept (e.g., social studies or science).

## Question Sequences and Tasks

In addition to reading and listening to quality texts, students should be thinking deeply about and responding to text through speaking and writing. To achieve this, instruction should include question sequences that integrate the standards to support students toward the enduring understandings and daily tasks that provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their new understandings using evidence from the text. In our observations, we see that **teachers have made a positive shift to more text-dependent questions, but question sequences and task assignments are often focused on a singular standard** (see example on page 14).



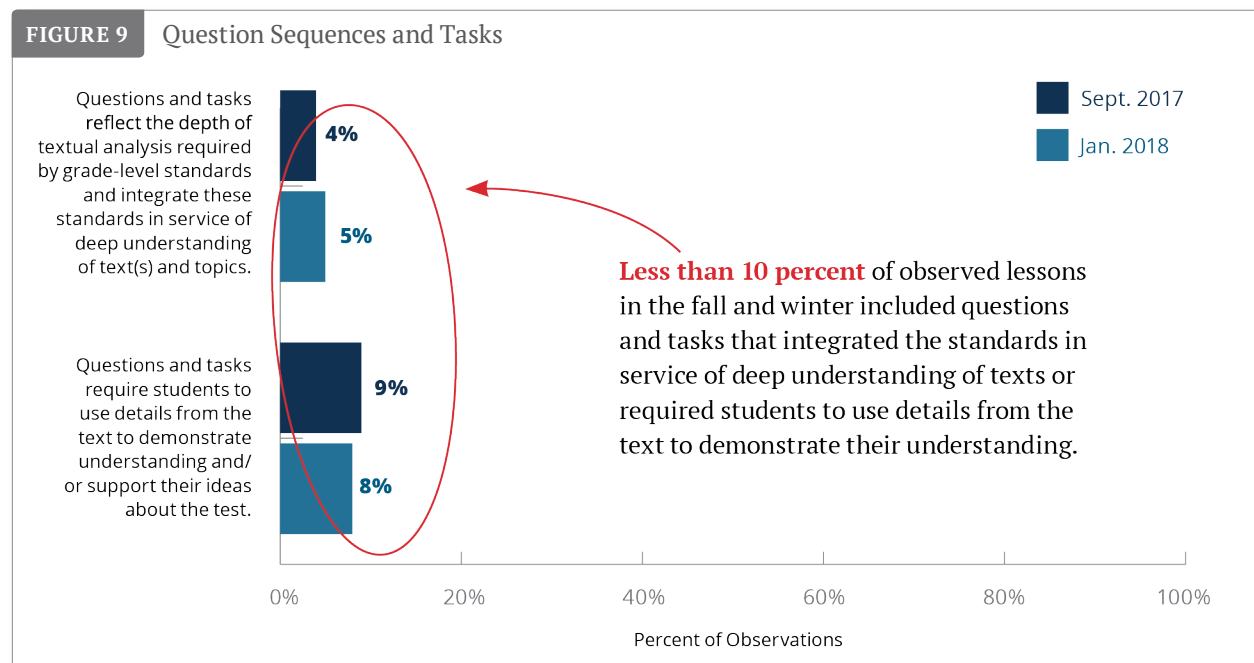
In fall 2016, many teachers were asking questions that did not reference the texts. For example, following a read aloud in 2016, a teacher asked: “What does dodging mean? What does it mean to babble? Who usually babbles?” This past fall, teacher’s questions were generally tied to texts—a step in the right direction. For example, teachers were asking questions like, “What happened at the beginning of this story?” and “What is our book about?” On surveys of R2BR district coaches and teachers, we also saw significant improvement in the ability of both coaches and teachers to identify text-dependent questions and select appropriate questions for a given situation. Still, less than 10 percent of observed lessons in the fall and winter included questions and tasks that integrated the standards in service of deep understanding of texts or required students to use details from the text to demonstrate their understanding (see Figure 9).

Tasks tended to narrowly focus on single standards, such as listing out the beginning, middle, and end of a story (Reading Standard 3), rather than integrating the standards to build students’ knowledge. Students should engage in writing tasks that allow them to demonstrate critical thinking and text analysis skills.

They also need to practice writing for different purposes and in response to different types of texts. While teachers are providing opportunities for students to write, most writing tasks focus on students’ personal experiences and preferences instead of thinking deeply about a text. Just six percent of assignments were informational, six percent were opinion, and two percent were narrative. Of the 161 writing tasks analyzed, **students were overwhelmingly able to meet the demands of the writing tasks, but the tasks were rarely aligned to the demands of the standards.**

### Foundational Skills Instruction

Students should have daily opportunities to practice foundational skills that have been taught explicitly and systematically and applied through reading and writing. Research indicates that phonics instruction is most effective when it is taught systematically and explicitly.<sup>6</sup> **In observations of Tennessee early grades classrooms, over half of teachers targeted below grade-level skills that students already had mastered.** There were more lessons where the foundational skills were aligned to grade-level standards in the winter compared to the fall (see Figure 10).

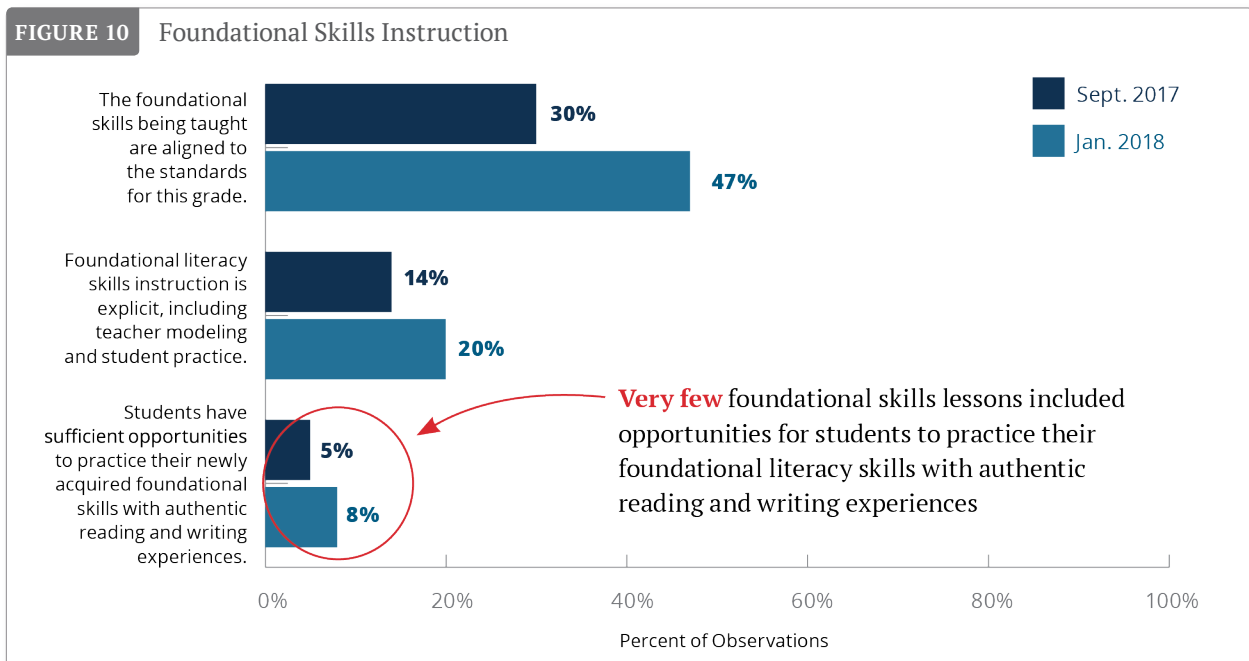


Furthermore, very few foundational skills lessons included opportunities for students to practice their foundational literacy skills with authentic reading and writing experiences. Teachers tended to provide a lesson, but then stopped short of allowing students to actually practice applying what was taught. Specifically, just 14 percent in the fall and 20 percent in the winter included explicit foundational skills instruction with teacher modeling and student practice, and less than 10 percent of observed foundational skills lessons included opportunities for students to practice their skills with authentic reading and writing experiences.

Based on what we know from the assessments—that students are struggling with comprehension, foundational skills, and writing—it is not surprising that we see that teachers are not yet fully enacting teaching practices that would best support students in growing these skills. **As teachers increase their use of high-quality texts, questions and tasks that build critical thinking skills, and sequential foundational skills instruction, we should see improvements to these areas in which our students struggled.** For example, more question sequences ac-

companying interactive read alouds that address multiple reading standards (like the comprehension items with “A Visitor to Bear”) will better prepare students for the assessment and help them develop the reading and critical thinking skills they will need throughout their lives.

Figure 11 on the next page provides an example of a question sequence observed in a Tennessee classroom last fall, compared to an ideal question sequence for the same text, *Eggs* by Marilyn Singer. *Eggs* discusses different characteristics of eggs ranging from texture, size, form, color, number, location when laid, and method of hatching. The observed question sequence represents isolated instruction targeting reading standard 3.RI.KID.2: Determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text. The ideal sequence supports multiple reading standards and is situated in the beginning of a conceptual unit that focuses on animals’ internal and external structures and how they support survival, growth, reproduction, and behavior, which aligns with third grade science standard 3.LS1.1.



## Observed Question Sequence Focused on a Single Standard

- What is our book about?
- What else did it say [an egg] could be used as?
- Can you find the main idea?
- Where do we look for the main idea?
- Which one is the main idea in this paragraph?

## Question Sequence that Integrates the Standards to Build Knowledge

- In the beginning of our book, the author said that eggs can be, “breakfast, lunch, and dinner.” Given what you know about how embryos survive in an egg, how can an egg provide “breakfast, lunch, and dinner?” Use specific vocabulary from our text. **3.RI.CS.4** **3.RI.KID.1**
- Why is the type, or texture, of the shell on an egg important? Give a specific example that explains your reasoning for the importance. **3.RI.KID.1** **3.RI.CS.5**
- Why do animals lay eggs that have different shapes? Give a specific example, and explain how the shape of that animal’s egg is important. **3.RI.KID.1** **3.RI.CS.5**
- Why does the egg’s color matter? **3.RI.KID.1** **3.RI.IKI.7**
- According to our text, why do animals like fish and dragonflies lay thousands or even millions of eggs? **3.RI.KID.1**
- Our text said: “Eggs have a long list of enemies...” Who are the enemies and how have animals and their eggs protected themselves from those enemies? Cite some specific ways based on our text. Use precise vocabulary we have learned in our unit. **3.RI.KID.3**
- The caption here says: “The female red-legged partridge builds two nests and lays eggs in each. She incubates one clutch. The male incubates the other.” Using the information we just read and the illustrations on these pages, what does “incubate” mean? How does the male emperor penguin incubate his egg? Why is it important for birds to incubate their eggs? **3.RI.IKI.7** **3.RI.CS.4**
- Why is it important for eggs to remain intact? Summarize some of the ways the eggs are designed to improve the chances of survival. **3.RI.KID.2**
- How do animals’ reproductive behaviors and their eggs support their survival? **3.RI.KID.2**

## STANDARDS

**3.RI.KID.1** Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as a basis for the answers.

**3.RI.KID.3** Describe the relationship between a series of historical events, scientific ideas or concepts, or steps in technical procedures in a text, using language that pertains to time, sequence, and cause/effect.

**3.RI.CS.5** Use text features to locate information relevant to a given topic efficiently.

**3.RI.KID.2** Determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea.

**3.RI.CS.4** Determine the meaning of words and phrases in a text relevant to a grade 3 topic or subject area.

**3.RI.CS.5** Use information gained from illustrations and the words in a text to demonstrate understanding of a text.



# Sourcing Materials to Teach in This New Way



The average K–3 reading teacher spends 4.5 hours per week creating or sourcing materials for daily reading blocks, according to data from our Tennessee Educator Survey. This large amount of time is related to the fact that an overwhelming majority of current early grades literacy instructional materials were adopted and purchased prior to the development of the new standards. While a new adoption will take effect in the fall of 2020, many teachers do not have materials readily available in the interim that meet the demands of the standards.

Open responses to the educator survey illustrate this materials challenge:

“I am excited about the Read to be Ready program. Most of the teachers who I work with have been very positive about working to plan and deliver interactive read alouds and shared reads. The biggest concern the K–2 teachers have expressed is the amount of time that it takes to plan for a well-developed task aligned to standards.”

“Quality, uniform teaching resources need to be provided for teachers. The time and training for using the resources correctly and effectively also needs to be a priority. Teachers should not be spending hours searching for and many times modifying instructional materials to teach standards.”

“It would be much more beneficial for me as a teacher to be able to use expertly created materials and focus my time on my delivery of that information.”

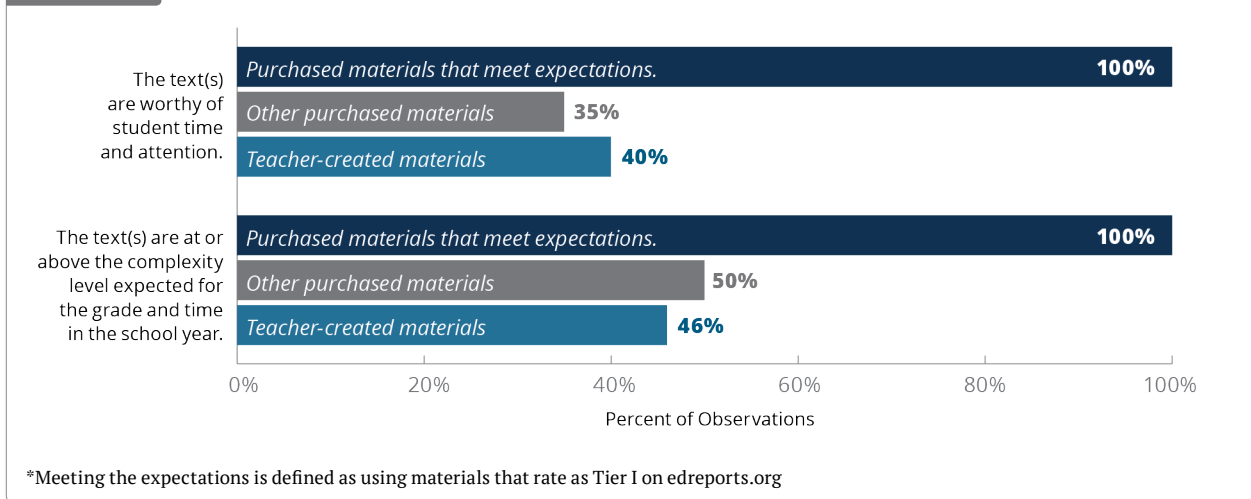
National research consistently finds that quality instructional materials matter for student achievement. Several studies comparing student outcomes in schools and districts that use different materials find

that students with access to better materials demonstrated greater achievement gains.<sup>7</sup> One study found that the difference equated to about eight months of additional learning.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, studies have found that the impact of quality materials is greater the longer students have access. For example, a 2013 quasi-experimental study conducted in DC and New York found that the longer the students’ school used a high-quality curricula, the greater the outcomes for the students.<sup>9</sup>

Our Tennessee observation data also provide insights into what happens when teachers have access to high-quality materials. When teachers leverage high-quality instructional materials, students are consistently exposed to complex texts worthy of their time and attention (see Figure 12).

“The average K–3 reading teacher spends **4.5 hours per week** creating or sourcing materials for daily reading blocks.”

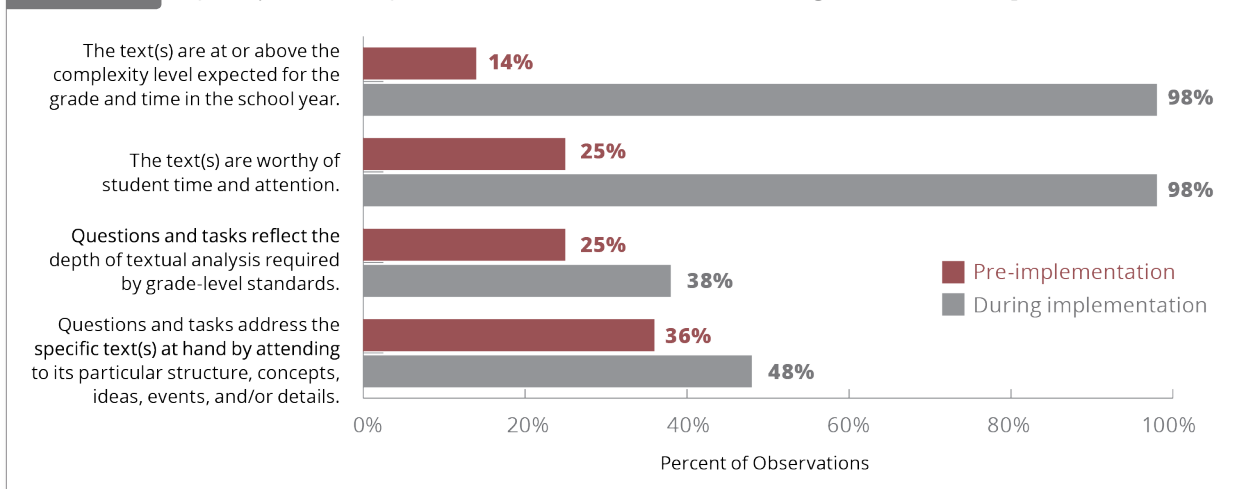
**FIGURE 12** Text Quality by Quality of Instructional Materials\*



To meet the need of high-quality materials, the department has worked with content experts to create high-quality units with interesting, rigorous texts and engaging student questions and assignments that build reading skills and science knowledge. The units incorporate the instructional practices from the R2BR Coaching Network and *Teaching Literacy in Tennessee* and cover approximately three weeks of literacy instruction. In the 50 pilot classrooms that first used the unit starters, we have seen a significant increase in the quality of texts, question sequences, and tasks (see Figure 13). We also see that teachers are confident of having the skills and knowledge necessary to develop new units, but they say they do not have the time required to develop their own units.

Although weak instructional materials can certainly contribute to weak instructional practices, strong instructional materials are not a substitute for strong teaching. As you can see, even with quality materials some teachers were still not adhering to provided question sequences and tasks. This is why the R2BR Coaching Network is transforming the role of the literacy coach from a provider of materials into a collaborative supporter of quality instructional practices. It is also why the unit starters pilot included extensive guidance and professional learning opportunities to support teachers with implementation.

**FIGURE 13** Quality of Texts, Questions, and Tasks Before and During Unit Starters Implementation



# Stories of Our Work



We talked to three teachers whose students had success well above the state average on the grades 2 and 3 assessments. Though teaching in different contexts, all three set high expectations for their students and approach literacy instruction in alignment with the principles in *Teaching Literacy in Tennessee*. They also all reported continually reflecting on their own practices and seeking feedback for their own improvement. **These teachers are:**

## Hope Blizzard

Hope has taught second and third grade at John Sevier Elementary School in Maryville City for four years, plus a year of student teaching while she was completing her educator preparation program at Tennessee Technological University.

## Angela Brown

Angela has taught both kindergarten and second grade at City Park Elementary School in Athens City for 22 years. She has served as a grade-level content leader and been trained as a TEAM teacher evaluator.

## Meron Ticer

Meron is a third grade teacher at EA Harold Elementary in Millington Municipal Schools. She has 13 years of experience teaching kindergarten, third, and fourth grades following her educator preparation at The University of Memphis.

**Here is what these three teachers had to say about their literacy instruction related to our three instructional priority areas.**

## High-Quality Texts

### Meron Ticer

“My team and I work together to find text sets. We look at the Lexile level and correlate with what we are learning in science and social studies and try to find a variety of fiction and non-fiction texts. For example, we did a weather unit where we read *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* and non-fiction texts that taught about the different types of clouds.”

### Angela Brown

“Right now, we are doing Christmas around the world. Each of the five second grade classrooms is in charge of finding research on a different country. For instance, ours is Germany. Our class is researching how Christmas in Germany is similar and different to here. We also have one big text that we are reading that has all the different celebrations around the world. At the end, the children will share their research that they have found. When we were developing our text sets for this unit we made sure that we were incorporating science, social studies, and writing standards.”

## Question Sequences and Tasks

Hope Blizzard

“For read aloud, I build questions ahead of time that enable the students to think through complex ideas within the text. They may do this with a pair share or by building a class anchor chart. A lot of times students will need to be pushed to exceed the minimal expectations. That offers me the opportunity to push them to a deeper understanding of the text. I might ask them a more challenging question or present information in a different way. Over the years, I’ve become more comfortable with productive student struggle because I feel the students really learn from it. This has allowed me to be more of a facilitator.”

Meron Ticer

“I do writing every day—a little piece of it every single day until they get the routine of it. One day, we talk about the prompt and what is it really asking them to write about. The next day, we focus on the planning. The next day they write an introduction, then details, then conclusion, toward the end I had them orally rehearse with their neighbors. The next day, they would work on writing a final draft.”

## Foundational Skills Instruction

Angela Brown

“We try to do a well-rounded approach to reading. We have shared and interactive reads and guided reading and independent reading every day. . . .This is our first year of a new phonics-based program and so the whole gamut is intertwined, my entire morning is based on literacy and literacy centers.”

Hope Blizzard

“We have foundational skills practice, and I tie those into social studies and science standards. I do tie social studies and science into writing as well—as much integration as I can. I love the flow of integration, when everything goes together. It allows students to keep track of the learning and relate everything to a shared concept.”

Meron Ticer

“Our phonics ties into spelling words for the week, they always have some sort of phonics element to them.”

# A Reason for Hope and a Call to Action



Given the time it takes to make systematic change, we were not surprised to learn from our state assessment results and classroom visits that, just one and a half years later, we still have a ways to go to achieve our vision. We are encouraged to see some evidence that instructional shifts are beginning to occur through increases in text-dependent questions and the use of instructional strategies like interactive read aloud and shared reading. However despite a stronger balance of skill- and knowledge-based competencies, both sets of competencies were still largely being taught in isolation rather than targeting meaning or purpose of a text.

*Teaching Literacy in Tennessee* illustrates a pretty dramatic shift in instruction compared to the prior patterns of practice, and changes this substantial take time. Research has found that it may take, on average, 20 separate instances of practice for a teacher to master a new instructional strategy.<sup>10</sup> However, we have many reasons to expect improvements in both our teachers' instruction and students' learning in future years.

- ★ The Coaching Network focused on foundational skills instruction in fall 2017 and is focused on writing instruction in spring 2018 and surveys of district coaches indicate strong improvements in coach knowledge in each of these areas.
- ★ Observations from this past winter indicate that compared to districts not engaged in R2BR initiatives, districts that are participating in both the Coaching Network and the Tennessee Early Literacy Network show more progress on our priority areas of increasing student access to high-quality texts, question sequences and tasks that build knowledge, and strong foundational skills instruction.
- ★ A survey of Tennessee school districts indicates that districts are using *Teaching Literacy in Tennessee* as a “north star” to guide their professional learning for their early grades teachers

and are also using it to rethink their curricular and planning resources for their teachers.

- ★ Eleven districts in Tennessee are piloting new literacy materials through Leading Innovation For Tennessee (LIFT), a network of diverse districts working together on problems of practice. In these districts, a third of literacy classrooms now show some or full alignment to the new Tennessee standards, compared to less than 10 percent prior to implementation. Furthermore, almost nine in ten teachers feel “more supported” because of this work and more than nine in ten teachers believe this work “benefits the students” in their districts.
- ★ Approximately 8,000 students rising to grades 1, 2, or 3, attended summer reading camps last summer, and we expect thousands to do so again this coming summer. An average student attending one of the camps spent around 8 hours writing, 8 more hours engaged in text-related activities, and 25 hours reading. Each student also took home an average of 22 new books. On average, students also saw improvements in their grade level reading accuracy and comprehension, as well as on a measure of their motivation to read.
- ★ As part of a pilot called Early Literacy Matters, almost 200 childcare centers and non-public

schools serving children from birth to 5 years old from 15 counties participate in online training modules designed by the department to encourage age-appropriate literacy practices. Participants also receive materials and books, both for their classrooms and for children to take home. Early Literacy Matters coaches provide tiered supports to participating centers by conducting observations, reviewing lesson plans and work products generated from the modules, and providing feedback.

★ Educator preparation providers (EPPs) that license early childhood, elementary, and special education candidates are engaging in a substantive review process to align their programs to the new EPP literacy standards and the state’s approach of *Teaching Literacy in Tennessee*. The recent launch of the EPP literacy network, which engages lead literacy faculty from each EPP across the state, will convene four times during 2018 for the purposes of working collaboratively to identify needs and goals related to effective literacy preparation.

★ Furthermore and perhaps most encouraging, is teacher eagerness to make changes to their practice after they have been exposed to strategies and materials that can enhance their students learning. As one third grade teacher said after piloting the unit starters, “I’ve learned a lot—we don’t realize what our students can remember and we don’t give them enough credit. They can tell you the phases of the moon—it’s unreal.”

While this evidence makes us optimistic about future student progress, we also know that engaging with our key partners around targeted strategies will best set us up for success. These partners include teachers, district and school leaders, and educator preparation providers. The section below lists three areas of focus for the coming year for each group. Each group’s areas of focus align with the **three instructional priorities** identified from observation and assessment data (quality texts, questions and tasks, and foundational skills instruction) and efforts to improve **instructional materials** to support improved instruction.

Teachers are already engaging with their instructional leaders to improve their practices and to select high-quality materials, and many teachers are also involved in Read to be Ready summer camps.

AREAS OF FOCUS

1. Use high-quality materials that are worthy of attention and engage students in building knowledge.
2. Increase time students spend on reading and writing throughout the school day.
3. Assign tasks and ask questions that align to expectations in the standards.

District leaders, school leaders, and instructional coaches are already supporting this work by attending Read to be Ready convenings and supporting organization of summer camps.

AREAS OF FOCUS

1. Lead efforts to ensure teachers have high-quality reading materials and consider using the unit starters as “bridge” to selecting new materials aligned to standards.
2. Ensure teacher feedback, support, and evaluation focuses on increased reading and writing in the classroom.
3. Ensure teacher feedback, support, and evaluation focus on improving questioning and creating more standards-aligned tasks.

Educator preparation providers are already working to align programs to new literacy standards, participating in a new literacy faculty network, and using new annual report data for program improvement.

AREAS OF FOCUS

1. Rethink course requirements, course sequencing, and clinical preparation while aligning programs to new literacy standards and expectations of teachers in *Teaching Literacy in Tennessee*.
2. Ensure candidates have access to and use high-quality materials and curriculum in literacy courses and clinical experiences, and integrate Read to be Ready resources, such as unit starters, to support candidate learning.
3. Actively participate in literacy networks.

As this work advances, we will continue to reflect on our progress to help determine where Tennessee stands regarding our early grades instructional vision around literacy so that we can learn how to best keep moving forward.

Tennessee has a number of strong educators just like those profiled in the previous section. We firmly believe that with the right supports through coaching and professional learning and through access to high quality instructional materials, our teachers will continue to improve in these instructional areas and more and more students will meet our elevated definition of what it means to be a proficient reader.

## NOTES

1. The Annie. E. Casey Foundation. (2013). *Early warning confirmed: A research update on third-grade reading*. Baltimore, MD.
2. In the past, Tennessee's TCAP results showed much higher proficiency ratings than exams like NAEP and ACT, which earned us an "F" from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for "Truth in Advertising" in 2007. Now, we are aligned to the level of performance our students show on national exams.
3. To access more items from the grade 2 assessment, visit <https://www.tn.gov/content/tn/education/assessment/tnready/grade-2-assessment.html>. More items from grade 3-8 ELA can be found here: <https://www.tn.gov/education/assessment/tnready/tnready-ela.html>
4. Excerpt from *A Visitor for Bear* by Bonny Becker. Text copyright © 2008 Bonny Becker. Reproduced by permission of the publisher, Candlewick Press, Inc.
5. The 2017–18 [grade 2 rubric](#) is the same as it was in 2016–17, but grade 3 has [a new rubric](#) for 2017-18.
6. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction: Reports of the subgroups* (NIH Publication No. 00-4754). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
7. Koedel, C., & Polikoff, M. (2017). *Big bang for a just a few bucks: The impact of math textbooks in California*. Evidence Speaks Reports, 2(5).
8. Kane, T., Owens, A., M., Marinell, W. H., Thal, D. R. C., & Staiger, D. O. (2016). *Teaching higher: Educators' perspectives on common core implementation*. Cambridge, MA: Center for Education Policy Research.
9. Nichols-Barrer, I., & Haimson, J. (2013). *Impacts of five expeditionary learning middle schools on academic achievement*. Cambridge, MA: Mathematica Policy Research.
10. Joyce, B. & Showers, B. (2002). *Student achievement through staff development*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.



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