

2022 DATA SNAPSHOT

K-12 English
Language Arts
Instructional
Materials

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, EdReports published its first round of reviews for English language arts (ELA) instructional materials for grades 3–8. A year later, we launched reviews for K–2 and high school curricula. In 2018, we delved into the supplementals market by publishing reviews of K–2 foundational skills programs. Over the course of a few short years, the quality of ELA materials has improved significantly as a result of educators better understanding what quality content looks like and demanding improvements. Today, educators have more high-quality materials to choose from than ever before.

However, despite the increased availability of aligned materials, the majority of students across the country still have limited access to ELA content necessary to prepare them for college and careers.

This Data Snapshot focuses on:

- The availability of quality K–12 English language arts programs and how regularly these materials are used.
- The extent to which materials provide culturally relevant content and support a diversity of student needs, including those of multilingual learners.
- ELA teacher perceptions of their materials, what teachers prioritize in the content they are using, and how their materials measure up to those expectations.
- Important factors that influence the use of high-quality materials, such as ongoing access to curriculum-aligned professional development.

This study draws upon data from EdReports reviews, copyright dates, and data from the RAND Corporation American Instructional Resources Surveys (AIRS) on curriculum use, teacher perceptions, and school context. In addition, these specific ELA analyses draw on trends and research from across the curriculum marketplace published in the [**State of the Instructional Materials Market 2021: The Availability and Use of Aligned Materials**](#).

Key Findings

1. The availability of standards-aligned English language arts instructional materials continues to increase.

EdReports has reviewed more than 90% of the known comprehensive K–12 English language arts materials market.

Of the **core English language arts** materials EdReports has reviewed, 51% meet expectations for standards alignment, 32% partially meet expectations for alignment, and 17% do not meet expectations for alignment. For **foundational skills programs**, which are not comprehensive core products but are designed to address the reading skills necessary for our youngest learners, only 20% of products meet expectations, 60% partially meet, and 20% do not meet expectations.

Based on our analysis, there are dozens of core, comprehensive programs for districts to choose from that are aligned to college and career-ready standards. This means that districts have more choices than ever before as they seek to match their local priorities with standards-aligned options.

Figure 1

Availability of aligned ELA core materials: 2018–2021

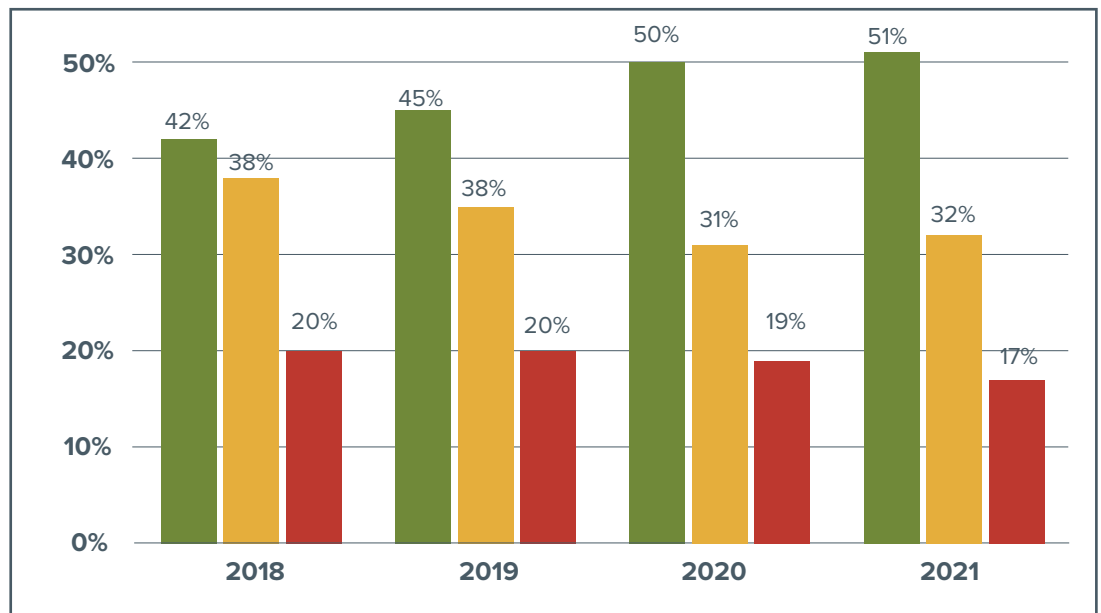


Table 1 Availability of aligned ELA materials - 2021

Grade Band	Meets (count)	Meets (percentage)	Partially Meets (count)	Partially Meets (percentage)	Does Not Meet (count)	Does Not Meet (count)
Foundational skills supplement	6	20.0%	18	60.0%	6	20.0%
Elementary grades (core)	69	37.1%	75	40.3%	42	22.6%
Middle grades	55	61.8%	25	28.1%	9	10.1%
High school grades	40	64.5%	15	24.2%	7	11.3%
ELA core (elementary, middle, and high)	158	51.5%	97	31.6%	52	16.9%

Note: Based on EdReports published individual grade-level reports, 2021 edition or earlier.

2. Only a quarter of ELA teachers are using aligned instructional materials.

Although the availability of aligned core materials in ELA continues to increase in both number and as a percentage of the market, the RAND AIRS data do not show commensurate increases in teachers using these materials.

Looking across the grade bands (table 3), the data reveal interesting differences between the availability and use of high-quality instructional materials. These differences lead to new questions, and point to distinct interventions to increase the use of quality curriculum.

Middle and High School (Grades 6–12)

There is a significant difference between the percentage of middle and high school teachers that indicate they use any core curriculum products at least once a week and their elementary counterparts. While 80% of elementary teachers report using a core curriculum product at least once a week, only 60% of middle school teachers and 55% of high school teachers report the same.

We do not know all of the reasons why there is such a large difference in the use of aligned ELA materials across grades; however, there are trends that are worthy of consideration. For teachers who do not report using core materials, we find that middle and high school ELA teachers are increasingly turning to supplements as their primary resources for instruction and use supplemental programs at twice the rate of elementary teachers (table 3).

In addition, high school teachers across ELA, math, and science are less likely to be using aligned materials, more likely to be the primary decision-maker about which materials are in use, less likely to be encouraged by principals to use district-provided curriculum, and less likely to receive professional learning on their materials.

We do know that the low levels of use of aligned materials is not due to a lack of options at the middle and high school levels. In these grade bands, there is actually a higher percentage of the materials market that meet expectations for alignment. Those making decisions about which materials to procure and use for grades 6–12 have multiple options, with 62% of the middle school market and 65% of the high school market meeting expectations for alignment (table 1).

Elementary School (Grades K–5)

In elementary school classrooms, in which the highest percentage of teachers use core ELA curricular materials, we see a different but no less complicated picture. While elementary school teachers use core curricular materials at a high rate, it is less likely that those core materials are aligned to college and career-ready standards.

Only **25% of elementary teachers** indicate they use aligned ELA materials at least once a week. For context, 45% of elementary school teachers indicate using aligned math materials weekly. One reason for this may be that despite the proliferation of K–5 ELA materials, only 37% of materials reviewed by EdReports for this grade band meet expectations for alignment. Therefore, it is more difficult for districts and schools to distinguish between programs that claim to be standards aligned and those that actually are since two-thirds of the materials that have been reviewed do not meet expectations for alignment.

The need for high-quality early literacy materials has been exacerbated by the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent **national reading scores** plummeted to their **lowest levels since 2019**. Access to high-quality content, particularly content that reflects the **research** on how students learn to read, is critical for teachers as they strive to accelerate literacy skills for each kid in their classroom. While there are myriad ways districts are selecting comprehensive early literacy materials, our data show that any strategy will not necessarily lead to high-quality reading instruction since there are still few foundational skills programs that meet expectations for quality. Simply put, the majority of programs reviewed by EdReports do not have the necessary components that will support students to read. In addition, the responsibility to combine programs to create an integrated, coherent experience for students ultimately puts a large burden on teachers.

Positive Trends

Despite the lack of widespread use of high-quality ELA materials, there are also bright spots. Even as the use of aligned programs does not yet match availability and varies across grade levels, it is still trending in a promising direction. Over the past three years, use of aligned ELA instructional materials has risen 11 percentage points, despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The use of older materials has also decreased dramatically over the past three years. In 2019, we found that 9% of materials used in ELA classrooms were created before 2012. That number is now 0.6%. This shows that districts and schools have been updating and selecting materials with more recent copyrights that are more likely to have complex texts, build knowledge, develop foundational skills, and support students to be college and-career-ready.

Table 2 Use of standards-aligned ELA materials at least once a week

Grade Band	2019	2020	2021
At least one aligned curriculum	14.8%	25.9%	25.6%
At least one partially aligned curriculum	22.7%	21.5%	16.5%
Nonaligned curricula	20.1%	19.1%	14.4%
Unrated materials ¹	41.4%	33.0%	42.6%
Created by the classroom teacher	1.0%	0.5%	0.9%

¹ “Unrated materials” includes curricula currently under EdReports review, non-reviewed comprehensive curricula, curriculum made by the school or district, supplemental programs, and indication of regularly using no particular curriculum.

Table 3 Percentage of teacher curriculum use by ELA curriculum standards-alignment rating and material type

	Elementary grades	Middle grades	High school grades	Overall
At least one aligned curriculum	24.5%	32.9%	21.0%	25.6%
At least one partially aligned curriculum	23.9%	9.9%	8.9%	16.5%
Non-aligned curricula	24.9%	5.0%	3.8%	14.4%
Under review by EdReports	0.6%	2.4%	0.6%	1.1%
Comprehensive curriculum not reviewed	1.2%	0.4%	2.4%	1.3%
Pre-2012 edition or no longer actively sold by publisher	0.1%	0.1%	1.9%	0.6%
Supplemental program	19.4%	39.5%	42.7%	30.5%
Other curriculum not listed on survey	3.3%	5.6%	10.0%	5.6%
Created by the school or district	2.0%	3.1%	5.7%	3.3%
Created by the classroom teacher	0.0%	0.9%	2.7%	0.9%
No particular curriculum	0.2%	0.1%	0.3%	0.2%

Question Text: Among the ELA curriculum materials in this list, select any materials you use regularly (once a week or more, on average) for your ELA instruction this school year (2020–21).

3. Research shows that ongoing professional learning is key to implementing high-quality instructional materials. However, few ELA teachers have access to consistent learning opportunities that prepare them to use their curriculum.

The numbers are grim: one-fifth of ELA teachers receive no curriculum focused professional development at all with over half of teachers only receiving 0–5 hours of learning on how to implement ELA materials.

Given how **important professional learning** is for the successful implementation of high-quality materials, these numbers signal a clear need for states and districts to invest in ongoing professional development to support teachers with their curriculum.

Even when ELA teachers do have access to professional development, they often do not feel satisfied with the learning they receive. This is particularly true around the use of instructional materials. Half of teachers do not feel that their professional development prepared them to use their district curriculum. Access to professional learning in terms of hours is only the beginning; the content of learning opportunities is equally as crucial.

Lack of access to and poor quality professional learning raises the question of how school and district leaders can ensure more tangible support to fully prepare teachers to effectively use aligned curriculum. Carnegie Corporation of New York’s report, [“The Elements: Transforming Teaching through Curriculum-Based Professional Learning,”](#) lays out a vision of professional learning that uses curriculum as both a lever and a guide, helping link teachers’ actions and ideas to new standards in a concrete, focused way. The report notes: “Done right, [professional learning] can close the gap between the experiences we provide for teachers and those we want them to provide for students.”

Table 4 Access to professional learning activities on how to implement main ELA instructional materials

Hours of professional learning	Elementary grades	Middle grades	High school grades	Overall
0 hours	16.5%	21.4%	26.1%	20.2%
1–5 hours	36.1%	35.2%	34.1%	35.3%
6–10 hours	19.1%	20.7%	19.4%	19.6%
11–20 hours	13.1%	9.4%	7.2%	10.6%
More than 20 hours	12.1%	11.2%	9.9%	11.3%

Question Text: Since the end of last school year (2019-20), how many hours did you spend in professional learning activities related to the following topics in ELA: Learning how to implement my main instructional materials?

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding error and missing data at 3.1% for elementary, 2.1% for middle school, 3.3% for high school grades, and 2.9%

Table 5 Quality of professional learning activities to use ELA curriculum materials provided by school or district

Extent of preparation	Elementary grades	Middle grades	High school grades	Overall
Did not prepare me at all	14.2%	22.3%	28.4%	20.0%
Prepared me to a slight extent	26.1%	31.0%	37.7%	30.4%
Prepared me to a moderate extent	41.0%	30.1%	23.6%	33.7%
Prepared me to a great extent	15.6%	14.7%	7.1%	13.1%

Question Text: To what extent have professional learning opportunities provided by your school or district this school year (2020–2021) prepared you to use curriculum materials provided by your school or district?

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding error and missing data at 3.1% for elementary, 1.9% for middle school, 3.2% for high school grades, and 2.9% for total.

4. Teachers want ELA materials that are aligned to their state standards, that engage and challenge all students, and include content and approaches that are culturally relevant. But few teachers believe their materials meet these needs.

Nearly three-quarters of ELA teachers say it is extremely important that materials help their students meet state standards. Almost all (93%) say it is either somewhat or extremely important. However, less than half of ELA teachers believe their curriculum adequately achieves this (response categories 6 and 7 on table 7). This perception is in line with the lack of use in classrooms with only 26% of ELA teachers using programs that meet expectations for alignment.

Teachers also highlight a strong demand for instructional materials that address a broader definition of quality in addition to alignment to college and career-ready standards. The data we analyzed confirms that educators are concerned about **whether materials can engage all students** with content and approaches that are culturally relevant and ensure access to high-level learning and grade-level content. Ninety percent of ELA teachers say that it is “somewhat or very important” for their curriculum to support them with culturally relevant content. Only 27% of teachers describe their curriculum as adequate or completely adequate in this area.

Finally, 72% of teachers express a desire for their ELA materials to include support for multilingual learners, but only 24% believe that their materials meet these needs.

The discrepancies between what ELA teachers say they need most from materials and what they believe their materials provide is a clear signal to school, district, and state leaders selecting and implementing curriculum to attend to these critical areas. In addition, publishers and product developers can also gain insight into how their programs may need to evolve to ensure all students can learn and grow.

Table 6 Importance teachers place on various characteristics of ELA instructional materials

Characteristic	Not important	Slightly important	Somewhat important	Extremely important
Will be engaging or compelling to my students	0%	1%	14%	84%
Offer activities at appropriate level of challenge for my students	0%	2%	16%	81%
Are easy to adapt to meet needs of my students	0%	3%	26%	70%
Include content and approaches that are culturally relevant	1%	8%	39%	51%
Include supports for English Learners	9%	18%	32%	40%
Are aligned with my state’s ELA standards	2%	5%	23%	70%

Question Text: 'Indicate the importance you place on various characteristics of ELA instructional materials when choosing which materials to use in your ELA classroom less

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding error and 1% missing data.

Table 7 Teachers' perception of ELA instructional materials adequacy

Curriculum purpose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Not sure or N/A
Helping my students master my state's ELA standards	3%	2%	3%	28%	15%	23%	21%	4%
Meeting the needs of English learners	7%	9%	12%	24%	13%	13%	11%	10%
Helping me provide culturally relevant instruction	6%	6%	13%	25%	16%	16%	11%	5%
Making learning engaging for students	5%	4%	10%	26%	17%	19%	14%	4%
Reflecting students' interests or experiences	6%	6%	12%	25%	19%	17%	11%	3%
Reflecting the diversity of identities within my classroom	7%	7%	12%	24%	15%	18%	11%	5%

Question Text: 'Indicate the extent to which the ELA curriculum materials provided by your district or school as a recommendation or requirement are adequate for each purpose listed below.' Rating scale anchor categories: 1 (completely inadequate), 4 (adequate in some ways and inadequate in others), 7 (completely adequate). *Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding error and 1% missing data.*

CALLS TO ACTION

1. Invest in high-quality standards-aligned English language arts instructional materials.

Almost all teachers indicate that ELA materials aligned to college and career-ready standards are important to them. These materials are widely and increasingly available, yet use of these materials is still not happening at a high enough rate. As districts make decisions with their Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, they have the chance to improve systems that the COVID-19 pandemic made clear were not working for all students. Investing in high-quality core ELA curricula is the start of ensuring every child is able to learn and grow.

When selecting materials for grades K–5, prioritize comprehensive programs that have excellent foundational reading skills. If the best decision is to procure a separate research-based reading program, develop a professional learning and support plan to ensure that the experience of teachers and students is coherent and comprehensive.

2. Meaningfully involve teachers in the selection of new ELA instructional materials including professional learning about what why materials matter and what makes materials high quality.

Our data shows that teachers have a clear vision of how materials should help to meet students' needs. In large numbers, educators cite alignment to college and career-ready standards, support for multilingual learners, and culturally relevant approaches and content as important.

As districts begin the selection process, additional time and effort may be needed to support adoption committee members in understanding the characteristics of K–5 ELA high-quality instructional materials. While comprehensive core programs are the most widely available in this grade band, the lowest percentage of these programs are actually aligned to state standards. The adoption process can help districts set a new bar for quality, and engage teachers in understanding how their core materials need to change in order to meet this bar.

When adopting ELA materials for grades 6–12, extra time and attention needs to be paid to make the case for why high-quality instructional materials are a critical component of the districts' instructional strategy. The data indicate that teachers in these grades have not had access to quality instructional materials and increasingly use supplements to fill those gaps. Addressing these trends up front, and demonstrating how core materials can benefit teachers and students to achieve their instructional goals, will be important throughout the adoption process to ensure materials are implemented and used with integrity.

3. Ensure regular, high-quality, curriculum-aligned professional development.

Investing in ongoing professional learning around instructional materials is as important as the selection of the quality curriculum itself.

Curriculum-aligned professional learning is critical for ensuring that materials are used well in classrooms and can help close the gap between what's selected and what's in use. Teachers report having access to very few hours of professional development on the whole, with few of those hours spent helping them to implement instructional materials.

Prioritizing quality, curriculum-aligned professional learning is important in all grade levels but may prove to be particularly impactful for middle and high school ELA teachers. These teachers report less access to curriculum-specific professional development, less satisfaction with the quality of the professional learning they do receive, and overall are less likely to use aligned materials. High-quality professional development alongside high-quality instructional materials could unlock solutions to increasing regular use of aligned materials.

END NOTES

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ABOUT EDREPORTS

VISION

All students and teachers will have access to the highest quality instructional materials that will help improve student learning outcomes.

MISSION

EdReports is an independent nonprofit designed to improve K–12 education. EdReports increases the capacity of teachers, administrators, and leaders to seek, identify, and demand the highest-quality instructional materials. Drawing upon expert educators, our reviews of instructional materials and support of smart adoption processes equip teachers with excellent materials nationwide.

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