

Key Findings

- 1 Overall, only about 5 percent of assignments fell into the high range on our assignment analysis framework (met 6-8 indicators).
- 2 Fewer than 4 in 10 assignments (or 38 percent) were aligned with a grade-appropriate standard. Moreover, rates in high-poverty schools were considerably lower, at roughly one-third of all assignments.
- 3 Fifty-five percent of assignments were connected to a text. However, overall, only 16 percent of assignments required students to use a text for citing evidence as support for a position or a claim.
- 4 Only 4 percent of all assignments reviewed pushed student thinking to higher levels. About 85 percent of assignments asked students to either recall information or apply basic skills and concepts as opposed to prompting for inferences or structural analysis, or requiring author critiques. Many assignments show an attempt at rigor, but these are largely surface level.
- 5 Relevance and choice — powerful levers to engage early adolescents — are mostly missing in action. Only 2 percent of assignments meet both indicators for engagement.

WHAT WE FOUND

1. **Overall, only about 5 percent of assignments fell into the high range on our assignment analysis framework (met 6-8 indicators).** Another 35 percent scored in the medium range (met 3-5 indicators), and 60 percent fell in the low range (met 0-2 indicators). English language arts (ELA) assignments were more likely to fall in the high range (10 percent) as were eighth-grade assignments (7 percent). And while no assignment met all eight points on the framework, most teachers, regardless of subject taught, submitted at least one assignment that met six or more indicators. And there was no difference between high-poverty and low-poverty schools on the percentage of assignments that were rated high.
2. **Fewer than 4 in 10 assignments (or 38 percent) were aligned with a grade-appropriate standard. Moreover, rates in high-poverty schools were considerably lower, at roughly one-third of all assignments.** While we certainly did not expect to see 100 percent of assignments fully aligned, that number is far lower than we would have hoped in year five of implementation. Even in low-poverty schools, only about half (48 percent) of the assignments were Common Core-aligned, with rates in high-poverty schools considerably lower, at roughly one-third of all assignments (31 percent). There were exceptions to this, however, with one of the high-poverty schools in the sample demonstrating alignment rates similar to their lower poverty counterparts.
3. **Fifty-five percent of assignments were connected to a text. However, overall, only 16 percent of assignments required students to use a text for citing evidence as support for a position or a claim.** While it was encouraging to see that more than half the assignments included texts, there were too many assignments that used texts in simplistic ways. For example, text-based questions often asked for recalling or retelling of basic facts rather than prompting for inferences, structural analysis, or author critiques. Moreover, in order to be college and career ready, students need to learn and practice how to cite specific textual evidence as they build and develop claims and arguments.
4. **Only 4 percent of all assignments reviewed pushed student thinking to higher levels. About 85 percent of assignments asked students to either recall information or apply basic skills and concepts as opposed to prompting for inferences or structural analysis, or requiring author critiques. Many assignments show an attempt at rigor, but these are largely surface level.**
 - *Many — if not most — assignments were over-scaffolded.* Instead of encouraging students to struggle with big ideas, everything was broken down into bite-size chunks, and much of the work was actually done for the students rather than by them. In many cases, assignments involving close reading and text annotation were so tightly scripted they actually appeared to interfere with the deep understanding of complex text, which is the ultimate goal of these new standards.
 - *Half of the assignments we reviewed (51 percent) lasted just 15 minutes or less; and of these short assignments, about 2 percent required students to practice higher level thinking skills, compared with 26 percent of longer assignments.* Short assignments typically involved the reinforcement of basic skills, brief reviews of previous lessons, quick writes, grammar practice, or short answer responses. While each of these experiences may have merit, the predominance of these types of assignments raises a caution flag. Additionally, the cumulative effect of these types of assignments across ELA, science, and history — knowing that they rarely involve cognitive challenge — is troubling.
5. **Relevance and choice — powerful levers to engage early adolescents — are rarely present. Only 2 percent of assignments meet both indicators for engagement.**
 - *Attempts to motivate and engage students were simplistic.* The “relevance” we saw (primarily superficial references to pop culture or presentation assignments that involved art activities) lacked rigor and complexity. We argue, instead, that middle school students deserve opportunities to consider the relevancy of rigorous content in ELA, history, and the sciences. For this to happen, teachers must identify the poignant big ideas and themes — that speak across cultures and generations — within their disciplines and use these points to pull their students into new or unfamiliar content.
 - *Opportunities for students to engage in relevant academic discussions rarely appeared.* Most of the discussions were brief activities that partially aligned with the Common Core’s speaking and listening standards. While these opportunities for student talk did promote cooperative conversations, they fell short of their potential to honor and expand student perspectives, to teach and refine the elements of argumentation, and to lay the groundwork for written work.

A DEEPER LOOK AT WHAT WE DID

School Sites and Participants



Six middle schools from two large, urban school districts in two states

Five of the six schools were traditional middle schools (grades six-eight), one was a K-8. Free and reduced lunch (FRL) ranged from 25-99 percent across the schools. We classified four schools with >65 percent FRL as high poverty in our data analysis. Student racial/ethnic populations were also different; students of color (African American and Hispanic students) ranged from 18-93 percent. The percent of English language learner students also varied across schools (5-51 percent).



92 Teachers

Sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade teachers teaching courses in the subject areas of English language arts, humanities, history/social studies, science.

Most eligible teachers agreed to participate (88 percent).

Average number of assignments submitted per teacher = 17. The median number of assignments submitted per teacher = 13.



Assignment Collection

Assignments were defined as any in-school or out-of-school task that a student completed independently or with a group of peers. Assignments completed during teacher-led practice or assignments given by substitute teachers were not collected.

A two-week assignment collection window between late February and early March 2015 was established. This method allowed us to see the full range of assignments students received (e.g., brief tasks like “exit tickets” to extended writing or research projects) and provided evidence of student opportunity to learn and the competencies they are typically asked to demonstrate.

All assignments were given a unique identification number to ensure teacher confidentiality.

Assignments Scored by the Numbers

Total number of assignments submitted

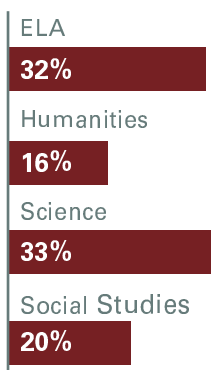
1,876

Total number of assignments scored

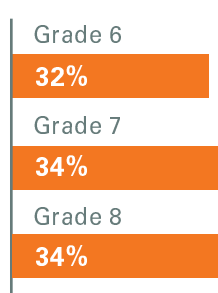
1,591 (85%)

Assignments were not scored if they were incomplete or if directions were not included. Additionally, lesson plans or other curriculum documents were not scored.

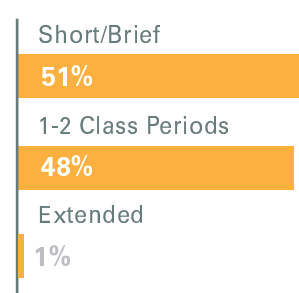
Assignments by Subject Area



Assignments by Grade



Type of Assignments



WHERE DO WE GO NEXT?

It is time for honest conversation about where and how we are in implementing higher level college- and career-ready standards.

Clearly, as practitioners, we are all wrestling with how to bring these standards to life in classrooms and how to expand our efforts across schools and districts. But this analysis suggests that some of our choices around bringing Common Core, and other college- and career-ready practices to scale, may have put us right where we are: far short, even five years in, of the quality and rigor we desire.

Perhaps the implementation approaches we have chosen are overly mechanical, denying the dynamic nature of teaching needed for strategic thinking. Perhaps our efforts to build “aligned” evaluation systems push teachers to include pedagogical moves regardless of whether they fit with the context and students in their classrooms. Perhaps we have reduced classroom implementation to a list of discrete standards or keywords and phrases to be included in lesson plans or jotted down on whiteboards so that they parse work out to students in small bits with heavy teacher guidance.

States and districts cannot use professional development as their safety net, nor as their proxy for Common Core support. Neither can they rely solely on annual standardized assessment results as their compass for implementation. This is not enough.

These messages need to be recalled and refined. More nuanced understanding of these standards are urgently needed. We recommend two starting points.

1. Dig deeper through questions. Our key findings have limitations given the scope of our analysis. Thus, we cannot offer guaranteed answers and solutions. Instead, it has cued for us important questions that all stakeholders should be asking about tasks, texts, rigor, and engagement in middle schools in the era of college- and career-ready learning standards. Now, more than ever, we wonder:

- *What does deep and impactful standards implementation look like? What indicators should education and community leaders be monitoring regularly to assess the progress of this work and our impact on student learning?*
- *How and when do students read, discuss, and write about texts in their classrooms? Do we require students to cite textual evidence in order to support or develop a claim or do we only ask general text-based questions?*
- *When and how often do students read without interruptions? What choices do **they** make about their note-taking or annotations?*
- *When and how often do students experience extended writing?*

- *How do school and district leaders ensure that science and social studies assignments reflect the literacy standards?*
- *How might leaders and teachers work together across grade levels and content areas to develop responsive, coherent systems that ensure students are writing extended pieces with enthusiasm, conviction, and authority?*
- *How adaptive are our instructional routines? Are teachers held to teaching structures and parameters that inhibit their ability to fully align with Common Core demands?*
- *What level of cognitive demand are we asking of our students in ELA, history, and science? Are we pushing students, particularly low-income students and students of color, to think strategically as speakers, listeners, readers, and writers? When and how often?*
- *How do we support autonomy and transition our young adolescents to academic independence? What role does student choice play?*
- *Do we offer opportunities for students to bring their own ideas, experiences, and opinions into the work they do? Do academically rigorous discussions, as described in the Common Core, occur in our classrooms?*
- *How can we analyze student work in order to identify and showcase the qualities of strategic thinking that is both rich in content and relevant for students?*

2. Begin with assignments. Leaders need to track what their students are being asked to do on a daily basis in their classrooms. Analyzing the texts and tasks their students experience provides the necessary insight to gauge the quality of Common Core implementation. It illuminates how the standards have been actualized in classrooms. And, it prompts us to question whether or not the status quo structures and approaches support or inhibit the true spirit of college and career readiness. Moreover, by looking closely at student assignments across grades and in all content areas, we can track where teachers are in their own understanding of more rigorous standards. This is the data we need in order to support teachers as they make their way through this complex transition and ensure greater and more sustained student learning outcomes.

As we push for the next iteration of Common Core implementation, we stand ready to support the efforts of both leaders and teachers. As we said at the outset, our analysis of assignments is in the earliest stages. Yet these initial findings represent both a troubling snapshot of the current realities and need for deeper examination and questioning of our implementation. Standards alone cannot ensure that all students are college and career ready. For young people of color and low-income students in particular, classroom assignments must reflect the deeper thinking and sophisticated application of skills that have been missing from

Figure 1: Writing Demand of Assignments

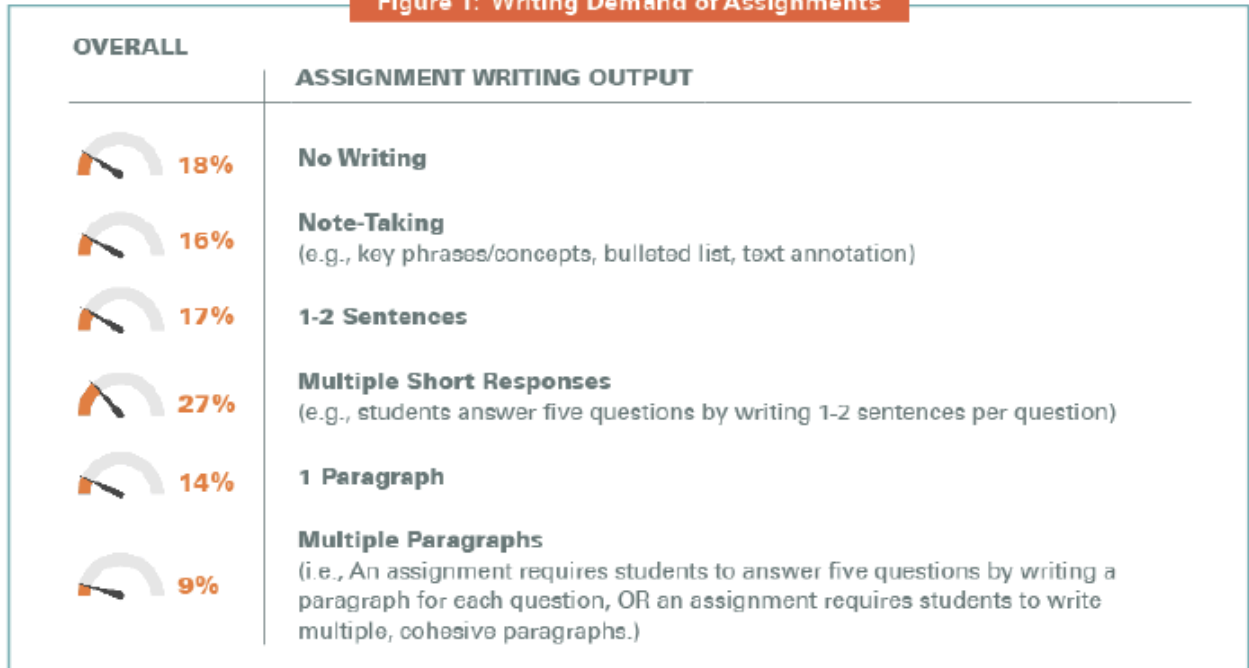


Figure 2: Cognitive Demand of Assignments

