

UNLOCKING ACCELERATION:

How Below Grade-Level Work Is
Holding Students Back in Literacy



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Introduction

The 2021-22 school year offered important new information on the amount of unfinished learning students face in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. [New research](#) suggests students missed many months' worth of learning while schools were shut down, with the largest losses at schools serving mostly low-income communities and among multilingual learners. [Some estimates](#) suggest students experiencing this level of missed learning time will ultimately "lose" 9% of their lifetime earnings. More broadly, if fewer students graduate in the years ahead with the skills they need for today's jobs, our entire economy will suffer in ways that affect every corner of our society.

It's against this backdrop that schools are working urgently to help students catch back up to grade level—something that's literally impossible if students don't have opportunities to engage with grade-level work. [Our past research, focused on mathematics](#), has shown that when students fall behind, providing access to grade-level work with appropriate support (learning acceleration) is the best way to help them catch up—and that delaying access to grade-level work (remediation) practically guarantees they will fall even farther behind.

But are schools increasing students' access to grade-level work in literacy? And are they increasing it fast enough to make up for such unprecedented levels of unfinished learning? To help answer these questions, we partnered with ReadWorks, a free digital English Language Arts (ELA) resource intended to support teachers with high-quality, grade-level texts and question sets that they use alongside their core materials. We analyzed trends in teachers' use of grade-level assignments in more than 75,000 public and private schools serving more than 12 million students across the country.¹

What we found was troubling:

- **Students are spending even more time on below grade-level work than they were before the pandemic.** Helping students recover from the pandemic requires a significant shift even from the pre-pandemic "normal," when [our research](#) revealed that too few students—especially students from historically marginalized communities—had consistent access to grade-level work. That shift doesn't appear to be happening. Students on the ReadWorks platform spent about a third of their time engaging with below grade-level texts and question sets. In fact, they received 5 percentage points *more* below grade-level content in the first full year after the pandemic.
- **Students were just as successful on grade-level work as they were on below grade-level work.** Students answered nearly two-thirds of questions on the platform correctly regardless of whether they were engaging with grade-level or below grade-level texts and question sets.
- **Students in schools serving more historically marginalized communities—particularly students experiencing poverty—were assigned the most below grade-level work.** Students in schools serving the most students in poverty spent about 65% more time on below grade-level texts and question sets than

¹ In order to focus on teachers, classrooms, and students who consistently used ReadWorks, we restricted most of our analyses to students who attempted at least 10 assignments in classes with at least 10 students in a given school year. With these restrictions, most of our analyses focused on a subsample of the broader ReadWorks usership, but one that still included nearly 3 million students across over 30,000 schools which resulted in over 65 million attempted assignments.

their peers in the most affluent schools. About a quarter of students spent *most* of their time on below grade-level work for the entire school year.

- **In schools serving more students in poverty, students got less access to grade-level work even when they'd already shown they can master it.** Students in these schools who consistently succeeded on grade-level texts and question sets got less access to grade-level work in the future than students in more affluent schools who hadn't mastered grade-level texts and question sets. In other words, there seems to be nothing students in high-poverty schools can do to break free of negative assumptions about their abilities and "earn" access to the grade-level work they need to be successful.

These trends confirm the findings [in our 2021 study, *Accelerate, Don't Remediate*](#), about inequitable access to learning acceleration opportunities. They also suggest that inequities in access to grade-level work [that existed long before the pandemic](#) have only deepened, and that most school systems are not yet implementing strategies that could put students on track to recover from the disruption of the last several years. In fact, when it comes to grade-level work, many school systems appear to be heading in the entirely wrong direction.

But our findings also offer a clear path forward. They reinforce the fact that students at all academic levels can succeed on grade-level work, and that learning acceleration should be a centerpiece of school systems' efforts to support all students in the wake of the pandemic. They also suggest that learning acceleration can be a promising strategy in reading specifically—a point we've received many questions about following our past research on the effectiveness of learning acceleration in math.

Methodology

This analysis is informed by aggregated data from over 3 million students in over 150,000 classrooms who frequently used the ReadWorks platform in the 2018-19 through the 2020-2021 school years². ReadWorks, a nonprofit, provides a free library of 5,400 curated K-12 nonfiction passages that teachers can assign to students to supplement core classroom instruction,³ providing reading practice while increasing background knowledge and vocabulary across subjects in support of reading comprehension.⁴ Each ReadWorks passage comes with a text-dependent question set that provides carefully scaffolded practice in inferring, monitoring and clarifying, and questioning.

ReadWorks determines an appropriate grade level for each of its passages, using both qualitative and quantitative analyses of its texts' complexity, aligned to the recommendations contained in Anchor Standard 10 of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The platform encourages teachers to assign grade-level passages to students, coherently building their knowledge of the world so that they can access complex texts independently—but the choice of texts provided to each student is ultimately up to their teachers.

The goal of literacy instruction is to equip all students with the knowledge and skills they'll need to read, write about, discuss, and meaningfully engage with content-rich, grade-level texts every day. We were interested in learning more about how often teachers actually assigned grade-level texts and questions, and to which students. Specifically, we analyzed:

- **To what extent are teachers choosing grade-level texts and question sets for all students?** How often are they assigning grade-level passages? How have those choices changed over time? And to what extent

² During these school years, more than 12 million students attempted at least one ReadWorks assignment. For this analysis, we focused on students and classrooms who had more frequent ReadWorks digital experiences and isolated most analyses to students who completed at least 10 ReadWorks "Articles and Paired Texts" digital assignments in classrooms with at least 10 such students.

³ The purpose of supplemental texts is to both build knowledge of a topic and act as an effective scaffold to the complex anchor text. If a teacher consistently gives students only the least complex supplemental texts, you might build knowledge of the topic, but not build an effective bridge to the anchor texts. Thus, the anchor texts could remain too complex for students in areas beyond the topic. As a result, we should consistently see students ultimately having access to grade-level supplemental texts.

⁴ ReadWorks is a reading comprehension support and is not intended to build foundational skills in children who struggle to decode. Students who are struggling with reading foundations need additional supports to build their ability to decode and fluently read grade-level texts.

are those choices associated with demographic characteristics of their students?

- **How do students perform on grade-level and below grade-level question sets?** What is the connection between the passages teachers choose to assign and student performance? To what extent is past student success on question sets associated with receiving more grade-level assignments, and is that relationship the same for different demographic groups?

Findings

Students are spending even more time on below grade-level work than they were before the pandemic.

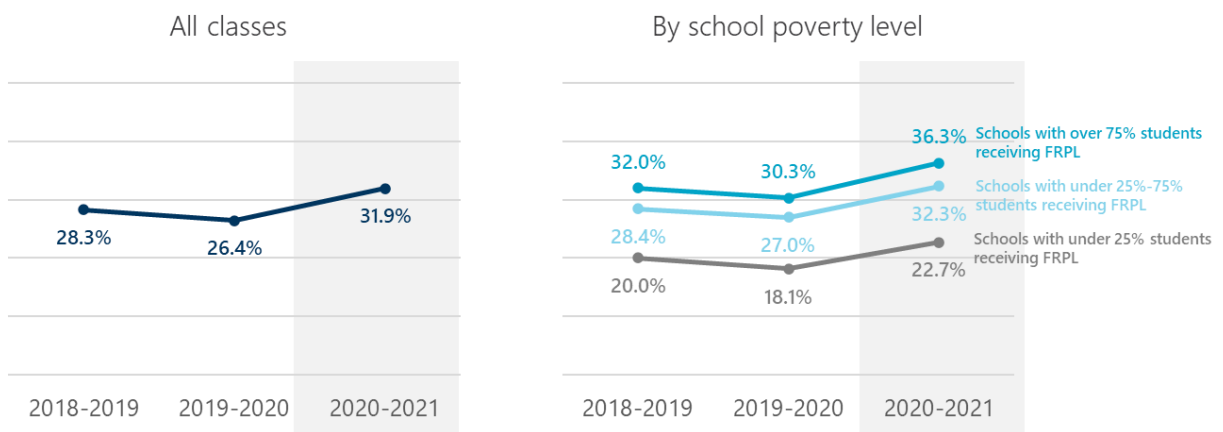
Many school systems are talking about learning acceleration and the importance of grade-level assignments, and with good reason: [research shows](#) that accelerating access to grade-level work—with the right supports—is the best way to help students catch up when they’ve fallen behind. One sign that schools are on the right track to helping students recover academically, then, is a significant increase in the time students spend on grade-level work—especially since [students already spent too much time on work below their grade level](#) before the pandemic.

Unfortunately, our analysis shows that learning acceleration is currently more talk than action. Teachers who used ReadWorks in 2020-21, the first full year after the pandemic, assigned below grade-level work nearly one-third of the time—and at a slightly higher rate in schools serving more students in poverty.

More significantly, teachers are assigning less grade-level work in the wake of the pandemic—the exact moment when students need *more* grade-level work. Students received about 5 percentage points more below grade-level texts and questions sets in 2020-21 compared to 2018-19. This trend was not driven by teachers who started using ReadWorks during the pandemic to assign mostly below grade-level work: teachers who consistently used ReadWorks from 2018-2019 to 2020-2021 assigned 4 percentage points more below grade-level work on average in the first full year of the pandemic than they did in the 2019-2020 school year.

Typical percent of below grade-level assignments by year

For the 2018-2019 through 2020-2021 school years



Note: Only student-by-class combinations that had attempted at least 10 assignments in classes with at least 10 students are included. For each student-by-class combination, we first calculated the typical proportion of assignments below grade-level. Percentages in figure represent the mean of these student-by-class level percentages by year. For all classes, Ns are 904,314, 1,092,813, and 1,126,030 students for 2018-2019, 2019-2020, and 2020-2021 respectively. For results by school poverty level, Ns range from 108,703 to 558,256 students for specific group by year combinations

Students were just as successful on grade-level work as they were on below grade-level work.

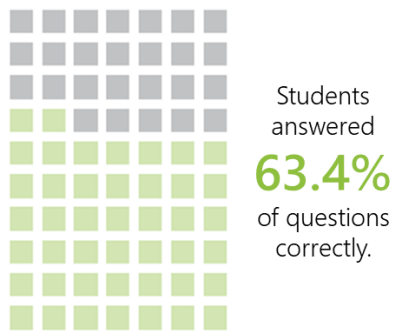
Well-intentioned teachers often assign students below grade-level work on the assumption that they will be more successful on a less challenging assignment—especially if the students are struggling academically. But we found that when students using ReadWorks completed both grade-level and below grade-level assignments, their performance on each was nearly identical: they answered 63.4% of questions correctly on grade-level assignments, and 68.2% on below grade-level assignments (a difference of only about three additional correct answers over the course of the 70 multiple choice questions that comprise ten ReadWorks assignments). This builds on our findings [in our past research](#) that assigning students work below their grade level mainly just denies them important opportunities to engage with material they could master if given the chance.

Typical success rates for the same student on grade-level and below-grade-level assignments

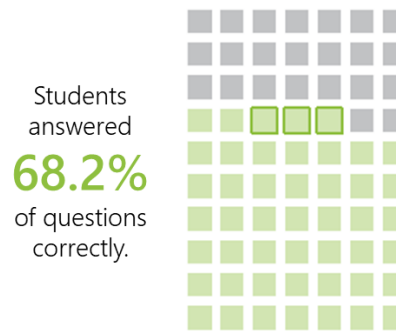
For the 2018-2019 through 2020-2021 school years

Giving a student a below grade-level assignment was only associated with answering about **3 additional questions correctly** over the course of ten assignments.

QUESTIONS ON 10
GRADE-LEVEL ASSIGNMENTS



QUESTIONS ON 10
BELOW GRADE-LEVEL ASSIGNMENTS



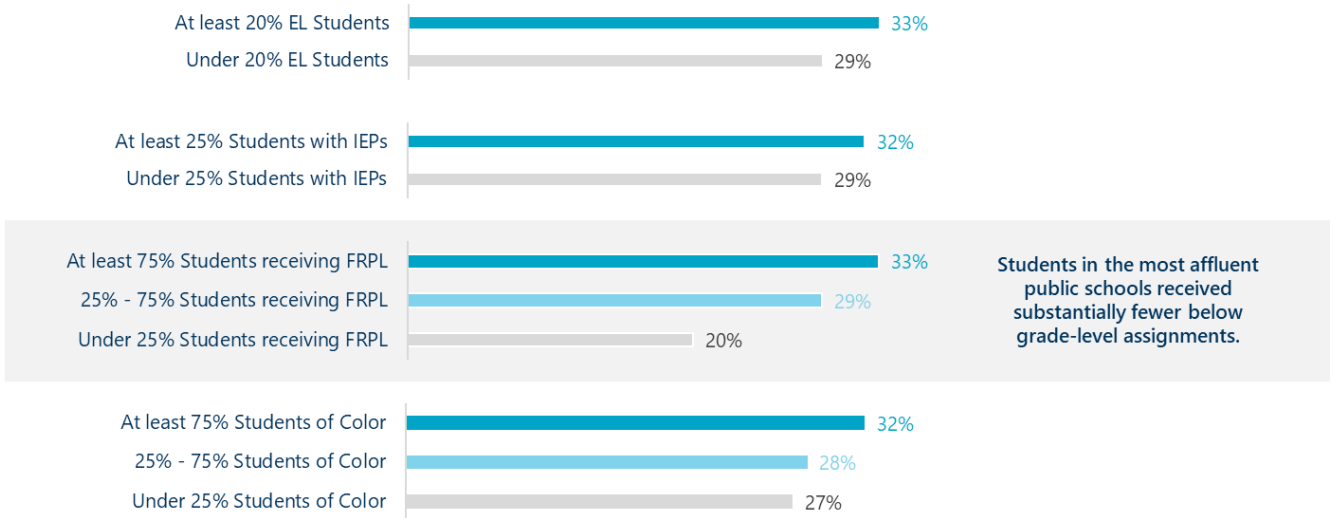
Note: Only student-by-class combinations that had attempted at least 10 assignments at grade level and 10 assignments below grade level and in classes with at least 10 other students are included. Data from 2018-2019 to 2020-2021 combined. For each student-by-class combination, we first calculated the mean success rate in each grade-level category. Percentages in figure represent the mean of these student-by-class level percentages. N = 2,420,773.

Students in schools serving more historically marginalized communities—particularly students experiencing poverty—were assigned more below grade-level work.

Students in schools serving historically marginalized communities usually received even less grade-level content than their more privileged peers. In schools where at least 75% of students qualified for free- or reduced-price lunch, 32% of students’ texts and question sets were below grade-level, compared to only 20% of texts and question sets in schools where no more than 25% of students qualified for free- or reduced-price lunch.

Typical percent of below grade-level articles and paired texts given to students by school demographic
For the 2018-2019 through 2020-2021 school years

For schools serving...



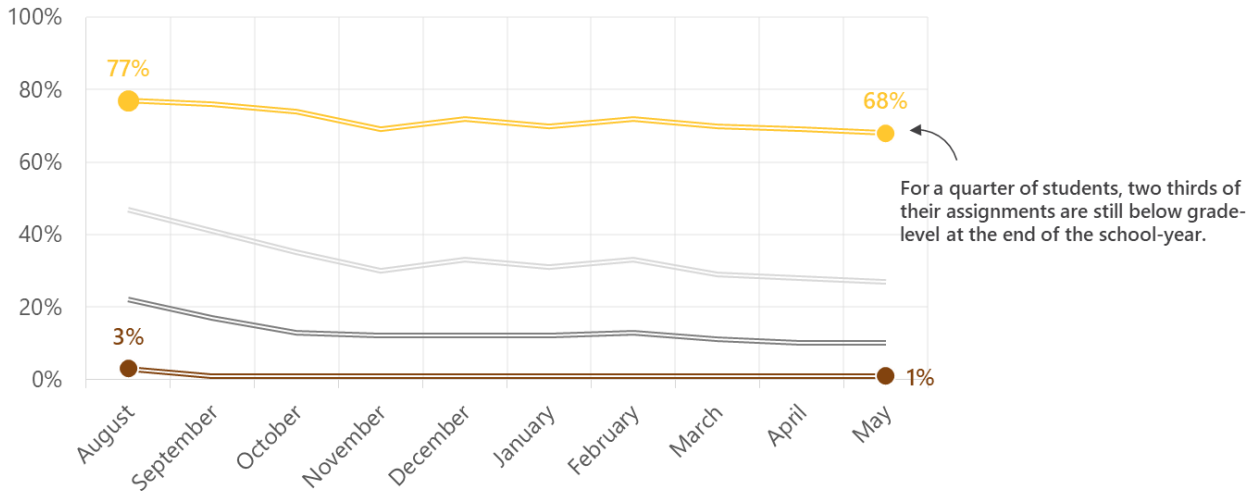
Note: Only student-by-class combinations that had attempted at least 10 assignments and in classes with at least 10 students are included. For each student-by-class combination, we first calculated the typical proportion of assignments below grade-level. Percentages in figure represent the mean of these student-by-class level percentages by school characteristic. School demographics matched to school-by-year data from NCES for FRPL and race/ethnicity, and school-level data (from the 2017-2018 school year) from the Civil Rights Data Collection for EL and IEP populations. For all demographics, we used the mean school-level value since the 2016-2017 school year. Ns range by school characteristic with a low of N = 74,969 students for schools with at least 25% IEP to a high of 2,807,628 for students with less than 25% IEP.

It's also worth noting that a significant number of students receive an enormous amount of below grade-level work throughout the year. The quarter of students who received the most below grade-level work started off the year receiving over three-quarters below grade-level assignments, and by the end of the year still had below grade-level work make up over two-thirds of their assignments. The students in that quartile attended schools serving more students of color and more students from low-income families. Meanwhile, the quarter of students who received the least grade-level work received just 1% below grade-level assignments at the end of the school year.

Average percent of assignments below grade-level by quartile.

For the 2018-2019 through 2020-2021 school years combined

Quartile 1 (25% of students receiving the most below-grade level work)
 Quartile 2
Quartile 3
Quartile 4 (25% of students receiving the least below-grade level work)



Note: Only student-by-class combinations that had attempted at least 10 assignments in classes with at least 10 students are included. For each student-by-class combination, we first calculated the typical proportion of assignments that were below grade-level across an entire school year, and then determined each student's quartile ranking. Percentages in figure represent the mean of these student-by-class level percentages in each month for each quartile. Ns ranged by month but were always over 100,000 assignments for each quartile in each month except for August. There were 780,905 students in each quartile.

In schools serving more students in poverty, students got less access to grade-level work even when they'd already shown they can master it.

Some of the missed opportunities to get grade-level work for students experiencing poverty may be rooted in low expectations from teachers—a phenomenon we have observed in our past research both [before](#) and [after](#) the pandemic. Fundamentally, teachers make the decision to provide remedial, below grade-level content to students with good intentions, believing this is a choice that will help students be successful.

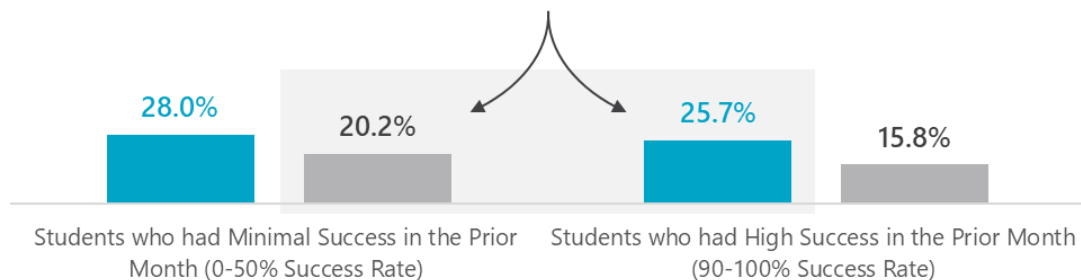
Many students using ReadWorks were assigned below grade-level texts and question sets even after they'd already succeeded on grade-level work many times—and this was especially true for students in schools serving more students in poverty. In those schools, when students correctly answered more than 90% of the questions on their previous month's grade-level assignments, almost 25% of their assignments were still below grade-level the next month. In fact, these students received less grade-level work than students in more affluent schools who consistently struggled with grade-level assignments. There seems to be nothing many students in high-poverty schools can do to break free of negative assumptions about their abilities and "earn" access to the grade-level work they need to be successful.

Percent of assignments in current month that are BELOW grade-level based on typical success rate on grade-level assignments in previous month.

For the 2018-2019 through 2020-2021 school years

- Students in schools where at least 75% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch
- Students in schools where fewer than 25% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch

Even when they demonstrated tremendous success on grade-level assignments, **students in schools serving more students experiencing poverty** were more likely to receive below grade-level assignments than students in more affluent schools who did not have the same success.



Note: Only students who completed at least 10 assignments during the school year in a class with at least 10 students are included. Only students who had at least one assignment in two consecutive months are included. Ns represent student by month combinations and range by category from 205,832 for students with minimal success in schools with fewer than 25% FRL students to 957,067 for students with minimal success in schools with at least than 75% FRL students

Recommendations

Our analysis reveals a stark disconnect between the extent of students’ unfinished learning during the pandemic and the opportunities they’re getting to engage with the grade-level work they need to catch up. It suggests that while many school systems are talking about learning acceleration, far fewer have implemented a successful learning acceleration strategy.

Our analysis also shows that students’ ability to succeed on grade-level texts and questions regardless of their academic level—something we’ve seen repeatedly in our research over the years—extends to reading specifically.

Below, we offer recommendations that can help school systems give more of their students access to grade-level work as part of a comprehensive, coherent learning acceleration strategy—available in greater detail in our [Learning Acceleration for All](#) guide. We also offer additional advice for implementing a successful learning acceleration strategy in reading.

Unlock acceleration by operating as if many of your students, especially students in historically and systemically marginalized groups, are not getting enough chances to do high-quality, grade-level work—and set a clear goal to change that.

Our research over the last several years reveals a widespread lack of access to high-quality grade-level work. Far too many students spend most of their time on work below their grade level, even when they’ve proven they can succeed on more challenging work. School and district leaders should assume this is happening in their classrooms—including in literacy classrooms, given the way many teachers have been taught to match students to texts at their independent reading level. Set a clear goal to address this in your schools, and use the tools you have available (like reports from

online materials your teachers use) to ensure as many students as possible have access to grade-level content, even as you're building out a longer-term learning acceleration strategy.

Make sure that your school system's vision and instructional strategy is designed to accelerate learning for all students.

Articulate a clear, research-based vision for what students experience in excellent literacy classrooms. For too long, educators have articulated that we need to “meet students where they are” in literacy instruction, giving classes “just-right books” that they can read largely independently, removing the opportunity to engage with more complex ideas, vocabulary, and language with teacher support.

Research shows that the best way to build reading comprehension skills after a student can decode is to ensure they build language comprehension: knowledge of the world, vocabulary, and understanding of language structures that facilitate their understanding of what they read. And language comprehension is most efficiently built through exposure to complex texts. When it comes to reading comprehension, then, learning acceleration means ensuring that students consistently read, write about, and discuss grade-level texts most of the time—while sometimes using more accessible texts to build the knowledge and vocabulary they might need to access the grade-level texts (as we outlined in pages 10-14 of our recent guide on [instructional coherence](#).)

The notable exception to this approach comes when a student is not yet able to fluently decode a text. In this case, learning acceleration **in reading foundations** requires prioritizing foundational reading skills the student needs—while still finding ways to give them access to grade-level texts **in reading comprehension** to build knowledge and comprehension (through strategies like read-alouds).

In your system, make sure that all educators – whether teachers, school leaders, or district leaders – can articulate what they expect to see in literacy classrooms that build students' ability to read, write, and speak about rigorous texts that will build their knowledge and understanding of the world. This vision should include the expectation that all students experience explicit, systematic reading foundational skills instruction and that all students read, write, and speak about rigorous, grade-level, culturally and linguistically responsive texts that build students' knowledge of their world. This vision should also detail that all students, especially multilingual and emergent bilingual students, receive explicit language development instruction that supports students' language acquisition. For more details about how to articulate this vision, you can review [TNTP's instructional coherence guidance](#).

Ensure that your students have access to high-quality instructional materials. Whether you lead a school, a district, or a state, you should work to ensure that every student you educate has access to high-quality instructional materials that will result in students spending most of their reading comprehension time reading, writing, and speaking about grade-level texts that will build their knowledge of the world. If you don't already have high-quality instructional materials, run an inclusive process to adopt them. Make sure that your process includes authentically engaging students, families, and your educators in your decision – and use external resources, like the guidance at [EdReports](#), the [Culturally Relevant Curriculum Scorecard](#), and the [English Language Success Forum's ELA Guidelines](#) to select materials that will serve your teachers and students well.

Ensure equitable access to opportunity for all students, and adjust your strategy when you see inequities.

Once your students have access to high-quality instructional materials, ensure your educators have the support to use them well. This will mean grounding professional learning for teachers, principals, and central office academic staff in those materials. Educators need an effective introduction to the materials and to the expectations for using them, grounded in the clear vision that you've articulated. This training and support will need to help educators at all levels of the system understand how instructional materials will support them in reaching the goals you share for all of your students. You'll want to anchor your professional learning around supporting teachers to

prepare their units and lessons so they deeply understand the texts they are reading and the knowledge those texts should build in their students.

Make sure that your supports for educators include opportunities for educators to see their own students experiencing success with rigorous, grade-level content. As we outlined in [The Opportunity Myth](#), the most effective way to change unintentionally low expectations that educators may have for students is to give educators a chance to enact high expectations, then reflect on what students *were* able to accomplish when given a chance to engage in reading, writing, and discussing content-rich, meaningful texts. Consider providing teacher and school-level supports grounded in a reflective cycle where teachers work together to plan a rigorous lesson, deliver it, and then [use an asset-based protocol to examine their students' work to look at what students were able to accomplish](#).

Monitor the execution of your strategy for inequities in access to high-quality reading comprehension experiences—especially for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, students with learning and thinking differences, and multilingual learners. Even when you have adopted high-quality instructional materials and provided support to help educators use them, it is imperative that you have systems to measure these choices and that you are prepared to intervene if you see these differences. Consider using [the resources we've designed to support systems in asking students about their experiences and monitoring students' access to grade-appropriate assignments and strong instruction](#). It's critical to invest in gathering and analyzing this data: assume that inequities exist, and make sure you have systems in place to address them.