

# Findings Brief

## Beyond Standards: *Which ELA Curricula Build Knowledge?*

Winter 2022

Research shows how important high-quality, content-rich curriculum is for students' long-term academic success. But how do we know if a curriculum is "content-rich?" The field has made strong progress in evaluating the degree of standards alignment of different ELA curricula – but not whether these curricula simultaneously provide a robust, sequenced approach to the acquisition of meaningful knowledge about the world.

This gap in students' background knowledge constitutes a serious impediment to improving America's reading outcomes. Our nation's modest levels of reading fluency and the tragically large performance differences between student populations follow from this lack of attention to background knowledge in our classrooms.

The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy has developed analytic tools to assess the specific content knowledge, the quality of each individual text or artifact, and the topical coherence within each unit, of ELA curricula. We are now sharing our findings to bring much-needed, national attention to the critical importance of knowledge building in student learning, and to assist states, districts, schools, teachers, and parents as they select the materials through which children learn about the world and the human condition.

### IN THIS BRIEF

This Findings Brief outlines why a content-rich, high-quality ELA curriculum is important; how the ELA Knowledge Map™ works; what the Institute has learned from analyzing numerous ELA curricula; and a topline review of specific findings from 12 widely used curricula.

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The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy is dedicated to integrating research, policy, and practice to achieve educational excellence for all of America's students. Specifically, we connect research to the policies and practices that will ensure all children have access to intellectually challenging curricula, highly effective educators, and school models that meet students' diverse needs. By delivering the strongest evidence to the policymakers who set the course and the practitioners who teach and lead, we hope to serve the American children who enter our classrooms every day. Learn more at [edpolicy.education.jhu.edu](https://edpolicy.education.jhu.edu).

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

In the early grades, students must be taught to read through the science of reading (e.g., phonemic awareness, the skills of decoding). But children also need simultaneously to learn about the world: its history, geography, science, myths, stories, and cultures.

**If they do not build meaningful content knowledge early on, students face a profound disadvantage in their later years of their education that will ultimately limit their professional and civic opportunities.**

In math, “skills/standards” and “content” are tightly aligned. This isn’t the case in ELA, in which skills/standards are necessary but insufficient. Indeed, once students can read fluently, skills such as “find the main idea” or “compare and contrast,” while critical, cannot take the place of reading thoughtfully sequenced, topical content knowledge presented through high-quality sources within topically coherent units. Too many ELA curricula focus on skills alone and thus miss critical opportunities to build background knowledge.

Moreover, we know from other research that the great majority of teachers find materials for their classroom lessons on the internet, through such sites as Pinterest and Teachers Pay Teachers.

**The good news is that, when students experience an intentional approach to knowledge building, they retain new information much more quickly and deeply. This is what researcher Dan Willingham calls “the stickiness” of knowledge: the more you know, the more you can know.**

Many of our country’s leaders are taking up this research in concrete form by embracing a sequenced, content-rich approach to learning that:

- Is rigorous and challenging.
- Builds students’ knowledge about the world systematically and intentionally.
- Includes multiple perspectives.
- Honors both received traditions and previously silent voices.
- Includes attention to skills but does not prioritize them.

The time dedicated to social studies and science has been reduced nationally, so as to place greater focus on ELA and math. That makes it even more imperative that ELA curricula provide students with wide and deep knowledge.

## UNDERSTANDING THE KNOWLEDGE MAP™

The Institute designed the ELA Knowledge Map™ to analyze an ELA curriculum in terms of the knowledge it offers students, both about the world (primarily through nonfiction texts) and about the human condition (through nonfiction and fiction texts).

We conduct the analysis by “mapping” the domains of knowledge and topics that a curriculum opens up and those it omits, grade by grade, and by assessing the quality of each resource on its own and in tandem with others.

## Key Questions

The ELA Knowledge Map™ seeks to answer the following questions:

- What topics, in what depth, are addressed?
- What is the quality of the material – primary and secondary – used to address a given topic?
- Do the materials in a given unit, taken together, create a coherent, rigorous, learning experience for students?
- Are key topics sequenced across grade levels so that students encounter a progression of learning that builds on previous knowledge?

## Fundamental Principles

The following principles capture the Institute’s analytic approach.

**Content Knowledge Matters.** Research from around the world shows that background knowledge, rather than disaggregated skills, is a critical lever for accelerating students’ learning and narrowing achievement gaps. The background knowledge should include sources that reflect a wide range of perspectives and voices.

**High-Quality Content is Essential.** A high-quality text or visual does many important things, often simultaneously. It touches students’ emotions, enlivens deep conversations, helps students understand their world, and builds knowledge about other times and places. A low-quality text or visual does not.

**A Curriculum Cannot Cover Everything.** The Knowledge Map™ is designed to track how the content developed by a specific curriculum compares to the universe of possible content. It’s a landscape analysis, not an impossible ideal.

**The United States is Behind – And We Want to Change That.** Most of our democratic peers provide much richer curricula than our school systems do – and their academic outcomes show it. Our research team has looked at international models and found overwhelming evidence that a rigorous, knowledge-focused curriculum helps all students succeed, while also closing the gaps between well-off and low-income kids. These outcomes matter.

**We Do Not Evaluate the Belief Systems Within Curricula.** We apply the same quality criteria to all of the texts we review – regardless of their philosophical, pedagogical, or religious values.

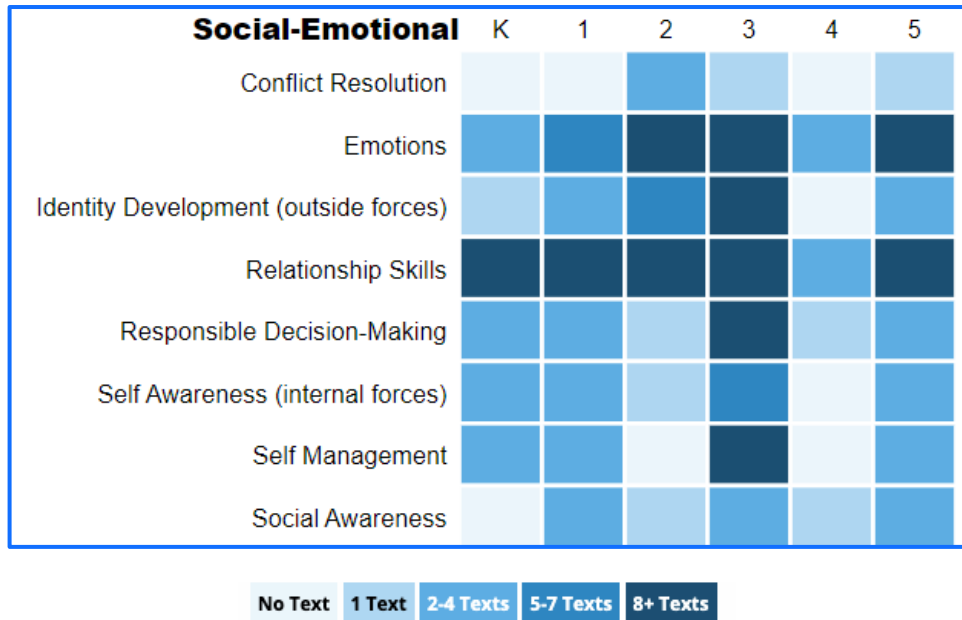
## Report Components

The ELA Knowledge Map™ and the resulting reports have three main components:

- Knowledge Domain Heat Maps
- Quality & Coherence Maps
- Recommendations for Continuous Improvement

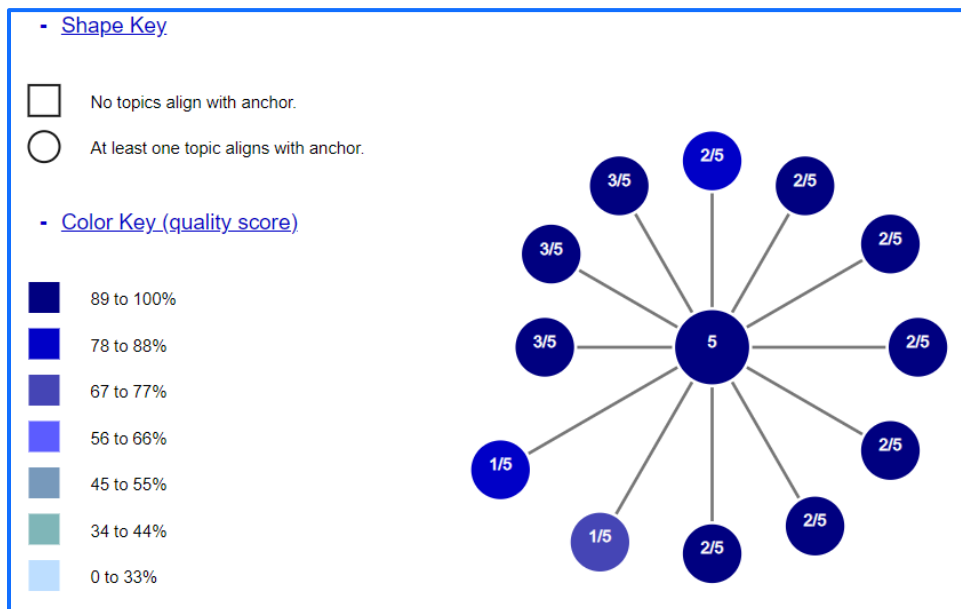
## Knowledge Domain Heat Maps

The ELA Knowledge Map™, quite literally, charts high-level domains of knowledge (such as American Literature, Diversity & Cultural Responsiveness, Global Literature, Social-Emotional, Science, and World History) and specific topics within them, illustrating those that are covered – and that are not.



## Quality/Coherence Maps

The analysis also measures the quality (evidentiary base of the material) and coherence (how the various materials within a unit relate to one another) of each curriculum unit.



## Recommendations for Continuous Improvement

Each ELA Knowledge Map™ report provides recommendations to improve the knowledge domain coverage, text quality, and coherence of the curriculum. The recommendations and results of the Knowledge Map™ provide immediate, actionable data to partners to help guide instructional, policy, and procurement decisions at all levels of K-12 education. As importantly, we are sending signals to curriculum providers to help improve their materials.

## ELA Knowledge Map™ Partnerships

The Institute evaluates ELA materials for three purposes: first, to help individual school systems assess and improve the materials they already use; second, to support publishers as they stand up new units or texts; third, to provide public analyses of commonly used curricula to the field.

When a school district, school, or publisher requests a review of their internally designed curriculum, we do not publish the resulting Knowledge Maps™. We have completed a total of 52 of these types of reviews. When, however, our team is funded to review commonly used, public materials, we do publish the results on our website.

The Knowledge Maps™ assess only the formal materials, not their real-world implementation. We have [a different tool](#) to chart teachers' use of materials, and [yet another tool](#) to evaluate whether a school's culture includes classroom deliberation and access to challenging coursework.

## INSTITUTE FINDINGS

The trends in this brief reflect what we've learned from all ELA Knowledge Map™ partnerships with school systems, publishers, and philanthropies since 2019.

### District-Created Curricula Findings

The following findings represent what we've learned from 52 district-created curricula. The full analyses are available only for internal use by our partners, and are therefore not released.

- The vast majority of district-created curricula do not systematically build students' knowledge.
- The vast majority of district-created curricula do not consistently use high-quality sources.
- We often find the same texts repeated in multiple grades in district-created curricula.
- In some cases, we work with districts to realign units topically within their existing curricula.
- In most cases, we recommend adoption of a high-quality, content-rich curriculum.

### Published Curricula Findings

The following findings represent what we've learned from the 12 ELA curriculum analyses included in this release.

**The most important finding is that the ELA curricula provide very different levels of knowledge building in key domains. In fact, several curricula focus so heavily on a small number of topics that there is little time left to explore other, equally important ones.**

The published curricula also differ considerably in the quality of texts that are included, and the degree to which individual units in a particular curriculum add up to a coherent basis for effective student learning. Although our Knowledge Maps™ include Grades K-12, this brief focuses on the Grades K-5 – the grades most common across the maps in this release.

## High-Level Findings

Summary of Findings in Published K-5 ELA Curricula Analyzed		
Positive	Concerning	Key Takeaway
Virtually all curricula provide strong knowledge building in the social-emotional domain.	Several curricula accomplish this by omitting other important domains of knowledge.	<b>A strong curriculum uses rich texts that build knowledge in multiple domains and topics simultaneously.</b>
Some curricula offer materials from a rich variety of literary genres.	With rare exceptions, most curricula expose students to very few works from outside the United States.	<b>Young people should experience important texts from a variety of sources.</b>
The majority of reviewed curricula incorporate high-quality materials.	In many cases, these materials appear as scattershots rather than as part of coherent, topically aligned units.	<b>Many curricula could be made stronger simply by placing sources within more appropriate units, so the knowledge build becomes "sticky."</b>
<p>Publishers have improved their offerings as a result of our reviews.</p> <p>Many publishers work with us in the design process, as they stand up new editions and even new materials.</p>		<b>The field is beginning to take knowledge building seriously.</b>
	<p>Few curricula attend to a logical progression of knowledge building.</p> <p>Certain topics are overrepresented; others underrepresented. For example, while plants, animals, and seasons/weather/meteorology are ubiquitous, African and Asian histories, global literatures, and the performing arts are not.</p> <p>Some curricula with a religious worldview pay very little attention to knowledge building.</p>	<b>Early-grade curricula should focus on a much wider array of knowledge domains.</b>

The Institute’s dataset will expand appreciably as we evaluate more materials from across the country. To date, we are encouraged to find some strong examples that are academically challenging, comprised of high-quality texts, and representative of a diverse authorship.

## A Closer Look

On February 22, 2022, the Institute released ELA Knowledge Map™ analyses of 12 widely used curricula/sets of materials. It is important to note that, while there is only one Knowledge Map™ methodology, the 12 curricula themselves differ in important ways.

### About the Curricula

We selected these resources for formal review because each of them is in wide use in the field. With rare exceptions, these analyses were commissioned by third parties, not by the publishers themselves. However, we shared each report prior to release and offered publishers the opportunity to respond publicly in tandem with our release or request corrections if appropriate evidentiary support could be provided.

Grade Levels	Description
<b>K-5</b>	<p>Open Court Reading is an ELA curriculum that covers phonics, reading comprehension, writing, vocabulary, and grammar for Grades K-5.</p> <p>Units of Study is a reading curriculum that encourages student choice and some constrained teacher choice of texts from a wide variety of options for Grades K-5.</p>
<b>K-6</b>	<p>CKLA is an ELA curriculum for Grades K-6.</p> <p>Into Reading is an ELA curriculum for Grades K-6.</p> <p>Journeys is an ELA online or text-based ELA curriculum for Grades K-6.</p>
<b>K-8</b>	<p>EL Education is an open access curriculum for Grades K-8.</p> <p>Living Books is an ELA curriculum that focuses on homeschooling materials for Grades K-8.</p> <p>Wit &amp; Wisdom is an ELA curriculum for Grades K-8 and also includes Geodes® phonics program for Grades K-2.</p>
<b>K-12</b>	<p>Abeka is a Christian-based ELA curriculum for schools and homeschooling for Grades K-12.</p> <p>BJU Press is a Christian-based ELA curriculum for Christian schools and homeschooling for Grades K-12.</p> <p>Calvert is an ELA curriculum for homeschooling for Grades 3-12.</p> <p>My Father’s World is a Christian-based curriculum for Christian schools and homeschooling for Grades K-12.</p>

## Individual Findings for Each Curricula

The following section provides a high-level overview of each analysis. Details and recommendations are available in the full reports.

### Abeka

**Type:** A Christian-based ELA curriculum for Grades K-12 that is used for both brick-and-mortar schools and homeschooling.

**Analysis:** The language arts curriculum has strong exposure to different eras of American and British literature in addition to strong knowledge building in social studies.

**Top Recommendation:** Some of the materials lack intellectual rigor. Even while respecting the religious basis of the worldview, the Institute's analysis still found that the materials are overly narrow in their scope.

[View Abeka Report](#)

### BJU Press

**Type:** BJU Press is a Christian-based ELA curriculum for Christian schools and homeschooling for Grades K-12.

**Analysis:** This ELA curriculum exposes students to diverse knowledge domains including the arts, diversity and equity, world history, and mathematics. In the upper grades, the quality of texts in particular units is often especially high.

**Top Recommendation:** Within each grade, the Institute found multiple units that could have higher-quality texts and also be better designed, so that texts would create a coherent learning experience resulting in strong knowledge growth.

[View BJU Press Report](#)

### Calvert Education

**Type:** Calvert Education (not to be confused with Calvert Learning), is a homeschool curriculum for Grades 3-12.

**Analysis:** Calvert Education selects high-quality texts for use in its ELA curriculum. In Grades 6-12, the knowledge build in the various social sciences is strong and introduces a rich diversity of perspectives.

**Top Recommendation:** The amount of knowledge building in American history, world history, and geography could be improved. Also, some units could be amended to strengthen knowledge growth.

[View Calvert Report](#)



## CKLA

**Type:** CKLA, developed by the Core Knowledge Foundation, was designed to integrate key domains of knowledge into an ELA curriculum for Grades K-6.

**Analysis:** CKLA offers intentional reinforcement of knowledge across grades and units. It was designed with that end in mind.

**Top Recommendation:** The curriculum would be improved by attention to sources that address Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion, and by making better use of the visual arts.

[View CKLA Report](#)

## EL Education

**Type:** As an open-access resource, EL Education offers a comprehensive and interactive ELA curriculum for Grades K-8 including options for student-initiated project learning.

**Analysis:** EL Education K-5 reflects its core principles by offering an ELA curriculum that devotes primary attention to human development and science topics.

**Top Recommendation:** The curriculum is strong in unpacking knowledge on human character, but there is a missed opportunity to better develop other, associated, fields of knowledge, especially in the domains of history.

[View EL Education Report](#)

[EL Education Response](#)

## HMH Into Reading

**Type:** HMH Into Reading is an ELA curriculum (with a fully online access option) for Grades K-6 which incorporates reading, phonics, grammar, vocabulary, and writing.

**Analysis:** While the units are well designed, the knowledge they offer students is overly repetitive.

**Top Recommendation:** Diversify the topical coverage across all grades with high-quality texts that build students' background knowledge.

[View HMH Into Reading Report](#)

[HMH Response](#)

## Journeys

**Type:** Journeys is a K-6 ELA online or text-based curriculum. *The Institute evaluated Grades K-5 only.*

**Analysis:** There are high-quality materials in the upper elementary grades and strong phonics instruction in the early grades (K-2).

**Top Recommendation:** The supplementary materials in various units could be better aligned with anchor texts to strengthen unit coherency and knowledge building. In addition, some important domains of knowledge need meaningful coverage.

[View Journeys Report](#)

[HMH Response](#)

## Living Books

**Type:** Living Books ELA curriculum focuses on homeschooling materials for Grades K-8.

**Analysis:** Strong knowledge build in American, British, and global literature and rich, academically right content in the arts.

**Top Recommendation:** The curriculum contains pejorative terms labeling minority populations. We recommend removing this vocabulary. The curriculum would benefit from the introduction of more diverse authors.

[View Living Books Curriculum Report](#)

## My Father's World

**Type:** My Father's World is a Christian-based curriculum for Christian schools and homeschooling for Grades K-12.

**Analysis:** This curriculum uses mostly high-quality materials that provide considerable academic rigor.

**Top Recommendation:** Contextual materials could be added to support student learning of major texts. The curriculum would benefit from the introduction of alternative viewpoints on key topics in the high school grades, even if those viewpoints are simultaneously critiqued from within the Christian philosophy.

[View My Father's World Report](#)

## Open Court Reading

**Type:** Open Court is a K-5 ELA curriculum that is both online and text-based.

**Analysis:** Open Court offers stories with high interest to engage and foster the love of reading for students.

**Top Recommendation:** A stronger text selection – including canonical literature - focused on high-quality materials that work to support the unit’s themes and build knowledge in multiple domains, would increase the curriculum’s coherence and students’ exposure.

[View Open Court Reading Report](#)

[McGraw Hill Response](#)

## Units of Study for Teaching Reading

**Type:** Units of Study’s K-5 reading curriculum encourages student choice of text from a wide variety of options.

**Analysis:** The curriculum provides excellent teacher support to model critical reading skills and uses strong, high-quality materials.

**Top Recommendation:** In keeping with its founding principles, the curriculum could develop strong student libraries with carefully selected texts that complement the whole group and build knowledge in topics covered.

[View Units of Study for Teaching Reading](#)

[Heinemann Response](#)

## Wit & Wisdom®/Geodes®

**Type:** Wit & Wisdom® is an ELA curriculum offered to Grades K-8 that includes Geodes® phonics program for Grades K-2.

**Analysis:** Wit & Wisdom® contains high-quality texts with *extensive* topical coverage, especially in the elementary grades. It makes especially good use of the visual arts.

**Top Recommendation:** Some units could pay more attention to the academic cohesiveness between the various texts, particularly in the secondary grades.

[View Wit & Wisdom Report®](#)

[Great Minds Response](#)

## NEXT STEPS

The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy is dedicated to integrating the domains of research, policy, and practice to achieve educational excellence for all of America's students.

Connect with our team members at the Institute to learn more about the ELA Knowledge Map™ and our other work.

- Questions About this Findings Brief – [David Steiner, Executive Director](#)
- Social Studies Knowledge Map™ and ELA Knowledge Map™ – [Amy Fuller, Program Manager](#)
- School Culture 360™ Survey – [Ashley Berner, Director](#)
- Teacher Survey of Curriculum Use - [Al Passarella, Research Analyst](#)