

Introduction to the ELA Knowledge Map™

Introduction

The achievement gap is in large part a knowledge gap. There is now compelling research that students' reading levels – especially from fifth grade onwards – are deeply related to students' level of background content knowledge. More affluent students succeed on skills-based English language arts (ELA) assessments not because they are better at “finding the main idea,” but because they are far more likely to know more about the subject matter discussed in any given text. Research from around the world shows the same: [most democracies](#) around the world require all schools to teach a common body of knowledge, and a comprehensive, content-rich curriculum is a signature feature of [high-performers](#).

Despite the research record, the great majority of the United States' ELA curricula treat texts not as a source of building knowledge, but simply as a site for trying (fruitlessly) to hone disembodied reading “skills.” Our state assessments [follow suit](#): by design, they do not assume that students have read any specific texts or mastered any specific literary genre. Consequently, education leaders seldom know which specific bodies of knowledge their students have experienced across the K-12 system. In a departure from this norm, Dr. Sonja Santelises, Superintendent of Baltimore City Public Schools, [wrote recently](#) in *The Washington Post*, “If we want to ensure that all students — no matter their zip code, family income or background — get what they need to be successful, we must take a far more thoughtful approach to curriculum: the actual content kids learn in school.”

Project Description

The Institute has developed a tool with which to analyze an ELA curriculum in terms of the knowledge it offers students, both about the world (mainly through non-fiction texts) and about human psychology and the human condition (through both non-fiction and fiction texts). We conduct this analysis by “mapping” the knowledge domains that are implicit in the selection of the texts to be read. This mapping enables policymakers to see not only the domains of knowledge that are opened up in the reading – and others that are missed – but also to what degree, in what quality, and over what grade span. This is a one-of-a-kind instrument.

The Knowledge Map™ supports local, state, and national efforts to adopt the use of content-rich instructional materials. *EdReports*, a nationally-recognized evaluator of K-12 materials, focuses its analysis on the curriculum's alignment to Common Core Standards. Standards-alignment is critical – especially in the early grades, where standards provide explicit guidance on learning to read. However, standards-alignment alone is not sufficient. Beyond a brief reference to ancient mythology and America's founding documents, the standards are silent about ELA content; they recommend merely that attention be paid to it. A curriculum could be aligned with most or even all state standards, but be weak on knowledge-building. The reverse could also be true. In short, The Knowledge Map™ should not replace a standards-alignment review, but be used in concert with it. Foundational reading and writing skills should be

mastered in the context of learning about the human condition and the world we live in – its history, its geography, its cultures, and the science through which we understand physical phenomenon.

The Institute has reviewed dozens of state, local, and published ELA curricula through the knowledge-mapping process – and the results, particularly the coverage reports, provide compelling, actionable data that chiefs have used to adopt or amend classroom materials. (Indeed, Dr. Santelises’s op-ed, noted above, resulted in part from the knowledge-mapping exercise in Baltimore City.) Importantly, the knowledge-map work does not establish a canon of must-read texts. Rather, it presents graphic displays of *what is actually read* in the district or state and includes topics that matter locally (state history? cultural relevance? the immigrant experience?) in the review.

In partnership with [Chiefs for Change](#), the Institute developed a dedicated database to curate the findings and report cross-sections of data according to text, grade-level, and knowledge domain (and, of course, of an entire curriculum). This innovative resource is currently being deployed by a team of teacher-experts who have been trained by the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy.

Why the Institute for Education Policy?

The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy’s leadership has a longstanding institutional and personal commitment to ensuring that all students, regardless of income, receive the highest-quality curriculum available. As commissioner of education in New York State, the Institute’s director, David Steiner, included major funding for curricula in the state’s Race to the Top grant, which led to the launch of EngageNY, the nation’s most consulted on-line curriculum resource. The Institute’s deputy director, Dr. Ashley Berner, studies international education and the critical role that content-rich curricula play in narrowing achievement gaps in other countries.¹ In 2017, the Institute released the most extensive analysis of national and international research on the curriculum effect,² followed by an analysis of the data from the Institute’s director, Dr. David Steiner (see [here](#)). Dr. Berner and Dr. Steiner have each published numerous, related op-eds and essays on this subject (for examples, see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). David Steiner is a lead for the CCSSO’s 8-state initiative on high-quality instructional materials and has worked with multiple individual state commissioners in the process. Finally, the Institute has led extensive reviews of the formal, taught, and learned ELA curriculum across the country, and partners with districts and state education agencies to assess the knowledge build derived from texts, media, and artwork across their K-12 ELA curricula.

¹See Chapter 6 in: Ashley Berner, *Pluralism and American Public Education: No One Way to School* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), <http://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9781137502230>.

² David M. Steiner et al., “StandardsWork: A Narrative Research Review,” Center for Research and Reform in Education; Institute for Education Policy (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, January 2017).