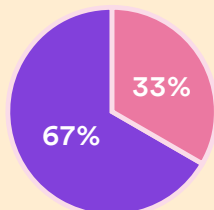


## ELA STATS

How students score for reading “proficiency”

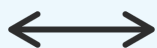


■ Below level required  
■ At or above level required

## ELA CURRICULUM



Preexisting understanding of text improves critical thinking and comprehension



There is a knowledge gap between learners from marginalized backgrounds and more privileged peers

October 2019

## ELA: The way forward

When thinking back to your own school days, you may recall English lessons focused on literature, themes, and poetry. But today’s cohort of students face ever-mounting pressure to perform on tests, resulting in more ELA time being dedicated to skills practice. With new standards meant to introduce students to the kinds of texts they’ll encounter in the 21st-century workplace, reading skills often get decoupled from content — all in hopes of creating versatile thinkers who can apply their comprehension and critical analysis skills in any context.

There’s a need for both scholarly literature study and pragmatic skills exercise in ELA classrooms — but there’s a growing gulf between these practices, and it’s resulting in fragmented ELA study that fails many students. In the past 20 years, two-thirds of students have scored below the level required for reading “proficiency,” and income and racial achievement gaps have widened. A piece of the puzzle is missing: instructional content that can help students build background knowledge to draw connections between seminal literature and real-world skills.

### The disconnect: Skills-based instruction doesn’t always promote proficiency

Today’s ELA curriculum, particularly in elementary education, has been anchored to the idea that it’s possible to teach skills, like identifying analogies and finding the main idea, without context. If skills are taught in isolation, the theory goes, then students will be able to apply them to any kind of text they encounter outside the classroom.

The problem? Cognitive science has proven that background knowledge is essential for comprehension, and students are better at both comprehension and critical thinking when they have a preexisting understanding of a text’s topic. In fact, students who receive instruction where reading skills are uncoupled from content knowledge struggle to apply those skills to other topics. This isn’t surprising when you consider the studies that show that content knowledge makes the difference in students’ ELA achievement. Students who score low on reading skills outperform their higher-scoring peers on comprehension when they have

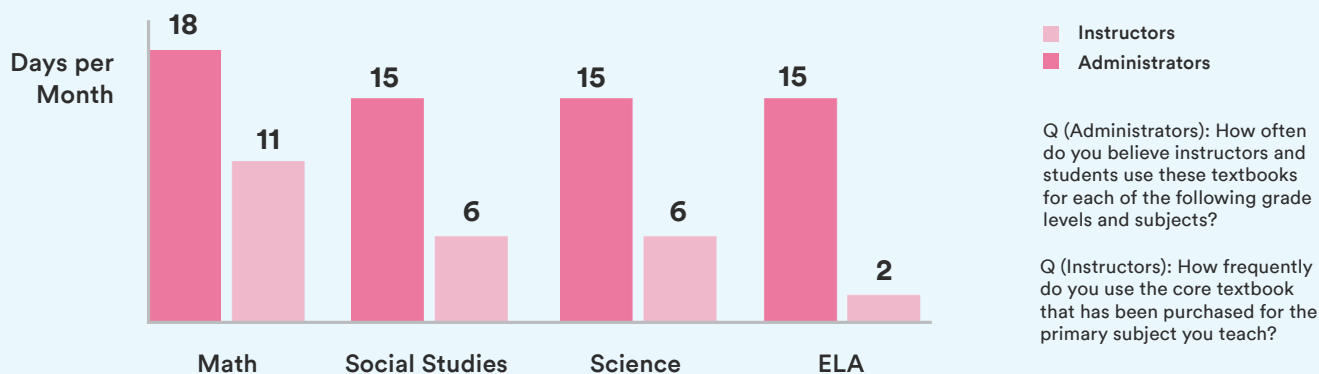


background knowledge about a text that other students do not.

That explains why the skills-only approach is actively harmful from an equity standpoint: learners from marginalized backgrounds might be less likely to encounter general content knowledge in the home than ones from more privileged families. When schools miss chances to fill this knowledge gap, they widen the gulf between students and their more advantaged peers.

Content knowledge could be the key to putting low-achieving students on an even playing field with their higher-achieving peers. But it’s not only these students who stand to benefit—teachers have seen students of all levels flourish when curriculum puts content first. Students just need the chance to go deep on the content they love.

**Question: Do you currently use a textbook as a core content for each of the following grade levels and subjects?**



Source: EY-Parthenon K-12 Classroom Content Platform Usage Survey N=741

## The role of the textbook: Views at odds

Teaching reading skills in isolation is not engaging, it's not effective, and it's not evidence based. Fortunately, it's possible to integrate skill-building techniques into an instructional philosophy grounded in meaningful content. Right now, these skills are being taught with textbooks or digital programs through disconnected passages that are not authentic or relevant to students' lives. Data backs this up — administrators assume that ELA textbooks are used 15 days of the month, while teachers report using them only 6 days of the month. But it doesn't have to be this way.

What does inspire learners is building a foundation of topic-based knowledge in the classroom. Strong subject knowledge also makes it easier to learn new skills:

When students are conversant with a text's content, they need less working memory to process it, leaving more available to learn the skill that's being taught.

Of course, high content quality does more than build skills: It also promotes students' love for reading and writing, both in and out of the classroom. One of the unique powers of ELA is that if teachers can instill passion for the subject, students can reinforce and even learn new skills through self-directed reading outside the classroom. In the long run, stoking intellectual curiosity will produce meaningful benefits for students, just like building proficiency in standards-based skills. Educators aspire to sparking passion — and modern, engaging content is an essential tool to make that happen.

## The way forward

Education journalist Natalie Wexler writes, "In perhaps half of all elementary schools, teachers are supposed to use a reading textbook that includes a variety of passages, discussion questions, and a teacher guide. In other schools, teachers are left to their own devices to figure out how to teach reading, and rely on commercially available children's books. In either case, when it comes to teaching comprehension, the emphasis is on skills. And the overwhelming majority of teachers turn to the internet to supplement these materials, despite not having been trained in curriculum design."

ELA needs an approach that combines the best elements of both the traditional, literature-focused approach and the new

skills-based one. That requires content that can serve as the connective thread between literature and skills practice, and that is effectively vetted and instructionalized to support both endeavors. We propose something revolutionary: consistent, readily accessible content that takes the onus off of teachers, and caters to the interests of all students regardless of their backgrounds. It's essential to complement novels with current, relevant content that helps them draw modern connections and build skills. That's how educators will instill a love of reading, close the achievement gap — and effectively teach skills along the way.