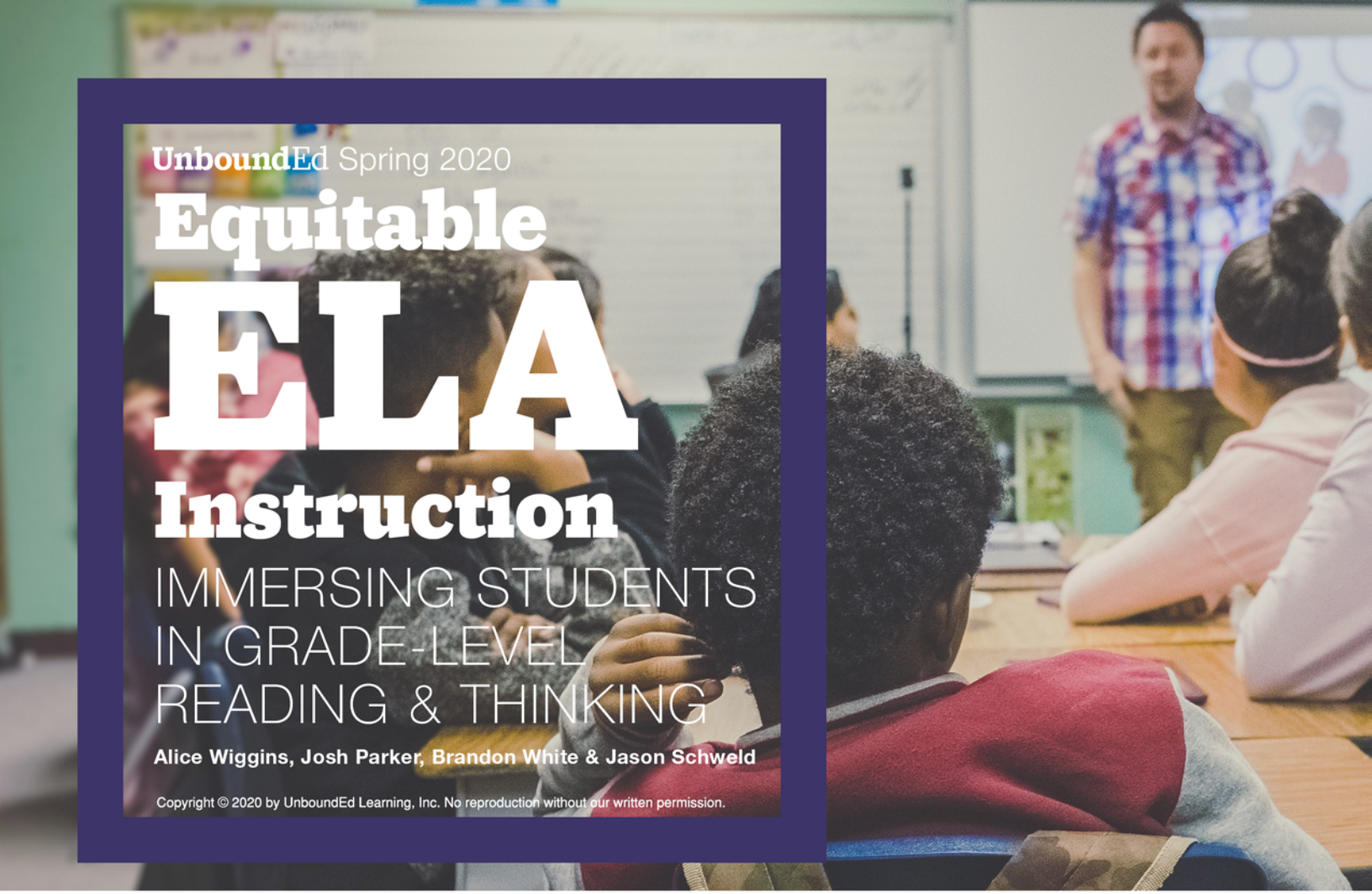

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Equitable ELA Instruction

IMMERSING STUDENTS IN GRADE-LEVEL READING & THINKING

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Graduating from high school with low levels of literacy threatens students' quality of life and ability to be fully vested with the rights, privileges, and duties of democracy. A school's English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum is a significant teaching and learning tool that provides access to the power and opportunities afforded by literacy. Given that reading proficiency rates for many students of color are historically lower than those of their white peers, we must consider the roles race and bias play in whether students of color are receiving high-quality instruction and support. Attending to implicit and explicit racial bias in our work is difficult and uncomfortable. Yet this work is imperative. Although only 49% of public school students are white,[1] more than 80% of public school teachers are white.[2] Data demonstrate "that non-black teachers of black students have significantly lower expectations for their students than do black teachers."[3] In addition to having teachers with lower expectations, students of color are more likely to have inexperienced teachers[4] and are less likely to be placed in higher-level courses than other, equally qualified students.[5] If their peers are also economically disadvantaged and/or non-white, they are more likely to attend schools receiving less per-pupil funding.[6] Students of color are also more likely to require remedial college courses, despite "meeting" their system's high-school graduation requirements.[7] Taken together, the data connecting teacher race and student expectations paired with the data demonstrating racial bias in district and school policies convey the urgent need for attention to racial bias in all aspects of education.

The Bias Toolkit

UnboundEd's core value of equity calls us to commit to disrupting patterns of implicit bias, privilege, and racism in ourselves, our organizations, and in the education field. We recognize that, without an intentional study of biases, we may unintentionally create barriers to learning despite our belief in educational equity. We have developed the Bias Toolkit to guide brave conversations in school communities all over the country so we can listen, lead, and teach toward equity.

Download the Bias Toolkit from UnboundEd.org.

Equitable ELA instruction happens by aligning best practices for instructional delivery with a consistent focus on eliminating bias and inequity.

In the words of Paul Gorski, "The path to racial equity requires direct confrontations with racial inequity—with racism. We start, again, by asking, 'How is racism operating here?'"[8] One of the places racism operates in schools is through curriculum and instruction. In this paper, we explore equitable ELA instruction as one element of many required to make schools more equitable for all learners. Equitable ELA instruction closes the space between performance and expectations from both ends by providing all students the opportunity to complete unfinished learning and to participate in grade-level instruction. Equitable ELA instruction ensures all students have access to a **standards-aligned curriculum** that facilitates rigorous grade-level reading, thinking, and instruction. It means educators provide supports that allow students to successfully persist in the work of an aligned curriculum. It also means targeted intervention that addresses previously unmet needs is applied when students do not experience success, even with supports. Equitable ELA instruction happens by aligning best practices for instructional delivery with a consistent focus on eliminating bias and inequity. Treating the symptoms of bias and inequity is futile without attention to the sources of bias and inequity.

At UnboundEd, we believe grade-level texts and tasks—expertly delivered and supported—are key to ensuring all students meet their potential. To move toward grade-level expectations, educators must provide instruction that keeps students immersed in grade-level reading and thinking, including opportunities to develop and become proficient in the performances described by the standards. The most efficient path to effective and equitable instruction requires that educators do three things:

1. Adopt an aligned curriculum.
2. Provide instructional support that fosters all students' persistence with grade-level reading and thinking.
3. Provide targeted intervention in addition to and in service of grade-level learning.

It is imperative that educators not just do these three things, but ensure that they work together. Creating and communicating a seamless vision of equitable ELA instruction will ensure that teaching and support are aligned in the most equitable ways.

There is a paradox associated with supporting students who are not yet reading and working to grade-level expecations. Intuitively, educators often bring the work to a level where students can immediately experience success. However, the real benefits and opportunities for growth come from bringing students to the work of the grade. Learning takes place in the productive struggle around this work. And this struggle, for both adults and students, will take place in the intersection of the standards and equity.

This paper is *not* a "how-to" document. It does not contain step-by-step instructions for educators, recommend school curricula, or share coaching or leadership techniques. It also does not provide enough information and resources for educators to begin to enact equitable ELA instruction by reading it alone. This paper is motivated by the idea that, before taking action, educators must build awareness of the need, opportunity, and direction for improvements that will allow a strong vision of equitable instruction to take root. The goal of this paper is to **build awareness** of three foundational "moves," including how they work together as a means of providing equitable ELA instruction and why they advance equity. Such awareness is a prerequisite to the urgency, advocacy, and fundamental change in habits, mindsets, and behaviors required at all levels of our system in service of equity. This paper will emphasize that these moves, when coordinated and implemented well, create conditions for increasing and reinforcing students' opportunities to participate in work that meets grade-level expectations. There is no equity without these opportunities.

1. Adopt an Aligned Curriculum

Curricula aligned with high standards have the potential to maximize learning by holding all students to rigorous expectations. With appropriate support, these curricula can maximize the time students spend engaged in grade-level reading and thinking. At UnboundEd, we believe aligned curricula and the high standards they exemplify are key levers to promote equity. Aligned curricula include many tools, instructional techniques, and pedagogical prompts that foster academic mindsets and collaborative learning environments. These curricula support equitable and responsive teaching practices that raise students' sense of self-worth and affirm their developing identities. These practices include questions that prompt consideration of other perspectives, activities that provide opportunities for student discourse and debate, and explicit teaching of content and routines that build students' independence. Within aligned curricula, these tools, instructional techniques, and pedagogical prompts can be identified and amplified to best serve the needs of all students.

Adopting an aligned curriculum also provides a common anchor for administration and staff to have conversations about grade-level rigor, standards, and instruction—without which there cannot be equity. Only when educators in a system have a common understanding of aligned grade-level instruction can deep conversations occur about what it looks like to implement equitable ELA instruction. Further, high-quality, aligned curricula positively impact students' learning.[9] By design, aligned curricula exemplify the rigor and demands of grade-level standards. They frequently incorporate proven, research-based features

The Case for Grade-Level Text

College and career success hinges on the ability to navigate complex text. The demands of career-related reading align with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) text complexity guidelines. This is true for positions that require little to no training beyond high school. It is also true for those requiring extensive preparation.[15]

The ability to comprehend complex text differentiates performance on the ACT assessment of college and career readiness. Researchers thought that students' performance on the ACT hinged on question type. They looked at differences between student performance on literal and inferential comprehension questions. They also looked at performance on questions about main idea, author's approach, and supporting details. They found that student performance could not be differentiated in any meaningful way by question type. Students did not perform differently if they were answering vocabulary questions or main idea questions. Researchers found little variation between performance on literal or inferential questions. After finding no performance differences based on question type, they turned to the reading passages. What they found was that the text, rather than the questions about the text, affected performance. As the text became more challenging, performance for all but the highest scoring students (above and below the benchmark) went down. And,

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including collaborative discussion, challenging grade-level tasks, repeated reading of texts, and ongoing formative assessments that provide opportunities for feedback to guide students' learning.[10] These curricula also employ grade-level complex text to expose students to new language, knowledge, and modes of thinking.[11] Aligned curricula, when implemented well, offer every child access to the learning that results when we pair high-quality instruction and grade-appropriate text with the best of what we know about thinking and learning.

Developing aligned curricula is a time-consuming and expensive process that in many cases takes years. It is unlikely that individual educators can create their own materials with the same careful standards alignment, consideration of proven instructional practices, and coherently sequenced learning. It is even more unlikely that "do-it-yourself" curricula will sequence learning both within and across grades in a manner that consistently and intentionally takes advantage of the features of grade-level texts to build knowledge and vocabulary. Still, most teachers demonstrate this inequitable practice, reporting more frequent use of materials developed by themselves or with colleagues.[12] This do it yourself approach often results in assignments that lack rigor, cohesion, and alignment. For example, TNTP's "The Opportunity Myth" reported in 2018 that 4 out of 10 classrooms with a majority of students of color never received a single grade-level assignment.[13] Likewise, a 2015 EdTrust report documented that only 38% of middle school literacy assignments reflected grade-appropriate standards.[14]

With an aligned curriculum, teachers can redirect their autonomy and creativity toward preparing for

The Case for Grade-Level Text
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when texts were "complex," performance dipped, regardless of question type.

Researcher Tim Shanahan added support for the notion that students need experience working with complex text. Shanahan examined the prevalent practice of "instructional level" text. He looked for support that learning is facilitated if students are placed in the right levels of text. He found a dearth of research to support that idea.[16] Since then, he has documented evidence that suggests the opposite—that students can learn from text written at very different levels (more complex) when provided with support.[17]

and refining instructional delivery to meet individual students' learning needs. Only the adoption of an aligned curriculum allows this shift from the complex, expensive, and time-consuming task of lesson design to the more productive work of instructional preparation. Through instructional preparation, teachers develop and deepen understanding of the standards, the curriculum, and the texts and how they work together. Understanding how the standards, curriculum, and texts work together creates space for teachers to focus on students' needs. In particular, focus can be directed to where and how students will need support for learning and how those supports strengthen instruction that is meaningful and affirming. Maximizing the time students spend engaged in grade-level instruction requires that educators know where and how to provide supports to keep students persisting in the work of the grade. Maximizing the time students spend engaged in grade-level instruction maximizes equity by moving all students toward grade-level achievement. **Lessons that do not hold *all* students to grade-level expectations demonstrate the institutional bias of low expectations.** Aligned curricula provide a source for lessons that set grade-level expectations for all students.

2. Provide Instructional Support That Fosters All Students' Persistence With Grade-Level Reading and Thinking

To maximize the time students spend engaged in grade-level reading and tasks, teachers must deliver the grade-level instruction of the standards-aligned curriculum. To successfully engage and persist with an aligned curriculum, many students will need instructional support and/or intervention. Defining a few terms related to support allows us to make important distinctions. In particular, distinguishing between **supports** and **modifications** is essential:

- Supports are adaptations that allow access to the day's grade-level instruction. Other terms related to supports include:

- *Differentiation* is merely a support when implemented as designed. As such, it provides access to the day's grade-level instruction and doesn't change the goal of students' learning.
- *Scaffolds* are a type of gradually removed support, allowing students to demonstrate increasingly independent proficiency with grade-level instruction.
- *Intervention* (addressed in the next section) is a set of steps targeting students' specific, identified needs and unfinished learning. Intervention is applied when students are not reaching success, despite supports.

- Modifications are adaptations that change the learning goal and/or lower the level of challenge for students.

The path to equitable instruction is through supports, not modifications, unless a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) specifically calls for instructional modifications. To better distinguish between supports and modifications, consider the two vignettes below:

Maria

Maria is a sixth grader who is barely meeting the reading expectations of a fourth grader. Her class is currently reading *Bud, Not Buddy*, by Christopher Paul Curtis. With a Lexile level of 950, this book is considered a grade-level text for Grade 6. In today's lesson, as presented in the curriculum, students will be reading passages from the text to determine the theme and how the author conveys the theme. Maria and four of her classmates are watching a scene from the film version of *Bud, Not Buddy*. Another group of students is reading an excerpt from the text with teacher-created annotations that guide students to specific words in the text, along with questions to help the students articulate the theme. As she dives into the day's work, Maria's teacher, Mrs. Palmer, directs Maria and her group to the teacher table. They wait patiently while Mrs. Palmer gives directions to the rest of the class. When the other students begin their work, Mrs. Palmer joins Maria and her group. She instructs the students to listen for evidence of "kindness" in the passage as she conducts a short read-aloud from the book. The passage she reads represents the portion of the film Maria and her peers watched.

Daniel

Daniel is in the class next door. He is also a sixth grader who is meeting the reading expectations of a fourth grader. Daniel's teacher, Ms. Thompson, has reflected deeply on what Daniel and his peers need to access grade-level instruction. As a result of that reflection, she provides Daniel with an audio recording of the *Bud, Not Buddy* text for the next day's lesson. For homework, Daniel listens to the audio, following along while reading aloud from his text. In class the following day, Ms. Thompson reads aloud a short sample passage from the chapter as the students follow along. Next, Ms. Thompson and the class read the passage out loud together. She provides students with an opportunity to ask questions about pronunciation and phrasing and gives them time to make notes as needed. When students are not particularly

fluent during choral reading, Ms. Thompson may repeat the choral reading. After a second choral reading, Ms. Thompson moves into the lesson. All students reread the pertinent passages and then break into small groups to discuss the passages' theme. The students use flip charts and markers to document the theme and evidence of how the author conveys it. As Ms. Thompson rotates to check in on how students are doing with the work, she notices who may need additional support. She asks just enough probing questions to direct students' thinking but avoids giving the answers away.

Reading grade-level texts is central to the work of aligned curricula. When the challenge for students is the act of reading itself, providing support is critical to their participation in the work of the day. In considering these vignettes, it is important to note some fundamental differences in the approaches taken by these two teachers.

Ms. Thompson supports Daniel with scaffolds. Her scaffolds advance equity by providing opportunities for Daniel to participate in the grade-level reading required by the lesson in the following ways:

- Providing Daniel with an audio recording to accompany his homework reading allows him to hear the complex words and sentences as he sees them for the first time. The homework reading also provides Daniel with an extra opportunity to read the text before he has to analyze it.

- Ms. Thompson's read-aloud provides an opportunity for students to hear a fluent model of the reading, but it does not replace reading students do on their own.

- The cycle of repeated reading Ms. Thompson implements provides students like Daniel the opportunity to develop fluency with the text and clarify confusion before tasks requiring his comprehension of the text.

In contrast, Maria and her group experience the inequity that accompanies lack of opportunity. Maria's group has little to no opportunity for reading, relying instead on a video representation and hearing a read-aloud. Maria's group is also provided with no opportunity to determine the theme of the text.

Other students receive annotations leading them to the theme, without providing them the opportunity to engage in the full grade-level reading. Aiming to support students, Mrs. Palmer modifies the lesson, changing the grade-level reading goal and target standard for most of her students.

Repeated Reading

A cycle of repeated reading is a key scaffold that supports all students in reading grade-level text.[18] Repeated reading provides opportunity for students to develop fluency with the text, clarify confusion and summarize the text through annotation, comprehend the text at a general level, and finally synthesize and/or analyze the text for a deeper understanding of its structure, implicit meaning, and nuance.

Aligned curricula often employ this cycle across a series of lessons. For students who are challenged by reading, or when the texts are particularly complex, increasing opportunities to read the texts, including orally—prior to the conversations and tasks that hinge on comprehension of the texts—is imperative. Students who have had multiple opportunities to read a text, in particular the passages most pertinent to the day's lesson, will gain reading accuracy and have the opportunity to make annotations that will better prepare them to comprehend the text and participate in the lesson.

In our work at UnboundEd, we frequently observe educators modifying curricula—even aligned curricula—in a manner that limits opportunities for students to read grade-level texts and engage in grade-level thinking. When teachers provide students with a lower-level text and read all or most of the text aloud to students, or allow students to watch video versions of the text, they are eliminating the need for students to read grade-level text. Teachers also minimize students' challenges (and grade-level demands) when they translate text into a more "readable" language or otherwise excerpt, edit, or consolidate text. Even in classrooms filled with discussion about the text, teachers compromise grade-level demands when they explain or discuss the text without anchoring the discussion in the specific details, craft, structure, and words of the text. The farther modifications take students from the words and language of the text, the less rigorous assignments become. Modifications such as these change the reading complexity to below grade-level or eliminate the need for student reading altogether. Such modifications demonstrate the institutional bias of low expectations and perpetually keep students in below-grade-level texts and tasks.

A 2018 review of teacher expectations research confirmed findings that teachers' differential expectations for students can be manifested and transmitted to students through differential behavior. These behaviors include both different interactions with students and different feedback provided to students.[19] There is also evidence suggesting teachers provide different learning experiences based on their expectations. TNTP's "The Opportunity Myth" found that 80% of teachers surveyed supported college- and career-ready standards, but less than half held expectations that their students could achieve those standards. In the same study, TNTP found "classrooms that served predominantly students from higher-income backgrounds spent twice as much time on grade-appropriate assignments and five times as much time with strong instruction, compared to classrooms with predominantly students from low-income backgrounds."[20]

When students in the same class receive different work, curriculum and instruction for “advanced levels” tend to focus on higher-order skills taught through authentic and collaborative learning experiences. Curriculum for “regular” or “remedial levels” tends to cover less content and emphasizes memorization and comprehension.[21] Often, teachers hold inaccurate perceptions, based on race, regarding which students are high-achieving. These inaccurate perceptions can have negative implications for students’ academic growth and success.[22]

Whether tracking is formal (ability-separated classes) or de facto (ability groupings within a given classroom), it is not shown to benefit students. When students are tracked into high- or low-ability groups, they usually remain where they are initially placed and continue to perform in ways consistent with the initial grouping. Further, they are often not provided with opportunities to be regrouped.[23] Unfortunately, the majority of students (approximately 60%) are placed in low-ability tracks, from which they do not emerge. At the secondary level, tracking does not appear to raise achievement in the student population as a whole, and it does not provide equal access to educational experiences that would result in higher academic achievement.[24] Even when students are placed in ability groups within the same class, it has been demonstrated that students who were held to differing expectations within a classroom underperform students who were placed in non-grouped classrooms with common expectations for the class.[25]

Evidence suggests teaching all students with high expectations supports the performance of average students, without negatively impacting high-achievers.

Evidence suggests teaching all students with high expectations supports the performance of average students, without negatively impacting high-achievers.[26] In fact, effective differentiation has been shown to provoke significantly better literacy and comprehension outcomes in mixed-ability classrooms, far outpacing results in classrooms not practicing differentiated support.[27] Inclusive systems holding all students to similar expectations and providing similar learning experiences exhibit significantly smaller achievement differences than those altering their expectations.[28]

Returning to our vignettes, Daniel’s teacher, Ms. Thompson, knows reading poses a challenge for him. She also knows that when he comprehends the text, he can almost always do the work of the lesson. Ms. Thompson uses a variety of scaffolds, allowing Daniel to complete the reading and comprehend the text. In the previous vignette, Ms. Thompson uses a cycle of repeated reading that allows Daniel to read for fluency. She often follows fluency-focused reading with opportunities to reread, annotate, and summarize.

Ms. Thompson ensures Daniel has a general comprehension of the text before reading and tasks requiring analysis and/or synthesis. Along with ensuring Daniel has multiple opportunities to read the text, Ms. Thompson sometimes uses these additional scaffolds:

- Providing copies of texts with line numbers makes it easier for Daniel to cite the location of evidence and quicker for Ms. Thompson to direct Daniel to relevant areas of the text.
- Providing copies of texts with more room helps Daniel build the habits of annotating meanings of key vocabulary, writing passage summaries, connecting pronouns to referents, sentence parsing, etc.
- Chunking longer texts into smaller pieces helps Daniel navigate the structure of the text.
- Interspersing the comprehension questions and tasks within pertinent chunks builds and supports Daniel's understanding.

Modifying tasks to bring the work to students is an inequitable practice, allowing millions of students each year to graduate from high school but enter college requiring expensive, remedial, non-credit-bearing courses.[29] Equitable instruction preserves grade-level expectations using scaffolds to foster persistence. It maintains opportunities for all students to read the grade-level texts and engage in the grade-level tasks that prepare them for college and career.

3. Provide Targeted Intervention in Addition to, and in Service of, Grade-Level Learning

Reading is a complex endeavor. Students who are not reaching success, despite support, require intervention to remain on track for college and career. The quality of our help for striving readers increases with the precision of our understanding of their needs. The most precise understanding of needs comes from screening and diagnostic assessments, administered by a trained professional. These assessments are the best way to identify specific learning needs[30] to inform targeted intervention. Assessments providing levels, benchmarks, or percentile designations of student performance may point to the broad direction of challenges. More often than not, though, these are not diagnostic nor precise enough. From these broad understandings, we must drill down to ever more specific understanding of students' unfinished learning.

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Targeted intervention should explicitly attend to the distinct needs identified by a diagnostic assessment. Additionally, it should continue to strengthen the factors contributing to fluent word reading and comprehension. Aligning intervention with core ELA instruction and ensuring intervention does not take place in lieu of core grade-level instruction will both deepen and extend student learning.

The Importance of K-2 Phonics Instruction

Phonics instruction is the most effective way to teach children how to read.[36] Phonics involves teaching young children sound-spelling correspondences. Mastery of phonics allows children to quickly and accurately decode words. This fluent decoding paired with ongoing exposure to the sounds and spellings of English lead to word recognition. The more words students recognize, the more fluently they read. Students who read with fluency can concentrate on making meaning from the texts they read.

K-2 foundational skills instruction, including phonics, is essential and should be paired with additional reading instruction and activities. This additional instruction attends to standards beyond the foundational skills and employs reading and read-alouds that build knowledge and vocabulary.

When students don't read proficiently by third grade, they are four times more likely to leave school without a diploma. Thus, the singular impact of not supporting students' fluent decoding and the development of knowledge and vocabulary as early as possible extend well beyond the school years.

For students in PreK through Grade 2, intervention should provide an additional portion of foundational reading instruction. **This intervention should both duplicate and extend the core instruction.** It should take place in addition to (not in place of) core instruction and in a small group to more precisely target specific foundational skills of reading.[31] Some students will require intensive reteaching and support, others will require more practice. The importance of these early-grades interventions cannot be overstated. The earliest grades provide a window of opportunity for more easily addressing reading challenges and minimizing the risk of later difficulties.[32] It is also well demonstrated that students who struggle in the early grades, without appropriate intervention, will continue to struggle as they progress through the grades.[33] As Lyon & Fletcher state, "studies of early intervention sponsored by four federal agencies have pointed unambiguously to the effectiveness of prevention, with tantalizing evidence that it may reduce the incidence of reading disability at later ages."[34]

For older students, to deepen and extend student learning, the advice is similar. Intervention should both duplicate and extend the core instruction. Intervention using the texts and topics of core instruction builds vocabulary and content knowledge and provides repeated exposure to the text in a supportive environment. This support for vocabulary, knowledge-building, and repeated exposure to the text provides students the opportunity to develop fluency and clarify any confusion.[35] By relating intervention to the content of core instruction we do two things: we account for missed learning opportunities and concurrently develop students' capacity for persistence with grade-level expectations. In doing so, we both address unmet needs and ensure students are increasingly prepared for their core ELA instruction and are not falling further behind.

Consider the following vignette of Daniel and Maria's intervention instruction:

> Mr. Paez
>
> Mr. Paez used to pull students out of their core classes to provide support. He found that although students were making progress on unfinished learning, missing core instruction for intervention made it difficult for his students to catch up with their peers. His district adopted a new schedule with a dedicated block for intervention. Now Mr. Paez targets unfinished learning in a manner that focuses on what students will need in the near-term for their core instruction. For instance, Mr. Paez has conferred with the classroom teachers so he knows Maria and Daniel are currently reading *Bud, Not Buddy*. He has crafted intervention plans to address Maria's and Daniel's individual needs, but they will both be working with passages from *Bud, Not Buddy*—the grade-level text used in their core ELA instruction this week. Mr. Paez understands that, in addition to fluency, Maria is challenged by comprehension. She also has difficulty following the coherence of the text and, in particular, tracking characters. Today, he will use a short article about the era of the Great Depression to ensure Maria has the background knowledge to understand the setting and circumstances portrayed in the text. Then, he will use a passage from *Bud, Not Buddy* to work with Maria on tracking pronouns and the people or things to which they refer.

Mr. Paez knows that comprehension is more than just knowledge, vocabulary, and strategies—although these are important. When students comprehend what they are reading, they develop a mental model of the ideas and situations about which they are reading and apply a standard of coherence—a threshold of understanding that causes them to pause or slow down when something doesn't make sense. When Maria and Daniel are unable to create a strong mental model of what they have read, comprehension suffers. Mr. Paez uses a diagnostic assessment as well as listening to and watching students read. This allows him to more specifically identify barriers to comprehension. To support comprehension, Mr. Paez has both a keen understanding of the text at hand and Maria's and Daniel's specifically identified learning needs. Working with the features of a specific text, he is able to determine where students have unfinished learning.

Knowledge-Building Content

The role of content knowledge in successful reading cannot be overstated. Knowledge allows the reader to achieve literal comprehension and impacts the reader's ability to fill in gaps and make inferences. Background knowledge facilitates the reader's ability to make sense of new information and make connections across the text. Readers who have more knowledge read more accurately and fluently. Connecting new reading to one's existing background knowledge also supports the reader's ability to remember vocabulary and information central to

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Knowledge-Building Content

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the meaning of text. Background knowledge allows the reader to focus attention on meaning-making to support comprehension of the text.[37]

Research has demonstrated that topic knowledge is a better predictor of comprehension than general reading ability. Students who have a knowledge store related to the topic about which they are reading have demonstrated better comprehension than readers with better skill but less knowledge of the topic.[38]

For older students, poor reading comprehension commonly results from disfluency (decoding and word-reading fluency difficulties) that was not previously addressed or resolved.[39] Students rarely have isolated difficulties with comprehension, so intervention should attend to both fluent word recognition and comprehension.[40]

Daniel

Vocabulary and word recognition challenge Daniel. He has difficulty decoding multisyllable words, which inhibits his ability to store them in memory. When a text has many multisyllable words, Daniel's comprehension suffers. He focuses his attention on sounding out words. As a result, he often loses track of the meaning of the text. Mr. Paez works with Daniel on the rules for breaking words into syllables, then has Daniel practice applying the rules. He has Daniel mark the syllabication (syllable breaks) of multisyllable words in his copy of *Bud, Not Buddy*.

Fluency

Fluency serves as an important link between word recognition, decoding, and comprehension.[41] Without fluency, comprehension is hindered by the need to sound out many words. As texts increase in complexity, automaticity will allow students to focus their attention on making meaning from the text, rather than sounding out words. By Grade 3, students should have progressed from sounding out words to increased automaticity and word recognition.

The good news is that fluency is an element of reading that can be improved relatively quickly with some attention and practice. And, fluency practice can be conducted during existing classroom activities and routines, with little in the way of additional resources.

Read more in the Fluency Guides on UnboundEd.org.

In this manner, Mr. Paez provides Maria and Daniel with instruction and practice for their unfinished learning. They get the opportunity to read the text, with scaffolds, before the lesson in which they will need to read the text independently. This repeated exposure facilitates fluency and comprehension of the text, which in turn supports students' success with comprehension-based tasks. Each of the essential components of adolescent literacy instruction—vocabulary, word recognition, fluency, and comprehension[42]—can be addressed in service of the demands and content of the standards-aligned curriculum.

This coherence of instruction is both equitable and essential. Learning is further fractured when students are not given the opportunity to participate in grade-level instruction because they are pulled out of class for intervention and/or the intervention lesson does not align with the grade-level classroom instruction. To enable grade-level reading and thinking while addressing unfinished learning, the intervention must be scheduled so it does not pull students out of the grade-level instruction. It must also be designed in a manner closely aligned with the core content so that intervention facilitates ever-increasing access to the grade-level content while addressing students' previously unmet needs. The equitable way to ensure the efficiency and rigor of supplemental instruction is by providing it in service of the current or upcoming work of the grade.

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Maximizing the opportunities for students to do grade-level work maximizes equity by moving all students toward grade-level achievement and minimizing the time spent doing below-grade-level work. Providing targeted intervention outside of core ELA instruction preserves the whole of ELA instructional time for grade-level opportunities. Providing targeted intervention in the service of core ELA instruction addresses students' unfinished learning and prepares students for the specific demands of the current grade-level learning—thus, increasing the efficiency of supplemental time and materials.

Create a Vision for Equitable ELA Instruction

The standards-aligned curriculum anchoring instructional equity cannot be divorced from attention to and conversations about race and bias. The vision for equitable instruction, which includes aligned curriculum, supports, and intervention, must include a system-wide acknowledgment of the roles of racism and bias in instructional equity. Educators across the system must be supported and encouraged in the delivery of

equitable instruction and provided space to talk about bias and its role in their work and learning. The vision should be paired with systematic attention to racial and instructional equity. A collaboratively created, shared vision of racial and instructional equity serves as an essential north star and should be used to guide the roles of system leaders, school leaders, instructional leaders, and teachers.

Educators at all levels must see and enact the vision of equitable ELA instruction with a growth mindset and learning orientation. Everyone must encourage and engage in courageous conversations about racism and bias that keep equitable ELA instruction at the forefront.

System leaders must engage others across the organization in the process of creating a shared vision of equitable ELA instruction with aligned curriculum, supports that maximize persistence, and interventions that serve the aligned curriculum.

System leaders and school leaders must ensure schedules that include dedicated intervention time and provide supplemental and intervention materials that work in service of the content, concepts, and skills of the standards-aligned curriculum. That is, intervention materials should be aligned to the grade-level texts and topics of the standards-aligned curriculum.

School leaders and instructional leaders must develop a deep understanding of what the standards demand and what equitable ELA instruction looks like in action. They must ensure educators' learning, planning, and practices are anchored in the standards-aligned curriculum; without this, equitable student access to the goals and objectives of the curriculum are compromised. They must develop a lens and tools for surfacing inequitable practices (e.g., modifications versus supports; using core class time for intervention; interventions that aren't aligned to the core grade-level instruction). Using these lenses and tools, they must coach toward practices that maximize the amount of time students spend (supported as needed) reading or listening to grade-level texts, as well as writing and speaking about them.

Instructional leaders and teachers must use coaching conversations and collaborative conversations with grade-level peers and interventionists to improve the planning and delivery of instruction, instructional supports, and intervention needed to advance students' abilities to engage and persist with grade-level learning.

Teachers must marry the critical work of understanding, internalizing, and preparing aligned lessons with reflection on their role within our biased systems in order to identify barriers to offering the grade-level instruction, supports, and interventions that cause change.

Educators at all levels must learn to recognize the instructional moves impeding students' access to grade-level work.

The practices educators employ—the habits they develop and the decisions they make—along with what leaders accept or encourage, have the power to increase equity or perpetuate inequity.

Our choices either maximize or hinder students' opportunities to grapple with grade-level reading and thinking. The path to equitable learning experiences includes both opportunities for grade-level reading and thinking and opportunities to complete unfinished learning. Efforts to provide both must be coordinated. Organizational decisions and priorities must reflect an honest belief in students, teachers, and the vision of racial and instructional equity. These decisions and priorities must guide policies, systems, and structures that support and uphold the vision of equitable ELA instruction to serve all students and families.

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Join us at the UnboundEd Standards Institute to engage with educators across the country on the intersection of standards and equity.

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Endnotes

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