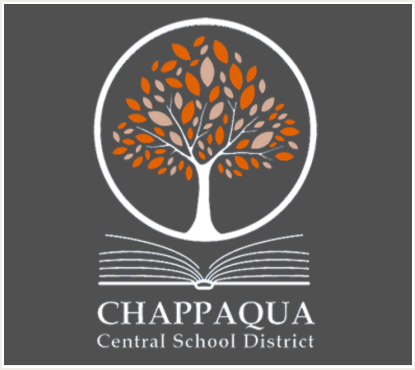
Chappaqua Central School District
K - 6 Literacy Program Evaluation Report



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CCSD K - 6 Literacy Program Evaluation Report Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Chappaqua Central School District K - 6 Literacy Program Evaluation

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Project Objectives, Methodology & Participation

Theory & Practice implemented a mixed-methods evaluation exploring the efficacy of CCSD's existing K-6 literacy program through the Science of Reading, in order to provide robust, practical recommendations specific to this context. Over 11 weeks, 2 consultants collaborated with key district administrators, conducted onsite visits, observed in over 45 classrooms, led a session with the district's Literacy Task Force, conducted 11 focus group interviews with 32 faculty, and analyzed survey responses from 322 parents and guardians, 32 faculty, and 1,514 students. The study resulted in the identification of three key themes and 14 recommendations, the key components of which are highlighted in this summary.

Synergy

CCSD embodies the qualities of a true learning organization, fostering an environment that prioritizes professional growth, innovation, and the pursuit of educational excellence across all levels of the institution. The district is characterized by a highly motivated and collaborative team that consistently demonstrates a commitment to excellence and continuous improvement. Faculty value their colleagues and professional development, are exceptionally dedicated, and have actively participated in this evaluation, advocating for program enhancements.

Change

While core reading and writing curricula and strong performance on standardized assessments remain the same, the literacy program is in the process of transformation, with numerous initiatives in progress. Stakeholders widely perceive the program as being in a state of flux, viewing continual growth and change as both inevitable and necessary. There is substantial feedback on the decision-making and implementation processes, coupled with a strong desire for further improvements. A research-based approach to institutional change with continued emphasis on professional development would ease growing pains.

Alignment

Vertically, horizontally, across programs and approaches, the appetite for continued change can be summed up as a desire for improved alignment in general, and to the Science of Reading in particular. Parents, guardians, and faculty are eager for better communication and a more streamlined suite of programs and assessments that allow for deeper, more meaningful instruction. Comprehensive overhaul would add new elements while strategically removing ineffective components, creating a more focused and effective literacy curriculum.

Key Recommendations

Establish a formal Philosophy of Literacy to guide instruction and decisions district-wide
Provide professional learning to deepen understanding of the Science of Reading at all levels
Replace the Units of Study in Reading and Writing with high quality instructional materials
Align Tier 1 phonics instruction with Tier 2 and 3 intervention programs
Create a philosophy of assessment to guide selection and implementation of tools
Establish a team-oriented approach to educational change and professional development

CCSD is well-poised to implement these recommendations, which will enhance the literacy program, improve outcomes, align with research, and meet the expectations of stakeholders who are eager for positive change.

Theory & Practice

Background & Framework

Introduction

Chappaqua Central School District (CCSD), a high-performing, public school district located in Chappaqua, NY, sought a comprehensive review of their kindergarten through sixth grade (K-6) Literacy Program based on the scientific research and evidence-based practices in the field of reading instruction, commonly referred to as the "Science of Reading" (SoR). Theory & Practice, an education consulting firm, was retained to conduct a study designed to assess the quality and effectiveness of their literacy program and provide programmatic recommendations.

Theory & Practice provides bespoke solutions for education stakeholders by utilizing a holistic approach that acknowledges each client's specific context and goals. Our core values are unwavering integrity; a whole child-centered approach; commitment to science and research; appreciation for the wisdom honed through experience; and deep respect for the practical realities of teaching, administration, and parenting.

This project was led by two consultants. Eleni Siderias is the founder and CEO of Theory & Practice. She is an educational leader and consultant with a demonstrated history of strategic vision, collaborative innovation, curricular and instructional expertise, and leading school change. For over a decade she was a school leader at a NYC K-8 independent school pedagogically aligned with the SoR. She holds a B.S. from St. John's University in Childhood Education, as well as an M.A. in Gifted Education and an M. Ed. Leadership in Curriculum & Teaching from Teachers College, Columbia University[1]. After years of supporting families, mentoring educators, leading teams, and managing institutional change, Eleni established Theory & Practice in order to bring her unique problem-solving approach to a broader audience. Patty Kim is the Chief Academic Officer of Theory & Practice. She has a BS in Early Childhood and Elementary Education from NYU, an M.A. in the Reading Specialist program from Teachers College, Columbia University and an M.S.Ed. in School Leadership from the University of Pennsylvania. In addition to her 19 years of classroom experience in grades K-4, Patty has experience in school leadership, culturally responsive pedagogy, and best practices in literacy instruction. She is the chair of the notable book committee for the National Council for Social Studies.

This comprehensive report discusses:

- the strengths and opportunity areas of the CCSD literacy program in addressing components of a researched-based literacy program
- three key themes that emerged during the study which are unique to this context and moment and time
- 14 tailored recommendations organized into three categories

Central to these recommendations is the establishment of a formal Philosophy of Literacy,

[1] The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project (TCRWP) was one of many programs of study at TC for over four decades. The consultants were not part of TCRWP as students, nor have they had any affiliation with the program since then.

which would guide instruction and decision-making district-wide. This report also emphasizes the need for replacing current reading and writing curricula, aligning phonics instruction, improving assessment strategies, and fostering a collaborative approach to educational change.

This report comprehensively addresses the majority of the components in New York State's recently released K-3 Literacy Curriculum Review Guide as well as the additional components of a comprehensive literacy program as outlined in this guide. CCSD is well-positioned to implement the recommendations in this report through a multi-year plan that would potentially transform its literacy program to better serve its students and community.

Methodology

This study utilized two consultants to conduct a mixed methods analysis over 11 weeks in order to explore the efficacy of CCSD's existing literacy programs and implementation through the lens of the SoR. Key CCSD district administrators collaborated with the consultants to support the process, provide information and data, develop surveys, and advise on the district's program and professional development in the SoR thus far. The evaluation was designed based on the following research questions:

(1) How closely does CCSD's implementation of their current literacy programs across different schools and grade levels within the district align with the research-based practices advocated by the SoR, and what areas may require modification or enhancement?

(2) To what extent do the current literacy programs incorporate culturally relevant materials and approaches and accommodate different learning needs and profiles of students, and how does this impact student engagement and understanding?

(3) What are stakeholders' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the current literacy programs, and how might these perceptions influence learning outcomes?

Data Collection & Analysis

District Provided Documentation

Our understanding of CCSD's reading and writing programs was initially developed in partnership with CCSD's district administrators. Key informants provided detailed information about how CCSD's vision for literacy education has been designed, structured, integrated, implemented, and assessed. We were provided with the district's analysis of standardized assessments and access to the newly developed elementary school data dashboards. District leaders also provided background information on the district's usage of various literacy programs, how they were chosen and implemented, and the professional development that has been provided.

Additionally, the district team provided background on the Science of Reading Task Force. This is a group of teachers and specialists who volunteered to participate on a committee related to program review and development. We were provided information about the work the committee has done thus far, including the results of their recent "Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats" analysis of the current literacy program.

After reviewing the provided materials, Theory & Practice developed a preliminary framework from which to further refine our questions, data collection focus, and analysis. Given the district's generally high performance on standardized assessments, the number and variety of literacy programs in place, as well as the amount and type of ongoing professional development, we were eager to explore if and how CCSD's use of multiple literacy program components could be integrated to result in comprehensive, cohesive, consistent literacy program aligned with the SoR. We wanted to understand the faithfulness and efficacy of implementation, how various programs complement each other to meet every student's needs, and the extent to which they are culturally relevant and responsive. We were curious about the impact of specific professional development choices, the experience and perception of faculty[2] implementing this assemblage of programs, as well as how the district's approach to literacy education is perceived by parents, guardians, and students.

Observations and Immersion

Over the course of the study, the consultants met regularly with key district administrators to review the process, request and discuss information, and plan components of the study. In addition, we participated in two and a half days of on-site visits with the goal of deeply understanding the context and culture of CCSD, as well as identifying any patterns, themes, and trends that could provide insights into the educational practices in the district. We examined the levers that impact effective implementation–teachers' schedules, collaborative time for planning and data analysis, and teachers' confidence using professional development in their practice–and suggest these as future areas of study.

The consultants' first onsite visit was a half day dedicated to three sessions: 1) a meeting with elementary building leaders, 2) a meeting with middle school building leaders, and 3) leading an interactive session with the Science of Reading Task Force. The focus of all the sessions was on gaining a better understanding of the current literacy program and identifying leaders' perceptions of the strengths and opportunity areas through discussions about the SoR, national trends in literacy education, and perceptions of CCSD current program and next steps. A great deal of published information already exists about the SoR in general, including the specific programs utilized in the district and the changes being made in districts across the state and country. Thus, our focus was on gauging the participants' current knowledge and impressions of this information, as well as their appetite for any potential future change. The session with the SoR Task Force ended with an anonymous exit survey allowing for participants to provide final insights, feedback, and recommendations.

Shortly thereafter, the consultants returned to spend two full, immersive days observing in all three elementary schools as well as both middle schools, visiting over 45 classrooms, talking with faculty, and meeting with several building and district administrators. All classroom visits occurred during literacy instruction and provided an opportunity to analyze how multiple programs are utilized within typical literacy periods. Consultants kept notes in journals, paused to ask questions of key informants, talked with students, and spent time reflecting with district leaders. Unfortunately, due to scheduling conflicts, we were not able to observe in any second grade classes, which is a limitation in our observation data.

[2] For the purpose of this study and report, we use "faculty" when referring to the entire group of educators involved in the study, meaning all teachers, special education teachers, and specialists. When describing a particular group, such as special education teachers or specialists, we use those titles to highlight the distinction.

Survey Data

A culturally responsive, comprehensive evaluation of curriculum would not be complete without accounting for the perspectives of stakeholders, including faculty, parents and guardians, and students. Members of the CCSD district team collaborated with the consultants to develop three anonymous surveys: one for literacy teachers and specialists in grades K - 6, one for parents and guardians of students in grades K - 9, and one for students in grades 3 - 9.

The Staff Literacy Survey was designed to collect detailed feedback from educators on various aspects of the literacy program with an emphasis on the SoR. It asked about overall impressions of the program and the likelihood that a faculty-member would recommend the literacy program at CCSD to a colleague. It included questions targeting one's confidence in implementing research-based literacy instruction, identifying and addressing early reading challenges, and the adequacy of professional development and collaboration opportunities. The survey also assessed the effectiveness of the literacy curriculum in covering essential components, such as narrative, expository, and opinion writing, as well as editing, revision, handwriting, and typing skills. Additionally, it evaluated the program's ability to meet diverse student needs, support struggling students, and challenge advanced learners. Faculty were asked about the cultural responsiveness of the curriculum, the integration of literacy skills across subjects, and the effectiveness of current assessments. Open-ended questions solicited feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the literacy program and suggestions for improvement.

The survey for parents and guardians was designed to be completed once for each student, so a parent with three children in grades K - 9 would complete the survey three times, allowing for responses to reflect the unique experience of an individual child. The survey inquired about perceptions of the CCSD literacy program, including whether they would recommend the program to a friend, the strengths of the program, and areas for improvement. It asked about their child's reading and writing habits for pleasure, the frequency of various in-school literacy supports, as well as any support parents/guardians provide at home (themselves or via tutors). Open-ended questions aimed to gather feedback on strengths and weaknesses of the program, ways the district could better support parents and guardians, students' attitudes and experiences with reading and writing, and suggestions for improvement.

Both the staff and parent surveys included questions that would yield a Net Promoter Score (NPS). NPS is a metric used to gauge customer loyalty and satisfaction by asking respondents how likely they are to recommend a product or service to others, with scores ranging from -100 to 100 based on the proportion of promoters to detractors.

The student survey included questions about students' self-perception as readers and writers, their desire for additional help in reading and writing, and their enjoyment of ELA activities. It also inquired about the effectiveness of ELA homework, the support they receive in school, how ELA learning impacts their performance in other subjects like social studies and science, and if they read and write for pleasure outside of school.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are qualitative research methods used to gather in-depth insights into participants' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences through guided discussions. They do not aim to provide statistically representative data or measure population parameters like surveys do. Instead, focus groups are used to explore complex behaviors, understand motivations, and

generate ideas, without the need for confidence levels and margins of error, which are relevant to quantitative survey research. That being said, a large number of respondents volunteered to participate. All literacy educators in K - 6 were invited to participate on scheduled days and were also encouraged to contact the consultants to identify alternate times to meet. Again, due to scheduling constraints, several participants were not able to participate at the allocated time, but many contacted the consultants to schedule time outside of the initially provided sessions. In all, we conducted 11 focus group sessions with 32 participants, including classroom regular education teachers, special education teachers, and reading specialists. Thirty four percent of possible respondents participated, many expressing eagerness to share their perspectives and learn about the results of the overall program evaluation.

Curriculum Review Tools

Students and teachers spend a significant part of their day immersed in literacy instruction and therefore should be using the highest quality curriculum available. While there are many factors influencing student outcomes, only some are under control of the district, including curriculum. Thus, the selection and implementation of a high quality educational program is an exceptionally important and complex component of delivering literacy education aligned with the research base.

In a 2012 study, Chingos and Whitehurst found that most curricula had not been subjected to rigorous or methodological review. In 2015, EdReports became the first organization to undertake thorough reviews that helped decision makers understand what to look for when making curriculum decisions. Since then, EdReports reviews have become a guidepost for many districts as they seek to implement the highest quality curriculum for their students. While Theory & Practice does take EdReports reviews into account, they should not be the sole decision-making factor for curricular choices.

None of the literacy curricula currently in use in CCSD have received an EdReports review (EdReports, 2024). However, it should be noted that an earlier version of the Units of Study did not meet expectations of alignment, with an average score of 20 out of 58 in grades K-2 and 10 out of 42 in grades 3-5.

In the years since the EdReports rubric was published, a number of other tools for curriculum evaluation have become available, including:

- CAREI Rubric (Minnesota Department of Education, 2024)
- Culturally Responsive English Language Arts Scorecard (NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, 2003)
- The Reading League Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines (2023)
- Knowledge Matters Review Tool (Knowledge Matters Campaign, n.d.)

As far as we know, the aforementioned tools have not published any reviews of literacy curricula currently in use for Tier 1 instruction at CCSD. Most recently, the Reading League sought to review the revised Units of Study, but its publisher declined to respond to the invitation to submit materials.

While each of these tools aims to evaluate curriculum quality, they differ in how they structure their evaluation processes. The tools also vary in who they are primarily designed for, from policymakers to educators to community members. As part of our curriculum analysis process,

Theory & Practice utilized these tools to assess various components of the CCSD literacy program. Literacy is complex and nuanced, and comparing and contrasting the components of CCSD's literacy program to the various review tools provides a structured approach to applying the scientific research to program review. Throughout the report, we provide examples for each tool that stood out in our analysis and are relevant to the topic being reviewed. A brief overview of each of the tools is provided below.

- CAREI Rubric:
    - Developed for reviewing K-5 literacy curricula as required by MN state legislation
    - Evaluates curricula on components like phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and cultural responsiveness
    - Uses a two-step review process with qualifying questions and detailed rubric
- NYU Culturally Responsive ELA Curriculum Scorecard:
    - Focuses on evaluating cultural responsiveness and representation in curricula
    - Examines areas like diversity of characters, accurate portrayals, social justice themes
    - Designed to be used collaboratively by parents, educators, and community members
- The Reading League Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines:
    - Specifically looks for "red flags" or practices not aligned with science of reading
    - Evaluates word recognition, language comprehension, reading comprehension, writing, and assessment
    - Emphasizes identifying practices that could impede skilled reading development
- Knowledge Matters Review Tool:
    - Focuses specifically on knowledge-building in ELA curricula
    - Emphasizes eight dimensions of high-quality, content-rich ELA curricula
    - Aims to advance understanding of knowledge-building practices in literacy instruction

NYS K-3 Literacy Curriculum Review Guide

During the final phase of this research project, New York State released its much anticipated K-3 Literacy Curriculum Review Guide (New York State Education Department, 2024). The guide was developed as part of NYS Governor Kathy Hochul's 'Back to Basics' reading plan to ensure that students in every school district are immersed in high quality curricular materials and instructional approaches grounded in the Science of Reading. While this guide was not available to the public during the bulk of our evaluation process and, therefore, was not utilized for our review of the curricula utilized in CCSD, the research and philosophy underpinning this guide is very much aligned with the curriculum review tools and literacy framework we utilize. Thus, the criteria in this guide are addressed throughout this report and we have included some excerpts from the guide in the rubric examples provided.

In comparing our report to the NYS guide, it is important to note that the guide is designed specifically for K-3 curriculum review. The second page of the guide acknowledges that high-quality materials alone do not constitute a comprehensive literacy program and affirms that districts must review and analyze their literacy programs for:

1) High-Quality Curricula and Curricular Materials,
2) Instruction,
3) Assessment,

4) Professional Learning,
5) Family and Community Partnerships, and
6) Leadership (p. 6)

We agree with these priorities, and therefore our evaluation and recommendations naturally address each of these components to varying degrees. For example, this project did not focus on evaluating the instruction we observed during our visits, nor did we assess family and community partnerships. However, we do thoroughly discuss instructional design and strategies, as well as ways to improve connectedness and communication with families, as we agree they are key components of a literacy program. High quality curricular materials, assessment, professional learning, and leadership are core components of our evaluation and recommendations. The box below offers a brief summary of each component from the guide to further clarify the connections between our report and the guide.

High-Quality Curricula and Curricular Materials: Curriculum and materials must be culturally responsive, evidence-based, aligned to state standards, and designed to meet individual student needs.

Instruction: Instructional design and strategies should be student-centered, evidence-based, culturally responsive, and prioritize deep, meaningful learning through interdisciplinary and inquiry-based approaches.

Assessment: Ongoing, multi-tiered, and developmentally-appropriate assessments, including universal screeners and diagnostic tools, should be used to monitor progress, develop learning goals, and inform instructional decisions.

Professional Learning: Effective professional development should be ongoing, job-embedded, tiered based on expertise, and incorporate educator input in areas such as literacy research, standards alignment, and evidence-based practices.

Family and Community Partnerships: Strong connections with families and the community support whole-child development, create culturally responsive environments, and promote learning both in and out of the classroom.

Leadership: Strong district leadership is essential for implementing lasting change by setting vision, allocating resources, providing support, advocating for students, and creating environments conducive to student success.

This report can be utilized by the district as a tool for engaging in the curriculum review process as outlined in the NYS K-3 Literacy Curriculum Review Guide. The guidance for implementing the review tool advises:

> *When using this Guide or any other tool to examine district curriculum, the focus should be on the process, rather than on simply checking boxes. Focusing on the review process underscores the dynamic and iterative nature of educational improvement, where the goal is not simply to perform a perfunctory task but also to foster understanding and promote continuous growth to support the success of all students.*

> *District leaders should ensure that the review committee has adequate time, resources, and information to review the literacy curriculum. As appropriate, the review committee may produce recommendations for improving the literacy curriculum based on guidance and evidence-based practices. To strengthen recommendations, the curriculum review committee may also want to review disaggregated district data to identify specific areas for focus and growth.* (p. 9)

This aligns closely with our three categories for recommendations: developing a philosophy of literacy, implementing high-quality instructional materials, and leveraging the strengths of the district to create positive institutional change. Throughout the report we discourage the "checklist" approach to designing a literacy program and advise CCSD to engage in a district-wide commitment to developing a shared understanding of the SoR through professional development and the establishment of a Philosophy of Literacy. We also encourage the district to engage in a thorough process for reviewing curricula, researching alternatives, implementing pilots, and emphasizing a collaborative approach to change. The district already has a strong Science of Reading Task Force in place, which is well-poised to conduct this review process. However, we recommend inviting additional community members to join after the Theory & Practice report has been shared with faculty and initial professional development on the SoR has been provided. We anticipate that a greater number of faculty would be interested in participating in the NYS curriculum review process, especially if transparency and communication related to the process is prioritized. Once a committee is established, much of the information necessary for engaging in the review process is included in this evaluation report. Information included in this report can be utilized to support the process of identifying "evidence/notes" as well as "missing/unaligned" components of curricula in use in CCSD.

Key Themes & Stakeholder Perceptions

Evaluating how well the CCSD literacy program integrated key components of a research-based literacy program as well as the efficacy of the levers that impact implementation form the structure of this report and recommendations. However, before we discuss these components, we address three themes that emerged in this study (in this section) and also provide an overview of stakeholder perceptions (next section). The themes are impressions unique to this context and moment in time, and they bore out in important ways throughout the study. We will discuss each of these throughout the findings and recommendations. What follows here is a brief overview of each key theme.

Synergy

From our very first impressions through the end of our analysis, it has been impossible to ignore the synergy of CCSD. This is a dynamic, energized, dedicated team of education professionals. The pursuit of excellence is woven throughout the district and the desire to problem-solve, collaborate, and create was evident across buildings and classrooms. Faculty members repeatedly expressed that what they most value about CCSD is the positive experiences they have working with their colleagues. Faculty frequently described all the ways they work together to plan, innovate, and support each other. Their dedication was evident throughout our immersion in the community, including in their willingness to participate in the study and

advocate for program improvements. Overall, CCSD gives the strong impression of being a learning organization committed to excellence, continued growth, and renewal.

Change

Connected to that sense of synergy in CCSD was the immense energy of change. While much has stayed the same in terms of key reading and writing curricula and strong performance on standardized assessments, an ambitious number of initiatives are underway. Nearly everyone we spoke to described the district's K-6 literacy program as being in a state of flux, incomplete, or unsettled. However, change was not framed as a problem; rather, it was seen as inevitable and necessary. We repeatedly encountered educators who are inspired to continually improve their practice and efficacy and, overwhelmingly, they embrace change. That being said, there is clearly a sense of how and when change feels manageable versus unproductive. There was a tremendous amount of feedback from faculty about how decisions for change are made, communicated, and implemented. Despite this, there is still a very strong appetite for additional change. We found that the majority of faculty who participated in surveys and focus groups were eager to see the district further overhaul its literacy program. The motivation for this lies in their impressions of the efficacy of specific approaches, the difficulty of juggling multiple disparate curricula, and their desire to have a program that is more closely aligned with the SoR.

Alignment

This appetite for change can be summed up as a desire for better alignment. The majority of faculty, parents, and guardians who participated in the study are eager to see the district further overhaul its literacy program to better align with the SoR. The district needs an aligned stance on the best approaches to teaching children how to read and write, and an aligned vision for how to accomplish that. Many participants noted that while a lot has been added to the curriculum, almost nothing has been taken away. Faculty members are eager for greater vertical and horizontal alignment and a more streamlined suite of programs and assessments that allow for deeper, more meaningful instruction. Teachers feel that they lack a clear understanding of what is being taught in other grades, which makes it difficult to build on previous learning. There is also a wish for the schedule and structures to better align with the desired outcomes for their students.

Given these key themes, as CCSD plans to implement the recommendations provided in this report, we encourage leadership to build on the district's considerable strengths, especially the eager, synergistic team of professionals. Planning to leverage this momentum and expertise will help ensure that CCSD continues to improve the quality and efficacy of its literacy program.

Stakeholder Perceptions

The following provides an overview of perceptions gathered from surveys, interviews, and observations.

Faculty

Our study of faculty resulted in 36 survey responses, 32 focus group participants, and 45 classroom observations (occasionally with more than one teacher or specialist present in each

classroom at a time). Of the 94 total faculty in grades K - 6, we interacted with a significant percentage of the population and considered these results to be representative.

The faculty participants demonstrate a strong sense of care and passion for their students and their profession. They frequently expressed a deep commitment to student success, emphasizing the importance of providing high-quality literacy instruction and the desire to see their students thrive academically and personally. This dedication is evident in their willingness to collaborate with colleagues, seek out professional development opportunities, and advocate for improvements in the literacy program. Their discussions in focus groups reflected a genuine concern for the well-being and progress of their students, highlighting their role not just as educators, but as mentors and supporters in their students' lives.

Faculty perceptions of the district in general are mixed. Members expressed very positive feelings about working with their colleagues, emphasizing the benefits of collaboration and peer support. They appreciate the opportunity to share ideas, strategies, and resources with like-minded peers, which enhances their teaching practices and fosters a sense of community. This collaborative environment helps them feel more supported and less isolated, contributing to their professional growth and overall job satisfaction. Faculty value the wonderful environment created by the eagerness of their students. They noted that many students are enthusiastic and motivated, showing a genuine interest in learning and participating actively in class. However, they also note that some students struggle with engagement, and teachers expressed a desire for more strategies and resources to help bolster student engagement and address diverse needs effectively. Similarly, teachers were grateful for the involvement and concern of parents and guardians in the district, noting that the home-to-school connection is highly valued by all parties. Participants frequently expressed deep appreciation for the district's efforts to provide professional development and resources, which they generally find very helpful. However, there are concerns about the overall support and communication from the district administration. Teachers feel that there is a lack of consistency and alignment in various programs and initiatives, leading to confusion and inefficiencies. Additionally, some faculty members express frustration with the district's decision-making processes, feeling that their input is not consistently considered or valued. There is also a desire for more autonomy and flexibility in their teaching methods to better meet the needs of their students. Overall, while there are positive aspects, faculty believe there is room for improvement in terms of support, communication, and decision-making within the district.

The faculty in the district expressed mixed feelings about the current literacy program. They appreciate the support, resources, and professional development provided, particularly the implementation of research-based phonics programs like Phonics First, which have positively impacted students' decoding skills. Components of the Teachers College Readers and Writers Workshop model, including access to rich texts and time spent reading, as well as the integration of whole-class novels, are also valued aspects of the program. However, there are significant concerns about the alignment and integration of various literacy programs, particularly the Units of Study, which many feel do not adequately support students' needs. Most believe that the Units need to be supplemented or modified to better align with the SoR and provide more comprehensive, systematic reading instruction tailored to students' needs. Beyond phonics, faculty believe the program does not place enough emphasis on other foundational reading skills like fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies. Therefore,

teachers supplement the program with additional resources and instruction to fill gaps in foundational skills. Teachers also find the pacing of the Units of Study to be rushed, leaving little time for in-depth instruction, practice, and mastery of skills. Many feel the curriculum tries to cover too much content in a limited amount of time, leading to a superficial treatment of important skills and concepts. Teachers report feeling upset, fearful, and frustrated by pressure from leadership to closely adhere to the Units of Study, especially when they question its efficacy. They believe there is a need for more explicit instruction in vocabulary, grammar, and spelling, as well as better early intervention for struggling readers. Given the significant modifications and supplementation required to make the Units of Study effective, many teachers and specialists believe it may be time to move to a different approach.

Teachers also highlight a hasty roll out of new programs and a lack of sufficient professional development in the newest programs that have been implemented. They also feel they need more time for planning as well as collaboration opportunities. Structural issues such as the middle school schedule and the pulling students out of classes for reading support and special education services are seen as barriers to effective literacy instruction. Teachers feel overwhelmed by the number of assessments and the pressure to adhere to multiple programs, which sometimes leads to a fragmented approach. There is a strong desire for more autonomy, better vertical alignment, and a balanced curriculum that allows for deeper, more meaningful instruction. Teachers also express a need for more data-driven instruction and better differentiation. They feel that the current model does not adequately address the diverse needs of students, particularly those who require more intensive support.

The question “How likely are you to recommend the current Chappaqua literacy program to a teacher in another district?” resulted in a Net Promoter Score (NPS) of -36 among, with only 6 of the 36 respondents saying they would promote the program to other teachers. This score is quite low and highlights the need for improvements. More than one participant said they would not want to send their own child to the district as the literacy program is currently constructed.

Parent Perceptions

Our knowledge of parents’, guardians’, and students’ perceptions of the program are limited to survey data. Survey data is a valuable tool, allowing for the collection of diverse and comprehensive feedback on various aspects of the educational experience, which can highlight both strengths and areas needing improvement. However, measuring perceptions solely through surveys has several possible limitations, including subjectivity, response biases, potential misinterpretation due to question design, brevity of responses, and issues with response rates. For example, our 322 parent and guardian respondents were not a random sampling of the population and there is a strong probability of self-selection bias. The nature of voluntary participation means that individuals with strong opinions, whether positive or negative, are more likely to respond, leading to potentially skewed results that should be interpreted cautiously. Thus, the findings from parent/guardian survey data must be compared with other data points to provide for a more comprehensive understanding. Future opportunities to further probe parents’ and guardians’ perceptions should include other data collection methods.

Based on the survey responses, parents' and guardians' perceptions of the current literacy program in the district are mixed, but largely negative. Many parents express dissatisfaction with the lack of effective support for struggling readers and writers, particularly those with dyslexia. There are frequent calls for more direct phonics instruction, better communication from teachers about their child's progress, and more individualized support. Some parents also criticize the use of "debunked literacy programs" and advocate for evidence-based methods. While a few parents appreciate the availability of books and the recent emphasis on phonics, the overall sentiment is that the program does not adequately challenge advanced readers, support struggling readers, or provide sufficient development of writing skills.

Many respondents report some form of support provided for their child on a regular basis outside of school. Twenty-one percent of respondents said their child receives daily or weekly tutoring in reading from a private tutor, tutoring center, or other support service. Perhaps more interesting, 44% report a family member providing daily support in reading, with another 24% providing this weekly. An additional 16% report their child receiving daily or weekly support from a peer or sibling. Similarly in writing, 54% of respondents said an adult provides daily or weekly support for their child, with another 14% relying on daily or weekly support from a peer or sibling. In writing, only about 13% of respondents said their child receives weekly tutoring services. These responses track for other subjects as well, with 52% of respondents reporting adults providing daily or weekly support at home and 17% receiving weekly tutoring.

The question "How likely are you to recommend the CCSD literacy programming to a friend who is considering moving into the district?" resulted in a Net Promoter Score (NPS) of -60.83, indicating a low level of satisfaction among respondents, with significantly more detractors than promoters. This score suggests substantial dissatisfaction with the literacy program and highlights the need for improvements.

Again, these results should be viewed cautiously and through the lens of voluntary selection bias. That being said, of those who chose to respond, the majority are not highly satisfied with the program. Thus, while it is very possible that there is extremity bias at play, the majority of respondents were detractors- respondents who rated the program at a six or lower. There were only 55 passive respondents, giving a rating of seven or eight, and only 34 total promoters rating the program at a nine or ten. Also, notably, the comments of the parent/guardian survey strongly aligned with themes revealed in the staff survey, focus groups, and observations. Therefore, although the survey respondents may disproportionately represent stakeholders dissatisfied with the literacy program, their perspectives align with the views expressed by other informants, lending credibility to the findings despite the potential for self-selection bias.

Student Perceptions

While our data on student perceptions is limited to surveys, the surveys were administered in school and we received 1,515 responses from the total population of 1,912 students in grades 3

- 9. This represents more than 79% of the population in these grades, resulting in a confidence level of 99%. It is worth noting that one teacher reported that her students misunderstood some questions and were able to retake the survey, meaning a handful of students may have taken it more than once. Given the volume of students who completed the survey this likely has very little impact on the overall results but, again, survey results should be viewed within the limitations of the data they provide. While future opportunities to further probe students' perceptions should include other data collection methods, these responses may be considered representative of the population.

Of the survey respondents, a majority of students feel confident in their reading and writing abilities, with 78% and 73% respectively agreeing or strongly agreeing that they are good readers and writers. Moreover, over half of the students believe that what they learn in ELA helps them in other subjects, indicating a positive cross-disciplinary impact. Despite students' confidence in their abilities, 30% of students wish they had more help with reading and writing in school and the same number of students feel they are unable to do their ELA homework independently. Further inquiry should be developed to better understand the challenges students feel they face at school and at home. Similarly, it would be worthwhile to probe why less than half of the students (47% for reading and 42% for writing) enjoy their ELA activities. It is worth noting that one teacher reported that some students perceived this question as referring to ELA test prep activities, and not the coursework during the rest of the year, which is an interesting finding in and of itself.

Recommendation 1: Establish a Strong Philosophy of Literacy Education

Recommendations

- **Establish a districtwide philosophy of literacy education with a clear stance on best practices in literacy instruction that is rooted in the Science of Reading and agnostic of any published curriculum**
- **Ensure the philosophy includes explicit guidance on assessment–both formative and summative–in order to guide selection and implementation of assessment**
- **Provide ongoing professional development to deepen understanding of the Science of Reading at all levels from district leadership to specialists and teachers**
- **Utilize guidance from long-standing experts in the Science of Reading to support professional development and decision making**

Need for a Shared Vision

Beginning with the end in mind–a highly effective K-6 literacy program aligned with the SoR where all students experience success–the district must develop a comprehensive philosophy about how reading and writing is taught, agnostic of any specific curriculum, and ensure all stakeholders are educated and aligned.

Throughout the evaluation, Theory & Practice observed a consistent emphasis on the Science of Reading from faculty, administration, and caregivers within the district. There was a profound desire to improve instructional practices in the pursuit of the best possible outcomes for all students, and tremendous efforts are being made by administrators, parents, and especially teachers. However, the consultants did not observe a common, deep understanding among various stakeholders of what the SoR should look like in action in CCSD schools. This has resulted in confusion and a perceived lack of direction in the district's literacy programming.

While the administration expressed a strong commitment to the principles of the SoR, there is a disconnect in translating this commitment into a cohesive and well-implemented literacy curriculum and instructional approach that is manageable for teachers and transparent for caregivers. The evaluation revealed varying interpretations and applications of the SoR among different stakeholder groups, leading to inconsistencies in classroom practices and a lack of alignment with the established research and evidence-based practices in the field of reading instruction.

This is most evident in the patchwork of combined materials utilized in an attempt to address all components of literacy in the research base. Generally, participants described “adding on” Phonics First and Benchmark to “cover” phonics, piloting Heggerty because the district was “missing” phonemic awareness, using Patterns of Power to supplement grammar, working with professional development consultants to improve vocabulary instruction, and so on. Perhaps most glaring is the fact that the longstanding core curriculum–the Units of Study, authored by Lucy Calkins and published by Heinemann (2023)--significantly lacks instructional guidance across all of these areas. This is not a fact lost on CCSD teachers, who additionally supplement—on top of all of these district sanctioned materials–to ensure the curriculum is well-rounded and their students’ needs are met.

Repeatedly, district administrators shared their rationale that the Units of Study in Reading and Writing works for their district, as evidenced by their impressive NYSED ELA scores. We frequently heard about how deeply invested the district is in the Units of Study (in time as well as resources), how the district has always made the Units of Study curriculum “their own,” that the district has always aligned with the research on literacy, and that the recent revisions to the Units of Study had made significant improvements to the curriculum. We also learned that much of the recent professional development related to the SoR has been provided by consultants formerly very closely aligned with the Units of Study approach. We were eager to identify systematic ways that CCSD had adapted the Units of Study and integrated an approach to literacy instruction that reflects the scientific research and evidence-based practices.

Our strong impression of CCSD’s approach to literacy instruction is that it is deeply grounded in the specific curricular approaches outlined in the Units of Study, and therefore not a curriculum-agnostic philosophy of literacy instruction, and not particularly compatible with the scientific research and evidence-based practices of the SoR. While the revised Units of Study have added components that better emphasize direct phonics instruction, overwhelmingly the evidence, including from the CCSD faculty implementing the curriculum, is that it is just simply not compatible. While the Reader's Workshop doesn’t claim to deliver systematic phonics instruction, and recommends using an outside program (which CCSD is doing), the Units of Study does integrate some phonics which creates a significant alignment challenge. Additionally, teachers found the pacing rushed and the curriculum overloaded, making it difficult

to achieve in-depth mastery of skills. Faculty also identified issues with lack of differentiation, alignment between grade levels, and an overreliance on guided reading, resulting in a disconnect from SoR principles. Moreover, the need for multiple other instructional materials and supplementation is overly complicated and does not leave time for deep, meaningful instruction. Similarly, the current approach lacks a coherent vision for assessment, resulting in an inconsistent approach to data usage.

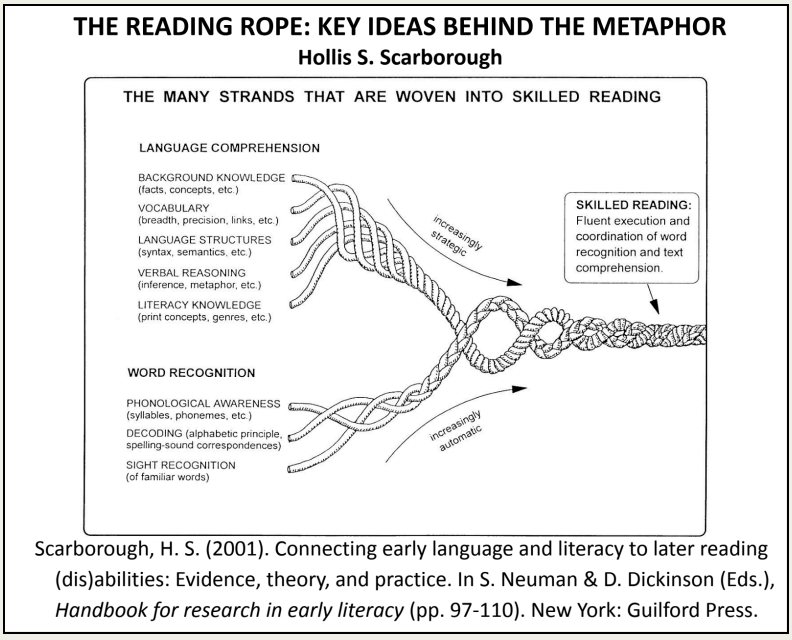
For the program to continue to evolve, CCSD needs a more unified understanding and consistent implementation of the SoR principles across the district. As a start, the district is encouraged to develop deeper expertise within the administrative team, with an emphasis on training and professional development from experts with long-standing commitment to the SoR. While the administration is very well-educated and generally well-informed on trends in research-based literacy education, the SoR is an evolving evidence base built upon decades of rigorous empirical research across multiple disciplines, including education, psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience. Guidance and professional development from experts who have dedicated their careers to the SoR would ensure district leaders are better-poised to design programming and support teachers in implementing strategies that have been proven to enhance reading outcomes for diverse student populations.

Strong Frameworks for Understanding Reading and Writing

As a first step in developing a deeper understanding of the SoR, Theory & Practice recommends that district and building leaders incorporate the following models to their Philosophy of Literacy. These comprehensively address literacy and are well-suited to inform instructional decisions.

- The Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001) - Figure 1, below
- The Writing Rope (Sedita, 2019) - Figure 2
- The Active View of Reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2021) - Figure 3

Figure 1 -The Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001):



Scarborough, H. S. (2001). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. In S. Neuman & D. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook for research in early literacy* (pp. 97-110). New York: Guilford Press.

Figure 2 - The Writing Rope (Sedita, 2019):

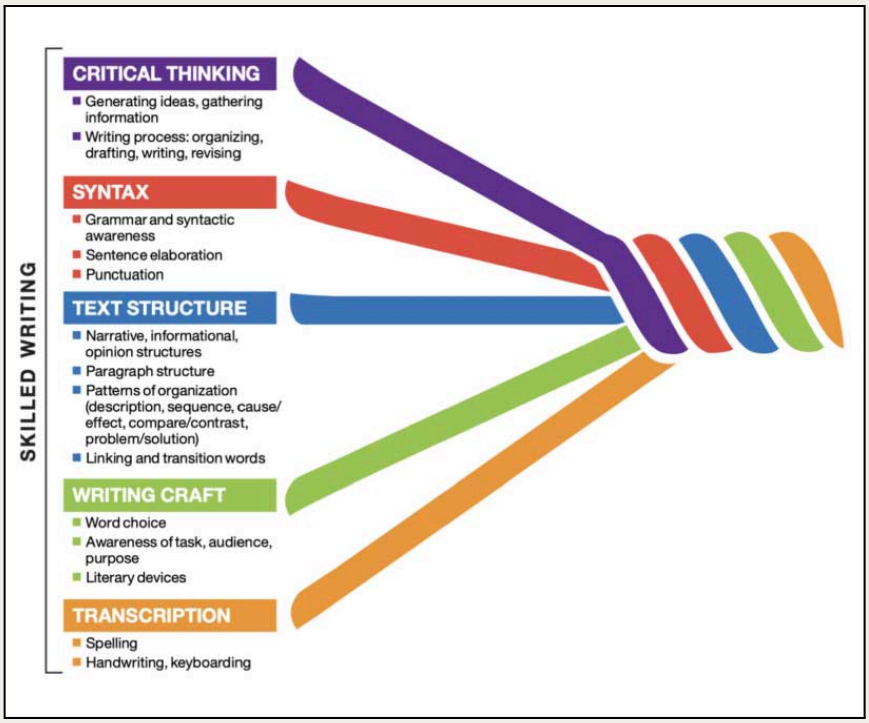
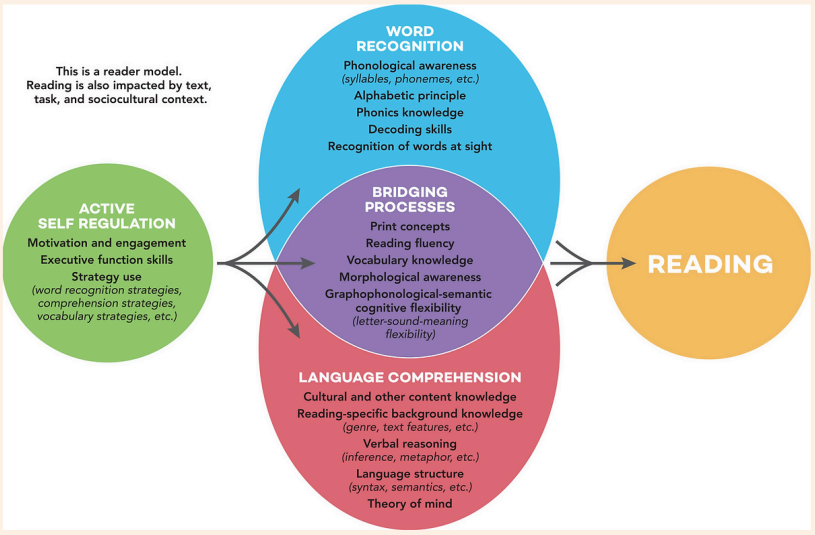


Figure 3 - The Active View of Reading (Duke & Cartwright, 2021):



Note: Several wordings in this model are adapted from Scarborough (2001)

When used in concert, these theoretical literacy models will empower district leaders to make sound decisions that are more informed by reading research. Using these models would incorporate key components of literacy, including:

Sociocultural Context

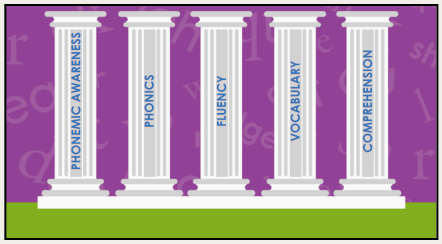
A large body of cognitive research has found that sociocultural context has a direct impact

on student learning. Diverse representation in texts, teachers, and school leaders can all contribute to improved outcomes for all students, but particularly for minoritized students. The work of Zaretta Hammond (2015), Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995; 2014), and Dr. Muhammed Khalifa (2018) all provide helpful guidance on culturally responsive pedagogy, curriculum, and school leadership. CCSD is encouraged to create structures for equitable opportunities for culturally responsive practices. While the district has taken steps to add more diverse texts to the curriculum, the texts exist as an add-on rather than an integral part of the curriculum. It is also important to note that diversifying texts is only one part of cultural responsiveness. For instance, partnership with families is a key component of culturally responsive educational leadership. A disconnect between the district and caregivers was a theme that emerged in the surveys, with some survey respondents expressing their lack of confidence that or understanding if their child is reading or writing according to expectations.

Writing
Joan Sedita's Writing Rope (2019) uses a design similar to Scarborough's Reading Rope because like reading, writing is a complex task that comprises multiple interwoven skills, all of which require explicit instruction. From handwriting skills to sentence elaboration, to text structures, the writing rope offers a comprehensive, research-based framework for effective writing instruction.

Background Knowledge
Background knowledge plays a crucial role in both the Active View of Reading and Scarborough's Reading Rope, contributing significantly to a reader's ability to comprehend and engage with text effectively. In order for teachers to equitably leverage background knowledge for and within literacy instruction, the background knowledge must be built by the class together.

The Five Pillars of Reading
During our immersion in the district, when discussing the components of a research-based literacy program, we often heard this complex and vast research base reduced to the components of The Five Pillars of Reading. While these research-based principles are useful for understanding the SoR, and we saw district materials that included other models, we are providing the guidance below to support the district's development of a Philosophy of Literacy.



(Really Great Reading, n.d.)

The National Reading Panel, convened by Congress in 1997, designed the five pillars of reading as a framework for research-based reading instruction as part of, "Teaching Children to Read," published in 2000. The committee who authored this framework did not develop a visual to complement the theory. In the years since its development, a visual with five equal pillars is often associated with the framework and the five pillars have been used as a tool for curricular

design and selection. While each pillar continues to be supported by a large research base, the five pillars were not designed for district-level decision making, including curricular design and selection. This is not the intended purpose of this model. We encourage the district to heed these key considerations when utilizing the five pillars of reading:

1. While the common infographic represents the five pillars as carrying equal weight in literacy instruction, they do not each require the same amount of instructional time or resources. For example, research indicates that phonemic awareness instruction is most effective in grades K-2, whereas students and teachers will work on comprehension throughout grades K-8.

2. In this model, comprehension is a pillar of instruction, while in other models comprehension is the output of a variety of interconnected skills. Within its report, the panel described comprehension as "the essence of reading." Vocabulary is a subsection of comprehension within the report, but a separate pillar in the visual, "Vocabulary is one of the most important areas within comprehension and should not be neglected" (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000, p. 236). The role of prior knowledge as a key factor in comprehension is also discussed.

3. The imagery of pillars is not meant to convey that each element of instruction can or should be taught in isolation. Cognitively, reading is an incredibly complex task. All of the pillars work interactively when students read.

4. The pillars were not designed to include guidance on writing instruction. While all of the pillars support skilled writing, additional instruction specific to writing skills, such as syntax, grammar, and genre structures, are also necessary components of a high quality instructional plan for literacy.

Recommendation 2: Implement High Quality Instructional Materials and Assessments

Recommendations

- **Replace the Units of Study in Reading and choose alternative(s) based on the district's philosophy of literacy and commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy**
- **Reconsider the use of two different phonics programs and pause any further integration of Heggerty until the above is resolved**
- **Align Tier 1 phonics with Tier 2 & 3 intervention programs to better support students who are below benchmark**
- **Replace the Units of Study in Writing with an approach that emphasizes teaching explicit skills, begins at the sentence level, and prioritizes quality over quantity**
- **Utilize/develop a scope and sequence for grammar/mechanics to ensure greater consistency, efficiency, and equity**
- **Review existing assessment protocols in order refine and consolidate where possible**
- **Provide ongoing professional development on the structure, norms, purpose, and features of NWEA Map assessment to improve utility across all levels in the district**

- **Implement structured opportunities for faculty to analyze assessment data, both independently and collaboratively, to enhance data-driven instructional practices and decision-making processes**

Summary of Current Instructional Materials

This section of the report reviews the district's current instructional materials through the lens of the components of a research-based literacy program. Since the district uses several programs and there is significant overlap, we do not review each program separately. Instead, we discuss each component of literacy and evaluate how well the districts' usage of various programs address these aspects of literacy education. The structure of this section relies heavily on the structure of the CAREI rubric, because this tool provides a very comprehensive framework for components of a research-based literacy program.

Currently the district utilizes several literacy programs, including:

- Reading Units of Study (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2023) in K -6
- Writing Units of Study (Calkins, Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2023) in K - 6
- Phonics First (Brainspring Educator Academy, 2022) in in K - 2
- Benchmark Phonics Workshop (Benchmark Education Company, 2021) in 3 - 5
- Handwriting Without Tears (Learning Without Tears, 2023) K - 2

The district has also been piloting the Heggerty Phonemic Awareness Program (Heggerty, 2022) in some grades.

For Tier 2 and 3 services, the district utilizes the Wilson Fundations, Just Words, and Reading System programs (Wilson Language Training Corporation, 2024). Service providers also use resources from a number of other programs, determined by the needs of each student.

Research on Instructional Materials

While there are a number of factors that impact student achievement, a large body of research indicates that curricular choices matter. "Research suggests that, in the aggregate and for specific instructional programs, changing from "business-as-usual" to a high-quality curriculum, or from a low-quality to a high-quality curriculum, can boost student achievement" (Chiefs for Change, 2017). Compared to other levers such as class size and MTSS, curriculum reform is a low-cost shift that potentially yields a high return on investment. (Goodman, 2019; Hjelm, 2019).

When teachers know that their curriculum is lacking in some way, they source supplementary materials–either by searching for them online or creating them themselves. Teachers know their students best, so the issue is not the quality of teacher-made materials. The issue is that this practice diminishes horizontal alignment and leads to students in different classes having inequitable experiences. It has also become common practice to download materials from sources that may not necessarily be high-quality, such as Teachers Pay Teachers. Research has found that the materials on such websites are market-driven rather than research driven (Aguilar, Silver, & Polikoff, 2022). A study on teacher motivation in using online resources found that teachers are attempting to address curriculum gaps and time pressures (Aguilar, Silver, & Polikoff, 2022). But online resources do not necessarily address curriculum gaps in a research-aligned way. On the issue of time, the creation or sourcing of supplementary materials takes valuable time that teachers could be spending on collaboration and planning. Teacher

customization will always have a place in classrooms, but ideally, that customization should be built off of a high-quality instructional program that teaches literacy in a research-supported way.

The temptation to make curricular changes in ELA has been strong in the era of the Science of Reading movement, but the leadership team of CCSD has served its students and teachers well by not rushing to make hasty decisions. While there is not yet student data from the districts that have rushed to implement new curricula over the past couple of years, any school change should only take place after thorough review. Rushed changes will likely have a negative impact on student outcomes. The time that the CCSD administration and teachers have spent building background knowledge in research-based literacy practices will enable them to make well-informed decisions.

There does not seem to be a thorough understanding of the alternatives to the Units of Study and we heard quite a few misconceptions about other available core curricula that have received excellent reviews from EdReports and other curriculum review tools. We recommend that this review process be run by an outside firm that does not have an affiliation with any particular curricula or publisher, and that has a history of commitment to the SoR. This would ensure that district leadership has the support necessary for a productive decision-making process.

General Research-Based Components

An effective literacy program should encompass a range of essential components including and beyond those directly tied to aspects of literacy development. These include accessible student materials, a curriculum that supports multiple means of expression and engagement, and embedded high-impact instructional routines. It should provide clear guidance for explicit, systematic instruction and offer resources to support diverse learners, including those with dialectical variations, multilingual learners, and students with reading difficulties or advanced skills. Well-organized materials that facilitate consistent implementation through ease of use are also vital, as is a research-based approach to assessment that facilitates data-driven decision making.

Continuous, integrated professional development is also crucial to support teachers of varying backgrounds and experience levels and is typically considered a component to a research-based literacy program. While we agree, for the purposes of clarity in this report, professional development is not addressed in this section. It is, instead, discussed in detail in Recommendation 3: Leverage Strengths for Change.

Program Design

The design of the literacy program in CCSD is complicated. Teachers are required to toggle between multiple curricula, teacher guides, student materials, scopes, and sequences. While the district provided some guidance on modifications and integration between the various materials, the result is that there are a large number of materials for faculty to review and/or supplement. A stronger core curriculum may significantly resolve these complications.

Direct Instruction/Gradual Release of Responsibility

The district should provide ongoing professional development on instructional approaches and

strategies aligned with the SoR. Any research-aligned core curricula will likely include emphasis in this area, but the adoption of a new curriculum is not necessary to begin strengthening research-based approaches to instruction.

A key component of the SoR is direct instruction that uses a gradual release of responsibility model (Fisher & Frey, 2008). Cognitive research has shown that direct instruction is an equitable and effective instructional approach. While it is particularly effective for students with learning challenges, it is effective for all learners–and not just for phonics.

The report of the National Reading Panel (2000) cited an important study by Barak Rosenshine (1987) that outlined a set of steps for explicit instruction that has been cited in thousands of other papers. These findings were made by observing highly effective teachers.

1. Review previous, requisite learning - New learning should build upon prior knowledge that has been delivered in the classroom. If the lesson objective includes writing an opinion paragraph on whether zoos are good for humans and animals, students must have learned background knowledge about zoos together in a previous lesson.
2. Present new material in small steps
3. Provide “considerable” opportunities for students to practice the small steps
4. Check for student understanding
5. Design tasks that obtain responses from all students (rather than only the ones who raise their hands)
6. Provide immediate, corrective feedback
7. Repeat steps 3-6 until students achieve mastery of the skill - It is important to note that some areas of literacy take students months if not years to gain proficiency. Many adults would not claim to have mastery of opinion writing or making inferences. While a science teacher can reasonably expect 80% of students to master the differences between igneous and sedimentary rocks within a given unit, many aspects of literacy instruction require far more time and practice. Mastery cannot always be achieved within a unit, but there should be clear, timebound, reasonable goalposts for what students should be able to do.

The approach to literacy instruction in CCSD is heavily structured around the Units of Study, which maintains a workshop model with mini-lessons followed by independent application. While the newer edition includes more emphasis on systematic instruction of foundational skills, in general the workshop approach differs from the more direct, systematic instruction advocated by proponents of the SoR. The emphasis on coaching during independent work may not provide the level of explicit, systematic instruction needed for effective word attack strategies.

Throughout our classroom observations across 45 classrooms, Theory & Practice encountered small group work in most classrooms and direct instruction in a small number of classrooms. A criticism of direct instruction that came up from district leaders several times throughout our evaluation is that it is joyless and prevents students from loving reading and writing. Conversely, the majority of focus group participants mentioned the need for direct instruction and the

inefficacy of small groups, with many teachers acknowledging that they prefer the whole group instructional approach of the recently adopted phonics programs.

Phonics First is grounded in explicit instruction. New phonics skills are taught explicitly, with clear explanations and demonstrations. This includes discussing sounds, patterns, and any irregularities, and providing scaffolded instruction to support student learning. Lessons are taught in a systematic scope and sequence; each lesson builds upon the instruction and practice from previous lessons.

In classrooms where the whole class was receiving direct instruction, it was of a high quality and nearly every student appeared to be engaged. In contrast, the workshop model involves a significant amount of time spent in small groups or partnerships. While teachers make significant efforts to prepare multiple activities each day, and they are actively working with some students the entire time, we found engagement levels for students who were not in the teacher-led group to be lower. Students who were not in teacher-led groups were also less likely to be engaged in practice that was directly connected to the literacy objectives for the day. Again, despite teachers' significant efforts to plan carefully and group students well, focus group participants emphasized that small group work is often fragmented and ineffective. Students can and should work collaboratively in groups, but learning is maximized when the groups are working on a task that is directly related to the explicit instruction.

In the Gradual Release of Responsibility model, the structure of a lesson is consistent and predictable. When students have a reliable lesson structure, they have more of their cognitive load available for learning and improving their skills (Sweller, et al., 2011). Below is an overview of the Gradual Release of Responsibility model. The example section provides a description of high-quality direct instruction that we observed in a CCSD Kindergarten classroom.

Gradual Release of Responsibility

1. Modeling - "I do it" (from the teacher's point of view)
    - The teacher models the specific skill
2. Guided instruction - "We do it together"
    - With the teacher as the guide, the class applies the same skill together. The teacher thinks aloud as they are guiding the class through the task.
3. Collaboration - "You do it together"
    - Students work in groups to apply the same skill to a new task; teachers have the opportunity to provide immediate feedback.
4. Independent work - "You do it alone"
    - After multiple opportunities to practice in a group, each student applies the skill to a similar but novel task.

Instructional Routines

Instructional routines are well utilized within CCSD. All of the curricula in place emphasize instructional routines. For example, while they are lacking in other aspects of the SoR, Units of Study follows a consistent workshop model structure, with components like mini-lessons, independent work time, and sharing sessions. Regular annotation routines are also established for close reading of texts and students use specific norms and structures for collaborative discussions about texts and writing. While instructional routines in the Units of Study are fairly

consistent, many are not aligned with the SoR. Faculty have worked very hard to implement explicit routines for group work.

Similarly, the Units of Study promote frequent participation from students, but often they are not universal methods constructed to require frequent participation from students such as choral responses, response cards, and hand signals. This can result in inequitable participation, where students who are more verbal or those who have more background knowledge have access to more participation and feedback. Again, faculty have implemented many of these types of routines but it is difficult to gauge usage across classrooms and buildings.

Routines in Phonics First appear to be slightly more explicit. A key routine in Phonics First is the Three-Part Drill, which includes 1) Visual Drill: Flashing sound cards to students who then orally provide the sound, 2) Auditory Drill: Students spell the sounds they hear, connecting phonemes to graphemes, and 3) Tactile/Kinesthetic Drill: Using multisensory techniques like writing in sand to reinforce learning. In addition, regular review is emphasized to ensure retention and mastery of phonics skills by utilizing activities. Methods that require frequent participation are embedded into the curriculum, ensuring more equitable participation.

Differentiation

In choosing a different core curriculum, considerations for the inclusion of an effective, manageable approach to differentiation should be considered. While many faculty are committed to differentiation and there are opportunities to differentiate within the current approach to literacy, we did not identify a consistent approach to differentiation in the district.

While the Units of Study curriculum does provide guidance on differentiating instruction and providing scaffolds for diverse learners, it is minimal. Many faculty described the desire to differentiate more, but it did not appear as though they would rely on the Units curriculum guide for support with decisions about differentiation.

Examples

Example of High-Quality Direct Literacy Instruction in a CCSD Classroom - Kindergarten

Skill: The heart word* “want”

**Heart words are irregularly spelled high-frequency words. Caregivers of older children may be more familiar with the term ”sight words”. “Heart words” indicates that even in irregularly spelled words, only a part of the word needs to be learned by heart. In the word “want,” only the “a” makes an irregular sound. Shifting from sight words to heart words enables students to rely less on visual memory and more on the print in front of them. This is a more research-aligned approach to instruction than the teaching of sight words.*

The teacher announced that the class was going to learn a new heart word. The class knew what to do because they likely use the same sequence of activities each time they learn a new heart word. The teacher did not need to instruct on anything other than the new word. Students independently retrieved the correct set of materials, which included a notebook, a red crayon, a bumpy board, and a pencil. After they watched and listened to their teacher instruct on the orthographic mapping of the new word, they were ready to try it on their own. Students knew to start with the bumpy board and crayon and then switch to the pencil. Each student used multisensory Orton-Gillingham-based activities to practice the word multiple times, both in reading and writing.

Once the teacher prompted the students to begin their practice, she did not need to provide a lot of verbal cues because the students already knew what to do. This allowed for a relaxed and joyful atmosphere in which students could work at their own pace. Students were able to happily chat with their tablemates as they completed the task at hand.

GENERAL RESEARCH-BASED COMPONENTS

CAREI Rubric (Minnesota Department of Education, 2024)

G11 High-impact instructional routines are embedded in the resource and support student learning:
"A) Clear language is provided for teachers around how to implement instructional routines
B) A rationale is provided as to why the routines are effective
C) New instructional routines are introduced before being used with new content"

G12 Clear Evidence of Explicit Instruction:
"A) Lesson design includes:
1. *lesson opening (get students' attention, state lesson target, discuss relevance of target skill, and review previous content)*
2. *examples for teacher introduction and modeling (I do)*
3. *items that could be used for guided practice (we do)*
4. *items that could be used for independent practice (you do)*
5. *lesson closing*

B) Lesson is constructed to require frequent participation from students (e.g., choral response, response card, hand signal)
C) Guidance is provided for giving affirming and corrective feedback"

Knowledge Matters Review Tool (Knowledge Matters Campaign, n.d.)

1: Laser-like focus on what matters most for literacy
Curriculum is designed to seamlessly integrate practices from ELA standards in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, as well as facility with language. The standards themselves are not the goal of daily instruction; instead, the goal of instruction is to develop students' ability to understand texts they encounter and to express that understanding in multiple ways. Standards mastery is the end result of, not the organizing force for, reading instruction.

6: A volume of writing to build knowledge:
Curriculum includes explicit instruction in the fundamentals of writing, including sentence construction and the planning, drafting, and writing of paragraphs and essays, as well as grammar and usage instruction in the context of students' writing. This includes explicit instruction on how to convey knowledge through specific text genres and features.

8: Ease of enacting curriculum:
Curriculum is purposeful in its design, including many regular, predictable instructional routines that teachers and students can rely on from the moment the new program is enacted.

Teacher-facing materials are clear and concrete about what program elements are essential for the core instruction and which are "nice to have" additional dimensions. This clarity extends to communicating high-level program dimensions for caregivers and community stakeholders.

Curriculum encourages professional learning that deals concretely with how the materials can be effectively

implemented and supports ongoing and systematic work in teacher study groups and professional learning communities. (This is in contrast with one- or two-day "unpack the boxes and organize the materials" training sessions.) Professional learning should offer aligned sessions for teachers, coaches, and administrators.
NYS K-3 Literacy Curriculum Review Guide (New York State Education Department, 2024) *The curriculum reflects evidence-based, interdisciplinary scientific research on P-12 literacy development, known as the Science of Reading.* *• The reading process is broken down into skills that are introduced systematically and consistently in a logical sequence.* *• Lessons are organized to teach skills explicitly and directly.* *• Objectives and examples are clear and specific.* *• Learned skills are applied in an integrated manner through engagement with authentic reading and writing tasks.* *• Texts are high-quality, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive.*

Cultural Responsiveness

Overview

Ensuring a culturally responsive literacy program requires deep, thoughtful consideration of multiple components and ongoing support of administrators and faculty. The literacy program should feature diverse representation in its instructional materials, including a variety of characters, authors, and illustrators across grade levels, and should depict a wide array of cultures, identities, experiences, and languages. Additionally, the program should support a strong home-school connection, providing guidance on engaging families and connecting learning to students' home lives. Faculty should receive guidance on recognizing biases and cultural gaps, treating diverse student identities as assets rather than challenges, and promoting inclusion and acceptance of others. Faculty also should be supported to make real-life connections between academic content and the local culture and environment, offer opportunities for students to contribute their prior knowledge, and include culturally sensitive experiential learning activities. Support for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds is crucial, with materials that scaffold multilingual development and match instruction to students' phases of language acquisition. Furthermore, the program should promote critical thinking about cultural and linguistic experiences and examine surface, shallow, and deep aspects of culture. Finally, ongoing assessment of materials for diversity and inclusiveness, along with feedback from students, families, and community members, ensures the program remains effective and relevant.

Analysis

Culturally responsive pedagogy is a core component of the SoR. CCSD should ensure that any core curriculum under consideration for the district is culturally responsive. New York State's Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework (New York State Education Department, 2019) should be utilized as a guide for assessing options. In addition, application of the Culturally Responsive English Language Arts Scorecard (NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, 2003) will be useful to decision makers.

As stated by both framers, ongoing professional development on culturally responsive pedagogy for all education stakeholders is essential in this process.

Overall, while the Units of Study curriculum has made some efforts towards cultural responsiveness, it appears to fall short in many key areas according to multiple analyses. The curriculum does include some texts by authors of color and features diverse characters, though not proportionally. The publisher has expressed a commitment to improving representation and cultural responsiveness in newer editions. Furthermore, the flexibility of the workshop model allows some room for teachers to incorporate culturally relevant texts and practices, though there is minimal guidance on selecting learning materials that authentically represent the cultures and ethnicities of students in the program. Similarly, the curriculum provides minimal guidance on how to connect content to students' cultural backgrounds or engage in culturally responsive interactions with diverse children and families. The curriculum would likely need significant revisions to be considered truly culturally responsive based on current standards and frameworks for culturally responsive education.

The district formally introduced an initiative to feature a variety of texts that reflect diverse perspectives and experiences in order to make the curriculum more inclusive and interesting for students. Many teachers discussed the “DEI Book Initiative" as a positive addition to the curriculum. They believe the introduction of these books have helped students see themselves and others in the stories, promoting a more inclusive and empathetic classroom environment. This exposure to diverse perspectives was seen as a crucial component of students' literacy and social-emotional development. However, teachers also noted that while these books were initially introduced as add-ons to the existing curriculum, ideally they should be an integral part of the curriculum.

Walking through the classrooms, we noted many books with diverse characters on display. We also noted that chapter books being used for read-alouds in upper elementary grades often included diverse characters.

The district has made an effort and investment into using decodable texts more consistently, particularly in K-2. Book series that were researched by district leaders and teachers and purchased in the past year or two are of high quality and represent a far wider range of human experience than students would have encountered in the past. For example, the Jump Rope Readers feature characters from various backgrounds and cultures, and the stories depict diverse neighborhoods, families, and experiences, making them relatable to a wide range of students.

Examples

Example of the approach to cultural responsiveness in the Units of Study:

TEACHING

Demonstrate how you look through a variety of markers to choose the just-right color to represent skin tone and other special details in your drawing.

"Let me show you. I am going to make me and my friend, Jordyn. One thing we love to do together is play games. So, I need to first make myself. What color will I look for, white?" I held out my arm. "No, my skin isn't exactly white. Let me look at these colors." I held a couple up to my skin. "What do you think?" I held up two choices. "Yup! This one matches the best, it's called beige. Now I am going to make my friend Jordyn. She has skin that is a different color than me. She is more like this one, which is called sienna. It's a beautiful brown color. Now I have to make our hair. I also have to make the table that we are sitting around, and the cards that we like to play. I'll have to choose my just-right colors for *all* those things too!" As I talked, I started to draw on the page.

While the idea of a more inclusive approach to coloring pictures is appreciated, this example centers whiteness.

CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

CAREI Rubric (Minnesota Department of Education, 2024)

CR9. Treatment of culture includes surface culture (observable and concrete elements), shallow culture (unspoken rules, social interactions and norms) and deep culture (tacit knowledge and unconscious assumptions)
CR10. Teacher guidance is provided within core materials on giving students opportunities to contribute their prior knowledge and experience with a topic, not just respond to the text and information presented in class (Bryan-Gooden, Hester & Peoples, 2023)
CR11. Teacher guidance is provided in core materials on how to engaging students in culturally sensitive experiential learning activities (Bryan-Gooden, Hester & Peoples, 2023)
CR12. Teacher guidance is provided on practices that support the learning, development, and engagement of students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, both when the teacher is able to speak the shared language and when they are not

RED FLAGS:
CR17. Cultural responsiveness is an add-on to the curriculum
A) Guidance is offered only in addendums or additional resources (educators may need to hunt for them)
B) Guidance is offered only in the front matter or backmatter of the teachers manual (not woven throughout to support daily instruction)
C) There are culturally-responsive lessons, but they are optional
D) Culturally-responsive guidance and supporting documents seem to have been created as a way to support educators in navigating problematic texts rather than substituting better texts or lessons or proactively including cultural responsiveness

CR18. Materials engage tropes and stereotypes in subtle but identifiable, or overt ways
Only depicting marginalized groups as overcoming an injustice (i.e., the single story); encouraging empathy and connection only with White characters
CR19. There is little to no diversity of representation of people and/or cultures in curricular materials
Materials only present characters of color when they have topics such as immigration, slavery, or biographies of a few, well-known people of color

CR20. Materials primarily reflect surface culture
Superficial visual representations to signify diversity, especially skin tone and bodily presentation, without including meaningful cultural context, practices, or traditions

Knowledge Matters Review Tool (Knowledge Matters Campaign, n.d.)

Targeted supports to ensure all students have access to challenging, grade-level content:
"Curriculum includes strong representation of authors and illustrators of color in the texts children read, abundant opportunities to read how people from a range of historically underrepresented social groups have contributed to knowledge, and guidance on how to implement the curriculum in a manner that promotes equity and elevates student assets."

Culturally Responsive English Language Arts Scorecard (NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, 2003)

Representation:
1. The curriculum features visually diverse characters, and the characters of color do not all look alike.
2. Queer, trans and non-binary characters are represented and are main characters.
3. There are references to different ethnic and cultural traditions, languages (non-English and multilingual speakers), religions, names and clothing, abilities and gender expressions.
4. Diverse ethnicities and nationalities are portrayed – not all Asian families are Chinese, not all Latinx families are Mexican, etc.

Accurate Portrayals:
8. Characters of color are not assumed to have low family wealth, low educational attainment and/or low income.
9. Characters with disabilities aren't presented as the problem in the story, as bad, wrong or abnormal, or as the butt of jokes.
10. Transgender characters are not depicted as abnormal, evil, or problems to be solved.
11. Gender is not determinative in the storyline. Characters are portrayed with a variety of roles and gender expressions, not just the ones that align with traditional expectations of their sex.
12. Social situations and problems are not seen as individual problems but are situated within a societal context.

Decolonization/Power and Privilege:
18. Curriculum highlights non-dominant populations and their strengths and assets, so that students of diverse race, class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation can relate and participate fully.
19. The curriculum communicates an asset-based perspective by representing people of diverse races, classes, genders, abilities and sexual orientations through their strengths, talents and knowledge rather than their perceived flaws or deficiencies.

Centering Multiple Perspectives
22. The curriculum recognizes the validity and integrity of knowledge systems based in communities of color, communal spaces created by non-dominant communities, collectivist cultures, matriarchal societies, and non-Christian religions.
23. The curriculum presents different points of view on the same event or experience, especially points of view from marginalized people/communities.

NYS K-3 Literacy Curriculum Review Guide (New York State Education Department, 2024)

The curriculum enhances the capacity for students to view concepts, issues, events from the perspectives of diverse groups, including race/ethnicity, language, ability, etc.
• All backgrounds, cultures, and identities are acknowledged, reflected, and respected.
• Materials reflect a diversity of perspectives and voices.
• Examples of relationship building and/or conflict resolution among people from different backgrounds are highlighted.
• Materials provide opportunities to have conversations about differing perspectives and points of view.
The curriculum includes a balance of representation of people with multiple perspectives and identities

including race/ethnicity, gender, language, ability, etc.
• Texts include a diversity of characters that span genres, affirm and broaden perspectives, and develop an inclusive community.
• Strengths and contributions of all individuals are recognized, including those from underrepresented or historically marginalized groups.
• Portrayals of diverse people and cultures are accurate and multi-dimensional.
Students' languages, literacies, and cultural ways of being are authentically centered throughout the curriculum instead of being "add-ons."
• An asset-based approach that affirms students' backgrounds is exemplified in the materials.
• Diverse cultural and social backgrounds of all students are integrated.
The curriculum includes authentic opportunities for students to showcase their voices and learning experiences.
• An asset-based approach is used so that students have an opportunity for self expression and connection to their lived experiences.
• A wide variety of learning modalities is supported in the materials.
• Demonstration of mastery can be expressed in multiple ways.
The curriculum offers opportunities for students to reflect on and practice core social and emotional skills.
• Texts and materials explore a range of emotions, allowing students to analyze how characters experience and express feelings.
• Stories feature characters who demonstrate active listening, perspective-taking, and empathetic behavior.
• Literature depicts goal-setting and perseverance as themes or through character experiences.
• Texts allow students to explore concepts of identity, agency, and belonging.

Assessment

Overview

A comprehensive literacy program incorporates a variety of assessments to guide instruction and measure student progress across key reading components. These include both formative assessments to inform ongoing teaching and summative assessments to evaluate overall learning. In order for teachers to make data-driven instructional decisions, they need assessment data that is specific and useful. While assessment is a must, it does take up instructional time, so care must be taken to ensure that each assessment serves a purpose.

In order to determine the purpose for assessment, the district must develop a stance on the role of assessment in their instructional model. Is assessment a way to celebrate student growth and identify opportunities for intervention and remediation? Is assessment a means for evaluating teacher efficacy? Is assessment a proof point for the strength of the district's instructional program? While the answer can potentially be all three, we found a desire for greater transparency as to why assessments are chosen and how the data is used at the district level. State testing is typically a standardized, summative evaluation conducted annually to measure overall student achievement and school performance, often used for accountability purposes. In contrast, assessment for instructional purposes is an ongoing, formative process integrated into daily teaching that provides immediate feedback to inform and adjust instruction, allowing teachers to monitor student progress and tailor their approach to meet individual learning needs. In any case, key factors in the approach to assessment should include:

Utility of Student Data
The primary purpose of assessment in English Language Arts for grades K-8 should be to provide actionable data to inform and improve instruction tailored to students' individual needs. In order to effectively make instructional decisions based on student data, teachers need sufficient training and planning time.

Alignment to Standards
Next Generation Learning Standards should not be the reason for any particular unit of instruction; however, it provides guidance for what students should be able to do by the end of a given school year.

In addition to progress monitoring, end-of-year assessment is an important tool for measuring both student progress and the effectiveness of the curriculum. Transfer of student data to the following year's teachers gives end-of-year data utility for two years of instruction.

Formative assessment
In their daily work with students, teachers should find opportunities for formative assessment. Formative assessment should be ongoing, brief opportunities for teachers to gauge student learning and provide timely feedback to students. Formative assessments can be as informal as taking observational notes while listening to a student read or conducting a writing conference. Teachers can also use student tasks, such as exit tickets, as formative assessments. Formative assessments are meant to measure progress rather than mastery. They allow teachers to correct misunderstandings or provide extra help in a timely manner.

Summative assessment
Summative assessments measure student learning at the end of a school year or unit of study. They provide valuable data, but offer limited opportunity for a teacher to provide intervention. Since summative assessments are larger in scope, educators should be cautious about drawing conclusions about individual areas of literacy. For example, if at the end of a third grade unit, every student must write an opinion essay on the Oregon Trail (check for a grade-aligned example), background knowledge and an understanding of how to write an opinion essay are key factors that cannot easily be measured separately in a rubric.

Benchmark assessments/Progress monitoring
Assessments should frequently monitor students' development of key literacy skills like phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing. This allows teachers to identify areas of strength and weakness for each student and adjust instruction accordingly. Benchmark assessments live somewhere between formative and summative assessments and they are a crucial part of literacy assessment. They measure progress towards mastery rather than mastery itself. This is particularly important in ELA, where students need years to master some skills.

Alignment
All forms of assessment should be tightly aligned to student learning. In an assessment model where every student has an opportunity to be successful, assessments should cover concepts and skills that have been explicitly taught, with sufficient opportunities for guided practice. A notable exception to this is online adaptive assessments such as the NWEA MAP assessments. MAP growth assessments adapt to individual student responses and the questions are not aligned to a particular grade level or set of standards. All students will likely see unfamiliar content on an adaptive assessment and it is not possible for teachers to "cover" everything students might encounter. The out-of-

reach items on the NWEA enable the tool to effectively measure growth without hitting a testing ceiling.

Timing
With limited instructional time, educators must ensure that every assessment contains high value. The entire suite of assessments should be reviewed to ensure all covered content is being assessed and that assessment data has practical utility. The sole purpose of any assessment should not be to fill a box in a data dashboard.

Analysis
The district is to be commended for moving towards an approach to assessment that creates opportunities for data-driven instructional decisions. They have committed considerable resources to this component of the literacy program. CCSD should continue to refine its approach to streamline and condense assessment where possible while also strengthening teachers' ability to use data for instruction.

The district implements and utilizes data from a variety of literacy assessments including:

- The New York State Assessment in English Language Arts
- The NWEA Measures of Academic Progress (MAP)
- Phonics First Assessments K - 2
- Benchmark Phonics Workshop Assessments in 3 - 5
- Teachers College Reading Units of Study Assessments
- Running Records

For Tier 2 and 3 services, the district utilizes assessment components integrated as part of the Wilson Fundations, Just Words, and Reading System programs (Wilson Language Training Corporation, 2024). Service providers may also use assessment resources from a number of other programs, as determined by the needs of each student.

Participants in CCSD acknowledged both positive and negative aspects of the assessment practices in the district. On the positive side, the district has implemented frequent standardized assessments like the NWEA, which allows for continuous monitoring of student progress and helps identify students who may need additional support. This systematic approach ensures that no student falls through the cracks and provides data to inform instruction. However, there are significant drawbacks, including the overwhelming number of assessments that faculty believe contributes to student testing fatigue. Participants also noted the lack of alignment between assessment content and the curriculum. Teachers also express frustration with the limited actionable insights provided by some assessments, such as the NWEA, which do not always correlate well with classroom instruction or state tests. Some participants mentioned they did not have access to data, making it challenging to use the information to inform instruction effectively. Additionally, there was a desire for more training on how to interpret and utilize the data from these assessments to better support student learning. Lastly, the time required for these assessments often detracts from instructional time, making it challenging to cover all necessary content effectively.

While NWEA assessments do provide some data on phonics skills, it is not best practice to rely on one assessment, particularly for such a critical set of skills. Using multiple data points allows educators to triangulate the data (Northwest Evaluation Association, n.d.). So it is good that the district requires teachers to complete phonics assessments. However, when assessing phonics skills, there should be a clear distinction between when students are tested on skills for which they have received instruction and had opportunities to practice and when they are tested on overall phonics mastery. Students should be assessed on their ability to sound out consonant digraphs once they have learned consonant digraphs, and they should also be assessed using realistic text that requires a variety of phonics skills. Skills assessment that immediately follows instruction and practice is helpful for teachers because it lets them know who would benefit from classroom-level intervention. Currently the district's phonics instruction for Tier 1 is Phonics First as a supplement to the Reading Units of Study. Units of Study does not claim to provide comprehensive phonics instruction; rather, it recommends that districts use a standalone phonics program. Nonetheless, it does attempt to integrate phonics practice and assessment. Teachers in CCSD are required to use the phonics assessments aligned to either the Units of Study or Phonics First, but the concepts being covered in each are not always the same. Teachers feel that this does not provide useful data, and we concur.

A more intentional approach might call for a streamlining of assessments. Teachers consistently reported that they spend far too much time administering assessments, even in the younger grades, where students do not take the NYSED tests. While district leadership attributes high performance on state tests to readers and writers workshop, faculty attribute those scores to the district's significant test prep, outside tutoring, and supplemental teacher developed curriculum. Our impression, given the mix of programs and the significant supplementation, is that it is impossible to attribute the district's performance on standardized assessments to any one program or factor. However, we provide some insights into each assessment below.

NYSED ELA

The New York State English Language Arts (ELA) test is a standardized assessment administered annually to students in grades 3-8. It is designed to measure student proficiency in reading, writing, and language according to the New York State Next Generation Learning Standards. The test includes multiple-choice questions, two-credit constructed-response questions, and four-credit constructed-response questions, all based on close reading of informational and literary texts. The ELA test is a traditional standardized test with a fixed set of questions for all students at each grade level, regardless of their performance during the test. This means that some students may find the test too challenging or too easy, potentially affecting their ability to demonstrate their true proficiency. This also means the assessment itself does not provide qualitative data that can be useful for instructional purposes. It is a 2-day untimed test, and results are categorized into performance levels indicating proficiency. The primary purpose of the ELA test is to assess whether students meet grade-level expectations and to inform state accountability measures. It functions as a summative

assessment, evaluating student learning at the end of the instructional period and determining whether they have met the state standards.

It is indisputable that CCSD achievement on the New York State English Language Arts assessment is among the highest in the state, and all stakeholders in the district should be proud of this accomplishment. District leadership attributes high performance on state tests to professional development, high-quality teaching, and a districtwide commitment to academic excellence, and our observations, survey data, and focus groups supported those attributions. However, there is a disconnect in one key area. District leadership believes that the district's curriculum is a key contributor to high achievement on state tests, but teachers believe that students achieve high scores in spite of a low-quality curriculum. Teachers reported that they supplement a significant amount of instruction to fill "gaps" in the current curriculum, particularly in the areas of vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. There is also a significant amount of time committed to test prep. The middle school pacing guides call for four to six weeks of test prep with minimal reading or writing instruction outside of test prep. The K-4 pacing guide includes a few weeks of test prep, but some teachers reported doing as much as six weeks. Additionally, teachers reported that the pressure to improve ELA test scores has increased, leading to a more intense focus on test preparation, which some teachers feel detracts from more meaningful and engaging literacy instruction. There is a call for more transparency and access to test data to better align teaching strategies with the demands of the state assessments.

While it is not the only factor, research indicates that students in high-income districts often perform well on standardized tests, even despite lower reading skills, due to factors such as higher socioeconomic status, access to extracurricular activities, private tutoring, better school funding, and strong parental involvement (Hughey, 2009; Journalists Resource, 2012; Urban Institute, 2022; HigherEd Dive, 2023; PPIC, 2023; American University, 2020; Ballard Brief, 2022). Theory & Practice did not have access to the NYSED data dashboard, but we would encourage the district to compare the projected NYSED ELA performance in the NWEA MAP progress reports with actual NYSED ELA performance. In addition, the district should utilize comprehensive literacy assessments, including diagnostic and formative assessments, to provide a more accurate picture of students' literacy levels (Moroff, 2023).

NWEA MAP

The NWEA MAP test is a computer-adaptive assessment designed to measure student growth and proficiency. The version administered in CCSD is aligned with the 2017 NY Next Generation Learning Standards Language Arts, the same set of standards to which the NYS ELA Test is aligned. The NWEA MAP covers reading comprehension, language usage, and writing mechanics, adjusting the difficulty of questions based on student responses to provide a personalized assessment experience. Administered three times a year, the untimed MAP test uses the RIT (Rasch Unit) scale to report scores, helping educators identify strengths and areas for improvement. Normed using a broad, nationally representative sample, the test focuses on student growth over time, applying a multilevel growth model for fair comparisons

at individual and school levels, and includes a filter for student test-taking effort to ensure accurate and fair norms. Unlike the fixed-format NYS ELA test, which assesses student performance against New York State standards at a single point in time, the MAP test is administered multiple times a year to track academic progress. Additionally, MAP scores are reported on the RIT scale and offer detailed insights into individual and group performance, making it a more dynamic tool for informing instruction and addressing learning gaps.

In spite of the high NYSED ELA scores, we heard from building administrators, teachers, and parents that many students in the district cannot read or write well. We also heard a concern from several district administrators that any changes to the district's current literacy program could negatively impact NYS ELA Test Scores. Data from the NWEA could potentially be very helpful in giving a more accurate and authentic picture of how well students are reading currently, as well as over time. The district-level analysis feature within the MAP dashboard allows administrators to retrieve detailed insights into specific areas of strength and weakness in literacy skills across grades, schools, and the district. The data can be used to analyze trends over time, identifying whether literacy skills are improving, declining, or remaining stable. MAP offers growth norms that can help the district understand how much progress students are making over time, which is particularly useful for measuring the effectiveness of instructional strategies and interventions. Administrators can also utilize the MAP data to assess various components of literacy, such as reading comprehension, vocabulary, and language usage, identifying specific areas where students struggle the most as well as utilizing detailed item-level analysis that helps in understanding which types of questions or content areas are most challenging for students. This data can inform curriculum planning, instructional strategies, and resource allocation.

For the NWEA MAP assessments to be most helpful, faculty must have a deep understanding of the format and reports of the test, as well as how to utilize the data effectively and efficiently. We heard many concerns and misconceptions about the NWEA MAP test including its perceived difficulty, questions of its validity, and concerns that it is not accurately aligned with the district's standards and benchmarks. Intentional design features, such as the ability to present students with items beyond their grade level in order to avoid the ceiling effect seen in fixed-format tests like the NYSED ELA, were viewed as flaws in the assessment by many participants. Some also reported that they find the extensive data generated by MAP overwhelming and difficult to use for instruction. In addition, teachers and specialists expressed concerns that parents do not understand how to interpret the reports, thus causing undue concern and confusion. Conversely, the participants we talked with who are familiar with adaptive assessments viewed the MAP assessment and data positively, suggesting that it could be better received by other faculty once more training and time to analyze results is provided. We recommend that the district engage in professional development so that all stakeholders have a common understanding of the purpose, design, and utility of MAP assessments. Doing so may provide ongoing parent/guardian education on the types of assessments administered within the district and how the various data points and reports should be interpreted.

Phonics Assessments Platformed on ESGI
Phonics First

Phonics First includes assessments that evaluate students' decoding and encoding skills, including alphabet knowledge, basic sounds, word coding for phonetic and non-phonetic words, pseudowords, and multisyllabic word attack. The assessment kit includes an administration guide, reproducible student response forms, scoring forms, assessment word cards, and a quick-reference scoring guide. Designed for grades K-3 in general education and K-12 for intervention, these assessments are part of the Phonics First reading system, which is based on Orton-Gillingham principles and aims to identify word-level weaknesses and inform targeted instruction. If used with fidelity in concert with other assessments, this approach is sound.

Heggerty
The district has also been piloting the Heggerty Phonemic Awareness Program in some grades, which includes an assessment component. The Heggerty program includes assessment components that are available for download from their website, offering Beginning, Middle, and End of Year assessments for PreK-1st grade, as well as screeners for older students. These assessments, available in English and Spanish, are designed to monitor progress in phonological and phonemic awareness skills, though they are not norm-referenced and are primarily intended for targeted instruction in Tier 2 or 3 settings. Our study did not reveal use of Heggerty assessment materials.

Units of Study
The 2023 revised version of the Units of Study in Reading includes assessment components such as Beginning, Middle, and End of Year assessments, embedded formative assessments, performance assessments, learning progressions, and tools for student self-assessment, along with digital resources like anchor charts and instructional videos. However, these assessments have faced criticism for their lack of alignment with the curriculum content, insufficient emphasis on phonics and foundational reading skills, continued use of the three-cueing system, inadequate guidance on using assessment results to inform instruction, insufficient support for English learners, and a lack of systematic vocabulary and knowledge-building activities.

Running Records
Running records are informal assessments that are used to determine a student's instructional and independent reading level–that is, the level of texts at which they should receive instruction for maximum learning and the level at which they can read independently, without instruction. Running records and reading levels are so widely used that it is easy to assume that they are aligned with the SoR. However, reading levels do not have sufficient reading research to support their use in classrooms. Running records purport to measure a number of things—reading fluency, word attack skills, comprehension, etc. For all of those distinct skills to be boiled down to one level is not a reliable measure. One student at a level E may have stronger decoding skills and weaker comprehension skills than another student at a level E. As another example, one student may achieve an independent reading level C after reading a text in two minutes while another may get a level C after laboring through the same

text for 15 minutes.

We did not observe consistent understanding of the district's policy on the use of running records and reading levels in Chappaqua schools. The district leadership reported that CCSD is in the process of phasing out Fountas & Pinnell text levels, but they are still in use in many classrooms. Multiple teachers reported that they had been told to remove their leveled libraries, evidence that the use of leveling has been discouraged. However, teachers also reported that they had not received guidance on an alternate way to arrange their libraries. While we did see leveled libraries in many classrooms, it could be because educators do not have a district-approved method for reorganizing their libraries. It could also be because, in practice, they are still very much in use. Many participants talked about students in terms of what book level they are currently on. Faculty need the district's guidance on implementing a systematic, research-based approach to replacing running records and level libraries.

While research does not support the use of running records as a way to level and then group students, to be clear, it is still helpful and important for teachers to hear students reading aloud, especially in K-2. Many participants acknowledged this directly; while they question the validity of the levels, they do value the time listening to every student read. By listening to students read aloud, teachers may be able to identify common needs among students and group them accordingly. For instance, if a teacher notices multiple students who are not attending to the end of longer words, they might benefit from working on syllabication in a small group.

Addressing Misconceptions

But aren't reading levels important?

1: Reading levels of texts are not reliable.
A text can potentially be rated at three different grade level equivalents depending on which measure one uses.

2: Students can read books above their "level."
Research has found that students benefit from reading rigorous texts. This makes identifying each student's level less important than choosing a high-quality, high-interest text–as long as teachers provide appropriate scaffolding. Scaffolding strategies can include preteaching some vocabulary and delivering important background information beforehand.

3: Reading levels do not take sociocultural context or background knowledge into account.
Students bring their life experience and previously learned knowledge to each new text that they encounter. A student who is on a soccer team will likely be able to comprehend a text about soccer that is more challenging than their reading level would indicate, and a student who has never been in a courtroom may struggle to comprehend a text on their level that centers around a court case. This is an especially important consideration for minoritized students, as their sociocultural experiences are far less likely to be reflected in texts used in their classrooms.

For the past twenty years, reading levels have become a clear-cut way for schools to communicate their students' reading ability to parents. When a kindergarten parent hears that their child is reading at a level E, they take that to mean that their child is reading slightly above grade level. While a reading level is straightforward, it is also an incomplete picture of reading achievement. That student at a level E may be a slow but diligent and accurate decoder, or they may be an inaccurate decoder who uses strong comprehension skills to compensate for poor word reading accuracy.

If a quantitative readability measure is a high priority for the district, the NWEA MAP assessment does generate a Lexile range for every student. The district should provide a resource with approximate grade level equivalents for caregivers to help them understand this part of the score reports. It should be made clear that Lexile levels are purely a quantitative measure of text complexity and do not take into account qualitative aspects of reading and texts.

Examples

ASSESSMENT
CAREI Rubric (Minnesota Department of Education, 2024) *A1. Materials include formative assessments (for learning) and summative assessments (of learning) that guide instruction* *A2. Curriculum assessments measure learning objectives* *A3. Curriculum assessments measure student progress on word recognition:* ** phonemic awareness* ** phonics (decoding & spelling)* ** high-frequency irregular words"* *"A4. Curriculum assessments measure student progress on language comprehension* ** knowledge* ** vocabulary* ** language structures (syntax, semantics)* ** verbal reasoning (inference, metaphor, etc.)* ** literacy knowledge (print concepts, genres, text structure, etc.)"* *A5. Program provides a way to measure fluency as appropriate for the given grade* *A6. Assessment supports accurate results for students with a wide variety of needs* *A7. Assessments are designed in a way that teachers are able to use the materials to make data-based decisions* *RED FLAGS:* *A8. Assessments include running/reading records* *A9. Assessments allows acceptance of incorrectly decoded words if they are close in meaning to the target word (e.g., assessment based upon the cueing systems, M/S/V)* *A10. The program includes an assessment which identifies a precise text level for every student (e.g, guided reading levels A-Z, 1-50+)*
Knowledge Matters Review Tool (Knowledge Matters Campaign, n.d.) *"Curriculum provides a range of supports designed to address results from informal and more formal assessments (gathered from observations, assignments, and test questions), and promotes timely and concrete feedback to students."*
NYS K-3 Literacy Curriculum Review Guide (New York State Education Department, 2024) *The curriculum includes methods and resources to measure student progress.*

• Varied formative and summative assessments such as performance tasks and rubrics are included to assess student progress toward learning standards and to inform instruction.
• Materials include frequent formative assessments used to identify students' misconceptions and gaps in skills and content knowledge, as well as identifying students' strengths and mastery of foundational skills.
• Annotated exemplars of student work illustrate various performance levels at different points during the school year.
• Guidance is provided on how to move students to the next level. The curriculum-embedded assessments are aligned to NYS ELA Learning Standards.
• Curriculum-embedded assessments indicate the targeted Standards.
• Materials include summative assessments used to ascertain attainment of Standards.
- Additional Consideration: Universal screening assessments are used to identify general strengths/needs and gauge overall progress relative to grade-level learning standards.
- Additional Consideration: Diagnostic assessments are used to clarify and target the difficulties of individual students when the information provided by universal screening assessments is not sufficient to do so.

Phonemic Awareness

Overview

A curriculum that comprehensively addresses phonemic awareness should follow a research-based progression of simple to complex skills in grades K - 2. This begins with isolating sounds (initial, final, medial), then moves to segmenting and blending sounds, and finally to manipulating sounds in words. Instruction should incorporate scaffolds and supports to make sounds concrete, such as Elkonin boxes, manipulatives, and gestures. The phonemic awareness activities should align with and reinforce the phonics skills being taught. Explicit instruction should be provided on articulation, addressing how sounds are formed in the mouth. The curriculum should build phonemic awareness skills for both reading and spelling, with increasing complexity across grades K - 2. This builds from working with 2-3 phoneme words in kindergarten to multisyllabic words by second grade. Overall, phonemic awareness instruction should be systematically integrated with phonics to develop students' foundational literacy skills.

Analysis

District leaders, mindful that Units of Study and Phonics First do not sufficiently address phonemic awareness, developed a pilot of Heggerty. However, since phonemic awareness instruction should be integrated with print/phonics and faculty already feel overloaded by programs, adding an additional program is not advised. We advise that the district pause any further pilot of Heggerty. In reviewing the district's approach to phonics and core curriculum, the treatment of phonemic awareness should be considered.

Heggerty is primarily an oral program that does not incorporate letters or print. Some research suggests that phonemic awareness instruction is more effective when it includes letters rather than being purely auditory (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2022). Some critics also argue that Heggerty places too much emphasis on advanced phonemic awareness skills like phoneme deletion and substitution, to an extent which may not be necessary or beneficial for all students. Additionally, the program recommends 8-12 minutes of daily instruction, which may be too much time spent on solely oral phonemic awareness activities without application to reading and writing. During the course of the study, district leaders were planning to expand implementation of Heggerty and Theory & Practice advised that that decision be reconsidered in light of the forthcoming report and the drawbacks of a standalone phonemic awareness program.

If the district chooses to implement Wilson Fundations, which is discussed in the Phonics section, then the Fundations program may sufficiently address phonemic awareness. There is not a clear research consensus on the ideal dosage of phonemic awareness instruction, but recent studies have shown that more is not more (Little, et. al., 2023).

Examples

PHONEMIC AWARENESS
CAREI Rubric (Minnesota Department of Education, 2024) *RED FLAGS* *PA6. An excessive amount of time is spent on oral-only phonological and/or phonemic awareness activities. (NRP guidelines no more than 20 hours per year)* *PA 7. Phonological sensitivity instruction & practice (word counting, rhyming, syllables, onset-rime) continue past the first several months of kindergarten* *PA 8. Phonemic awareness instruction & practice (phoneme isolation, segmentation, and blending) begin after half the kindergarten year* *PA 9. Phonemic awareness exercises treat blends (e.g. /t/ /r/) as a single unit for segmenting and blend*
NYS K-3 Literacy Curriculum Review Guide (New York State Education Department, 2024) *The curriculum emphasizes explicit, systematic instruction of phonological awareness, including phonemic awareness.* *● Phonemic awareness and phonological lessons have clear objectives, are introduced systematically, and are organized to teach knowledge and skills directly and explicitly.* *● Larger phonologic units (e.g., syllable, rhyme) as well as phonemic units (e.g., consonant blends) are included.* *• Stages of simple to advanced phonemic manipulation tasks (e.g., isolating, blending, deleting, substituting) are included.*

Phonics/Morphology

Overview

One area where the theme of alignment is particularly compelling is in Phonics. The district utilizes several different programs across grades and tiers. CCSD made the decision to implement Phonics First for Tier 1 and Wilson for Tiers 2 and 3 in 2019. Participants across the board, from parents and guardians to teachers and specialists, regarded the decision to implement a direct, explicit, sequential, multisensory phonics program as one of the most positive developments in the district's literacy program. As one would expect given CCSD's commitment to excellence, their movement to introduce an explicit phonics program predates more recent trends towards this. However, the use of two separate phonics programs in Tier 1 as well as a different suite of programs in Tiers 2 and 3 is problematic. We recommend that the district reconsider the decision to use two separate phonics programs across upper and lower grades.

A comprehensive phonics instruction program in a literacy curriculum should follow a logical progression from simple to complex concepts across early grades. The instruction should be explicit, with clear instructional routines provided. Sufficient decoding and encoding practice is crucial to ensure mastery of word-reading and spelling skills for most students. The program should also include a logical progression for teaching high-frequency irregular words, using

explicit and effective routines, with adequate practice to ensure mastery. Additionally, morphological instruction should be incorporated, following a logical progression and taught explicitly as appropriate for each grade level. Morphology practice should be designed to ensure generalization in both word recognition and language comprehension. This structured approach to phonics instruction provides a solid foundation for students to develop strong literacy skills.

Analysis

The resounding critique of the current approach to phonics in CCSD is time and alignment. Many teachers felt there needed to be allocated blocks of time for phonics instruction to ensure that teachers have sufficient time to implement the programs thoroughly and effectively. In addition, faculty hoped there would be better alignment between Phonics First, Benchmark Phonics, and phonics in the Units of Study to ensure coherence and consistency. This could involve revising the scope and sequence of the programs to better fit with other instructional components. There is also a need for more alignment in the approach to phonics instruction across all Tiers.

Phonics First & Benchmark

Phonics First is a structured literacy program that aligns well with many aspects of high-quality phonics instruction. It follows a logical progression from simple to complex concepts, divided into four "Learning Layers" that span from kindergarten through 5th grade, although the district only uses the program through 2nd. The program emphasizes explicit, direct instruction in phonics with clear routines, and includes both decoding and encoding practice to ensure mastery of word-reading and spelling skills. Phonics First incorporates instruction on high-frequency irregular words (called "Red Words") and includes morphological instruction through structured syllabication study and instruction on affixes. The program emphasizes the application of skills in both reading and spelling, suggesting a focus on generalization. Additionally, Phonics First employs a multisensory approach. Overall, Phonics First's strong alignment with Orton-Gillingham principles suggests a comprehensive approach to phonics instruction.

Benchmark Phonics presents a structured approach to phonics instruction, incorporating many key components recommended by research. The program follows a systematic progression from simple to complex concepts, providing explicit instruction with detailed teacher guidance. It emphasizes application through decodable texts and practice in both decoding and encoding. The curriculum addresses high-frequency words and includes morphology instruction at higher levels. However, faculty generally find it difficult to implement. Many believe the program significantly underestimates the time required, with initial lessons taking an hour instead of the expected 10 minutes. They also believe the program makes incorrect assumptions about students' prior knowledge, that the assessment components are not helpful, and that there are errors in the manual. Many faculty have had no choice but to cut it out, including faculty that highly value implementing a research-based approach to literacy instruction. They do not find that this particular program hits the mark.

CCSD implemented the revised version of the Units of Study, published by Heinmann and authored by Lucy Calkins, in 2023, shortly after it was published. According to its publisher and author, the revision was published in order to reflect a closer alignment to the SoR. In a statement to Education Week in 2022, Calkins wrote, “[T]here are some strategies that the field—university courses, professional books, intervention programs, and yes, the last edition of

Units of Study—has taught that no longer represent the latest and most current thinking" (Sawchuk, 2022). Heinemann and Calkins promised "wholesale changes" in the new version. When reviewing materials, we found that while the revised Units of Study curriculum has made some changes to address criticisms, there are indications that it may not fully align with a systematic approach to sounding out words. The persistence of elements from the previous approach, combined with the curriculum's structure and pacing, suggests that students may still not receive the kind of explicit, systematic phonics instruction recommended by reading science advocates.

In all, the approach to Tier 1 phonics instruction is disjointed. Faculty report significant improvements in phonics instruction with the introduction of explicit phonics programs. Faculty also appreciate that both Phonics First and Benchmark Phonics provide systematic, explicit phonics instruction aligned with the SoR. Teachers also appreciate the professional development for Phonics First and Benchmark's focus on morphology. However, both programs face challenges in integration with other curriculum components like the Units of Study, leading to fragmented instruction. Time constraints for implementation are a concern for Phonics First and Benchmark. Teachers expressed a need for better alignment between programs, more manageable assessments, and improved training and support for effective implementation. Overall, while the programs offer valuable phonics instruction, their integration into the broader literacy curriculum and practical implementation remain significant challenges for teachers.

Examples

PHONICS
CAREI Rubric (Minnesota Department of Education, 2024) *RED FLAGS:* *PM14. Instruction consists of optional or sporadic mini-lessons* *PM15. Instruction incorporates a three cueing systems approach to word reading (meaning, structure, visual)* *PM16. Program uses word shapes as a way to read or spell* *PM17. Program includes memorization of whole words* *PM18. Guidance recommends prompting students to use sentence context to decode words* *PM19. Guidance recommends prompting students to use only a sampling of the letters/sounds to decode words* *PM20. Guidance recommends prompting students to use pictures to decode words* *PM21. Pacing of phonics instruction is too slow to ensure mastery of foundational skills by third grad* *PM22. Early readers primarily practice with predictable texts* *PM23. Early readers primarily practice with texts which include mostly high-frequency words* *PM24. Early texts for practice include many words which the students lack the skills to decode accurately* *PM25. Phonics instruction does not extend beyond single syllable word reading and spelling* *PM26. The program includes practice activities that do not directly support proficient reading* *PM27. The program includes practice activities that do not directly support proficient spelling* *PM28. Spelling lists are not aligned with phonics or morphology* *PM29. Encoding mastery is expected before moving on to the next phonics skill for decoding* *PM30. Instruction expects students to become proficient at marking up words and word parts (e.g., syllables, vowel patterns, blends) as opposed to a tool used during a brief time to support reading*
<u>Reading League Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines</u> (The Reading League, 2023) *"Word recognition Non-Negotiable: Guidance to memorize any whole words, including high frequency words, by sight without attending to the sound/symbol correspondences."*

"Word recognition: Phonics instruction takes place in short (or optional) "mini-lessons" or "word work" sessions."

NYS K-3 Literacy Curriculum Review Guide (New York State Education Department, 2024)

The curriculum emphasizes explicit and systematic instruction of evidence-based phonics.
• Phonics lessons have clear objectives, are introduced systematically, and are organized to directly and explicitly teach knowledge and skills.
• Letter-sound-symbol association is taught sequentially, from least to most complex relationships.
• Phonetic decoding is emphasized, with attention to word structure.
• Decodable texts match the phonics skills being taught and selected according to the needs of the student.

One example of the limitations of the Units of Study in Reading is below.

EdReports reviewed a prior version (2018) of the Units of Study in 2021. At that time, it received a score of 34/112 for alignment and it did not meet the threshold for review in usability. To date, this represents the lowest score among all EdReports ELA reviews. In the 2023 edition, while Theory & Practice did find greater alignment to reading research in the area of three-cueing, there was insufficient evidence of the wholesale changes that were promised.

Three-cueing is an approach to early literacy instruction in which students are encouraged to use syntactic, semantic, and visual cues to solve an unfamiliar word. Research has consistently shown that while syntactic and semantic cues should play a role in how students make sense of a new word, their main approach to solving it should be a grapho-phonemic approach (Moats, 2006). That is to say that students should rely first on sounding words out in order to read new words rather than thinking about what the word could be or looking at the picture.

While three-cueing has largely been attributed to the Units of Study, it is important to note that it has been a prevailing instructional method in the United States, regardless of curriculum. In 2019, an EdWeek Research Center survey found that 75 percent of K-2 and elementary special education teachers taught students to use three-cueing. In the same year, 16% of teachers reported using the Units of Study in their classrooms at least once a week (Doan, Kaufman, & Diliberti, 2020).

Our review did not find evidence of three-cueing in the revised version of the Units of Study. However, our research suggests that the word attack strategies included in the revised version are still not closely aligned with the approach to reading instruction advocated by the SoR. The description of the new approach still includes prompts like using "slider power" to slide through sounds in a word, but students could also choose to use "snap power." The revised curriculum appears to still downplay the importance of phonology in word recognition, discouraging reliance on phonological cues, presenting them as just one of many strategies rather than the primary method for decoding unfamiliar words. While the revised materials do include more guidance on phonemic awareness and letter-sound correspondence, there are concerns about the pacing.

Fluency

Overview

Well-structured fluency instruction in a literacy curriculum should follow a logical progression, ensuring that students build their skills systematically over time. Fluency should be explicitly taught, with instruction tailored to be appropriate for each grade level, ensuring that students understand the components of fluent reading, such as accuracy, rate, and expression.

Additionally, fluency practice should be an integral part of the instructional design, providing students with ample opportunities to engage in guided oral reading, repeated readings, and other activities that promote the development of fluent reading skills. This approach helps students achieve automaticity in word recognition, freeing cognitive resources for comprehension and enhancing overall reading proficiency.

Analysis

The CCSD literacy program requires a more consistent, research-based approach to fluency development. As the district researches a new core curriculum, considerations should be made for how each option addresses fluency.

Phonics First addresses fluency by providing ancillary fluency practice materials and decodable stories. The program integrates fluency development through multisensory techniques and structured syllabication study, which helps reinforce phonics skills and improve fluency. However, the program lacks explicit details on fluency instruction strategies, and it is unclear how fluency is balanced with other reading components or differentiated for students at various skill levels.

The Units of Study addresses fluency primarily through its shared reading component in grades K-2. This includes repeated and assisted reading of texts, which aligns with research-based fluency practices. The program also incorporates wide reading and teacher read-alouds, supporting fluency development. However, the program has notable weaknesses in its approach to fluency instruction; it relies on the supporting phonics curriculum for fluency. It lacks a clear, logical progression for fluency development across grade levels and provides insufficient guidance on differentiating instruction for struggling students. There is a heavy reliance on teacher and student choice in text selection, which may not guarantee appropriate fluency practice with increasingly complex texts. Lastly, there is insufficient guidance on assessing fluency and using assessment data to inform instruction. Fluency work does not include sufficient teacher-led modeling, oral reading by students, and immediate feedback.

Examples

FLUENCY
CAREI Rubric Minnesota Department of Education, 2024) *F1. Fluency instruction follows a logical progression* *F2. Fluency is explicitly taught as appropriate for the grade* *F3. Fluency practice is part of the instructional design* *RED FLAGS* *F4. Only narrative text is used for fluency practice* *F5. Reading practice happens primarily with silent reading* *F6. Reading practice includes round robin and popcorn reading* *F7. Fluency practice is assigned as homework*
Reading League Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines (The Reading League, 2023) *"Fluency: Word-level fluency practice to automaticity is not provided, or fluency is viewed only as text-reading fluency."*

NYS K-3 Literacy Curriculum Review Guide (New York State Education Department, 2024)

> *The curriculum emphasizes explicit, systematic instruction of fluency.*
> *● Fluency is a clear objective.*
> *● Materials provide consistent opportunities for students to hear fluent oral reading of increasingly complex texts that lead to proficiency in both oral and silent reading.*
> *● Oral reading is practiced at the word, sentence, and paragraph level, while being exposed to a variety of genres.*

Vocabulary

Overview

Robust vocabulary instruction in a literacy curriculum should focus on selecting rich, high-utility words for instruction and teaching these words in the context of the text to enhance understanding and retention and promote word usage. A structured and explicit routine should be used for introducing targeted words. While there should be words that are targeted for whole class instruction, students should also be taught vocabulary learning strategies to support independent learning of new words, empowering them to expand their vocabulary autonomously. Multiple opportunities should be provided for students to practice with newly learned words, reinforcing their understanding and usage. Additionally, students should have opportunities to practice the skills and routines for independent learning of new words, ensuring they can apply these strategies effectively in various contexts. This comprehensive approach to vocabulary instruction helps students build a rich and functional vocabulary, essential for reading comprehension, overall literacy development, and high quality writing.

Research has found that while some vocabulary can be learned through context, vocabulary within a curriculum does also require explicit instruction, guided practice, and assessment. For the purposes of student learning, vocabulary can be sorted into three tiers (Beck et al., 2002)

- Tier 1: Common words that students will learn through their everyday experiences, such as “clock” and "happy.” These words do not generally require instruction, with some exceptions, such as English language learners.
- Tier 2: High-utility academic words that appear across different contexts, such as “pride” in kindergarten, “contradict” in fourth grade, or “reverberate” in sixth grade.
- Tier 3: Low-frequency, domain-specific words, such as “photosynthesis” or “colonization.”

Analysis

Any review of potential new curriculum should include consideration of how vocabulary instruction, practice, and assessment are integrated into the program. Currently, vocabulary instruction in the district is not as systematic, integrated, or reinforced as it should be.

CCSD faculty understand that vocabulary is a key component in literacy development, and they lament that their current programs lack a systematic, research-based approach with a clear scope and sequence. Participants described the common approach to vocabulary instruction as choosing to instruct on words they deem important, typically encountered in read-alouds. This does not facilitate vocabulary routines connected to verbal reasoning and morphology. While Benchmark includes some morphological work, it draws from controlled texts within student books and is not integrated with the reading lesson content. In the workshop model, vocabulary

instruction is at the teacher's discretion, limiting purposeful practice opportunities, especially in print. Although Tier 3 word instruction was not observed during our visit, it is likely occurring sporadically. Curriculum guidelines suggest that these words should be embedded within the curriculum rather than left to individual teachers. Teachers expressed a need for an intentional, context-based vocabulary approach that builds across grade levels. One teacher noted the lack of morphology instruction at the elementary level, while others highlighted the need for vertical and horizontal alignment of vocabulary terms. Vocabulary lessons in the phonics/grammar program were reported as disconnected from reading passages. Recognizing gaps in vocabulary and spelling, teachers have independently emphasized explicit vocabulary instruction, integrating lessons across subjects and employing strategies to enhance student understanding and retention.

The Units of Study approach emphasizes time with complex texts, and this gives students the opportunity to encounter a high volume of vocabulary words, particularly those in Tier 2. In our classroom observations, we noted examples of teachers pausing during read-alouds to call out a difficult word and discuss it with the class (usually by asking if anyone knows what the word means). The opportunity to model how good readers use context and morphology to figure out the meaning of a new word exists within the reader's workshop, but the frequency and quality of in-context word instruction will vary depending on the teacher and the text. However, relying on the approach to vocabulary in the Units of Study results in notable weaknesses. The vocabulary section of the CAREI rubric has 7 descriptors, each with multiple “look fors” across the domains of Word Selection, Vocabulary Instruction, and Vocabulary Practice. Almost none are systematically addressed in the Units of Study. In particular, the Units of Study lacks a systematic and explicit approach to vocabulary instruction, which may not adequately support all students, particularly those with smaller vocabularies or English Learners. There are insufficient opportunities for practice and reinforcement of new vocabulary across multiple contexts, and the program does not focus enough on morphology or provide adequate assessment and differentiation. This reliance on incidental learning through reading may not be sufficient for comprehensive vocabulary development, suggesting a need for supplementary, structured vocabulary instruction.

Benchmark Phonics is designed to address vocabulary through a structured literacy approach that integrates vocabulary instruction with phonics and content knowledge and it does address the red flags of Units of Study to some extent. However, we did not find consistent implementation of the Benchmark program nor did we see evidence of consistent vocabulary instruction in other grades. Even if Benchmark is utilized more consistently, the program may not provide sufficient explicit vocabulary instruction or practice opportunities across multiple contexts. This reliance on incidental learning through reading may not be adequate for comprehensive vocabulary development, particularly for students who struggle with reading. Overall, while Benchmark Phonics has strengths in integrating vocabulary with phonics and content, it would likely require supplementary resources to effectively support all students' vocabulary growth.

Phonics First also incorporates vocabulary instruction as part of its approach to literacy. The program integrates vocabulary learning with reading instruction, employing a multisensory approach that may help reinforce word knowledge through various modalities. At higher levels (not currently used in the district), it introduces morphology, teaching students about affixes and Greek and Latin roots to expand their vocabulary. The program emphasizes applying vocabulary

in reading and writing contexts, which can help solidify understanding. However, as its name suggests, Phonics First primarily focuses on phonics instruction, potentially limiting the depth and breadth of explicit vocabulary teaching. Like Benchmark, if relying on Phonics First entirely, the district would need to supplement it with additional explicit vocabulary instruction and practice to ensure robust vocabulary development for all students.

Examples

VOCABULARY
CAREI Rubric (Minnesota Department of Education, 2024) *V2. Vocabulary words are taught in the context of the text.* *V3. Pacing of vocabulary instruction allows for effective word learning* *V4. A structured and explicit routine is used for introducing targeted words* *V5. Students are taught vocabulary learning strategies to support independent learning of new words*
Knowledge Matters Review Tool (Knowledge Matters Campaign, n.d.) *Systematic development of high-value academic language to support building knowledge:* *"Curriculum provides robust vocabulary and syntax routines both in context (through text-based questions and tasks) and out of context (through games, exercises, etc.). These routines are designed to strengthen verbal reasoning as well as knowledge of morphology."*
Reading League Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines (The Reading League, 2023) *"Vocabulary: Tier 2 words are not taught explicitly and practiced; students are not given opportunities to use them in their speech, see them in print, and use them in writing."* *"Vocabulary: Students are not exposed to and taught Tier 3 words."* *"Knowledge of Language Structures: Conventions of print, grammar, and syntax are taught implicitly or opportunistically with no evidence of consistent, explicit, simple to complex instruction across all grade levels."*
NYS K-3 Literacy Curriculum Review Guide (New York State Education Department, 2024) *The curriculum emphasizes explicit, systematic instruction of vocabulary.* *• Vocabulary lessons have clear objectives, are introduced systematically, and are organized to teach the meaning of words directly and explicitly.* *• Materials provide instruction in word meaning (both in isolation and within context).*

Comprehension

Overview

A comprehensive and effective approach to developing comprehension should be centered around building critical understanding of topics through both oral and text-based engagement. It should ensure that all students interact with high-quality grade-level texts, while explicitly addressing all components of comprehension with a clear instructional focus. The program should require students to extract information and construct meaning both orally and in writing.

Teachers should be guided to understand what background knowledge and experiences students bring to the text, with texts serving as the central focus of lesson design. The program should include explicit instruction at multiple levels: sentence-level, paragraph-level and

text-level comprehension for both narrative and informational texts, as appropriate for each grade level.

While there is not a definitive research-based answer to how much time students should spend in different types of reading (whole class shared text vs. independent reading vs. read alouds, etc.), the idea of a high volume of reading has a substantial research base supporting it. When students spend more time reading, they develop background knowledge about the world around them, their comprehension skills are improved, their stamina is improved, they develop larger, more sophisticated vocabularies, and reading achievement overall is higher (Allington, 2017). It should go without saying, but the district should certainly choose a program that emphasizes quality time spent with good books. From what we have seen, the highest rated curricula on the market rely on a significant amount of time spent with high quality texts. While there are some programs that include reading out of a textbook, there are many that do not, and those in the latter category could potentially be a good fit for the district.

Explicit instruction on reading comprehension strategies and their application should be provided, along with a clear routine for understanding complex texts. The curriculum should incorporate focused, high-quality discussions about texts and explicitly teach metacognition and inferencing skills as appropriate for each grade level.

Practice activities should progress from gathering information to synthesizing it both orally and in writing, with sufficient opportunities to ensure most students develop fluency in using comprehension strategies. This comprehensive approach to comprehension instruction helps students develop the skills necessary to understand, analyze, and engage deeply with texts across various genres and subjects.

Analysis
Building strong comprehension and critical thinking skills is a point of pride for educators in CCSD. The district can continue to strengthen its approach by utilizing a curriculum that treats comprehension strategies as tools for deeper understanding of meaningful content.

The Units of Study curriculum incorporates several important components of effective comprehension instruction. It engages students with high-quality, grade-level texts and places these texts at the center of instructional design. The program provides explicit instruction on comprehension strategies and skills, including sentence-level and paragraph-level comprehension. It also includes focused, high-quality discussions about texts, which help deepen students' understanding and engagement with the material.

However, the curriculum has significant weaknesses in its approach to comprehension instruction. In some classrooms, we saw high-quality rigorous texts in use–mostly as read-alouds. However, the content knowledge that was being built in shared texts was not necessarily connected to the texts or writing that students did after the shared reading. While teachers were told to remove their leveled libraries, student book bins did seem to be chosen to align with teachers' best understanding of each student's "reading level." A well-designed literacy curriculum should not rely heavily on student-selected texts or brief mini-lessons for teaching comprehension. It lacks a clear, logical progression that builds systematically from simple to complex understandings. The program does not sufficiently emphasize teaching metacognition and inferencing skills, nor does it provide explicit routines for understanding

complex texts. There is limited explicit instruction on text-level comprehension for both narrative and informational texts. Additionally, the curriculum falls short in guiding teachers to understand students' backgrounds, providing sufficient practice for strategy fluency, and moving students from gathering information to synthesizing it. It is important to avoid teaching inference based primarily on images or before establishing literal comprehension. Comprehension strategies should not be treated as isolated skills to master, but as tools for deeper understanding. The curriculum should move beyond simple question-answering or basic text responses for student work. Finally, it should not prioritize "just right" or independent leveled texts at the expense of more challenging, knowledge-building materials. By avoiding these approaches, a literacy curriculum can foster more effective and meaningful comprehension skills in students. Addressing these gaps would significantly enhance the program's effectiveness in developing strong reading comprehension skills among students.

Understanding what we read is the goal of skilled reading, and to that end, the current CCSD instructional program relies heavily on the instruction of comprehension skills, such as summarizing, visualizing, and familiarity with various text structures. When students read a new text, they must use various comprehension strategies that align to the complexity and genre of the text, but they also gain an understanding of the text by applying background knowledge. When that background knowledge is not delivered in the classroom, the text and any connected writing tasks will be more accessible to students who happen to have the right background knowledge, which can lead to inequitable outcomes. As an example, when reading the Newberry Award winning novel in verse *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander (2014), students who have background knowledge and/or prior experience in basketball, sneaker culture, free verse poetry, hip-hop, and rap would be better equipped to understand the following excerpt: "*With a bolt of lightning on my kicks . . .The court is SIZZLING. My sweat is DRIZZLING. Stop all that quivering. Cuz tonight I'm delivering.*" While the pre-teaching for this text cannot cover all of the background knowledge that would be helpful, strategies such as visualization or making predictions would likely be insufficient for a student who has never played basketball to understand the text.

Examples

COMPREHENSION
CAREI Rubric (Minnesota Department of Education, 2024) *C2. The program ensures that all students engage with high-quality grade level texts* *A) Texts represent appropriate complexity (e.g., rigorous lexile levels)* *B) Texts represent multiple genres (e.g., poetry, opinion, narrative, essays)* *C) Whole-group lessons ensure access to rigorous grade level texts (e.g., teacher reads aloud)* *D) Small-group lessons and independent practice ensures access to rigorous grade-level texts (e.g., reading, listening)"* *C3. All components of comprehension instruction are explicitly addressed* *A) Vocabulary* *B) Sentence comprehension* *C) Text structure* *D) Background knowledge* *E) Levels of understanding (e.g., surface code of text, the textbase, constructional of a mental model) and inference* *C6. Program guides teachers to understand what their students are bringing to the text*

A) Materials guide teachers to activate students' background knowledge (e.g., KWL charts, anticipation guides)
B) Materials give teachers ways to connect to students' culture and experiences"

C7. Texts are at the center of the instructional design for lessons
"A) Targeted words and phrases in the instructional examples are taken directly from the text(s) being studied
B) Materials guide teachers to ask text-dependent questions
C) Language is provided for teachers to model citing evidence from the text"

C8. The program includes explicit instruction on sentence-level comprehension
A) Words/word choice and how they impact sentence meaning (e.g., the job of an adverb, shades of meaning)
B) Phrases and how they impact meaning (e.g., similes, idioms, noun phrases)
C) Clauses and how they impact meaning (e.g., dependent and independent clauses)
D) Students are taught a routine for arriving at an understanding of a sentence's message

RED FLAGS
C19. Comprehension practice occurs primarily with books students have been encouraged to self-select
C20. Comprehension is taught through mini-lessons
C21. The program lacks texts that are grouped around a knowledge-building topic
C22. Topics of focus are surface-level and do not build high-leverage knowledge
C23. The ratio of narrative to informational text significantly privileges one over the other
C24. Students are taught to infer based on pictures/images and not what the text says
C25. Students are asked to infer before literal comprehension has been established
C26. Instruction treats strategies as skills to be mastered and not tools students use to deepen comprehension
C27. Student comprehension work is primarily answering questions or responding to texts
C28. "Just right"/independent leveled texts are prioritized for student practice

Knowledge Matters Review Tool (Knowledge Matters Campaign, n.d.)

Communal close-reading of content-rich, challenging text:
"Curriculum includes regular communal practice for all students with high-quality, complex texts that anchor each unit. These texts are at students' grade level, as defined by quantitative and qualitative analyses. In K-2, interactive read-alouds that are two to three years above what children are able to read themselves are a staple. Read-alouds are interactive with specific instructional goals and continue to contribute to knowledge-building well into adolescence. The curriculum rejects the leveled-reader approach that denies many students access to rigorous texts in favor of providing universal student access to rigorous texts. See here for grade-level complexity chart in tandem with the content-knowledge demands of the text."

Reading League Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines (The Reading League, 2023)

"Comprehension Non-Negotiable: In early grades, the instructional framework is primarily a workshop approach, emphasizing student choice and implicit, incidental, or embedded learning."

While the revised version of the Units of Study show improvement in de-emphasizing incidental learning, it continues to use a workshop approach that emphasizes student choice.

NYS K-3 Literacy Curriculum Review Guide (New York State Education Department, 2024)

The curriculum emphasizes explicit, systematic instruction of comprehension.
• Comprehension lessons have clear objectives, are introduced systematically, and are organized to teach comprehension skills directly and explicitly.
• Clear connections are made to activate background knowledge and prior experiences.
• Materials provide exposure to complex texts in a variety of genres, (including but not limited to informational, literary, and poetry) with attention to building background knowledge, focusing on text structure to increase comprehension, and boosting student enjoyment.

Writing

Overview

A comprehensive writing program should encompass several key components. It should begin with explicit handwriting instruction, providing sufficient practice to ensure mastery for most students. The program should follow a logical progression in teaching mechanics like punctuation and capitalization, as well as parts of speech related to syntax, appropriate to each grade level. There should also be a systematic approach to the length of compositions that students are expected to complete. Students should begin with sentence-level composition, with practice applied both orally and in writing. Then explicit instruction on paragraph-level composition should be included. With appropriate scaffolding, students should be taught a clear writing process with aligned strategies, with ample practice to ensure fluency and flexibility for most students across genres. The program should encourage writing for different audiences and purposes, and explicitly teach narrative, informational, and opinion/argumentative writing. This comprehensive approach ensures students develop a strong foundation in various aspects of writing, from basic skills to more complex composition techniques.

Just as phonics is a foundational skill of reading, handwriting is a foundational skill of writing. When students are efficient at handwriting and keyboarding, they can focus their attention on higher level writing skills that enable them to develop and communicate their ideas. Poor penmanship, an improper pencil grip, and incorrect letter formation developed in early grades can have negative consequences throughout a student's school life. When students do not write fluently, they cannot transcribe the language in their minds onto paper or a screen.

In order to make students available for the deep work of crafting writing, print penmanship should be taught in an explicit and systematic manner in kindergarten and first grade. Research has found that handwriting instruction that emphasizes correct letter formation can enhance letter recognition(Reutzel, P., Mohr, K.A.J., & Jones, C. D. (2017). Exploring the relationship between letter recognition and handwriting in early literacy development. Journal of Early Childhood Literacy. 19 (3) 349-374). Furthermore, the ability to recognize and name letters quickly (letter naming fluency) is a strong predictor of future reading achievement. Research has also found that students who receive handwriting instruction write more words, longer words, with more speed, and their writing was of higher quality (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2000).

Two exemplar writing approaches exist, which are worth of consideration by the district: ThinkSRSD and The Writing Revolution (TWR). The Writing Revolution (TWR) and ThinkSRSD both align with many best practices for comprehensive writing instruction, but each has its own strengths and focus areas. TWR emphasizes explicit instruction in writing, starting with sentence-level skills and progressing to paragraphs and essays. It integrates writing instruction across all content areas and grade levels, following a logical progression. TWR provides strategies for teaching mechanics, syntax, and composition within the context of content learning. However, it may not emphasize distinct genre-specific writing as strongly, as it is designed mostly for expository writing.

ThinkSRSD, based on Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD), offers a set of strategies with embedded deliberate skill practice to improve writing quality. It focuses on teaching the writing process, providing students with a simple toolkit, and using exemplars to guide instruction. ThinkSRSD emphasizes developing students' self-regulation skills in writing and encourages writing for different purposes. It addresses many aspects of writing instruction, including genre-specific skills.

Both programs offer explicit instruction, emphasize practice, and aim to develop students' writing skills across various contexts, aligning with many of the best practices outlined by the research on writing. Furthermore, both approaches allow for significant teacher input in content selection. TWR explicitly states that the content of the curriculum drives the writing instruction. The program is designed to be embedded in the content being taught in any subject area and at any grade level, allowing for teachers to have significant input in selecting the content for writing instruction, as it is meant to align with and support the existing curriculum across disciplines. Similarly, ThinkSRSD focuses more on strategy instruction, which can be applied to various content areas as chosen by the teacher. Both approaches prioritize flexibility and integration with existing curricula, allowing teachers to select content that is relevant and appropriate for their students and subject areas.

Analysis

Writing is an area worthy of immediate attention. Faculty are appropriately concerned about the lack of an effective, systematic approach to writing instruction in the district. While teachers supplement heavily, a great deal more can be done to strengthen the writing program. Our recommendation is that CCSD replace the Writing Units of Study with a program aligned to literacy research. Although district administrators have plans to purchase the newest version of the Units of Study for grades 3-5, expected for the 2024-2025 school year, we urge reconsideration of this plan. While there may be urgency to adopt a new curriculum, we advise a mindful approach to school change. Writer’s Workshop is unique, and transitioning to a new curriculum will require significant adjustments for teachers. Although we believe this shift is necessary, it should not be rushed for the upcoming school year. Instead, a more gradual timeline will better prepare all stakeholders for success.

The Units of Study in Writing program includes instruction on narrative, informational, and opinion/argumentative writing, ensuring that students are exposed to a variety of writing genres. The program emphasizes a high volume of writing using strategies. Despite its strengths, the Units of Study writing program has several notable weaknesses. Handwriting instruction is not included in the program, so students may not have the transcription skills that are required in order to produce the volume of writing that is expected starting in kindergarten. Writing instruction is frequently disconnected from the books and topics students are reading about, and students may lack adequate background knowledge on topics they are asked to write about, making it difficult for them to compose lengthy pieces successfully. The program's approach to writing is primarily unstructured, driven by opportunistic individual conferring sessions, and kindergarten students might be asked to write sentences or longer pieces before receiving sufficient letter formation instruction. Additionally, students are often not shown exemplars as

guides, and graphic organizers or anchor charts are not required to support their writing. Grammar and mechanics instruction is sporadic and often taught in isolation rather than through authentic application, which can limit its effectiveness. The program also tends to privilege one type of writing over others and expects students to compose pieces more advanced than the instruction they have received, prioritizing quantity over quality. Finally, the audience for most writing tasks is often limited to the teacher, reducing the authenticity and motivation for students' writing efforts.

While we did not come across districtwide guidance on writing instruction, we did hear repeatedly from building and district leadership that there is a deep commitment to Writer's Workshop. In our observations, we had the opportunity to see many classes engaged in writing activities. The writing instruction in CCSD is indeed tightly aligned to the Writing Units of Study. Teachers are doing their best to follow the district's vision for writing. However, in our conversations with teachers, we learned that many of them, based on both their understanding of best practices in literacy and their personal experience as educators, find Writer's Workshop to be less than ideal. Similar to Reader's Workshop, the teachers see gaps in their students' skills, and many of them reported going to great lengths to fill those gaps by finding materials and creating entire sequences of supplementary lessons on their own. Teachers also saw a gap between the curriculum's instruction and what it expects students to be able to accomplish.

Some of the ways teachers have modified the Units of Study have been collaborative and systematic while others have been more individual to specific teachers. Several teachers discussed the benefits of integrating "Patterns of Power" (Anderson, et al., 2018) materials to enhance grammar instruction, at the recommendation of a district leader. Teachers have also adapted the lesson plans from the Units of Study to better suit their students' needs. This includes modifying the order of units and integrating additional grammar and phonics lessons where necessary. Teachers group students based on data from assessments like NWEA and reading responses, allowing them to provide more targeted instruction and address the diverse needs of students within a heterogeneous classroom. Once grouped homogeneously, teachers target students' specific needs and provide additional support to ensure that students who struggle with certain concepts receive the necessary reinforcement.

With regard to handwriting instruction, while faculty agreed that there is a lack of consistent support of handwriting development in CCSD they also acknowledged that this was not the greatest of their integration concerns. Handwriting Without Tears (HWT) was not widely addressed by faculty during our study, but when it was some noted that it was hard to prioritize integrating another disparate program into the literacy block. Others also noted that they preferred materials, such as writing paper, from other programs not utilized within the district.

HWT is a research-backed program employing a multisensory approach to make handwriting engaging and accessible for all learners. The program follows a developmentally appropriate sequence, progressing from simple to complex letter formations, and emphasizes explicit instruction combined with guided multisensory practice to promote handwriting automaticity. HWT integrates hands-on tools and activities to build fine motor skills, alphabet knowledge, and

vocabulary. It offers both print and digital resources, allowing for flexible implementation in various learning environments. The curriculum aligns with the science of reading, recognizing handwriting as a foundational skill for literacy development, and has proven effective for many students, particularly those struggling with handwriting.

Examples

Example of kindergarten writing instruction in the Units of Study

In the first writing unit in kindergarten, there is a lesson called, "Names Can Help Writers Write More Words." In this lesson, teachers are instructed to, "...use the class name chart to bolster students' letter-sound connections by identifying a familiar classroom object, slug-stretching the word to listen for the first sound, then matching a student's name to that initial sound to encode the word" (p. 88). Examples include the classroom objects *easel* and *carpet*. Then the teacher delivers the teaching point: "Today I want to teach you that you can use names to help you write more words on the page. When you stretch out a word and listen for the sounds you can think, 'Whose name can help me with this word?'" Examples include "Rayan" to figure out the first letter in *rug* and "Badr" to figure out the first word in *bookshelf*. Then students are sent off to write with encouragement to match a word to the first sound in a friend's name and then ask the friend what letter their name starts with. While students write, teachers are given a number of options for how they can provide scaffolding or instruction: conferring with students to "start the year off strong," practicing isolating initial sounds in a small group, or leading a sound hunt with cut up letters.

This lesson does not align with research-informed best practices in literacy instruction for a number of reasons.

In an instructional approach that is aligned with the SoR, teaching must be systematic. New skills must be directly connected to skills that were previously taught and practiced. In this case, it does not appear that students have received sufficient instruction and opportunities to practice isolating initial sounds and matching them to a corresponding letter. If the skill is matching the initial sounds of words in their writing with the first letter in their friends' names, it would stand to reason that students should have learned most if not all of the consonant, short, and long vowel sounds. But by this point in kindergarten, CCSD students have received instruction from Phonics First in the sounds of the letters *o*, *a*, *d*, and *g*. Surely students must be resourceful when they are sounding out unfamiliar words, and surely they should not be confined to writing only words that use those four letters, but if a suggested strategy applies mostly to sounds they don't yet know, then they are not set up to successfully do what is being asked of them. And what if none of the names in the class start with o, a, d, or g? Then students will not have an example that aligns with sounds they actually do know.

Another problematic aspect of this lesson is that there is no accountability or assessment built in. Teachers have no way of knowing if students are applying the strategy correctly because everyone is writing different words, and they may or may not be using a classmate's name at all, let alone correctly. If they are, the teacher might be working with a student on "using manipulatives to hear syllables" at the same time, so they might miss that marker of success. Teachers will likely notice selected examples of students applying the strategy, but the SoR calls for an equitable experience for all students, and this is not an equitable approach to assessment or instruction.

In a research-aligned approach to literacy instruction, the task should be directly aligned to the lesson. Students should have to practice the skill they were just taught. In the writer's workshop approach, the task is sometimes simply to write or to keep writing. If that is the case, then successful completion of the task does not require usage of the skill.

It is clear that the goal of this lesson is to support students in writing words, and that is a critical and age-appropriate objective in kindergarten. Teachers are instructed at the beginning of this section of this unit to, "convey an attitude that implies, 'Of course you can write words—go ahead!'" (p. 71) But students can't learn to write words through an implied attitude. The encouragement and confidence that a teacher can convey must be accompanied by explicit and systematic teaching of sounds, sound segmentation, and grapheme-phoneme correspondence. The Reading Units of Study do call for the use of a separate phonics program, and they do include phonological awareness extensions, but if the focus and instruction of those components is not aligned, there is not sufficient research to support its efficacy.

Example of upper elementary writing instruction using the Units of Study:

The Writing Units of Study takes a genre-based approach to teaching writing, likely because there are three genres named in the NYS Next Generation Learning Standards: narrative, argumentative/opinion, and informative/explanatory. In theory, students learn tools for writing each of the genres and then transfer that knowledge to writing about any topic. In practice, this does not necessarily provide sufficient scaffolding to become good writers. Additionally, we would argue that starting in upper elementary, students should be engaging in informational writing throughout the year rather than only during one unit.

During our observation of fifth grade classes, for example, students were engaged in the writing Unit of Study on argumentative/opinion writing. The amount of sources that were provided to students ranged from pictures of the nutritional label of a carton of chocolate milk to an article authored by Lucy Calkins to supplementary articles sourced by teachers. While we saw some students deeply engaged in conversations about whether or not schools should serve students chocolate milk, it did not appear as though they had sufficient background knowledge with which to write an entire essay on the topic. When a student's opinion is that schools should not serve chocolate milk because it is unhealthy, one wonders how a fifth grader could develop that into an entire essay. Proponents of this approach might say that rather than developing deep knowledge about a topic, students develop deep knowledge about how to write an argumentative essay. In classrooms where teachers were not supplementing the curriculum with concrete scaffolds, we did not find that to be the case. When we saw some classes preparing to write after the research phase, their instructions were to create a flash draft. They were expected to draft the entire composition in one sitting.

An alternative approach might look something like this, following guidance from the Writing Revolution:

In fifth grade, students learn about the impact of European colonization on indigenous societies. While reading rigorous texts in order to build background knowledge, students take notes using a graphic organizer that they've practiced using in the past. After reading, students demonstrate their understanding by completing a familiar activity, such as:

1. Sentence expansion using the conjunctions because, but, and so - This can serve as formative assessment for the teacher.
    - European explorers traveled across the Atlantic Ocean because _____.
    - European explorers traveled across the Atlantic Ocean but _____.
    - European explorers traveled across the Atlantic Ocean so _____.

2. Sentence expansion using question words:
   - Teacher provided sentence stem: *They explored.*
   - Students fill in details:
     - Who?_____
     - When?_____
     - Where?_____
     - Why?_____
   - Students use the answers to create a detailed sentence such as: *Europeans explored the land now known as America in the 15th-17th century because they wanted access to valuable resources and they wanted to claim land for their countries.*

After engaging in sufficient text-based research, all students will write an essay on the topic of European exploration. While everyone is writing about the same topic, each student will create their own thesis, which teachers will review before approving. Teachers will provide scaffolding and corrective feedback to students who find this to be challenging. An example of a scaffold would be to create a thesis that includes a cause and effect. Then students will use phrases to create an outline of their first paragraph, which should include the topic and its importance. The approved thesis will serve as the final sentence of the introductory paragraph. Again, the teacher will provide timely corrective feedback. If students follow this structure, which is displayed on a classroom chart, they will likely write a coherent and concise opening paragraph outline:

- First: general statement
- Second: specific statement (There can be more than one specific statement)
- Third: thesis statement

Once the class has completed the outlining of the introduction, together they will move on to outlining the body paragraphs, with the teacher providing modeling before each step and feedback as students work, as needed. The class moves through all subsequent steps of the writing process together. This allows for each student to bring their own ideas and opinions while sticking to a reliable structure that will set them up for success.

Key differences between the two approaches:

Chocolate Milk Example	European Exploration and Colonization Example
• A relatively shallow topic for which the background knowledge is nonessential • Students can choose the topic of their composition, which means that teachers may not necessarily be able to provide corrective feedback on the topic • Minimal pre-writing planning • Students have a range of strategies they can use to support their writing, but successful completion of the task does not necessitate the correct use of any particular strategy • Students draft with little structure,	• A complex topic that is part of the social studies standards • The content knowledge that students develop will connect to other topics of study and make it easier for them to gain related background knowledge • Students can choose the topic of their composition, and the teacher can provide corrective feedback and support because the whole class has built common background knowledge • Students develop a high-quality outline • Students are guided to use specific

necessitating significant time spent on revision, which will likely require one-on-one support from the teacher ● The teacher must rely on summative data, usually in the form of a rubric. They cannot equitably provide feedback on the process for every student because they have spent much of the student writing time conferring or working with small groups.	previously taught strategies that are applicable to the content and genre ● Students draft in a structured way, so less revision will be required ● Formative assessment data is generated throughout the project, meaning that the writing process can be evaluated. This can be used in combination with summative data from a writing rubric.

WRITING

CAREI Rubric Minnesota Department of Education, 2024)

W4. Parts of speech (as related to syntax) instruction follows a logical progression as appropriate for the grade
W5. Sentence-level composition instruction follows a logical progression as appropriate for the grade
W6. The program applied sentence-level practice orally and in writing
W7. The program includes explicit instruction on paragraph-level composition

RED FLAGS
W17. Students have not built adequate background knowledge on the topic about which they are asked to compose lengthy pieces to be able to do so successfully
W18. Writing approach is primarily unstructured, instruction is opportunistic and driven by individual conferring sessions
W19. Kindergarten students are asked to write sentences or longer pieces before they have had adequate letter formation instruction
W26. The program prioritizes quantity over quality (e.g., writing more pieces or more paragraphs over ensuring pieces are high-quality)
W27. The audience for all or most writing tasks is the teacher

The Writing Units of Study includes at least 9 of the 14 highlighted red flag components.

Knowledge Matters Review Tool (Knowledge Matters Campaign, n.d.)

A volume of writing to build knowledge:
"Curriculum includes explicit instruction in the fundamentals of writing, including sentence construction and the planning, drafting, and writing of paragraphs and essays, as well as grammar and usage instruction in the context of students' writing. This includes explicit instruction on how to convey knowledge through specific text genres and features.
Curriculum includes writing assignments that vary in purpose, audience, genre, length, and duration. Composition instruction is generally directly or indirectly linked to the curriculum content."

The program is lacking in explicit instruction in the fundamentals of writing, from the sentence level up through longer compositions. While the genre, duration, and length of writing assignments varies, the audience is either the teacher or pieces are written for a nonspecific audience. The purpose of writing tasks is tied to the genre and does not go beyond that.

Reading League Curriculum Evaluation Guidelines (The Reading League, 2023)

> *"Composition: Conventions, grammar, and sentence structure is not explicitly taught and practiced systematically (i.e., from simple to complex) with opportunities for practice to automaticity, instead it is taught implicitly or opportunistically."*

Conventions are taught, but lack sufficient systematic practice. Grammar and sentence structure instruction are insufficient and heavily supplemented by teachers.

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Conventions are taught, but lack sufficient systematic practice. Grammar and sentence structure instruction are insufficient and heavily supplemented by teachers.

NYS K-3 Literacy Curriculum Review Guide (New York State Education Department, 2024)

> *The curriculum emphasizes explicit systematic instruction of writing.*
> *• Writing lessons have clear objectives, are introduced systematically, and are organized to teach the skills of writing directly and explicitly.*
> *• Lessons focus on the characteristics of writing beyond physical scribing and conventions, including the development of ideas, organization, fluency, and word choice.*
> *• Materials include a variety of paper types to help students learn print concepts, develop handwriting skills, increase writing stamina, and establish organization.*
> *• Students write in a variety of genres and for a variety of audiences and purposes.*

Alignment Across Tiers

Overview

The district utilizes a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), which is a comprehensive framework that addresses the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of all students through a tiered approach. The framework typically consists of three tiers:

- Tier 1 provides universal support and high-quality instruction for all students (75-90% of the student population);
- Tier 2 offers targeted interventions for some students (10-25%) who need additional support beyond Tier 1; and
- Tier 3 delivers intensive, individualized interventions for a small number of students (less than 10%) with significant challenges.

These tiers represent increasing levels of intensity of support, with students able to move between tiers based on their progress and needs. The MTSS framework emphasizes data-driven decision-making, regular progress monitoring, and a collaborative approach involving educators, specialists, and families to ensure all students receive the appropriate level of support to succeed academically, behaviorally, socially and emotionally.

Best practice is to use aligned curricula for all grades and tiers. Utilizing different curricula disadvantages Tier 2/3 students, who are the district's most at-risk readers. This practice can create confusion, gaps in learning, and increased cognitive load for students, especially those at-risk who need a stable, coherent instructional approach (Blömeke & Olsen, 2019; Fix et al., 2019). Research on effective multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) emphasizes the importance of a unified, evidence-based core curriculum that is supplemented with additional

supports as needed, rather than entirely separate curricula for different tiers (Branching Minds, 2023; Instructure, 2023). This alignment allows for more targeted interventions, simplified professional development, and ensures all students build on the same foundational skills (ASCD, 2023; Shaltry, 2020).

Analysis
As the district reconsiders its core reading program as well as the decision to implement two different phonics programs and a third program for phonemic awareness, we also suggest exploring alignment between phonics programs for Tier 1, 2 & 3 to better support students who are below benchmark

Fundations, Just Words, and the Wilson Reading System are the primary curricula utilized for intervention in CCSD and they can effectively support Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions within an MTSS model. Fundation can serve as both a Tier 1 prevention program for all K-3 students (though it is not used for this purpose at CCSD) and a Tier 2 early intervention for struggling readers, providing explicit, systematic instruction in foundational reading skills. Just Words is designed as a Tier 2 intervention for students in grades 4-12 with mild to moderate decoding and spelling difficulties, offering an accelerated word study program. The Wilson Reading System is an intensive Tier 3 intervention for students with significant reading challenges, including those with dyslexia, providing comprehensive, multisensory structured literacy instruction. All three programs follow a systematic, explicit approach aligned with the science of reading, allowing schools to provide a continuum of support across tiers. They can be implemented in small groups or individually, with increasing intensity and frequency of instruction as students move from Tier 2 to Tier 3, ensuring that struggling readers receive appropriate, targeted interventions within the MTSS framework. The use of these instructional materials were very highly valued by participants in the study who believe they have significantly improved intervention services.

Given the current use of multiple programs for phonics instruction and that Fundations can be effectively utilized in Tier 1 as a prevention program, Theory & Practice encourages the district to consider the following:

- Fundations for Tiers 1 and 2 in Grades K-3
- Just Words in Tier 2 for Grades 4-8
- Wilson Reading System for Tiers 2 and 3

All three programs are published by Wilson and they use consistent components, such as terminology, strategies, markups, writing lines, etc. An additional benefit of using Wilson products is that Wilson recently acquired Acadience, the original authors of the DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills), a high-quality and high-utility benchmark assessment which we recommend in the Assessment section of this report. For Tier 1 phonics instruction, Fundations includes more phonemic awareness practice and instruction than Phonics First (Rehfeld, Kirkpatrick, O'Guinn, & Renbarger, 2022). While some schools supplement with Heggerty for additional phonemic awareness coverage, Fundations may be sufficient. There is not a clear research consensus on the ideal dosage of phonemic awareness instruction, but recent studies have shown that more is not more (Little, Edwards, Harris, Santangelo, & Terry, 2023). As an added bonus, the Wilson Reading System is very highly valued by the CCSD specialists who participated in our study. Over hours of transcripts with multiple

participants including many specialists, there was not a single negative comment made about the choice to implement Wilson, the training provided, or the program itself.

Additional Guidelines Choosing High Quality Instructional Materials

Recommending a specific program is outside of the scope of this evaluation. While we immersed ourselves in the district in order to make tailored recommendations, our understanding of the district is limited in time and scope. Choosing a new curriculum is a complex decision that requires a deep understanding of the needs, priorities, and quirks of the district. As outside consultants with limited engagement with the community, we do not presume to understand every nuance of this district nor do we believe there is one answer to the questions of how CCSD should replace the Units of Study. We also do not believe now is the right time to choose an alternative. Any choice the district makes will come with decisions and trade-offs that require time for thoughtful debate and consideration. It is our perception that the district should not begin to consider replacement programs until professional development ensures all educators and administrators in the district have a shared, thorough understanding of the SoR and a philosophy of literacy has been established. Once these components are in place and the team begins researching options, the instructional materials on the market may look very different than they do right now. Moreover, the CCSD team choosing curricula will be well-positioned to weigh the benefits and limitations of each program, and the potential trade-offs to be considered will be very clear.

During the reading/core curriculum discovery process, we encourage the district to consider a few additional guidelines. This is not intended to replace the district's Philosophy of Literacy or as an exhaustive list of all components that the district's next reading program should encompass. Rather, this is a list of additional considerations based on the time and context within which this evaluation was conducted, our knowledge of materials available on the market, as well as our knowledge of aspects of the CCSD literacy program that have emerged as specific areas of concern.

- Throughout the report, especially in the Philosophy of Literacy section (under "Frameworks" and "Look Fors") there are specific guidelines for choosing a program. These are a brief summary of key components that should be included. You will also want to utilize the components of well-developed rubrics, such as those listed earlier in this section, as evaluation tools. Depending on the district's timeline, New York State's forthcoming guidelines may soon be available and will, of course, be essential for evaluating alternatives.
- We recommend that you consider programs that address both knowledge building and comprehension skills in order to boost language comprehension.
- Not all programs available include a phonics component. If the district chooses a program that does include phonics, consider how well the phonics component would allow for alignment with Tiers 2 and 3 (described in more detail in the next section). If you choose a program that does not include phonics, consider the guidance in the following sections for how to create more fluid alignment with a stand-alone phonics program.
- Not all programs currently available have writing components, but of those that we are familiar with, the writing components are not as robust as some of the high-quality stand-alone approaches to writing that are available. In the writing section of this report,

we outline our recommendations for effective, well-developed writing approaches that we believe would be very successful in your district. If you choose to follow that recommendation, then you would not need a reading program that has a writing program.

- The only reason to replace Handwriting Without Tears is if an equally good or better option for handwriting is integrated into a different program that will be in use in the district. Streamlining and integration are the goal but if a stand alone handwriting program is required, the district should continue to utilize HWT. For example, Fundations is designed to cover reading, spelling and handwriting; if this program were chosen as a Tier 1 program, then HWT would no longer be needed. Neither ThinkSRSD nor Writing Revolution include specific handwriting instruction.
- Most programs will include some type of assessment, so be sure that the assessments are in alignment with your district's approach to assessment. We discuss recommendations related to assessment in a later section of this report, and encourage you to consider that guidance when choosing and integrating a new reading program.
- Do not hold out for a perfect, one-size-fits-all solution. We are not aware of one available on the market. There will be flaws in every program and the goal is not to avoid integration of programs; the goal is to have much better integration. Similarly, CCSD will likely still need to supplement the programs you choose, but we do think you can find an option where the core pedagogy is less flawed and, therefore, less supplementation and modification is required. That being said, CCSD faculty are very practiced with supplementation and modification, and they enjoy collaborating and creating. With a core program that is research-aligned and effective, the opportunity to modify in small, manageable ways may be welcomed by teachers.
- Historically, while the research has been consistent, there has been a tendency to swing from one extreme to the opposite when it comes to the implementation of literacy research. Our recommendation is not that CCSD schools should abandon the instruction of comprehension skills. Rather, we recommend that the district take a more holistic approach that goes beyond the teaching of language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge so that it also includes both background knowledge and comprehension skills.

Addressing Misconceptions of Alternatives

Before the exploration of alternatives can be considered, district leaders should work to address the misconceptions about alternatives that exist across the leadership team as well as with the faculty. Below is an overview of some of the misconceptions we encountered during our study, which further evidence the case for a clear district-wide philosophy of literacy education, need for more training in the SoR at all levels in the district, and the benefit of an outside firm to support the decision-making process.

Misconception: Any changes would lead to the loss of joy

Throughout this process, Theory & Practice repeatedly heard from administrators that moving away from a workshop model would diminish the joy of learning to read and write. All of us who care about children and teachers can agree that we want students to find joy in reading and writing, both in school and beyond. However, joy in and of itself is not a means to good reading and writing skills. On the contrary, research has found that literacy skills have a

positive impact on literacy enjoyment - not the other way around (Torppa, Vasalampi, Eklund, Sulkunen, & Niemi, 2023). Students are far more likely to enjoy reading and writing when they are good readers and writers. They should indeed learn in a joyful environment, but they should also engage in purposeful skill building. We saw evidence of this joy during the "heart word" lesson described earlier in the report. Regardless of which curriculum the district uses, we believe that joy would be infused by the faculty, who we found to be consistently caring and deeply invested in their students' success. Joy comes from being able to read, write, speak, and listen well, and a lack of good literacy skills can create an absence of joy.

Misconception: Any changes would lead to the loss of teacher agency

It is true that in a reader's and writer's workshop model, teachers do a significant amount of decision making when planning lessons. They are not tied to a script or rigid set of activities. In our observations, surveys, and focus groups, the way agency seemed to play out in classrooms was teachers making the choice to supplement the existing curriculum with materials that they felt were missing.

In an ideal model of teacher agency, teachers would already be provided with high-quality instructional materials that meet their students' needs, and they would have the agency to enhance and differentiate as they see fit. What we saw was that teachers in CCSD feel that they have to do both: source supplementary materials in order to make the curriculum instructionally sound, and then enhance on top of that. Some teachers did report a lack of a sense of agency in reference to changes and mandates from the district. Multiple participants mentioned fear of "getting in trouble" for making modifications, even though as professionals they believed that the changes were necessary for their students' success. It should be noted that where teachers found the most need to modify and supplement is with the Units of Study, and this was also the only curriculum where teachers reported there was rigid pressure from the district to adhere closely to the manual. One respondent identified this as a recent shift in the culture in the district, resulting in less passion and commitment from faculty as a result. We also heard from many teachers who were very energized by the recent additions of new phonics curricula and inspired to collaborate with peers on how to best implement new programs and philosophies.

In the workshop model that is currently in place in the district, we observed that in kindergarten through second grade classrooms, teachers had done the work of preparing multiple different activities for each day. The current curriculum instructs teachers to split students up into small groups, but it does not provide the different activities for each group. It cannot be overstated that this takes a significant amount of time every day to prepare–more time than teachers have available during the school day. While collaborative learning in small groups can have strong positive effects on learning, several studies have highlighted the challenges and comparative effectiveness of small group instruction versus whole group instruction, noting that small group instruction can be difficult to implement effectively and may often be less effective than whole group instruction (Tal, 2018; Shanahan, 2018; Ruhe, 2023).

There seems to be a commonly held belief among educators and administrators in the district that making any changes in reading and writing curriculum would mean adopting a program

that requires students to read out of a textbook, resulting in a loss of agency for both teachers and students. While there are some programs that include a basal reader, there are also a number of well-reviewed choices that use the same high-quality, inclusive trade books we saw in Chappaqua classrooms. An exploratory study of the range of alternatives would be very helpful for the district.
Misconception: We should only change programs if there is a perfect all-in-one program The unfortunate truth is that there is not a perfect program that we know of that includes everything that we would hope for. While there will be a number of new curricula and updated versions published over the next few years, it is unlikely that any of them will feel like the perfect fit. But if that is a requirement for change, that would leave the district with a less-than-ideal program for good. While it may still require some supplementation, we do believe that adopting a new curriculum would be a step in the right direction. Shifting to a core ELA program that might require a grammar supplement, for example, would go a long way in resolving alignment issues, which was a common theme of critical feedback from CCSD faculty. It is important to note that most participants, including those in the Science of Reading Task Force and participants in the focus groups and surveys did not hold this view. The vast majority shared the perspective that can best be summed up by one respondent's statement: “Know better, do better.” In other words, literacy educators nationally, as well as CCSD educators specifically, know the shortcomings of the Units of Study and would prefer to move towards more efficient, SoR-aligned programs. Many participants lamented the district’s insistence on staying the course with the Units of Study, describing the current state of affairs–managing multiple disjointed programs–as far more difficult than making big changes to their current practices.

Once these misconceptions are addressed, you can use your literacy philosophy as your guidepost rather than comparing and contrasting alternatives to the Units of Study. That will ensure that you avoid adopting something that is very similar in approach to the workshop model, because it is a pedagogical approach that is misaligned with the SoR. We are also seeing that some districts are overcorrecting and choosing to focus mostly on phonics, and we know that CCSD is aware that is not what the research calls for, either. So focus on pedagogy and best practices over products and brands, and we urge you to keep an open mind. The misconceptions that we heard about other products wouldn’t bear out if a committee or task force were to look at the products themselves.

Recommendation 3: Leverage Strengths for Change

Recommendations

- **Develop a collaborative, team-oriented approach to educational change with a focus on high-quality, school-based professional development tailored to teacher needs**
- **Review of the middle and elementary school schedules and intervention structures, and the middle school advisory program in order to determine if the district can improve the effectiveness of student support services**

School Change

A great deal has been written and synthesized about school change (McLure & Aldridge, 2023) and many of the best practices appear to be in place in CCSD. However, given the faculty perceptions of recent changes and the potential for significant changes on the horizon, district leadership should pause and create guidelines and parameters for change, including minimum timelines, clarification of decision-making processes, best practices for professional development, and communication plans for everyone involved in the change process. Levers such as researching and choosing curriculum and approaches; initial and ongoing professional development; and pilots, implementation, and assessments of new programs should all be planned using carefully developed and well-communicated school change guidelines.

The work of Michael Fullan, a recognized authority on educational change, is relevant considering some of the growing pains described by participants in CCSD. His "The Six Secrets of Change" (Fullan, 2008) would be helpful in providing key principles that the district can use to help the organization thrive through the processes of complex organizational change. Key components of this approach emphasize creating a supportive environment, collaboration with purpose, ongoing learning and growth, transparency and clear communication, and creating a learning organization that is adaptable and responsive to change. Fullan's work with Richard DuFour (2013) on Systemic Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) could also be a useful guide for achieving system-wide reform and long-lasting change. District leaders should never lose sight of the fact that what CCSD faculty value most about their community is opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues. They are eager for ever more structured opportunities to collaborate with peers on specific areas of focus across grade levels and subjects, suggesting that ongoing PLCs would be particularly well-received. Fullan and DuFour's notion of the "loose-tight dilemma" could be particularly helpful to district leaders in navigating the teachers' strong desire for autonomy and the need for consistency and fidelity across the district. The importance of combining top-down directives with bottom-up initiatives can not be underestimated, and the district should develop an approach to managing accountability that ensures everyone is set up for success while working towards the same and overall goals of the system.

The work of Ellie Drago-Severson, a prominent figure in adult learning and school leadership, is also particularly well aligned to the culture and context of CCSD and would pair nicely with the approaches outlined in Fullan's work. Much of what Drago-Severson outlines as "Four Pillar Practices" (2009) to support adult learning in schools is already in place in CCSD. Using her work to enhance and solidify those practices could build on the strong sense of synergy in the district while strengthening alignment. Her concept of developmental capacity building is also of critical relevance here. She calls for creating environments for the growth of all of the adults in the system, including teachers, principals, and superintendents. This involves meeting each professional where they are and providing for their unique needs. With much of the CCSD district leadership holding terminal degrees and many years of experience, it is important to ensure they are growing with the organization as well, and that the depth of their knowledge

related to the SoR continues to grow. Much of the concern for change that we encountered during our immersion in the community came from individuals in leadership capacities, not the faculty. Application of Drago-Severson's practical guidance for learning-oriented leadership could ensure that openness to learning, growth, and change is modeled for and embraced by faculty.

More than any other change in the district, replacing Units of Study will have the biggest impact–on the students, the faculty, and the culture. There is no doubt the district's literacy identity has the Units of Study at its core, so a loss will be felt even as this change is longed for by so many CCSD faculty. Meaningfully engaging faculty in this process from beginning to end, with appropriate transparency and time for professional learning and reflection, will be essential to success. Again, we recommend utilizing the literature on school change as a guide and emphasizing learning-oriented leadership (Drago-Severson, 2009) that ensures leaders in the organization are modeling the commitment, flexibility, and growth-mindset necessary for this initiative to succeed. Designing a thoughtful, multi-year timeline for adoption that emphasizes a supportive environment, collaboration with purpose, ongoing learning and growth, transparency, and clear communication will ensure success.

Professional Development

A synergistic, well-supported and organized district, CCSD is already very well-poised for continued success implementing additional school change. However, to avoid common pitfalls related to school change efforts and literacy program development, the district should develop a guide for implementing high quality professional development.

Professional development (PD) is intended to enhance and update teachers' knowledge and skills (Feiman-Nemser, 2001) and is essential to improving schools (Bolam, 2000; Hargreaves, 1993). In order to positively impact individual teacher practices, PD needs to be school-based, tailored to teacher-needs, and include collaboration with other teachers (Hunt, 2009). Large, workshop style PD tends to have less impact on teacher practice (Wei et al., 2009), since the greatest challenge for teachers comes from the implementation of new skills in the classroom (Fuller & Johnson, 2001; Gulamhussein, 2013). This may be mediated through small group collaborative exchange that includes opportunities for teachers to examine their current practices critically (Cohen & Hill, 2000; Loucks-Horsley et al., 2010). Not surprisingly, these are exactly the types of professional learning experiences participants said they value most and hope to see more of in CCSD.

Professional development is provided generously and consistently in CCSD and district leaders should be commended for supporting an environment that emphasizes continued professional learning. To continue to strengthen professional development in CCSD, district leaders should carefully consider steps to ensure smooth implementation and high-quality options.

Throughout focus group sessions, participants expressed concerns about professional development on the SoR being provided by consultants closely aligned with the Units of Study. There is a desire for professional development from experts with fresh perspectives and expertise that does not currently exist in the district. In addition, participants were frustrated

with the approach to and quality of professional development for some recent programs, suggesting hasty roll-outs. Participants describe experiences where a trainer was not available and the faculty were instructed to watch “generic informational videos” or go online and “basically teach themselves” how to implement a new program. Conversely, when high-quality, research-aligned professional development is provided, the impact is felt deeply by faculty. Several participants described training in Wilson as really improving her efficacy and confidence. They valued being certified in a “scientific research-based approach” and seeing excellent results in their students.

Professionals at every level of CCSD are proud of their expertise and commitment to excellence. The district should continue to build on this culture by providing ongoing professional development in the SoR as well as the programs and curricula that are chosen for implementation.

Schedule and Structures

Oftentime the levers that most impact implementation of programming are completely out of the control of teachers and specialists. There typically tends to be a good reason for operational decisions such as the structure of a schedule or the format for intervention services, but sometimes these components have unintended consequences.

Across most of our focus group interviews we received quite a bit of feedback about how the schedule is structured and when Tier 2 and 3 intervention services are able to be provided. The perception of many participants is that services could be more effective if structures for how and when they are provided were modified. While an in depth analysis of the schedule and these structures was outside the scope of this study, it seems fairly straightforward that something ought to be done to ensure children receiving intervention services do so regularly and without having to miss other classes. While we do not purport to understand the full complexity of CCSD’s schedule and structures, we trust that the faculty do and they have significant concerns. Therefore, we recommend that the district conduct a review of the schedules in both the middle and elementary schools with an acute focus on how and when push-in and pull-out services are provided to students. Any revisions should be designed to limit the possibility of children being pulled from classes to receive services.

In addition, we recommend that the district conduct an inquiry into the structure and effectiveness of the current middle school advisory program. Advisory can be understood as an organizational structure that allows for an educator to advocate for, nurture, and oversee the school experience of a small group of students (Vaught, 1992) and personalize that experience through the creation of a community of peer learners (Shulkind & Foote, 2009). The type of connectedness provided by advisory is linked to better outcomes in school, including higher test scores, grades, and student retention, regardless of students’ socioeconomic status (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Klem & Connell, 2004; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991; McNeely & Falci, 2004; Shulkind & Foote, 2009). In addition, research suggests that students value the impact advisor support has on their schooling (Esposito & Curcio, 2002; Galassi et al., 1997) as well as the peer interaction and socialization this structure offers (Esposito & Curcio, 2002). Especially for the most struggling students in CCSD, middle school advisory could be another lever that has positive effects on student learning and growth and should be reviewed. In

addition, it could be a channel for stronger communication between home and school at the middle school level.

Conclusion

Chappaqua Central School District (CCSD), a high-performing public school system in Chappaqua, NY, initiated a comprehensive evaluation of their K-6 Literacy Program, focusing on alignment with evidence-based practices known as the Science of Reading (SoR). The district engaged Theory & Practice to conduct an in-depth assessment of the quality and effectiveness of the literacy program, with the goal of receiving expert recommendations for program enhancement. The consultants focused on examining the key components of a research-based literacy program and the levers that impact implementation in CCSD. This evaluation came at a good time for review and reflection, as the district has implemented significant changes in the last several years and stakeholders believe that the literacy program is still incomplete. Additionally, New York State has implemented a plan which will provide literacy guidelines for districts, and the K-3 Curriculum Review Guide was just released. Faculty, parents, and guardians are eager to see the district further overhaul its literacy program to align more closely with the SoR and desire better transparency and communication. Faculty seek a more streamlined suite of programs and assessments that allow for deeper, more meaningful instruction, as well as improved vertical and horizontal alignment. The district's decision to evaluate the program now, as well as the high participation in the study, demonstrates CCSD's commitment to excellence and delivering a literacy program that reflects current research and best practices.

The program evaluation yielded three key themes and 14 robust recommendations organized into three categories. These are unique to this context and moment in time, designed to guide CCSD towards a program that is better aligned with the SoR. At the heart of these recommendations is establishing a strong foundation in the Science of Reading by developing a formal Philosophy of Literacy to guide instruction, professional development, and decision-making district-wide. This would include applying research-aligned models for instructional decision-making as well as providing ongoing professional development to deepen understanding of the SoR at all levels. A key component of improving the district's literacy program is replacing the Units of Study in Reading and Writing with alternatives that align with the research-based, as outlined in the district's new literacy philosophy. Alignment efforts should also explore aligning phonics instruction across all Tiers of the program. In addition, creating a comprehensive approach to assessment will guide selection and implementation of both formative and summative tools and further strengthen the program. The plan also encourages the review of school schedules, intervention structures, and support services to improve effectiveness. Finally, to ensure these changes are successful, CCSD should establish a collaborative, team-oriented approach to educational change, focusing on high-quality, school-based professional development tailored to the needs of teachers, specialists, and district leaders. The district is in a very good position to continue to improve its literacy program by developing a multi-year plan to implement these recommendations. The authors of this evaluation are grateful for the opportunity to provide this service to CCSD and are eager to see how the district's literacy program continues to evolve.

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