Beyond the Surface: Leveraging High-Quality Instructional Materials for Robust Reading Comprehension

Learning brief

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SRI

November 2025

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Suggested Citation

Reynolds, D., Rutherford-Quach, S., Cassidy, L., Jennerjohn, A., & Woodworth, K. (2025). *Beyond the surface: Leveraging high-quality instructional materials for robust reading comprehension* [Learning brief]. SRI.

Acknowledgments

The SRI research team would like to thank the Aldine Independent School District, Baltimore City Public Schools, Guilford County Schools, and Richmond Public Schools for welcoming us into their schools and supporting our data collection efforts. We greatly appreciate the time and input from all the individuals—district staff, principals, coaches, and teachers—who participated in data collection. We also would like to thank our classroom observation team, including Allison Berg, Madeline Coole, Marie Cushing, Sarah Dec, Monica Figueroa, Cris Jimenez, Anandita Krishnamachari, Katherine Necochea Tinco, Sophia Ouyang, and Mallory Scott. We are thankful to Santiago Navia Jaramillo, Rebecca Schmidt, and Tejaswini Tiruke for their data cleaning, analysis, and visualization. In addition, CJ Park has been instrumental in project leadership, Mallory Rousseau in project management, and Jennifer Medeiros with graphic design. We are grateful to Julie Jackson Cohen and Marie Cushing from the University of Virginia for their expertise and training on the Tools for Equitable Reading Instruction: Text-Based Comprehension. Finally, this study would not be possible without the support of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies.

Inspired by the increased national attention on literacy, more districts are implementing *high-quality instructional materials* (HQIM) to support students' reading comprehension. Review tools used by districts and mandated by states around the country, such as EdReports (2025), rate the quality of comprehension-focused instructional materials based on their knowledge-building text sets and sequences as well as their opportunities to support students in making meaning from those texts. Adopting and implementing comprehension-focused HQIM have been many districts' first steps to improve students' comprehension development across the elementary grades.

In implementing comprehension HQIM, a critical distinction is whether instruction facilitates the development of students' *surface-level* or *robust* comprehension. In other words, does it lead students to develop a superficial or a deep understanding of text? Prior research has shown that as educational innovations spread, they often retain the surface features of the innovation, but not the deeper features that truly drive increases in student learning and achievement (Coburn, 2003). Researchers have yet to examine the quality of mature comprehension HQIM implementation at scale to determine if instruction consistently leads to robust comprehension.

This brief examines the extent to which teachers in districts using comprehension HQIM implemented them in ways that supported students' robust comprehension. Findings are based on a study of four districts receiving support through the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies' School System Partnerships to improve their students' literacy outcomes. These four districts were at the national vanguard of HQIM implementation: Each had adopted highly rated knowledge-rich comprehension curriculum, including Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA), Wit & Wisdom, and EL Education, at least 5 years before our study, giving us a unique opportunity to examine mature implementation of these commonly used curricula.

Findings show that these districts have all reached a level of implementation of their comprehension HQIM that features near-universal focus on comprehension with quality texts and active student participation across hundreds of classrooms. However, most lessons—two thirds—resulted in teachers and students doing work that only facilitated *surface-level* understanding of texts. In this brief, we explain how we discovered this problem hiding in plain sight and identify high-leverage comprehension practices that could help districts, schools, and teachers consistently deliver high-quality instruction. Use of these practices could maximize the potential of comprehension HQIM—and be a step toward robust comprehension for every reader.

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About School System Partnerships

The Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies invests in School System Partnerships to strengthen K–8 literacy across urban school systems. Schusterman supports efforts to help school systems build the vision and forge essential partnerships to improve the conditions that can significantly improve K–8 literacy results, including implementing instructional materials and aligned professional learning, building literacy capacity across all educator levels, and increasing community engagement. The theory of action undergirding these efforts proposes that improving district and school conditions, deepening implementation of instructional materials, and aligning professional learning opportunities will result in higher quality instructional practices and improved student outcomes.

In 2024, Schusterman commissioned SRI Education to conduct a 2-year independent study of districts supported by the foundation and committed to this theory of action.

In 2024–25, SRI researchers examined literacy instruction in K–5 classrooms and teachers' experiences with instructional materials, professional learning, and school and district conditions. In each district, SRI researchers (1) observed the literacy blocks of K–5 classrooms in a set of focal schools; (2) surveyed K–5 teachers in focal schools; (3) observed professional learning community meetings across grade levels; and (4) interviewed K–5 teachers, instructional coaches, and principals, as well as district staff. An examination of student outcomes using districts' student achievement data is forthcoming.

What distinguishes surface-level from robust comprehension?

The distinction between surface-level and robust comprehension is made in the Tools for Equitable Reading Instruction: Text-Based Comprehension (TERI: TBC) observation protocol, developed by educators at the University of Virginia and used by SRI researchers for this study (Cohen et al., 2022).

The TERI: TBC conceptualizes a teacher's comprehension instruction as including both the *purpose* and the *work* of a lesson. The *purpose* is the aim, objective, or stated goals of the lesson. Classroom *work* consists of both the instructional practices the teacher uses and the routines in which students are engaged.

Surface-level comprehension: "Shallow comprehension of the text, fueled by an expectation that reading is about completing tasks; students do not complete a mental model of the text—their understanding is restricted to literal understanding with no focus on inference, evaluation, or synthesis."

Robust comprehension: "Indicates deep comprehension of the text, fueled by an expectation that reading is about understanding; students develop a complete mental model of the text that includes both literal and inferential understanding."

(Cohen et al. 2022, p. 5)

About the TERI: TBC

The TERI: TBC captures the depth and quality of reading comprehension instruction and can be used with different reading comprehension curricula. Its main constructs are valid indicators of instructional quality that can be reliably observed with training (Cohen et al., 2024). TERI observers are trained to evaluate a 30-minute comprehension lesson across four domains, including scoring indicators related to:

- Lesson format (including its purpose, work, and materials alignment)
- Support for text comprehension (via analysis, modeling, and prior knowledge activation)
- Supportive learning opportunities (e.g., participation, reasoning, language supports)
- Dispositions and stances (e.g., humanizing stance, engagement and motivation)

A classroom lesson that targets surface-level comprehension might involve the *purpose* of meeting a single standard, such as explaining events in a historical text (e.g., Common Core English Language Arts [ELA] Standard RI.4.3) for a grade 4 CKLA lesson about the Revolutionary War. The *work* students engage in might be to explain the events and training methods that Baron von Steuben used to support the Continental Army wintering at Valley Forge in 1778.

A lesson that supports robust comprehension might focus on one or more comprehension standards (e.g., figurative language, narration, text structure), but the teacher always sets a *purpose* and engages students in *work* related to the text's larger meaning. In the example CKLA lesson, the teacher and students should not merely explain von Steuben's training methods but also contextualize them within the larger meaning of the CKLA text and the CKLA American Revolution unit—about how French and German support during the Continental Army's difficult winter of 1778 was essential to its later success against the well-trained British army. That larger meaning must be central to robust comprehension work.

What did we learn about comprehension instruction?

The SRI research team studied the implementation of knowledge-rich comprehension curricula in 24 elementary schools across the four districts. We used the TERI: TBC to observe comprehension-focused lessons in 111 grade 1–5 classrooms. We also surveyed 539 K–5 teachers about the frequency with which they use their district-adopted HQIM; observed 63 meetings of teachers' professional learning communities (PLCs); and interviewed teachers, instructional coaches, and principals at 12 elementary schools (three per district).

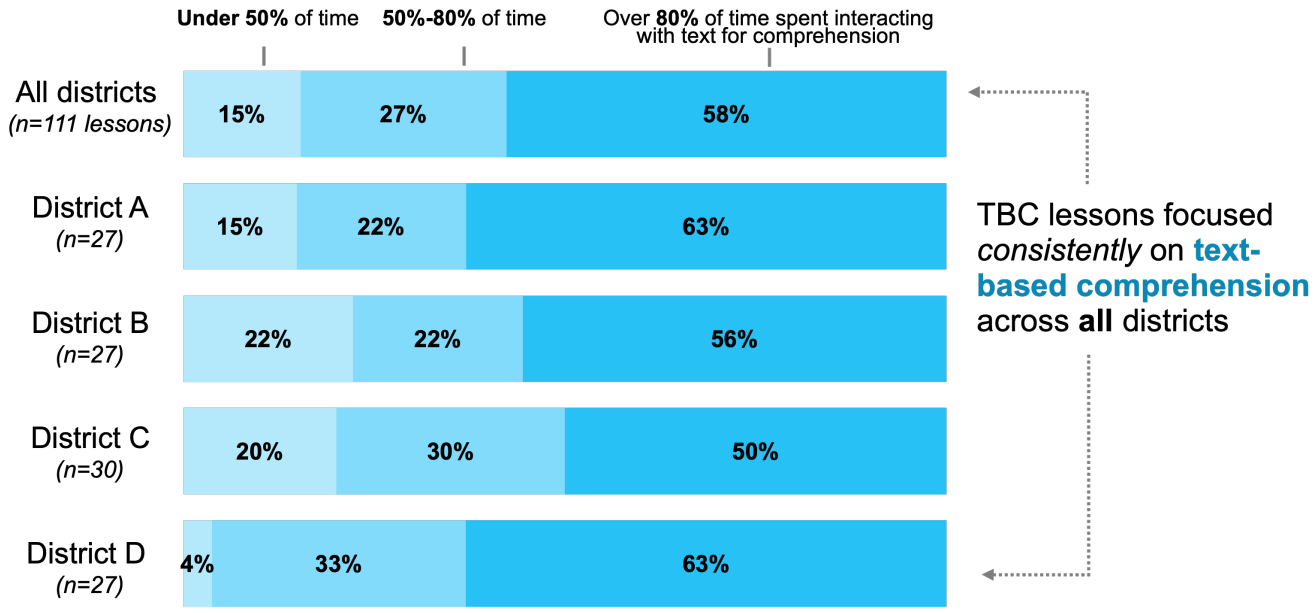
Given the scale and rigor of this study—methodologically one of the strongest observational studies of classroom reading comprehension instruction conducted in the last 50 years (Capin al., 2025)—the findings are applicable to districts across the country. These findings inform concrete action steps that educators can take to improve comprehension instruction.

Finding 1: Teachers consistently implemented comprehension HQIM

Most teachers surveyed—between 72% and 89% across the four districts—reported implementing their comprehension curricula daily or almost daily. This finding corroborated what the research team saw during classroom observations. Exhibit 1 illustrates that during observed lessons (n=111), which all featured each district's adopted comprehension curriculum by design (we requested to see lessons featuring use of HQIM), students had sufficient time for text-based comprehension, with 58% of lessons devoting more than 80% of instructional time to students interacting with text for the purpose of reading comprehension. In other words, teachers used instructional time to focus on comprehension—they did not drift into creative writing, fluency, or non-text-focused discussions. Ensuring this clear focus on comprehension is an essential first step in districts' curriculum implementation.

Survey and observation data show that nearly all teachers were using their HQIM daily or almost daily, that lesson time was largely dedicated to reading comprehension work, and that students were actively engaged in this work.

Exhibit 1. Time Spent Interacting with Texts for Comprehension



Our observations also showed that instruction included strong opportunities for students to participate, although opportunities varied across districts. For example, 93% of lessons across the four districts included at least some opportunities for some students to actively participate in comprehension work, and 58% regularly included opportunities for all students to participate. These data show that most teachers were not lecturing, nor were students engaged in extended periods of silent reading or seatwork.

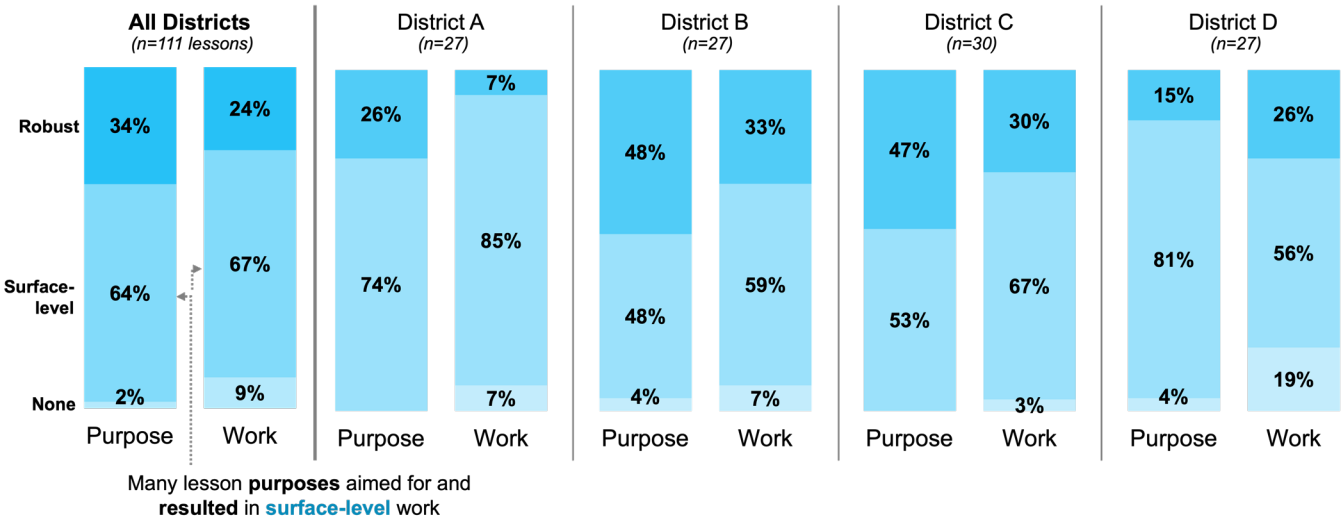
Taken together, the survey and observations clearly reveal that, across these four large districts, teachers and students actively engaged in comprehension work using the district-adopted comprehension curriculum on a near-daily basis. This practice established a high and consistent floor for comprehension instruction and was likely the result of years of intentional implementation work and district support.

Finding 2: Most instruction aimed for and resulted in work that supported surface-level comprehension

Despite the regular comprehension HQIM use and focus, the *purposes* and *work* of most observed lessons only facilitated surface-level analysis of texts, without orienting students to more robust understanding. This clear trend was visible across the districts and in each individual district (Exhibit 2). Nearly two in three lessons (64%) across the districts had *purposes* (i.e. objectives) that supported the development of surface-level, rather than robust, comprehension. Similarly, in 67% of the lessons, teachers and students engaged in *work* (i.e., instruction, engagement, and activity) that only facilitated students' surface-level understanding of texts.

Teachers and students were doing text-based comprehension work, but most of that work was skimming the surface rather than supporting a deeper understanding of texts.

Exhibit 2. Lesson Purposes and Work



As SRI researchers conducted observations in each district across the span of one week, we saw many related lessons from the same unit, and sometimes even an identical HQIM lesson, in different schools and classrooms. These observations revealed how the same lesson, in the same school, with similar students, could look very different across classrooms. Some instruction facilitated comprehension learning at the surface level, often focusing mainly on a task or standard, and other instruction supported robust

comprehension, incorporating tasks and standards work into a broader discussion or synthesis related to textual meaning. Exhibit 3 provides examples of both surface-level and robust work for the same lesson, by curricula.

Exhibit 3. Examples of Surface-Level and Robust Comprehension Work

HQIM / Grade Level	Surface-Level Work Example	Robust Work Example
Wit & Wisdom Grade 3	Teacher (T) guided her students to identify and label literal and nonliteral language in *One Giant Leap*, a text about the moon landing.	T first helped identify and label literal and nonliteral language and then asked her students what it *meant* when Neil Armstrong described his "one giant leap for mankind."
CKLA Grade 4	T guided her students to find details that describe characters in a vignette from the novel *The House on Mango Street*.	T guided her students to describe character details in *The House on Mango Street*, and then they analyzed how the details revealed themes of discrimination.
EL Education Grade 4	T guided her students to identify literal and nonliteral language in *Divided Loyalties*, a text about the American Revolution.	T first helped identify nonliteral language and then asked her students what it really *meant* when a storm helped "breathe new life" into the American Revolution in *Divided Loyalties*.

In the surface-level examples, teachers focused on finding and labeling key visible features of the text. In the robust examples, the teachers found and labeled those features but also engaged students in building a complete meaning of the text. Building robust meaning, then, requires teachers to go beyond identifying surface-level features and guide students to integrate those features with the rest of the text's details into a robust understanding. Because comprehension HQIM texts are designed to be content-rich with an array of details from which to construct meaning, current curricula should be able to provide consistent opportunities for teachers to focus on surface-level features but always build toward a larger meaning.

Building on these powerful examples of robust comprehension work, which are likely the result of masterful, well-prepared teachers working with high-quality curriculum, offers a promising route to deepening HQIM implementation to achieve instruction that leads to improved student comprehension.

The Role of HQIM in Fostering Surface-Level vs. Robust Comprehension

While the study did not examine the relationship between specific HQIM and instruction, it is important to recognize the role of HQIM in driving teachers' practices. The specific designs of comprehension curricula likely influence the robustness of instruction.

The HQIM might, for example, suggest a surface-level activity such as a book walk previewing text features that is meant to activate students' curiosity and does not guide them toward a robust understanding of the text (such as Wit & Wisdom's WORD+Knowledge framework, which begins each unit with a *Wonder* phase). Other lessons might explicitly provide teachers with task and discussion questions that use standards-aligned activities to build toward robust understanding of text. A close analysis of the HQIM lesson plans could better untangle the degree to which they may facilitate lessons that lead to robust comprehension work—or unintentionally guide teachers to surface-level lessons.

Finding 3: Certain instructional practices may support robust comprehension

Beyond specifically attending to making meaning instead of completing tasks, what characterizes instruction and classroom work that supports robust comprehension? To better understand the instructional practices of lessons that facilitated robust understanding of texts, we further analyzed the data for the 27 lessons (out of 111) that supported robust comprehension. We examined TERI: TBC dimension and indicator scores as well as the spread of scores across and within districts. This analysis suggests that implementing a *specific* HQIM curriculum is not the determining factor that influences whether lessons facilitate more robust understanding of texts. For example, the two districts that used CKLA respectively delivered the lowest (7%) and the second highest (30%) percentages of observed lessons that led to robust comprehension work.

Certain instructional practices and routines, however, appeared more frequently in lessons that supported robust comprehension. Moreover, these associations mirror previous theory and research that suggest the integrated use of certain core or high-leverage teaching practices may result in higher quality teaching and learning (Grossman et al., 2013; Shaughnessy & Forzani, 2012). Many of these previously identified core teaching practices—particularly those specific to ELA—are also central to the framing of the TERI: TBC dimensions (Cohen et al., 2022).

Observed lessons that facilitated more robust understanding of text were more likely to include six instructional practices. Exhibit 4 lists these six practices in order of the strength of their association with instruction that supported robust comprehension (strongest to weakest) in this dataset. The exhibit also provides a description and an observed example for each instructional practice. These examples illustrate *how* teachers across these four districts were implementing their HQIM to develop students' robust textual understanding.

Exhibit 4. Instructional Practices Associated with Robust Comprehension Work

Practice	Description	Observed Example
Engaging students in text-specific analysis	Teacher (T) organizes opportunities for students to closely analyze a common text. This may include literal and figurative questioning and requires students and T provide textual evidence for claims.	T led students through a sequence of questions about the details and the significance of the moon landing in *One Giant Leap*. T prompted students to ask questions as well as provide textual evidence to support their answers.
Activating & leveraging students' prior knowledge	T and/or students draw on prior knowledge to support comprehension of a focal text. This involves making connections and inferences between textual information and prior knowledge.	T revisited the "big question" the class had been focusing on and asked students to review their writing. T prompted students to make connections between what they learned about space from various texts (*Moonshot*, *One Giant Leap*, etc.) and their current piece of writing.
Explaining & modeling meaning-making and content	T provides explanations and models for comprehension. Explanations support text-specific analysis. Modeling focuses on making one's thinking about textual meaning explicit.	When reading a text about the Age of Navigation, T modeled synthesizing details about new technologies (e.g., compasses, sailing ships, hourglasses) that supported explorers' ability to navigate. T focused on integrating details into a main idea.
Providing instructive feedback	T provides feedback to students that guides their comprehension learning, promoting accuracy and understanding of the text. This includes probing, revoicing, extending, or clarifying student contributions.	T provided confirming feedback to students regarding their reasoning about the main character of *Hatchet*. T revoiced students' responses with academic language, asked specific students for elaboration, and extended student contributions.
Providing opportunities for students to engage in text-based reasoning	T organizes opportunities for students to think deeply about a text orally or in writing. High-level opportunities require students to do most of the intellectual work of reasoning for robust understanding.	T provided students with a graphic organizer with several inquiry questions about *The House on Mango Street*. They answered independently in writing and then discussed in small groups. Three questions were identified to students as literal, two as evaluative, and one as inferential.
Setting up peer learning opportunities	T positions students to communicate about and make sense of texts together. Higher level opportunities involve students' responding to and building on each other's thinking.	T provided several opportunities for students to co-analyze a vignette from *The House on Mango Street*. Students discussed the text in pairs, in small groups, and as a whole group, building on each other's responses through a shared routine, tossing a ball to each other.

Merely implementing these practices, however, will not necessarily lead to lessons that feature robust comprehension work. To do so, the practices must be oriented toward a big idea about a meaning of the whole text. For example, conducting text-specific analysis requires students and teachers to ask and answer literal and inferential questions and provide evidence for claims (see Exhibit 4, Row 1). However, if the questions are all literal (such as "Where does the character live?"), even text-specific analysis is likely to lead to surface-level understanding. Inferential questions, such as those about a character's motivations, can also lead to surface-level understanding if students do not connect those complex motives to the full text to build robust understanding of how those motivations influence the story.

What steps can educators take to deepen HQIM implementation and support robust student comprehension?

The complex ecologies of districts suggest that multiple factors likely influence the high proportion of observed surface-level lessons. If districts focus on narrow standards such as narration, text structure, or vocabulary, they may be unintentionally encouraging teachers to focus on surface-level goals. If teachers' professional learning experiences and PLC meetings only focus on superficial aspects of unit planning and preparation such as improving handouts, keeping to pacing guidelines, or surface-level rehearsal, teachers and coaches may be unintentionally preparing for superficial work. If teachers themselves do not understand the full meaning of their curricular texts—and indeed the districts' HQIM have knowledge-rich and meaningful texts—they may fall back on surface-level goals. While no one factor is an obvious cause, in this section we describe three concrete actions districts can take to break through the surface-level floor and work toward maximizing their comprehension curriculum to facilitate robust student understanding in every classroom.

Action 1: Articulate and communicate a vision for instruction oriented toward robust comprehension

A first step in ensuring that students are working toward robust comprehension is to clearly articulate a shared vision for robust comprehension and define what it means for students, teachers, schools, and the district. For example, a particular district's leaders may decide that, for them, robust comprehension means that *students understand texts deeply and can analyze both their meaning and structure*. Or they may define robust comprehension as *students being able to articulate, orally and in writing, both literal and inferential meaning of texts as well as synthesize information across texts*.

This work requires district and literacy leaders to build a shared, clear understanding of the instructional practices that will guide students toward more robust understanding of texts. Do educators believe that providing opportunities for students to closely analyze texts using comprehension strategies (i.e., predicting, visualizing) will help students more deeply understand those texts? That teachers modeling textual meaning-making through explicit think-alouds during every lesson will move the needle? Districts likely have some of this language in existing literacy goals—but those statements may be inadvertently focusing on practices that lead to only surface-level understanding (e.g., focusing on observable reading practices or simply *using* HQIM).

Leaders must then set explicit goals around robust comprehension. Taking into consideration a district vision for robust comprehension and how to enact it, potential goals might include:

- All literacy lessons will incorporate at least one objective related to robust comprehension.
- Teachers will model metacognition related to the analysis of a complex text at least once during each comprehension lesson.

- All grade 2–5 students will have daily practice to focus on the meaning of texts in small groups.
- Students will regularly write to build robust understanding of texts.

After articulating a vision for robust comprehension and identifying aligned goals, district leaders must clearly communicate these to school leaders, literacy coaches, and teachers. This includes explaining how the vision and goals align with their HQIM and fit into the district's broader literacy plan. Consistent messaging across all levels of the school system and tailored direct messaging to principals, coaches, and teachers will facilitate more widespread buy-in across schools. Messages to principals might focus on using observation tools to capture robustness, while messages to coaches might include tips on shifting teachers' instructional practice to orient lessons toward robust purposes. Finally, direct messages to teachers might give precise examples of instruction that fosters robust understanding with the specific curricular texts and unit content.

Action 2: Build teachers' professional capacity to facilitate robust understanding through existing structures

All four study districts have well-established professional learning structures that focus on HQIM implementation. This infrastructure, however, has not always focused on deepening comprehension instruction. Curriculum-based professional learning is essential but not sufficient. Still, districts can build teachers' capacity to support robust comprehension through their existing infrastructure. Reorienting, not rebuilding, curriculum-based professional learning experiences could prove powerful.

Deepen lesson internalization

One way to sharpen a district's focus on instruction that leads to robust comprehension work is to deepen lesson internalization procedures and treat them—particularly shallow internalization—as a starting rather than an ending point for implementation. Qualitative and survey data suggest that even in districts where lesson internalization is commonplace, teachers see it as focusing more on the *what* of the curriculum and want more guidance regarding *how* to best implement it and support a wide range of students.

> **"The professional development is just for us to understand the curriculum … there's not enough substance to help with students' learning."**
>
> **– Teacher**

A first step to deepening lesson internalization is to ensure that teachers have a strong understanding of the texts used in their HQIM. The knowledge-rich nature of the districts' HQIM presents substantial textual challenges for teachers and students alike. Classroom observations often showed teachers wrestling with the associated texts. To facilitate CKLA, teachers need to understand both the details of significant historical eras (e.g., von Steuben's role in the American Revolution) and the complexity of canonical literary texts like *Don Quixote* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Similarly, Wit & Wisdom's texts and knowledge demand that teachers understand medical practices during the Civil War and the human circulatory system. EL

Education has modules focusing on the evolutionary adaptations of frogs and the process of ratifying the 19th Amendment. Teachers may themselves be far removed from studying these topics in school—and may need content-focused professional learning not just on a comprehension curriculum's architecture but also on the topic and domain knowledge demanded by its texts. Districts might consider, then, supporting teachers in grade-specific teams to deepen the content knowledge that will, in turn, facilitate deeper lesson internalization.

Model and rehearse high-leverage instructional practices targeting robust comprehension work

Focusing professional learning on high-leverage instructional practices associated with lessons that develop students' robust comprehension is a tangible way to shift toward the *how* of HQIM implementation. Modeling high-leverage instructional practices, either in person or through curated videos, can be a powerful tool for teachers as it operationalizes the practice in the context of a lesson (Biancarosa et al., 2010). The TERI: TBC, for example, uses a video-based training process to ensure that raters can reliably distinguish work that fosters surface-level versus robust textual understanding. A video library, aligned to a district's comprehension curriculum, could be a strong tool to help teachers internalize this key distinction.

> **"I did find watching recordings of colleagues teaching [HQIM] very useful because it gave us a chance to look at a different skill through the eyes of how that teacher was delivering the skill. And then it was also a reflective moment, like 'Oh, I like how this teacher did this. I can start implementing and tailoring it to my students.'"**
>
> **– Teacher**

Incorporating more explicit and complex lesson rehearsals during which teachers focus on a particular instructional practice, such as providing elaborative comprehension-focused feedback oriented towards a robust understanding, could be a powerful lever for instructional improvement. This practice might be particularly impactful within curriculum-based professional learning aligned to a curriculum's texts and knowledge base.

> **"We've had this thing in the past called 'at bats,' and so that's when the teachers prepare a lesson and then we go and model it for our peers during PLCs. That's been nice because we're all teaching the same lesson, but it's delivered so differently across us all because of different teaching styles. So just seeing how my peers did it was definitely insightful for me."**
>
> **– Teacher**

Building teachers' instructional repertoires, though, must remain anchored in lesson objectives that focus on robust goals. Teachers who are learning to orchestrate these practices with complex knowledge-rich texts may inadvertently drift away from a robust lesson purpose. Expert guidance and feedback during these rehearsals, perhaps provided by trusted literacy coaches, can help avoid this potential pitfall.

Build coaching capacity

Building coaching capacity can also be a powerful lever to support teachers' instructional growth, especially if coaches and teachers are engaged in cycles of planning, modeling, observation, and feedback (National Center for Systemic Improvement, 2019; Van Keer & Verhaeghe, 2005). Survey data from our districts indicates that most teachers who had access to coaching characterized it as helpful in improving their literacy instruction. District leaders can build on this positive sentiment by supporting literacy coaches' capacity to coach teachers towards instruction oriented towards comprehension work.

Interviews with district leaders suggested that some coaches might not be prepared to guide teachers in delivering comprehension instruction oriented toward robust understanding.

> **"And if the coach is not comfortable with it, if [the coach supervisor] is not comfortable with it, it's very hard to get support around being effective with delivering [comprehension HQIM] instruction."**
>
> **– District leader**

In addition, some coach interviews suggested that districts' focus on foundational skills meant that coaching time and attention was less focused on comprehension. These interviews suggested school system capacity for deepening comprehension instruction might be limiting the potential for transforming instruction.

On the other hand, surveyed teachers reported a high degree of trust in their literacy coaches' expertise. A targeted professional learning experience for coaches, then, could leverage this trust into a systemic reorientation of comprehension instruction toward more robust understanding. Depending on district leaders' expertise, that professional learning experience might also build capacity for coach supervisors and district literacy leaders to ensure ongoing capacity to support coaches.

Action 3: Align tools and procedures to gauge the extent to which lessons foster robust understanding of text

While setting and communicating goals about robust comprehension and building teacher capacity for delivering aligned instruction are essential, it will be difficult for districts to gauge progress toward those goals without observing teaching and learning and using data to improve instruction.

Aligning classroom observation tools

Most classroom walkthrough tools are not designed to capture evidence of or distinguish between surface-level and robust textual understanding (or even the high-leverage instructional practices that foster such understanding). Walkthrough tools designed for busy principals may, in fact, unintentionally reinforce superficial, easy-to-observe features of classroom instruction such as student participation, bell-to-bell instruction, posted objectives and standards, or the visible use of HQIM. Intentional alignment of tools and

procedures is therefore required to help coaches and principals communicate to teachers the importance of targeting robust comprehension.

Alignment could mean revising an existing protocol that is already in use for classroom walkthroughs or coaching observations, or it could mean using a separate protocol specifically designed to capture instruction that supports robust comprehension. For either process, the Purpose and Alignment dimension of the TERI: TBC—referenced above and shown here as Exhibit 5—offers a blueprint from which to build. It is worth noting, though, that every TERI: TBC observation lasts 30 minutes. It may be difficult for observers who observe for shorter time periods to truly discern whether a given comprehension lesson supports the development of robust comprehension or leads students to robust understanding of text.

Exhibit 5. TERI: TBC – Purpose and Alignment Dimension

PURPOSE AND ALIGNMENT			
Is instruction aligned towards a purpose that advances students' robust text-based comprehension?			
Low		**Mid**	**High**
The purpose of the lesson does not support text-based comprehension. The work of the lesson does not lead students to understanding text. Few instructional materials and tasks are aligned to the lesson purpose.		The purpose of the lesson supports the development of surface-level text-based comprehension. The work of the lesson leads students to surface-level understanding of text. Some instructional materials and tasks are aligned to the lesson purpose.	The purpose of the lesson supports the development of robust text-based comprehension. The work of the lesson leads students to robust understanding of text. Most instructional materials and tasks are aligned to the lesson purpose.
Dimension Score	**1 2**	**3 4 5**	**6 7**

Note. *From Cohen et al., 2022, p. 5.*

Establishing procedures for how observation data are used would also help system alignment. District leaders must consider, for example, the importance of a robust purpose alongside other dimensions of reading instruction that are also part of a district's plan for literacy improvement (e.g., vocabulary instruction, student discussion, or opportunities for writing). In addition, if districts have a separate observation rubric for formal teacher evaluation and accountability, it may be critical for district leaders to explain how an observation tool that captures robust purposes and work is to be used alongside such a rubric. Teachers must understand how their observation data are used—and guidelines for data use should be transparent. Ultimately, with a strong observation tool that focuses on robust lesson purposes and work, and data use practices that reinforce its importance, districts can build the infrastructure necessary to maximize the impact of comprehension instruction.

Establishing procedures for using comprehension assesssment data

Many districts ask teachers to unpack standards and analyze data to improve literacy instruction, often in PLCs with their peers. While data-driven instruction is generally a good idea, it also can lead to unhelpful practices that reinforce surface-level instruction (Truckenmiller et al., 2024). For example, in one district, SRI researchers observed a PLC meeting in which the literacy coach and teachers analyzed data from a

benchmark end-of-unit assessment broken down by their state's standards. The team discussed how they could target several specific standards where students appeared to have done poorly (e.g., recognizing the structure of informational text, recognizing the main idea of a text with supporting evidence). The team did not focus on the topic of the challenging texts (art patronage in Renaissance Europe) and how to make meaning from these texts, but only on narrow standards.

This approach also does not consider that state ELA assessments and commonly used comprehension benchmark assessments cannot reliably measure separate standards within reading comprehension. (See technical manuals for state ELA and vendor benchmark assessments for explanation.) A student's ability to recognize the structure of informational text and their ability to recognize the text's main idea are too intercorrelated for distinct measurement—and thus cannot be isolated as instructional targets. Focusing too narrowly on, for example, teaching students to recognize text structure, without also showing how that structure influences the text's meaning, may unintentionally lead to instruction that fosters surface-level understanding. If this is the case, districts might consider revising guidelines for using student comprehension assessment data.

A hopeful path

The notable proportion of lessons featuring classroom work that facilitated robust textual understanding (24%) is a clear sign that districts are primed to support a shift away from the surface level. There is much to build on. This brief offers insights about high-leverage instructional practices that may support more robust student comprehension and recommends actions educators can take to support these practices. The recommended actions will not be simple tasks, but the four districts in this study and others with similar literacy ambitions may take them up as an opportunity to be national leaders in improving comprehension instruction.

We also observed that lessons which featured work oriented towards robust understanding, when compared to lessons that included only surface-level work, scored higher for student motivation and engagement. In other words, students seemed to enjoy robust comprehension lessons more than surface-level ones. Teachers likely prefer them, too: They became teachers to guide children in meaningful learning, not merely to ensure they complete tasks. Helping teachers engineer instruction that facilitates more robust understanding of texts might not only improve students' comprehension achievement but also create more joyful classrooms.

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