



# Progress and Potential: School System Approaches to Strengthening Literacy Instruction

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Improving students' reading abilities is a top priority for families, educators, and policymakers alike. Many states have enacted Science of Reading legislation to combat ongoing concerns about students' lagging literacy skills, and there are early signs of success in some states and younger grades (Neuman et al., 2023). States have also mandated the adoption of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM), which are building consistency across districts and states and making quality reading instruction more replicable (Steiner, 2024). Through its [school systems partnership](#) strategy, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies (Schusterman) is seeking to support and learn from such efforts in urban school systems.

As part of this strategy, Schusterman is investing in four large, urban districts that have been making notable strides in developing their literacy programs. These districts are at the national vanguard of HQIM implementation: Each has been implementing highly rated foundational skills curricula (e.g., UFLI Foundations, Core Knowledge Language Arts [CKLA]) and knowledge-rich comprehension curricula (e.g., CKLA, Wit & Wisdom, and EL Education) for several years. The districts have been receiving support from Schusterman to improve K–8 literacy achievement in three ways: building a vision for literacy instruction that is understood and shared at all levels of the system, developing the capacity of educators through their use of HQIM and professional learning, and aligning school-based and central office supports (including roles and resources).

Given their years of HQIM adoption, these districts offer a unique opportunity to examine mature implementation of and supports for these commonly used curricula. More broadly, these districts can serve as exemplars for how to build upon and improve existing literacy structures.





## About the districts

The participating districts—Aldine Independent School District, Baltimore City Public Schools, Guilford County Schools, and Richmond Public Schools—are located in different geographic regions of the United States and range in size from approximately 25,000 to 75,000 students. The student populations are racially and economically diverse, and some serve large percentages of multilingual learners.

## Study goals and methods

In 2024, Schusterman commissioned SRI to conduct an independent study of the four districts. The study examines Schusterman's theory that strengthening and aligning district and school supports, providing focused professional learning, and increasing the consistent and skillful use of HQIM will result in higher quality instructional practices and improved student literacy outcomes.

In the study's first year (2024–25), SRI researchers investigated literacy instruction in K–5 classrooms and the school-based and central office systems in place to support it. Across the districts, SRI researchers conducted 223 observations of K–5 literacy lessons, using the Tools for Equitable Reading Instruction (TERI) classroom observation protocols; surveyed 539 K–5 teachers; observed 63 meetings of teachers' professional learning communities (PLCs); and interviewed a total of 113 K–5 teachers, instructional coaches, principals, and district staff.

			
<b>Classroom observations</b>		<b>Teacher survey</b>	
Foundational skills <b>112</b>	Text-based comprehension <b>111</b>	Sample <b>539</b>	Response rate <b>81%</b>
Instructional practices to support students' foundational literacy and text-based comprehension skills		School and district conditions for instructional improvement, professional learning, mindsets for teaching, and use of HQIM	
			
<b>PLC observations</b>		<b>Interviews</b>	
<b>63</b>		Teachers <b>67</b>	Coaches <b>14</b>
Alignment of PLC activities with attributes of high-quality professional learning		Principals <b>12</b>	District <b>20</b>
		Staff perspectives on HQIM, professional learning, and school and district conditions	

## What we learned about districts' literacy improvement efforts

All the districts were deeply invested in improving their literacy programs and supports. District leaders and literacy staff were committed to setting and communicating a clear vision and instructional priorities for literacy, and they were working to align messages across central office teams. All districts had adopted HQIM, which teachers were implementing across the board, and all were providing literacy-focused professional learning to teachers. At the same time, gaps remained in the depth of both foundational skills and comprehension-focused instruction. Many teachers pointed to the need for additional time for and focus on literacy professional learning, particularly with regard to the district-adopted curricula.

### Districts were making concerted efforts to increase coherence for school-based staff.

All districts had established and communicated literacy priorities that consisted of using the district-adopted HQIM and implementing observable classroom practices. For example, one district prioritized strengthening foundational skills instruction through core routines like dictation and building words (the teacher says a word, and then the students repeat the word, segment it, and build it with manipulative letters). Another district expected teachers to give students daily opportunities to practice skills that support fluency (in K–2) and respond to grade-level text through discourse and writing (in grade 3 and above). Still, there was often a disconnect for school-level staff in understanding the why and the how of those priorities, and district leaders were aware they needed to more clearly articulate the rationale behind the priorities and ensure consistent messaging across the district.

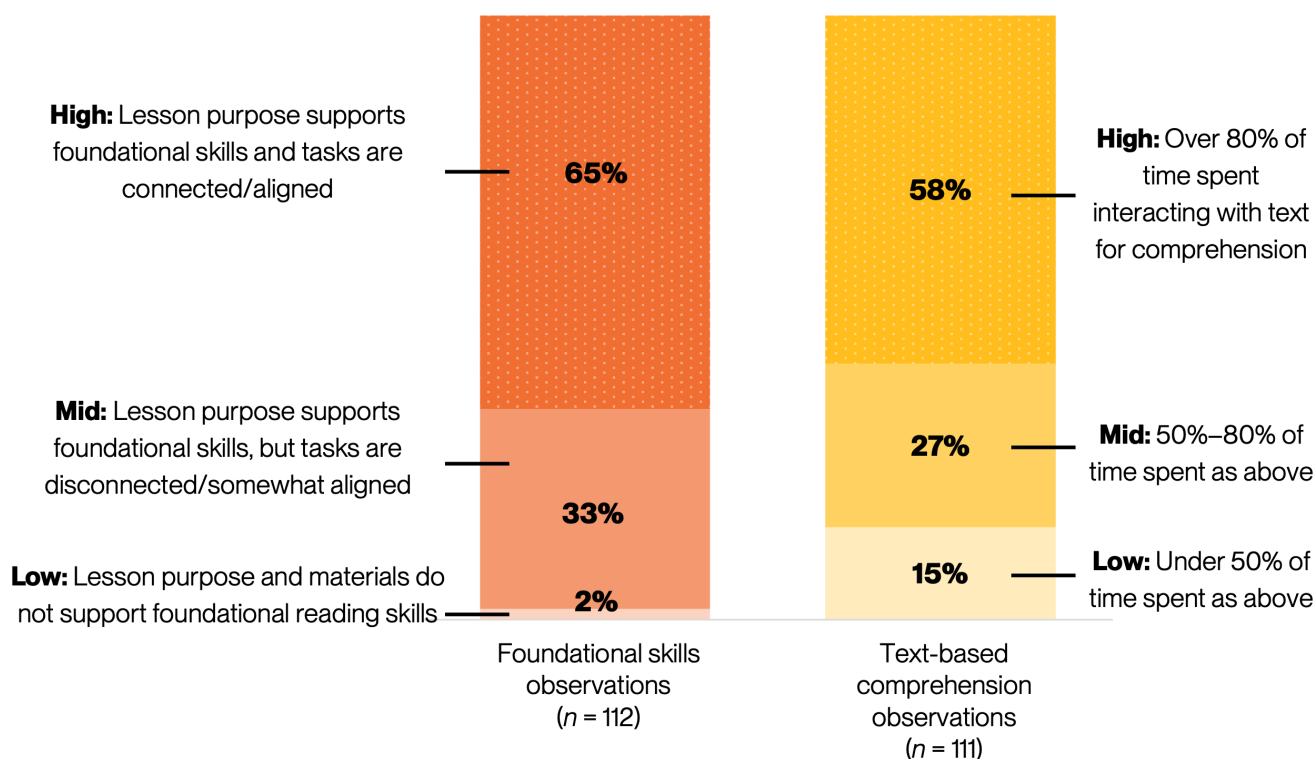
Through their school systems partnerships, Schusterman offered opportunities for the districts to convene throughout the year and receive support from experts in literacy, organizational change, and communications. These convenings sharpened the districts' literacy focus by bringing together stakeholders across district departments, who often had no time to meet during their regular workdays, to collaborate and align priorities. One district leader said this work “just really helped us [different district departments] collaborate more and let us see how our work has to be interlocked together rather than ‘you do your thing, I do my thing’ ... It’s really helped marry the two [departments] to support and champion the work for kids.” One district took this idea back home, implementing a new weekly meeting for departments to collaborate around literacy. One leader described these meetings as bringing them “closer and closer” to coherence.

**“While we’re not at a hundred percent [coherent], we are getting closer and closer because of the Wednesday collaborative time that we have together.”**  
– District leader

## Across the districts, classrooms demonstrated a strong foundation for literacy instruction.

Across the districts, teachers understood the priority to use the district-adopted HQIM regularly, a baseline for consistent literacy instruction across classrooms. In the classroom observations, nearly all foundational skills and comprehension-focused lessons used the district-adopted curriculum. On the survey, most teachers reported using their primary literacy curriculum almost daily. In the observed classrooms, teachers also spent a high percentage of time on task—time directly focused on explicit foundational skills instruction or text to be comprehended—and demonstrated positive teacher and student engagement.

### Classrooms demonstrated a strong foundation for literacy instruction



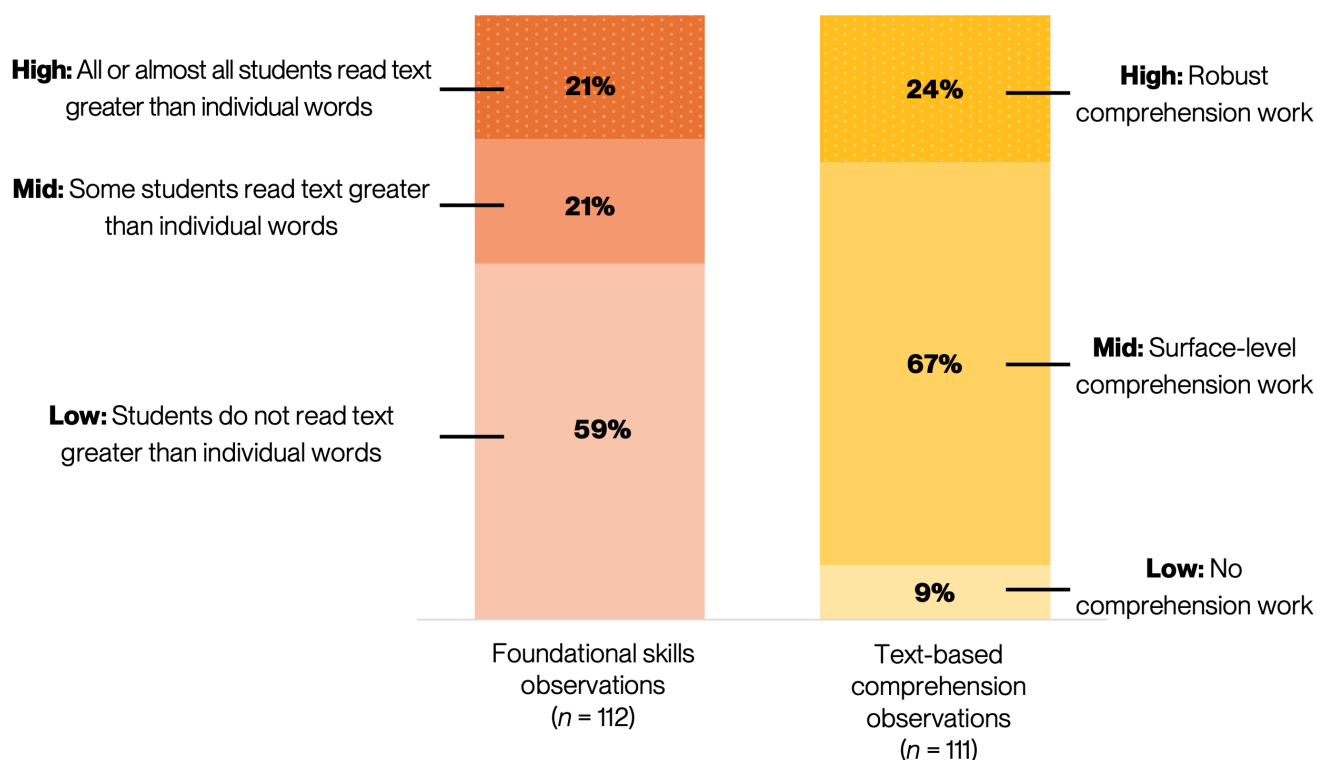
**Exhibit reads:** (1) In 65% of the 112 observations focused on foundational skills, the lesson purpose supported foundational skills, and lesson work was comprised of connected tasks that aligned with the purpose. (2) In 58% of the 111 observations focused on text-based comprehension, over 80% of instructional time was spent interacting with text for comprehension.

## However, both foundational skills and comprehension-focused instruction lacked depth.

Despite widespread use of the district-adopted HQIM, in many instances literacy instruction lacked depth. For example, in observed foundational skills lessons, students primarily interacted with text at the single word level (e.g., students read words like rain, faith, jail to practice the –ai spelling of long a, but never read –ai words embedded in a simple sentence or paragraph), even though HQIM provided opportunities to read greater than individual words. This finding indicates that more work is needed to ensure skillful use of the curriculum and provide students with opportunities to develop fluency and independent reading skills.

Similarly, while more than half of the observed text-based comprehension lessons dedicated over 80% of instructional time to students interacting with text for comprehension, most observed lessons only facilitated surface-level analysis of texts, without orienting students to more robust understanding. In other words, the lessons focused mainly on completing a task or addressing a specific standard rather than integrating tasks and standards work into a broader discussion or synthesis related to textual meaning. Moreover, neither foundational skills nor comprehension lessons offered many opportunities for meaningful peer learning. For the most part, students interacted with each other infrequently and perfunctorily during literacy lessons.

### Foundational skills and comprehension instruction lacked depth



**Exhibit reads:** (1) In 59% of the 112 observations focused on foundational skills, students did not read text greater than individual words. (2) In 67% of 111 observations focused on text-based comprehension, students engaged in surface-level (rather than robust) comprehension work.

## Many teachers found comprehension-focused HQIM difficult to implement, more so than foundational skills HQIM.

Curricula focused on foundational reading skills target a constrained set of skills that include letter knowledge, phonics, concepts of print, and phonemic awareness (e.g., knowledge of 26 letters, approximately 44 phonemes, and approximately 175 sound-spelling correspondences in English; Paris, 2005). On the other hand, comprehension-focused curricula must target an unconstrained set of thousands of vocabulary words, increasingly complex syntactic arrangements, and a broad range of background knowledge and topics. Perhaps not surprisingly, many more teachers reported on surveys that they found the district-adopted foundational skills-focused curriculum easy to implement (73%), compared with the district-adopted comprehension-focused curriculum (41%).

In interviews, teachers reported that comprehension-focused HQIM were too dense, required substantial planning, and were not developmentally appropriate. Moreover, in interviews and on surveys teachers were more likely to report that comprehension-focused HQIM did not meet the needs of all students, particularly multilingual learners and striving readers. Teachers expressed concern that the texts were at an advanced level of English that was not appropriate for emergent bilinguals and may be discouraging. Some teachers reported the curricula did not provide enough scaffolds or ideas for how to support students.

Consequently, teachers were more likely to report modifying comprehension materials. For example, they added scaffolds like visual aids and anchor charts, added or replaced texts to improve relevance and engagement, and condensed or cut lessons they deemed developmentally inappropriate. One teacher described “just using a video to help them picture and make the connection. I always try to use little videos that they know ... I think that’s really helpful.”

47% of teachers reported modifying half or more of the comprehension-focused HQIM lessons, compared with 13% of teachers reporting modifying foundational skills lessons.

## While most teachers reported engaging in school-based literacy-focused PLCs led by knowledgeable staff, the time for and depth of the professional learning was limited.

In all districts, grade-level PLCs were the primary method for providing teachers with literacy-focused professional learning. They happened regularly within schools and were led by instructional coaches that teachers trusted for their literacy expertise. On the survey, teachers reported spending significant time discussing the literacy curriculum in PLCs. Interviewed teachers found modeling the use of the curriculum particularly helpful for showing them new ways to teach a lesson or specific skills.

- 69% of surveyed teachers received literacy-focused PLC support at least weekly.
- Four in five teachers agreed with the statement “I have confidence in the literacy expertise of ... my school-based coach [81%] and principal [79%].”
- More than half of teachers (56%) reported that the time for professional learning was insufficient.
- About half of teachers (49%) reported that the PLC time was focused on depth and mastery of HQIM “a lot” or “nearly all the time.”

However, on the survey, many teachers reported not having enough time for professional learning on literacy curricula. PLC time was sometimes taken up by other priorities, like preparing for testing. When PLCs did focus on curriculum, teachers reported focusing on mastering lesson content and rehearsing literacy instruction about half the time. Similarly, PLC observations suggested that coaches and teachers planned instruction but did not consistently focus on specific problems of practice or engage teachers in inquiry into strategies that would advance students’ reading skills. An interviewed coach said, “For me, the area that I know I need to get better at, and we all need to get better at, is pull out a lesson, let’s dig into this lesson. I think that’s where we are as a school.”

**“I don’t think we do enough around development of teachers in teaching [comprehension curriculum]. Even if you’re new to the district, you might have this introduction ... course for 60 minutes, but that’s it. And if my coach is not comfortable with it, if my [coach supervisor] is not comfortable with it, it’s very hard to get support”**

**– District leader**

## What comes next

Because of its breadth of data collection and scale across large districts, this study is methodologically one of the strongest observational studies of elementary literacy instruction, professional learning, and system supports. For example, the comprehension observations alone are more rigorous than nearly all studies conducted in the last 50 years (Capin et al., 2025). Given its scale and rigor, these findings are applicable to districts across the country that are invested in supporting teachers to consistently and skillfully implement HQIM. The SRI research team is continuing this research in the 2025–26 school year and will be releasing a series of learning briefs that dig deeper into the study findings.

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