

Adapting ELA/Literacy Instructional Materials to Align with College- and Career-Ready Standards: A Case Study at Harrison Township, NJ

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Background and Pilot Design

"This process gave us a different way of looking at instruction. It allowed us to see what students were/were not understanding along the course of the unit. Having this [process] at our fingertips was very useful and we were able to change and target skills that students weren't understanding."

- Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Harrison Township

Why

Districts across the country are working to implement rigorous college- and career-ready standards, but their existing instructional materials do not adequately reflect the changes needed in practice.¹ Existing materials, even those that claim to have been revised to align with more rigorous college- and career-ready standards like the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), have significant gaps and areas of misalignment. The deficiencies in the materials make it difficult, if not impossible, for teachers to adequately prepare their students to meet expectations at each grade level.

We know that instructional materials matter a great deal in teacher effectiveness.² Nonetheless, many districts are using materials they have identified as insufficient until purchasing cycles line up with the broader availability of better-aligned materials.³ The result: far too many teachers are in classrooms with instructional materials they know to be inadequate, with very few supports in place to help them adapt or supplement that material.

This project has focused on building and piloting models that can increase teacher and district capacity to adapt instructional materials with the intent of improving their alignment to the expectations of college- and career-ready standards. A team from Student Achievement Partners worked with two pilot districts in English Language Arts (ELA)/Literacy in order to build and pilot test materials, with the end goal of creating a widely shareable process that can be used by teachers and districts across the country.

Who

The pilot team consisted of grade 4 classroom teachers, interventionists, and administrative staff of the Pleasant Valley School, Harrison Township School District ("Harrison Township"), in Mullica Hill, New Jersey. Harrison Township serves approximately 1,500 students across two schools (Pre-Kindergarten through grade 6). Thirteen percent of students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), 1% are English Language Learners (ELL), and 10% receive free and reduced lunch. The grade 4

1. Rachel Leifer and Denis Udall, "Support the Common Core with the Right Instructional Materials," *Phi Delta Kappan* 96, no. 1 (September 2014): 21–27.

2 Chingos and Whitehurst, "Choosing Blindly: Instructional Materials, Teacher Effectiveness and the Common Core," Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings, (April 10, 2012), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2012/04/10-curriculum-chingos-whitehurst>.

3 For more on this conundrum, see report by Pace and Stanford University researchers Milbrey McLaughlin, Laura Glaab and Isabel Hilliger Carrasco, *Implementing Common Core State Standards in California: A Report from the Field*, which articulates the difficulties of educators in California who took action when they realized their current materials and curricula needed improvements to align with rigorous standards

team at Pleasant Valley School in Harrison Township was specifically selected for an ELA/Literacy pilot for this project because they a) use a widely adopted elementary school basal reader (*Reading Street*⁴ published by Pearson), b) had the capacity and interest to take on a project to adapt existing materials, and c) expected at the outset of the project to be using the 2014 edition of *Reading Street* for at least one school year.

What

A team from Student Achievement Partners worked directly with teachers to review and adapt a single unit of the grade 4 *Reading Street* materials to meet the criteria for alignment to the CCSS, focusing specifically on the high priority focus areas that the administrative team identified:

- Text-dependent questions
- Topical reading and writing

The administrative team felt that adapting the curricular materials to reflect the identified focus areas above would directly impact and increase the level of student engagement by providing more academically demanding literacy experiences that meet the expectations of the CCSS. Specifically, as Harrison Township's Director of Curriculum & Instruction shared:

"We knew that our teachers and students needed a change in their daily English Language Arts routines in order to meet the expectations of the Common Core. We were looking for help to get students to engage more authentically with the texts they were reading."

When

The entire pilot project spanned February 2015–June 2015:

| Training Dates | Session Topic | Focus |
|----------------|---|---|
| February 2015 | PD Activities for Districts (with administrative staff) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand the instructional shifts for ELA/Literacy required by the CCSS• Set goals for the project |
| February 2015 | Basal Alignment Project Workshop (with teachers and interventionists) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Analyze texts for complexity and quality.• Understand the importance of text-dependent questions and tasks |

⁴ Market Share (2013) – 13.6% according to Robert M. Resnick, Ph.D. and Glenn, Sanislo, *The Complete K-12 Report: Market Facts & Segment Analyses 2015* (Rockaway Park, New York: Education Market Research/Simba Information, 2015).

| Training Dates | Session Topic | Focus |
|----------------|---|--|
| February 2015 | Expert Pack/Text Set Workshop (with teachers and interventionists) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Understand the importance of building content knowledge through a series of texts and resourcesIdentify texts and resources in <i>Reading Street</i> from Open Educational Resources (OER) materials to create Expert Packs |
| March 2015 | Lesson Observations and Debrief (with teachers and interventionists) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Observe teacher and student behavior with the adapted materials |
| March 2015 | Check-in and Guided Planning Session (with teachers and interventionists) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Plan text-dependent questions and tasks to use with the next <i>Reading Street</i> unit |
| April 2015 | Check-in and Teacher-Led Planning Session (with teachers and interventionists) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Plan and identifying texts and resources to create Expert Packs to use with the next <i>Reading Street</i> unit |
| June 2015 | Reflections and Next Steps (with teachers, interventionists and administrators) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">Reflect on teacher and student growth through the projectCreate and plan for turnkey training beyond the pilot grade |

Results

This project resulted in an enhanced set of supplementary materials for multiple *Reading Street* units that, when used in instruction, will help teachers to help students meet the rigorous expectations of the CCSS. Specifically, the project resulted in the following shareable resources for any teacher using *Reading Street* in the classroom:

- Student-Facing Guides:** Student guides for [Navajo Code Talkers](#) (Unit 4, Week 3), [Smokejumpers: Life Fighting Fires](#) (Unit 5, Week 1) and [My Brother Martin](#) (Unit 6, Week 1) that include:
 - Vocabulary self-assessment
 - Embedded graphic organizers to facilitate student thinking and discussions
 - Writing space for responses
 - Page number references to support engagement with text evidence
- Assessments:** Previously, teachers were using the original weekly assessments including in the *Reading Street* print materials. (see “[Original Assessments](#)”) The choice was made to begin using the alternate CCSS-aligned assessment for *Reading Street* which are available on Pearson’s SuccessNet which better align with the expectations of the CCSS. (see “[Revised Assessments](#)”)

- **Expert Pack:** An Expert Pack to accompany *Smokejumpers: Life Fighting Fires* (Unit 5, Week 1), designed to promote students engaging with a volume of reading to increase vocabulary and knowledge, thereby building their ability to read increasingly complex texts.

The pilot was a successful project for the district and exceeded the district administrator's expectations. In the classroom, the administrators observed that teachers were able to teach lessons that put the cognitive load onto students and, in turn, students showed growth in their independent work. Through the adaptations, teachers were able to build both student knowledge and vocabulary, essential skills for success in literacy.

Going forward, Harrison Township plans to continue adapting *Reading Street* and their other existing materials throughout the current school year. After the pilot concluded in June, district leaders at Harrison Township shared the trainings they experienced in the pilot to other grade-level representatives across the district. They expanded the training to the remaining teachers within the district in September 2015. In addition, Harrison Township hosted a session with curriculum directors and teachers from three other districts in the state to share the information. All of this work will allow Harrison Township to continue to make adaptations to *Reading Street* in order to better align their instructional materials to the expectations of rigorous college- and career-ready standards.

Adaptation 1: Close Reading and Higher-Quality Text-Dependent Questions

The work began with the teachers in the district establishing a common understanding of the program and how they have observed that it does or does not align with the CCSS. Teachers shared their experiences with *Reading Street* and articulated where in the instructional materials there were clear examples of 1) complex texts, 2) text-dependent questions, and 3) knowledge building. The teachers also surfaced areas where they recommended improving alignment. Through initial conversations, the teachers and district team identified the lack of high-quality text-dependent questions included in the program as a key deficiency.

To begin the adaptation work, the grade 4 team utilized a resource from Student Achievement Partners' website: the [Basal Alignment Project \(BAP\) lesson for the Navajo Code Talkers](#). The BAP is the collected work of hundreds of educators who volunteered to revise the questions, tasks, and lesson instructions for several leading basal reading programs across the country, including *Reading Street*, to make them more aligned with the expectations of college and career readiness. The set of questions, vocabulary words selected for discussion with students, and culminating tasks for each main text selection in the lesson database have all been carefully aligned to the CCSS for ELA/Literacy. The grade 4 team spent time with the BAP resources initially doing the following:

- Analyzing and discussing the text complexity and quality of each main text included in the current unit of study (Unit 4);
- Selecting the most complex and worthwhile text for close reading (*Navajo Code Talkers*, Unit 4, Week 3);
- Conducting a lesson study using the adapted lesson plan, questions, and tasks for *Navajo Code Talkers* available from SAP's [BAP database](#), and
- Planning day-by-day lesson sequences for the entire close reading experience.

Then the grade 4 team adapted the *Navajo Code Talkers* lesson materials by creating a detailed [student-facing guide](#) to facilitate class discussions, small group work, and students' responses to the text-dependent questions. Over the course of the pilot, the grade 4 team went on to adapt the lesson materials for three (3) additional main-selection texts. For each of the texts, they created student-facing guides ([Smokejumpers: Life Fighting Fires](#) and [My Brother Martin](#)). The student-facing guides include:

- Vocabulary self-assessment
- Embedded graphic organizers
- Writing space for responses
- Page number references to support engagement with text evidence

Student work samples of the Navajo Code Talkers student-facing guide can be accessed [here](#).

Adaptation 2: Aligned Assessments

Another adaptation made by the grade 4 team related to assessments. After planning the close reading lesson, teachers realized that the typical weekly assessment would no longer accurately assess student skills and knowledge. The original assessments included in the Teacher's Edition for both [Navajo Code Talkers](#) and [Smokejumpers: Life Fighting Fires](#) focused on discrete comprehension skills and strategies and deemphasized the careful reading of the anchor text and evidence-based meaning-making students were engaged in throughout the week. As a result, the team chose to use the alternate CCSS assessment from Pearson's SuccessNet. Students completed the alternate weekly test provided in the curriculum for both [Navajo Code Talkers](#) and [Smokejumpers: Life Fighting Fires](#). The teachers felt that the replacement assessment was more rigorous and aligned more closely with the types of literacy activities students experienced in the lessons. In particular, careful attention was paid to the anchor text from the lesson, and students' comprehension was assessed through a series of text-specific questions that required evidence-based responses. For this part of the adaptation, teachers did not have to create alternate assessments that aligned to the CCSS, as the publisher had already created better-aligned assessments to support CCSS implementation. The adaptation was rather a matter of strategically using resources already provided by the publisher to ensure their instruction was aligned to the CCSS.

Adaptation 3: Building Knowledge through Topical Reading and Writing

To address the gap in topical reading and writing, the grade 4 team decided to work with another lesson from *Reading Street* called *Smokejumpers: Life Fighting Fires* (Unit 5, Week 1). The team worked with the [BAP lesson](#) again as described above in Adaptation 1 and also adapted a [student-facing guide](#) to support the lesson. (Note: A [work sample](#) of the student-facing guide is included as a resource). Finally, the grade 4 team used the [CCSS assessment](#) to replace the [standard weekly assessment](#) as they did with *Navajo Code Talkers*. In addition to these adaptations, there was more work to be done to ensure that the materials addressed the focus on topical reading and writing required by the CCSS. The team decided to create an Expert Pack to supplement the lesson.

Expert Packs are collections of resources organized with the intent for students to coherently build knowledge about a specific topic and are accompanied by a set of suggested activities to help students capture and express their learning. Expert Packs are designed to promote students engaging with a volume of reading to increase vocabulary and knowledge, ultimately contributing to developing students' ability to read increasingly complex texts. (Note, similar to the Basal Alignment Project, Student Achievement Partners has a [free collection of Expert Packs](#) available through the Text Set Project (TSP) that are available for all educators.)

The team then created an [Expert Pack](#) to accompany the unit 5 week 1 main selection text *Smokejumpers: Life Fighting Fires* by selecting texts from the leveled texts selections as well as ancillary texts and passages included with each unit in the *Reading Street* materials.

Rather than assigning the leveled readers based on students' general reading ability as suggested by the program, the teachers assigned students to read all the text, regardless of reading level.

This gave all readers the benefit of first reading the less complex texts to support their ability to read the more complex texts. Additional resources were gathered from the school's existing guided reading library, and other resources were added to the Expert Pack by selecting freely accessible videos, websites, and [online resources](#). Each resource was chosen to build students' vocabulary and knowledge about the smoke jumping profession that was first introduced through the main selection text.

Once the resources' selections were finalized, one teacher on the team used www.zaption.com to accompany the [video](#) included in the *Smokejumpers: Life Fighting Fires* Expert Pack. As seen [here](#), the website allowed the teachers to embed resource-specific questions while the video played so that students were accountable for the content of the video. The questions were developed to ensure students were connecting the information in the video to what was previously learned during the close reading of the main selection text. Students answered questions both orally and in writing to build additional knowledge around the topic.

The team noticed an increase in the level of engagement of the students. The work sample below is an example of independent work that is indicative of text-dependent questions that were developed by teachers and that students were then able to answer through the course of the pilot.

1. Page 180 explains that some fires are easier to get to than others. Tell why this is so.

Some fires are easier to get than others because of these reasons. My first reason is that some fires burn near roads as said on page 180. Some are hard to get to because they are in the mountains or in forest. Both don't have any roads and they are far. So it's easier to just park a fire truck on the road for path then to take a plane and jump out of it. That's why some fires are easier to get to than others.

All students completed the assigned activities and teachers were able to frequently monitor students' progress by accessing their [independent work and responses](#) through Google docs.

Index of Links and Tools

Resources Produced During the Pilot

- Student-Facing Guides
 - [*Navajo Code Talkers* \(clean version\)](#)
 - [*Smokejumpers: Life Fighting Fires* \(clean version\)](#)
- Student Work Samples
 - [*Navajo Code Talkers*](#)
 - [*Smokejumpers: Life Fighting Fires*](#)
- [Adapted Expert Pack \(*Smokejumpers: Life Fighting Fires*\)](#)
- [Online Resources \(*Smokejumpers: Life Fighting Fires*\)](#)
- [Zaption Screenshot \(*Smokejumpers: Life Fighting Fires*\)](#)

Materials Used During the Pilot

- [Navajo Code Talkers - BAP Lesson](#)
- [Smokejumpers: Life Fighting Fires - BAP Lesson](#)
- [Annotated Bibliography - excerpt from TSP Participant Handout](#)
- [Learning Worth Remembering Template](#)
- [Basal Alignment Project Professional Development](#)
- [Text Set Project Professional Development](#)
- [Introductory Training](#)

Additional Resources

- Assessments
 - *Navajo Code Talkers*
 - [Original Assessment](#)
 - [CCSS-aligned Assessment](#)
 - *Smokejumpers: Life Fighting Fires*
 - [Original Assessment](#)
 - [CCSS-aligned Assessment](#)
- Student-facing Materials – *My Brother Martin*
 - [Student-facing Guide](#)
 - [Expert Pack](#)
 - [Picture of Knowledge](#)
 - [Rolling Knowledge Journal](#)