

# Adapting ELA/Literacy Instructional Materials to Align with College- and Career-Ready Standards: A Case Study at Stamford Public Schools, CT

November 13, 2015

## Table of Contents

Background and Pilot Design .....	3
Step 1: Evaluating Using the EQuIP Quality Review Rubric .....	7
Step 2: Revising the Unit.....	8
Step 3: Piloting the Unit to Meet the Needs of All Students .....	11
Index of Links and Tools .....	13

## Background and Pilot Design

“The pilot allowed us to see the many ways teachers make changes to their curricular materials. We were able to preemptively incorporate those changes in the unit, which ultimately makes teacher planning time a lot more efficient and class time with students more effective.”

– *Curriculum Developer, Stamford Public Schools*

### **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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, many districts are using materials they have identified as insufficient until purchasing cycles line up with the broader availability of better-aligned materials.<sup>3</sup> 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 modify 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 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**

Stamford Public Schools was an ideal district for participation in the pilot. Their curriculum team included district leaders, English Language Arts (ELA)/Literacy coaches, teachers on special assignment, and classroom teachers. Additionally, the curriculum team had attended training

---

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.

in the area of curriculum development and had previously taken steps toward adapting their district-created balanced literacy curriculum to bring it closer to alignment to the demands of the CCSS.

Stamford Public Schools in Stamford, Connecticut serves approximately 16,000 students across 20 schools (Pre-Kindergarten through grade 12). Ten percent of students receive special education services, 13% are English Language Learners (ELL), and 53% receive free or reduced lunch. (Note: these percentages do not include Pre-Kindergarten and out-placed students.)

### **What**

The administrative team was concerned that the existing balanced literacy<sup>4</sup> curriculum did not fully support the demands of the CCSS.

*In particular they were concerned the curriculum did not meet the expectations for text complexity, evidence-based reading, writing, and speaking, and the building of knowledge.*

The previous curriculum was organized and sequenced by skill/strategy, meaning units focused on ideas like “Analyzing Characters” or “Non-fiction: Reading for Information.” The texts selected for these units were chosen primarily to support the teaching and practice of the skill or strategy at the center of the unit, and not because of their complexity or the depth of information and knowledge offered to students. The result was a disconnected series of texts about scattered topics that were sometimes way below or way above the expected complexity demands of the grade level, making it impossible for the district to meet the demands of the CCSS in instruction.

Another area of concern for the district was that the reading and writing units of the existing curriculum were designed separately, resulting in a lack of connection between reading and writing experiences for students. For example, students might be engaged in a reading unit about finding the main idea in a text, while concurrently working in another unit about writing a memoir. The district sought to provide better coherence between the reading and writing elements of their curriculum.

In order to meet the demands of the CCSS and significantly increase the level of academically demanding literacy experiences for students, the team developed a plan to adapt the curricular materials in the following ways:

---

4. The term “balanced literacy” is a term widely used to describe the ELA/Literacy curriculum of many districts and schools across the country. Exactly what balanced literacy instruction looks like varies from school to district. From an initial general philosophy or framework, balanced literacy has come to be associated with more specific models and structures. In particular, writers Fountas & Pinell articulated a balanced literacy model in their book *Guided Reading* (1996), while others like Lucy Calkins and the Teachers’ College Reading & Writing Project put forth their own model, based on Readers’ & Writers Workshop, in books such as *The Art of Teaching Reading* (2001). These two models in particular have come to dominate the field and are what many envision when they hear the term “balanced literacy.”

- Organize new units of study that focus on topical reading and writing based on science and social studies topics, rather than skills- and strategy-focused units.
- Select texts that are appropriately complex for the grade and that offer specific knowledge about science and social studies.
- Incorporate text-dependent questions as well as writing tasks and speaking and listening tasks to engage all student with the texts and knowledge.

### **When**

The pilot project spanned February 2015–June 2015:

Training Dates	Session Topic	Focus
February 2015	<a href="#">Introductory Training</a> on the EQulP (Educators Evaluating the Quality of Instructional Products) Quality Review Rubric and Feedback Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce a tool designed to evaluate lesson and unit alignment to the CCSS</li> </ul>
February 2015	Evaluation with <a href="#">EQulP Rubric</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apply the EQulP Rubric to a unit of study from district-created curriculum</li> </ul>
March 2015	Planning Session (with teachers and professional developers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gather and incorporate feedback from teachers to adapt the unit of study</li> </ul>
April 2015	<a href="#">Training</a> and Feedback (with all ELA/Literacy professional developers)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce the design and purpose of the units of study to the broader professional development team</li> </ul>
May 2015	Lesson Observations and Debrief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observe teacher and student behavior with the modified materials</li> </ul>
June 2015	Working Session to Finalize Unit of Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Receive and incorporate feedback on the alignment of the unit of study to the CCSS</li> </ul>


## Pilot teachers' reflections about the adapted focus on topical reading and writing:

- *"Our word walls use to be separated by content area like science or social studies, but I think now it's better if we just combine them and call it literacy."*
- *"Student vocabulary is accelerated and much deeper."*
- *"Students have a lot of work to do, and they are happy to do it."*
- *"So much opportunity to differentiate is built right into the unit."*
- *"It will be so much easier for ELL and SPED teachers to push-in to my classroom."*

**Results**

In order to meet the demands of the CCSS and significantly increase the level of academically demanding literacy experiences for students, the district developed a single unit focused on topical reading and writing based on science and social studies topics, rather than skills- and strategy-focused units, as a model.

The prototype unit of study was submitted for review by the EQuIP Peer Review Panel. The unit was rated "Exemplar," which is the highest rating category available. The entire unit of study, related texts and student materials, as well as the full EQuIP Peer Review Panel evaluation can be found at: <http://www.achieve.org/exemplars/grade-4-coming-america-nation-immigrants-exemplar>

<b>EQuIP Review Feedback</b>	
<b>Lesson/Unit Name:</b> Coming to America: A Nation of Immigrants	<b>Overall Rating:</b> <b>E</b> Exemplar
<b>Content Area:</b> English language arts	
<b>Grade Level:</b> 4	

The Grade 4 integrated ELA/Social Studies unit: [\*Coming to America: A Nation of Immigrants \(1820-Present\)\*](#) will now serve as a model for all other units currently being developed for Stamford Public Schools. The district will systematically replace the former reading/writing strategy-driven units with topic- and knowledge-driven units similar to the prototype created during the pilot. Stamford's adaptations provide some guidance to the field around how to adapt a balanced literacy model to align with the expectations of the CCSS. This work may look different in other districts given that balanced literacy can take a lot of different formats, but certainly the lessons learned in this pilot can be applied by other districts looking to meet the demands of the CCSS and significantly increase the level of academically demanding literacy experiences for students.

## Step 1: Evaluating Using the EQuIP Quality Review Rubric

The first step in the pilot was to familiarize the team with the [EQuIP Quality Review Rubric](#) developed by Achieve.

EQuIP is an initiative of Achieve designed to identify high-quality materials aligned to the CCSS. The objectives are two-fold:

1. Build the capacity of educators to evaluate and improve the quality of instructional materials for use in their classrooms and schools.
2. Increase the supply of high-quality lessons and units aligned to the CCSS that are available to elementary, middle, and high school teachers as soon as possible.

### **EQuIP Rubrics and Quality Review Process**

The [EQuIP quality review process](#) is a collegial process that centers on the use of criteria-based rubrics for ELA/Literacy and Mathematics. The criteria are organized into four dimensions focusing on key initiatives of the CCSS. As educators examine instructional materials using the criteria in each dimension, they are able to use common standards for quality and generate evidence-based commentary and ratings on the quality and alignment of materials to improve lesson and unit plans.

After initial training, the curriculum team then conducted a full evaluation of Grade 4, Unit 5's *Coming to America: A Nation of Immigrants (1820-Present)*. The [evidence and feedback](#) gathered during the review provided concrete next steps for further developing the unit. One interesting learning of the pilot was that the EQuIP rubric evaluation surfaced different areas of misalignment than initially identified by the district. High-priority areas identified for improvement were:

- More guidance for close reading and building knowledge across texts – particularly through text-specific questions for each anchor text
- Integrated supports for all students to access a range of topical texts at varying levels of complexity

## Step 2: Revising the Unit

Over the course of two full-day planning meetings, each anchor text for the unit was carefully read and analyzed for complexity and considered for the specific knowledge the text contributed to the topic. Note: the curriculum team had already selected the texts and verified their quantitative measures using [Lexile](#). As a result, the teacher team used the [Text Complexity: Qualitative Measures Rubric](#) to evaluate and discuss the qualitative features of the texts. The results of the analysis was that teachers deeply understood each text and were then able to make text-specific adaptations described in the next paragraph.

Then, using the specific features of each text, teachers adapted the unit by creating additional text-dependent questions and graphic organizers to ensure the meaning-making and connection of ideas and vocabulary across lessons. Notice, in the example below, where 1) the focus question for the lesson was changed to be more supported by the evidence available from the text and 2) the pre-reading activity, which was not text-dependent, was changed to a text—dependent vocabulary activity related to a key concept of the unit.

*Prior to Adaptation Work by the Team:*

Write the following student-friendly focus question on the board, then read the question out loud with the class:

**Focus Question: Is America a melting pot?**

**I Part 1: Teacher Modeling**

**1 Prepare Students for the Lesson**

- Have you ever met someone who speaks a different language or was born in a different country? Talk about the people and places. How do you think it feels to move to a place where people speak a different language than you and daily routines are unfamiliar?
- Look at the cover of *Coming to America*. Point to the picture of the Statue of Liberty. Discuss what *liberty* means. Look in the book at pictures of Ellis Island. Talk about what you think these people are doing and where they are going.

**2. Set a purpose**

- Read the title and look through the text. Predict what it will be about.
- Why do you think all of these people are so happy about seeing the Statue of Liberty? Let's read the book to find out!



*After Adaptation Work by the Team:*

Teacher Tip: Read the book once to your students, either the day or morning before teaching the lesson

1 Focus Question: *Why did people leave their homeland and come to America?*

Part 1: Teacher Modeling

2

1. Set a purpose

- Write the above student-friendly focus question on the board, read the question, making sure the students understand all parts of the question.
- Review a few student responses from the Carousel Charts titled:  
*What are some reasons people leave their homeland?*  
*What are some reasons people come to America?*
- Look at the cover of *Coming to America*. Point to the picture of the Statue of Liberty. Discuss what *liberty* means. Look in the book at pictures of Ellis Island. Talk about what you think these people are doing and where they are going.

More guidance for close reading and building knowledge across text – particularly through text-specific questions for each anchor text

In this next example, the writing prompt for student independent practice was changed to ensure that students build knowledge and connect key ideas from a text they had read previously about Ellis Island with specific details from a text about Angel Island that comes later in the unit.

*Prior to Adaptation Work by the Team:*

**Part 3: Student Independent Practice ( Reader's Response)**

Use the following question or a similar one to help student's practice active reading and personalize what they have read. Suggest that students respond in their reader's journals at the writing station.

*How might the lives of Asian immigrants coming to America be shaped by their experiences on Angel Island? Be sure to support your answer with evidence from the text.*

**Assessment:**  
Use the Constructive Response Rubric for assessing students work.

**Investigation**


**Exclusion Act Document Based Question (DBQ)**

Students answer the preview questions out loud, written or projected by the teacher:

- What does it mean to be excluded or left out?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you felt unwanted or left out? How did it make you feel?
- Why do people sometimes exclude other people?

These questions can be modified by the teacher as needed to fit grade and skill level of students.

After Adaptation Work by the Team:


INTEGRATED ELA/SOCIAL STUDIES		Unit 5
<p><b>Part 3: Student Independent Practice ( Reader Response)</b></p> <p> Students respond to the following question in their reader's response journal at the writing station. Place copies of the book at this station for this assignment:</p> <div style="border: 2px solid red; padding: 5px; margin: 10px 0;"> <p><b>Focus Question: Was Lee Sun Chor experiences on Angel Island similar or different to those who landed on Ellis Island?</b></p> </div> <p>Use the following 6 Step process from <i>Writing Fix</i> to teach students how to answer a constructive response question:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Re-read the text at least once, then re-read the question carefully to decide all the parts it is asking for. Mark the key words in the question. The key words are the verb or verbs, any character names, and key literary terms.</li> <li>2. Rewrite the question in your own words to make sure that you know exactly what is being asked. Then, turn that question into a topic sentence for your answer.</li> <li>3. Go back to the passage and collect the needed information. Make sure you get the relevant details (If the question asks for 3 details, make sure you find 3 details).</li> <li>4. Organize the details into a logical order. Use a graphic organizer if that helps.</li> <li>5. Write your answer neatly.</li> <li>6. Re-read your answer to make sure you answered all the parts of the question.</li> </ol> <p><b>Assessment:</b> Use the Constructive Response Rubric for scoring students work. (Page 74 )</p>		
		<p><b>Strategies for Varied Learners</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create and display an anchor chart of the 6 steps process with visuals to support struggling learners</li> <li>• Students may use RACE (Appendix ) or the Hand Paragraph to support writing the Constructive Response</li> <li>• Have students combine visuals and writing when appropriate</li> </ul> <p style="color: red; font-weight: bold;">More guidance for close reading and building knowledge across texts – particularly through text-specific questions for each anchor text.</p>

Changes like the examples illustrated above were made throughout the unit. The resulting units provided more guidance for the close reading of each text and the building of knowledge across texts.


## Step 3: Piloting the Unit to Meet the Needs of All Students

The curriculum team in Stamford then asked a group of teachers to pilot the unit. The team spent time conducting observations of teachers teaching select lessons from the unit and gathering feedback. A larger committee was convened to include a larger group, and specifically ELL teachers and special education coaches, to discuss the results of the pilot and strategies for thinking about instruction based on the changes that were made to the instructional materials in the pilot process. Debrief meetings were scheduled in which each member of the committee offered their experience and expertise, and teachers involved in the pilot provided specific feedback for how students were supported during implementation. Based on the discussions coming out of the committee, the curriculum team captured those ideas and integrated them throughout the unit by adding a column to the unit template titled “Strategies for Varied Learners,” as illustrated in the examples below.

*Prior to Adaptation Work by the Team:*

 <h3>Investigation</h3>	<b>ALIGNMENT TO CCSS:</b> <b>TARGETED STANDARD(S):</b> RI.3.7; W.3.3 <b>SUPPORTING STANDARD(S):</b> RI.3.2; W.3.8
<b>Research and Discovery: Scholastic Virtual Field Trip and Immigration Resources</b>	
<b>Focus Question: What was the experience like for immigrants passing through Ellis Island?</b>	
<p>Step 1: Write "Ellis Island," on the board and explain how it is an important part of the history of American immigration. Discuss the focus question as a class.</p> <p>Step 2: Complete a Close Reading: <b>ELLIS ISLAND: Oysters, Pirates and Ammunition: The Early Days of Ellis Island</b> (For support in planning this lesson, refer to the close reading planner in Appendix )</p> <p><b>ABCTeach:</b> <u>ELLIS ISLAND: Oysters, Pirates and Ammunition: The Early Days of Ellis Island</u>            This document includes the history of Ellis island. This document also includes two pages of text dependent questions or you can create your own questions.</p> <p><a href="http://www.abcteach.com/free/17333.pdf">http://www.abcteach.com/free/17333.pdf</a></p>	
	<b>Meeting Students Needs</b>

*After Adaptation Work by the Team:*

<b>INTEGRATED ELA/SOCIAL STUDIES</b>		<b>Unit 5</b>
 <h3>Investigation</h3>	<b>ALIGNMENT TO CCSS:</b> <b>TARGETED STANDARD(S):</b> RI.4.7; W.4.3 <b>SUPPORTING STANDARD(S):</b> RI.4.2; W.4.8	
<b>Research and Discovery: Scholastic Virtual Field Trip and Immigration Resources</b>		<b>Strategies for Varied Learners</b>
<b>Focus Question: What was the experience like for immigrants passing through Ellis Island?</b>		
<p>Step 1: Write "Ellis Island," on the board and explain how it is an important part of the history of American immigration. Discuss the focus question as a class.</p> <p>Step 2: Complete a Close Reading: " <b>ELLIS ISLAND: Oysters, Pirates and Ammunition: The Early Days of Ellis Island</b>" (For support in planning this lesson, refer to the close reading planner in (Appendix B3-B8)</p> <p><b>ABCTeach:</b> <u>ELLIS ISLAND: Oysters, Pirates and Ammunition: The Early Days of Ellis Island</u>            This document includes the history of Ellis island. This document also includes two pages of text dependent questions or you can create your own questions.</p> <p><a href="http://www.abcteach.com/free/17333.pdf">http://www.abcteach.com/free/17333.pdf</a></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For Close Reading it is important to build background knowledge.</li> <li>• Work in small groups to provide videos, images and resources in English and first language that would prepare students to engage with the text.</li> <li>• Employ echo reading during the second reading to support students with improving sight reading, speaking skills, and remember important concepts</li> <li>• Pair strong readers with struggling learners for these task</li> </ul>
<b>Integrated supports for all students to access a range of topical texts at varying levels of complexity</b>		

As each lesson was considered, teachers suggested a variety of text-specific strategies for engaging all students, including English Language Learners and others, with the complex and knowledge-rich texts included in the unit.

Finally, the curriculum team met for a two-day working session in Washington DC where they received targeted support and feedback against the [EQuIP Quality Review Rubric](#). The team made the final changes to the unit before submitting to the EQuIP Review Panel.

## Index of Links and Tools

### **Resources Produced During the Pilot**

- [Grade 4 - Coming to America: A Nation of Immigrants - Exemplar](#) includes the entire unit of study, related texts and student materials including supports for varied learners, as well as the full EQulP Peer Review Panel evaluation (A PDF of the unit and individual appendices can be found [here](#).)

### **Materials Used During the Pilot**

- [Introductory Training](#) on the EQulP Quality Review Rubric and feedback process
- EQulP Quality Review Rubric
  - [Grades 3-12 rubric](#)
  - [Grades 3-12 Electronic Feedback form](#)
- [EQulP Rubric of Coming to America Unit \(before adaptation\)](#)
- [Stamford's 2015 Literacy Plan \(PDF\)](#)

### **Additional Resources**

- [Tools for Measuring Text Complexity](#)
- [Lexile Framework for Reading](#)
- [Text Complexity: Qualitative Measures Rubric](#)