

EL Education Response to EdReports' Review of our Expeditionary Learning ELA Grades 6-8 Curriculum

EL Education (formerly Expeditionary Learning) appreciates EdReports' comprehensive and positive review of our Grades 6-8 ELA curriculum (created by EL Education on behalf of Public Consulting Group, Inc.). We thank EdReports' independent team of reviewers for thorough, incisive work, and encourage educators to read the full report.

Our program is unique: modules meet EdReports' indicators while engaging all students with compelling topics, empowering them, and building teacher capacity. The curriculum is “by teachers, for teachers” – 50+ teachers lent their passion and practical wisdom throughout the design.

We are seeing results:

“My students have learned that they can tackle challenging work. They’ve figured out ways to help each other, to be more independent in their own reading, and they’re not afraid to read complex text anymore. They’re happy and engaged to take on that challenge. That thrills me.”

8th grade teacher, Queens, NY

EL Education

For 20 years, EL Education has redefined student achievement in communities across the country by engaging teachers and students in active learning. Our approach emphasizes three dimensions of achievement – mastery of knowledge and skills, character, and high-quality work. A leading K-12 nonprofit, EL Education creates curriculum, books, and videos, and provides professional development for schools, districts, and states.

Currently in use in over 550 districts in 43 states, our open-source, free curriculum has been downloaded well over 6 million times.

Our design

Four modules (three units each) comprise a full year's curriculum. Modules are designed around authentic trade books (not textbooks or anthologies) vetted by external reviewers.

We use backward design and our unique “4 Ts” framework: Topic, Task, Target, Text. (See [video](#).)
Each module:

- » Is grounded in a compelling **topic**. Examples: “Rules to Live By” (Grade 6), screen time and the adolescent brain (Grade 7), Japanese-American relations in WWII (Grade 8).
- » Includes six on-demand assessments (including an academic essay) and a culminating performance **task** (for an authentic purpose and audience).
- » Explicitly teaches and formally assesses a bundle of **targets** – CCSS ELA standards.
- » Includes multiple complex **texts** – literary (e.g., *Pygmalion*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*) and informational (e.g., *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Unbroken*).

Response to EdReports Review

Below we note EdReports highlights and offer additions.

Gateway 1: Text quality and alignment to standards

Criterion 1A-1F: Texts are worthy of students' time and attention: texts are of quality and are rigorous, meeting text complexity criteria for each grade. Materials support students' advancing toward independent reading.

Score: 20/20

- » Texts are worthy, rigorous, and address varied student interests. Unlike many programs, we incorporate high-quality, full-length works.
- » We include texts representing diverse perspectives (e.g., Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly*, Thanhha Lai's *Inside Out & Back Again*, Cesar Chavez speeches)
- » Reviewers found our curriculum builds students' knowledge, skills, and independence across the year. Module 4 includes a capstone "science and society" research project.

Criterion 1G-1N: Materials provide opportunities for rich and rigorous evidence-based discussions and writing about texts to build strong literacy skills.

Score: 15/16

- » All students are challenged and supported to work with complex text in meaningful ways.
- » EL Education uses Vermont Writing Collaborative's *Writing for Understanding*. Students build knowledge and then write (or speak) about a topic they truly understand.
- » Our performance tasks propel student learning. Said one teacher: "For the final performance task for the novel *Inside Out & Back Again*, students were so committed to creating heartfelt, authentic, culturally appropriate poems from the perspective of a refugee that the end results blew me away. They wrote with skill, creativity, and a maturity I hadn't seen before."
- » Reviewers praised the protocols and ways to engage students in text-based discussions and building academic vocabulary. Teachers concur: "I'm impressed by my students' ability to use the strategies – through discussion, annotation, writing about text, looking for text-based evidence to support their thinking. I'm proud they now approach a difficult text in a new way." (See videos: [Reading Closely](#) and [Engaging Vocabulary Instruction](#).)
- » Students lead their own learning: setting goals; self-assessing; using models, critique, and feedback to improve their writing.
- » EdReports scored 1/2 points on Indicator 1n: explicit grammar and conventions instruction. We concur. The curriculum includes mini-lessons for each language standard, yet teachers should build in more practice. (See [Common Core-aligned Interventions for Adolescent Readers](#).)

Gateway 2: Building knowledge with texts, vocabulary, and tasks

Criterion 2A-2H: The instructional materials meet expectations for building knowledge.

Score: 32/32

- » EdReports praised our rich text sets that build knowledge and vocabulary; carefully sequenced text-dependent questions that *scaffold* understanding, not just assess it; and robust, evidence-based writing tasks. .
- » Reviewers highlighted ample opportunities (accountable independent reading) for volume of reading on the module topic, which accelerates knowledge and vocabulary growth (most critical for students farthest behind).
- » Our 4 Ts process ensures students build knowledge while grappling with complex texts: studying survival and Sudan while reading *A Long Walk to Water*, or Jim Crow alongside *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Content-based literacy is a potent paradigm shift for middle school English teachers, who've often taken a more skills-based approach. Said one principal: "The reading materials are fantastic... These texts allow our students to not only learn the basics with reading and writing, but also learn about the world they live in."
- » Building literacy while studying compelling topics propels student engagement.

Gateway 3: Usability

Criterion 3A-3E: The use and design of the instructional materials facilitate student learning.

Score: 8/8

- » Reviewers said materials are well-designed, and show effective lesson structure and pacing; student resources include ample review and practice, clear directions, and alignment documentation to standards.

Criterion 3F-3J: Materials support teacher learning and understanding of the Standards.

Score: 8/8

- » We view curriculum as professional development. Reviewers found our program builds teacher capacity with instructional practices and a deep understanding of the standards and shifts. The teacher’s edition contains useful annotations plus full explanations and examples of advanced literacy concepts and research-based instructional practices.
- » Reviewers said grade-level curriculum maps offer a high-level year-long view. Extensive lesson-level teaching notes illuminate the nuances of the standards and key teaching practices (e.g., helping students read closely).
- » Reviewers noted our robust, free, downloadable resources commoncoresuccess.education.org (e.g., Preparing to Teach the Modules, Assessment Design, Teaching Research).
- » Other resources help teachers understand our approach to the standards: *Transformational Literacy: Making the Common Core Shift with Work that Matters*, and [publicly available videos](#).
- » We offer services (planning, professional institutes, onsite coaching) to support high-quality curriculum implementation. Partners have included State Departments of Education, NYC, Boston, Denver, Shelby County (TN), and Oakland, CA.

Criterion 3K-3N: Materials offer teachers resources and tools to collect ongoing data about student progress on the Standards.

Score: 8/8.

- » Reviewers found materials regularly and systematically offer assessment opportunities that genuinely measure student progress. Six on-demand assessments per module each align to a targeted bundle of standards.
- » Students build test-taking skills in the context of rich learning, not “test prep.” Assessment formats mirror those of high-stakes tests.
- » Reviewers said materials include routines and guidance to monitor student progress; lessons suggest “ongoing assessment” (e.g., exit tickets) and checking for understanding techniques. The lesson structure builds teachers’ capacity for formative assessment.
- » Teachers gather actionable data on how well a student has mastered a particular standard as well as overall reading proficiency.
- » Reviewers noted strong independent reading structures—critical to growing students’ knowledge, vocabulary, and confidence.

Criterion 3O-3R: Materials provide teachers with strategies for meeting the needs of a range of learners so that they demonstrate independent ability with grade-level standards.

Score: 7/8

- » We’re proud we earned 4/4 on Indicator 3p: “Materials regularly provide all students, including those who read, write, speak, or listen below grade level or in a language other than English, with extensive opportunities to work with grade-level text and meet or exceed grade-level standards.” Lessons suggest strategic grouping and purposeful differentiation for ELLs and students who struggle.
- » EdReports scored 1/2 for indicator 3q: extensions for students ready for more challenge. We concur that only some lessons include extensions, yet we respectfully note that all module and unit overviews do. Challenging texts from the Recommended Texts help build students’ knowledge, vocabulary, and interest in the topic.
- » Module overviews suggest fieldwork, experts, and service—for all students.

Criterion 3S-3V: Materials support effective use of technology to enhance student learning. Digital materials are accessible and available on multiple platforms.
These indicators aren't assigned a point value.

- » Reviewers noted materials, available as Word files, can be easily customized.

Onward!

The Expeditionary Learning ELA curriculum honors teachers as professionals and creative change agents. Our materials encourage teachers to build on existing expertise and to continuously improve their ability to make strong instructional decisions (planning and in response to students' needs). Students achieve high academic standards when immersed in deep study of compelling topics, building knowledge, engagement, and ownership of their learning.

EL Education offers this open educational resource to districts nationally.

- » Visit commoncoresuccess.ELeducation.org to download the curriculum for free (Word/PDF).
- » For information about ordering printed curriculum or purchasing required trade books, see the “How to Order” link.
- » To seek professional development or implementation guidance, write pd@ELeducation.org.

We thank EdReports for their extensive review and insightful analysis.