



# AIMING HIGHER

How a Standards-Driven Approach Achieves  
Equity and Improves Student Learning

LITERACY DESIGN  
**COLLABORATIVE**

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## THANK YOU

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- Glen Alta Span School, LAUSD
- Johnnie L. Cochran Jr. Middle School, LAUSD
- Lockhurst Drive Charter Elementary School, LAUSD
- Melrose Elementary Mathematics/Science/Technology Magnet, LAUSD
- P.S. 48 The William Wordsworth School, NYC DOE
- P.S. 133 William A. Butler School, NYC DOE
- P.S. 182 The Bilingual Bicultural School, NYC DOE
- Rosa Parks Learning Center, LAUSD
- Urban Assembly Institute of Math and Science for Young Women, NYC DOE
- Vista del Valle Dual Language Academy, LAUSD

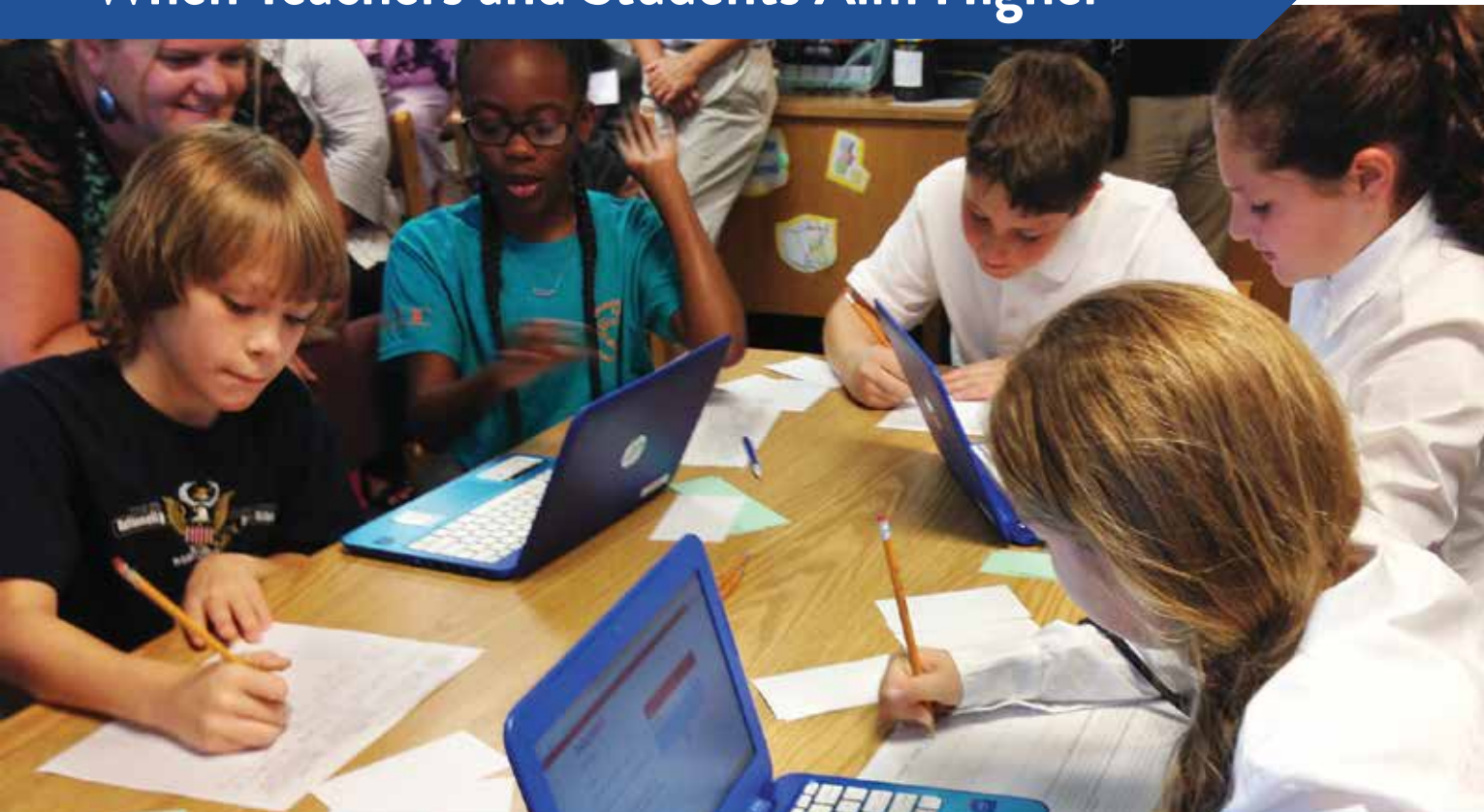
Thank you for all that you do to support your students in developing lifelong literacy skills.



**The Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) is a national nonprofit working to advance educational equity for all students through high-quality curriculum, instruction, and professional development.**

LDC launched a decade ago as a collaborative of practitioners and organizations committed to raising rigor and improving teacher efficacy in order to impact student outcomes and address issues of educational equity while implementing new college and career-ready academic standards. Including teachers, literacy experts, and curriculum specialists, LDC has spent over 10 years developing frameworks, tools, and professional learning for teachers in ELA, social studies, and the sciences. First piloted in a handful of districts across the United States, these resources and strategies were tested, refined, and validated through additional collaborations with state departments of education, performance task experts, and disciplinary partners.

# When Teachers and Students Aim Higher



At Melrose Elementary Mathematics/Science/Technology Magnet in Los Angeles, CA, all teachers employ common tools and strategies for standards-driven instruction. The schoolwide use of these practices emerged out of early positive results in a few select grade levels of teachers implementing a new approach to instructional planning. Double digit gains in state test scores for these early adopters made others eager to integrate the same approaches into their teaching. The school now sees a tight alignment to standards across grades and subjects, and expectations for all students have risen.

At P.S. 48Q William Wordsworth Elementary School in Queens, NY, a group of teachers including one from each grade work to compare instructional tasks with examples of the resulting argument pieces students have written. Referring to nationally calibrated rubrics of desired student performance, they note how expectations progress from one grade level to the next, and how this looks in actual student work. This leads them to plan ways to bring more rigor and targeted differentiation to their instruction.

At P.S. 133K William A. Butler Elementary School in Brooklyn, NY, 4th graders bounce in their seats

with excitement as they discuss an analysis of text. With arms raised high, they vie for the chance to share evidence to defend their points of view. Asked by a classroom visitor why standards appear on their class assignments, students respond without hesitation: “Those tell us what to think about and do!”

Each of these snapshots captures a highly productive learning environment—one defined by four important characteristics:

- 1 *The same high expectations for all students;*
- 2 *A focus on delivering standards-driven assignments;*
- 3 *A focus on assessing evidence of standards in student work; and*
- 4 *Collaborative, data-driven inquiry cycles to monitor and respond to student learning.*

All three schools achieved these objectives through a research-based partnership with the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC), a national nonprofit working to advance educational equity for all students through high-quality curriculum, instruction, and professional development.



LDC launched a decade ago as a collaborative of practitioners and organizations committed to raising rigor and improving teacher efficacy in order to impact student outcomes and address issues of educational equity while implementing new college and career-ready academic standards. Including teachers, literacy experts, and curriculum specialists, LDC spent its first years developing frameworks, tools, and professional learning for teachers in ELA, social studies, and the sciences. First piloted in a handful of districts, these resources and strategies were all co-created with teachers and tested and refined through additional collaborations with a number of state departments of education, performance task experts, and disciplinary partners.

Through a five-year federal Investing in Innovation (i3) validation grant, these three schools and others like them in the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) transformed their classrooms into standards-driven learning environments by building authentic teacher understanding of academic standards and bringing literacy-rich writing assignments to students within their existing curriculum. Based on extensive interviews and visits to LDC partner schools in both districts, *Aiming Higher* describes the LDC model and the on-the-ground methods schools used to realize significant learning gains for students as well as transformative results for teachers and schools. Included are key insights from practitioners on how they leveraged rigorous academic standards to raise student performance and close longstanding gaps in student achievement.



# Students and Teachers Rise to the Occasion



The UCLA Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing's (CRESST) independent evaluation of LDC's impact on student outcomes found that students in both cities **gained from four to nine additional months of learning compared to matched-pair peers** when exposed to multiple LDC teachers. In some cases, gains of three to seven months of additional learning were seen after just *one year* of teacher participation in LDC.<sup>1,2</sup>

Gains of this magnitude are unusual in education, especially in such a short time period. By some measures, they are greater than the gap in learning among students with teachers in the top and bottom quartiles in terms of their teaching effectiveness.<sup>3</sup> The cumulative effect of such large improvements in student learning has the potential to greatly narrow the achievement gaps between disadvantaged students and

their peers. This holds the promise of setting youth from marginalized populations on a new trajectory for significantly better life prospects.

The results of the CRESST evaluation are supported by established research that states, unequivocally, that "task predicts performance."<sup>4</sup> Students need grade-appropriate assignments, effective instruction, high expectations, and to be engaged in what they are learning in order to consistently meet grade-level standards. Yet, only 17% of the assignments that students currently receive meet grade-level standards,<sup>5</sup> solidifying the reality that students will underperform those standards. When students are offered assignments with grade-appropriate expectations, they can meet their grade-level standards and close the achievement gap with their peers by more than seven months.<sup>6</sup>

## LDC STUDENTS GAIN

**4-9 MONTHS** OF ADDITIONAL LEARNING IN 1 SCHOOL YEAR

LDC STUDENTS

One School Year

4-9 Months of Extra Growth

NON-LDC STUDENTS

One School Year





LDC partners with district and school leaders to guarantee equity of access to rigorous and standards-driven instruction across all classrooms. To meet that guarantee, LDC works with school leaders to design an implementation path that utilizes LDC assignments, known as modules, and data inquiry cycles centered on teaching and assessing focus clusters of standards. LDC modules aren't random assignments. Rather, they are strategically placed, scaffolded opportunities for students and teachers to gain valuable insight into the thinking processes of different disciplines at different grade levels.

LDC's goal, and the goal shared by LAUSD and NYCDOE, was not only to offer grade-appropriate assignments to students, but to support teachers in writing and delivering *exceptional* assignments.

LDC schools demonstrate the use of higher-quality and more rigorous student tasks, more effective instruction, heightened expectations, and increased student engagement. Practitioners in partner schools described myriad outcomes for students, teachers, and schools that all contribute to significant student growth.

## RESULTS BEYOND STUDENT TESTING

### ... for students

Growing agency over learning and ability to engage with complex concepts and texts.

Higher engagement in classrooms and stronger understanding of assignment expectations.

Improved writing quality, quantity, and stamina.

Increased depth of thinking.

Expanded discourse with peers, leading to deeper connections and applications of knowledge.

### ... for teachers

Higher expectations for all students.

Deeper understanding of the standards and knowledge of what mastery of specific standards looks like.

Ability to plan standards-driven assignments and make more intentional choices about instruction and texts.

Ability to effectively differentiate to meet varying student needs.

Ability to anticipate student thinking and respond with appropriate in-the-moment instructional moves.

Ability to assess student learning for evidence of the standards, and to provide more meaningful feedback to students based on that assessment.

### ... for schools

Writing is infused into all core content areas, allowing students to experience comfort and success with writing.

Connections across classes and content areas emerge naturally, resulting in a more coherent learning experience for students.

Teachers have the knowledge and planning tools to support authentic, content-based collaboration and connections across grades and subjects.

Teachers apply the knowledge and instructional planning learned from LDC to their lessons broadly, so using standards to drive planning, teaching, and assessment becomes the norm.

Schoolwide coherence of curriculum and instruction to standards increases dramatically.

# Aiming for Standards-Driven Instruction Across the School

LDC asks school leaders to think about questions of distributing rigorous instructional equity across all classrooms. School leaders initially situate the LDC work within their own school improvement goals by asking the questions: How can we increase our teachers' capacity to develop students' ability to read and write with intentional and deliberate purpose? And how do we make this happen systemically?



## LDC IMPLEMENTATION PATH

LDC partners with school leaders to design an implementation path that utilizes LDC modules and data inquiry cycles centered on focus clusters of standards.

STEP  
1

### IDENTIFY A CLEAR PURPOSE

- School leaders identify current *problems of practice* they want to address (e.g. improving the rigor of writing assignments; increasing the volume of student writing; and aligning assignments to literacy standards across the curriculum).

STEP  
2

### ENGAGE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP & STAFF PARTICIPATION

- Working with LDC, school leaders outline an *approach to launching and growing the model* with an eye on eventual spread and sustainability.
- School leaders determine which staff members will make up the *initial LDC teacher team* (e.g. grade level teams, departmental teams, vertical teams) and how participation will grow.
- School leaders select an *LDC Teacher Leader* and work with LDC to determine a training plan to build leadership capacity.
- School leaders identify *protected time* for the LDC teacher team to meet weekly.

STEP  
3

### EMBED LDC MODULES INTO EXISTING CURRICULUM

- Working with their LDC coach, school leaders and teachers determine *when and where they will teach LDC modules within their curriculum scope & sequence*. These modules form the foundation for the *standards-driven data inquiry cycles* teachers implement throughout the school year with the support of their LDC coach.

STEP  
4

### IMPLEMENT ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Teachers, teacher leaders, and school leaders receive *LDC job-embedded professional development* as they implement facilitated data inquiry cycles. Teachers meet weekly with their LDC coach to plan LDC instruction, receive feedback from their coach, and review student work.
- Teacher Leaders meet monthly with the LDC coach, and meet monthly with their school leader to share teacher progress and student outcomes.

STEP  
5

### IMPLEMENT A PLAN FOR SPREAD & SCALE

- As growth in teacher and student learning progresses, school leaders begin to enact their *plan for spreading LDC practices to classrooms throughout the school*.
- School leaders continue to meet with the LDC Teacher Leader for ongoing data-based progress monitoring meetings.
- LDC supports school leadership in determining if and how their existing assessments align with the standards-based skills addressed in LDC modules.

# Elevating Teacher Thinking and Standards-Driven Instruction



LDC’s approach is premised on the idea that the standards come first. Instructional plans and activities—including all in-the-moment moves that teachers make and how they assess student work—must be designed and executed using the standards as a starting place. **Teachers start with a cluster of three focus standards as the driver of their work with students. Their instructional plans and practices are then all designed in the service of answering the question, “How can I best teach these focus standards?”**

This differs from typical practice in many places, where the standards remain ideas that are superficially connected to curricula or instructional activities, or where the standards may be tacked on to existing instructional practices and therefore deemed to be “aligned.” This is the result of a common but problematic mindset in which the goal of standards implementation is to become “standards aligned” or “standards compliant” rather than **standards driven**. While many efforts to support standards implementation claim to “unpack” the standards for teachers, this often translates into merely naming the standards and describing their goals and how they’re organized. Too often the process stops at superficial explanations of the standard’s meaning.

## FOCUS CLUSTER



**CONTENT  
STANDARD**



**READING  
STANDARD**



**WRITING  
STANDARD**

## PROGRESSIONAL RUBRICS

A unique aspect of LDC’s model are progressional rubrics for ELA reading and writing, NGSS, and C3 standards developed in conjunction with the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE). LDC/SCALE also provides a double-blind peer consensus review process that evaluates standards alignment, rigor, and disciplinary authenticity in assignment prompts and instructional plans.

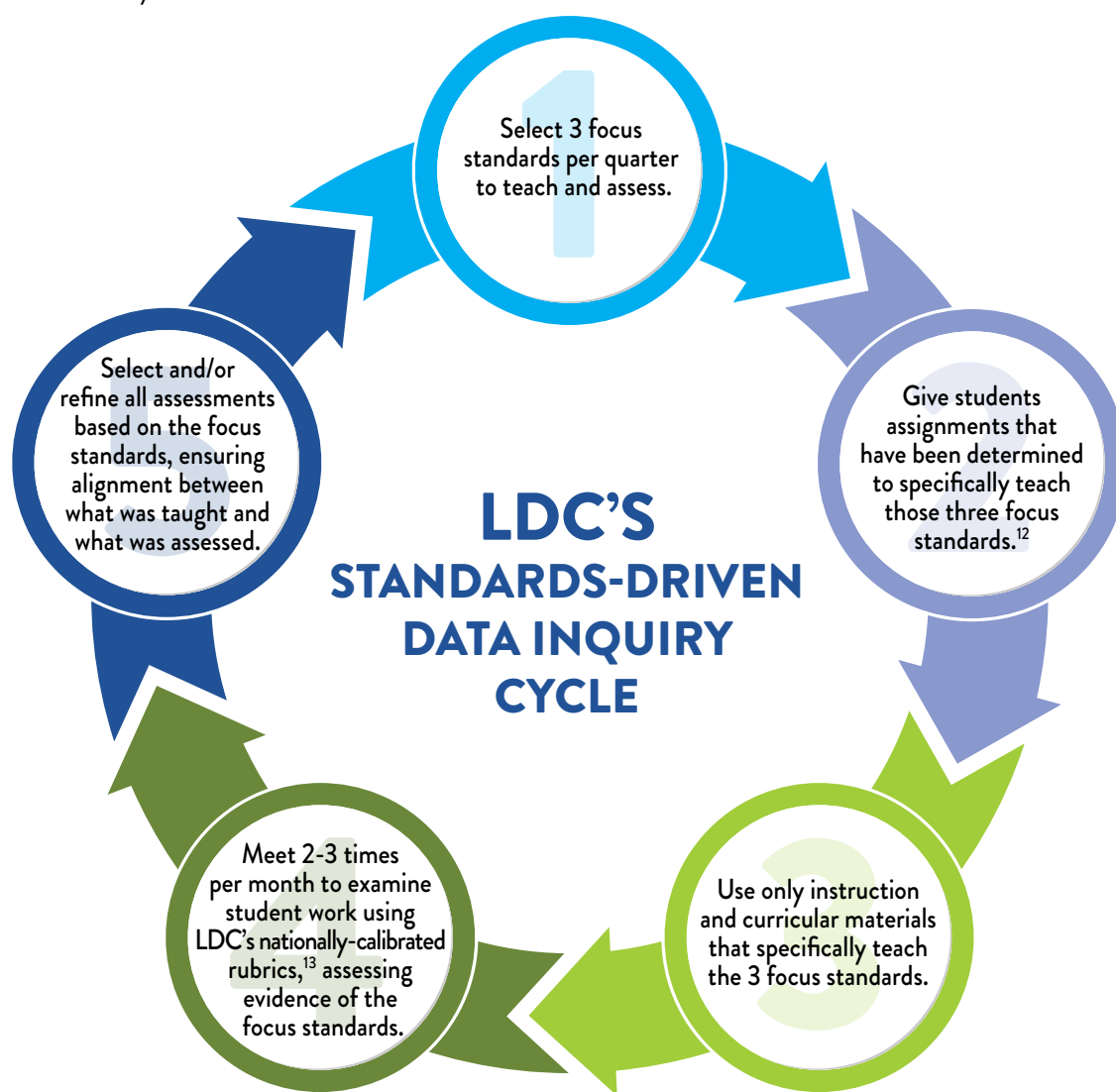


This review process ensures that teachers and students have access to the high quality assignments that research shows predict high student performance.<sup>7</sup> In the i3 LDC model, teachers submitted their assignments to this review process and were also able to select assignments to teach that have been reviewed and rated by SCALE, giving teachers confidence that students would be spending valuable instructional time on assignments designed to significantly impact their performance.<sup>8</sup>

### STANDARDS-DRIVEN DATA INQUIRY CYCLES

LDC's implementation utilizes a job-embedded, blended coaching model to support teachers through two to three data inquiry cycles throughout each school year. Those data inquiry cycles support teachers in recognizing, refining, and delivering standards-driven assignments. They leave behind topical teaching, disjointed teaching, and dissociated teaching, and complete these five steps repeatedly over the course of the entire school year.

Importantly, LDC's data inquiry cycles require teachers to select **just three priority standards to focus on in each quarter—one content, one reading, and one writing standard.**<sup>9</sup> These standards focus clusters help teachers learn deeply the ways in which the thinking work of those standards manifest in reading, writing, and speaking in various content areas. Teachers are able to consider the type of reading, writing, and thinking work students need to do in order to most deeply engage with the content. This often involves setting aside topics and standards in order to deliver authentically disciplinary instruction based on specific standards pairings.<sup>10</sup> While teachers may initially question this tight focus, LDC's approach has shown what the research recommends—that teaching important things deeply has more impact on student learning outcomes than teaching many things superficially.<sup>11</sup>



# How the LDC Model Drives Significant Student Learning Gains

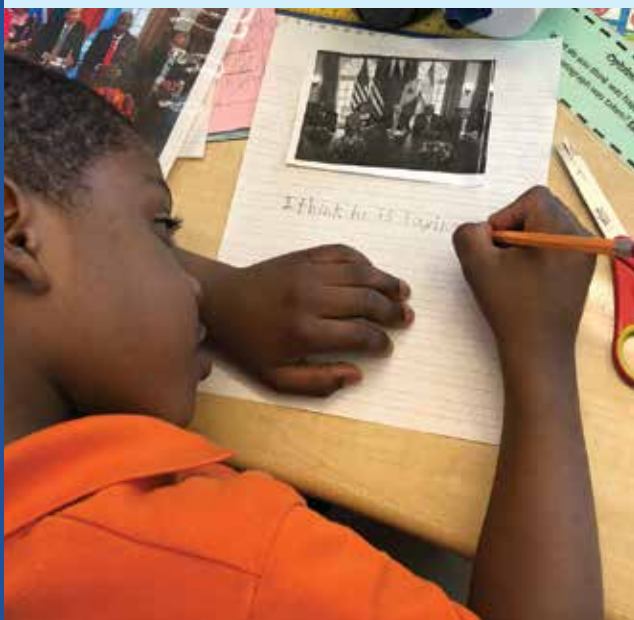


## LDC IN PRACTICE: WHEN STUDENTS JUMP FOR JOY TO ANALYZE TEXT

**William A. Butler Elementary's LDC story demonstrates how a standards-driven environment can have a significant impact on student learning and engagement.** The school started implementing LDC in grades 4-5, and in that first year saw students in those grades make larger one-year gains in English language arts proficiency on state standardized tests than similar students across the district. In fact, they outperformed district averages by 8 percentage points. Now in their second year of LDC implementation, participating teachers say they are confident that they're on track to realize further gains in student test scores, and they report even more improvements in student engagement, discourse, depth of thinking, and writing performance.

The impact on students of LDC's standards-driven assignments is clearly visible in a recent visit to the school's 4th grade classrooms. Students discuss the novel they have been reading, *Maniac Magee*, a Newbery Medal winner about an orphan who becomes a legend in a small, racially divided town. Students' overarching task is to write a literary essay in which they analyze how Maniac responds—through thoughts, words, or actions—to challenging events in his life. The task was designed to teach two key state ELA standards.

During a lesson where they are finding evidence in the text that shows how Maniac responded to the challenges, students remain deeply engaged in individual reading and reflection, group tasks, and full group discussion. Student attention to their own work and group or classroom discourse is consistently high and focused on the text and task at hand. When students are able to share the evidence they have found in a class discussion, along with their analysis of how it describes Maniac's response to adversity, they have a hard time containing their excitement as they wait to be called on to share and connect their ideas to their classmates. Some literally jump out of their seats to engage in this rich class discussion and share their evidence and ideas. When they do, they make clear connections to the writing task ahead of them.



A deeper look into the transformation that has resulted at schools like Butler Elementary reveals more of what students know and are able to do as a result of standards-driven instruction. Interviews with teachers, instructional leaders, and students—along with observations of classroom work—suggest that as students take part in standards-driven learning activities, they gain a fuller understanding of, and appreciation for, the practice of effective writing. Below are many of the key positive changes in student behavior and performance that participants say are the result of their participation in LDC.

## Students demonstrate improved writing quality, quantity, rigor, and stamina.

Improvements in student writing are reflected both in state standardized test scores as well as in students' day-to-day work. Similar to the performance seen at Butler Elementary, students in other LDC partner schools outperformed matched students in non-LDC schools on standardized tests, with gains equivalent to 4-9 months of additional instruction, or nearly a full school year for some students. More than 80% of LDC schools visited as part of this study saw a positive average change in state standardized test scores as compared to their local district.

Looking beyond standardized test scores, teachers describe improvements in student writing as both sustained and indicative of significantly richer and more rigorous learning. Teachers see greater endurance or stamina on the part of students when it comes to writing. Many said students have gone from providing responses of a few sentences to being able to respond to a prompt with multiple paragraphs over the course of a year of LDC instruction. They also say the quality and rigor demonstrated in student writing is greatly improved. This means students can better plan and organize their writing, state their beliefs and incorporate evidence to support their reasoning, and write with various objectives, such as to persuade or make a scientific argument.

## Student depth of thinking reaches consistently higher levels.

Teachers see an increased depth of thinking and complexity in student writing as students “grapple with big ideas” every day and show they can synthesize what they are thinking and learning, use evidence to support their beliefs, provide high-quality feedback to peers, and ask and answer higher-order questions. As one teacher said: “LDC was instrumental in taking the students into a higher level and caliber of writing and thinking, and into more collaborative work. It just picked kids brains in a different way to create richer conversation and more rigor.”

## Students are more engaged in classrooms and understand what is expected of them.

LDC's instructional modules are designed to create an environment where students understand what is being asked of them and why. Students also are given the opportunity to engage in content in more personally meaningful ways. With the standards clearly articulated at the beginning of the unit, teachers and students have a shared, clear understanding of the end goal of any lesson or unit, serving as an effective

and eye-opening tool for students to garner sustained motivation and focus.

One LDC teacher noted, “If they know the intentionality of the work, what they're shooting towards, it builds excitement and rigor because they're making the connections from the very beginning of a task through everything they're asked to do along the way.” Another said, “The driving force is to know the end point and what your goal is as a writer or researcher. Because LDC does this the kids really know what's expected at the end.” In particular, teachers credit LDC's SCALE rubrics with clearly showing students what is expected of them and what good writing looks like at the outset and throughout a unit.

## Students display growing confidence in their own abilities.

Clear expectations and greater connections in their day-to-day work boosts student confidence as well as their independence and ability to take charge and lead their own learning. Teachers see growing confidence on the part of students about what they believe they can accomplish, with success meeting clear and more rigorous learning goals leading to an even greater desire to do more and learn more.

## Student discourse expands to richer conversations with deeper connections for students.

Instructional units planned with LDC's standards-driven approach include an increased reliance on student discourse and higher-order thinking skills to drive standards mastery. Students are taught how to deconstruct complex text, find evidence of their beliefs to support their reasoning, and critique peers' writing. They practice these skills in structured ways, regularly and across content areas, creating a comfort with these tasks and ways of thinking and ultimately the ability to apply them to multiple contexts.

As a result, teachers and school leaders report greatly improved overall student discourse and speaking within LDC-led classrooms. Students are seen as more willing to speak out and share their ideas, and do so in conversations with peers that include a heightened level of analysis and reflection about what they are reading, thinking, and writing. At Butler Elementary, 4th graders were heard actively connecting their ideas to what classmates said. They explained why they agreed or disagreed, and added on to others' ideas with well thought out analyses about how the text-based evidence they found supported the discussion. Importantly, teachers describe seeing these higher-quality interactions across the board, from students at all learning levels and from all backgrounds.

# How Teacher Knowledge & Practice Changes in a Standards-Driven Environment



## LDC IN PRACTICE: TEACHERS PUT STANDARDS UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

William Wordsworth Elementary School began its partnership with the goal of targeting student learning of central literacy practices. As the principal noted, the team wanted “scholars to have an active role in becoming more proficient with their writing and being able to speak to writing excellence based on the standards.” To accomplish this, a K-5 team was formed to serve as the LDC PLC with the mandate to take a vertical view of writing instruction and rigor across the curriculum. Organizing as a vertical team allowed teachers at Wordsworth to bring both a *multidisciplinary* and *developmental* lens to the LDC work. Even with just one lead teacher in each grade utilizing LDC, students in tested grades outperformed district average gains in English language arts proficiency by 5 percentage points over the course of the 2018-19 school year.



The school developed a schoolwide **LDC Curriculum Map** which identified two target standards for each quarter and the common assignments to be used to teach those standards. All teachers were expected to teach those standards in the designated quarter. Thus, teachers were able to collaborate and compare student learning of standards across grade levels even while the content differed.

WORDSWORTH CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT MAP			
TIMELINE	SEPTEMBER–NOVEMBER	DECEMBER–FEBRUARY	MARCH–APRIL
Focus Literacy Standards	Reading Standard 3 Writing Standard 2	Reading Standard 6 Writing Standard 1	Reading Standard 7 Writing Standard 2
<b>LDC Module</b>	<b>K:</b> Blueberries For Sal <b>1:</b> Retelling Frog and Toad Together <b>2:</b> Comparing and Contrasting Character Responses in Yeh-Shen and Rough Face Girl <b>3:</b> The Big Influence of One Small Character <b>4:</b> Analyzing How Character Traits Develop Theme in "Fox", by Margaret Wild <b>5:</b> Wilma Unlimited: Character Analysis	<b>K:</b> Using Information to Make Choices Between Wants and Needs <b>1:</b> Citizens Have Responsibility <b>2:</b> How Peoples' Actions in History Have Shaped Our World Today <b>3:</b> The United States Constitution <b>4:</b> Battle of Olustee: Comparing Firsthand and Secondhand Accounts <b>5:</b> Patriot or Loyalist?	<b>K:</b> How Animals Live and What They Need <b>1:</b> Discovering Patterns in Animal Parent Behaviors <b>2:</b> How Does an Animal's Habitat Help Support its Needs? <b>3:</b> Weather Design Solutions <b>4:</b> Save the Seagrass <b>5:</b> Life Zones Research Project
<b>Content</b>	ELA	Social Studies	Science
<b>Writing Mode</b>	Informative / Explanatory	Argumentative	Informative / Explanatory
<b>Writing Products</b>	Literary Analysis	Historical Analysis	Poster Presentation or Infographic
<b>Assessments</b>	LDC Student Work Rubric	LDC Student Work Rubric	LDC Student Work Rubric District Extended Response Exam

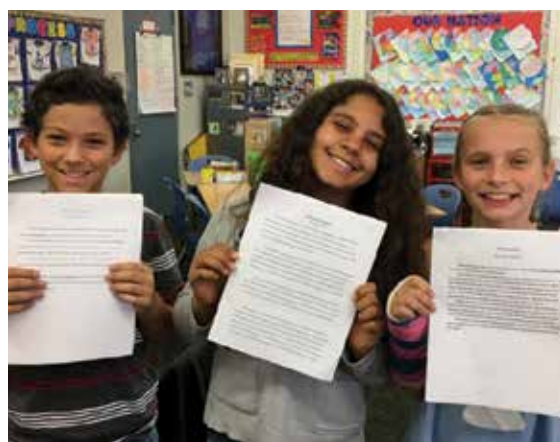
In one PLC meeting we observed, teachers read their assignment tasks in grade level order, followed by excerpts of their students' final writing products for those assignments. The first grade students were studying US government and fifth graders science ethics, but because the teachers were focused on the same pairing of two literacy standards, they were able to analyze student learning based on the ways students demonstrated those common standards.

The PLC activity had an immediate impact on instructional planning. As teachers reviewed actual student work from vertical grade levels, they consulted the LDC/SCALE rubric to understand and assess how thinking becomes more sophisticated as students progress through the grade levels:

READING INFORMATIONAL TEXT STANDARD							
GRADE LEVEL & SCORING ELEMENT	EMERGING		APPROACHES EXPECTATIONS		MEETS EXPECTATIONS		ADVANCED
	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	3.5	4
<b>Grade 3</b> <b>RI.3.3: Describe Relationships in a Text</b>	Describes the events, ideas, or steps in the text		Describes the <b>connection between</b> events, ideas, or steps in the text		Describes the <b>relationship</b> between events, ideas, or steps in a text using some relevant <b>academic language</b> (e.g. words pertaining to time, sequence, cause/effect)		<b>Accurately</b> describes the relationship between events, ideas, or steps in a text using <b>precise</b> academic language
<b>Grade 4</b> <b>RI.4.3: Explain Events, Procedures, and Ideas</b>	Describes events, procedures, ideas, or concepts in the text		<b>Generally explains</b> events, procedures, ideas, or concepts in the text		<b>Accurately explains</b> events, procedures, ideas, or concepts, <b>including what happened and why</b> , using <b>specific information</b> in the text		<b>Precisely explains</b> events, procedures, ideas, or concepts, including what happened and why, using specific information in the text

Rooting their conversation in the LDC/SCALE rubric criteria helped teachers to effectively target student learning of standards-driven literacy practices across the grade levels. Their conversation then turned to planning specific instruction that they could provide to bring more rigor to each individual students' learning.

As one PLC member stated, "When you utilize the LDC work vertically, it's like magic flying in the room. It really gives the understanding of whether I'm supporting students as they go to the next grade, and is the grade below me preparing students for me." Through a focus on specific standards pairings, teachers expanded their understanding of the progression of student mastery of the standards over time, and raised their expectations for what *all* students can master with standards-driven assignments.



**Teachers implementing LDC credit their ability to support better student writing and thinking with key changes in their knowledge and practice.** Participants say they benefit from an improved understanding of the standards and a clearer idea of what good writing looks like. They are able to plan high-quality, standards-driven lessons with clearer, higher expectations for students. They are more capable at leading students through thoughtful, intentional tasks and can better anticipate student thinking and stand ready with appropriate teaching moves. This also allows them to provide better assessments of—and feedback on—student work, based on their deep understanding of standards, which in turn supports more effective differentiation for individual student needs. Following are more detailed explanations of these benefits.

### **Teachers gain a deep understanding of the standards, and know what mastery of specific standards looks like.**

Creating a standards-driven learning environment starts with ensuring teachers have a deep understanding of the standards—what they mean, why they’re important, and how to use them. Teachers report that as a result of participating in LDC, they gained an eye-opening new awareness and understanding of the standards. “One of the biggest outcomes I’ve seen as a teacher is really understanding the Common Core standards well for the first time in my career because of LDC. The standards are something I have been on board with since inception, but still I didn’t know them like I know them now. With LDC, you eat, sleep, and breathe the standards.”

### **Teachers are able to plan high-quality standards-driven instructional units and make more intentional choices about instruction and texts.**

Teachers report participation in LDC led to dramatic improvements in their ability to plan high-quality standards-driven instructional units, or act as “instructional designers.” Central to this is LDC’s “forward mapping” process, which helps teachers put the standards first and consistently use them as the foundation throughout their instructional units. Many teachers said that in the past they selected texts or instructional activities first, and then asked what standards those texts or activities teach. In contrast, teachers describe how LDC taught them to choose the standards first and then plan the complex texts and instruction by answering the question “what is needed to best teach this standard?”

Participants described this seemingly small shift as a seismic change in the way they thought about and planned their instructional units. For them, it represents the difference between a superficial, after-the-fact attachment of a standard to an instructional plan and an authentic plan to teach standards through activities specifically designed to do so. It also serves as a forcing function that prompts teachers

to make fundamental changes to what and how they teach, rather than take a path of lesser resistance by maintaining the status quo. One Teacher Leader described the changes seen in teachers by noting, “I credit LDC with helping teachers examine the importance of everything they teach and examine its alignment to the standards.” Participants report this has helped them plan more effective lessons and be more focused. This also means they are able to let go of content and “favorite lessons that they have always taught that don’t drive standards in a meaningful way.”

### **Expectations for students rise, while teachers are better able to effectively differentiate to meet varying student needs.**

With a clear view of what mastery looks like, along with increased capacity to design and deliver high-quality instructional plans, teachers’ expectations of what all students are capable of achieving are raised. Teachers and school leaders credit LDC with advancing equity within their schools through improving their ability to more effectively differentiate instruction while maintaining consistently higher expectations for all students. This improved ability was linked to the structures, tools, and resources used by LDC to support standards-driven planning, and to the support of LDC’s coaches, which worked together to shift teachers’ understanding of how to utilize a wide variety of texts and activities to achieve mastery of the same standard. Said one teacher: “To me, LDC means that even given my diverse students, everyone has an opportunity and an entry point to participate in standards-driven activities and tasks and complete the tasks in a meaningful way.”

Teachers said they greatly appreciate LDC’s balance of structure and enactment of standards—supported by clear processes and tools—with the ability to be flexible and modify to meet the specific needs of their students. An understanding that LDC is not a one-size fits all program, and that school and teacher teams must be empowered to use it in the ways that best fit their students, undergirded the notion that all students will benefit from instruction clearly structured to achieve mastery of specific standards. This coupling of structure

with flexibility is seen as a unique and powerful quality of the model, with the scaffolding embedded within LDC’s instructional modules and planning tools seen as extremely helpful in supporting teachers to meet the needs of all students, including ELLs and students with other specific needs. At a foundational level, LDC’s instructional modules were seen as freeing up teachers to focus on differentiation and on responsive instruction, while giving them the knowledge and moves to do so effectively.

### Teachers are better able to anticipate student thinking and respond with appropriate in-the-moment instructional moves.

When teachers work to understand the meaning of standards and what they look like when demonstrated, they gain better insights into how students come to understand them as well. Several participants said they acquired a heightened ability to predict student thinking, and in particular possible misconceptions. This helped them to be ready with high-quality instructional responses to those misunderstandings. School leaders also report LDC teachers can better lead students through a thoughtful instructional task from start to finish. Their questions of students are seen as more purposeful and aligned to the end goal—mastery of standards—that they are striving for.

### Assessments of student learning are driven by the standards, and teachers are able to provide more meaningful feedback to students.

Effective implementation of the standards must include standards-driven formative assessment along with instruction. LDC teachers said their knowledge of how to use standards-driven rubrics to assess student work has greatly improved, as has their ability to provide more meaningful feedback to students. LDC’s extensive bank of resources includes disciplinary rubrics for ELA, science, and social studies that are designed to assess mastery of standards, and that teachers can use or modify as they design or implement instructional units. Participants said they found these rubrics especially valuable when paired with LDC’s professional learning about standards, and with LDC-designed tools to support their instructional planning.

Teachers and school leaders alike credit LDC with increasing their knowledge about how to design effective assessments, and with providing tools to support this work. One teacher noted that working with her LDC coach on assessing student performance raised questions she’d never before asked herself, such as: “How do I assess? What am I looking for? I’m giving them a 3, but why? Were they really able to do it? I’m just realizing I can assess reading standards through their writing, so how were they able to score on reading standards even though this is a writing assessment?” Teachers said they more frequently build formative assessments into their units and describe this as a critical factor in their ability to better support student learning and differentiate instruction. The LDC/SCALE rubrics also support student understanding of expectations for their learning at the outset of a unit, while helping teachers maintain a clear view of the learning goal and ensuring that feedback given to students is meaningful and targeted to the focus standards.

### A PRINCIPAL ON LDC PARTICIPANTS:

***“Their teacher moves are incredible.”***

“What’s unique about these teachers is that they have such a deep understanding of the standards and they can assess and anticipate misconceptions. Their teacher moves are incredible—that’s what I see as the difference between teachers who have been engaged in LDC and those who have not. LDC helped build that deep understanding of the standards. They began to understand that we had looked at standards and referred to them but didn’t really understand them. They (LDC teachers) were the first ones who got us to actually look at the thinking work of the standards—meaning look at what students should be able to say or do to show evidence that they thought about their reading in the ways the standards call for. It’s the first thing you do—say what students need to write to show what they know. It’s the backwards planning that’s so powerful so you’re figuring out ‘how does this piece demonstrate this standard’? It’s so easy to do in LDC because the rubrics, exemplars, and scaffolds are all there—teachers have the tools in front of them.”

– School Principal



# School Transformation with LDC: How School Leaders are Spreading Success



## LDC IN PRACTICE: TAKING A “SEEING IS BELIEVING” APPROACH TO SCHOOLWIDE TRANSFORMATION

**Melrose Elementary School’s path to schoolwide implementation of LDC began with 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade teachers.** After implementing the LDC model for just one school year, the 5th grade students realized double-digit gains in their scores on the Smarter Balanced Assessment for English Language Arts.

Melrose’s principal shared the belief that LDC is a powerful tool for both teachers and students, yet understood that other teachers needed evidence before they would be willing to sign on to a new way of thinking about standards-driven instructional planning. Rather than mandate all teachers use LDC, the principal instead showed teachers the pilot data and then empowered them to opt-in to the model, acknowledging that each grade level has a unique culture and way of operating. The first-hand evidence of LDC’s impact on upper grade teachers and students provided the motivation that other teachers needed to join the LDC team.

As a result of starting with local data demonstrating the model’s impact, and giving teachers a voice in implementation, Melrose successfully built strong ownership among its teachers of the LDC model. Teachers embraced the model and remained highly engaged in the collaborative work to integrate it across grades and subject areas.

Melrose experienced significant transformation in several areas as a result of schoolwide implementation of LDC. Instruction and assessment across the school is now even more explicitly driven by the standards. Teachers bring a clear and intentional focus on the standards to their instructional plans and activities, and describe how being more mindful of the end goal, rather than only the lesson at hand, has transformed their everyday work.

Teachers also credit this shift to standards-driven instruction with changing the student-teacher role, placing teachers as facilitators and students more squarely as the leaders of their own learning. One teacher noted, “Students have more independence in their work and now have ownership in how they execute the tasks they are assigned.” Teachers also have consistently higher expectations for students and embed these expectations in their instruction.

In describing LDC’s impact, Melrose’s principal noted the model helps teachers at all grade levels understand and meet today’s more rigorous expectations for student learning. “Before, we might have left some skills on the table and students are now rising to those.” And teachers also are collaborating more frequently and in more meaningful ways with their grade-level teams, reporting an increased level of support and camaraderie and ultimately stronger instruction as they draw on the unique strengths of their colleagues.



**Schoolwide instructional coherence is an essential ingredient for school improvement.** When teachers and instructional leaders in a school share a clear and consistent vision of high-quality teaching, they're better able to collaborate and work productively toward realizing that vision. Participants in LAUSD and NYCDOE partner schools described how the LDC model supported such schoolwide changes in teacher knowledge and practice, which in turn led to schoolwide improvements in student engagement and learning.

All credited the model's combination of professional learning for teachers and teacher leaders, expert coaching, and rich library of nationally validated tools and other resources for helping teachers effectively plan and implement high-quality standards-driven instruction within their classrooms.

They also explained what steps school leaders are taking to ensure the model reaches its maximum potential. Schools seeing positive results for teachers and students described several structures and conditions as key to their implementation success and part of their vision for sustaining the work. Among these structures and conditions:

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**Clear messages from school leaders that standards-driven instruction is an important part of school improvement efforts along with provision of associated implementation supports** — School leaders said it was important to allocate time and other resources to LDC activities and to ensure that participating teachers and teacher leaders have the space and bandwidth to attempt this new instructional approach. Leaders must also send clear messages to their staff that this work is an important part of the school's broader instructional improvement plans, and make explicit connections between it and other curricular or instructional resources. Teachers needed to see LDC as a way to improve their core work—that is, a way to get better at planning and delivering lessons—rather than as an add-on program taking time away from their core work.

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**Teachers working together in collaborative teams to design instructional modules and reflect on student work** — Teachers note that creating standards-driven instructional plans and assessments is new and difficult work, and their business-as-usual approaches to instruction require significant changes within LDC's "forward mapping" approach. Teachers in successful schools report that collaboration with

peers is necessary to the work of teasing apart and understanding standards, planning units, reflecting, and iterating—and importantly, collaboration allows them to see their colleagues' strengths and learn from each other in powerful ways.

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**Dedicated time for teacher teams to focus on standards-driven instruction** — LDC participants said regular, dedicated time for teachers to work together and meet with their LDC coach and teacher leader is a must, given the complex work teachers take on when implementing the model. In the most successful schools, LDC teams have a weekly meeting time focused only on the model, and have additional time set aside regularly to address other issues of their grade level or subject area team.

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**Access to an expert coach and school-embedded teacher leader certified to provide the necessary guidance** — LDC coaches and trained teacher leaders are viewed by teachers as a significant resource and driver of successful implementation of the model. LDC coaches provide professional learning to teachers regarding understanding the standards; help familiarize teachers with the model and its structures, processes, and online tools; serve as a resource for specific student-level content and provide feedback on teachers' instructional modules; serve as a facilitator of teacher learning and support of teachers' growth into a team of effective collaborators; and bring a broader set of expertise and knowledge about effective writing instruction to the school.

Examples from LDC partner schools underscore the importance of these implementation conditions and the key role school leaders play in supporting success. One teacher noted, "It has been so helpful to work as a teacher team. The fact that she (school principal) gave us the time to work together as a team made it exciting to do this work, and the strengths of the team were able to come forward." The Principal of The Bilingual Bicultural School in Manhattan incorporated LDC into her school's Comprehensive Education Plan through her leadership goals, student performance goals, and each core component of the school's plan. Teachers saw the critical role LDC played in the school's overall work and understood their leader's commitment to successful implementation.

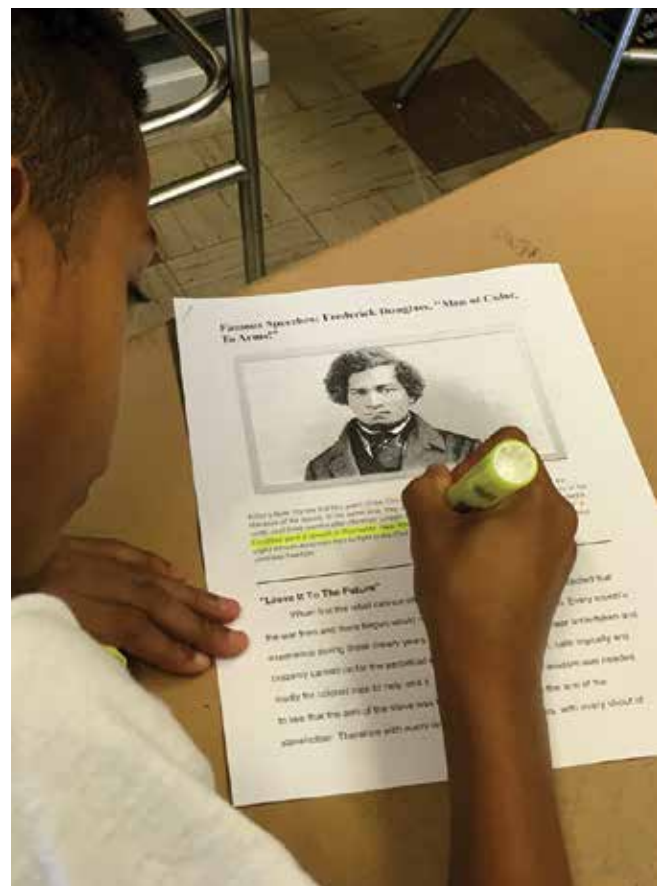
At schools that implement LDC in this way, teachers and school leaders say they begin to see dramatic and far-reaching changes to the level of standards-driven coherence across the school. Among the many benefits they cite:

- ✓ *Writing is infused into other subjects, such as math, science, and social studies. Disciplinary writing becomes a consistent and expected activity for students, and therefore is a more comfortable and successful part of students' learning experiences.*
- ✓ *Coherence of instructional content and practice across subjects becomes the norm. Connections across classes and content areas emerge naturally, resulting in a more coherent learning experience for students.*
- ✓ *Teachers have the knowledge and planning tools that are required to support authentic, content-based collaboration and connections across grades and subjects.*
- ✓ *Teachers utilize the knowledge and instructional planning learned from LDC to their lessons broadly, even when not explicitly part of an LDC module. Teachers and school leaders describe a “spillover” effect, where teachers are ensuring tight coherence, digging into the standards, creating rubrics, and using LDC’s practices in all of their lessons.*
- ✓ *Schoolwide coherence of curriculum and instruction to standards dramatically increases.*

School leaders in particular describe LDC’s impact on ensuring standards-driven assignments are being taught across their schools—a goal that many named as a primary rationale for their choice to implement the model. For example, Lockhurst Drive Charter Elementary School in Los Angeles sought to increase the rigor of the school’s writing tasks across the curriculum. After implementing the LDC model, Lockhurst teachers and leaders say that their assignments and instruction are now clearly driven by the standards in all upper grade level classrooms.

A teacher at Lockhurst described how LDC’s process of including the standards in the prompt was “an eye opener to all of us,” leading to questions such as “What is the writing demand I’m asking from them? What is the cognitive demand?” The teacher goes on: “Now, I put and underline what the cognitive and reading demands are in the prompt. We realized that things before didn’t really align.” Similarly, the principal believes the school has deeply changed practice regarding the rigor of writing assignments: “We’ve done much more than scratch the surface. We have transformed thinking and practice around the rigor of writing.”

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- 3 *Gathering Feedback for Teaching Combining High-Quality Observations with Student Surveys and Achievement Gains*. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, January 2012.
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# Reaching the Peak: Guaranteeing Quality for All



**These stories demonstrate the transformative impact LDC has on its partner schools**—impact that is driven from standards that are deeply embedded within the curriculum, increased expectations for all students, meaningful teacher collaboration, and dramatic increases in student learning and engagement. Participants quickly grew to understand that LDC is not a curriculum or an extra thing to teach, but is instead a means of infusing standards-driven thinking and literacy skill development across the curriculum. LDC provided the needed catalyst for these schools to realize the promise of the literacy standards for all students.

School leaders described clear plans to further spread and sustain the model in order to meet the guarantee of standards-driven instruction for all students:

- ✓ At **William A. Butler Elementary School**, the principal plans to expand LDC to additional grade levels based on the positive results for teachers and students seen in the initial two participating grades. Teachers also plan to engage the science specialist in the PLC work to further expand the use of LDC's instructional modules to that discipline.
- ✓ At **William Wordsworth Elementary School**, participating teachers are spreading the work by inviting their grade level colleagues to observe LDC instruction in their classrooms and to the PLC meetings to analyze student writing products using LDC/SCALE student work rubrics.
- ✓ At **Melrose Elementary School**, school-wide spread started with a grade band of early adopters whose student results demonstrated the power of the LDC model in their classrooms. Those upper grade teachers advocated for schoolwide implementation, and the principal empowered lower grade teachers to make critical choices about implementing in their own classrooms.

Each of these school leaders also plan to continue growing teacher leadership capacity within the school to support further spread and bring the LDC coach role in-house. In each of these cases and in other LDC schools, leaders say they want to do more than simply spread the LDC model. Their goal is to build upon the dramatic results and the reinvigorated passion and engagement in their buildings to ensure that curriculum, instruction, and assessment remain driven by standards—and thus rigorous for all students—for the duration.

The LDC process changed how teachers and students think about and respond to reading and writing across and within content areas. It shifted conversations at the classroom, grade, school, and even district level. And, most importantly, it closed the achievement gap for students—for some by a whole school year. We hope these stories and insights motivate school and district leaders to explore how they might transition from merely addressing standards to using standards to drive equity of instruction for all.



## MISSION

Finally deliver on educational equity.

## VISION

All public schools offer the best opportunity for every student to fulfill their academic promise.

## IMPACT

Independent study reports LDC students make up to 9 months of additional growth in one school year.

# LITERACY DESIGN COLLABORATIVE

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