

# Case Study: Tackling New State Assessments with a Focus on Literacy

How one Georgia school district  
saw remarkable student growth in  
just one year

# The Challenge

Across the country, many school districts have seen a drop in performance on standardized tests as states overhaul end-of-year assessments to incorporate more rigorous writing standards.

[Only 27 percent of eighth grade students](#) scored “proficient” or “advanced” the last time writing scores were evaluated nationwide, in 2011.

Georgia’s Department of Education anticipated schools would see their students underperforming compared to prior years when the state replaced old assessments with the new test, the Georgia Milestones, in 2015.

“That does not mean Georgia students know less or that teachers are not doing a great job,” state schools Superintendent Richard Woods [told the Atlanta-Journal Constitution](#). “It means they’ve been asked to clear a higher bar.”

That higher bar meant that beginning in the 2014-15 school year, student testing would go beyond offering multiple choice options and would also include short-answer and writing prompts for students to [demonstrate their mastery](#) of subject content.

Fayette County Schools, just south of Atlanta, was one such district that saw a drop in student scores when the new standards were implemented.

“The school district had traditionally been – if not the best, one of the best – school districts in the state and had lived a long time off that reputation, and deservedly so,” said Dr. Joseph Barrow, the superintendent of Fayette County Schools.

But following the financial crisis, which brought about a drop in student population, “We had some concerns that we weren’t achieving at the highest level anymore,” Dr. Barrow said. “We had not really focused on the literacy standards in our district very well.”

Fayette County Schools knew that a change needed to be made not just for the assessments, but for overall college and career readiness for their students. In the 2015-16 school year, the district made strategic shifts in instructional practice to expand student outcomes, including a deeper focus on literacy across disciplines.

## The Implementation

Beginning in August 2015, Fayette County Schools incorporated ThinkCERCA into its five middle schools to support reading and writing skill growth and improved teacher effectiveness across content areas. All the students at these five Fayette middle schools used device carts to share technology access.

By using ThinkCERCA, teachers were able to take advantage of a reading class that had been formed to help students grow their content knowledge and literacy skills across subject areas.

“While every teacher in the building taught one class of reading, they had a formula where they didn’t have to stretch too far and the students didn’t have to stretch too far,” Caroline Schmitt, the district’s Coordinator of Reading & Language Arts K-5 said.

Moreover, teachers were spending too much time searching for appropriate resources and texts. And while the students were proficient readers, they weren’t being rigorously challenged.

By incorporating ThinkCERCA into their instruction, teachers who were not previously accustomed to developing students' reading and writing skills had the necessary tools, curriculum, and guidance to support literacy growth in every class.

"We knew that we really wanted to change from the mindset of a reading class to a literacy mindset throughout the whole day," Schmitt said. "The science teacher might not be an English teacher, but he is a literacy teacher."

The ThinkCERCA Lesson Library provided English language arts, social studies, science, and math teachers with a wide range of differentiated close reading and academic writing lessons that aligned to Georgia's rigorous new standards.

The platform's Writing Lessons walked Fayette County Schools students through the process of reading a text closely to construct a cohesive argumentative, informational, or narrative piece of writing across subjects.

"ThinkCERCA's the tool that took the idea of literacy and put something in teachers' hands to help them understand what it is, what it looks like," Schmitt said.

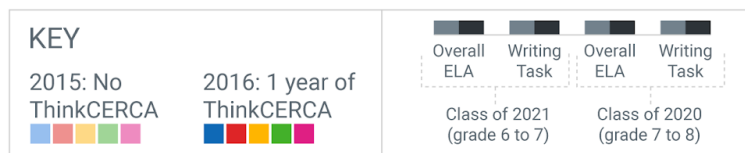
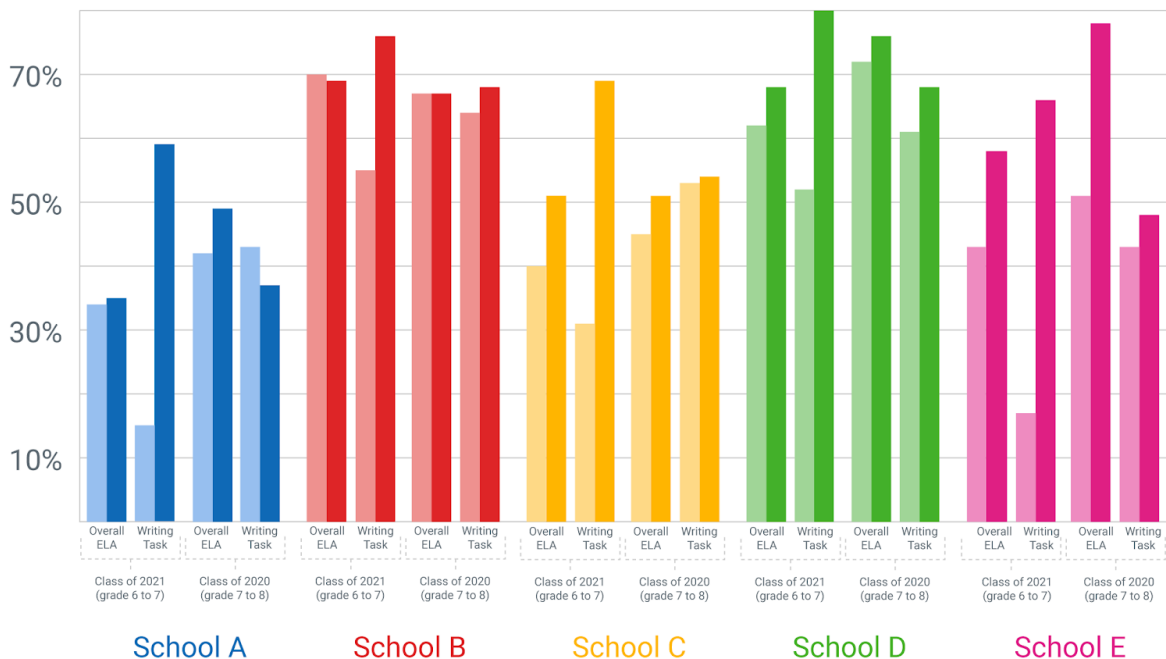
After almost one full school year of ThinkCERCA usage across curriculum, the Fayette middle school students were well-equipped to demonstrate a deeper level of content comprehension — a key performance indicator in the new Georgia Milestones — on their 2016 spring state assessments.

# The Results

The Georgia Milestones, Georgia's new state assessment, measure student skills at [one of four achievement levels](#): Beginning Learner (score 1), Developing Learner (score 2), Proficient Learner (score 3), and Distinguished Learner (score 4).

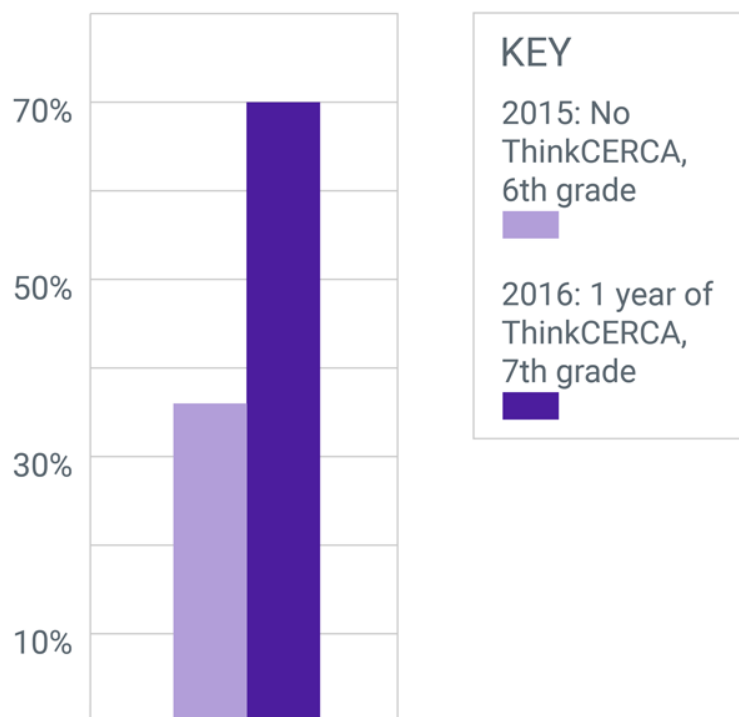
When Fayette received the results for the Spring 2016 Milestones, the full impact of instruction with the new strategic instruction was realized.

## Students Scoring "Proficient" or "Advanced" on Georgia Milestones at Fayette County Middle Schools



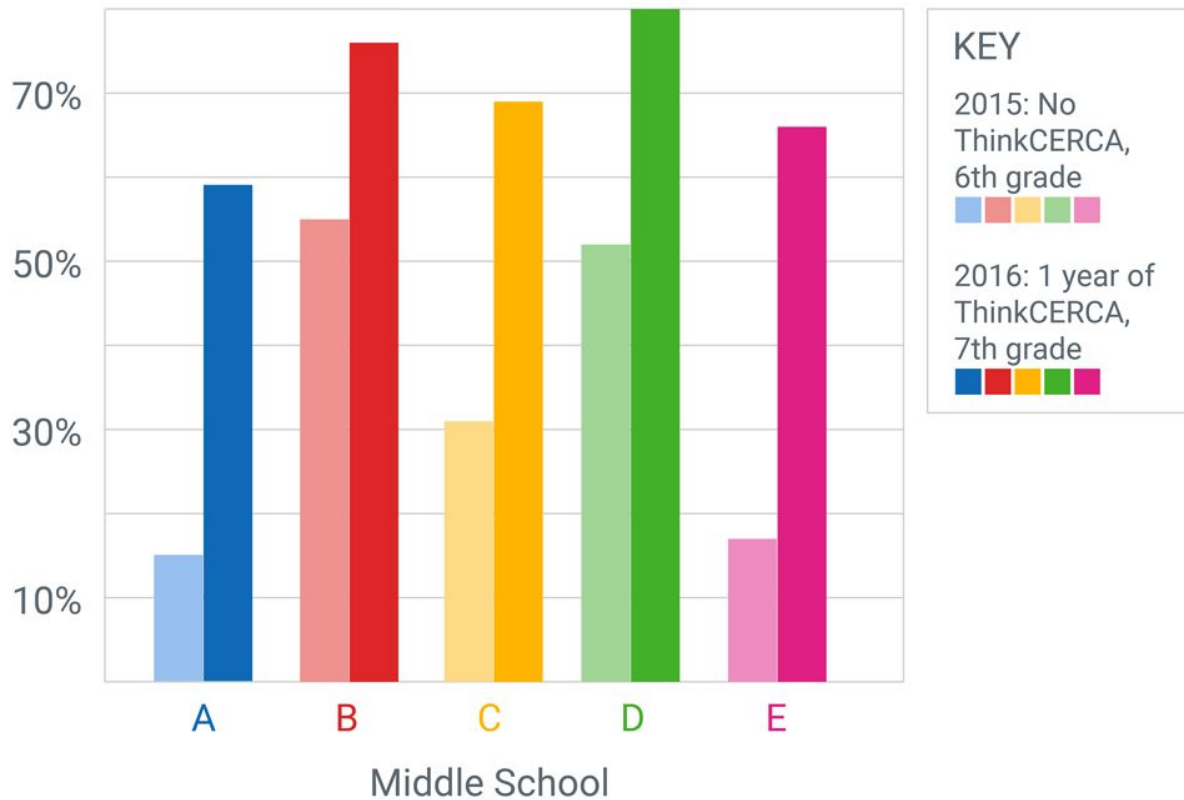
For the class of 2021 in Fayette County, the proportion of students scoring a 3 or 4 on the Milestones' Extended Writing Task nearly doubled—rising from 36 percent in 2015 (without ThinkCERCA) to 70 percent in 2016 (with ThinkCERCA).

## Students Scoring “Proficient” or “Advanced” on the Writing Task of Georgia Milestones at Fayette County Schools, Class of 2021



All middle schools saw increases in student writing proficiency from sixth to seventh grade. One middle school in particular saw an increase from 17 percent of students scoring at “Proficient Learner” or above in sixth grade to 66 percent of that same group of students scoring at “Proficient Learner” or above following almost one year of ThinkCERCA use, in seventh grade.

## Students Scoring “Proficient” or “Advanced” on the Writing Task of Georgia Milestones at Fayette County Schools, Class of 2021

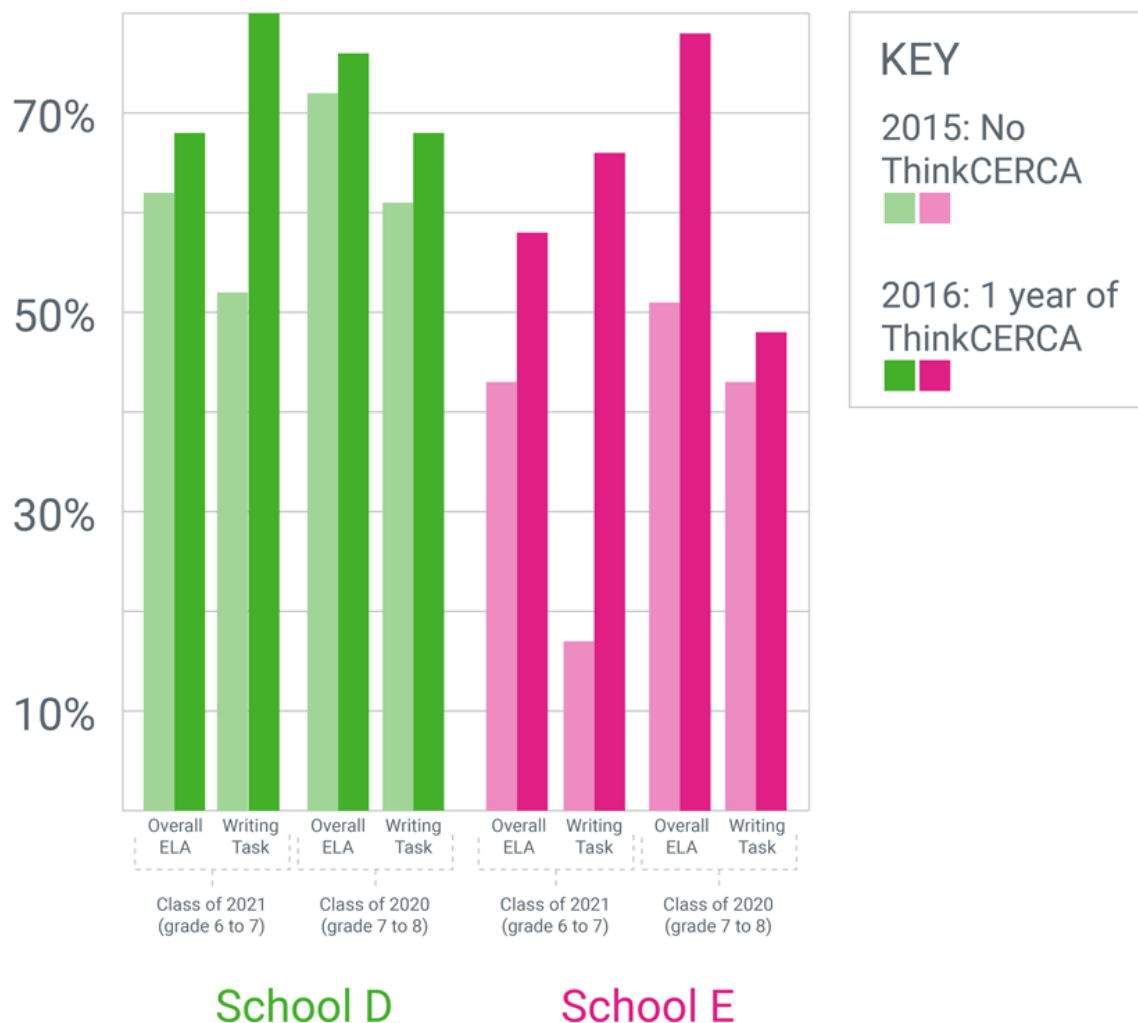


The middle schools that used ThinkCERCA the most saw notable improvements on Georgia Milestones for the class of 2020 and 2021 (the two grade levels with two years of data at the 6th-8th grade schools). Every group of students at these schools improved in every aspect of the state assessments tracked.

At school D, only 52 percent of sixth graders in 2015 scored a 3 or 4 in the Extended Writing Task of the Georgia Milestones. By the following year, 80 percent of those same students were earning 3s and 4s.

Of the class of 2020 in school E, 51 percent of students scored a 3 or 4 on overall ELA Performance, which improved to 78 percent of that same group scoring a 3 or 4 the next year.

## Students Scoring “Proficient” or “Advanced” on Georgia Milestones at Fayette County Middle Schools with the *Highest ThinkCERCA Usage*





## Takeaways

“When I think of the shift from reading to literacy, one of the biggest things I think of is having kids do more to explain their understanding of the content. Answering multiple choice questions is just really touching the surface,” Schmitt said. “I’m asking you to have kids demonstrate their understanding of what you taught them. That’s literacy.”

Given the impact of ThinkCERCA on student performance and depth of comprehension, along with its assistance in enhancing teachers’ literacy instruction, Fayette County Schools began the 2016-17 school year with a commitment to seamless implementation of ThinkCERCA into existing curriculum.

“The tool gives good evidence that it works for students. And while we can see the results are correlated to ThinkCERCA use,” Dr. Barrow said, “We will need to see year-over-year growth to consider it causal.”

ThinkCERCA has also been expanded into two high schools within the Fayette district that requested access to the product, allowing these schools to continue the vertical alignment of writing and reading across core subjects.

The district is dedicated to seeing student improvement in all performance indicators.

ThinkCERCA “helps us to differentiate for students in the classroom on their [readiness] level, but still be working on the same standard. That’s pretty rich,” Dr. Barrow said. “I strongly feel that if we do well with our literacy skills, all our content performance will increase.”