COMMONLIT 360 IN BLOUNT COUNTY, TENNESSEE: A CASE STUDY

An analysis of student academic growth in reading and effective implementation of CommonLit 360

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Blount County is a school district in Tennessee. In the middle of the 2017-2018 academic year, the district began phasing in the CommonLit 360 Curriculum in the Blount County high schools for English I and English II (Grade 9-10).

In subsequent years, the district saw tremendous growth in reading achievement, as measured by the Tennessee state assessment – and moved from among the lowest scoring districts to among the highest in terms of reading growth.

As part of this case study, evaluators examined student scores on the TNReady English Language Arts assessment, and interviewed teachers and school administrators about their adoption of the CommonLit 360 Curriculum.

The report looks at reading proficiency from school year 2017-2018 to school year 2020-2021. Even in the midst of a global pandemic, in which experts warned could result in months of learning loss (Dorn et al., 2021), students in Blount County showed consistent growth in reading.

The major findings were:
- **Student reading growth in Blount County went from below to above the state average,**
- **Higher proportions of students scored at *On Track* or *Mastery* levels,**
- **Lower proportions of students scored *Below* grade level,**
- **Historically underserved student populations saw growth similar to those seen for all groups of students.**

Teachers and administrators interviewed as part of this case study reported that adoption of the CommonLit 360 Curriculum led to:
- More time for collaboration, planning, and instruction,
- Greater student engagement,
- Deeper student insights,
- More student-led questioning,
- Less student variability on standardized test scores,
- Greater alignment across teachers, classes, grade levels, and schools,
- Tighter alignment of curriculum to English Language Arts grade level standards.

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2018, Blount County Schools' English I and English II high school students scored below the state average on the state of [Tennessee's TNReady English Language Arts assessment](#) (Tennessee State Board of Education, 2017). Yet, by 2020-2021 Blount County Schools' English I and English II students had scored well above the state average. Not only did students score at the highest level, but in terms of growth relative to all Tennessee schools, the proportion of students scoring *Below* grade level declined and the proportion of students scoring at *On Track* and *Mastery* levels increased.
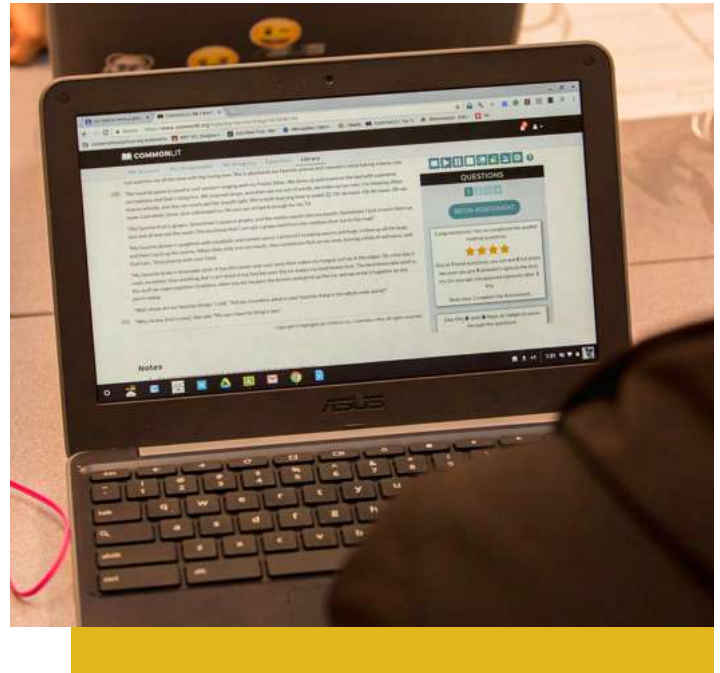
This report examines the trends in these scores, including among demographic subgroups. It also includes qualitative data, in the form of interviews with teacher, school, and district-level leaders about the implementation of CommonLit 360 and the factors that led to Blount County Schools' transformation.

In their own words...

This case study describes the path to reading success for 9th and 10th grade students enrolled in English I and English II at two Blount County Schools. To learn more about implementation of CommonLit 360, evaluators interviewed:

- **Terri Bradshaw**, Blount County Schools 6th through 12th grade Literacy Coach,

- **Jake Jones**, former principal at Heritage High School and current Assistant Director of Schools, Curriculum and Instruction, and

- **Jennifer Bayola**, English Language Arts teacher, Learning Acceleration Coach, and Department Chair for Heritage High School English Language Arts.

BACKGROUND

Blount County Schools' English Language Arts program began partnering with CommonLit in the middle of the 2017-2018 school year. That year, Terri Bradshaw joined Blount County Schools as the district level Literacy Coach, encouraging teachers to adopt a shared curriculum.

At the time, the English I curriculum primarily consisted of a district-provided curriculum. That year, one of the two high schools began piloting CommonLit 360 Curriculum materials with a 7-week unit called "Science Fiction and Social Commentary." This success with the materials led to the decision to fully phase in CommonLit 360 materials as the core English Language Arts curriculum.

The next year, teachers' utilization of CommonLit 360 materials increased gradually. During that year, schools used a mixture of district-provided instructional units and CommonLit 360 instructional units. By 2019-2020, teachers had fully transitioned to CommonLit 360 in grades 9 and 10 (English I and English II). Due to the success with CommonLit 360, as well as the enthusiasm for the materials among teachers and students, the district has remained faithful to the 360 program.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Blount County suffered disruptions similar to schools across the nation. The academic improvement seen in Blount County runs counter to the narrative of anticipated learning loss, which suggests that students were likely to regress several months during the pandemic (Dorn et al., 2021), and further underscores the promise of the CommonLit 360 program.

In their own words...

Question: What did English Language Arts instruction look like before adopting CommonLit?

*"I've been at the district level for two years, and what I can tell you is that previously, when I first arrived at the high school level as a principal, we didn't really have a consistent curriculum that was being implemented. We were working toward the standards, but **we didn't have a consistent curriculum across the district**. And, so our second year at the high school level is when we began to look at CL to adopt a consistent curriculum. We had teachers who were working on standards, but they had different novels to support that. "*
~ Jake Jones, district leader

*"Teachers were using materials, texts, and pacing according to their individual comfort levels. There was **little alignment among grade levels and teachers**."*
~ Terri Bradshaw, district leader

"...teachers were working very hard to prepare students. But as far as consistency across the district, we just didn't have it. We were very young, I believe, as a district, as far as collaboration in PLCs (Professional Learning Communities), and teamwork, and lesson design and implementation as a specific grade level and team..." ~ Jake Jones, district leader

*"I had come from a standards-based grading world, so I was very hyper-standards-focused at the time. So it was **very overwhelming**. And as a new high school teacher it was almost too much choice. So, you know, I absolutely went in with my knowledge of standards and did the best I could with the resources that we had. But in all honesty, **I spent a lot of time either finding or creating resources**." ~ Jennifer Bayola, high school teacher*

STATE TEST RESULTS

GROWTH: COMPARISON WITH OTHER TENNESSEE SCHOOLS

Prior to CommonLit adoption (2017-2018) in Blount County, student growth in reading in English I and English II was mixed. In English I (Grade 9), growth in reading was on par with state levels. In English II (Grade 10), growth of students prior to the implementation of CommonLit 360 was at Level 1, the lowest categorization according to the TNReady, the state assessment in English Language Arts.

Figure I. TNReady Assessment Growth Levels

| Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Well-below average growth	Below average growth	Average growth	Above average growth	Well-above average growth

In school year 2018-2019, Blount high schools began transitioning to greater utilization of CommonLit 360 materials. That year, scores were mixed. School year 2019-2020 marked the first year of full implementation of CommonLit 360 in Blount. The global pandemic prevented evaluators from assessing progress since students did not take state assessments that year.

Then, in 2020-2021, the second year of full CommonLit 360 adoption, **all four high school English classes (English I and II at both high schools) scored at Level 5, the highest growth category in Tennessee.** The English II classes, which were the furthest behind, showed the greatest growth across the years. In sum, Blount County English I and II students went from scoring in the lower levels to the highest level for Tennessee schools. Figure 2 illustrates trends in student growth for the years 2017-2018, 2018-2019, and 2020-2021. Note that school year 2019-2020 scores are not included because the state test was canceled in March of 2020 due to the global pandemic.
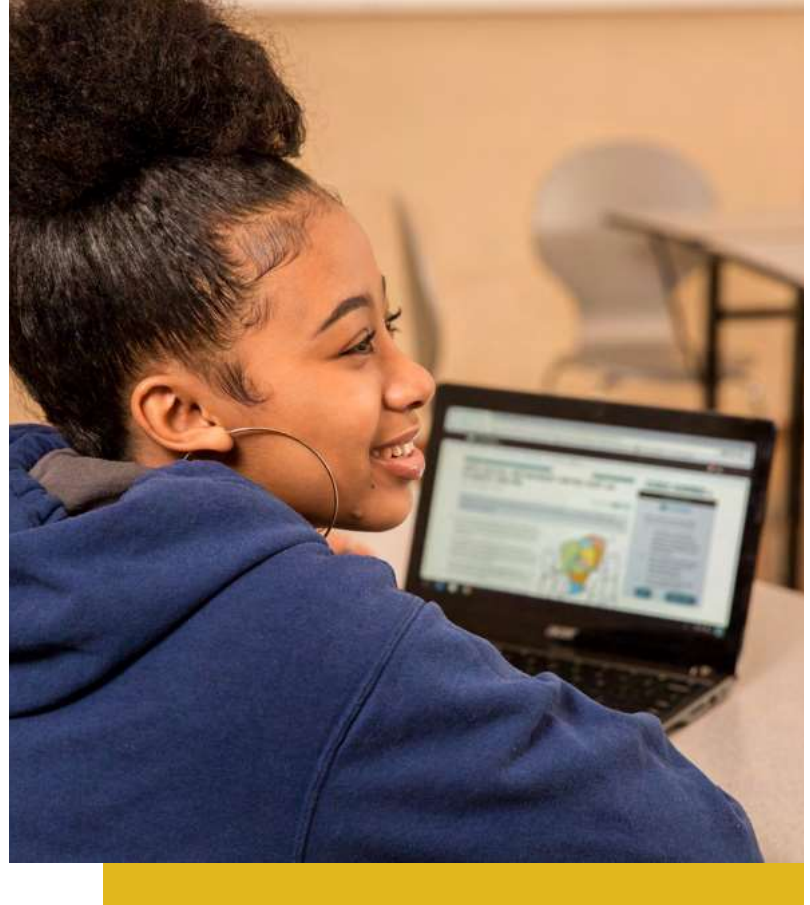
Figure 2. Blount County value-added growth levels for years 2017-2018, 2018-2019, and 2020-2021
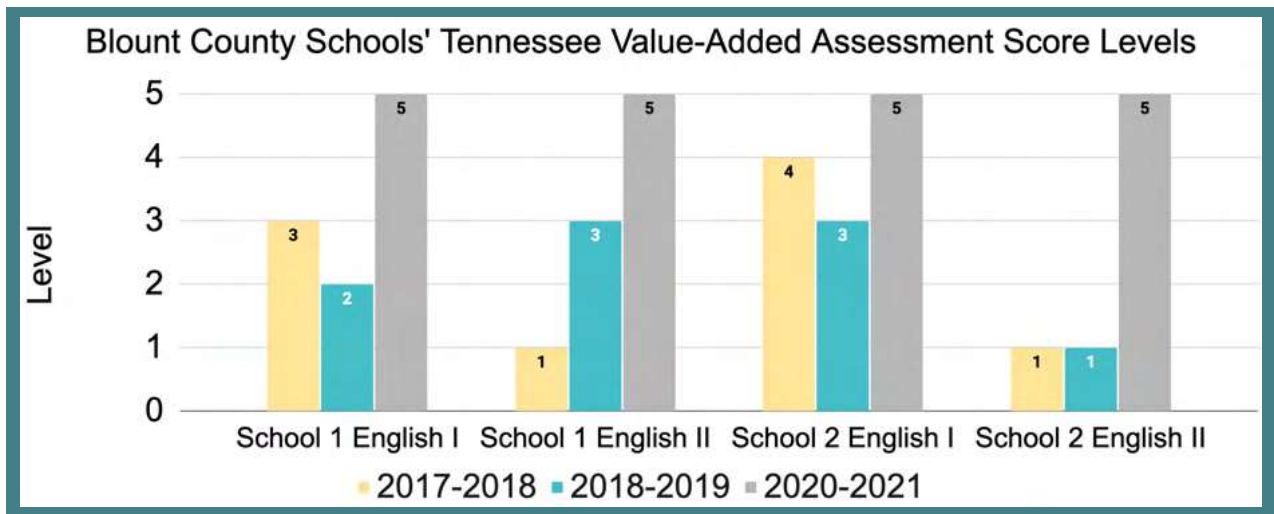
Additional data, including value-added scores and additional information about the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment Scores (TVAAS) may be found in Appendices A and B.

In their own words...

Question: How did instruction change after adopting CommonLit 360?

"One change is just the **consistency across the district**... When I go into a 9th-grade classroom, then visit another 9th-grade class in the same building, and I see almost the same lesson being used and they're at the same place, that is exactly what we want to see. And then I go to the next 9th grade class and I see almost the same thing going on and they're at the same place, that just makes me really happy. That's that consistency,... **we reduced that variability for students.** I witness that same consistency across schools. I can go from the 9th grade at Heritage, then visit the 9th grades at William Blount and ECCA, and teachers are using the same texts, lessons, and strategies. So that's that consistency across the district."

"...That's one piece, but the other part has to do with what I'm seeing in terms of instruction, because before we participated in the pilot [CommonLit 360], we were extremely centered on passive instructional strategies: lecture, students reading silently in class, students listening to audio. Often, the questioning was surface-level. So one of the changes that I've seen is not only **the students doing most of the work**, and the **students are engaged** with one another around a text, but we've also seen that **level of questioning raise up**. And so the kinds of things that the kids are thinking about really are getting to the depth of the standard. So those are the changes that I've seen..."

"I think that having thematic units has helped students really be engaged in what we're doing, because it makes sense. We've got this group of texts... **we had not been doing any informational texts [before], yet half of our reading standards are informational.** And so, making that connection instead of adding random informational texts here and there, **everything is connected together**. To go into classrooms and see the freshmen just really getting upset over Lee Sherman and the Bayou and the environment. They have been **really engaged by the topics,** themselves, and then the text, as well."

~Terri Bradshaw, district leader

SUMMARY OF STUDENT READING PROFICIENCY LEVELS

In addition to assessing student growth in reading, the TNReady also provides information on student proficiency levels. Figure 3 shows how the TNReady classifies student proficiency.

Figure 3. TNReady Student Proficiency Levels

| Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4
Below Grade Level	Approaching Grade Level	On Track for Grade Level	Mastery of Grade Level

Moving Students Out of "Below" Grade Level Category

Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the year over year trends among students scoring in the lowest performance category, *Below* grade level. On both the English I and English II graphs (Figures 4 and 5, respectively), a clear downward trend may be noted, indicating **fewer students scoring *Below* grade level as implementation of CommonLit 360 increased.** The strong findings run counter to the narrative of anticipated learning loss, in which some experts suggested that students were likely to regress by several months during the pandemic (Dorn et al., 2021).

Figure 4. Trends of English I students' Below grade level classification
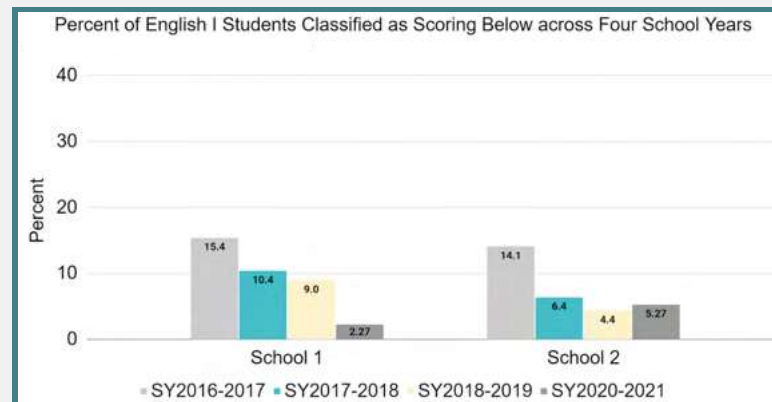
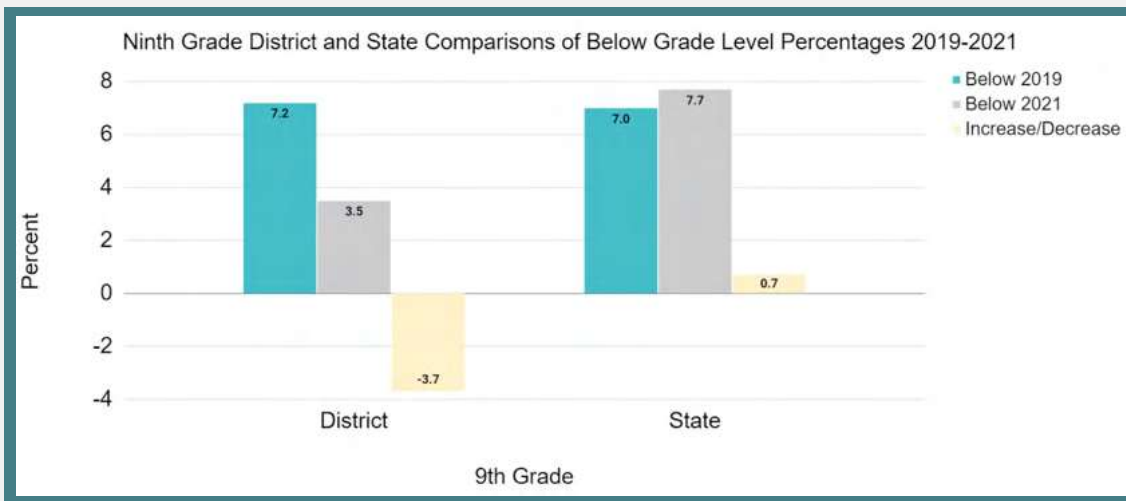*Figure 5.* Trends of English II students' Below grade level classification
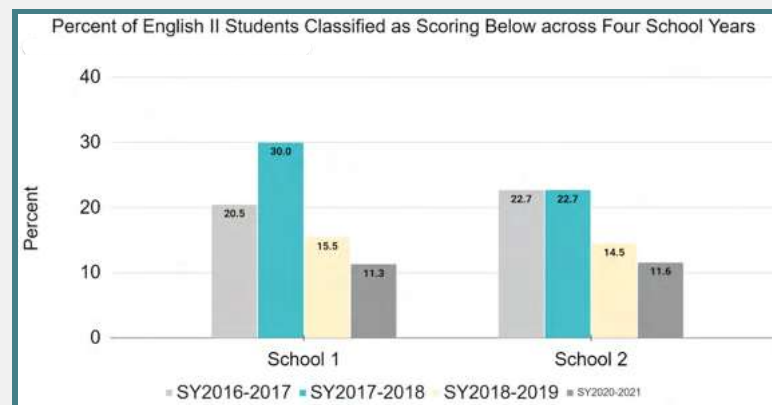
District and State Comparisons of Below Grade Level Classifications: 9th and 10th Grades

The TNReady also provides information to allow district leaders to compare results to statewide results. Figures 6 and 7 represent 9th and 10th grade students, respectively, whose reading proficiency was classified as *Below* grade level; these charts show Blount's results compared to the statewide results.

As shown in Figure 6, while Blount County saw a decrease in the percentage of 9th grade students scoring in the *Below* grade level category (a decrease by nearly four percentage points), the state saw an overall increase.

Figure 6. *Ninth grade district and state comparisons of Below grade level classifications*

Figure 7. *Tenth grade district and state comparisons of Below grade level classifications*
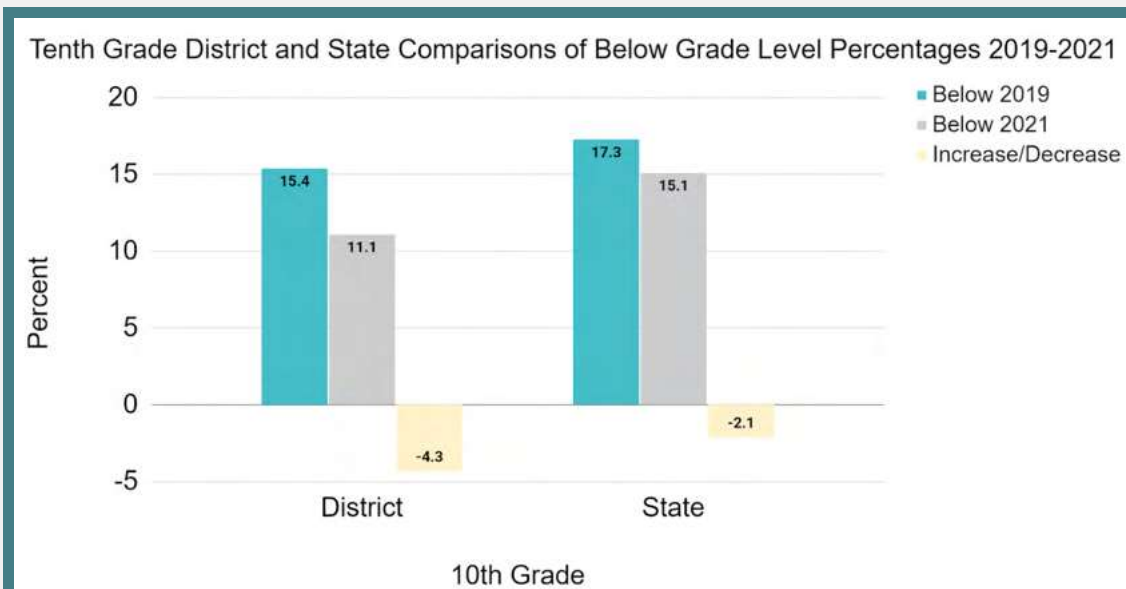
## Moving Students into "On Track" and "Mastery" Categories

Figure 8 shows the trends of *On Track* and *Mastery* proficiency levels within Blount County's high school English I students, and Figure 9 illustrates the same within English II.

Despite some variation, as CommonLit 360 implementation increased across the years, in most cases, proficiency scores also tended to increase. Note that school year 2019-2020 scores are not included because the state test was canceled in March of 2020 due to the global pandemic.

Figure 8. Trends of English I students' On Track and Mastery proficiency classification
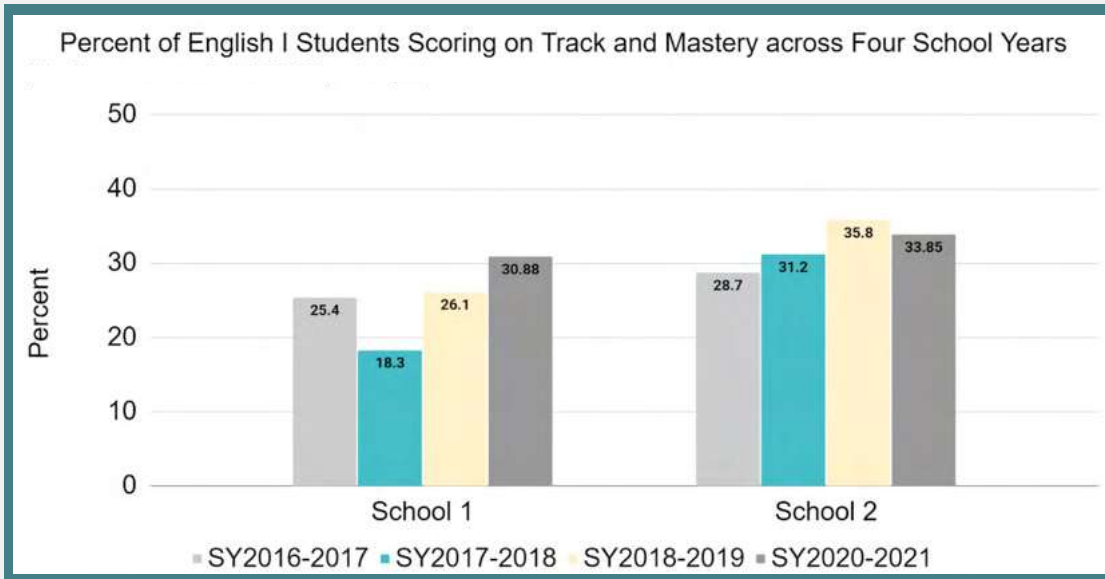
Figure 9. Trends of English II students' On Track and Mastery proficiency classification
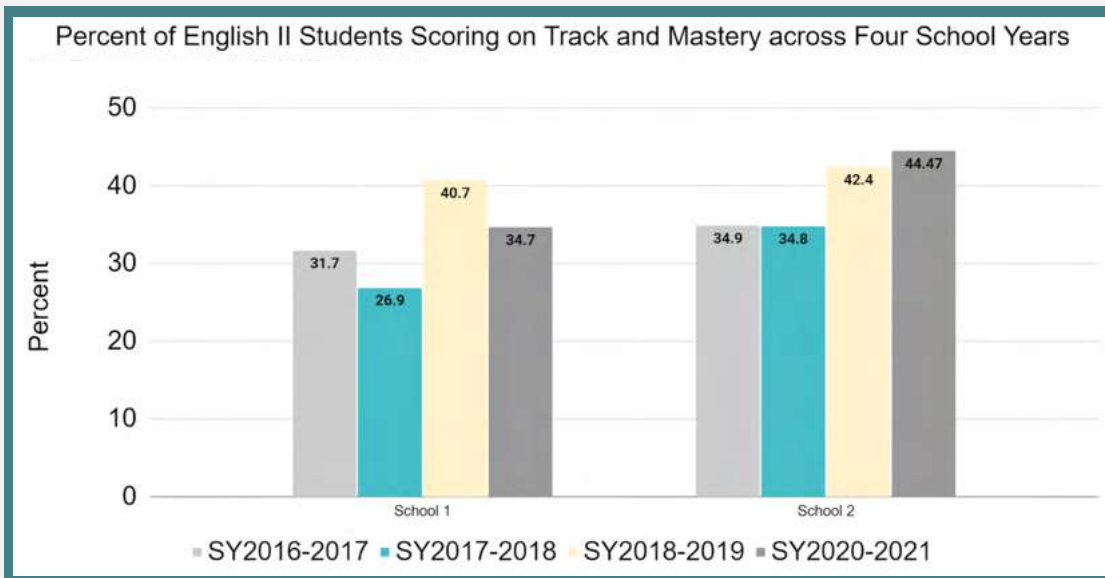
In their own words...

Question: What does student engagement look like with CommonLit 360?

*"There are little things that make a big difference, like encouraging partner [work]. It's the **collaboration and discussion** that happens around just a partner read... It sounds like something small, but it makes a really big difference. You know they're not just reading this short chunk together, they're talking about that chunk together, **they're working through problems together,** and the conversations I would walk around and hear from my **hyper-focused students**. It wasn't conversations about what happened with my best friend yesterday, it was conversations around this text, and it was **high quality conversations**, and it was moments where I could say 'Yes! You've got it! Keep thinking like that. Go down that path.' There were also moments where I could say 'Not quite, let's think about it a different way.' But, because they were getting there together with their peers, that learning changes everything. And it's, again, it sounds like a small thing but, **oh my gosh, the difference it makes when our kids are doing the work and doing it together.** For me, that was one of my moments that took me even deeper into 'Oh my gosh, I just love this even more.' Because there were class periods where I would spend the bulk of the time just walking around and listening to them [students] interact and interacting with them some, too." ~ Jennifer Bayola, high school teacher*

*"The change, you know, **I'd been a teacher for 15 plus years** – just, we were having those moments all the time and it was just amazing, and that's one of the biggest things I saw in regards to the student experience. That collaboration, and that I would just hear things and think 'My gosh, these kids are saying things I didn't even get to, and **I'm a literature person. I was an English major, and they're saying things that make me say 'well I didn't even think about that.'"** So it's just amazing that kind of shift that our kids are having together in the classroom." ~ Jennifer Bayola, high school teacher*

District and State Comparisons of On Track and Mastery Levels: 9th and 10th Grades

To further contextualize proficiency levels, Blount County results can be compared to statewide trends from 2019 to 2021.

Figures 10 and 11 illustrate the percentage of students in the district scoring at *On Track* and *Mastery* levels between 2019 and 2021 compared to statewide trends. The third (yellow) bar on each graph illustrates the change in percentage of students classified as *On Track* and *Mastery* from 2019 to 2021.

As Figure 10 shows, Blount County successfully saw an increase in the percentage of 9th grade students scoring at the *On Track* or *Mastery* levels, while the state saw an overall decrease from 2019 to 2021.

Figure 11 illustrates the *On Track* and *Mastery* levels trends for 10th graders, illustrating once again that Blount had better outcomes than the state. While the state saw an overall 3.7 point decrease, the district only saw a 1.2 point decrease.

Figure 10. *Ninth grade district and state comparisons of On Track and Mastery classifications*
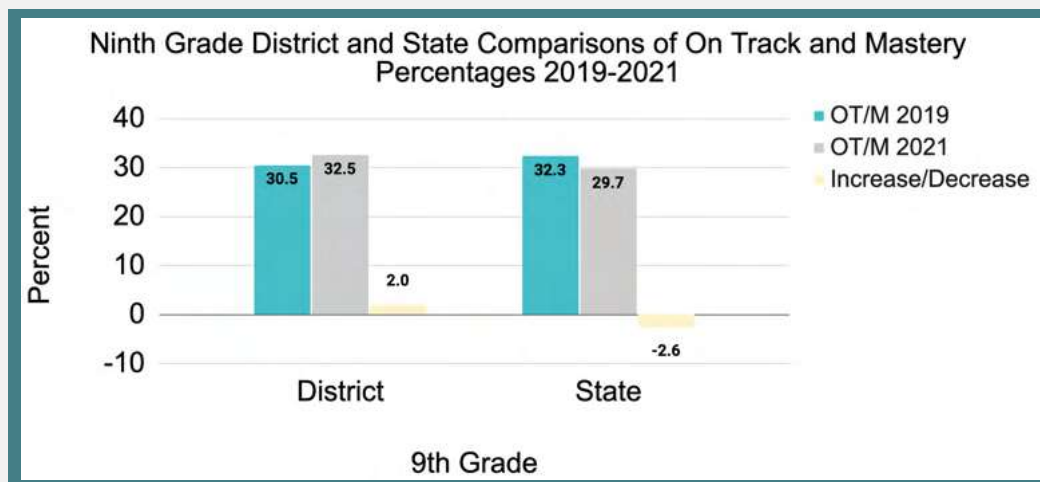
Figure 11. *Tenth grade district and state comparisons of On Track and Mastery classifications*
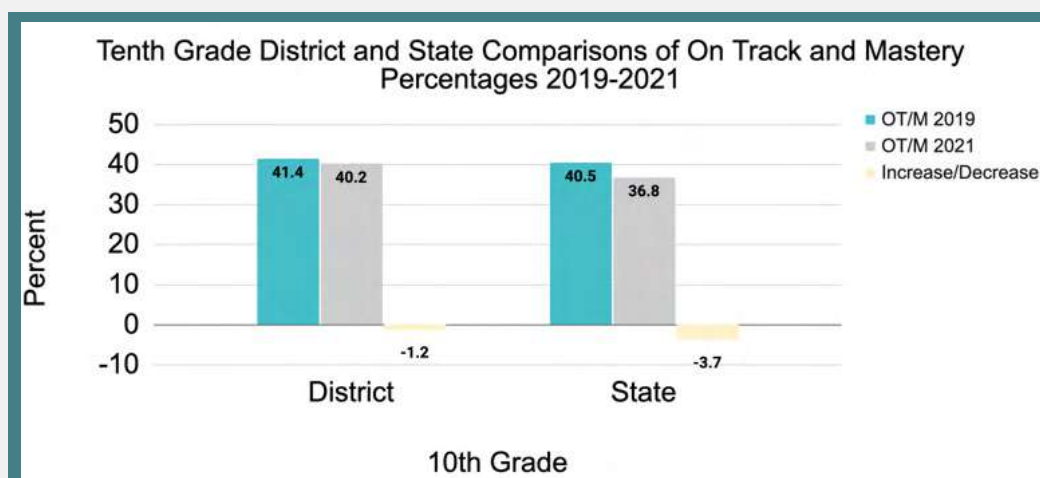
In their own words...

Question: How does CommonLit adoption have an impact on teachers?

*"I think one of the things I was thinking about a few minutes ago was the impact that it's [CommonLit] had on teachers, as well. As you know, there's all kinds of teachers. And, I think a good curriculum takes a teacher who might be struggling, or you know, a little weaker, and it makes that person a better teacher. And it takes those high flyers and makes them even better. So, **it pushes everybody up**. We've seen the kids be pushed, but the teachers are also being pushed. And that's a huge shift. It's making us all better."*
~ Terri Bradshaw, district leader

*"I think the biggest thing is, you know, **as educators we're not curriculum writers.** We provide instruction and we implement the curriculum that is provided for us. So I think it's given us **more time to collaborate, to plan, and to provide instructional opportunities** that are going to push our students to the next level. We're not tired because we're researching the curriculum. We're tired because we're providing intense instruction in the classroom, which is what we were trained to do."* *~ Jake Jones, district leader*

SUBGROUP RESULTS

<u>What is a subgroup?</u>
Tennessee State reports aggregate scores for students who are from populations that have been historically underserved within the US, referring to this as the "super subgroup".

Sub-populations of students whose data are included in the super subgroup include students from economically disadvantaged situations, students with disabilities, and students who identify as English Language Learner, Black, Hispanic, and Native American.[1]

<u>Results</u>
Trends for the super subgroup from 2017 to 2021 are similar to the trends from the entire body of Blount County Schools students. The percentage of *On Track and Mastery* level students either slightly increased or remained stable, depending on school and course.

Most notably, the percentage of students scoring *Below* grade level markedly decreased across the years. Figures 12 and 13 illustrate the percentage of English I and II students scoring Below grade level from 2016 through 2021.

Figure 12. Historically underserved English I students classified as Below grade level
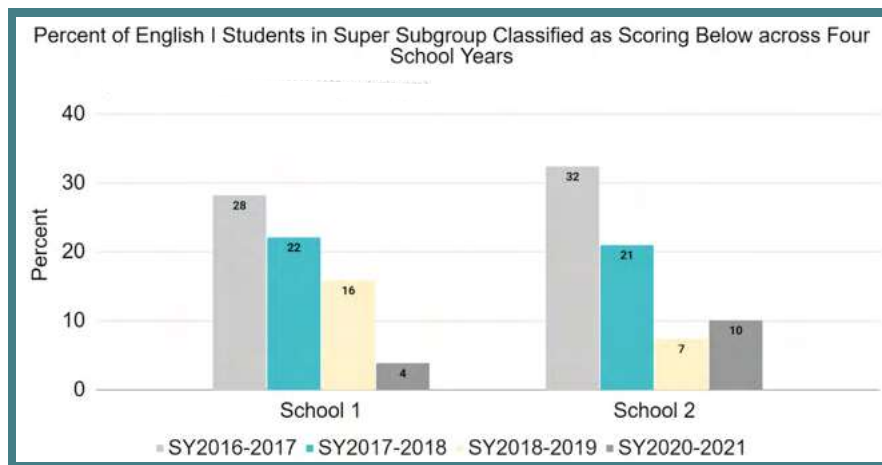
Figure 13. Historically underserved English II students classified as Below grade level
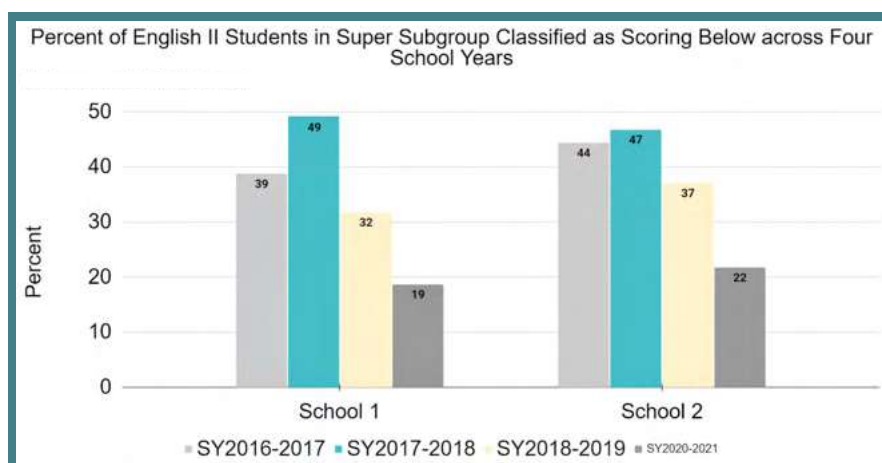
IN THEIR OWN WORDS...

Question: How did you roll out your adoption of CommonLit 360? What was the transition like?

*"You know, from a principal's perspective, anytime you change a curriculum or choose to introduce a new curriculum mid-year, that causes some anxiety for a principal. And so, I think you have to walk softly, and you have to comfort your teachers through that. It was a little bit of a struggle, number one, because it was a new curriculum. I mean we really didn't have any consistency in that grade level, so **we had to learn how to develop schedules, to allow for planning time, so that was a big piece that we as administration had to work through.** And when we began to see, as administrators, consistency across that grade band, when we went from one classroom to the other; we didn't have to worry about whether they would get the same as Ms. Bayola's [JB] class. We knew that all grade level students were receiving the same instruction...*

*"...The following year, all freshman teachers began implementing the curriculum. The data from the previous year provided confirmation that implementing a consistent grade level curriculum would assist student learning and achievement. The transition to a new curriculum did not come without anxiety, but I believe **once they started to see the progress of students on benchmarks and state achievement tests, they became believers."** ~ Jake Jones, district leader*

"The shift was when the results came back that year. So after they did the Science Fiction and Social Commentary [unit] in January, and then they saw there was another unit available, so they decided to try it as well. So they had a full semester of using the material, and they went from - like - 19% to 42% On Track and Mastery levels. That rattled the cages of other people, when they saw those results. And we have another school in the district who I had been trying to work through this framework with a lot of resistance, probably even more there. But when the principal saw the results, he said 'we need to, we need to join this...'"
~ Terri Bradshaw, district leader

IN THEIR OWN WORDS...

Question: Anything else you'd like to add?

*"One of the things we've talked about some, too, is if I ever have a question about the assessment platform, or I'm ever having trouble with anything, or a link doesn't work, **the speed and consistency, and response time on your tech support,** your curriculum support...It's fast; it's amazing. It's impressive what CL does and the support they provide teachers from CL's [own] group. It's just been amazing. I mean we email Anjali a lot and she would then, I don't know, in five minutes is back to us. So that's just something – we love that support and that relationship that we have been able to build with CommonLit. We've all been exposed to, in our years of teaching, multiple curriculums. **Nobody does what CommonLit does in regards to that actual connection with the people who are using these units."** ~ Jennifer Bayola, high school teacher*

APPENDIX A

BACKGROUND: CHANGES TO STATE STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS

It is important to note changes to the state-level assessment process (TNReady) that occurred over the last twelve years. The timeline, below, outlines these changes to the standards and assessment tests, resulting in the current TNReady statewide assessment test.

As shown in Figure 14, there have been substantial changes in both the standards and statewide assessment across the past twelve years. During this time, Tennessee educators transitioned from the Common Core Standards to the development and implementation of the Tennessee Academic Standards (TNAS). Simultaneously, the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) transitioned to the TNReady assessment test in 2015-2016. The TNReady assessment test remains in place; however, despite maintaining the same name, TNReady, multiple changes in vendors resulted in lack of consistency across the years.

Although the changes weaken conclusions that may be drawn when comparing scores across years, the changes affected all students in the state, and not simply Blount County Schools. Therefore, the changes do not affect comparisons between Blount County Schools and other schools and districts in the state.

Figure 14. Timeline table to illustrate changes in the standards and statewide assessments

Standards Development		Year	Statewide Assessment	
Common Core Standards (CCSS)	Adopted CCSS	2009-2010	Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP)	
	Implemented CCSS	2010-2011		
		2011-2012		
		2012-2013		
		2013-2014		
	Discontinued CCSS	2014-2015		
Tennessee Academic Standards (TNAS)	Developed TNAS	2015-2016	New vendor	TNReady
	Adopted TNAS	2016-2017	Another new vendor	
	Implemented TNAS	2017-2018	Adjusted for new standards (same vendor)	
		2018-2019		
		2019-2020	New vendor, but no test (pandemic year)	
		2020-2021	New test	

APPENDIX B

TNREADY ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS: VALUE-ADDED ASSESSMENT SCORES

The Tennessee Academic Standards and common TNReady English Language Arts assessments permit comparisons of student growth across all Tennessee schools through a Value-Added Assessment Score (TVAAS). This classifies students' individual growth in English Language Arts as Level 1 through Level 5, relative to all schools in the state. Levels 1 and 2 are below average growth, relative to the other Tennessee schools. Level 3 represents average growth or, alternatively, may be interpreted as students maintaining the same growth ranking within the state as the previous year. Levels 4 and 5 represent above average growth, relative to the other Tennessee schools.

The TVAAS metrics for Blount County Schools table tells a story of student success across the years of CommonLit 360 adoption. These value-added scores address the question of whether students "maintain the same relative position with respect to statewide student achievement from one year to the next for a specific subject and grade?" (SAS, 2019, p. 9).[2] Figure 15 summarizes the Blount County English Language Arts value-added scores for three years (2017-2018, 2018-2019, and 2020-2021).[3]

Figure 15. Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System Metrics for Blount County Schools

Timeline →	2017-2018 Prior to CommonLit	2018-2019 Beginning use of CommonLit	2020-2021 Full Adoption of CommonLit
School 1 English I	Average -0.59	Below Average -1.39	Well Above Average 3.44
School 1 English II	Well Below Average -6.81	Average 0.81	Well Above Average 2.21
School 2 English I	Above Average 1.73	Average -0.45	Well Above Average 4.98
School 2 English II	Well Below Average -2.87	Well Below Average -4.00	Well Above Average 2.99

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[2] SAS EVASS (2019). Statistical models and business rules of TVAAS analysis. https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/data/tvaas/Statistical_Models_and_Business_Rules.pdf

[3] Note that there are no scores for 2019-2020, the first year of the global pandemic.

APPENDIX B

Figure 16 explains the color-coding and the index ranges, with red and pink representing low growth scores (below average, less than -0.99 standard errors), relative to all schools in the state, and green representing average growth (average, -0.99 to 0.99 standard error range) relative to the state. Finally, blue represents high growth (above average, greater than 0.99 standard errors), relative to other schools in the state.

Figure 16. *Explanation of Value-Added Metrics*

Index Range	Level
2.00 and higher	5
1.00 -- 1.99	4
0.99 -- -0.99	3
-1.00 -- -1.99	2
-2.00 and lower	1

Note: Index values represent performance, in terms of standard error of the school's performance, relative to other Tennessee schools.
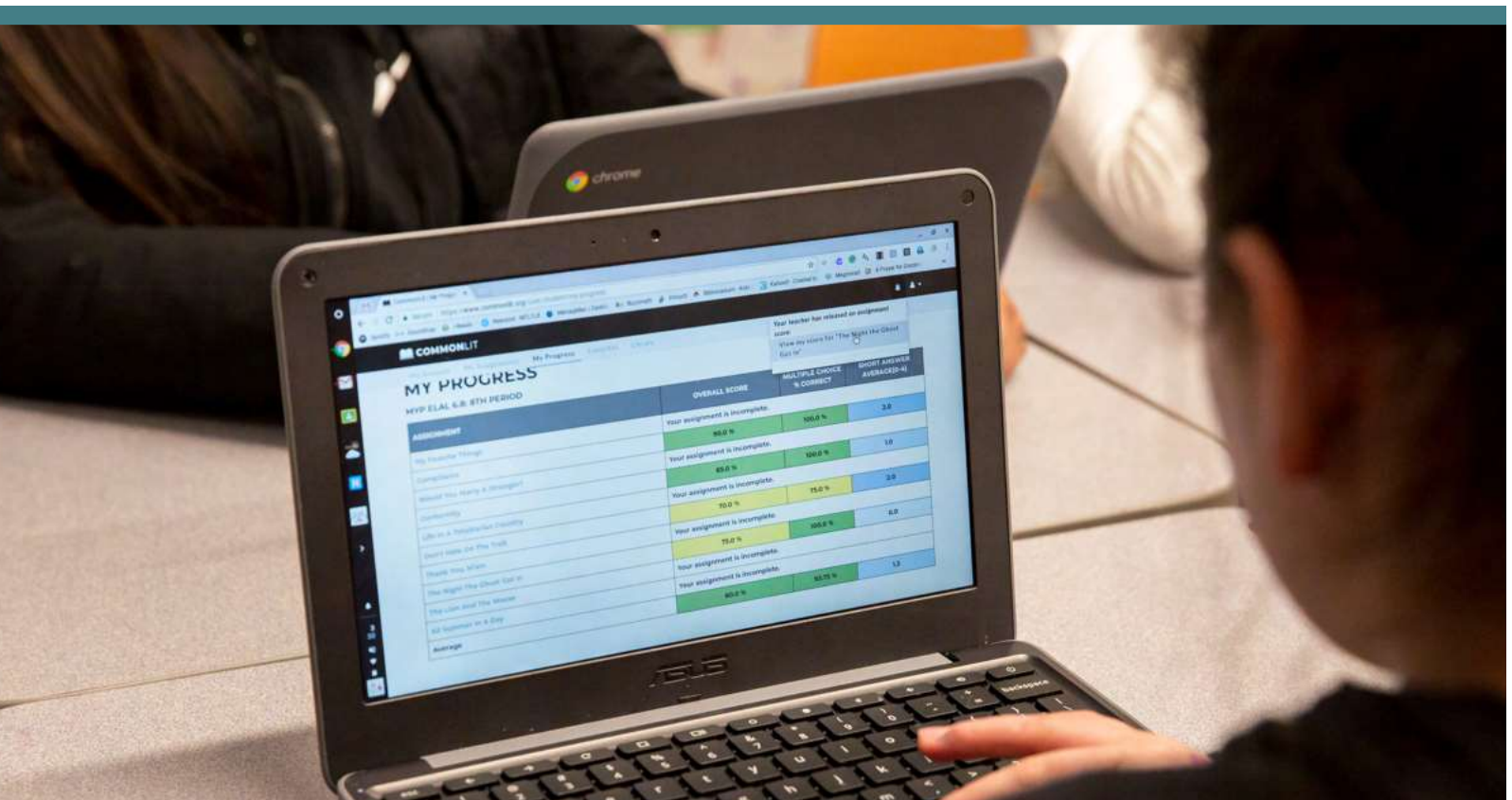
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