Teachers of elementary English language arts/literacy (ELA) tend to line up behind one of two very different approaches to reading instruction. In a forthcoming book, journalist Natalie Wexler reports observations she made in two classrooms that serve to illustrate the difference:

The focus of the lesson in Ms. Arredondo’s first-grade classroom is the skill of identifying captions. A recent test had shown that most students could not distinguish them from subtitles, though she had explained they are labels that tell them about pictures. She repeats the definition, but the students are not grasping it. “Words?” one student ventures, when asked to repeat the definition. When Ms. Arredondo shows them a book with a picture of a shark, they are eager to know what the shark is eating. When she shows them a picture of a planet, they want to know if it is the moon. But Ms. Arredondo does not answer these questions because the point of the lesson is not learning about sharks or planets but identifying captions.

In Ms. Williams’s first-grade classroom, students are reading a book about mummies. They already have lots of ideas about mummies—derived from movies and TV—but today they listen, rapt and open-mouthed, as Ms. Williams tells them what mummies are really like and what scientists can tell about them: that one ancient man used hair gel, that another’s last meal was vegetable soup. Along the way she casually points out “text features” that elsewhere would be the focus of instruction…. When Ms. Williams asks the children if they have questions, hands fly up: “Can they tell how the mummy died? . . . Was the soup still in the mummy’s stomach?”

The first approach prioritizes reading comprehension strategies over content. The second rests on the idea that building background knowledge of the world, including the vocabulary that accompanies such knowledge, is a more powerful way to develop strong readers. This article will explore the tension between the two approaches and suggest a role state boards of education might play in navigating these tensions.

The first a...
group's part. A characteristic feature of guided reading is teacher prompting of students to draw on targeted reading comprehension strategies as they make their way through the texts. Often, texts used in guided reading are selected for the specific purpose of enabling such practice. According to a 2016 RAND report, “Leveled readers were the dominant reading instructional materials reported [used] by teachers, especially at the elementary level, where 80 percent of ELA teachers reported using leveled readers at least once per week, and 59 percent reported using them daily or almost daily.” (Also see the authors’ article on page 18.)

How did the explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies become so widespread? Certainly, one factor was how prominently they figured in discussion of the much-heralded National Reading Panel report in 2000. An effort to settle the “reading wars” between those advocating phonics and those championing a “whole language” approach,1 the panel’s report was controversial from the start.2 While the primary message—and the subject of much federal and state policy in its wake—confirmed the importance of systematic phonics instruction, the panel also identified benefits from reading comprehension strategies, particularly of monitoring students’ understanding of what they had read. The report suggested ways students might achieve this metacognition—for example, by frequent summarizing, asking and answering questions, or visualizing.

Of the 204 studies on reading comprehension examined by the National Reading Panel, it should be noted, few extended beyond six weeks. And herein lies the problem. If all showed positive effects but none lasted more than six weeks, how can researchers justify urging an approach to reading comprehension that extends over an entire school year, year after year? In fact, cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham, who has focused much of his recent work on improving reading instruction, has concluded, “Reading strategies do not build reading skill, but rather are a bag of tricks that can indirectly improve comprehension. These tricks are easy to learn and require little practice.”3 He adds that comprehension monitoring “may be more like a trick in that it’s easy to learn and use, and the only difficulty is to consistently remember to apply it. An analogous process may be checking one’s work in mathematics. There is not a lot to learn in checking your work; it’s not a skill that requires practice. But you do have to remember to do it.”

In any case, the National Reading Panel did not indiscriminately commend all reading comprehension strategies. The studies it highlighted supported students’ learning to question themselves while reading in order to increase understanding. It cited no studies demonstrating the effectiveness of finding the main idea, learning to infer, or comparing and contrasting—all of which consume countless classroom hours. It is also quite likely the case that the accountability movement—with its emphasis on “data-driven instruction”—contributed to the dominance of the reading strategies approach. In creating learning standards that met the test for being “clear and specific” and in overseeing high-stakes tests that claimed to assess mastery of what were often as many as 40 ELA standards per grade, state policy may have inadvertently suggested to educators that mastery of strategies was the goal. Given the paucity of professional development at the time to help teachers learn how to teach to standards and weak curriculum to support them, it is little wonder that many teachers concluded strategies could be learned in isolation and that context was to a great extent irrelevant.

In this environment, standards-based formative assessments claiming to isolate skills and strategies; learning management systems promoting remediation to address skill deficits; and shiny, new leveled-reading materials tied to strategies work all sounded good. Given the flood of products supporting this approach, teachers can certainly be forgiven for assuming that mastery of reading comprehension strategies would deliver the literacy goods.

The Knowledge-Building Approach

The knowledge-building approach—which is both new and very old—argues that the purpose of reading, beyond pleasure, is to learn things, and that in order to learn things from text, one has to know a little something about the topic that appears on the page or screen. The approach relies on cognitive science, which holds that
the amount of information readers can keep in working memory is small. Only a few items can be held in suspension while readers are working on a problem (like figuring out a word’s meaning), and they can only be held there for a few seconds. So while it is possible for students to handle a couple of unfamiliar words and concepts when they encounter them in their reading, the cognitive load of much more than that shuts them down.

The Knowledge Matters Campaign asserts that reading with understanding depends far more on what a child already knows about the topic in the text than any strategy she might employ. E. D. Hirsch Jr. compares background knowledge to Velcro; the more you have, the easier it is for additional knowledge and vocabulary to “stick.” Studies support this view. Poor readers who know something about a subject comprehend text better than good readers who are unfamiliar with the topic, and students who read a series of texts on a single topic are likely to learn new vocabulary four times faster than when they are jumping from topic to topic, as happens in strategies-based instruction.

A knowledge-building approach to reading is distinguished from the reading strategies approach by the texts students are asked to read. Knowledge-building texts—whether informational or narrative—immerse students in content that builds their knowledge of the world and is rich in the vocabulary used to describe it. By nesting new content in familiar subject matter, access to increasingly complex words and ideas becomes more automatic.

Knowledge zealots claim no role at all for teaching comprehension strategies and criticize the strategies camp for treating content merely as a delivery mechanism for skills. But most in the knowledge-building camp do not so much eschew comprehension strategies as argue that the scales have tipped too heavily in their favor. They would argue that spending an inordinate amount of time teaching them without regard to the context—that is to say the content—to which they are applied is squandering an opportunity. And the burden of this lost opportunity falls most heavily on children living in poverty and English learners, who tend to have the biggest knowledge gaps.

Curriculum Renaissance

The Common Core State Standards and other college- and career-ready standards now in place in most states acknowledge the tension between standards—which, in the case of English language arts, are skills-focused—and content. Authors of the Common Core ELA standards addressed this tension in the CCSS preamble: “By reading texts in history/social studies, science and other disciplines, students build a foundation of knowledge in these fields that will also give them the background to be better readers in all content areas. Students can only gain this foundation when the curriculum is intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades.”

Over the past five or more years, a new breed of English language arts curriculum has been developed that is beginning to make inroads into classroom practice and also reshaping the thinking about reading comprehension. Products such as Core Knowledge Language Arts, EL Education (formerly Expeditionary Learning), Wit & Wisdom, and American Reading Company all use a knowledge-building approach and do so without ignoring reading comprehension strategies. Each prioritizes content differently (e.g., Core Knowledge is more history/civics-focused, EL is more science-centric), and consequently they deliver substantively different learning experiences. But the focus is squarely on stitching in the Velcro and not primarily on building proficiency in comprehension strategies.

Call to Action

There are compelling reasons why state board members should want to understand how educators in their state think about improving reading comprehension—and to investigate the degree to which existing policies encourage or discourage the adoption of high-quality curriculum.

First, there is good and growing evidence that quality curriculum may be one of, if not the most powerful driver of student academic success. In an extensive review of the literature on the impact of curriculum conducted for my organization, StandardsWork, David Steiner of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Educational

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Policy concluded that “curriculum is deeply important [and] that a teacher’s or district’s choice of curriculum can substantially impact student learning.”10 (He also cites research that says “effective curricula cost, on average, no more than weak curricula.”)

Yet it is “business as usual” across the country for teachers to use curriculum materials they have created themselves or found on the internet.11 While a certain degree of such poaching makes sense, it is also the case that “materials created or selected by teachers are less likely than those provided by their district to meet academic standards appropriate to the grade level.”12

A second and perhaps the most important consideration for state boards of education as they dip their toe into the reading comprehension waters is to reflect on equity. As the Knowledge Matters Campaign puts it, “While all students need and will benefit from an increased focus on building knowledge, the greatest beneficiaries of knowledge building will be our most vulnerable students.”13 Poor students growing up in homes with less educated parents and without access to the many extracurricular activities that privilege provides are often the ones with the least amount of background knowledge on which to build. They have the greatest deficits of vocabulary and general knowledge as a result of exposure to fewer spoken words, access to fewer books at home, and more limited opportunities for travel. Children growing up in poverty rely on school to give them the Velcro they need for knowledge from complex informational and literary texts to stick. If it is not learned at school, it is unlikely to get learned at all.14

Third, small nonprofits created much of the new curricula that exists to meet the higher demands of the Common Core and other college- and career-ready standards—curricula that reflects the need for a significant shift in instructional practices as discussed here. But these nonprofits face obstacles in competing with major publishing houses for districtwide textbook adoption under traditional procurement policies. Not only does the cost of participating often preclude them, reviewers who participate in such processes do not always know how to evaluate materials for alignment to the new standards. State boards might want to conduct an audit to determine the degree to which policies are in place to encourage the adoption of high-quality, aligned curriculum—curriculum that, in the case of ELA, is knowledge building and provides an appropriate but not inordinate focus on reading comprehension strategies.

In navigating one’s way around the debate about reading comprehension, it is worth considering these words from education expert Dylan Wiliam:

> The big mistake we have made in the United States, and indeed in many other countries, is to assume that if we want students to be able to think, then our curriculum should give our students lots of practice in thinking. This is a mistake because what our students need is more to think with. The main purpose of curriculum is to build up the content of long-term memory so that when students are asked to think, they are able to think in more powerful ways because what is in their long-term memories makes their short-term memories more powerful. That is why curriculum matters.

While it has generally not been the role of state boards of education to dictate curriculum to districts, it is a legitimate aim of state policy to ensure that students are thinking about topics more than they are thinking about reading comprehension strategies and that students’ knowledge of the world is at a minimum growing on par with their ability to apply these strategies. These concerns point toward a more active state role in incentivizing good decisions on reading/literacy curriculum than has heretofore been the case.

3 I will not address this issue here, other than to say that I do not minimize the very important role for systematic phonics instruction in teaching children to read. Quite the contrary, because the evidence for phonics instruction is so well established, I think discussion ought to be refocused on how, once students possess foundational skills, they should begin to make meaning from texts and use reading to grow their understanding of the world.
4 National Reading Panel, “Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading
Standards for Mathematics and English Language Arts and Literacy: Findings from the American Teacher Panel” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).
14Last winter, members of the Knowledge Matters Campaign visited schools across the country serving low-income students who are using a knowledge-rich ELA curriculum to close the knowledge gap. A travel blog from that tour can be found at www.knowledgematterscampaign.org/school-tour/.

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