

How Misunderstandings of Text Complexity May Have Widened the Achievement Gap

by Elfrieda H. Hiebert | February 27, 2025



The 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (NCES, 2025) results reveal a troubling trend: reading scores for the lowest-performing students have plummeted to historic lows. While scores of high-performing students have remained stable, the gap between low- and high-performing students has reached an all-time high. This decline among students in the bottom performance tier isn't sudden but represents a steady deterioration over the past decade. Education experts have proposed various explanations, including changes in classroom technology, shifts in teaching methodologies, and broader societal factors (Schwartz, 2025).

However, a compelling explanation emerges when we examine the timing. The decline coincides with the implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which required students to read increasingly complex texts. In 2013, as states and districts implemented higher text complexity levels recommended by the CCSS, a colleague and I (Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013) published a crucial warning: The CCSS approach to text complexity could potentially harm vulnerable readers. Our concern stemmed from CCSS developers' view that text complexity needed significant escalation across grades because, according to their conclusion, "K-12 reading texts have actually trended downward in difficulty in the last half century" (CCSS, Appendix A, p. 3).

This assumption was incorrect. CCSS developers based their conclusion on analyses of texts from classrooms prior to the 1990s. In reality, the complexity of first-grade texts rose substantially in the early 1990s due to new textbook mandates (Foorman et al., 2004). First-grade texts beginning in the 1990s were at their highest complexity levels in 60 years (Fitzgerald et al., 2016). A similar upward trend occurred in third-grade texts throughout the 20th century, while sixth-grade texts maintained comparable or higher complexity levels during the same period (Gamson et al., 2013).

Despite this evidence, beliefs that text complexity had declined precipitously prevailed. CCSS developers emphasized that progressively higher complexity levels across grade levels were essential for ensuring high school graduates' success with the texts of college and careers. The elementary grades saw the steepest recommended acceleration of text complexity with fifth graders required to read materials previously assigned to ninth and tenth graders. Even states not participating in the CCSS issued directives requiring their textbooks and assessments to align with these text complexity specifications.

Texts had already been challenging, but harder texts likely triggered significant changes in classroom instruction. Most consequentially, teachers or digital devices began reading texts for students, rather than students reading on their own (Swanson et al, 2016). While well-intentioned, such practices mean that students do less reading. Diminished reading practice means that reading becomes increasingly challenging and unappealing for many learners.

Data show that when struggling readers face texts beyond their instructional level and receive less reading practice, they miss crucial opportunities to build reading fluency and comprehension (Amendum et al., 2016). To address this crisis, state education leaders must fundamentally rethink approaches to text complexity and reading instruction. This means revising guidelines to align with research-based developmental progressions while maintaining high expectations. It requires ensuring struggling readers have access to texts at their reading levels while providing systematic support to help them progress to more complex materials.

The goal of developing reading levels by high school graduation necessary for college and careers remains essential, but the path to that goal cannot come at the expense of our most vulnerable readers. The 2025 NAEP results serve as a clear call to action: we must align our text complexity policies with research-based understanding of reading development and support struggling readers through authentic reading experiences.

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