

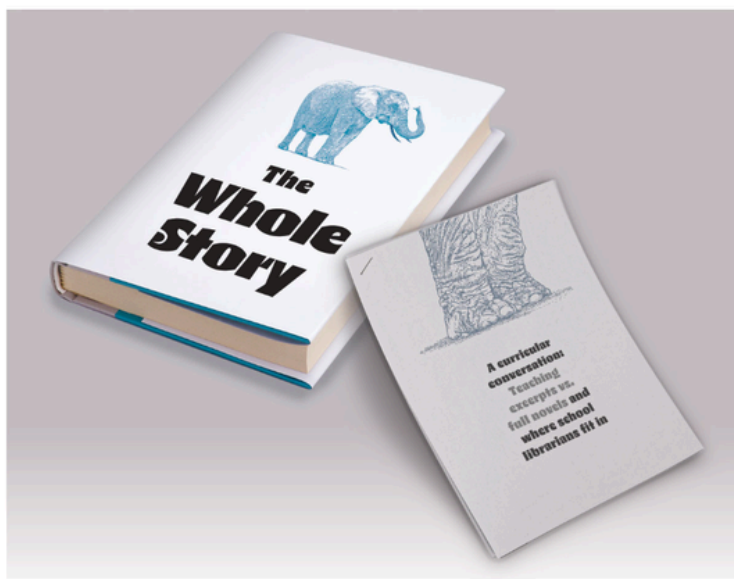
A Curricular Conversation: Excerpts vs. Full Texts

by Kara Yorio

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The ELA debate continues without clear consensus on where teaching is trending and how school librarians factor into the equation.



Susan Barber was shocked at what she was hearing at her district training with English Language Arts (ELA) specialists before this school year began.

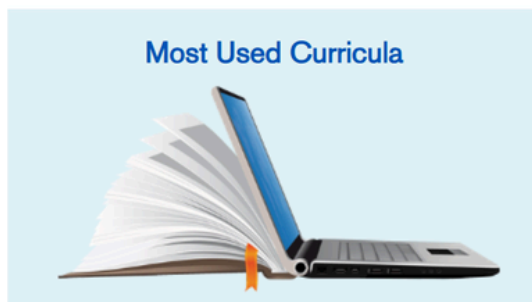
"They said, 'We're not going to teach whole novels; we just want you all teaching excerpts,'" says the English teacher at Midtown High School in Atlanta.

She had never been told that before, and she didn't plan to change what or how she taught now.

"I'm just not going to do that," she says of going excerpts-only in her 11th and 12th grade classes.

For Barber, who has been a College Board Advisor for AP Literature and on the [National Council of Teachers of English \(NCTE\)](#) Secondary Steering Committee, this fell into a trend she says she has seen over the last couple of years with more districts teaching entirely excerpts.

But as with almost any discussion of



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But as with almost any discussion of education, it is difficult to find a consensus. Her NCTE colleague Rex Ovalle observes something different.

"We have this pendulum swing that moved pretty hard towards excerpts," says Ovalle, chair of NCTE's Secondary Section and an English teacher at Oak Park and River Forest High School in Illinois. The idea, says Ovalle, was to give the students reading strategies with the smaller texts, which would translate into them knowing how to read longer works. In practicality, though, teachers say that is not how it has worked at all. And some are responding accordingly.

"I'm getting the sense that there's a group of us that are swinging back in the other direction," says Ovalle, who noted it's just as important for educators to teach entire books as it is for students to read them. "If we move too far in this direction, we'll forget culturally as teachers how to teach a whole book."

The one thing that isn't debatable is that this is a big topic of conversation in the world of education right now, and, with more than 13,000 public school districts across the United States, "No one can say anything categorical about what's happening across all or even most of them," says Karen Vaites, an educational advocate who spent years working in the curriculum space.

The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress scores showed statistically significant improvement in reading scores, but kids say they aren't reading books in their free time and teachers report a startling lack of reading stamina and comprehension.

Reading whole books is certainly part of the solution, these educators say. Like Barber, NCTE past president Carol Jago doesn't see a trend toward returning to ELA curricula dominated by full books. But, she is also not willing to point a finger at curricula that focus on excerpts as the sole culprit of the literacy crisis.

"There are some programs that are all excerpts, but there are a lot of programs that aren't," says Jago, who served as chair of the College Board's English Academic Advisory committee. "You don't want to just classify all middle and high school textbooks as full of excerpts. And yet, people want to make that the devil sometimes. 'That's the reason my kids don't read. We've got to use this terrible program.' No, take a look at that program more carefully."

Most curricula have recommended full books to add to the lesson plans. Teachers have options, she says.

Besides, teaching excerpts is not a new phenomena.

"Curricula dominated by excerpts are not new; they're called basals and/or anthologies," says Vaites. "They've been with us a long time."

In Atlanta, Barber hasn't heard any more about the excerpt directive, and she and her fellow ELA teachers are continuing on as they always have—teaching full books to their high school classes. The district uses a Houghton Mifflin Harcourt curriculum and the full novels selected are suggested from units in the text.

The [Center for Education Market Dynamics](#) (CEMD) collects and analyzes district curriculum selection data. This past year, CEMD researched over 5,000 school districts across the country, seeking public record information for the the 25–26 school year on what curricula they used.

For English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum for K–6, CEMD collected information from 3,942 districts. The top three purchased curricula were:

- **Wonders** from McGraw Hill Education (19.3 percent)
- **Into Reading** by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (18.6 percent)
- **Core Knowledge Language Arts** from Amplify (13.1)

(The three comprise 51 percent of the market share.)

For secondary (middle and high school) ELA curricula, CEMD could not collect as much data from public records. They found information for 3,243 middle schools and 2,415 high schools. (The lack of high school data could mean that they are less transparent about their purchases and curricula or that they design their own and use whole books.)

The top three purchased curricula were:

- **StudySync** by McGraw Hill (now owned and distributed by Imagine Learning) (20.6 percent)
- **HMH Into Literature** from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (20.1 percent)
- **myPerspectives** by Savvas Learning Company (20.1 percent)

(The three make up approximately 60 percent of the market share.)

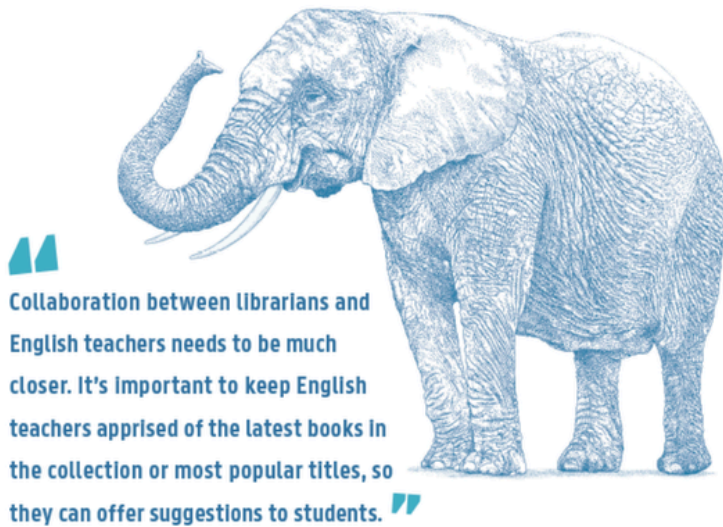
According to representatives for McGraw Hill and HMH, their curricula at all levels include excerpts and full texts, including books.

For example, at the start of this year, Barber taught *What the Constitution Means to Me*, a play by Heidi Schreck, to her 11th grade students, while other schools from the district used the workbook or digital platform that didn't include the full text.

"Reading books is what is what helps our students think," says Barber. "It's what helps our students grow. I don't even know how we've moved away from that. It's kind of crazy that we're even having this conversation."

But it is important to talk about, because administrators need to make informed decisions and educators need to advocate for what they think is best for students, says Vraites.

"We have more and more districts adopting these and believing that it's the right thing to do," she says. "Districts end up adopting these book-free programs. I think we're seeing a lot of accidental stumbling into programs that are suboptimal, because we haven't centered this conversation."



How did we get here?

As Vaites notes, teaching excerpts is not new. Jago says it started with No Child Left Behind, a federal policy launched in 2002 that intended to increase accountability by having students take standardized tests and meet state standards. There was talk of policies that would tie funding and teacher pay to test results.

"Even if [the policies] didn't happen, teachers absorbed them and said, 'Well, maybe I need to be doing more to prepare my students for this assessment,'" says Jago.

If a test is going to be from excerpts, wouldn't it make sense to teach kids excerpts? Just as you wouldn't want a student to encounter their first multiple choice question or first use of a computer while taking an assessment, yes, they should get experience with pulling information from and analyzing excerpts, says Vaites, but she adds, "Schools have followed that logic off a cliff."

No Child Left Behind is no longer law, but standardized tests remain, as do districts that only use excerpts.

"Those districts are out there. How many? I can't be certain," says Ovalle. "They're usually tied to the kind of administrative model where administrators will buy a curriculum from a large corporation, and everything is packaged.... If a district is going to fork over money for those kind of curriculums, they expect teachers to be using it."

A key component of making this a productive conversation and not just shouting strongly held opinions into the ether is not seeking to blame those who are teaching excerpts. There are the constraints put on them by administrators to use the purchased curriculum, as well as budgetary reasons for not being able to teach full books and even logistical issues such as needing space to store the books.

"As a principle, NCTE really values the teaching of whole novels and whole texts in general, but also values teaching of text as broadly defined as possible," says NCTE president Antero Garcia. "Our hope is to support teachers wherever they're at with whatever constraints they have. As an example, many schools and teachers and districts are confined by the choices of what textbooks they have. So that might mean reading excerpts. It might mean that they have to read short

What do we know?

Educators and administrators like data, but there are no studies that show whether excerpts or full novels are better.

“In education, we are always being told you follow the data,” says Barber. “Where is the data that supports only reading excerpts? Where is the data that supports only working with an online textbook? What is the data that supports that this is really in the best interest of students? I would encourage teachers to not be afraid to use their voice to ask, ‘Why are we doing what we’re doing?’”

Vaites points to studies that show the importance of reading a lot; therefore it would stand to reason that a curriculum with more reading would be better for students.

For the sake of this conversation—excerpts vs. full texts, teaching curriculum with books or not—it’s important to know much of an issue this actually is across the country. How many districts are not assigning books to students at all?

RAND, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, put out a national survey of public school teachers to learn whether secondary ELA teachers assign full books to students, how many books they assign, and how assignments vary by teachers’ curricula and context. The survey asked two main questions:

- “By the end of the school year (2024–25), how many full fiction or nonfiction books will your students have been assigned to read this school year?”
- “Of the full fiction or nonfiction books your students have been asked to read, how many are part of your required or recommended ELA curriculum materials?”

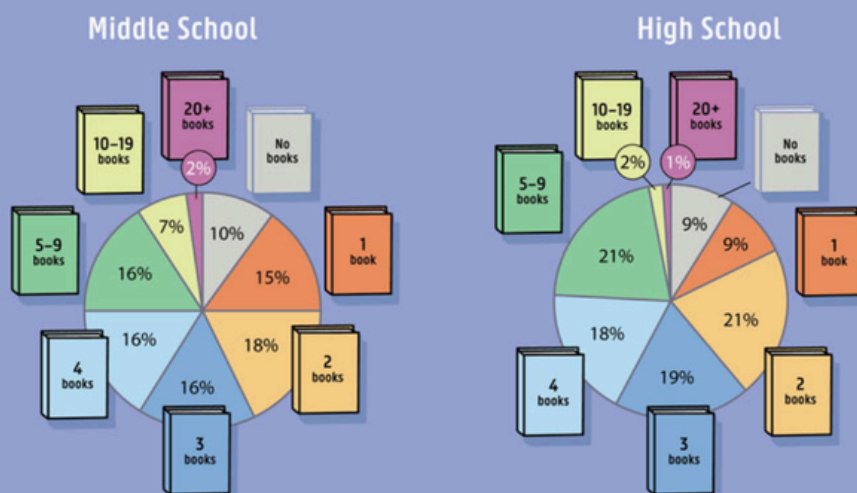
The responses from a nationally representative 1,596 secondary school teachers shows that the majority of schools are, in fact, teaching full novels.

The RAND survey found that two-thirds of secondary ELA teachers planned to assign one to four full books to their students. On average, teachers assigned four full books, two of which came from their curriculum’s required or recommended materials.

Most teachers (60 percent) assigned more books than were in their curricula. Teachers who primarily used publisher-developed curricula assigned fewer books than teachers who did not use the curricula.

The survey also found that teachers serving more historically disadvantaged students—students experiencing poverty, students of color, multilingual learners, and students with disabilities—assigned fewer full books.

Percent of secondary ELA teachers reporting the number of books they assigned students to read during the 2024–2025 school year



Q: By the end of the school year (2024–25), how many full fiction or nonfiction books will your students have been assigned to read this year?

Where do librarians fit in?

This discussion is dominated by English teachers, but no conversation about books and literacy should take place without librarians in the mix.

"School librarians have a huge role to play," says Jago. "It probably won't be influencing teachers to teach more whole books, but that's not the only way we get to solve this problem of reading scores, stamina, attention spans. "

Students need a "vibrant independent reading life," Jago says, and school librarians can help by doing booktalks in class and helping ELA teachers see how independent reading can fit in the curriculum.

Ovalle agrees librarians must be a part of the solution.

"Librarians are absolutely essential in this process," he says. "If we're going to ask students to not [only] read for the transaction of school and for pure information, if we're going to put that aside a little bit and say, 'This is important for you to read for endurance, for the aesthetic experience,' then, some of that also has to be having students read for pleasure, and librarians are 100 percent in that—keeping the library stocked, seeing what students are reading, creating that vital reading culture."

Ovalle admits he is lucky to have librarians actively book talking titles from a robust library collection. They also organize author visits, which creates enthusiasm for reading.

Jago says librarians should be part of English faculty meetings, ideally book talking a new title at the start of each one.

"Collaboration between librarians and English teachers needs to be much closer," says Jago. "It's important to keep English teachers apprised of the latest books in the collection or most popular titles, so they can offer suggestions to students. It's also important for librarians to know what's happening in the curriculum and suggest titles that could be complementary to the work or good recommendations for students who are interested in the subject or author."

Knowing about students' reading interests and trends is important for teachers who can add titles to their curriculum or break away and teach something new that will excite and engage the students.

"Sometimes you see a book that catches fire with kids, and they're passing it around, and you say, 'Next year I'm going to teach that book,'" says Jago. "On the other hand, there are some books that you say, 'No. I would ruin this book with foreshadowing and symbolism. Keep it underground.'"

While ELA teachers and librarians work with the same underlying mission, their approach to reading is different.

"It's such a weird thing," says Garcia, whose wife works for a public library system. "I don't want to say there's a rift between what English teachers get to do and what librarians get to do, but [reading] joy just doesn't even get to be the centerpiece of English classrooms these days in a way that I think it should be."

Librarians, on the other hand, can focus on the joy of reading whether in a district that teaches excerpts or full books.

"A teacher in collaboration with a librarian can change the dynamic within a classroom to [create] a classroom of readers," says Jago.



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