# Classroom Assignments Fail to Meet Common-Core's Higher Bar, Study Says

**By**[**Liana Heitin**](http://www.edweek.org/tm/contributors/liana%20.heitin.html)**on September 2, 2015 5:46 AM**

There have been several [**notable efforts**](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/DigitalEducation/2014/02/claims_of_common_core-aligned_.html) recently to determine whether [**textbooks are aligned to the Common Core State Standards**](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/03/18/review-of-math-programs-comes-under-fire.html)—most of which have had fairly negative findings.

A new report looks at whether [**individual classroom assignments meet the common-core criteria for literacy**](http://edtrust.org/resource/classroomassignments/). And it, too, finds that alignment, for the most part, is lacking.

The Education Trust, a research and advocacy think tank that has long been a proponent of the common standards, analyzed 1,500 student tasks assigned at six urban middle schools. The assignments were given in English/language arts, humanities, social studies, and science classes over a two-week period in February and March of this year.****

The group found that about 4 in 10 assignments were aligned with their respective, grade-appropriate standard. In high-poverty schools, the average was closer to 3 in 10.

"The majority of assignments included keywords and phrases found in the common-core standards, fostering a comforting sense that 'we are aligned,'" the report says. "Unfortunately, this is not the case—much of this is window dressing."

## Tasks Are Over-Scaffolded

In addition to examining whether tasks were aligned to grade-appropriate literacy standards, the group looked at how cognitively challenging the tasks were, whether they required the use of a text, and how engaging they were for students.

Just 13 percent of assignments were found to require "high levels of cognitive demand." (The reviewers based this measure on [**Norman L. Webb's Depth of Knowledge Levels**](http://static.pdesas.org/content/documents/M1-Slide_19_DOK_Wheel_Slide.pdf).) The tasks were also found to be "over-scaffolded."

"Instead of encouraging students to struggle with big ideas, everything was broken down into bite-size chunks, and much of the work was actually done for the students rather than by them," it says.

While more than half of assignments were connected to a text, just 16 percent actually required students to cite evidence from the text—a key dimension of the common standards.

The study also looked at how much writing output the tasks demanded, and found that fewer than 1 in 10 assignments required multiple paragraphs of writing. (Most required just note-taking or one to two sentences).

"We've got a lot of stop-and-go, truncated learning going on that I think we need to make adjustments to now," Sonja Brookins Santelises, the vice president of K-12 policy and practice for the Education Trust, said in an interview. "Otherwise, these standards won't reach nearly the level of impact we all want them to."

The assignments were found to be lacking in relevance and student choice as well. Only 2 percent of them met the reviewers' criteria for motivation and engagement.

"Really, who we were directing this first check-in towards were education leaders who are responsible for providing teachers with the support and direction on what translation to college-and-career-ready standards is supposed to look like," said Santelises, a [**former district leader herself**](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/03/18/turning-district-academic-visions-into-classroom-realities.html). "We definitely saw indications that people were moving, but there was still far too much in the everyday work kids are doing that says we're not there yet."

The group plans to release a similar report on math assignments this winter. See the full report, "[**Checking In: Do Classroom Assignments Reflect Today's Higher Standards?**](http://1k9gl1yevnfp2lpq1dhrqe17.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CheckingIn_TheEducationTrust_Sept2015.pdf)"