

Moonshot for Kids Proposal: Executive Summary

Problem and Goal

In 2017, 64% of 8th graders were unable to read and write at proficient levels ([NAEP, 2017](#)). In high school, these students don't close the gap: Nearly 60% of students matriculating as college freshmen have to take a remedial class. Of these students, only about 10 percent earn a bachelor's degree ([Center for American Progress, 2016](#)).

Despite a flurry of educational reforms, many adolescents in the average American classroom don't get the opportunity to learn to read and write proficiently. Research shows:

- Adolescents spend only 8 percent of the day reading and writing (Fisher, 2009).
- In a study of 64 middle and high school classrooms in 19 schools across 5 states, researchers found that open discussion averaged 1.7 minutes per 60 minutes of class time. Worse, students in lower-tracked classrooms were much less likely to speak during the school day (Applebee, 2003).
- In a random sample of 361 teachers, nearly half of respondents reported that they assigned one or fewer multi-paragraph writing assignment per month (Kihara, 2009).
- In a 2018 report, *The Opportunity Myth* released by The New Teacher Project, researchers found that students spent over 500 hours (6 months of class time) on assignments that didn't qualify as grade-level work. Nearly 50 percent of students told researchers they rarely or never had an experience in the classroom that they thought was both engaging and worthwhile ([The Opportunity Myth, 2018](#)).

CommonLit: Innovative, Scalable, Research-Based

CommonLit.org is a proven, research-backed, free online reading program. Our OER resources have reached over 10 million teachers and students in over two thirds of American public schools. In 2019, third party evaluators funded under a federal Department of Education grant found increased CommonLit usage was associated with higher percentages of students scoring at 4 or 5 ("proficient" or "advanced") on the Florida State English Language Arts Assessment ([Ad Hoc Analytics, 2019](#)).

Our moonshot idea to double the number of eighth graders who can write an effective persuasive essay is to develop an OER full course curriculum unlike any that has come before it. The curriculum will be flexibly designed, and will build student background knowledge in topics that cut across literature, science, and history. The curriculum will work hand-in-hand with a digital platform to help teachers make research-based instructional practices a routine part of the day.

Past Attempts to Solve the Problem

The adoption of the Common Core State Standards by 45 states in 2013 was a major policy shift: The CCSS assessments (PARCC and SmarterBalanced) were far more difficult than the state-created

assessments they replaced. To do well on the new assessments, students needed more background knowledge, better vocabularies, better study habits and stamina, and better command of written language and ideas — skills that can only be developed through years of good curriculum and good classroom instruction.

At the same time, classrooms have gone digital. Between 2013 and 2014, U.S. schools bought 23 million laptops, tablets, and Chromebooks for students and teachers to use in the classroom ([Education Week, 2016](#)). Between 2013 and 2014, there was a 40.5 percent annual growth rate in the market for mobile computing devices, a jump that can be attributed to technology requirements in CCSS ([EdWeek Market Brief, 2015](#)).

There were three major groups who entered the market to fill the curriculum vacuum in the English Language Arts (ELA) space. First were large institutional publishing companies like Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH) which released digital versions of their existing ELA products. A [2017 review by EdReports](#) found that HMH Collections' middle school and high school ELA curriculum did not meet expectations or only partially met expectations for alignment to standards, text quality, and building students' knowledge. Teachers have expressed frustration at the lack of authentic reading materials, the lack of flexibility, and difficulty of use ([Proteacher Reviews](#)). Pearson, another big player, left the K-12 market as of February 2019, selling off the bulk of its business. Recent reports show that districts are searching for better and more sustainable OER alternatives ([New America, 2018](#)). Districts with a high proportion of students in poverty have adopted open licensed full-course curricula materials at twice the rate of districts with low rates of child poverty ([Babson Survey Research Group, 2017](#)).

The second group to enter the market were venture-backed edtech startups that offered supplemental solutions. In 2014, venture and equity financing for edtech companies reached \$1.87 billion, an increase of 55 percent from the year before ([New York Times, 2015](#)). In 2013, Newsela launched its freemium platform which allowed teachers to assign different leveled versions of the same news article to help students read “at their current reading level.” In 2013, LightSail released its product through which students could access a library of public domain texts and read news articles from The Washington Post ([EdSurge, 2018](#)). ThinkCERCA also entered the market in 2013, providing a platform on which students could complete argumentative writing activities. While some like LightSail, Curriculet, and ConnectEDU have now dissolved, tools like ThinkCERCA and Newsela have remained popular staples in the supplemental curriculum market.

The third group was a nonprofit, EngageNY, which released a comprehensive full-year OER scripted curriculum aligned to CCSS. By 2017, a Rand Education report found that EngageNY's PDF-based OER curriculum had become one of the top published set of instructional materials for secondary ELA teachers, rivaling big textbook publishers like Pearson, HMH, and McGraw Hill. EngageNY primarily spread through top-down decisions; the report found that most teachers indicated that their district recommended or required its use. Researchers also found that fidelity of usage of EngageNY varied a great deal; only 26% of the teachers interviewed reported using EngageNY as scripted ([Rand Education, 2017](#)).

Despite the choices available in the market, recent data shows that teachers still spend hours (7 hours per week on average) searching the internet for high quality digital resources ([Education World, 2017](#)). A recent Gallup and NewSchools Venture Fund report, “Education Technology Use in Schools,” underscores the need for digitally-enabled curricula. Sixty-five percent of teachers reported that they use edtech tools daily; 53 percent wanted to use them even more often. The report also indicated that when selecting edtech tools, teachers and schools seek out resources that provide high-quality content aligned to learning standards, from sources with a proven track record of effectiveness ([Gallup, 2019](#)).

The CommonLit Moonshot: A Summary

CommonLit proposes to change the game for students through the release of the first ever free literacy curriculum which uses its online platform to enhance instruction.

Our OER curriculum and free digital tools will address an urgent market need for better curriculum and formative assessment in English Language Arts, science, and history. Our value proposition is extremely strong, especially for low-income, budget-strapped districts: By adopting CommonLit, districts can reallocate funding that would have been spent on curriculum toward other important resources like after school programs or arts education. Moreover, the curriculum is unlike prior full course offerings: it is designed to be flexible, easy-to-use, high-interest, and intentionally designed to work hand-in-hand with an innovative digital platform.

CommonLit’s curriculum is educative for teachers. Teachers who use the units will incorporate research-based best practices in adolescent literacy — practices that have been shown over and over again in the literature to make a difference for all students. These best practices will be supported through wraparound services to help schools and districts adopt the curriculum and create systems to nurture and sustain the work. Services include content-based teacher professional coaching, formative data tracking, and aligned assessments.