

# CURRICULUM HANDBOOK

## Language Arts: A Chapter of the Curriculum Handbook

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### Chapter III. Questions and Answers

Educators must continually strive to remain current, although keeping up with the latest research is a time-consuming task. The following questions are framed around some of the most topical issues related to language arts; answers to these questions reflect the most current research.

#### **1. What are the current best practices for instruction with regard to reading, writing, speaking, and listening?**

Best practice is not a specific strategy or program. Best practice involves more than just having a curriculum and delivering it as designed; it also encompasses teacher expectations and classroom culture. Knowing what to teach and how to teach are equally important.

While the reading wars seem to rage on with slightly different battle cries each decade, a growing body of research on language arts can and should inform instructional practice. Snow, Burns, & Griffin (1998) and the National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) strongly suggest that four components be part of language arts instruction: word study, comprehension, fluency, and writing. Each component looks different at the various grade levels.

- **Word study**—In primary classrooms, word study involves phonemic awareness, phonics, and sight word instruction. As students move up grade levels, concept and content vocabulary make up the greater portion of this component.
- **Comprehension**—Shared and guided reading needs to be part of every K-12 classroom. Shared reading involves generally whole-class instruction, with the teacher providing most of the support with the text, and is used to provide strategy instruction and to model fluent reading. Guided reading is generally done in small need-based groups in which all children have an opportunity to read a connected piece of text. In primary grades, the teacher takes more responsibility for the text through shared reading. By the end of 2nd grade, the teacher should be moving more responsibility for learning to the student. Shared reading should still be a part of instruction, but more guided reading is taking place. Moving into intermediate grades and on to middle and high school does not mean that shared reading is abandoned. Students still need explicit teaching of

strategies and skills. Whole-group and small-group instruction for comprehension is needed at all grade levels.

- **Fluency**—Instruction in this area involves direct teaching of strategies to increase fluency, along with opportunities throughout the day for students to read for extended periods of time. What is important is that students have some choice in the selection of reading material and that they are guided in their choices to select material that is at their independent and instructional level. Fluency is not just high-speed word recognition. Fluency includes rate as well as expression and intonation. At all levels, choral reading, paired reading, and independent reading are used to develop fluency.
- **Writing**—Students need opportunities for self-selected writing topics, along with teacher-directed topics, to become effective writers. Students need to learn the process of writing. That process includes planning, writing, revising, editing, and finally publishing. The process remains the same for all levels of students. What looks different is the structure and form of instruction based on such factors as the needs of the students, teacher expertise, and local expectations for writing. Whole- and small-group instruction is also a hallmark of effective writing programs.

No one component holds primacy over another. The needs of the students should drive the program of instruction.

Case Technologies to Enhance Literacy Learning (CTELL) is an Interagency Education Research Initiative (IERI) project designed to use knowledge about best practice of early literacy education to support improvements in teacher education and literacy achievement for young children. The principal investigators on this project—Charles Kinzer, Linda Labbo, Donald Leu, and William Teale—are recognized leaders in the area of early learning.

At the American Educational Research Association's 2002 annual meeting, CTELL presented a list of 12 principles of effective practice in K-3 reading instruction:

1. **Teacher knowledge, insight, and orchestration of instruction.** The teacher's knowledge; ability to make principled, insightful, instructional decisions for individual children; and the ability to orchestrate effective instruction for the group of children being taught are more influential factors in student literacy achievement than knowing particular procedures for instruction or following scripted lesson plans.
2. **Language, culture, home background, and literacy instruction.** Providing reading instruction at school that builds on young children's language, culture, and home background enhances their chances for success in learning to read and write.
3. **Emergent literacy foundations.** Basic early literacy concepts, skills, and positive attitudes that form the foundation for subsequent reading and writing achievement are developed by immersing young children in literacy-rich classrooms.
4. **Phonemic awareness instruction.** Instructional activities that develop children's phonemic awareness increase reading achievement when individual children have not yet acquired the ability to produce, segment, and blend sounds.

5. **Decoding instruction.** Instruction in the sound-symbol correspondences of language (often called phonics instruction) is positively related to student achievement in reading.
6. **Comprehension instruction.** Instructional activities that develop children's abilities and strategies for comprehending written language enhance reading achievement.
7. **Independent reading.** The more young children read a variety of texts that interest them, the more likely they are to achieve in reading.
8. **Fluency instruction.** Fostering the development of reading fluency through appropriate instructional activities and extensive opportunities to read fluently is associated with higher reading achievement.
9. **Integrating writing and reading.** Providing writing instruction linked to reading instruction enhances achievement in reading as well as in writing.
10. **Technology and early literacy development.** Integrating computer and Internet technologies into literacy instruction in the early grades provides the foundation for continued learning of both conventional and digital literacies as children proceed through school.
11. **Early assessment and instructional intervention.** Monitoring children's early literacy development through ongoing classroom assessment and providing instruction on the basis of the diagnostic information obtained, including appropriate instructional intervention to children who fall significantly behind, enhances the chances that children will achieve satisfactorily in reading and writing.
12. **Enthusiasm for reading and writing.** Teaching in ways that foster young children's enthusiasm for and engagement with reading and writing enhances the likelihood that they will learn to read and write successfully and become lifelong readers and writers (Kinzer, Labbo, Leu, & Teale, 2002).

In a recent ASCD publication (Marzano, 2003), several research-based strategies for increasing achievement are presented. General categories are included, along with specific behaviors related to each category. Although these strategies represent instruction in all areas of the curriculum, most are also critical for effective language arts instruction.

1. Have students identify similarities and differences by
  - Assigning in-class and homework tasks that involve comparison and classification, as well as metaphors and analogies.
2. Use summarizing and note taking by asking students to
  - Generate verbal and written summaries.
  - Take notes, as well as revise their notes, correct errors, and add information.
3. Use nonlinguistic representations and ask students to
  - Generate mental images representing content.

- Draw pictures or pictographs representing content.
  - Construct graphic organizers representing content.
  - Make revisions to their mental images, pictures, pictographs, and graphic organizers.
4. Organize students for learning by using
    - Cooperative groups when necessary and appropriate.
    - Need-based or ability groups when necessary and appropriate.
  5. Build and activate student knowledge prior to presenting new content by
    - Asking questions that help students recall what they already might know.
    - Providing students with direct links with what they already have studied.
    - Allowing ways for students to organize or think about the content.

## **2. What is the current state of assessment and evaluation in language arts?**

With the current No Child Left Behind legislation, assessment and evaluation have taken a prominent place in the field of language arts. Assessment should be formative and ongoing to facilitate a teacher's knowledge of students' instruction. The International Reading Association (1999) asserts the right of all children to reading assessment that helps to determine instruction and provides benefits to their literacy achievement. The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) outlines several examples of literacy assessment, which include

- The use of portfolios.
- Records of independent reading and writing.
- Prereading plans.
- Student self-evaluations.
- Observational protocols.
- Informal reading inventories.
- Retellings.
- Literature responses.
- Running records.
- Miscue analysis.
- Writing samples using rubrics.
- Checklists.
- Student interviews (for metacognition purposes). (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, n.d.)

The consensus is that standardized testing only should be used with other forms of assessment. Again, the IRA (1999) states its "opposition to using scores on a single test as the criterion for important decisions about students' education." No one standardized test can tell the whole picture of a child's literacy and limits the curriculum. Standardized tests give a limited view of a child's literacy level and may not show strengths, weaknesses, or growth of individual children.

### **3. How can support staff—including reading specialists, learning disability teachers, and second-language teachers—work with classroom teachers to deliver effective language arts instruction?**

The perceived role of the support teacher has shifted from the "take them down the hall and fix them" mentality to the coteacher perspective. Instruction is most powerful when all systems are aligned. If the program of instruction a student receives from his or her "support teacher" is not aligned to the instruction within the classroom, then less than optimum results can be expected. Schools must examine the structure of support programs and design a system that allows teachers to work as a team, not as separate entities.

This paradigm shift requires time, professional development, and a commitment to success. Bean, Swan, and Knaub (2003) examined the role of the reading specialist in schools with exemplary reading programs. These characteristics also can apply to learning disability and second-language teachers.

#### 1. Resource to classroom teachers

- Discuss and share ideas with teachers about helping struggling readers, using materials and ideas that enhance reading instruction and assessing students' learning.
- Hold collaborative planning sessions to develop lessons and strategies for working with students. These can be held either on a systematic, regular basis (once a week during planning time), as needed, or "on the fly."
- Serve as a mentor to new teachers by modeling, providing feedback, and coaching.
- Demonstrate strategies (especially those that are new for teachers), observe, and provide feedback.
- Participate in observations (teachers observing each other) for professional growth.
- Lead study groups (read a professional book or article and then discuss).
- Provide professional development for teachers as part of the school staff development program, and teach classes that teachers can take for credit. Work with teachers in planning and conducting professional development in the schools.
- Provide a "friendly ear" for teachers who want to talk about issues, problems, or ideas that they have about reading instruction.

2. Resource to allied professionals, parents, other community members, volunteers, and tutors

- Work closely with the principal in setting a schedule and making decisions about professional development.
- Work with special educators and serve on instruction support or pupil personnel teams.
- Work with librarians, speech therapists, counselors, and psychologists.
- Serve as a resource for parents (communicate with parents, providing and accessing information); conduct workshops on how they can work with their children; provide workshops for parents of preschool students.
- Work with volunteers (provide training sessions, coordinate schedules, recruit).

3. Coordinator of the reading program

- Assist in the writing of curriculum.
- Look for and assist in the selection of new materials (including development of criteria for determining quality of those materials); assist in the piloting of new materials.
- Serve as a leader on curriculum committees.
- Coordinate schedules for reading specialists and classroom teachers.
- Maintain a literacy center or the location of various literacy materials.

4. Contributor to assessment

- Assist in the development of assessment instruments (retelling protocols and running records) and the selection of assessment instruments.
- Conduct assessments for individuals or groups of students (e.g., assess all entering 1st graders).
- Assist in interpretation of test results with teachers and parents.
- Coordinate testing schedules.
- Share results of assessments with public.

5. Instructor

- Provide instruction for individuals or small groups of students, especially those identified as struggling readers. Such instruction tends to be supplemental to that provided by the classroom teachers.
- Work on a short-term basis with targeted students, then provide a program for classroom teachers to follow.
- Work in pull-out or in-class settings or both.

- Provide instruction, using research-supported programs (e.g., Reading Recovery).

#### **4. What types of instruction accelerate the literacy development of older students who lack literacy in a first and second language?**

The research in this area is limited. However, Yvonne and David Freeman (2002), in their book, *Closing the Achievement Gap: How to Reach Limited-Formal-Schooling and Long-Term English Learners*, provide four keys for school success for this special population.

1. **Challenging, theme-based curriculum.** This assumes that teachers have high expectations for students and believe that they are capable of accessing concepts. This type of curriculum is based on the big ideas or questions in a thematic unit. The curriculum needs to be challenging, not consisting of worksheets and basic skills but, rather, consisting of interactive, expansive activities and work that increases students' knowledge.
2. **Building on students' background knowledge, including culture, experiences, and language.** Teachers who honor what children bring to school with them give students the knowledge and belief that what they know is important and valued. Teachers can honor and value children's knowledge without speaking their language or being from their ethnic background. They do this by listening, responding, and providing scaffolding opportunities to bridge between the two knowledge bases—home and school.
3. **Using collaborative activities and scaffolding instruction.** Activities that allow children to use language and interact with their peers give students opportunities to develop not only academic skills, but oral and social skills as well. The instruction that students receive should be a little higher than their current level so that they are continually growing and being challenged.
4. **Creating students who value themselves and school.** Many of our students who are longtime English learners or of limited schooling are students who have given up on themselves and school. They need teachers who believe in them and respect them as learners. Teachers must demand high accountability from all their students. Teachers who respond by reducing expectations or not making students participate, teachers who feel sorry for students or allow work to be substandard, these teachers are not fostering students who value themselves. "A most effective way for teachers to be uncaring and unconcerned is to tolerate and/or facilitate academic apathy, disengagement and failure" (Gay, 2000, p. 48).

#### **5. What is the best use of paraprofessionals and volunteers in the language arts classroom?**

Paraprofessionals are valuable assets to schools. Their role of providing support services to students is frequently extended to that of providing direct services as well. In many schools that are understaffed and underfunded, paraprofessionals are taking on greater responsibility for instruction. Under NCLB, the role of the paraprofessional is clearly articulated. Programs staffed solely by paraprofessionals are no longer permitted.

Under NCLB, paraprofessionals only may provide instructional support services, not primary instruction. In addition, the support instruction must be under the direct supervision of a teacher. According to the Department of Education (2002), NCLB also specifies academic requirements for all paraprofessionals facilitating instruction:

- An associate's degree or two years of college, or
- Meeting a rigorous standard of quality through a formal state or local assessment.

NCLB (Department of Education, 2002) defines *working under the direct supervision of a teacher* as

- The paraprofessional works in close and frequent proximity with the teacher.
- The teacher prepares the lessons and plans the instructional support activities that the paraprofessional will carry out.
- The teacher evaluates the achievement of the students with whom the paraprofessional is working.

Community Consolidated School District 15 in Palatine, Ill., uses paraprofessionals and volunteers in research-based intervention programs and in classrooms so that all students can meet high standards.

Four years ago, District 15 transformed its reading support program from a model based on remediation to a model of acceleration. Recognizing the need to have all students reading on grade level before the 3rd grade, the district sought out best practices in research-based reading intervention programs. The model selected uses well-trained paraprofessionals and volunteers under the supervision of reading specialists to provide intensive, strategic intervention programs for students in grades K-2. In 2003, District 15's intervention programs were awarded the national Leadership for Learning Award from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). The programs are called KIP (Kindergarten Intervention Program), FLIP (First-Grade Literacy Intervention Program), and SAIL (Second-Grade Acceleration in Literacy).

KIP, FLIP, and SAIL are specifically tailored for each grade level, and each program requires a minimum of two full days of training. This training is conducted on an annual basis, and all paraprofessionals attend. Those who previously have attended serve as mentors during training for those new to the program. The intervention programs are one-on-one daily instruction, provided by the trained paraprofessional.

A critical component of the intervention program is coaching the paraprofessionals. To maintain the integrity and fidelity of the program, two half-time reading specialists serve as coaches to monitor and support the work of the paraprofessionals. Coaches go into buildings on a regular basis to watch the paraprofessionals as they work with students. Coaches use a standardized coaching form that serves as a basis for discussion between the coach and the paraprofessional. This feedback is provided immediately and usually lasts no more than five minutes.

Results of the program are dramatic. During the first year, 127 students from a kindergarten population of just more than 1,000 qualified for KIP, the intervention program. Of these 127, two-thirds returned to regular classroom instruction by the 1st grade. The remaining one-third continued in FLIP, the 1st-grade intervention program. By the end of the 1st grade, only 18 students from the original group of 127, or less than 2 percent of the total grade-level population, continued to require services in SAIL. Results in 1st and 2nd grades are very similar. These programs also have been replicated in Spanish for students in need of intervention in their native language.

The success of these programs is due in large part to the dedication and determination of the paraprofessionals. The training and coaching provide the paraprofessionals with a sense of purpose. At the same time, the results validate their efforts.

In addition to the paraprofessionals, a group of high school students, also under the supervision of a reading specialist, work with students from the 1st grade intervention program who are not quite ready to return to the regular classroom. The high school students, referred to as interns, provide services through the Book Buddies program, developed by Johnston, Invernizzi, and Juel (1998). Using many of the same research-based strategies as FLIP, Book Buddies sessions are conducted twice each week in 45-minute sessions. The interns receive extensive training and coaching, and the reading specialist is in the same room with the group of interns and students, monitoring each session and providing feedback to the interns on a daily basis.

For more information on these programs, please contact:

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## **6. What does language arts instruction look like in inclusion and self-contained, mixed-ability classrooms?**

The current state of education is that classrooms are made up of students from different languages, different cultures, different cognitive abilities, and different academic levels. The job of the teacher is to ensure that every child learns. In order to do this, teachers need to know how to differentiate the entire process, including content, process, and product.

In her book, *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms* (2nd edition), Carol Ann Tomlinson gives direction into what differentiation is and what it is not.

Differentiation is not

- **Individualized instruction for every student.** Children need meaningful instruction.

Although it may be individual at times, differentiated instruction involves whole-class, small-group, and individualized instruction.

- **Chaotic.** Teachers who successfully use differentiated instruction have good classroom management skills. They need to be effective leaders in managing several groups doing different activities at the same time. There is extensive planning beforehand to ensure that every child is engaged in meaningful activities and not searching around for something to do. Effective differentiated instruction, while active, does not mean disorderly classrooms.
- **Another way to provide homogeneous grouping.** Flexible grouping is key to differentiation. Students flow to and from groups as their learning dictates. The groups are always changing because children are growing and their needs change.
- **Tailoring the same set of clothes.** Differentiation is not about taking a basic set of rules and stretching or resizing them to fit everyone. It is about teachers understanding what students must know, understand, and be able to do and finding ways to ensure that all children have access to the knowledge. As teachers come to know their students—their strengths and their areas for growth opportunities—they look for ways to meet individual student needs.

Differentiated instruction is

- **Proactive.** Teachers assume that there are mixed abilities in the classroom, and they plan for it. From the first day, teachers who practice differentiated instruction come prepared to challenge all students, to observe them, and to practice ongoing informal assessment to develop the best instructional program.
- **More qualitative than quantitative.** Differentiated instruction is about what happens in the instruction, what level it is, and what level the student needs and can learn from. It does give the more advanced students more work to do, but also a different level of work to do. Many educators feel that challenging a student means assigning 40 problems instead of 20. This is not differentiated instruction; it's instruction that punishes students because they have a strength in a particular area.
- **Rooted in assessment.** Assessment drives instruction. In differentiated instruction, assessment is ongoing, informal, and formal. The results of the assessment change the instruction for the child. Teachers who practice differentiated instruction see assessment as a tool to support scaffolding. Assessments tell them when and if they need to teach in a different way, where students are achieving, and where they still need support.
- **Multiple approaches to content, process, and product.** This is the essence of differentiated instruction. Because there are multiple paths for learning, students can access learning through their strengths. Students who are given the opportunity to demonstrate what they know—in the best way that they know how—achieve more.
- **Student centered.** Differentiated instruction teaches students to share the responsibility for their learning. They are active learners and a part of the decision-

making process. Together, teachers and students decide what the instruction will include.

- **A blend of whole-class, small-group, and individualized instruction.** Classroom instruction should include the use of all three ways of grouping students. Differentiation consists of multiple ways of grouping for instruction depending on the needs of the students.
- **Organic.** Differentiated instruction is a way of teaching. It defines how a teacher constructs the learning in the classroom and scaffolds instruction to ensure that every child learns.

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