

LITERACY IMPLEMENTATION GUIDANCE FOR THE ELA Common Core State Standards

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have the potential to ensure that every child in the United States is prepared for college and careers. It is a worthy goal and one that we must work together to achieve. However, information, policies, and products aimed at helping educators to implement the ELA Common Core State Standards are being produced rapidly, sometimes with conflicting messages about literacy practices. This can be a confusing situation for school leaders and classroom teachers as they seek to understand the Standards and the best practices for literacy instruction and assessment. It is state and local leaders and teachers themselves who, ultimately, must make the Standards into an effective instructional reality—what happens day to day in classrooms determines student ELA learning.

The International Reading Association is providing this document to address specific literacy issues related to the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. It focuses on issues that have proven to be especially confusing or challenging to implement. This implementation guidance from IRA represents a consensus of the thinking of literacy leaders in the field who support thoughtful implementation of the Standards for student literacy achievement. The intent is to support state and local leaders, teachers, university faculty, publishers, and planners and facilitators of professional development as they implement the ELA Common Core State Standards.

Use of Challenging Texts

The CCSS require that students read more challenging texts during instruction than has been general practice in the past. There is reason to believe that this shift could help students reach more advanced literacy achievement levels. But, research also shows this to be a complex instructional issue and one that will not likely be accomplished successfully without a nuanced and thoughtful approach. Merely adding more challenging texts to the curriculum will not be a sufficient or effective response to this requirement.

A successful response will require awareness of a subtle but important distinction that is made in the Standards. First, the CCSS raise the text levels assigned to each grade *only for Grades 2 through 12*. It is important to recognize that the shift to having students read more complex text does *not* apply to beginning readers in Kindergarten and Grade 1. A

key aspect of learning to read conventionally in these early years involves cracking the alphabetic code—being able to decode words effectively and to develop solid word recognition skills. The most suitable texts for these purposes include features like decodable words, common sight words, and predictable language, rather than the presentation of highly complex ideas and language. Kindergarten and Grade 1 children should have opportunities to engage with complex texts, but this best takes place in the context of having those texts read to them, a practice that supports their language development and emerging comprehension skills. For their own reading, texts written at traditional levels are most appropriate, and unlike the texts for Grades 2–12, should not be raised at this time.

The Common Core State Standards specify the levels of text that students need to be able to read effectively by the *end* of school years. However, this does not mean that all assigned reading should be at these levels. In order to help students to attain the necessary end-of-year levels, teachers need to establish an ambitious itinerary of rich and varied narrative and informational texts, including some texts that are easier than the Standards specify. Athletes vary their routines to build strength, flexibility, and stamina; likewise, readers need reading experiences with a range of text difficulties and lengths if they are to develop these characteristics as readers.

Finally, beyond the beginning reading levels, the CCSS guidelines on text complexity encourage teachers to engage students in reading at least some texts they are likely to struggle with in terms of fluency and reading comprehension. This represents a major shift in instructional approach. To ensure that the interactions with such texts lead to maximum student learning, teachers must provide significantly greater and more skillful instructional scaffolding—employing rereading, explanation, encouragement, and other supports within lessons. To accomplish this shift successfully, teachers must have access to appropriate instructional resources and professional learning opportunities that support them in providing such scaffolding.

Summary of Recommendations for Use of Challenging Texts:

- Do not increase levels of texts used in reading lessons in Kindergarten and Grade 1.

- Instruction across the school year needs to involve students in the reading of texts written at a variety of levels.
- Teachers need professional learning opportunities to be able to provide adequate scaffolding and support for student reading of complex texts in Grades 2–12 and listening to complex texts in Kindergarten and Grade 1.

Foundational Skills

The CCSS require the teaching of phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, and other foundational literacy skills in Grades K–5. This makes sense since research has demonstrated the value of explicitly and systematically teaching these skills. Nevertheless, the placement and format of these skills is quite different than in past standards, and these changes are confusing to some educators and observers. In the past, such skills have been prominently displayed first in standards documents, followed by reading comprehension. In the CCSS, the Reading Foundations Standards do not appear until page 16, and then they are not described in great detail (e.g., “Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words”). Placement and formatting of this information aside, to meet the requirements of the Standards, teachers will need to continue to provide high quality explicit and systematic instruction in these foundational skills if students are to succeed in learning to read.

By leading the discussion of K–2 ELA Standards with attention to Reading Standards for Literature and Reading Standards for Informational Text, the CCSS also indicate that accomplishment of Foundational Standards in the early grades (and therefore instruction in Foundational Skills) should not be thought of as prerequisite to other aspects of the ELA Standards. Rather, instruction in Foundation Skills should occur in concert with instruction related to Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language.

Summary of Recommendations for Foundational Skills:

- Early, systematic, and explicit teaching of the foundational reading skills is required.
- During the K–2 years, teaching of all aspects of the English Language Arts should take place simultaneously and be coordinated.

Comprehension

The Common Core State Standards for Reading only focus on learning outcomes or goals, and do not explicitly address what students need to be taught to accomplish these goals.

“By emphasizing required achievements, the Standards leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed. Thus, the Standards do not mandate such things as a particular writing process or the full

range of metacognitive strategies that students may need to monitor and direct their thinking and learning. Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards.” (NGACBP & CCSSO, 2010, p. 4)

The Standards describe the kinds of interpretations of text that students must demonstrate, but they do not specify the cognitive strategies that students may need to engage in to arrive at such interpretations. Specifically, the CCSS stress the importance of teaching students to engage in “close, attentive reading.” This means that students must learn to engage independently in critical reading, determining what a text says explicitly, making logical inferences, and analyzing a text’s craft and structure to determine how those affect the text’s meaning and tone, evaluating the effectiveness or value of the text, and using the information and ideas drawn from texts (often referred to as “evidence”) as the basis of one’s own arguments, presentations, and claims.

Certainly, comprehension instruction should include opportunities for students to read texts with an intensive focus on meaning, and with lively and critical discussions of ideas in the text. However, given the extensive body of high quality research conducted into the effectiveness and benefits of explicit comprehension strategy instruction, teachers should also rededicate themselves to teaching such strategies in the future as another avenue to accomplish the Core Standards. Research clearly shows the success of “gradual release of responsibility” models of instruction, in which teachers model the use of a strategy, then have students use it with teacher guidance, subsequently reducing the amount of guidance and support so that students come to use the strategy independently to understand and remember what they read.

Research shows the effectiveness of summarizing text as it is read, asking oneself questions about text and answering those questions, recognizing and using narrative and informational text structures to help make sense of and to remember text information, visualizing, comprehension monitoring, and other active ways of thinking about the ideas in a text. The use of such strategies is especially helpful with texts that a reader finds challenging. Students need to learn how to use such strategies independently, so they can eventually interpret text on their own as well as they are able to under the guidance of a teacher.

Summary of Recommendations Related to Comprehension:

- Engage students in reading high-quality texts closely and critically.
- Teach research-proven reading comprehension strategies using gradual release of responsibility approaches.
- Guide students to apply strategies when reading particularly challenging texts.

Vocabulary

The CCSS emphasize vocabulary development. This is appropriate, since research consistently shows vocabulary to be an important factor in reading comprehension and academic achievement. Vocabulary instruction is especially vital for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, English learners, and struggling readers. A strong grasp of vocabulary is needed if students are to read and write well in disciplines such as science and history.

However, the emphasis on vocabulary within the CCSS is unusual in its placement, and consequently, may be confusing with respect to instructional implications. Usually, vocabulary teaching is explicitly linked to reading comprehension, but the CCSS provide this explicit emphasis within the Language strand of the Standards (along with mechanics, usage, grammar, and spelling) where it is easily overlooked.

The Language strand of the Standards calls for the development of knowledge of a “range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases,” including figurative language, multi-meaning words, and meaningful word parts. Research shows that the explicit teaching of the meanings of such words and parts of words, along with reading to students and encouraging them to engage in their own extensive reading, can steadily build such vocabulary knowledge. These Standards also emphasize aspects of the interpretation and use of vocabulary that have too often been neglected.

Other strands also emphasize vocabulary—less prominently but no less essentially—throughout the Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening sections of the CCSS. In these strands, the Standards ask students to interpret the meanings of key words within context, with particular attention to their tones as well as their meanings. Thus, both the nuanced interpretation and use of words (diction) and the development of a robust, continually growing collection of known academic words are emphasized.

Implementation of the CCSS requires that teachers identify academic vocabulary and phrases in instructional texts and support students’ learning of such vocabulary. The Standards also stress the need for teaching students to interpret the meaning and tone of an author’s or speaker’s vocabulary as a key to making sense of the information being presented. Not only do students require instruction in the meanings of individual words and phrases and the relationships among word meanings, but also they must understand and be able to use word-solving strategies that allow them to determine meanings of words in context, as well as in various kinds of dictionaries and other references. Such instruction should take place throughout the school day and across all subject areas.

Summary of Recommendations Related to Vocabulary:

- Study all strands of the Standards for references to vocabulary development.

- Plan for vocabulary development across the school day in all subjects.
- Provide instruction in word-solving strategies as well as teaching individual words.

Writing

The CCSS Writing Standards strongly emphasize the need for students to learn to write about the information that they find in text. This is in line with recent research suggesting that writing about texts and engaging in the act of writing text increase reading comprehension. Thus, research and presenting the results of research—both in writing and multimedia formats—are central to the Standards, and as such, students need to know how to summarize text, critically analyze the information reported in texts, and synthesize information from multiple texts, using what is drawn from sources as evidence in support of students’ own ideas. This is a major shift in instructional emphasis from existing state writing standards and will require more explicit teaching and a major professional development effort to ensure that teachers know how to teach students to write about text.

Writing about reading requires more resources than when students are just asked to write about what they already know, especially when the Standards—and research findings—emphasize the importance and value of digital tools in writing. To accomplish the CCSS, students need not only the active support of well-prepared teachers but also easy access to online research resources and digital writing and editing tools.

Summary of Recommendations for Writing:

- Provide opportunities for students to write in response to reading across the curriculum.
- Provide research opportunities that involve reading both print and digital texts, and that require writing in response to reading.
- Teachers will need professional development in teaching students how to write the types of texts required in the CCSS. This professional development should include teachers doing their own writing, as well as analyzing annotated student writing.

Disciplinary Literacy

The Common Core Standards emphasize disciplinary literacy; that is, the teaching of reading and writing in social studies, history, science, and the technical subjects. This emphasis is more than just a call for the use of reading and writing across the curriculum. Disciplinary literacy focuses on the specialized ways that reading, writing, and language are used within each discipline and attempts to introduce students to these specialized ways of thinking, problem-solving, and

communication. The CCSS require that students be taught disciplinary literacy in Grades 6–12.

The successful implementation of the disciplinary literacy Standards will require more than the involvement of English language arts teachers. Content teachers will need to deliver these standards, and as such it is important that science, social studies, and technical subject teachers collaborate with literacy professionals to help plan and implement appropriate lessons.

Summary of Recommendations for Disciplinary Literacy:

- Involve content area teachers in teaching the disciplinary literacy Standards.
- Teach students the literacy strategies that are pertinent to each discipline.
- Provide appropriate professional learning opportunities for teachers in the literacy practices appropriate for their disciplines.

Diverse Learners

There is an important paradox inherent in the CCSS: The Common Core establishes a one-size fits all common set of college and career readiness learning goals for all students—no matter who they are, where they are, or what their circumstances may be. But, despite these common aspirations, we recognize that there will be great differences among children and in what it will take to get them to achieve these goals.

In the past, in an effort to adjust teaching to students' needs, educators have, at times, lost sight of the goals (for example, placing students in simple texts because of their difficulty handling complex texts, but without steadily increasing the complexity levels so that the students would eventually reach the goals). The CCSS are extremely clear about expected text complexity at each grade level, but there is little public acknowledgement about the need to vary inputs to ensure success for all.

These new standards are more honest about what we need to teach if students are to leave school ready to work and to learn. We need to be just as forthright about the resources and adjustments that will be needed to ensure that all children—struggling learners, gifted students, dual language learners—reach these goals.

The U.S. Department of Education has recognized the importance of varied instruction to reach the Standards by providing financial support to Understanding Language (<http://ell.stanford.edu/>), which is creating resources to help English Learners to reach these new goals. Much more of this kind of information and support will be needed for a wider range of diverse learners.

Summary of Recommendations for Diverse Learners:

- The CCSS require equal outcomes for all students, but they do not require equal inputs. Vary the amounts and types of instruction provided to students to ensure high rates of success.
- Monitor student learning and provide adjustments and supplements based on that information.

Conclusions

The Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts are a major shift in the focus of K–12 education in the United States. These standards are not just more rigorous versions of past standards, nor were they simply shifted across the grade levels. Instead, these standards represent qualitatively different outcomes and their accomplishment will require significant shifts in educational practice involving teachers across the curriculum. Changes this significant are not likely to occur successfully without equally significant investments in the knowledge and skills of educators along with necessary material supports (e.g., texts, technology). There are many things that teachers must do to try to help students reach the expectations detailed in the CCSS—this guidance is provided to help with such implementation. States and schools will need to support such efforts with appropriate and timely professional development for teachers.

This document is not meant to be a research paper and as such it does not include references throughout. However, when the document refers to research findings it generally relies upon publicly available studies and reports such as those analyzed by the What Works Clearinghouse. Thus, we have relied on the highest quality of evidence that has been publicly adjudicated and synthesized.

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