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Content Standards and Instructional Practices

Kindergarten Through Grade Three

Although all the skills within strands are important, no greater responsibility exists for educators of students in kindergarten through grade three than to ensure that each student in their care leaves the third grade able to read fluently, effortlessly, independently, and enthusiastically.

The period spanning kindergarten through grade three is the most critical for instruction in the language arts. During that time students acquire the foundational skills needed for later academic, social, and economic success. By the end of the third grade, students should be able to (1) read complex word forms accurately and fluently in connected texts and decode multisyllabic words independently; (2) read grade-level narrative and expository texts and recall sequence, main ideas, and supporting details; and (3) write compositions that describe familiar events

and experiences and construct complete, correct sentences to communicate their ideas. In addition, they should be able not only to respond to questions but also to make well-organized oral presentations centered on major points of information. As a result of their new skills, they are beginning to enjoy the richness of ideas expressed in books. Achievement of those skills by the end of the third grade is the goal for all students. Students achieve those skills by building on a progression of carefully specified and strategically sequenced content standards and instruction that begins in kindergarten.

Proficiency is based on critical building blocks in each grade. Some of the building blocks (e.g., vocabulary development, analysis of narrative text) span kindergarten through grade three, and others (e.g., phonemic awareness, concepts about print) are mastered in specific grades. The building blocks and their importance to overall language arts success in kindergarten through grade three are profiled in this chapter. An overview is followed by grade-specific summaries and instructional analyses for kindergarten through grade three.

Reading Word Analysis, Fluency, and Systematic Vocabulary Development

The standards for word analysis, fluency, and systematic vocabulary development are a key part of development in kindergarten through grade three. Although readers access words in many ways (whole words, decoding, word parts, and context), research has found that decoding, or the ability to apply knowledge of letter-sound correspondences to identify words, is fundamental to independent word recognition. Good readers rely

primarily on the letters in a word rather than context or pictures to identify familiar and unfamiliar words (Ehri 1994). The fluency good readers have with word recognition makes us think they read whole words at a time. In fact, fluent readers process virtually every letter in a word (Adams 1990). The speed and facility with which they recognize words differentiate good readers from less successful readers.

Automaticity is the ability to recognize a word (or series of words in text) effortlessly and rapidly. The foundations of automatic word recognition begin in kindergarten through developing phonemic awareness and learning the sounds associated with letters as well as concepts about print. Phonemic awareness, the ability to hear and manipulate the sounds of language, is a key indicator for students who learn to read easily versus children who continue to have difficulty. Instruction in phonemic awareness begins in kindergarten and concludes with more complex activities by the middle of the first grade. By the middle of kindergarten, students should be tested on phonemic awareness. Beginning in kindergarten and continuing into the first grade, children should be explicitly taught the process of blending individual sounds into words. For example, the printed word *man* is converted into its component letters (*m a n*), then into its corresponding sounds, each sound being held as readers progress to the next sound (*mmmmmaaaaannnn*). This explicit blending process is temporary yet critical as children advance in the word-recognition process.

In the late first grade and continuing through the second and third grades, students focus on two dimensions of word recognition—advanced word recognition skills and automaticity. In the first grade they progress from vowel-consonant and

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consonant-vowel-consonant word types to consonant blends, vowel digraphs, and *r*-controlled letter-sound associations. Inflected endings and word roots are added to extend word-recognition abilities. In the second grade decoding and word-recognition skills take on greater sophistication with the addition of multisyllabic words and more complex spelling patterns. In both the second grade and the third grade, more advanced decoding strategies focus on how to break up multisyllabic words and employ morphemic analysis (analyzing affixes and word roots). The second-grade and third-grade curriculum also focuses on orthographic knowledge; that is, recognizing larger, more complex chunks of letters (e.g., *ight*, *ierce*) to enhance fluency.

Proficient readers, writers, and speakers develop fluency with the fundamental skills and strategies. *Fluency is defined as the accuracy and rate with which students perform reading tasks.* In oral reading it includes additional dimensions that involve the quality of such reading (e.g., expression and intonation). To be considered fluent readers, students must perform a task or demonstrate a skill or strategy accurately, quickly, and effortlessly.

Fluency in kindergarten through grade three involves a wide range of skills and strategies (e.g., identifying letter names, producing sounds associated with letters, blending letter-sounds into words, reading connected text, spelling words, and writing sentences). Instruction in developing fluency must focus first on explicit opportunities for the student to learn the skill or strategy. Once a skill is learned, fluency develops as a result of multiple opportunities to practice the skill or strategy with a high rate of success. For early decoding in the first grade, students read stories in which there is a high percentage of words composed of taught

letter-sound correspondences and a few previously taught sight words.

An important feature of language arts instruction in kindergarten through grade three is vocabulary development, beginning in kindergarten with direct instruction in specific categories of words and progressing to understanding the relations of such words as synonyms and antonyms and the importance of structural features of words (affixes) to word meaning. Wide reading is essential to learning vocabulary and must be an integral component of instruction. At first the teacher should read literary and expository texts to students, exposing them to vocabulary they are not yet able to read. As students develop proficiency in word recognition, they are taught independent word-learning strategies, such as learning meanings from context and using dictionaries and glossaries as instructional resources.

The primary means by which students learn new words is through independent reading. The volume of that reading is crucial (Cunningham and Stanovich 1998). The authors acknowledge the strong relationship between decoding and vocabulary, noting that decoding skill mediates reading volume and thus vocabulary size. Therefore, one of the most effective strategic strikes educators can make in helping students develop vocabulary growth is to teach them to become fluent readers and encourage them to read extensively. In a study of independent reading, Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) found that the difference between children scoring at the ninetieth percentile in the amount of out-of-school independent reading and those scoring at the second percentile was approximately 21 minutes of independent reading per day. By the fourth grade students should read one-half million words of running text

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independently (see Chapter 4, page 114). Therefore, the process and benefits of independent reading must begin in the earlier grades.

Reading Reading Comprehension

An important building block in kindergarten through grade three is instruction in strategies related to reading comprehension, including how to predict what will happen in a text, how to compare information between sources, and how to answer essential questions. The foundation for this proficiency begins in kindergarten, when students receive explicit instruction and opportunities to answer simple questions about *who* and *what*. More abstract *why* and *what if* questions are mastered in the first and second grades. Although kindergarten nonreaders use the strategies orally in response to the teacher reading the text, more proficient readers also apply the strategies to the text they themselves read. Direct teaching and modeling of the strategies and readers' application of the strategies to the text they hear and read increase the ability of students to develop literal and inferential understanding, increase vocabulary, and make connections between parts of a text, between separate texts, and between text and personal experience.

Most students require explicit instruction in strategies related to reading comprehension, just as they do for decoding. Before the students listen to or read a story or informational passage, the teacher must bring to bear relevant student experiences and prior knowledge, develop knowledge of the topic, and teach critical, unfamiliar vocabulary. And the students should engage in predictions

about upcoming text that are based on titles and pictures. While the students are reading, the teacher should introduce questions strategically to focus attention on critical information and encourage the students to monitor comprehension by self-questioning and returning to the text to fill in gaps in comprehension. When the students have finished reading, they should engage in analysis and synthesis, retelling, summarizing, and acting on information, such as placing events in sequential order. *Recommended Readings in Literature, Kindergarten Through Grade Eight* (California Department of Education 1996a) lists high-quality, complex materials to be read by students.

Reading Literary Response and Analysis

In kindergarten through grade three, students develop their ability to analyze literature and distinguish between the structural features of narrative text (e.g., characters, theme, plot, setting) and the various forms of narrative (e.g., myths, legends, fables). They learn the commonalities in narrative text and develop a schema or map for stories. Again, the standards progress from kindergarten, where analysis focuses on the characters, settings, and important events, to more sophisticated story elements (e.g., plot in the first grade, comparison of elements in the second grade, and theme in the third grade). Although kindergartners and early first graders also develop the strategies orally in response to text that has been read aloud, older students increasingly develop comprehension strategies through text they read and in conjunction with direct teaching and modeling of strategies.

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Writing Writing Strategies and Applications

Students in kindergarten through grade three develop foundational writing strategies, applications, and conventions. They begin by forming uppercase and lowercase letters and using their knowledge of letters and sounds to write words. That knowledge of the alphabetic principle continues in the first grade as students write sentences. By the second grade writing extends to paragraphs, and by the third grade students write paragraphs with topic sentences. In penmanship students progress from legible printing in the first grade to the use of cursive or jointed italic in the third grade.

The systematic progression of instruction and application from kindergarten through grade three prepares students to write clear and coherent sentences and paragraphs that develop a central idea. Their writing shows clear purpose and awareness of audience as they refine their ability to use writing to describe and explain objects, events, and experiences (see page 93 in this chapter).

In the first grade another essential building block is introduced; that is, writing as a process. The act of writing is made up of a set of thinking and composing processes used selectively by a writer. Students learn that writing consists of several iterative phases (i.e., prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and postwriting) that vary depending on the purpose and audience for writing. Students are also taught, however, that they are not limited to using the various phases all the time or in any fixed order. Instruction continues in the second and third grades and beyond. Throughout those grades the dimensions of organization, grammar, sentence structure, spelling, basic punctuation and capitalization, and

handwriting are introduced and extended progressively.

With its emphasis on planning and revising for clarity, the writing process helps students understand that writing is not the same as speech written down. Direct instruction in more specific writing strategies also helps students understand how to go beyond writing down conversation. Of particular interest here are ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. The first five involve content (rather than spelling and mechanics) and directly address aspects of decontextualized communication that many students find challenging. They are discussed fully in Spandel (1998).

Written and Oral English-Language Conventions

In kindergarten through grade three, written and oral English-language conventions are integrated with the respective strands (writing applications, speaking applications) where they are most directly applied. Over the course of the four-year span, students learn to write and punctuate declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory sentences.

Spelling instruction and proficiency progress in the first grade from phonetic stages, during which children learn to represent all of the prominent phonemes in simple words, to more advanced phonetic, rule-governed, and predictable patterns of spelling in the second and third grades (Moats 1995). Kindergarten and first-grade students will progress from prephonetic to phonetic stages of spelling as they begin to write. The National Research Council (1998, 8) states that temporary spellings, specifically those used in the phonetic stage, can be “helpful for developing understanding of the identity and segmentation of speech sounds and

sound-spelling relationships. Conventionally correct spelling should be developed through focused instruction and practice. Primary children should be expected to spell previously studied words and spelling patterns correctly in their final writing products.” Fundamental skills in sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling become building blocks for more advanced applications.

Listening and Speaking

Listening and Speaking Strategies and Speaking Applications

In kindergarten through grade three, students develop listening and speaking strategies and speaking applications that parallel and reinforce instruction in the other language arts. For example, as students learn to identify the major elements in stories, they practice retelling stories and include characters, settings, and major events. When speaking, they need systematic opportunities to use the vocabulary introduced in reading and writing. Students are taught to listen and follow instructions that begin as one-step directions in kindergarten and progress to three and four steps in the second and third grades.

Making Connections for Students

Instructional materials must help students make connections between standards and between skills and strategies. For example, students must learn not only to hear and manipulate the sounds in words but also to practice skills and integrate them into beginning reading and spelling activities. However, if they

practice writing sentences with correct punctuation and capitalization but never apply those skills in larger contexts or for authentic purposes, instruction is fragmented and the skills without purpose. The goal in language arts instruction must, therefore, be to ensure that component parts (skills, strategies, structures) are identified; are carefully sequenced according to their complexity and use in more advanced writing applications; are developed to mastery; and are progressively and purposefully connected and then incorporated with authentic learning exercises, including those presented in the study of history–social science, mathematics, and science.

A transformation takes place in learners between kindergarten and the third grade. A typical kindergartner enters school with little formal knowledge of academic requirements and uses of language. Exiting third graders who have mastered the code are able to access, comprehend, compose, discuss, and enjoy a wide range of literature and informational text. Their transformation comes from the systematic and strategic design and delivery of instruction anchored to the English–language arts content standards. Students who acquire necessary skills and knowledge early have a high probability of continued academic success. But students who fail to learn the fundamental skills and knowledge of the alphabetic writing system by the third grade will find themselves in relentless pursuit of the standards and will need extra support to arrive at grade level. Critical to the task are well-trained classroom teachers and teaching specialists who plan and implement lessons and assessments based on standards and current research and who are tireless in their efforts to teach all children to read, write, speak, and listen well.

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Teaching Students to Read: A Special Priority

Although all the skills within strands are important, no greater responsibility exists for educators of students in kindergarten through grade three than to ensure that each student in their care leaves the third grade able to read fluently, effortlessly, independently, and enthusiastically. Each student must understand the relation of print to speech, the sound structure of language, and the alphabetic principle and be able to apply those abilities to grade-level text. Effective instruction in reading nurtures both comprehension and fluency in word recognition. Concentration on the skills that build word recognition are critically important in the early primary grades.

Learning to read is the most important skill that students develop during their early academic years. Moreover, converging evidence reveals that the kindergarten through grade three span is the optimal period of time for such learning. Students who fail to read fluently by the end of the third grade have only a minimal chance of achieving literacy competence without specific interventions (Juel 1988; Felton and Pepper 1995).

What is particularly intriguing and elusive about reading is that despite its complexity, skillful reading looks like an easy and natural thing to do. On the contrary, reading requires deliberate and systematic human intervention and context (Kame'enui 1996). The process of reading is learned. Although some students become skillful readers without systematic instruction, many others need intense, systematic instruction in reading to succeed—a need that has not been fully recognized or addressed. Scientific re-

search has made considerable progress in gaining an understanding of what the components of reading instruction should be and how many more students can be helped to learn to read successfully. Our knowledge is not yet absolute in some areas, and many important questions remain to be answered. Nevertheless, we know that learning to read in an alphabetic writing system requires that we attend tenaciously to the features of that writing system and make explicit and conspicuous the key features of the system. Otherwise, large numbers of students will be at risk of not learning to read well.

Becoming a fluent and skillful reader requires extensive engagement with the English language, including:

- Listening to words and to the sounds inside of words
- Hearing and talking about stories
- Gaining facility with the concepts of print
- Understanding the sounds that make up our language
- Manipulating the sounds and relating the specific sounds to printed letters and words
- Connecting words with events, actions, things, and ideas and expressing those ideas in writing
- Learning about the connection between sounds, letters, syllables, words, and concepts
- Gaining an understanding of the structure of stories and informational text and relating events to personal experiences

Reading as a process is more than it appears to be. Because it does not come naturally to many students, the parts, especially the important parts, must be taught strategically and intentionally as an absolute priority. To improve reading achievement, we must fully understand

and appreciate the complexity and primacy of early reading instruction. The dimensions of beginning reading are like the strands of a strong rope. Like such a rope, the strength of the reading process depends on the strength of the individual strands, the strategic integration of all the strands, and the effective binding or connecting of the strands (Chard, Simmons, and Kame'enui 1998). First, it is critical that the strands, including vocabulary acquisition, concepts about print, phonemic awareness, decoding and word recognition, knowledge of the structure of stories, and listening comprehension are robust, stable, and reliable. Next, the strength of the reading process depends on strategic integration of the strands to produce readers who can apply their skills in a variety of contexts and tasks.

An important principle in early reading instruction is that skills from all strands must be part of the students' reading programs from kindergarten on. Emphasis on particular skills will differ over time and from student to student. For example, word-recognition skills should be trans-

ferred and applied, first with decodable text where students can apply and practice the skills reliably and then with quality literature and informational texts as students demonstrate an ability to apply skills and strategies successfully.

A second essential principle is that new skills must be integrated across strands to reinforce and extend learning. For example, words learned in word-reading exercises can be used in writing, and vocabulary from a story can be incorporated with speaking. Systematically establishing connections between new skills and authentic applications and between skills in one strand and applications in another is essential to retention and generalization.

The following sections profile and summarize the content of the language arts program for each grade level in kindergarten through grade three. Each grade-level description includes a summary of the content, relevant instructional analyses, content connections across domains, and curricular and instructional profiles.