

The Updated Pre-K-3 English Language Arts (ELA) Framework: A Brief Summary of the Supporting Research

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Introduction: An Updated Framework for Elementary English Language Arts (ELA) Instruction

In summer 2020, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) revised its pre-K-3 English Language Arts (ELA) Framework to continue to make progress toward the goal of 100% of students reading on grade level by the time they turn eight years old.¹

The updated PreK-Grade 3 SDP ELA Framework emphasizes the explicit and systematic development of key foundational skills that lead to reading fluency, including concepts of print, alphabetic knowledge, phonological awareness, phonics, spelling, and high frequency words. The revisions to the framework also provide better alignment to two key shifts of the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards: (1) building extensive content knowledge via a variety of genres and types of media, especially when engaging with informational text; and (2) engaging regularly with rich, complex text at the appropriate grade level and their academic language.² Finally, the updated SDP framework places a renewed emphasis on one of the foundational elements of the Common Core: reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts.³

This brief provides a short summary of research that supports these shifts and the District's revised early literacy (PreK-Grade 3 ELA) framework.

¹ For a full draft of the updated ELA Framework, [visit the Office of Curriculum and Instruction's website](#).

² Academic Standards for English Language Arts, Grades Pre K-5. (March 1, 2014). Retrieved October 16, 2020, from <https://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/Teachers-Administrators/Curriculum/ELA/PA%20Core%20Standards%20ELA%20PreK-5.pdf>

³ Academic Standards for English Language Arts, Grades Pre K-5. (March 1, 2014). Retrieved October 16, 2020, from <https://www.education.pa.gov/Documents/Teachers-Administrators/Curriculum/ELA/PA%20Core%20Standards%20ELA%20PreK-5.pdf>

Why change the ELA framework?

Research supports a renewed focus on explicit instruction of foundational reading skills, such as phonics and phonemic awareness.

In alignment with this research, SDP's updated framework includes greater emphasis on explicit and systematic development of foundational skills.

Although there is some debate among researchers and practitioners about the most effective approach to improving early literacy,⁴ the introduction of the Common Core State Standards in 2010 highlighted the importance of building students' foundational literacy skills, especially phonics and phonemic awareness. This was consistent with the findings of the National Reading Panel's extensive review of research on reading in 2000 that concluded that **explicitly teaching students phonics and phonemic awareness was "highly effective across all literacy domains and outcomes."**⁵ Similarly, the What Works Clearinghouse, along with many early literacy researchers, recommend teaching young children to "develop awareness of the segments of sounds in speech and how they link to letters," which is the first step in helping students decode words.⁶ When students are able to read fluently – that is, to decode words with ease – they are able to comprehend the text's meaning.⁷

Despite the preponderance of research that supports phonics instruction, explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness has not been highlighted in some teacher preparation programs, or in published early reading programs.⁸ Instead, instructional strategies have focused on the theory of "three cuing," which instructs readers to use graphic, syntactic, and semantic clues to

⁴ Sparks, S. and Schwartz, S. (2019). How Do Kids Learn to Read? What the Science Says. Retrieved October 16, 2020, from <https://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/how-do-kids-learn-to-read.html>

⁵ National Reading Panel. (2000) Report of the National Reading Panel--Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; Hanford, E. (2020, September 28). Why aren't kids being taught to read? Retrieved October 16, 2020, from

<https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2018/09/10/hard-words-why-american-kids-arent-being-taught-to-read>;

Liben, D., and Paige, D. (2017). Why a Structured Phonics Program is Effective. Retrieved October 16, 2020, from <https://achievethecore.org/aligned/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Why-a-Structured-Phonics-Program-is-Effective.pdf>

⁶ WWC: Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade. (n.d.). Retrieved October 16, 2020, from <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PracticeGuide/21>; Hanford, E. (2020)

⁷ Liben, D., and Paige, D. (2017)

⁸ Liben, D., and Paige, D. (2017)

decipher text.⁹ However, students who rely on context to identify words have been shown to be poorer readers than those can decode or recognize words.¹⁰

Therefore, implementing a structured, research-supported phonics program is necessary to incorporate explicit phonics and phonemic awareness instruction into the curriculum. A structured, research-supported phonics program should directly teach “the spelling/sound patterns of English in a clear sequence (e.g., beginning with consonant sounds then moving to short vowel sounds, long vowel sounds, and consonant blends)” and should systematically introduce students to spelling/sound relations “separately, explicitly, and gradually.”¹¹ Short, daily practice is important: the National Reading Panel report found that programs that focused on phonemic awareness that lasted less than 20 hours total (and about 25 minutes per session, on average) had the greatest effect on reading skills.¹²

It’s also important to consider how explicit phonics instruction can be supported by text choice. Pairing a structured phonics program with predictable or “leveled” texts can be counterproductive because the leveled texts are not aligned with the spelling/sound patterns students have learned. In addition, a student may need more practice with a spelling or sound pattern that does not appear in leveled texts they are using.¹³

Research supports efforts to intentionally increase students’ vocabulary and background knowledge.

In alignment with this research, SDP’s updated framework includes greater emphasis on content-rich, language-rich instruction via topically focused units anchored in complex texts.

Teaching phonics skills and phonemic awareness aren’t sufficient on their own– students must also know what a word means.¹⁴ **So, in tandem with explicit and structured phonics instruction, teachers must build students’ vocabulary and background to enable students to comprehend what they are reading.**¹⁵ To truly know what a word means, students need a “full and flexible knowledge of a word involves an understanding of the core meaning of a word and how it changes

⁹ Hanford, E. (2020); Shwartz, S. and Sparks, S. (2019)

¹⁰ Hanford, E. (2020); Shwartz, S. and Sparks, S. (2019)

¹¹ Shwartz, S. and Sparks, S. (2019); Liben, D., and Paige, D. (2017).

¹² National Reading Panel (2000). Note: the authors of the NRP are quick to point out that these patterns are descriptive, not prescriptive. The studies they looked at weren’t specifically testing the effectiveness of different time lengths, and it may be that time wasn’t the relevant factor in these shorter programs performing better.

¹³ Liben, D., and Paige, D. (2017).

¹⁴ Hanford, E. (2020)

¹⁵ Hanford, E. (2020); Hirsch, Jr., E. D. (2003). Reading Comprehension Requires Knowledge – of Words and the World: Scientific Insights into the Fourth-Grade Slump and the Nation’s Stagnant Comprehension Scores. Retrieved October 16, 2020, from <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/Hirsch.pdf>.

in different contexts.” For example, students should consider a word’s “synonyms, antonyms, categories, and specific examples of the words under study.”¹⁶ While students often learn new words indirectly – for example, just by hearing or seeing new words – research supports direct and specific word instruction, which can help students learn words that “represent complex concepts that are not a part of students’ everyday experiences.”¹⁷

Students also need background or “domain knowledge,” which is “a threshold level of knowledge about the topic being discussed.”¹⁸ Domain knowledge helps students make the correct inferences to understand a text, and will enable them to make easier connections within the text and across texts.¹⁹ Numerous studies have also shown that having prior knowledge of the subject helps you remember new knowledge: “Simply put, it is easier to fix new material in your memory when you already have some knowledge of the topic.”²⁰ This highlights the importance of exposing children as early as possible to subjects such as science and social studies, which can provide students with necessary background knowledge “to understand both written texts and the world around them.”²¹

Focusing on building vocabulary and background knowledge may be especially important for students from communities whose access to educational opportunities has historically been restricted. One study showed that when students from lower-socioeconomic (SES) families and students from higher-SES families had the same background knowledge on a subject, their comprehension of the text was roughly the same. However, when only the higher-SES families had background knowledge on the subject, they outperformed the students from lower-SES families.²² Thus, “the earlier we start building children’s knowledge, the better our chances of narrowing the gap.”²³

Research supports increasing the amount of instructional time and focus devoted to supporting all students to access complex text.

¹⁶ Fisher, D., Frey, N., and Shanahan, T. (2012). The Challenge of Challenging Text. *Educational Leadership*, 69(6). 58-62. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar12/vol69/num06/The-Challenge-of-Challenging-Text.aspx>

¹⁷ Ambruster, B., Lehr, F., Osborn, J. Adler, C.R (2006). *Put Reading First: Kindergarten Through Grade 3: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read*. National Institute for Literacy. <https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/PRFbooklet.pdfv>

¹⁸ Hirsch, Jr., E. D. (2003)

¹⁹ Willingham, D. (2020). How Knowledge Helps. Retrieved October 16, 2020, from <https://www.aft.org/periodical/american-educator/spring-2006/how-knowledge-helps>

²⁰ Willingham, D. (2020)

²¹ Wexler, E. (2019). Elementary Education Has Gone Terribly Wrong. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved October 16, 2020, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/08/the-radical-case-for-teaching-kids-stuff/592765>

²² Wexler, E. (2019)

²³ Wexler, E. (2019)

In alignment with this research, SDP's updated framework seeks to ensure that all students can access complex texts by providing teachers with instructional strategies that offers guidance on the use of small group instruction.

As students learn solid phonics and decoding skills, build their vocabulary, and expand their context knowledge, the real work of reading comprehension can begin. **Common Core standards require students to frequently engage with rich, complex texts, which both requires that students have - and supports their acquisition of - foundational reading skills, vocabulary, and background knowledge.**²⁴ However, to incorporate and fully utilize complex texts, teachers need to understand what makes texts complex and how make complex texts accessible to students at all levels and stages of reading.²⁵ There are many elements of a text that affect its complexity, including sentence structure, coherence, and organization – but also the vocabulary and background knowledge required for students to make sense of the text.²⁶ It is especially important to consider these elements when exposing students to nonfiction text, which often requires more background knowledge for comprehension than fiction text.²⁷ It is also important to consider ways of grouping students that will provide struggling readers with the support they need to access complex text – for example, “providing social contexts where students discuss text with each other,” which can aid in comprehension.²⁸

The Common Core requires students to demonstrate their knowledge of texts of all kinds by responding to text-dependent questions and citing texts as evidence when they answer questions.

Grounding thought and reason in specific evidence presented in the text is a hallmark of a good reader as it requires both comprehension and critical thinking skills. The shifts in the framework, as noted above, seek to develop readers who can be successful at this task.

The focus on text evidence in the Common Core requires that “teachers must ask students, regardless of grade level, text dependent questions so that students not only comprehend the texts but also acquire more knowledge.”²⁹ In this way, it reinforces the Framework’s focus on building foundational skills, vocabulary, and background knowledge. It also pushes students to demonstrate their comprehension of a text, because “in each phase of instruction [students are] expected to cite

²⁴ Liben, M., and Pimental, S. (2018). Placing Text at the Center of the Standards-Aligned ELA Classroom. Retrieved October 16, 2020, from <https://achievethecore.org/content/upload/Text-at-the-Center-Report-V5.pdf>

²⁵ Fisher, D., Frey, N., and Shanahan, T. (2012)

²⁶ Fisher, D., Frey, N., and Shanahan, T. (2012)

²⁷ Fisher, D., Frey, N., and Shanahan, T. (2012)

²⁸ Reynolds, D. and Goodwin, A. (2016). Supporting Students Reading Complex Texts: Evidence for Motivational Scaffolding. *AERA* 2(4). Retrieved October 16, 2020, from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2332858416680353>

²⁹ Fettrow, D. (2013). The Importance of Evidence in the Common Core. Retrieved October 16, 2020, from https://assets.pearsonschool.com/asset_mgr/current/201326/CommonCoreFettrow_med.pdf

their proof—to identify where in the text the evidence that supports their ideas is stated or implied.”³⁰ Doing so prepares younger students for the rigors of high school and post-secondary school, where they will be asked to “read multiple texts in a set, comprehend each completely, and then synthesize ideas across texts.”³¹

Conclusions

The research clearly shows that early literacy instruction is effective when multiple elements are included. Teachers must focus on phonics and phonemic awareness, building students’ vocabulary and background knowledge, and exposing students to a variety of increasingly complex texts. Additionally, the Common Core requires student to demonstrate comprehension and critical thinking skills by grounding their thought in evidence. To develop this skill, which is the hallmark of strong readers and writers, students must first develop the foundational skills and background knowledge that they need to understand what they are reading. In alignment with the research, the shifts in SDP’s updated preK-3 ELA framework highlight the development of these skills, while ensuring that all students can access complex texts and that teachers have the resources and strategies to help students do so.

³⁰ Fettrow, D. (2013)

³¹ Fettrow, D. (2013)