It’s Not Just Baby Talk

The Albert Shanker Institute, in cooperation with the AFT and other organizations and experts, has developed a range of materials designed to help parents and early childhood educators build the knowledge and vocabulary in young children necessary for their success.

Go to www.shankerinstitute.org/early-childhood-education to find:


- Literacy Ladders, a virtual volume of American Educator articles on oral language development and early literacy, with a new overview by Marilyn Jager Adams.

- Preschool Curriculum: What’s In It for Children and Teachers, an accessible research synthesis of how and how much young children learn in the academic domains.

- “Words Reflect Knowledge,” a three-minute animation about the “30 million word gap” between rich and poor children and how to prevent it.
THE TRUE MARVEL of young children is their boundless curiosity, unyielding energy, and unending ability to absorb new concepts.

High-quality early childhood education nurtures all these wonderful traits and helps build a foundation for children’s long-term success in school and in life. Efforts to expand access to affordable, high-quality early childhood programs are gaining momentum. Legislation such as the Strong Start for America’s Children Act, introduced last year in the U.S. Senate, would provide funding to expand early childhood education opportunities, develop quality partnerships, increase wages for early childhood educators, and support professional development.

As we continue these efforts, we also must ensure that the climate of hyper-testing currently in vogue in the K–12 world isn’t wrongly transferred to our early learners.

Unfortunately, the mentality of testing over teaching and learning is beginning to seep into early childhood education. Children who should be exuding excitement are increasingly sitting still for long periods of time, tasked with filling in bubbles to answer often-confusing questions.

The impact of our national intoxication with testing has been well documented in the K–12 years. The United States is the only country that administers standardized tests to every child every year, which results in a fixation on testing that squeezes out vital parts of the curriculum and robs students of much-needed learning time.

Standardized testing is at cross-purposes with many of the most important goals of public education. It doesn’t measure big-picture learning, critical thinking, perseverance, problem solving, creativity, or curiosity, yet those are the qualities that great teaching brings out in a student.

And that starts in the early childhood years. Research—and just plain common sense—tells us that young children learn actively, through hands-on experiences. This process is not always linear or quantifiable—expecting young children to know specific facts or skills at specific ages simply does not make sense.

Yet in states across the country, officials are developing Common Core State Standards for pre-K, without ensuring that these standards are appropriate for young children. At the same time, some states also are asking early childhood educators to begin to prepare their students for K–3 Common Core assessments—pushing developmentally inappropriate practices into those crucial early learning years.

Years of research show that the best way to assess the progress of our early learners is through the expertise of teachers who know how to observe and interpret young children’s activities and behavior. Teachers like Irma Voss, a preschool teacher in Chicago.

“They need something that’s hands-on, something that’s tangible that the child can touch and see, as opposed to something that’s written down,” Voss says. “These big-time companies, they push their stuff, but every child doesn’t do well with that.”

The AFT has launched a multipronged attack on testing that aims to ensure that early childhood educators like Irma are able to keep doing what they do best—help our early learners discover the joy of learning by engaging them in developmentally appropriate ways, while assessing the whole child, instead of turning them into a data point from the beginning.

The AFT is taking on big testing companies such as Pearson Education, which recently agreed to discuss the gag orders and lack of transparency around standardized tests that are fueling a growing distrust and backlash among parents, students, and educators about whether current testing protocols are in the best interests of children.

We are fighting back against VAM, or value-added measurements. These measurements, which are generated by unreliable algorithms, are being used to evaluate teachers, despite being developed initially for other purposes—and over the objections of leading researchers.

Randi Weingarten visits with pre-K students at W. B. Patterson Elementary School in Washington, DC.

We are working to change accountability systems so that they focus on improving and supporting rather than testing and punishing. Together with parents, teachers, students, and communities, we are fighting to turn our public education system around to restore the focus to teaching and learning, not testing above all else.

Our youngest learners possess an innate curiosity and joy for learning that we need to nurture—not squelch. That is why our fight is so important. Let’s give our children the early education they need and deserve by ensuring that they are engaged in developmentally appropriate programs that foster their social and emotional development—and by ensuring that early childhood educators are supported in their efforts to meet the individual needs of every child. In this issue of American Educator, we highlight approaches to early childhood education that can help our youngest learners shine.
4 The Magic of Words

Teaching Vocabulary in the Early Childhood Classroom

By Susan B. Neuman and Tanya S. Wright

From the beginning of schooling, children from various socioeconomic groups differ greatly in their vocabulary knowledge; those from high-income families tend to know many more words than those from low-income ones. Research shows that certain practices for teaching vocabulary—an important building block for learning—such as making connections among words and repeatedly exposing students to content-related words, can accelerate young children’s oral vocabulary development, regardless of family income.

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The Importance of Early Learning

By Chrys Dougherty

Our nation is far from ensuring that all students, especially economically disadvantaged ones, graduate from high school ready for college and other postsecondary education. Because learning gaps appear early, it’s important to strengthen early childhood education by building a rigorous curriculum across subjects to develop students’ knowledge and vocabulary.

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A Brief History of the Elementary Curriculum

By Ruth Wattenberg

A rich curriculum is the necessary precondition for improving schools—and it’s essential that students receive it early. Core Knowledge Language Arts is one child-friendly, content-rich program for preschool through third grade that can help teachers begin to build the broad academic knowledge and vocabulary that all children need.

28 Ask the Cognitive Scientist

Math Anxiety: Can Teachers Help Students Reduce It?

By Sian L. Beilock and Daniel T. Willingham

Although math makes some students anxious, research shows that teachers can rely on a few techniques to assist those whose nervousness impedes understanding.

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The Challenge of Helping Students “Get It Down on Paper”

By Andy Waddell

An English teacher reflects on various aspects of student writing, such as correcting common mistakes and supporting students in facing the blank page.
In recent years, a growing consensus has emerged about the importance of early childhood education. Educators, policymakers, and researchers recognize that because students come to school with large differences in their prior learning, early childhood classrooms can help level the playing field. They understand that early learning can help those children who lag far behind their peers catch up on what they need to succeed in school.

But it’s not just a matter of children entering the classroom early. Simply having 3- or 4-year-olds attend school does not guarantee they will be prepared to achieve in later grades. What many in education tend to overlook is the role that curriculum, in the hands of a talented and caring educator, plays in a child reaching his or her full potential.

This special collection of articles in American Educator highlights the importance not only of early learning, but also of what, exactly, young children learn. It begins with an article explaining the research on children’s oral vocabulary development and how educators can effectively support students in learning new words. Acquiring and understanding a significant amount of vocabulary in the early years helps children build the necessary background knowledge that will lay the foundation for future learning.

It goes without saying that such a foundation must be rock solid. Each article makes clear that curriculum in early childhood classrooms must be content-rich, meaning that students should be exposed to the full range of academic subjects and disciplines: English language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science, as well as music and the arts.

For too long, several myths have persisted in the field of early childhood education, including that young children are not ready to learn sophisticated content, and that they find it boring. Yet these long-held beliefs simply don’t hold up against years of evidence, some of which is presented in the following pages.

Besides noting the elements that make an early childhood curriculum challenging yet still child-friendly, this issue also highlights a strong example of one such curriculum: Core Knowledge Language Arts. This program for preschool through third grade offers a phonics-based approach to teaching reading and writing skills, and features engaging and informative materials for teachers to share with their students on topics such as the five senses, Native Americans, astronomy, early Asian civilizations, and insects, among other complex subjects that young children are eager to explore and are fully capable of learning.

The AFT has long been at the forefront of advocating for early childhood education and for greater access to rich learning opportunities for young learners.

The AFT has long been at the forefront of advocating for early childhood education and for greater access to rich learning opportunities for young learners.
It seems almost intuitive that developing a large and rich vocabulary is central to learning to read. Logically, children must know the words that make up written texts in order to understand them, especially as the vocabulary demands of content-related materials increase in the upper grades. Numerous studies have documented that the size of a person’s vocabulary is strongly related to how well that person understands what he or she reads, not only in the primary grades, but in high school as well.1

Yet here’s the practical problem. Right from the beginning of schooling, there are profound differences in vocabulary knowledge among young learners from different socioeconomic groups. Just consider the following statistics: by age 4, a child’s interaction with his or her family has already produced significant vocabulary differences across socioeconomic lines, differences so dramatic that they represent a 30 million word “catastrophe” (i.e., children from high-income families experience, on average, 30 million more words than children from low-income families).2 Recent analyses indicate that environmental factors associated with vocabulary development and emergent literacy skills are already present among children as early as 15 months of age.2 By first grade, unfortunately, the repercussions become all too clear: children from high-income families are likely to know about twice as many words as children from low-income families, putting these children at a significantly higher risk for school failure.3 Even more disturbing, however, is that these statistics are often treated as inevitable, more or less a byproduct of poverty or low-income status. This would mean that these children could be designated as reading failures before they ever enter through the schoolhouse doors.

Luckily, there is now a rich and accumulated new knowledge base that suggests a far different scenario. Consider these points:

• The highest rate of vocabulary development occurs during the preschool years; therefore, it represents a crucial time when we can intervene.4
• Effective vocabulary intervention can ameliorate reading difficulties later on. Children with resolved vocabulary delays can go on to achieve grade-level expectations in fourth grade and beyond.5
• The quantity, quality, and responsiveness of teacher and parent talk can effectively mediate socioeconomic status, thereby

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ensuring children’s growth in receptive and expressive vocabulary.\(^6\)

- Gains in oral vocabulary development can predict growth in comprehension and later reading performance.\(^7\)

This means that, in contrast to dire prognostications, there is much we can do to enable children to read and read well. Although we certainly have more to learn, the good news is that we now have an accumulated body of evidence on the characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction. And it turns out that this news couldn’t come at a better time.

**Oral Vocabulary Development and the Common Core State Standards**

You might say that we are entering into a new age of educational reform: the age of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). In the distant past, education was a local issue; districts acted on their own to adopt instructional guidelines and curriculum. In recent years, however, education has increasingly become more of a state and even a federal concern. The No Child Left Behind Act, the Bush administration’s reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, increased the role of states in enacting standards, assessments, and accountability. In 2010, state governments took their turn, becoming more proactive in educational reform. The Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association, working with the organization Achieve, set out to develop world-class standards that would essentially create a shared vision of what all students should know and be able to do in all grades, kindergarten through high school.

The reason that this is relevant for those in early education on up is that 46 states and the District of Columbia have adopted these Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics. The standards don’t define how teachers should teach, but they do tell them what students need to know and be able to do. Further, starting in 2014–2015, state tests will be geared toward measuring whether or not students are achieving these standards. In essence, education is moving toward a more unitary system with a shared vision of expectations for student learning.

These CCSS represent a sea change in how we think about early literacy and reading, in particular, even before children enter kindergarten and throughout the early grades.\(^1\) Here, in a nutshell, are some of the design features:

- **A cumulative model of expectations:** It used to be called “spiraling,” but the principle is the same. From grade to grade, similar standards will increase in complexity. For example, in kindergarten, children will be expected to “ask and answer questions about key details in a text, with prompting and support.” Grade 1 has the same exact standard, although the children will now be required to do it on their own.

- **Informational texts:** Right from the start, the standards place greater emphasis on listening to and eventually reading informational books. In this respect, the standards focus on the integration of knowledge and ideas through text. Further, there is the expectation that children will be able to cross traditional genre boundaries and compare and contrast text features; for example, children might listen to an informational book about insects one day and a story about insects the next day, and then be asked about the connections between the two. Children will be expected to learn about key subject areas, particularly science and history, through texts.

- **Challenging materials:** There is greater emphasis on stretching students to meet the demands of reading harder text than before. In the past, we used to try to meet children’s needs by selecting reading materials according to their instructional level; in some cases, when they have difficulty comprehending text, we’ll even choose an easier text and have them gradually build up speed for more challenging materials. The CCSS use a very different model: children are required to read grade-level text. A teacher’s job will be to help them learn through these more challenging texts without telling them what the texts say. For example, a teacher might focus on the organizational features of the text, the headings and subheadings, or the use of the glossary to unlock the meaning of words in context.

For more on how the Common Core State Standards will transform English language arts instruction, see “Letting the Text Take Center Stage” in the Fall 2013 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/fall2013/Shanahan.pdf.

By first grade, children from high-income families are likely to know about twice as many words as children from low-income families.
• **An integrated model of literacy**: Although the standards are divided into reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language, there is an expectation that all of these skills work together. Even kindergartners are expected to engage in rich conversations that place a greater emphasis on their abilities to build arguments from evidence in the text, whether it is read to them or they read it themselves.

• **An integrated media environment**: There is a greater recognition that today’s “texts” don’t come through only one medium—print. As all of us know, a high volume of information comes through print and nonprint media forms, both old and new. The CCSS encourage teachers to make use of multimedia, as it’s embedded into every aspect of today’s curriculum. Children will need to be able to gather, comprehend, evaluate, and synthesize information and ideas through different forms of media.

Without vocabulary knowledge, words are just words—without much meaning.

In short, these standards focus on results rather than on means. They establish clear goals and expectations that are designed to help children succeed in a world in which the development of information capital is increasingly important. And whether they are ultimately successful in achieving these lofty goals depends on teachers and how well they are supported in implementing these new standards in the classroom.*

So how do the CCSS relate to oral vocabulary development? And, for those who work with preschoolers or even younger children, how do K-12 standards affect what they teach? Here’s why teachers need to be informed about these standards: it is impossible for children to read, and to understand what they read, without a strong foundation in oral vocabulary development. Without vocabulary knowledge, words are just words—without much meaning. If we are to help children take on seriously challenging texts, then we need to give them word and world knowledge to bring to these texts. Given that most oral vocabulary development grows from a massive immersion in the world of language, there is not a moment to waste.

The purpose of this article is to explain our rationale for content-rich oral vocabulary instruction in the age of the CCSS, and how to effectively build children’s vocabulary. But first, we dispel some of the common myths about oral vocabulary development, which have often led to a lack of attention for this important topic in school instruction. We then move to a set of instructional principles that should guide teachers’ work.

### Common Myths

Like many myths, these notions may contain some partial truths, almost like folk wisdom. For example, some authorities once claimed that learning was based on the “neural ripening” of the brain; applied to reading, this reflected a philosophy of “wait and see” until the child appeared “ready” for instruction. Research and writings in the 1950s and 1960s by cognitive psychologists provided powerful evidence that early childhood was crucial in the cognitive development of an individual.* This conclusion led to designing new opportunities to engage children in early learning.

Similarly, a number of myths have been perpetuated about oral vocabulary development, and in many ways they have stymied efforts to promote quality teaching early on. Recent evidence has called into question these notions, and it suggests that we not only can improve children’s vocabulary—we can accelerate it with instruction. These new findings have powerful implications for further reading development and content learning.

### Myth 1: Children Are Word Sponges

Children seem to pick up words prodigiously and quite effortlessly. It looks natural. In one classic study, for example, researchers taught preschoolers a new color word simply by requesting, “You see those trays over there? Bring me the chromium tray. Not the red one, the chromium one.” When their memory for the new word was assessed one week later, the majority of children (63 percent) were able to correctly identify which color was chromium. Since this experiment, the term *fast mapping*—the notion that words can be learned based on a single exposure—has become common parlance to explain the extraordinary rate at which children seem to pick up words early on.

Today, however, there is ample evidence to suggest that children do not learn words through fast mapping. Rather, they learn words by predicting relationships between objects and sounds, which become more accurate over time. Word learning is incremental. Evidence for this comes from children’s struggles to understand color words. Although infants can distinguish between basic color categories, it is not until about age 4 that they can accurately apply these individual color terms. Typically, words such as *red* or *yellow* may appear in their vocabulary; however, their application of these words to their referents may be haphazard and interchangeable.

*For more on why teachers need proper training and support to implement the Common Core State Standards, and why these standards should be delinked from high-stakes testing, see “Common Core: Do What It Takes Before High Stakes,” by Randi Weingarten, available at www.huffingtonpost.com/randi-weingarten/common-core-do-what-it-ta_b_3300790.html.
Children, then, may have knowledge of these words, but this knowledge will be far from complete. Rather, word learning in most cases requires many exposures over an extended period of time.\textsuperscript{13} With each additional exposure, the word may become incrementally closer to being fully learned.

**Myth 2: There Is a Vocabulary Explosion**

It is often said that word learning starts rather slowly, then at about 16 months or when a child learns about 50 words, all of a sudden things begin to happen.\textsuperscript{14} Word learning begins in earnest. Variously called the “vocabulary explosion” or “word spurt,” it reflects the apparent dramatic ability of young children to acquire new words—on the scale of learning 10 or more new objects and names within a two- or three-week period. This notion of a vocabulary explosion may suggest that the optimal time for oral vocabulary development is in these toddler years.

Recent evidence, however, suggests that the “spurt” in word learning does not correspond to any change in the rate of word learning, but to a change in the rate of children’s integrating new vocabulary.\textsuperscript{15} In other words, it suggests that the vocabulary explosion is a byproduct of the variation in the time it takes to learn to actually use words. Although children are accumulating words at a constant rate, the written and verbal use of the words accelerates. We see, for example, a similar pattern with receptive and expressive language, with children demonstrating far greater capacity to understand meaning before they are able to effectively express ideas in words.

The course of word learning, therefore, has little to do with vocabulary explosions, bursts, or spurts. To the contrary, word learning is cumulative.\textsuperscript{16} The high-performing student who knows many thousands of words has learned them not by having received a jolt of oral language early on, but by accruing bits of word knowledge for each of the thousands of words encountered every day. By the end of high school, one estimate is that college-ready students will need to acquire about 80,000 words.\textsuperscript{17} This means that we should immerse students for extended periods in oral and written vocabulary experiences throughout their instructional years.

**Myth 3: Storybook Reading Is Sufficient for Oral Vocabulary Development**

Reading books aloud to children is a powerful and motivating source for vocabulary development.\textsuperscript{18} We now have a large corpus of research showing that children learn words through listening to and interacting with storybooks. Nevertheless, recent studies have begun to question whether incidental instruction through book reading may be substantial enough to significantly boost children’s oral vocabulary development.\textsuperscript{19} Several meta-analyses, for example, have reported only small to moderate effects of book reading on vocabulary development.\textsuperscript{20} One group of researchers examined the added benefits of dialogic reading, an interactive reading strategy, on children’s vocabulary growth and reported only modest gains for 2- to 3-year-olds.\textsuperscript{21} Further, these effects were reduced to negligible levels when children were 4 to 5 years old or when they were at risk for language and literacy impairments.

This means that exposure to words through storybooks is not likely to be potent enough to narrow the substantial gap for children who may be at risk for reading difficulties. Rather, to improve children’s oral vocabulary development, teachers will need to augment the read-aloud experience with more intentional strategies that require children to process words at deeper levels of understanding.

**Myth 4: We Do It All the Time**

Most teachers try to consciously engage children in active experiences that involve lots of conversation throughout the day. In the course of a science activity, for example, a teacher may explain a word to help children understand the context. She might pause during the lesson and say, “That’s the predator. That means he wants to eat the frog” providing a brief explanation that fits the context of the story. Or during a classroom discussion, a teacher might use the word celebrate when describing a birthday activity and then explain, “Celebrate means to do something fun.” These events represent important teachable moments—informal opportunities to engage in word learning, somewhat parallel to the types of language exchanges between parents and their children.

However, over the course of the 20,000 hours parents and children spend together in the home before entering school, vocabulary words are likely to be repeated frequently. The problem is, teachers do not have that luxury. In our study of 55 kindergarten classrooms, for example, we found that although teachers provided more than eight of these word explanations per day, they were rarely, if ever, repeated more than once.\textsuperscript{22} Further, words selected for teachable moments were different...
Children given child-friendly definitions of words or other attributes of words to be learned are more likely to remember them.

**Myth 5: Just Follow the Vocabulary Scope and Sequence in a Core Reading Program**

Several years ago, researchers examined the prevalence of oral vocabulary instruction in core reading programs at the pre-K level. We found a dearth of instructional guidance for teachers, despite the pre-K level. Since then, we have turned our attention to kindergarten and first-grade materials, focusing on the four most commonly used core curricula, to examine the breadth and depth of oral vocabulary instruction—the pedagogical features of instruction and how these features might align with research-based evidence on vocabulary development.

Despite greater attention to words in elementary curricula, our results indicated tremendous disparity across curricula. For example, one curriculum listed an average of 20 target vocabulary words per week to be taught, whereas another listed, on average, only two. Further, the criteria used to select words to teach remained a mystery. In one curriculum, words were selected based on the weekly stories. In other curricula, we could find no organizing principle for the selection of words at all. Finally, using three different criteria, we found that many of the vocabulary words selected for instruction were far too easy to warrant school-based instruction.

This means that until such materials are developed, teachers are going to have to rely on a set of research-based principles to ensure that all students receive the quality of oral vocabulary instruction they need. In the age of the CCSS, students will need a specialized language—some describe it as academic language—to convey their ideas, which will facilitate the development of more complex concepts in multiple disciplines. And our efforts to enhance the ability of all children to communicate in academic language and academic thinking through oral vocabulary development must begin early.

**Principles of Effective Oral Vocabulary Instruction**

Although there is certainly more to learn, we now have a growing research consensus about the characteristics of effective vocabulary instruction. Using evidence from our two recent meta-analyses synthesizing research from 75 vocabulary studies, as well as our own studies examining some of the mechanisms for word learning, five principles emerge to enhance oral vocabulary development, as described below.

**Principle 1: Children Need Both Explicit and Implicit Instruction**

Children benefit from explicit instruction. That is, children who are given child-friendly definitions of words or other attributes of the words to be learned are more likely to remember them. Prior to the beginning of a story, for example, a teacher might begin by introducing several words that are integral to the story. The teacher might encourage children to listen for each of the “magic words” during the story reading and to raise their hands whenever they hear one. Then the teacher might say to students, “Oh, good. Some of you raised your hands! What word did you hear? Yes, the word peculiar. When Anansi said the word seven, a peculiar thing happened. Peculiar means strange or different.”

Our syntheses of research reported that vocabulary gains were significantly higher when words were identified explicitly rather than implicitly (e.g., learning words by listening to a story). However, here’s something to keep in mind: the largest gains were made when teachers provided both explicit and implicit instruction. One study, for example, found that engaging children in acting out words after explicitly defining them enhanced word learning as measured by standardized assessments later on. In other words, when teachers made children aware of the meaning of the words and then engaged them in using those words in a meaningful context, children achieved greater gains than from explicit instruction alone.

**Principle 2: Be Intentional in Word Selection**

Given that there are only so many words we can teach—for example, one estimate is a total of about 400 words in a year—we must carefully select the words that we plan to teach. Some have argued that words for vocabulary instruction should be selected from high-utility sophisticated words (known as Tier 2 words) that are characteristic of written language. For example, instead of using the words keep going, you can use a Tier 2 word such as...
maintain; instead of the word lucky, you might use the word fortunate. These words are domain general and are likely to relate to more refined labels for concepts that may enhance children’s verbal functioning. Studies of “Text Talk,” a strategy used to engage children in rich language instruction, have shown impressive results with kindergarten and first-grade children, demonstrating vocabulary gains about twice as large as those resulting from read-aloud studies. Given this research-based evidence, the CCSS have adopted this heuristic for selecting words to teach.

However, our research suggests that it’s also important to consider content-related words very early on. These are words that will be critical for developing knowledge in key subject areas. For example, vocabulary related to living things, such as habitat, organism, and protection, can help children talk about and learn about key science-related concepts; moreover, science vocabulary words such as compare, contrast, observe, and predict are fundamental inquiry words used not only in science but in all subject areas. In our research, we found that Head Start preschoolers are highly capable of learning and retaining these and similar words over time. Introducing students to content-related vocabulary, therefore, helps them to build word knowledge and concepts essential for developing knowledge systematically from texts.

**Principle 3: Build Word Meaning through Knowledge Networks**

It’s fair to say that words represent the tip of the iceberg; underlying them is a set of emerging interconnections and concepts that these words represent. It is the rich network of concepts and facts accompanying these words that drives children’s comprehension. Thus, helping children to learn about words in clusters that represent knowledge networks has been shown to strongly support children’s inferential reasoning and comprehension. For example, if you know the word oar, you probably also know something about rowboats and paddling. Teaching words in categories, such as “healthy foods” (e.g., fruit, vegetable, protein), also aids in the retention of these words.

Recent evidence for the support of teaching words in knowledge networks comes from two large-scale studies of vocabulary interventions for low-income preschoolers. One study, for example, used a number of useful strategies to help children share semantic similarities between words. Strategies such as encouraging children to look at two picture cards with words on them and make inferences about how these words work together helped them make comparisons of concepts. In our World of Words curriculum, we teach words related to a semantic category. For example, children learn words associated with “parts of the body,” such as abdomen, lungs, heart, and brain, while focusing on the common features of the category (e.g., “parts of the body” means these are attached to the body). We then engage children in playful activities called “time for a challenge” and ask them questions such as, “Are eyeglasses part of the body?” or “Is hair part of the body?” (Some children argue that hair is not part of the body because their daddies are bald!)

We found that clustering words within categories facilitated children’s comprehension and provided promising evidence of accelerating word learning. For example, we showed a picture of a word not taught—in this case, ankle—and asked, “Is an ankle a part of the body?” Children who received instruction reported, “Yes, because it helps you walk,” whereas a comparison child not receiving instruction just said, “Yes, ‘cause.” Similarly, children who received our vocabulary curriculum were able to apply their categorical information to new words, suggesting that they were using the semantic information about categories to make inferences and generalizations. Finally, helping children understand how words build knowledge networks facilitates our ability to make teaching them more meaningful. This represents a far cry from our analysis of vocabulary in core curricula in which a teacher might be guided to teach the words platypus and around on the same day. Rather, children learn best when words are presented in integrated contexts that make sense to them. A set of words connected to a category such as “energy” can help children remember not only the words themselves but the linkages in meaning between them.

**Principle 4: Children Need Repeated Exposure to Gain Vocabulary**

Children are most likely to learn the words they hear the most. Findings from a large number of correlational studies on language have shown that frequency of exposure strongly predicts word learning and seems to have long-range consequences for later language and reading levels. Although this finding is often mentioned in the literature, what is new is that we may have underestimated the frequency required to learn words. For example, in attempting to better understand how many repetitions might be needed to learn a novel word, researchers studied 60 4-year-olds during a word-learning task. First, the researchers identified a pseudo-word (e.g., toma) for the children, and then they engaged in playing a game involving the word, followed...
by a brief assessment. For each word, 12 children heard the new word repeated three times; another 12 children heard the word repeated six times; and so forth, for nine, 18, and 24 repetitions. Only 20 percent of the children who heard a new word three times remembered it; in fact, it wasn’t until after 24 repetitions that the majority of children (80 percent) successfully remembered the word.

The point, of course, is not that all words need 24 repetitions. However, this research does suggest that children need many more encounters with new words than we may have previously suspected. Strategies such as repeated reading have been shown to be effective in helping children acquire new words. In addition, children may benefit from rich explanations of newly encountered words. Rich explanations often include as much information as possible about the new word, including information conveyed through defining, providing synonyms, pointing to illustrations, and using the words in other contexts. These explanations can also give teachers further opportunities to repeat new words, thereby providing children with additional exposures. Another way to build repetition actually goes back to our previous point of teaching knowledge networks. Categories and semantic clusters provide a built-in mechanism for repeating words in meaningful contexts.

At the same time, it is also important for teachers to expose children to additional contexts in which the word might be used. Two researchers, in their work with second language learners, suggest that multimedia can be highly effective for enhancing the meanings of words. Their research showed that multimedia-enhanced instruction significantly narrowed the gap between English language learners and non-ELL children in knowledge of targeted words. They found that video could help children learn by representing words in more than one media format, clarifying the instructional dialogue and adding more information to make sense of words that they are learning. Our research, as well, has shown that the addition of dynamic visuals and sounds in video accompanied by informational books provides children with multiple strategies for acquiring word knowledge. Together, this research highlights that frequency of exposure in a variety of meaningful contexts over an extended period of time enhances word learning. Further, children may continue to benefit from additional exposures to a word and its meaning even if they appear to already understand the word.

**Frequency of exposure in a variety of meaningful contexts over an extended period of time enhances word learning.**

**Principle 5: Ongoing Professional Development Is Essential**

The results of our meta-analyses suggest that children’s oral vocabulary development is highly malleable and can be significantly improved through intervention. However, these analyses also showed that teachers who have not received adequate preparation and teachers with limited educational backgrounds were not as effective in helping children make significant gains in vocabulary. Similar findings have been reported in other meta-analyses. This research highlights the importance of ongoing professional development for teachers and other school staff who regularly work with children who might need additional instruction.

Very recently, we have drawn from our work with young children the notion of an instructional regime as part of a teacher’s ongoing work in the classroom. This pattern of instruction involves several key steps:

- Identifying words that need to be taught;
- Defining these words in a child-friendly way;
- Contextualizing words into varied and meaningful formats;
- Reviewing words to ensure sustainability over time; and
- Monitoring children’s progress and reteaching if necessary.

This instructional regime, applied at any grade level, promotes greater attention to the depth of processing words and their meanings, and can provide a critical road map for the future planning of instruction.

Taken collectively, the five principles of oral vocabulary development, in effect, highlight an approach that is designed to help children unlock the complexities of texts that we see throughout the CCSS. Given that these standards place greater emphasis on students’ abilities to build arguments from evidence in texts, these instructional principles will give them the tools to engage in academically enriching conversations that can be fulfilling and highly rewarding.

Common myths are often based on some partial truths that have since been debunked or at least shown to have serious flaws.
Recent evidence indicates that children need planned, sequenced, and systematic vocabulary instruction.

in their logic. This is the case with oral vocabulary development. In the past, we have often described young children as “word wizards,” “word sponges,” “lexical vacuum cleaners”—all denoting the supposedly easy process of vocabulary development. Too often, it has been assumed that word learning is natural and that the conditions in classrooms provide spontaneous opportunities for vocabulary development.

Teachable moments are important; however, they will not be sufficient for students to engage in complex texts. Rather, we will have to be much more strategic about word learning than our previous standards or instructional guidelines have acknowledged. Recent evidence indicates that children need planned, sequenced, and systematic vocabulary instruction. This means selecting words, concepts, and ideas that matter most to children right from the very beginning of schooling. Many children from high-poverty circumstances will have had fewer experiences with the academic language that the standards require. Children who enter school in these situations will need skillfully developed instruction that not only improves their word knowledge and concepts, but actually accelerates their vocabulary development, maximizing the limited time they have in school.

Endnotes


34. Wright and Neuman, “Vocabulary Instruction.”


In the past six years, we have had opportunities to test our approach to vocabulary learning in many different settings, and with children who come from low-income communities, many of whom are English language learners. Here, we highlight some of what we’ve learned, and why it is so important to focus on content-rich instruction.

In all, we have studied vocabulary learning with more than 2,000 children. We’ve conducted design studies in an attempt to understand the active ingredients of high-quality instruction, as well as randomized controlled trials examining the impact of interventions. We’ve looked at vocabulary learning in the home and in school, and the environmental supports that are typical for young children. From these studies, we can summarize the following points:

- Children from low-socioeconomic circumstances are not receiving the type of language supports they will need to achieve the standards in the Common Core—in the home or in school. Children who have limited opportunities for academic language learning in the home most often go to schools with similar limited opportunities.*
- Early literacy instruction in many classrooms in low-income communities has been reduced to the basic skills of learning letters and sounds, with very limited time devoted to content instruction. With little time devoted to science and social studies, children will not develop the background skills needed for comprehending text.
- Despite calls for increasing the amount of informational text reading, little time is spent on it in classroom instruction.
- English language learners often go unnoticed and are not receiving the language supports early on in school that they will need to become successful.†

Together, these findings suggest that if we do not provide more targeted instruction in vocabulary in ways that help children build knowledge networks, children are likely to struggle to meet those Common Core standards that emphasize the importance of integrating knowledge and ideas in texts, making arguments based on evidence, and analyzing similarities and differences among texts.

To better understand effective vocabulary instruction, we focus on what children are capable of when given the opportunity to learn in content-rich settings. In a randomized controlled experiment (generally considered the “gold standard” of research), we examined how a yearlong program of content-rich instruction might compare with the typical day-to-day curriculum in 24 Head Start classrooms in a high-poverty urban area severely affected by the recent economic recession. Classrooms were evenly divided into treatment and control groups, with the treatment group participating in a 12-minute, four-day-per-week program of content-rich vocabulary instruction.

However, in addition to this traditional experimental design, we raised another question. We reasoned that it was not simply enough to compare two similar groups of students; rather, we needed to understand if content-rich instruction might “level the playing field” by helping low-income and language-minority children reach the same standards and skills that middle- and upper-middle-income children have when they enter school. In other words, could high-quality vocabulary instruction early on improve the odds that children would come to school with the vocabulary and conceptual skills that are essential to ensure they are ready to learn? To answer this question, we measured children’s progress from two additional groups: a sample of middle-class children in a state-related preschool program and a sample of children from a university-based program, where more than half the children’s parents were PhD students or faculty. In total, we measured more than 1,200 3- and 4-year-old children’s progress in vocabulary and conceptual knowledge over a year’s time. In addition, we then came back half a year later to see if the gains were sustained.

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* See Tanya S. Wright and Susan B. Neuman, “Vocabulary Instruction in Commonly Used Kindergarten Core Reading Curricula,” Elementary School Journal 113 (2013): 386–408.

Using assessments designed to measure young children’s growth in vocabulary and content knowledge, Figure 1 tells a compelling story. It shows that, by the middle of the year, we began to see dramatic gains for children in the treatment group compared with those of the control group, which remained rather stable. More interesting, however, was that as the words got harder, the children did better, so that by the end of the year, there was no statistical difference between the treatment children and the middle- and upper-middle-class children.

Now let’s take a look at children’s conceptual development. This is an area that is often not considered in the early years, yet it is central to children’s developing comprehension. As Figure 2 shows, the scores of the Head Start treatment group even exceeded those of the middle-class children by midyear, and were statistically on par with the upper-middle-class children at both the middle and the end of the year. In other words, children in the treatment group were engaged in using similar abstract language skills and concepts that their more economically advantaged peers were using as these children were about to enter kindergarten.

When we looked at the differences between native English speakers and second language learners, we found some interesting and very relevant results. Our assessments indicated significant growth in vocabulary and conceptual knowledge for both native and second language learners, as Figure 3 shows. However, for those in the control group, their understandings of conceptual categories throughout the year actually went down. These findings suggest that in settings where the language is not comprehensible and no effort is made to help these children learn concepts, second language learners’ growth in concepts is stymied.

Finally, we were curious about transfer: whether children who develop conceptual knowledge in some topics can apply their understanding to an entirely new topic. In particular, we were interested in whether our content-rich instruction supported children’s self-learning. In this extension task, children were introduced to six unfamiliar objects, half of which were targeted instruction, these children not only achieved at levels consistent with those of our content-rich instruction supported children’s self-learning. In this extension task, children were introduced to six unfamiliar objects, half of which were tested with a category-related property (e.g., “Can you use a backhoe to make things?”), while the remaining objects were tested with an unrelated property (e.g., “Can you use a backhoe to count?”). Children completed three steps for each of the six unfamiliar objects. First, they were asked to identify the target object from a set of three pictures; this step helped ensure that the object was, in fact, unfamiliar. Children were next told the name of the target object and its category membership (e.g., “This is a vise. It’s a tool.”). Third, children were asked whether the object possessed certain category properties (e.g., “Can you use a vise to make things?”).

As Figure 4 shows, we found that the children in our treatment group were significantly more able to make connections to concepts and to extend their learning to a topic that they were less familiar with. In other words, good-quality instruction, structured in a way that allows children to begin to make knowledge networks, helps them think more conceptually. In this example, children were able to use their existing knowledge for self-teaching purposes. Children’s conceptual knowledge appeared to bootstrap their ability to (1) determine the meaning of unfamiliar words, and (2) figure out how these unfamiliar objects related to a larger category. Consequently, with this type of targeted instruction, these children not only made educationally meaningful gains, they achieved at levels consistent with those of more economically advantaged children. This suggests, quite simply, that we have just begun to tap these children’s potential.

–S.B.N. and T.S.W.

We must provide more targeted instruction in vocabulary in ways that help children build knowledge networks.

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**FIGURE 3:**
*Overall Growth in Vocabulary and Conceptual Knowledge*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Change in average number of categories correctly identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>Native English: 15, Dual-language: 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Native English: 0, Dual-language: -5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIGURE 4:**
*Children’s Ability to Transfer Categorical Knowledge to New Words*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Average numbers of correct inferences and generalizations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insects</td>
<td>Treatment: 25, Control: 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parts of the body</td>
<td>Treatment: 20, Control: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild animals</td>
<td>Treatment: 15, Control: 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Treatment: 50, Control: 30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Starting Off Strong
The Importance of Early Learning

BY CHRYS DOUGHERTY

As our nation strives to have all students graduate from high school ready for college and other post-secondary learning opportunities, we have to confront the reality that we are far from achieving this goal. The problem is most severe with economically disadvantaged students. For example, in states where all 11th-graders take the ACT test, only 45 percent of low-income students in 2012 met the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks in English, 30 percent in reading, 21 percent in mathematics, and 13 percent in science.¹

For many students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, learning gaps appear in early childhood.² Large numbers of disadvantaged students enter kindergarten behind in early reading and mathematics skills, oral language development, vocabulary, and general knowledge. This situation poses a challenge for intervention models that presume that 15 percent or so of students need short-term additional help, 5 percent or so need long-term intervention, and the regular academic program will take care of the rest.³ In cases where the great majority of students are academically behind and need major assistance, the regular academic program must be upgraded to deliver a richer curriculum to all students. Such a curriculum is highly beneficial for all students, but is especially critical for disadvantaged students, who often arrive from home with limited knowledge and vocabulary. School districts must develop a system of practices that enable such a curriculum to be taught effectively.⁴

Why Early Learning Is Important

That learning gaps emerge early, particularly among disadvantaged students, is one of the better-documented facts in education.⁵ Students who do not have a good start usually do not thrive later on. That is not only due to the fact that students in stressful environments with limited learning opportunities often remain in those environments, but also because early learning itself facilitates later learning—students who already know more about a topic often have an easier time learning additional information.

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on the same topic, and early exposure to knowledge can stimulate students to want to learn more.6

Getting students off to a good start in preschool and the elementary grades is vitally important for several reasons:

**Learning takes time.** Research studies have addressed the value of allowing sufficient time per topic for students to adequately master the topic.7 This implies that subject-matter learning should be spread out over many years to permit a range of topics to be addressed in adequate depth. For example, one well-known curriculum for the elementary and middle grades spreads out the study of U.S. history over all of those grades, covering fewer topics in greater depth in each grade.8

**Learning is cumulative.** In a well-designed curriculum, learning in the upper grades builds on prior learning in the lower grades.9 This is most obvious in the case of mathematics, but is also true for other content areas such as science, history, geography, literature, and the arts. For example, students learning about glucose metabolism in high school biology classes benefit from having learned the necessary prior chemistry knowledge in elementary and middle school.

**Student interests often develop at an early age.** Students with the good fortune to be exposed to rich content in science, history, and other subjects at a young age may develop an interest in those subjects. Interest, in turn, leads to greater learning.10 Disadvantaged students often depend on their schools for this exposure, since their access to content outside of school may be limited. Simply having the content available in libraries and on the Internet is not enough, because children need adults to guide them to the content and help them understand it.11

**Empirical evidence shows the difficulty of catching students up in middle and high school.** Several studies have explored the importance of preparation prior to eighth grade for students to have a reasonable chance of meeting college readiness benchmarks by the end of high school.12 For example, students who were far off track in eighth grade had only a 10 percent chance in reading, 6 percent chance in science, and 3 percent chance in mathematics of reaching ACT’s College Readiness Benchmarks by 12th grade. In higher poverty schools, those numbers were 6 percent, 3 percent, and 3 percent, respectively.13 Results were similar for students catching up between fourth and eighth grade.14 The harder it is to get off-track students on track in the upper grades, the more important it is to get them on track in the early grades.

**Strengthening Early Learning**

What kinds of learning are important to emphasize in the early years? The following are components of a strong preschool and elementary school education.

**A strong start in reading (decoding) and mathematics.** Educators have long emphasized the importance of learning to read well in the early grades, a belief supported by longitudinal research.15 Reading consists of two abilities: the ability to identify the words on the page (decoding), and the ability to understand the words once they are identified (comprehension). Decoding is the main constraint on reading ability for beginning readers. Fluent decoding depends on mastering letter-sound relationships and becoming familiar with spelling patterns in the English language. Ensuring that students learn to decode well depends, among other things, on using activities and methods in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade that develop children’s phonological (sound) awareness and their knowledge of the relationship between letters and sounds.16 Meanwhile, children’s comprehension can be developed in the early grades by reading aloud to them from books that develop their knowledge and vocabulary.

In mathematics, the ability to do simple arithmetic and place numbers on the number line by first grade predicts mathematics performance in fifth grade.17 Engaging preschool and kindergarten students in games that involve number comparisons, counting, and adding can help prevent mathematics difficulties from emerging in the early elementary grades.18 That learning gaps emerge early, particularly among disadvantaged students, is one of the better-documented facts in education.

**A content-rich curriculum.** A large part of the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students may be due to greater vocabulary and content learning by students in advantaged home environments.19 One study found that kindergartners’ general knowledge of the world was a better predictor of those students’ eighth-grade reading ability than were early reading skills.20 This is consistent with research showing that reading comprehension, particularly in the upper grades, depends heavily on students’ vocabulary and background knowledge.21 To develop this knowledge, students need a curriculum rich in content not only in English language arts and mathematics, but also in science, history, geography, civics, and the arts.22

Development of wide vocabulary and background knowledge takes time.23 This helps to explain why reading gaps don’t close quickly, and why programs that have been successful in closing math skills gaps have had greater difficulty closing reading gaps.24 The time required to develop students’ knowledge and vocabulary is one reason why content-rich curriculum should begin in early childhood. Early content learning can also stimulate curiosity and interest in subjects such as science, history, and art. Content knowledge is also important for abstract reasoning—an abundance of concrete examples make reasoning easier.25

By contrast, explicit instruction in comprehension strategies such as “finding the main idea” and “questioning the author” makes only a limited contribution to students’ reading comprehension.26 Therefore, instruction in these strategies should not be
allowed to take large amounts of time away from content-area learning.\textsuperscript{27} A content-rich curriculum can also enhance the effectiveness of a major comprehension strategy—“activating the student’s prior knowledge”—by increasing the amount of prior knowledge possessed by students.

**Activities that develop students’ academic and social behaviors.** Behaviors such as paying attention, completing assignments, persisting in difficult tasks, and regulating one’s own actions (thinking before acting) play a large role in students’ success in school and later on in life.\textsuperscript{28} Educators can lay the foundation for these behaviors in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade through classroom activities that develop children’s “executive function”—their ability to direct their own attention and activity.\textsuperscript{29} Programs that target specific desired student behaviors and explicitly teach those behaviors through active learning (students act out or practice the behavior, rather than just being told about it) are effective at improving both behavior and academic achievement.\textsuperscript{30}

The time required to develop students’ knowledge and vocabulary is one reason why content-rich curriculum should begin in early childhood.

**Barriers to Strengthening Early Learning**

Three important barriers to strengthening the early curriculum may be summarized under the heading of A-B-C: accountability system design, beliefs about early learning, and capacity limitations.

**Accountability system design.** Accountability systems have been designed to create a sense of urgency about improving test scores. However, this has often had the undesirable effect of shortening educators’ time horizons so that they emphasize changes aimed at improving accountability ratings over the short run. These changes can include narrowing the curriculum to de-emphasize subjects not tested in the current grade, and spending inordinate amounts of time coaching students on how to answer sample test questions.\textsuperscript{31}

By contrast, many steps to improve academic learning and behaviors take time to bear fruit and may not immediately result in higher test scores. For example, implementing an excellent kindergarten and first-grade reading, mathematics, science, social studies, or fine arts program will not immediately affect test results in the later grades. Neither will field trips to science and art museums, nature areas, and historical sites—all of which develop knowledge of the world. Accountability incentives should be modified to recognize efforts that increase student learning over the longer run and promote learning in grades and subject areas not covered on state tests.

**Beliefs about early learning.** Some educators and policymakers have resisted the introduction of a content-rich curriculum in the early grades because they do not think that it is the right thing to do. Examples of these beliefs include:

- **The belief that content learning will be boring to young children.** Whether content is meaningful and interesting to students depends largely on how it is taught and on whether students have the prior knowledge needed to appreciate the new information.\textsuperscript{32} Good teachers present information in a way that appeals to students’ experience and imagination, and good curriculum developers pay attention to building necessary prior knowledge before introducing new information. Thus, the concern that content learning will be boring is largely a concern about the capacity of the school system to provide sound curriculum and effective teaching.

- **The belief that young students should mainly learn content close to their everyday experience.** This belief has held sway mainly in social studies, where a popular curricular approach, “Expanding Environments,” focuses on students’ families in kindergarten and first grade, neighborhoods in second grade, and community in third grade, before expanding to state history in fourth grade and U.S. history in fifth grade.\textsuperscript{33} This approach can sacrifice four years of student learning about the larger world outside their own communities.\textsuperscript{34}

- **The belief that students can learn everything they need later by looking up information online.** Understanding and evaluating the cacophony of information and opinion on the Internet—or even knowing what to look up—requires prior knowledge of the subject area being addressed.\textsuperscript{35} Further, the ability to look things up does not substitute for prior knowledge when people think or make judgments—learning enough to make informed
decisions usually requires sustained study, not just the acquisition of a few isolated pieces of information.46 Thus, the ready availability of so much information has probably increased the value of early exposure to knowledge.

- The belief that teaching academic content in science, social studies, and fine arts in the early grades will crowd out essential learning in reading, mathematics, and academic and social behaviors.

One promising approach to avoid this problem is to integrate learning in the other subject areas into the reading and writing program, using read-alouds to expose beginning readers to content knowledge and vocabulary. The approach treats content learning as an essential part of the comprehension strand of reading instruction.37 A pilot program using this approach was found to outperform conventional approaches to teaching reading.38

Capacity limitations. Teachers in the early grades may not be well equipped with training, instructional materials, and ongoing professional support to teach all of the necessary content in their classrooms. Addressing this problem requires school districts to upgrade their systems that support teaching and learning, as discussed in the next section.

Importance of a System to Support Early Learning

Improving teaching and learning in the early grades requires not a flurry of disconnected initiatives, but a sustained, coherent, coordinated effort by district and school leaders to provide the necessary support for improving practices at the classroom level. Educator practices learned from research on effective schools can be grouped under five major themes, described in more detail in the ACT Core Practice Framework.39

Curriculum and academic goals. School districts can support their teachers by developing a clear and specific written curriculum that describes what must be taught in each grade and subject, and provides examples of what mastery of each learning objective looks like. Such a curriculum can address the likely amount of time required to teach each topic and the integration of content across subject areas, issues that are especially important in the early grades.

Staff selection, leadership, and capacity building. Teaching a content-rich curriculum across the subject areas places a large premium on teachers’ knowledge and skills, especially for those who teach multiple subjects. This requires the careful selection of school and district leaders who can support teachers as they improve these skills, as well as the provision of frequent common planning times built into the school’s master schedule, when teachers can discuss their students’ learning in an environment of collaboration and trust. Professional development should be carefully chosen to focus on the most critical knowledge and skills needed to teach the district’s curriculum in each subject.

Instructional tools: programs and strategies. School and district leaders should carefully pilot and evaluate instructional materials they are considering for purchase to make sure those materials address the learning goals in the district’s written curriculum. A similar process based on evaluation, data, and prior research should be used to make decisions about instructional strategies and arrangements—for example, the extent to which teachers in the early grades should specialize in different subjects.

Monitoring performance and progress. Monitoring student learning is vital for helping educators make instructional decisions: to identify which students need extra help; to place students in learning groups or intervention programs; to know which concepts need to be retaught; and to identify which lessons, teaching strategies, or instructional materials are working. This requires schools and districts to use assessments in the early grades that are based on the district’s written curriculum. Frequent formative assessment is needed throughout the year in order for teachers to respond quickly to student needs and keep parents informed about how their children are doing.

Intervention and adjustment. School leaders need to work with teacher teams to identify and assist students who need extra help. Timely assessments make it easier to identify those students early when assistance can have the greatest impact. The same logic applies to identifying and assisting teachers and entire schools in need of support. A school district can be said to have a system to improve early learning when changes in any one of these five areas are accompanied by related changes in the other four areas. For example, changes in the district’s written curriculum should be accompanied by matching changes in staff development, instructional resources, assessment, and interventions.40

Implementing all of the components of a strong early learning program is difficult and requires a sustained districtwide effort to improve teaching and learning in the early grades. Maintaining such an effort requires school leaders and policymakers to promote public awareness of:

1. The importance of early learning. Educators and policymakers must help the public understand the reasons why early learning is so important: that later learning builds on early learning; that learning about a sufficiently broad range of topics takes time, and cannot be accomplished exclusively in the later grades; that catching students up from far behind is difficult in the upper grades; and that early learning develops students’ interests and intellectual curiosity, influencing whether they become lifelong learners.
2. The components of a strong early learning program. These components include a strong early reading and mathematics program; a content-rich curriculum not only in English language arts and mathematics, but also in science, history, geography, civics, and the arts; and activities designed to develop students’ academic and social behaviors.

Teachers need common planning times built into the school’s master schedule to discuss student learning in an environment of collaboration and trust.

3. The obstacles to strengthening early learning programs. These obstacles include accountability incentives that encourage educators to focus on short-term results on a few measures; beliefs that an increased emphasis on early content learning is not desirable or necessary; and limitations in the training and support for educators in the early grades.

4. The importance of a system to improve early learning. School districts should focus on steadily improving practices at the district, school, and classroom levels in five areas: (a) curriculum and academic goals; (b) staff selection, leadership, and capacity building; (c) instructional programs and strategies; (d) monitoring performance and progress; and (e) intervention and adjustment. They can use information derived from the study of effective schools, such as that contained in the ACT Core Practice Framework, as a guide to their improvement effort.
Taken for Granted
Why Curriculum Content Is Like Oxygen

By Carolyn Gosse and Lisa Hansel

When asked what matters most in life, it’s easy to quickly answer family and friends. It’s loved ones we care about most, so the answer is appropriate—but is it entirely accurate? Of course not. The precise answer, which no one wants to hear, begins with oxygen.

Life is full of such social conventions. Many are beneficial (at least for easing communication), and most are harmless. But sometimes the “appropriate” answer goes unexamined for too long. Sometimes an accurate answer is needed. We see a parallel situation in discussions of school improvement. Whether in casual conversations or even in serious debates, there seems to be a de facto, appropriate answer as to what matters most in creating a good school: great teachers and supportive parents. Not that these things are unimportant; just like family and friends, they are essential. But is there a more accurate answer, one that, like oxygen, is taken for granted? We contend that there is: the content of the curriculum, the specific knowledge and skills taught each day.

Experience tells us that curriculum is glossed over in different ways by educators and policy leaders.

For educators, the content of the curriculum really is like oxygen. Teaching is always about something, and that something has to be specified before any other decisions can be made. That’s so obvious that it’s assumed, prompting educators to jump to other factors in thinking about what’s essential to a great school. Don’t get us wrong: the curriculum doesn’t make a school great all by itself any more than oxygen alone makes us live. Both are merely necessary preconditions. Yet while it is possible to find a struggling school with a great curriculum, finding a good school with a weak curriculum is about as likely as finding a human being who can live without oxygen. Regrettably, when educators take the content of the curriculum for granted, they lose opportunities to coordinate and collaborate. Students may be learning something valuable in each grade or course, but they do not receive the benefits of a coherent, cumulative, cross-curricular experience.

Many leaders in education policy, on the other hand, seem to have no idea that curriculum matters. Some don’t even realize that standards and curricula are not the same thing. Theoretically, we could blame the educators for not explaining to the policy-

All of the images shown within this article come from the Core Knowledge Language Arts Preschool program. The program contains seven units; each unit has its own teacher guide, four of which are shown below.

Carolyn Gosse is the Core Knowledge Foundation’s lead developer of CKLA Preschool. She received her PhD in Language and Literacy Development and Disorders from the University of Virginia, where she worked on a research project evaluating the effectiveness of a preschool curriculum designed to enhance young children’s language and literacy skills. Lisa Hansel is the communications director for the Core Knowledge Foundation. Previously, she was the editor of American Educator. Portions of this article are adapted with permission from “What Really Matters Most?” by Lisa Hansel, which was published on the CUNY Institute for Education Policy blog, IdeaLab, at http://ciep.hunter.cuny.edu/really-matters.
makers that curriculum is like oxygen—but in the real world we can’t. In an era of “100 percent proficient or else,” what sane educators would encourage policymakers to “improve” their oxygen? Teachers realize, after all, that their evaluations are increasingly tied to student scores on high-stakes tests. As a result, they are reluctant—and rightfully so—to invite policymakers to offer what are likely to be similarly flawed suggestions about what the curriculum for each grade level should look like.

Unfortunately, the very lack of any discussion about the curriculum virtually ensures that the standards regime cannot attain its goal of raising student proficiency. There is no more direct connection to student achievement—i.e., what students know and can do—than what students have been taught.

It has been nearly five years since Russ Whitehurst of the Brookings Institution wrote “Don’t Forget Curriculum,” noting that “policy makers who cut their teeth on policy reforms in the areas of school governance and management rather than classroom practice [are] people who may be oblivious to curriculum for the same reason that Bedouin don’t think much about water skiing.” Importantly, Whitehurst compared the impact of curricular improvements to that of other reforms, such as charter schools, altering the teacher workforce, Common Core.” Examining curriculum effects versus teacher effects, they found that implementing a better curriculum can have a slightly greater impact on student learning than teachers whose value-added data puts them at the 75th percentile (as compared with a 50th percentile teacher). While teacher quality is the clear leader in policy discussions of what matters most, these findings indicate that curriculum is just as important as teaching.

Since curriculum matters, everyone ought to act like it matters—and educators should have the opportunity to lead the way. Within schools, educators can work together to adopt, adapt, or create a coherent, grade-by-grade curriculum that maximizes cross-discipline connections and efficiently builds knowledge and skills. Across schools in areas with high student mobility, they can agree to a set of specific knowledge and skills to be taught in each grade; children who change schools will benefit immediately—and so will their teachers.

These are bold claims. They rest only in small part on research, like Whitehurst’s, showing the relative power of curriculum. The fact is, there has been nowhere near enough research conducted on curriculum. But lots of relevant research has been done by cognitive scientists on how children learn. It is on this large body of evidence that we build our bold claims.

**Child Friendly, Content Rich**

As the articles on pages 4 and 14 of this issue explain, several findings have emerged that are critical to early education. For example, knowledge builds on knowledge, so it is essential to begin building broad academic knowledge and vocabulary in the early years. In addition, repeated and varied exposures to concepts and vocabulary are needed for solid understandings to take root in long-term memory. Therefore, the content of instruction should be carefully planned to introduce topics early, and then teachers can intentionally revisit, deepen, and extend learning on these topics in later grades.

For educators in preschool through third grade who don’t have the time or support to create such a curriculum, one potential model to adopt or adapt is Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA). The CKLA program envisions reading as a two-lock box—a box that takes two keys to open. One key is knowledge of the code (the sound-letter correspondences), which must be mastered for fluent reading and writing. The other key is knowledge of words and the world, which is essential for language comprehension (both oral and written). Both keys are addressed throughout the program. The first key is developed with a phonics-based approach, as reading and writing skills are taught in tandem. The second key is developed primarily through teacher read-alouds, along with text-based discussions and activities.

While CKLA’s skills instruction is absolutely essential, it is not all that different from other research-based phonics pro-

*To learn more about Core Knowledge Language Arts, see “More Than Words: An Early Grades Reading Program Builds Skills and Knowledge,” in the Fall 2012 issue of American Educator, available at www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducatorfall2012/dubin.pdf.*
grams. What makes CKLA unique is the content-rich read-alouds, in which teachers read texts to students and engage them in conversations about the text and accompanying images. These read-alouds and discussions, which range from 20 to 30 minutes, are organized in 7 to 12 domains per grade. Each domain is dedicated to a particular topic that the class stays focused on for 10–15 days. Domains include “The Five Senses,” “Native Americans,” “Astronomy,” “Early Asian Civilizations,” “Insects,” and more. The domains are carefully organized to build on each other within and across grades, giving students opportunities to refine and expand their knowledge and vocabulary over time. The topics are interesting and engaging too, as the content goes well beyond standard early grades fare (such as social studies that reviews families and neighborhoods year after year, and science focused on basic information about weather, plants, and animals) to include important historical and scientific events, ideas, and people.

Children in CKLA are immersed in sophisticated content, but it isn’t just randomly dropped in. Accessible concepts—like families and communities—are purposefully introduced in preschool and then revisited and extended in later grades—such as the first-grade “Early World Civilizations” domain. Given the complexity and long-ago history of such a topic, some may question whether young children can meaningfully learn about ancient Egypt. The answer is absolutely.

As Daniel T. Willingham explained in these pages several years ago, “no content is inherently developmentally inappropriate.” It turns out that Piaget’s notion of discrete developmental stages is not correct; young children not only differ from each other, their individual performance will vary from task to task and day to day. If children don’t understand a lesson, Willingham encourages teachers to ask why—and to ask if it really matters. Perhaps the children need more background knowledge or a different explanation, not more time to “develop.” And perhaps it’s just fine for them to start forming a concept, but not grasp each detail:

For example, suppose your preschool students have learned about Martin Luther King Jr., but you are having a hard time getting them to understand that he was a real person who is no longer here, and that fictional characters such as Mary Poppins are not here and never were. If it’s hard for a 4-year-old to conceive of people living in different times and places, does that mean that history should not be taught until the child is older? Such an argument would not make much sense to a developmental psychologist. For children and adults, understanding of any new concept is inevitably incomplete. The preschoolers can still learn something about who King was and what he stood for. Their mistaken belief that they might encounter him at a local store, or that he lives at a school that bears his name, will be corrected in time. Indeed, how do children learn that some people are fictional and some are not? Not by a magical process of brain maturation. Children learn this principle as they learn any other—in fits and starts, sometimes showing that they understand and other times not. If you wait until you are certain that the children will understand every nuance of a lesson, you will likely wait too long to present it. If they understand every nuance, you’re probably presenting content that they’ve already learned elsewhere.

A great curriculum is the necessary precondition for improving schools, closing the achievement gap, engaging parents, and preparing teachers.

For example, last year I visited the Museum of Natural History with my first grade students, and as we were walking through the ancient Egyptian exhibit in the museum, the students were amazed that they were getting to see things in person that they were learning about all month. Not only were the students amazed, but other museum goers and tourists were amazed at the rich vocabulary that was coming out of these little six-year-olds’ mouths. The students were able to recognize everything from the Sphinx to the sarcophagus, it was truly rewarding as a teacher to see this happening as a result of teaching this rigorous curriculum.

This early foundation enables second- and third-graders to really grasp historical and scientific content that has traditionally been reserved for middle school.

For example, at Thomas Jefferson Classical Academy in Forest City, North Carolina, a charter school that serves a rural, predominantly working-class community, Heidi Cole’s second-graders eagerly learn 19th- and 20th-century American history. With confidence, I can say that I have not only “taught” my students about...the War of 1812, Westward Expansion, and the Civil War, but my students have truly “learned” something about these topics. My students embrace the stories of hardship faced by slaves in the South. The result is empathy, followed by a desire to learn more, and the hope of a slavery-free world. Hearing the stories of slavery through the eyes of a child such as Minty (Harriet Tubman) helps children make important connections. Awareness of slavery also helps prepare students with the
A Brief History of the Elementary Curriculum

A Unique Pre-K Curriculum

CKLA Preschool is a comprehensive language arts curriculum that explicitly supports the development of knowledge and skills identified as key to building skilled, fluent readers.* In addition to systematically building children’s knowledge of letters, sounds, and print, CKLA Preschool is designed to expose young children to content-rich, coherent, cumulative instruction. It does so by building and deepening background knowledge using teaching practices that are appropriate for young children and generally familiar to early educators. Students and teachers engage in activities like singing songs and nursery rhymes, playing games in small groups, creating extended dramatic play scenarios, making crafts, reading books, and listening to stories. These activities not only are fun and appropriate experiences for young children, but reading, commonly known as basal readers, which for many years have served as the spine of the reading curriculum. In 1983, William Schmidt and his colleagues at the Institute for Research on Teaching analyzed

U.S. elementary schools in the 1980s were woefully thin on content. Since then, that has not changed.

34 basal readers for the second, fourth, and fifth grades, from eight major publishers, for a total of 1,959 different selections. Here is what they found:?

- 42 percent had no subject-matter content at all (defined as covering theories, facts, and information from typical elementary subjects, such as math, science, and social studies);
- 20 percent had content that was of a language arts nature—how words were used, etc. ;
- 20 percent had social science content (a third of which was “social themes,” concerning “enduring problems of individual and social life,” such as growing up, living with family members, etc.);
- 12 percent had science content; and
- Less than 6 percent had content in any other major subject-matter area, including art and music.

And, the lower the grade, the emptier it was of content. In second-grade books, 52 percent of the texts had no subject-matter content, but in fifth-grade books, only 13 percent of the texts had no subject-matter content. The crucial fact about the teaching of content in the elementary grades, the report’s authors barely mentioned elementary schools. Unsurprisingly, as a result, the post-1983 education reforms barely touched them. Here is the

*To learn more about Core Knowledge Language Arts Preschool, see the general overview at www.bit.ly/1bRKZJD. To download the entire CKLA program, preschool through third grade, for free, see www.coreknowledge.org/ckla-files.
are designed to create explicit opportunities for students to connect to specific content in the curriculum.

Infused throughout all grades of CKLA, but unique among preschool curricula, is the careful consideration given to the timing and sequencing of this content and how it contributes to students' later learning. Topics and subtopics are presented in a deliberately planned order, so that basic information and larger concepts build over time.

The end result is broad academic knowledge and skills, but what is the starting point in early childhood? Since many, many students arrive at preschool without prior educational experience, CKLA Preschool begins with the child himself. Starting with students' own experiences of themselves is a deliberate choice aimed at finding common ground for all students, regardless of socioeconomic or educational background. Moving all students forward together from this common place then becomes the aim of the first preschool domain, called "All About Me."

"All About Me" begins with the vocabulary and content the child needs to talk about himself—age, body parts, hair color, likes and dislikes, favorite activities, etc. Teachers and students read aloud and sing favorite songs and nursery rhymes (e.g., “Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes” and “Where Is Thumbkin?”) as they teach this content (see the sidebar on page 26). Strategically, they use these rhymes to teach and reinforce not only content, but also skills that prepare children to become fluent decoders in later grades. Essential early skills include language and content at all. Some 11 percent had science content and 14 percent social science.⁸ Taken as a whole, U.S. elementary schools in the 1980s were woefully thin on content.

Since then, that has not changed. The content-poor curriculum remains a staple at the elementary level. In contrast to secondary schools, most of the reform energy at the elementary level has focused on beefing up instruction in basic reading and math skills, with no infrastructure for driving improvements in the content areas. Even the academic content standards developed by states were typically weakest in the elementary grades.

The Fordham Institute has evaluated state standards in science and history periodically since 1998. Its reviewers have often aimed their greatest criticism at the early-grade standards, finding that they contain virtually no content, are repetitive across grades, and fail to address either sequencing or rigor.⁹

Like standards, textbooks have continued to neglect the content that underlies reading comprehension. For example, 20 years after Schmidt's study of basal textbook content, Kate Walsh, now director of the National Council on Teacher Quality, in 2003 reviewed the first- and second-grade texts from five top-selling basal-reader series. She found that they offered “mostly incoherent, banal themes that missed opportunities to develop word and world knowledge by offering and exploiting content-rich themes.”⁰¹

The recent policy emphasis on reading skills has led schools to further increase the time devoted to the English language arts block, leaving even less time devoted to history/social studies, science, and the arts than in earlier years. As shown in the table above, according to the National Survey of Science and Mathematics Education, the total time spent in grades K–3 on both science and social studies dropped 45 minutes per week from 2000 to 2012—from 3 hours and 40 minutes in 2000 to 2 hours and 55 minutes in 2012—meaning just 19 minutes per day for science and 16 minutes per day for social studies! (It had risen slightly between 1977 and 2000; it is now lower than it was in 1977.) In grades 4–6, the drop between 2000 and 2012 was 95 minutes per week.¹¹

In 2010, in a national survey of teachers conducted by Common Core* (an independent organization unconnected to—though supportive of—the Common Core State Standards), 63 percent of elementary teachers in self-contained classrooms indicated that social studies had been getting less “instructional time and resources over the past ten years” (or since they had begun teaching, if that was less than 10 years earlier). Fifty percent said that science had been getting less; and 49 percent and 37 percent, respectively, said the same of art and music.¹²

The squeeze on content was even tighter for struggling students. When elementary teachers were asked during what time period struggling students received extra instruction in English language arts or math, 60 percent said that these students were pulled from social studies class, and 55 percent said from science class.¹³ The bottom line: for decades, elementary schools have neglected to build the content foundation that students need and that the Common Core State Standards require for success. This reality is now ingrained in decades of elementary school practice.

To provide students with the necessary content foundation, the elementary curriculum must be thoroughly revamped so that history/social studies, science, and the arts are taught extensively and coherently. This will require that these subjects get more time in classes of their own and, at least as importantly, that they be heavily integrated into reading textbooks and instruction. Once revamped, curricular tools (curriculum frameworks, course outlines, etc.) and classroom materials that embody the new curriculum must be produced, and time, support, and training must be provided for teachers, so they can make good, smart use of the new materials.

(Endnotes on page 42)
Playful Immersion
Centers and Activities Reinforce Emerging Knowledge and Skills

CKLA Preschool kits come with an array of materials to infuse language-, vocabulary-, and knowledge-building opportunities throughout the various centers and activities typically found in a high-quality preschool setting. The materials include trade books, posters with nursery rhymes and songs, big books, and image collections, as well as detailed teacher guides to show how all of the materials work together. A sample of these materials is shown here; to see the complete program, download it for free at www.coreknowledge.org/ckla-files.

Trade Books
Familiar trade books are read aloud throughout CKLA Preschool. These books reinforce content covered in the domains and familiarize students with the conventions of print and book reading. The books shown to the left are read during the “All About Me” domain to highlight what makes people similar and unique, the parts of the body, and the five senses.

Learning Center Cards
CKLA Preschool includes two types of Learning Center Cards, as shown to the left: reference guides for adults and visual guides with labels for students. In “Doctor’s Office,” for example, students use their knowledge of body parts and descriptive words from “All About Me” as they engage in dramatic play. Meanwhile, the quick-reference poster for teachers and classroom volunteers reminds adults of key content and vocabulary as they facilitate the Learning Center.

Activity Pages
Activity Pages for use at home and in school provide a springboard for adults to facilitate conversations that reinforce domain-related concepts and vocabulary. Two examples are below. The one on the left, from the “All About Me” domain, asks students to point to illustrated body parts. The one on the right, from the “Animals” domain (which comes about halfway through the school year), reinforces code-related knowledge and skills in a developmentally appropriate way. Teachers have students count the number of syllables in the names of the animals. Students then record the number of syllables in each word by coloring in the corresponding number of empty squares.

Transition Cards
Transition Cards are provided to assist teachers in reviewing and reinforcing concepts and skills as they move students from one activity to another. For example, the Transition Card shown below on the right is designed for reviewing code-related skills taught in small groups. At the beginning of the school year, for example, a teacher might hold up two visually and phonetically distinct capital letters, such as M and P, and ask, “Matteo, which of these letters is at the beginning of your name?” Later in the year, a teacher might hold up the card shown here and ask what sound is at the beginning of “mittens,” “monkey,” “moon,” and “man.”

–C.G. and L.H.
grasp the concept of time and events that occurred in the past, they are introduced to Native Americans as part of the “Important People in American History” domain (see the sidebar on page 27). Through a read-aloud, a rich array of accompanying images, and related activities, children begin to conceptualize the first people to live in what is now the United States. The read-aloud begins with some content that will be familiar, weaving in the unfamiliar:

Long, long ago, long before your mother and father were born, and even long before your grandparents were born, the United States looked very different. ... In that time long, long ago ... there were trees and rivers. There were rocks and mountains. There were wild animals, like deer and birds. The only people who lived here way back then were the Native Americans.

Toward the end, the read-aloud becomes more specific: “The Native Americans we have been learning about have a special name. They are a group, or tribe, of Native Americans called the Wampanoag. A long, long time ago, there were many groups, or tribes, of Native Americans living all over the United States.” To deepen understanding, the teacher reviews some of the read-alouds, then shows new images with modern-day information:

Native Americans still live in the United States today. This is a photograph of a Native American boy wearing clothing that is like the clothing some Native Americans wore long ago. This is a photograph of a Native American family. There is a mom, a dad, and a son.

Of course, preschoolers do not understand exactly how or how long ago Native Americans lived prior to European exploration or the series of events that led to modern-day life, but they begin to get a sense of the past and that things were not always the

The CKLA domains are carefully organized to build on each other within and across grades, giving students opportunities to refine and expand their knowledge and vocabulary over time.
Preschoolers to Presidents

CKLA Builds Knowledge Step by Step

As described in the main article on page 19, CKLA Preschool is carefully designed to build knowledge and vocabulary. Across the year, children participate in interactive read-alouds and enjoy activities grouped in five core domains: “All About Me,” “Families and Communities,” “Animals,” “Plants,” and “Habitats.” The school year intentionally starts with the child, so that everyone has equal learning opportunities (regardless of how much academic preparation they have had at home), and then the domains are sequenced such that each builds on what has been learned. This approach not only facilitates comprehension, it also provides ample occasions for review. In addition, two more domains are interspersed throughout the school year. One is “Classic Tales,” which contains a dozen cherished stories, and the other is “Important People in American History.” Here we take a closer look at “All About Me,” and show how its content is expanded upon in the “Animals” and “Important People in American History” domains.

Body parts are an essential component of the knowledge and vocabulary students acquire during the “All About Me” domain. They acquire this knowledge in class, as teachers show images during an active read-aloud in which students point to and move their body parts as they listen to a rhyme. As shown in the CKLA images on the left, the program also offers materials for a related activity students can enjoy at home with their families, reinforcing what they have learned in school.

In the “Animals” domain (see the top images to the right), children draw on what they have learned about their bodies to think about how they are similar to and different from animals. These images are shown as teachers read aloud text that combines content knowledge and rhyme:

You are an animal. This bird is too.
Yes, you are an animal—
But you don’t have a pointy beak like some animals do.

You are an animal. This dog is too.
Yes, you are an animal—
But you don’t have a furry body like some animals do.

The “Important People in American History” domain is taught in association with national holidays (i.e., Thanksgiving,
Before the American experiment, “nation” was determined by place and birth. ... American patriotism is inherently different. It’s not based on birth but on a set of Enlightenment ideas, ... ideas of equality, freedom, and toleration. ... Core Knowledge ... tries to strike the right balance between loyalty to ideals and historical truth. ... Nationalism defines one group against others. It sees differences as inherent and essential. ... It is nativist, and uses terms that imply contamination and infiltration. That of course goes against the universalism of our founding ideals. The trans-national patriotism of the United States, symbolized by the flag, can accommodate all tribes within a larger conceptual loyalty learned in childhood.

From preschool through third grade, CKLA is carefully designed to plant the seeds for future studies and future responsibilities. By holding firm to the highest goals for education, CKLA demonstrates one way educators can develop the broad academic knowledge, vocabulary, and skills that really do matter most. We would never deprive our children of the oxygen they need to live. Why would we deprive them of the coherent, cumulative, content-rich curriculum they need to become educated citizens and lifelong learners?

(Endnotes on page 43)
How does the mind work—and especially how does it learn? Teachers’ instructional decisions are based on a mix of theories learned in teacher education, trial and error, craft knowledge, and gut instinct. Such knowledge often serves us well, but is there anything sturdier to rely on?

Cognitive science is an interdisciplinary field of researchers from psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, philosophy, computer science, and anthropology who seek to understand the mind. In this regular American Educator column, we consider findings from this field that are strong and clear enough to merit classroom application.

Question: Some of my students seem to get really nervous about math. I can understand not liking the subject very much—to be honest, I don’t love it myself—but their nervousness seems to get in the way of their understanding. How can I reassure them or otherwise make them less anxious?

Answer: There is no doubt that math makes some students very anxious. This problem can begin as early as elementary school, and might be prompted both by genuine concerns—the student perceives that his or her math skills need work—and by social cues that subtly convey the message that math should be feared. Research on how to best help students through this problem is ongoing, but there are a few techniques that teachers may find useful.

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to many people, “math” is a scary four-letter word. They don’t like it, they don’t feel like they are very good at it, and they just want to stay away from it. People who feel tension, apprehension, and fear of situations involving math are said to have math anxiety. And, perhaps not surprisingly, math anxiety is associated with poor math performance in school. Students with a high degree of math anxiety perform worse in math from elementary school through college, relative to their less math-anxious counterparts. But, it’s not just school situations where a negative relationship between math anxiety and mathematical performance emerges. Higher levels of math anxiety are associated with poor calculations of drug dosages by nurses and impaired financial planning.

Math anxiety is not limited to a minority of individuals nor to one country. International comparisons of high school students show that some students in every country are anxious about math. It is perhaps unsurprising that there is an inverse relationship between anxiety and efficacy: countries where kids are less proficient in math (as measured by the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA) tend to have higher levels of math anxiety. In the United States, an estimated 25 percent of fourth-grade students and up to 80 percent of community college students suffer from a moderate to high degree of math anxiety. Most students report having at least one negative experience with math at some point during their schooling.

Anecdotally, most of us can recall a time when we overheard a friend, colleague, or family member talk about his dislike for math or how she is “not a numbers person.” This is a notable contrast to reading; few people cheerfully volunteer that they just aren’t very good readers. It seems socially acceptable to be anxious about math.

Because math anxiety is widespread and often tied to poor math skills, it’s imperative to understand when anxiety about math starts to emerge, where it comes from, and what we can do to alleviate it. Only then can we start to attack the phenomenon, identifying strategies that target both how material is taught and how students feel about math, as a means to lower math anxiety, raise math achievement, and ensure that we are equipping students with the level of mathematics knowledge needed for the 21st-century workplace. Although research on math anxiety goes back to the 1970s, it has really gained momentum only in the last 10 years or so. Still, in that time, we have learned much about its origins and some ways to combat it.

When and How Does Math Anxiety Emerge?

Recent studies have examined early elementary students, and they indicate that math anxiety starts early. Although the specific details of these studies vary, the general questions have been similar: Do early elementary students report math anxiety and, if so, how is it related to math performance? In one recent study, math anxiety was assessed in 154 first- and second-graders with a newly developed scale that asked them questions like, “How do you feel when taking a big test in your math class?” or “How do you feel when getting your math book and seeing all the numbers in it?” Kids responded by using a sliding scale that featured a calm face on the far right, a moderately nervous face in the middle, and an obviously nervous face on the far left (see figure below).

Several days later, they completed a standardized test of math achievement (the Woodcock-Johnson III Applied Problems subtest). The test included items like identifying the correct time on a clock, money calculations, and word problems requiring arithmetic or simple fraction work.

Do first- and second-graders report having math anxiety? Yes. Averaging across all the questions, nearly 50 percent of the students reported moderate or high levels of math anxiety, being “moderately nervous” to “very, very nervous” about math. Do these reports of math anxiety relate to students’ math achievement? Yes, and in the way you would expect: higher math anxiety was associated with lower achievement (though, as we discuss below, this relation was stronger for some students than others). Finally, math anxiety’s predictive power was specific to math—there was little association between math anxiety and performance on a reading comprehension test.

Is Math Anxiety Just Another Name for “Bad at Math”?

We’ve just reviewed findings that math anxiety and math achievement are related. But how could it be otherwise? After all, math-anxious individuals stay away from math courses and math-related situations, and they learn less math in the courses they do take. Indeed, it’s tempting to conclude that their anxiety is logical—they are anxious because they are bad at math. For that matter, maybe the whole notion of “math anxiety” is not useful. Some might assume it’s pretty much just another name for “poor math skills.”

Math anxiety implies more than “bad at math.” It implies that someone would be better at math if he or she weren’t so anxious. And there is evidence that’s true. A growing body of work shows that math anxiety robs people of working memory. You can think of working memory as a kind of mental scratch pad—it’s what allows you to keep several things in mind simultaneously, and to
manipulate them in order to think and solve problems. For example, suppose a parent says to a teenager, “Your chores this afternoon are to clean the cat litter box, set the table for dinner, and take out the trash. And if you could chop some vegetables for the stew I’m going to make later, that would be nice.” The teen thinks, “Chopping vegetables and cleaning the cat box will make a mess, so I should take out the trash after I do those chores. And my hands should be clean when I set the table and when I chop vegetables. So I guess I’ll wash my hands, then set the table, then chop vegetables, then clean the cat box, then take out the trash.” Working memory is needed to keep the four chores in mind and to think about the consequences of doing each one in a particular sequence and to construct that sequence.

As you can imagine, if our teen had been given 10 chores instead of four, she would not have been able to keep them all in mind. Working memory can only hold so much. And the amount of “space” in working memory varies from person to person. Given that working memory is important for solving problems, it’s not surprising that one’s working memory capacity is related to one’s problem-solving and reasoning ability and to measures of general intelligence.

The role of working memory in thinking helps us understand the destructive consequences of math anxiety; anxious thoughts consume valuable working memory space. Math anxiety essentially prompts students to do two things at once: solve the math problem and deal with worries about the math (including worries about getting the problem wrong, looking foolish, and what others may think of them). As a result, they have less working memory to devote to the math, and their math performance suffers.

Neuroscientific data also support this interpretation. For example, one group of researchers explored neural activity in brain areas associated with negative emotions and in brain areas known to support numerical computations while third-grade children—both those lower and those higher in math anxiety—performed math problems. When performing mathematical calculations, math-anxious children, relative to their less anxious peers, show more brain activity in the right amygdala (known to be important for processing negative emotions). This increased amygdala activity was accompanied by a reduction in activity in brain regions known to support working memory and numerical processing (e.g., the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and the posterior parietal lobe). Using similar functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) methods, another group of researchers found that the higher one’s math anxiety, the larger the increase in activity in brain regions associated with threat and the experience of pain. Interestingly, we observed this relation when highly math-anxious people just anticipated doing math.

**Which Students Are Most Susceptible?**

Math anxiety may start when children are quite young, but it can’t come out of nowhere. What prompts it? Factors related to both students’ math abilities at the start of elementary school and students’ social environment (in the classroom, at home, and in society in general) likely play a role in the development of math anxiety.

We know that adults with math anxiety tend to have shortfalls in one or more of the basic building blocks of mathematical thinking and reasoning. These building blocks include skills like counting objects, deciding which of two numbers represents the larger quantity, and mentally rotating three-dimensional objects. We have speculated that a poor grasp of basic math building blocks early in schooling may predispose students to develop math anxiety, partly in response to their potential struggles in math. It seems predictable that students who struggle with math would be more likely to become anxious about it.

Another characteristic of kids is important, but this one doesn’t predict who is likely to suffer from anxiety. Instead, it predicts whose math performance is most disrupted should they get anxious. And the finding is rather counterintuitive: kids with the highest level of working memory show the most pronounced negative relation between math anxiety and math achievement. In other words, students with the most cognitive horsepower seem to suffer the most as a function of math anxiety. How can this be? Math anxiety depresses math performance because it eats up working memory space. Wouldn’t these students have spare working memory capacity, so anxiety would have less of an impact?

The answer to this question is not completely clear, but one possibility is that students with the most working memory tend to rely on more advanced problem-solving strategies; presumably, they’re in the habit of using these cognitively demanding strategies because they typically have the mental resources to carry them out. For instance, a simple strategy for a first-grader solving the problem “8 + 4 = ?” would be counting on his fingers. A strategy that demands more of working memory would be
decomposition, or breaking down units so that they are easier to process (e.g., \(8 + 4 + 8 + 2 + 2\)). Because the advanced strategies demand more working memory, they are more sensitive to anxiety’s deleterious effects. Ironically, something that usually helps kids in math—large working memory capacity—becomes vulnerable to disruption when they are anxious.

**Social Influences and Math Anxiety**

There is some evidence that children might pick up on cues from parents, teachers, or peers that math is, indeed, worthy of anxiety. Children who start schooling with deficiencies in basic mathematical skills may be especially predisposed to pick up on social cues (e.g., their teachers’ behavior) that highlight math in negative terms. There is also evidence of a more general link between teachers’ behavior and students’ math performance. In a preliminary study of 17 teachers and 117 first- and second-grade students, researchers found that female elementary school teachers’ math anxiety (over 90 percent of elementary school teachers in the United States are female) related to their female students’ math achievement at the end of the school year—the higher a teacher’s math anxiety, the lower her female students’ math achievement by the end of the school year (that’s after accounting for girls’ beginning-of-the-year math achievement and teachers’ math knowledge). Initially, we interpreted our findings as being specific to girls (a transmission of math negativity from female teachers to female students). However, in a large-scale follow-up enlisting more than 70 teachers and 650 of their first- and second-grade students, we found that teachers’ math anxiety also is negatively related to boys’ math achievement (albeit not as strongly) at the end of the school year. Regardless of a student’s gender, his or her teacher’s math anxiety seems to carry implications for the student’s level of math achievement.

Of course, there are many sources from which negativity about math could develop—ranging from parents to the media. But, clearly, information about positive and negative aspects of math can be found in the classroom, and it seems, at least at first glance, that not only do kids pick up on this negativity but it also carries implications for their math achievement across the school year.

**A course on how to teach math concepts seems to be more effective in addressing math anxiety among pre-service teachers than a course on math concepts themselves.**

**What Can Teachers Do about Math Anxiety?**

While there is still a lot of work to be done to gain a complete understanding of math anxiety, knowing something about where math anxiety comes from, how it relates to math performance, and whom it is most likely to affect helps us start to think about the remediation of math anxiety.

**Ensure fundamental skills.** Enhancing basic numerical and spatial processing may help guard against the development of math anxiety in young students. Research shows that the quality of numerical and spatial talk by parents in the home is related to children’s math and spatial skills. Thus, something as simple as encouraging parents to engage with young children around math may help ensure that children come to school with basic mathematical competencies that help prevent math anxiety. On the flip side, identification of at-risk students, coupled with targeted exercises designed to boost their basic mathematical competencies and regulate their potential anxieties, may help to prevent at-risk children from developing math anxiety.

**Focus on teacher training.** Knowledge that a teacher’s math anxiety can affect her students’ math achievement suggests that we also need to ensure that teachers feel fully confident in their preparation to teach math. Researchers have found that a course focused on *how* to teach math concepts was more effective in addressing math anxiety among pre-service teachers than a course focused directly on the math concepts themselves. This point is especially salient with the onset of new curricula prompted by the Common Core State Standards. Even experienced teachers may be asked to teach new material.

**Try reducing anxiety through a writing exercise.** Giving students the opportunity to write freely about their emotions for about 10 minutes with respect to a specific situation (e.g., an
When students struggle, teachers should acknowledge that the work is challenging but that they can do it.

Take the next several minutes to write as openly as possible about your thoughts and feelings regarding the exam you are about to take. In your writing, really let yourself go and explore your emotions and thoughts as you are getting ready to start the exam. You might relate your current thoughts to the way you have felt during other similar situations at school or in other situations in your life. Please try to be as open as possible as you write about your thoughts at this time.

Think carefully about what to say when students struggle. When a student struggles with math (or any subject), it’s natural to want to console him. You can see he’s frustrated and unhappy, and you want to help him feel better. But consoling the student—by saying, for example, “It’s OK, not everyone can be good at these types of problems”—may send the wrong message. The student may understand the subtext to be, “You’ve failed, and I am really sorry about that, but I’m not contradicting your conclusion that this math work is too hard for you.” Consolation sends a subtle message that validates the student’s opinion that he’s not good at math, and can lower a student’s motivations and expectations for future performances.

A better message is only slightly different: “Yes, this work is challenging, but I know that with hard work you can do it!” This acknowledges the student’s experience—there’s no sugarcoating the fact that he can’t do it—but it expresses confidence that he has the capability. Also, giving concrete strategies for changing up study habits or for approaching a particular problem differently in the future helps him understand that, with added hard work and effort, he has the potential for success.

Endnotes


(Continued on page 43)
Writing about Writing
The Challenge of Helping Students “Get It Down on Paper”

By Andy Waddell

In the 1954 novel The Horse and His Boy, part of “The Chronicles of Narnia” series by C. S. Lewis, an aristocratic young lady from a country called Calormen is called upon to relate her tale. Lewis describes the lady’s audience as listening avidly, “For in Calormen, story-telling (whether the stories are true or made up) is a thing you’re taught, just as English boys and girls are taught essay-writing. The difference is that people want to hear the stories, whereas I never heard of anyone who wanted to read the essays.” How true, how depressingly true!

As an English teacher, nothing I do is as important as teaching writing, and nothing is harder than getting a bunch of high school students to produce anything worth reading. After a quarter century on the job, it is still by far my biggest challenge.

Student essays are by and large dreadful concoctions of misremembered facts, misinterpreted passages, and misunderstood ideas, all spewed out in mangled grammar and creative spelling, cobbled together with a formulaic structure. No wonder I carry my stacks of papers home with a heavy heart. Nightly, they perch at the edge of my table like Poe’s raven, mocking me while I find something—anything—I absolutely must do first before I begin grading. Just one quick check of my email, maybe a tiny glance at Facebook, a short game of Spider Solitaire because I’m pretty sure it’s good for keeping my mind sharp—and then it’s down to business. Speaking of which, am I really prepared for tomorrow? Wouldn’t it be more productive to create a brand-new, exciting lesson plan than expend all my energies on putting red marks on a paper for students to throw away? And besides, to be fair to the students, I really need a time when I have total concentration. 10:00 p.m. already? I have to get up in seven hours. When will I be done grading? Nevermore.

Even so, I gnaw away at the edges of the stacks. My intention always is to limit myself to five minutes per paper, but more often than not it takes about 10. I have 150 students. At five minutes each, with no breaks, I can get through them all in 12 and a half hours. With breaks? Well, that’s another matter.

I pull out my trusty red pen and begin circling words and writing “SP” (spelling error) next to them. Naturally, the old standards “alot,” “narrator,” and “writting” rear their ugly heads, along with the classic homonyms: there/their/they’re, and to/too/two. Spelling is the least of my worries, but I do feel students need to at least be informed of their errors, as this is the primary way in which their writing will be judged after they leave school.

Whenever people gripe to me about how poorly others write, they inevitably refer to the misspelling they most recently read. If they know I’m a teacher, this is usually accompanied by a rant about

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Whenever I tell another teacher I teach English, he inevitably shakes his head and says, “Oh, that’s tough—you have all those papers to grade.”

Then there are those errors that are tough to pin down. I try not to use the old favorite “Awk,” meaning awkward, as this is meaningless to students, but I am a big fan of “N.C.” for not clear and the more emphatic all-caps “WHAT?,” which are probably no more helpful. Clarity cannot be mended by a comment.

By the time I’m ready to pull out the rubric and decide if the organization is “below standard” or “approaching standard,” whether the thesis was “insightful” or merely “clear,” and whether the grammar, usage, and spelling errors “impede meaning,” the paper looks like a crime scene. I try to add in a positive comment regarding the content of the essay, and I’m on to the next paper.

Seeing the Bigger Picture

The full-blown, complete, graded essay is only one way to improve writing, and may not be the most effective if students merely glance at the comments, check the grade, and chuck the paper. I’ve tried forcing them to rewrite their papers, making all the noted edits, but this requires me to reread every essay and becomes more of a burden on me than on them. I have had more success with requiring students to write in their own words an explanation of why they received their grade. This I attach to the paper before it goes into their file.

Students who wish to improve, and who take the exercise seriously, can at least be made aware of what they have to work on. I also always offer to speak individually with them to explain how they can write better. Conferencing of this type, with paper in hand, is extremely effective, but it is of course time-consuming. Very few take me up on the offer, and I’m not sure how I’d handle it if more of them did.

Whenever I meet another teacher and tell him I teach English, he inevitably shakes his head sympathetically and says, “Oh, that’s tough—you have all those papers to grade.” I accept this pity graciously; understanding the intended kindness, but inside I’m seething. I have to bite my tongue to keep from blurting, “Why don’t you have papers to grade?” What do we teach that cannot be expressed in words? Which of my fine colleagues received degrees in their particular disciplines without writing about the subject?

I recently spent virtually my entire winter break reading 120 8- to 10-page research papers that are a required part of our junior English classes. Nine out of 10 of these papers were on social studies topics, and the 10th dealt with science. None concerned literature, language, or anything else in my area of expertise. Hour after hour, day after day, paper after paper, I found my resentment growing. I thought about all the class time I had expended in teaching research methods, evaluating sources, and citing information, and how many things about American literature I had never gotten around to. It’s not that I am against research; in fact, I think it should be a part of every class. But if there is any class where a research paper really belongs, that class is history, because research is what history is.* That is what historians do. Teaching history or any of the social sciences without teaching research is like teaching math without doing any problems.

Research, I am told by my colleagues, is not part of the California State Content Standards for history. This is not entirely true. The old standards call for high school students to “construct and test hypotheses; collect, evaluate, and employ information from multiple primary and secondary sources; and apply it in oral and written presentations.” At my school, as far as I can tell, this is much more often applied to group posters and PowerPoint presentations than to individual research and writing. And when writing is used in these classes, mainly for exams, the teachers tell me they merely

scan for key words and devote no part of the grade to how logically or clearly the information is presented.

In this regard, I have high hopes for the new Common Core State Standards, which call for students to “write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.” Note that this standard applies to history/social studies, science, and technical subjects, as well as English. Furthermore, certain standards—such as “Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic,” and “Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing” (emphasis added)—clearly spell out that we are now expected to do what we should have been doing all along: use writing to teach subject matter, and use subject matter to teach writing. In the meantime, the burden still falls disproportionately on us English teachers to make students express themselves coherently, and then to evaluate whether they’ve done it.

This brooding is not helping me, so I refocus on grading. After an hour or two, a strange thing happens: I start to enjoy myself. The papers don’t improve exactly but a calm descends over me. I stop marking every single error, and when I do slash away with “Old Red,” a sense of ironic detachment has displaced my former despondency. The same errors that enraged me begin to make me smile as I hear the students’ personalities come through. Even the worst papers often have a sense of voice, albeit often inappropriate to the task at hand.

One of my students, a hulking young lad who came into the final with a solid 30 percent grade, nevertheless did take time to write the essay, an evaluation of a quote by Thoreau. His opening—“You want my opinion? YOU WANT MY OPINION?!”—made me laugh so hard I disturbed the patrons around me at the coffee shop where I was grading and woke the gentleman at a nearby table. It was impossible for me to read the line without seeing the young man’s face.

I wouldn’t say that my standards flag; it’s just that I start to see the bigger picture. As public school teachers, we must take whatever students come our way and move them forward. And, although it’s sometimes tough to see, they do improve. My school keeps writing portfolios of all our students. Sometimes, I look through the folder of one of my better writers and am amazed to see how poorly she wrote freshman year. And when I check the file of a poor writer, I often find that two years before she was a God-awful, horrible writer. Improvement is improvement.

Preparing to Write

Is it any surprise that the first step of writing is having something to say? New York Times columnist David Brooks tells his students at Yale that “by the time they sit down at the keyboard to write their essays, they should be at least 80 percent done. That’s because ‘writing’ is mostly gathering and structuring ideas.” Brooks calls his method, by the way, “geographical”—piles of notes scattered across a rug until he figures out a logical order for them.

Prewriting—whether through clustering, outlining, brainstorming, or pair-share discussion—helps students summon up what they have to say and come up with at least some idea of how to say it. Of course, it only works if they have the knowledge to back up their assertions. For a history paper, this means research; for a science paper, experimentation; for a literature essay, it means a close reading of the text. Only then, after gathering enough knowledge to have an opinion, after marshaling the requisite proof, is the student really ready to write.

Next comes drafting. The mantra is: “Just get it down on paper. Don’t worry about spelling and grammar. We can fix it later.” Anne Lamott, in her book Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life, makes a solid case for the shoddy first draft as a necessary part of the creative process. She warns against perfectionism, which she dubs “the voice of the oppressor.” As a writer, I am completely hypocritical on this point. I tend to micromanage my own production, wordsmithing to a ridiculous degree, slashing at the backspace key again and again before I complete a simple paragraph. Still, I see the value in the approach, so when I see a student staring at the blank page as the appointed hour wears away, I siddle up to the desk and whisper, “Just get it down on paper. Don’t worry about spelling and grammar. We can fix it later.”

The Common Core State Standards spell out what we should have been doing all along: use writing to teach subject matter, and use subject matter to teach writing.

The next stage, revision, is the most difficult. Revision involves looking hard at one’s writing to see if the objective has been met. Has the question been answered? Has the thesis been proven? Is there sufficient proof? Is the organization logical? In other words, is the paper clear?

My students are used to assignments that are extremely prescriptive: a literature-based question neatly formulated to be answered with three main supports, hence with introduction and conclusion, the standard five-paragraph essay. This form, as ancient and versatile as the Pee Chee folder, achieved its apex with the advent of the Jane Schaffer Writing Program. In the 1990s, Schaffer further mechanized the writing process by breaking down the body paragraph into a specified series of concrete details (typically quotes from the text) and commentaries on those details. The result is neither exciting nor artistic, but it does provide a common language to use when speaking of revision.

Students can check their own or each other’s papers by simply asking, “Are there two specific details per body paragraph?” “Are they correctly introduced?” “Do the comments show clearly how these details help to prove the thesis?”

When I meet college writing instructors, they invariably say, “The first thing I tell my class is, ‘I’m going to unteach everything you learned in high school.’” I smile politely, and suppress the urge to argue. This old game persists at all levels of education:
we blame the teachers before us. I know we high school teachers like to mutter under our breath about the education our students get in middle school, and I have no doubt that the middle school teachers also sit around the staff room and gripe about how their students come to them knowing “absolutely nothing.”

My students typically enter high school knowing three things about writing: first, that no sentence may begin with the word “because,” second, that a paragraph is by definition five sentences long, and third, that they must begin an essay with a “grabber,” usually in the form of a rhetorical question. They are nonplussed when I inform them that the first two are not true, and they are dumbfounded when many of my colleagues flatly disallow beginning any essay with a question. I don’t go as far as that, because the right question can in fact focus the reader’s intentions. So when I hear the professors whine, I let it go. I know they mean the formulaic, five-paragraph essay. I know how dull these are, and how tightly students can cling to this formula, even when it does not apply.

I also know these professors have never seen the stream-of-very-little-consciousness plot summary that is the first paper of the incoming ninth-grader. They have no idea of the labor it took to mold this inchoate mess into the formulaic writing they’re complaining about. I teach the five-paragraph essay. I teach the Jane Schaffer method, and I have seen firsthand its power to create confident writers. It is true that it imposes an artificial structure, but it is a first step, and only a first step.

The Importance of Practice

In my district, we administer Performance-Based Assessments (PBAs) twice a year. These timed essays are read by two teachers, and the scores become part of the student’s record. I’m proud to be part of a district that puts this emphasis on writing, as opposed to relying on another multiple-choice test, but it is a good example of how even a good assessment limits instruction. Because I know that my students’ papers are going to be read by other teachers, and because that reflects on me, I feel pressure to bring my students in line with district expectations. For the most part, this is an excellent practice that has no doubt raised the overall writing level of our students.

On the other hand, practicing for the test takes up quite a bit of time that could be spent on other types of writing. I also know that anything that varies from the set standards will likely receive a poor score, even if it is clear and logical. Readers are looking for five paragraphs, with a thesis at the end of the first paragraph and topic sentences at the beginning of each body paragraph. A writer skillful enough to imply his thesis is likely to fail.

This is the tyranny of the test. To be fair, we do grade holistically against a rubric; it’s not like the olden days when teachers just marked two points off for each spelling error, and minus five for each comma fault. Even so, to be reliable, tests must be uniform. To be considered important, results must be quantifiable. The data produced is indeed worthwhile, but we should be aware that not everything worthwhile is easily reducible to numbers on a chart. We run the risk of overvaluing anything that can be simply checked off and undervaluing everything that cannot.

For example, the year I came to my current school, the administration asked each department to provide three measurable goals for our students for the year. At my first department meeting, the first goal to make it on the list was, I kid you not, “M.L.A. (Modern Language Association) format.” When I suggested that perhaps that wasn’t one of our three main problems, I was told, “Yeah, but it has to be measurable.” So voice, tone, style, syntax, and even clarity lost out to making sure our students know whether the period goes before or after the citation. Fortunately, like most directives from administration, this one had no effect whatsoever. The goals were written on a chart somewhere and never looked at again.

The first PBA that my freshmen face is the simplest. They must read a story and write an essay explaining how the character changes as a result of the challenges he or she faces. This is a perfect fit for ninth-graders learning how to write the classic five paragraphs. One body paragraph about the character in the beginning, one on the challenges faced, and one on the newly transformed person we see at the end of the story. Formulate an introduction and a conclusion, provide decent proof, and you’ve got yourself a passing paper.

Before they ever sit down to write their own attempt at this topic, I prepare them for this task by having them write a group essay as an entire class. The essay is based on an excerpt from Black Boy by Richard Wright. In this section, 6-year-old Richard must take charge of the family’s shopping as his mother is gone all day working. At first pleased with this grown-up responsibility, Richard’s pride soon turns to fear when he is attacked and robbed by a group of bigger

Only after gathering enough knowledge to have an opinion, after marshaling the requisite proof, is the student really ready to write.
Boys. He turns to his mother for comfort, but she refuses, instead giving him more money, a big stick, and instructions to return with the groceries or not at all. Forced to overcome his fears, Richard wields his club like a wild man, not only protecting himself from robbery but chasing the boys home and even threatening to beat their parents who come out to protect them. He writes, “On my way back I kept my stick poised for instant use, but there was not a single boy in sight. That night I won the right to the streets of Memphis.”

The story is highly engaging and the transformation so clear that writing the essay is simple. First, I ask for words to describe Richard in the beginning: “scared,” “mama’s boy,” “naive,” “stupid,” “typical little kid,” etc. I write them all down on the board. “OK, now read over that part and find two quotes from the story that show he is scared or naive or a mama’s boy.” I have them mark the quotes in the story and then share with the person next to them. Each pair reads the best quote aloud until we have four or five to choose from.

Next, I seek descriptions of Richard at the end: “fearless,” “crazy,” “violent,” “gangster,” and so forth. Again, they repeat the process of finding good evidence from the text. We discuss which words are more effective and more accurate, and choose two adjectives and a noun from each list. I ask for words to describe the challenges that transform him: “fight,” “anger,” “stand up for himself,” “mother.”

Once I have their words, we can create a thesis. “In Black Boy by Richard Wright, a naive, scared mama’s boy transforms into a fearless, violent gangster when his mother makes him stand up for himself.” Besides telling them we need to mention the author and title, every word comes from them. Even if I disagree with them (for instance, whether any 6-year-old can be called a gangster), I bite my tongue and write it down. And that is how we proceed.

I type our essay into my computer and project it onto the screen. “OK, what’s our first body paragraph about?” I ask. “What he’s like in the beginning,” they shout back. “So what’s he like now?” We decide to write: “In the beginning of the story, Richard is just a typical 6-year-old. OK—that’s our topic sentence—that’s what this particular paragraph is about. Next, I ask for a quote that shows him as a typical little kid. They choose “I was proud; I felt like a grownup.” “When was that?” I ask. “When his mom tells him he’s going to the store alone,” they tell me. I write: “When his mother tells him he is going to the store alone, Richard says ‘I was proud; I felt like a grownup.’” I say, “See how I introduced the quote? OK, so why does that show he’s a typical little kid?” After some discussion, they tell me that only a little kid would get excited about grocery shopping, and it also shows that he’s a mama’s boy who wants to impress his mother. These become our two commentary sentences.

These are “well-developed” paragraphs, seven to eight sentences each. Each body paragraph has two concrete details, in this case quotes from the text, with two sentences commenting on each one, explaining how the evidence proves the thesis. This process goes on and on until the students beg for mercy. Their hands are hurting. They’ve never written so much in their lives. When we’ve finished, we read it aloud and it’s not half bad. It may not be immortal prose, but it’s clear, coherent, and answers the prompt. Most important, if I’ve done it right and not given in to impatience, it is all their words.

I prove to the students that they already have enough insight and skill to speak about what the author accomplished and the effect he or she created.

When it comes time for them to write their own, I can project the file again and do a quick debrief. Remember writing this? What was this sentence here at the end of the first paragraph? Right, the thesis. How did we get that? Etc., etc., etc. Now you’re going to do the same thing with a different story.

My idea is to demystify the process. By using their words, I prove to them that they, in fact, already have enough insight and skill to meet this new high school expectation, not just to retell the story, but to speak about what the author accomplished and the effect he or she created. In other words, they are writing about writing.

The next day, the training wheels are off; they’re reading something brand new to them and writing about it. Facts are being misremembered, passages misinterpreted, and ideas misunderstood. Their grammar is as mangled as ever, their spelling just as creative. Some are struggling to recall the simple structure taught the day before. One or two are simply blinking at the terrible white sheet. “Just get it down on paper,” I whisper to them. “Don’t worry about spelling and grammar. You can fix it later.”

Class is quiet now, only the scritch-scratch of pen on paper. Their brows are furrowed. I can see they’re struggling. Of course they are; they’re writing.
A Close Connection

THE LINKS BETWEEN education and lifelong health are stronger now than ever, according to a project of the Center on Society and Health at Virginia Commonwealth University. The center’s Education and Health Initiative, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is an effort to raise awareness that Americans without a high school diploma experience poorer health and shorter life expectancy rates than their better-educated peers.

Between 1990 and 2008, the difference in life expectancy between the most- and least-educated Americans grew from 13 to 14 years among males and from 8 to 10 years among females. The center’s report introducing the initiative states that this difference has been growing since the 1960s.

Major diseases, such as heart disease and diabetes, are also more likely to affect less-educated Americans. “By 2011, the prevalence of diabetes had reached 15 percent for adults without a high school education, compared with 7 percent for college graduates,” the report states. In addition, risk factors, such as smoking and obesity, that contribute to disease are more likely to affect those with less education. The report states that by 2011, 27 percent of people without a high school diploma or GED reported smoking, but only 8 percent of those with a bachelor’s degree were smokers.

When it comes to life expectancy among racial groups, differences persist. But “education—and the social factors associated with education—are transcending the influence of race on health,” according to the report. African Americans with a college education live longer than whites with less than a high school education. Although highly educated African Americans (those with at least 16 years of education) live four years less than comparably educated whites, they can expect to live eight years longer than whites who have less than 12 years of education.

The report also notes increasing disparities in life expectancy among better- and less-educated whites. Between 1990 and 2008, among whites with less than 12 years of education, life expectancy at age 25 decreased by more than three years for men and by more than five years for women.

“More education leads to higher earnings that can provide access to healthy food, safer homes, and better health care,” the report says. Because of this connection, the center calls for investments in early child care, affordable housing, and economic development to improve living conditions in communities. The report is available at www.bit.ly/1dotLBW.

The Promise of Community Schools

A REVIEW OF RESEARCH on community schools—schools that partner with outside groups to provide wraparound services to support the social, emotional, and health needs of students and their families—finds they have promise in helping low-income youth reach their potential.*

“School success (or failure) is the product of multiple and varied factors at the individual, family, and school levels,” according to a white paper titled “Integrated Student Supports: A Summary of the Evidence Base for Policymakers,” which is based on Making the Grade: Assessing the Evidence for Integrated Student Supports, a report published by Child Trends. “This suggests that providing an array of academic and non-academic supports in a coordinated fashion, as ISS does, is a more effective strategy than focusing on one, or a small set of, supports.”

The white paper notes that integrated student supports (or ISS)—another name for the community schools approach—includes connecting students and their families to medical care, parent education, family counseling, food banks, and employment assistance, among other services. Such programs serve more than 1.5 million students, many of whom are at-risk, in nearly 3,000 schools nationwide. According to Child Trends, more than 75 percent of students enrolled in these programs are African American or Hispanic.

Based on 11 rigorous evaluations, this study finds that community schools “can contribute to student academic progress as measured by decreases in grade retention and dropout, and increases in attendance, math and reading achievement, and overall GPA.”

The study also finds a positive return on investment in such programs, “ranging from more than $4 saved for every $1 invested to almost $15 saved for every $1 invested.”

The white paper is available at www.bit.ly/0tDfmx, and the full report is available at www.bit.ly/1p8tNjN.

SHARE MY LESSON SOARS IN POPULARITY

In less than two years, more than 500,000 teachers, parents, and others have used Share My Lesson, the free online resource created by the AFT and TES Connect, making it one of the most sought-out collections of lesson plans and resources. Winner of the Software & Information Industry Association’s 2014 CODiE Award for Best Crowd Sourced Solution, Share My Lesson now offers more than 300,000 free lesson plans—including more than 31,000 materials aligned to the Common Core State Standards—along with videos, handouts, and teaching and parenting tips. More than 5.5 million resources have been downloaded from Share My Lesson, with a recent average of 10,000 downloads daily. Find out more at http://go.aft.org/AE214news4.

TOO SMALL TO FAIL IN TULSA

In March, community leaders in Tulsa, Oklahoma, joined with Too Small to Fail, a joint initiative of Next Generation and the Bill, Hillary & Chelsea Clinton Foundation, to launch a campaign that will help parents and caregivers of children ages 5 and under prepare their children for success in school and life. Called “Talking Is Teaching,” the campaign will emphasize how simple actions like describing objects seen during a walk or bus ride, singing songs, or telling short stories a few times a day can significantly improve a baby’s ability to learn new words and concepts. Tulsa has emerged as a national leader in early childhood education, and the campaign is being developed in partnership with local organizations. Read more at www.bit.ly/1gMc40G.

GROWING CONCERNS OVER COMMON CORE IMPLEMENTATION

The Learning First Alliance (LFA), which includes the AFT among its members, is calling on policymakers to allow more time for implementing the Common Core State Standards, particularly the high-stakes consequences tied to Common Core testing, to ensure the required instructional alignment and supports are provided. “Rushing to make high-stakes decisions such as student advancement or graduation, teacher evaluation, school performance designation or state funding awards based on assessments of the standards before they have been fully and properly implemented is unwise,” the LFA statement says. More information is available at http://go.aft.org/AE214news2.

In spring 2013, the AFT called for a moratorium on assessment-driven sanctions tied to the Common Core standards until solid implementation plans are embedded in schools and after a year or more of field testing. Read the press release at http://go.aft.org/AE214news3.

WANTED: TESTING TRANSPARENCY

AFT President Randi Weingarten pressed the corporate testing giant Pearson to remove “gag orders” preventing educators from expressing concerns about company-developed tests. “Principals and teachers in New York who recently administered the Pearson-developed Common Core tests have said they are barred from speaking about the test content and its effects on students,” reported Weingarten. She said the forced silence comes from contracts tied to the tests that are executed by Pearson, the largest testing company in the world. In a letter hand-delivered to Pearson executives in London during the company’s annual shareholder meeting, the AFT demanded that the company “immediately remove these prohibitions (referred to as ‘gag orders’ in the press) from existing and future contracts.” The letter is available at http://go.aft.org/AE214news1.

INSIDE THE “BLACK BOX”

Good teachers are receiving poor evaluations because of a grossly flawed value-added algorithm that should be changed, seven Houston teachers and the Houston Federation of Teachers said May 1 in an unprecedented lawsuit filed in a federal district court. The lawsuit details numerous problems with the Houston Independent School District’s Education Value-Added Assessment System. Its statistical formula uses a student’s performance on prior standardized tests to predict current-year academic growth and to measure the effect, or added value, each teacher has on a student’s academic growth over the school year. What is considered a sufficient level of student growth is not defined, however, and the school district uses this deeply flawed methodology for decisions about teacher evaluation, bonuses, and termination in a “black box” system in which the calculation is considered proprietary and confidential. The legal brief can be found at http://go.aft.org/AE214news5.

PARTNERSHIPS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

The AFT has joined a broad coalition of education groups to release a blueprint for better-coordinated support systems for all children in public schools. “Partnerships, Not Pushouts—A Guide for School Board Members: Community Partnerships for Student Success” lays the groundwork for policy recommendations, including the use of community school resource coordinators to develop “Personal Opportunity Plans” for each student. Members of the coalition include the Alliance for Excellent Education; the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL); the Coalition for Community Schools; the National Education Association; the National School Boards Association; and the Rural School and Community Trust. More information is available at www.bit.ly/QvvzRL.
Spend Some of Your Summer with Share My Lesson

As the school year comes to a close, we know that many of you will be reflecting on how things went, taking a well-deserved vacation, and then getting right back in the groove to prepare for the fall. Whenever you’re ready, Share My Lesson offers access to thousands of free resources and a community of colleagues. Just follow these steps, and you’ll be well on your way:

1. Register on ShareMyLesson.com
   If you aren’t registered on Share My Lesson, you should be! More than a half-million people who work with students are registered on the site, sharing resources with each other. Registering is quick and easy. Just go to ShareMyLesson.com, click on the red “Join Us” button, and fill out the form.

2. Search for resources
   Once you’re registered, start browsing. You’ll find various resources covering all subjects and grades. If it is your first visit to the site, you might find it helpful to start with the Teacher Care Packages (www.bit.ly/PXdonf), which showcase users’ favorite resources. Care Packages include links to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), resources that are aligned to each of the standards, and lesson plans for teaching specific celebrations, heritage months, and historic events. Care Packages are regularly updated to reflect new additions. Be sure to bookmark this page and visit it often!

   Interested in resources about the Common Core? In addition to CCSS-aligned classroom materials, Share My Lesson houses a wealth of professional development materials for teachers looking to learn more about these standards. You’ll find the standards themselves, sample assessment questions, webinars (www.bit.ly/Sh7fEF) with education researchers and experts, sample parent letters (www.bit.ly/1kB4vuL), and more. To see the full range of available materials, check out the Common Core Information Center (www.bit.ly/1kB4KpQ).

3. Share your resources
   Do you have a favorite lesson or worksheet? Share it on Share My Lesson. It’s easy: log on to Share My Lesson, click on “Teaching Resources,” click on “Add a Resource” at the top of the page, fill out the form, upload your resource, and hit “Save.” It is really that simple.

   Summer break is a great time to take a close look at the materials you’ve prepared and get them ready for others to use as well. One AFT member likened the sharing process to getting ready for an open house. You find yourself wanting to make your resource more attractive and/or user-friendly for the next person who wants to download and use it.

4. Become a Share My Lesson ambassador
   Members across the country are signing up to be ambassadors of Share My Lesson. Ambassadors spread the word about this terrific website through social media, blog posts, and conference presentations, and they review resources for alignment to the Common Core and help with the development of new sections of the website (two recent additions cover early childhood education and STEM education).

   Much of this development work occurs through weekend events where members brainstorm ideas for the website, share lessons, learn how to assess whether a lesson plan aligns with the Common Core, and review and rate resources. Attendees have said that these events are both fun and professionally engaging; many have noted they are among the best professional development they’ve ever received. Read about one member’s experience on the AFT’s new “Voices from the Classroom” blog at www.bit.ly/RbdZTk.

   Interested in becoming a Share My Lesson ambassador? Just send an email to share@aft.org.

SHARE MY LESSON

As the school year comes to a close, we know that many of you will be reflecting on how things went, taking a well-deserved vacation, and then getting right back in the groove to prepare for the fall. Whenever you’re ready, Share My Lesson offers access to thousands of free resources and a community of colleagues. Just follow these steps, and you’ll be well on your way:

1. Register on ShareMyLesson.com
   If you aren’t registered on Share My Lesson, you should be! More than a half-million people who work with students are registered on the site, sharing resources with each other. Registering is quick and easy. Just go to ShareMyLesson.com, click on the red “Join Us” button, and fill out the form.

2. Search for resources
   Once you’re registered, start browsing. You’ll find various resources covering all subjects and grades. If it is your first visit to the site, you might find it helpful to start with the Teacher Care Packages (www.bit.ly/PXdonf), which showcase users’ favorite resources. Care Packages include links to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), resources that are aligned to each of the standards, and lesson plans for teaching specific celebrations, heritage months, and historic events. Care Packages are regularly updated to reflect new additions. Be sure to bookmark this page and visit it often!

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   Interested in becoming a Share My Lesson ambassador? Just send an email to share@aft.org.

FUN SUMMER CHECKLIST

- Travel
- Read some books
- Relax
- Explore Share My Lesson!
- Catch up on movies
- Buy more sunscreen
- Make popsicles
- Go hiking
- Do some gardening

Sixty-six teachers attended the February 2014 Share My Lesson marathon in Denver, Colorado. Larry Bello and Carlos Vargas, from the Perth Amboy Federation, are shown on the right; Bobbi Jo Rademacher, from the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers, is shown below.
\textbf{Transitioning to Kindergarten:}

\textit{A Toolkit for Early Childhood Educators}

As documented throughout these pages, research clearly shows the importance of early education to student learning. We all want to provide children with strong educational and social experiences well before kindergarten and formal schooling even begin. An early start, after all, gives students the best possible chance to succeed.

The AFT and the National Center for Learning Disabilities have created a toolkit to help educators implement strategies as their students make the transition to kindergarten. Whether you are a school administrator, early childhood professional, paraprofessional, child care provider, or kindergarten teacher, you will find practical, easy-to-use resources to engage students and parents alike.

Highlights of this toolkit include:

- **School Readiness**
  - \url{http://go.aft.org/AE214ftf1}
  - How do you know if a child is ready for kindergarten? The time that you spend with a child every day can give you lots of information about how he or she is progressing. This section contains a helpful guide on creating an “Early Learning Passport,” a kindergarten readiness indicators checklist, an observation and activity guide, and a template for drawing and writing.

- **Get Ready to Read!**
  - \url{http://go.aft.org/AE214ftf2}
  - The Get Ready to Read! Screening Tool is intended to provide early childhood professionals and parents with a snapshot of where a child is on the path to developing important early literacy skills, including print knowledge, linguistic awareness, and emergent writing.

- **For Parents**
  - \url{http://go.aft.org/AE214ftf3, and http://go.aft.org/AE214ftf4} in Spanish
  - This section guides parents through the process of sharing what they know about their child with the kindergarten teacher, including noting any special services the child is receiving. It gives parents the opportunity to pass along important information about the child’s likes and dislikes, the child’s strengths and weaknesses, and any early warning signs that may have been observed.

\textit{–FROM THE AFT’S EDUCATIONAL ISSUES DEPARTMENT}

\section*{RESOURCES}

\textbf{LISTEN CAREFULLY}

A website designed to help parents encourage their children to practice safe listening habits when using headphones and iPods also provides resources for teachers looking to educate students about the damaging effects of hearing loss. As part of its “Listen to Your Buds” public education campaign, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) has created lesson plans and classroom activities, available at \url{www.asha.org/Buds/Lesson-Plans}, that remind students to turn down the volume and take listening breaks when using personal audio devices.

As the site makes clear, hearing loss can contribute to academic, language, and social problems in school. To that end, ASHA has compiled several classroom resources on noise-induced hearing loss. These include “How Your Brain Understands What Your Ear Hears,” a curriculum supplement for grades 7 and 8 that explains the connections between hearing, language, and communication; “I Love What I Hear!”, which features classroom activities for grades 3–6 to help students learn how to protect their hearing and understand the science of sound; and “Dangerous Decibels,” a curriculum supplement for grades K–8 with activities for learning the anatomy and physiology of hearing and how to practice healthy behaviors for preventing hearing loss due to unsafe sound.

\section*{WHAT’S UP WITH THE WEATHER?}

A vast array of information for science teachers looking to supplement lessons at a variety of grade levels has been compiled by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and is available at \url{www.education.noaa.gov}. The site is filled with free lesson plans and activities on a range of topics, including wildfires, climate science, thunderstorms, blizzards, hurricanes, tornadoes, ocean currents, and environmental issues in the Great Lakes, along with detailed explanations of scientific concepts.

For instance, a resource on “Weather Systems and Patterns” includes a “Toasty Wind Lab” lesson in which elementary and middle school teachers can use a toaster “to show how infrared radiation produces convection currents and wind.” Another lesson for middle school students helps them understand air pressure, temperature, dew point, and pressure readings on a weather map, while a lesson for both middle and high school students examines air masses, weather systems, and forecasting.

The site also includes background information on each topic. For example, “pressure systems,” “meteorological processes,” and “severe weather” are important terms for students to know as they study weather systems and patterns. For students curious about careers in the field, the site provides links to video profiles of tornado chasers and hurricane hunters.
Elementary Curriculum Content
(Continued from page 23)

Endnotes


7. steak-schools, see www.act.org/products/additional-products-assessments/act-core-practice-framework. Rising to the Challenge. To learn more about the ACT Core Practice Framework, which identifies the successful practices of high-performing schools, see www.act.org/products/additional-products-assessments/act-core-practice-framework. ACT Core Practice Framework; and ACT, Rising to the Challenge. To learn more about the ACT Core Practice Framework, which identifies the successful practices of high-performing schools, see www.act.org/products/additional-products-assessments/act-core-practice-framework. ACT Core Practice Framework; and ACT, Rising to the Challenge.
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<td>Promethean Summer</td>
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Whether a child is in pre-K, Head Start, or child care, or at home with parents or caregivers, the transition to kindergarten can be an exciting but stressful time.

That is why the American Federation of Teachers and the National Center for Learning Disabilities have teamed up to offer the second edition of Transitioning to Kindergarten. Transitioning to Kindergarten, which is available at go.aft.org/t2k, is a free online toolkit with helpful resources in English and Spanish for:

- Early educators
- Parents
- Preschool-age children