Envisioning a Common Core Curriculum

Authors throughout this special issue of American Educator advocate for a common core curriculum. But what should such a curriculum look like? How specific should it be, and in what ways should it support teaching? As long as it is truly a core curriculum—leaving about one-third of instructional time free for districts, schools, and teachers to add their own materials and projects—we’ll venture to say that it should be detailed and specific, but not scripted. It should offer extensive support for teaching, such as lesson plans and classroom assessments, but using those supports should not be mandatory. The new Core Knowledge Language Arts Program for kindergarten through second grade seems to fit that description. While the program is new, pilot testing has demonstrated its effectiveness, and refinements based on teacher and researcher feedback are ongoing. In addition, the Core Knowledge Sequence, from which it is derived, has been used in schools across the country for 20 years. We hope this high-quality example will generate discussions throughout schools and statehouses about how detailed and supportive a common core curriculum for our nation ought to be.

—EDITORS

Listening and Learning
How a Carefully Crafted Language Arts Program Builds Knowledge and Strong Readers

The Core Knowledge Language Arts Program for kindergarten through second grade consists of two separate strands: (1) Skills and (2) Listening and Learning. The Skills Strand teaches sounds and the letters that represent them, beginning with the simplest sound-letter correspondences, and presenting reading and writing in tandem as inverse (decoding/encoding) procedures. Automaticity and fluency also are emphasized as students are given fully decodable texts to practice reading aloud independently. The Listening and Learning Strand builds students’ listening comprehension—a prerequisite to reading comprehension—by exposing students to complex texts that are read aloud daily, systematically increasing their vocabulary and knowledge. In each grade, 12 subject-matter domains—shown on the next page—are explored through fiction and nonfiction texts.

Although most widely used reading programs could improve their approach to reading skills (such as decoding and fluency), their primary weakness is building comprehension. Based on the mistaken belief that reading comprehension relies more on strategies (like finding the main idea) than on knowledge, they only minimally extend children’s knowledge, leaving students unprepared for more advanced texts in later grades. Therefore, here and on the following six pages, we have chosen to show excerpts from the Core Knowledge Language Arts Program’s Listening and Learning Strand. To download the Core Knowledge Sequence and learn more about the new program, see www.coreknowledge.org.
Comprehension Relies on Knowledge

Building Broad Knowledge: Key Domains Expand Children's View of the World

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Building Subject-Matter Knowledge: Solid Preparation for Academic Courses in Later Grades

**Literature**
Fiction is essential, but all stories are not of equal value. The selected fables, stories, myths, etc., in this program are as much a part of building subject-matter knowledge as the texts about science and social studies. Fictional works appear in each of the domains, with stories like “Bear, Gull, and Crow” in the Native Americans domain and “The Grasshopper and the Ants” in the Seasons and Weather domain.

**Science**
From insects to rainbows, children are very curious about the natural world. The science domains are sequenced to build knowledge within grades—as kindergartners progress from *Plants* to *Farms to Seasons and Weather to Taking Care of the Earth*—and across grades—as children learn about *The Five Senses* in kindergarten and then *The Human Body* in first grade.

**Social Studies**
Instead of merely “activating” children’s existing knowledge of their families and neighborhoods, these domains enlarge children’s knowledge. Careful sequencing allows content and ideas to build on each other—such as by moving from *Kings and Queens to Columbus and the Pilgrims to Presidents and American Symbols* in kindergarten, and on to *The Birth of Our Nation and Westward Expansion* in first and second grades.

Building Coherent Knowledge: Big Ideas Draw on Multiple Domains and Subjects

In addition to the domains being carefully selected to build essential subject-matter knowledge, they are also purposefully combined within and across grades to develop coherent knowledge. Take a closer look at the kindergarten domains. Several of the science domains help students better understand agriculture, which is essential to the knowledge being built in the social studies domains since early America was largely an agrarian society. An example of carefully constructed coherence across grades is the progression (illustrated above with solid purple arrows) from *Stories in kindergarten to Different Lands, Similar Stories, then Early World Civilizations and Early American Civilizations in first grade to Early Asian Civilizations, The Ancient Greek Civilization, and Greek Myths in second grade*. Looser but still vital connections are also built in, such as the *Plants, Farms, and Seasons and Weather domains in kindergarten* supporting comprehension of *Animals and Habitats* in first grade and then *Charlotte’s Web* in second grade (which is illustrated above with dashed arrows).

*Kindergarten and first-grade materials are currently available. Second-grade materials will be available in the summer of 2011.*
Knowledge Takes Time to Build

The Listening and Learning Strand of the Core Knowledge Language Arts Program contains 12 domains per grade, allowing one topic at a time to be studied for at least two weeks using a variety of texts and content-related activities. This focus on one topic at a time is the most efficient way to build students’ knowledge and vocabulary. Mastering new topics and new words requires hearing, thinking about, and discussing them repeatedly. Sticking with a topic is also more engaging and enjoyable, since the details (e.g., Mozart was a child prodigy who, at 5 years old, covered himself in ink as he began writing a concerto) are almost always more interesting than the introduction (e.g., Mozart was a composer).

Why Emphasize Read-Alouds?

Reading aloud to children is absolutely essential to building the knowledge that enables comprehension. Written language contains vastly more sophisticated vocabulary, ideas, and syntax than spoken language. So listening to a text read aloud has benefits that listening to a lecture, watching a movie, or engaging in a class discussion cannot provide (although these activities have their own benefits). In addition, students’ reading comprehension is not as advanced as their listening comprehension until they are 13 or 14 years old. The need for read-alouds in the early grades is obvious: young children cannot read at all, and children ages 5 to 8 are focused on decoding and gaining fluency. But even after age 9 or so, when most children can read some texts with comprehension, listening comprehension still far surpasses reading comprehension. Eighth-graders, for example, may be able to read their grade-level science textbook, but would still benefit from their teacher reading aloud a more advanced text, such as a popular book for adults by Isaac Asimov. Reading aloud is critical throughout elementary and middle school, even after students become independent readers. The knowledge and vocabulary they gain while listening will support their silent reading and allow them to move more quickly into advanced texts.
Read-Alouds Make for Rich Lessons

To maximize students’ learning, each read-aloud comes with a complete lesson, including clear objectives for both the language arts skills and the content knowledge to be mastered, core vocabulary, comprehension questions, and a broad array of extension activities. There are also “Guided Listening Supports” that prompt teachers to explain vocabulary and ask questions to actively engage students in processing and responding while they listen.

The lesson on the following three pages presents the “Teddy Roosevelt’s Hero” read-aloud, which is part of the Presidents and American Symbols domain in kindergarten.
**Lesson Objectives**

**Core Content Objectives**

Students will:
- Recognize Theodore Roosevelt as an important president of the United States
- Know that Theodore Roosevelt overcame childhood health problems
- Know that Theodore Roosevelt loved the outdoors

**Language Arts Objectives**

Students will:
- Use agreed-upon rules for group discussions, i.e., listen to the speaker, raise hand to speak, take turns, stay on topic, ask questions, participate in a conversation over four to five minutes (L.K.3)
- Identify and express physical sensations, mental states, and emotions of self and others (L.K.4)
- Listen to and understand a variety of texts, including stories, fairy tales, fables, historical narratives, informational text, nursery rhymes, and poems (L.K.11)
- Describe illustrations (L.K.13)
- Use new words from read-alouds and discussions (L.K.24)
- Make personal connections to events or experiences in a read-aloud (L.K.15)
- Answer questions that require making interpretations, judgments, or giving opinions about what is heard in a read-aloud, including answering “why” questions that require recognizing cause/effect relationships (L.K.17)
- Make personal connections to events or experiences in a read-aloud and/or make connections among several read-alouds (L.K.19)
- Learn new words from read-alouds and discussions (L.K.24)
- Retell important facts and information from a read-aloud

**Core Vocabulary**

- **education, n.** What someone has learned
  - Example: Because of her good education, Leah knew a lot about history.
  - Variation(s): none
- **expert, n.** Someone who knows a lot about a subject
  - Example: The zookeeper is an expert on wild animals and can tell you why they behave the way they do.
  - Variation(s): experts
- **judge, v.** To form an opinion about a person or a situation
  - Example: You should not judge a person by his or her looks; you should get to know the person.
  - Variation(s): judges, judged, judging

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**Introducing the Read-Aloud**

**What Have We Already Learned?**

Remind students that they have heard the stories of three former U.S. presidents so far in this domain. Tell students that you are going to say a statement about one of these great men and they are to name which of the three presidents the statement is about. Tell students their choices: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln.

- This president was admired for his honesty and has a cherry tree legend about him. (George Washington)
- These two presidents were two of the Founding Fathers who helped create the United States of America. (George Washington and Thomas Jefferson)
- This man had a talent for writing, and wrote the Declaration of Independence, a statement saying that the colonists were free from England and had the right to live, to be free, and to be happy. (Thomas Jefferson)
- This general fought England for American independence during the American Revolution. (George Washington)
- This man became the first president of the United States. (George Washington)
- This man became the third president of the United States. (Thomas Jefferson)
- This man known as “Honest Abe” was president during the U.S. Civil War and hid a paper under his hat that said all slaves were set free. (Abraham Lincoln)
- Ask: “Which of these three presidents do you admire the most? What things have they done to make you feel this way?” Remember to repeat and expand upon each response, using richer language, and more complex language, including, if possible, any read-aloud vocabulary. If a student’s response includes inaccurate factual information, refer back to earlier read-alouds and/or illustrations to correct any misunderstandings.

**Presenting the Read-Aloud**

Tell the students that today they will be listening to a story about another one of the past presidents of the United States, President Theodore Roosevelt. Explain to the students that, during the read-aloud, they will hear about one of President Roosevelt’s heroes.

**Discussing the Read-Aloud**

- Ask students to listen for the struggles that Roosevelt had as a child, and how he overcame those problems as he became an adult.
- Ask students to identify Theodore Roosevelt’s hero and the hero of Theodore Roosevelt’s father.
--Inquire about Roosevelt’s hero and the struggles Roosevelt had as a child and how he overcame those problems to become an adult.
- Ask students to identify Theodore Roosevelt’s hero and the hero of Theodore Roosevelt’s father.

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**Extensions**

- Complete Reminder of the Lesson Later in the Day

**Take-Home Material**

- Image Review
- Parent Letter
- Instructional Master 7B-1

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**Presidents and American Symbols 7A | Teddy Roosevelt’s Hero**
Teddy Roosevelt’s Hero

Everybody gets scared sometimes, but we can learn what to do about it. Today we are going to hear a true story about someone who decided that he would never let being scared stop him from doing what was right. This is a story about young Teddy Roosevelt.

His mother called him “Theodore” when she introduced him to her friends. His own friends called him “T. R.” for short. His father called him “Teddy” when saying something he especially wanted his son to remember. “Teddy,” he might say, “there is nothing more important than a good education,” and Teddy Roosevelt would listen. Teddy always listened to what his father said.

One day when Teddy was six years old, he and his younger brother, Elliott, were visiting their grandparents in New York City, where all the Roosevelt family lived. Teddy’s friend, Edith Carow (Car-oh), was with them, but the children were not playing as they usually did. They stood by a window with Mr. Roosevelt, Teddy’s father, and watched a train slowly moving by, not far from the house. Mr. Roosevelt said, “Inside that train is Abraham Lincoln, the president of the United States. President Lincoln died, and that train is taking him back to his home for his funeral.”

Teddy asked, “Why is the train moving so slowly, Father?”

“A lot of people loved Abraham Lincoln, Teddy, and thought he was a very good man. People are gathering out of respect for Abraham Lincoln. They want to say good-bye.”

Nobody gets scared sometimes, but we can learn what to do about it. Today we are going to hear a true story about someone who decided that he would never let being scared stop him from doing what was right. This is a story about young Teddy Roosevelt.

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“A lot of people loved Abraham Lincoln, Teddy, and thought he was a very good man. People are gathering out of respect for Abraham Lincoln. They want to say good-bye.”
What do you think it means that a man not by the kind of clothes he wears or whether he lives in a fancy part of town, but by the kind of things he does. I judge a man by the kind of things he does.

Mr. Roosevelt replied, "I think Abraham Lincoln was a great man, Teddy, and a great president. A great president can help a lot of people and do a lot of good things. Abraham Lincoln came from a poor family, but he worked hard. He was smart and kind, and loved the poor and needy, poor as they might be."

Teddy thought about this. "Do you think Mr. Roosevelt admired President Lincoln?"

"Yes," said Mr. Roosevelt. "I admire President Lincoln. He knew how to rule."

"I don't know," said Teddy. "I think Mr. Roosevelt admired Mr. Lincoln more than Mr. Lincoln admired Mr. Roosevelt."

"I think he admired Mr. Lincoln," said Mr. Roosevelt. "Mr. Lincoln was a great man."

"Why, some of the best people I have known hardly had two pennies to rub together."