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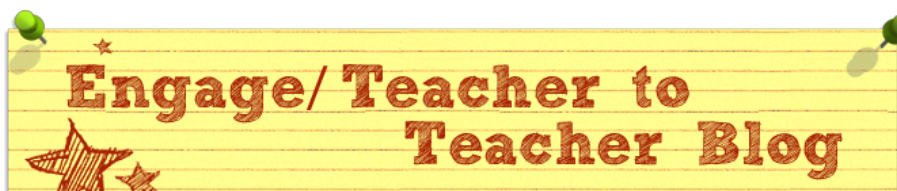
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Past IRA President Lesley Mandel Morrow on the Common Core



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The Common Core State Standards for Literacy: How Do We Make Them Work?

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The **Common Core State Standards** (CCSS) are an attempt to coordinate the education of the children the United States. So many families move from one place to another that we need continuity in the teaching of reading throughout the country. The CCSS raise questions of concern that deal with how to implement them and are their goals really the right goals for the children we teach.

One of the elements I like very much about these standards is that they are manageable. They don't involve a list of hundreds of skills to acquire in one school year. The standards are like a spiral staircase. That is, a standard in third grade builds on the same one in second, first and kindergarten. You can see a definitive continuum. Skills and

strategies are repeated but at a more complex level as one goes up the grades.



The ultimate goal of these standards is for students to become critical thinkers about what they read. Text becomes more complex and therefore the child is asked to engage in higher order thinking. The standards ask that the teacher expose children to varied types of text with equal emphasis on informational literature, and narrative literature. The standards guide children to read magazines, poetry, novels, newspapers, and more.

The CCSS are also intended to help children learn information and increase their vocabulary in many areas of the curriculum. To do this, the standards put an emphasis on integrating the use of literacy strategies into content areas such as social studies and science. Using themes for learning will help to achieve that goal. The standards also emphasize the need to be literate with technology.

Although there aren't any Pre-K national standards just yet, I believe there will be. Many states have Pre-K standards for literacy already. Therefore, it is important to include Pre-K in the discussion of the CCSS. At this time, we can adjust them for four-year-olds.

Most importantly, the standards suggest that every teacher is a teacher of reading and writing. That is, every teacher is teaching reading and writing whether it is during language arts, science or social studies.

The standards discuss six areas which include **(1) Narrative Literature** and **(2) Informational Literature**. In each of these two standards there are anchor standards that are the same and they include: Key Ideas and Details, Crafted Structure, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Range of Reading and Level of text Complexity.

The next major heading is **(3) Foundational Skills**. The anchor standards in this area are Print Concepts, Phonological Awareness, Phonics, Word Recognition, and Fluency for Kindergarten through grade 2. In grades 3 to 5, they are Phonics, Word Recognition and Fluency.

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Writing is given a prominent spot in these standards. My writing is thought about carefully and given the importance it should have. In Writing, the anchor standards are Text Types and Purposes, Production and Distribution of Writing, Research to Build and Present knowledge, and Range of Writing.

The next standard is **(5) Speaking and Listening**; the anchor standards in this category are Comprehension and Collaboration, and Presentation of knowledge and Ideas.

The final standard is **(6) Language** and the anchor standards are Conventions of Standard English, Knowledge of Language and Vocabulary Acquisition.

Based on what has been discussed so far, and the manner and order in which the standards are listed in the document, the skills in Narrative and Informational Literature, which focuses on comprehension, is emphasized. Foundational skills such as phonological awareness and phonics have been emphasized for early literacy as coming before comprehension in the past, but the opposite is listed here. This is not a bad thing but one hopes that the instruction needed in phonics will continue.

Writing is given a prominent spot in these standards and is finally getting the emphasis it should receive. The last two standards, Speaking and Listening and Language don't seem to get the emphasis I think they should have. Oral language is an important skill our children need, and vocabulary is crucial to success in comprehension, yet it's listed all the way at the end.

What many states are doing at this time is looking at their own standards and comparing them to the CCSS to see how they match. They are finding that their own state standards have many more required specific skills to learn, whereas the CCSS are more interested in depth rather than breadth. I am very much in favor of the fact that the CCSS are not as packed with an enormous numbers of skills that can't be accomplished. Teachers and children are overwhelmed about what they need to teach and learn in a given year and most children aren't given the time to really learn them all. The CCSS have a spiral effect and build on fewer skills but over a longer period. The same skill however requires more complex thinking as it goes up the grades. For example in writing under "Anchor Standard Research to Build and Present Knowledge," one of the kindergarten skills is:

a. With guidance and support from adults, recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question.

The exact same skill is listed for first grade:

b. With guidance and support from adults, recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question.

In grade two this standard is to:

c. Recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question.

The only difference here is that it does not involve guidance and support from an adult. For third grade it is:

d. Recall information from experiences or gather information from print and digital sources; take brief notes on sources and sort evidence into provided categories.

For fourth grade:

e. Recall information from experiences or gather information from print and digital sources; take brief notes on sources; take notes and categorize information, and provide a list of sources.

For the fifth grade it is:

f. Recall information from experiences or gather information from print and digital sources; take brief notes on sources; summarize or paraphrase information in notes and finished work, and provide a list of sources.

You can see the continuity between grades and the addition of one more element that makes the task a bit more complex but with time to keep practicing the task.

There are suggestions for creating units of study in social studies and science that include the CCSS as well as the content in these areas. This is an important idea but one that will require teachers to be engaged in professional development to learn how to do it. If this is done then reading will be taught all day long in school, which is a necessity. Reading is a skill, not a content area. When we read we can learn information from other fields.

The question that arises in my mind is this: should the content such as social studies and science be a part of the language arts block when explicit literacy instruction takes place especially in the early childhood grades? When reading in small homogeneous groups for skill development, should there be little books about a science theme such as hurricanes or volcanoes, and different levels of little books be created for the different achievement groups? On one hand it would give a purpose for reading. On the other hand, one might argue that it will detract from the explicit instruction.

My other question has to do with complexity of text. How complex should we require texts for children to be so they are considered proficient and fluent readers? How complex should we require texts for children to be so they are considered ready for college or to pursue a career that doesn't require college?

In the previous paragraphs, I ask questions to which I don't know the answers. I do believe that we are dissecting reading into too many skills and we need to select the precious few we really need. Sometimes less is more. Being able to do fewer skills proficiently might be better than doing more but not doing them very well. I do feel strongly that reading and writing need to be emphasized all day long in school through content areas, as it is the only way our children will become critical readers.

If you have answers to my questions I'd love to hear from you.

Answer Leslie's questions in the [Discussion Forum](#) for the new [Common Core Collaborative Community](#) on Engage. Join the Community to discuss your thoughts on the Common Core State Standards, debate the issues, share resources, and more!

Lesley Mandel Morrow holds the rank of Professor II at Rutgers University's Graduate School of Education where she is coordinator of the literacy program. Her area of research deals with early literacy development, and the organization and management of Language Arts Programs. Dr. Morrow has more than 200 publications that appear as journal articles, chapters in books, monographs and books. She received Excellence in Research, Teaching and Service Awards from Rutgers University. Dr. Morrow was an elected member of the board of directors of International Reading Association (IRA) and served as President of the organization in 2003-2004. She was also the recipient of the IRA's Outstanding Teacher Educator of Reading Award, as well as Fordham University's Alumni Award for Outstanding Achievement.

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