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PreK-3rd: Getting Literacy Instruction Right

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PreK-3rd
Policy to Action Brief

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PreK-3rd Policy to Action Briefs

PreK-3rd Policy to Action Briefs seek to promote the idea of PreK-3rd and to provide guidance for its implementation. The goal of PreK-3rd Grade Education is the creation of a seamless learning continuum from PreK to Third Grade.

PreK-3rd is a national movement of schools, districts, educators and universities seeking to improve how children from ages 3 to 8 learn and develop in schools. While these different efforts use a variety of names, all are working to connect high-quality PreK programs with high-quality elementary schools to create a well-aligned primary education for all our nation's children.

What is PreK-3rd Education?

PreK-3rd approaches require that educational standards, curricula, assessment and professional development are strongly aligned across high-quality PreK, Kindergarten, First, Second and Third Grades.

The PreK-3rd approach consists of:

- Public funding for Full-Day education starting at age three, including:
 - Voluntary, Full-Day PreK for three- and four-year-olds
 - Required, Full-Day Kindergarten
- Aligned educational strategies within and across grades, including:
 - Aligned standards, sequenced curriculum, instruction, and assessments
 - Well-rounded curriculum, including literacy, math, arts, physical education, social and emotional learning and science
 - Regular joint planning and shared professional development among all PreK, Kindergarten, and 1st-3rd grade teachers and staff
- Principal leadership to support joint professional development and teacher collaboration around PreK-3rd curriculum and instruction
- Family engagement focused on supporting what children learn in school and on promoting a Dual-Generation strategy

Introduction

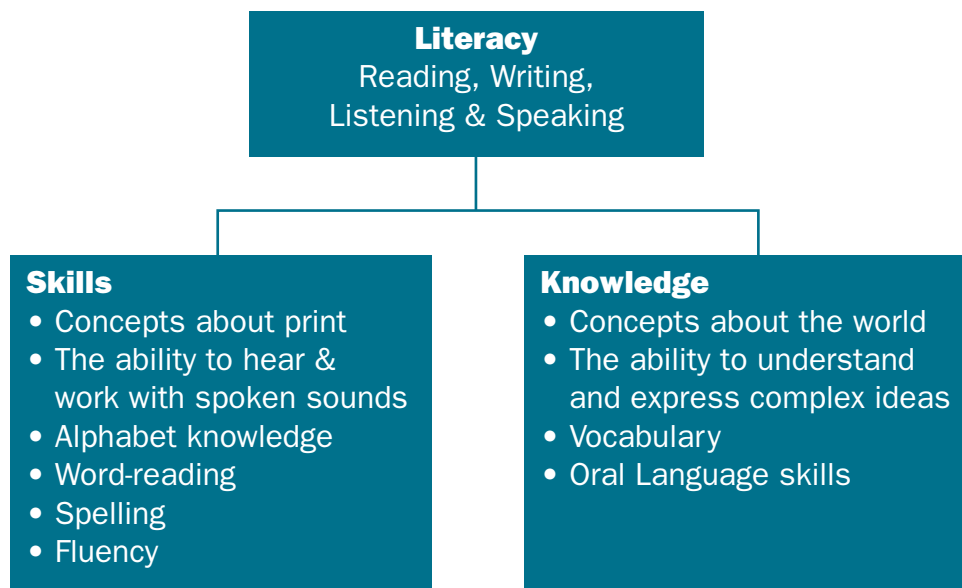
Educators need a plan for literacy instruction that will pull our at-risk readers along and push all readers forward. Children’s early literacy skills are a foundation for all of their academic efforts and are closely linked to their health and well-being. For example, one study showed that children who did not read well by the end of Third Grade were four times more likely not to graduate from high school on time, and not graduating from high school is closely linked to poorer health, unemployment, and incarceration.ⁱ In this brief, we focus on the elements of strong PreK-3rd literacy instruction, with a particular focus on developing children’s language and reading skills. Before we unpack these key parts of the plan, however, we first define what we call “reading,” and discuss why it is challenging for many of today’s children.



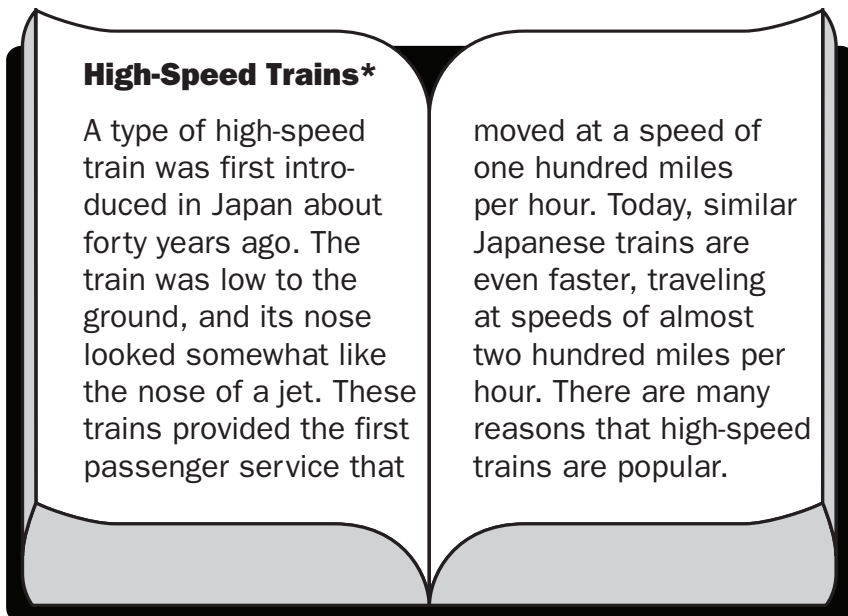
What Is Reading, and What Makes It a Challenge for Many Young Children?

When the parent of a First Grader hears her child finally work through the pages of a text with ease, successfully reading *Hop on Pop* aloud, there might be a sigh of relief and a feeling that the job of learning to read is done. But that sense of relief might be premature. “Reading” in Grade Two is not the same as “reading” in Grade Eight. With increasing grade levels, the demands of the texts children must read increase in difficulty and yet, text is the primary way that academic content is delivered to students in middle school and high school. In fact, to be successful in all academic subject areas, children need to be proficient readers. But what counts as proficient is always changing; to be a proficient reader throughout the years, a child has to accumulate experiences and adult-child interactions at home, in her community, and in any formal educational setting that will build up her language and knowledge, to support her literacy development.ⁱⁱ

The question is—after daily instruction throughout the years, why do many students struggle to comprehend texts? One major problem lies in whether children acquire both the skills and knowledge needed to read and understand complex texts. As illustrated in the diagram below, skills-based competencies are those that allow students to master the mechanics of reading—for example, the ability to map the 26 letters onto their respective sounds in combinations (44 in total), and thus read words.ⁱⁱⁱ Knowledge-based competencies, on the other hand, are comprised of the range of abilities and knowledge necessary for drawing meaning from text. They include the skills associated with language development, such as oral language, vocabulary, and listening comprehension skills, as well as the foundational knowledge needed to access and apply a text’s message.



The passage, *High-Speed Trains*^{iv}, adapted from a reading assessment commonly used in elementary schools, illustrates the distinction between skills-based and knowledge-based competencies in reading.



To read even this short passage, the reader must be able to map sounds onto letters (for example, /s/ /p/ /ee/ /d/) and blend these to form a word. She must also recognize common spelling patterns, such as the “-igh” family found in the word “high.” And she must do this quickly enough in order to then spend some time attending to the passage’s meaning; if the reader takes too long, the information from the beginning of the passage is no longer in memory.^v At Fifth Grade, a student must read at least 115 words a minute.

While having these skills-based competencies is necessary, it is not sufficient to support reading comprehension. Students also need knowledge-based competencies, including understanding the meaning of the words in their contexts and other relevant language skills. Without well-developed knowledge-based competencies, having mastered the mechanics of reading becomes less and less valuable with time—the core benefit of mastering the mechanics of print is that the reader has the “mental space” to devote to making meaning from print.

In the example from *High-Speed Trains*, students need to bring some conceptual knowledge about both trains and jets, for instance, to fully understand the passage. And students must have the interest and motivation to finish the passage and the cognitive strategies necessary to monitor their comprehension and repair any misunderstandings along the way (for example, a child who pictures a human nose upon coming to the word “nose” in the text must adjust this misunderstanding when reading the comparison to a jet’s nose). There are also many concepts that students need to be familiar with to comprehend this passage; for example, the many possible meanings of the word “service” makes this especially challenging. (Dictionary.com provides 37 entries under the word “service,” including noun, adjective, and verb forms along with a number of idioms.)

With strong instruction, skills-based competencies are mastered by Third Grade for the average student. Yet the development of knowledge-based competencies occurs over a lifetime, beginning with the language a child is exposed to from birth, and must be supported with good instruction throughout schooling. The need for increased emphasis on promoting knowledge-based reading competencies is especially important for supporting vulnerable populations. For many children, especially children from low-income or non-English-speaking homes, knowledge-based competencies are more likely to be key sources of academic difficulties—these populations often have difficulty comprehending more advanced text.^{vi}



What Does High-Quality PreK-3rd Literacy Instruction Look Like?

Preparing children for academic success means getting PreK-3rd literacy instruction right. Young children, especially academically vulnerable young children, require a cohesive learning experience as they move up through the grades; learning experiences that build on their strengths and address their needs, promoting knowledge and skill development along the way. How do educators and education leaders create these high-quality learning environments in classrooms and across grade-levels? Here we describe four key features of high-quality PreK-3rd literacy instruction, with a focus on developing language and reading skills.

Effective instruction spans the early childhood through elementary years, and responds to developmental needs of students

One key mechanism for creating high-quality, PreK-3rd learning environments is a coordinated approach to curriculum—one that provides educators with a shared framework for meeting young readers' needs across the grades. An appropriate curriculum balances the learning needs of students with their developmental needs and increases in complexity with every new stage of childhood. There must be a match between children's cognitive and social and emotional needs, and their ages, for example. A good curriculum at age three might be play-based to teach science and reading with focused language use to build skills; whereas by age seven, a good curriculum might include direct instruction in phonics and center-based reading practice using texts aligned with the current unit's theme. In addition, the best curricular choices step up academic demands as children mature, allowing for differentiation for individual needs, and also providing continuity from PreKindergarten through primary grades.

Effective instruction organizes classroom learning around content-based, thematic units of study

Content learning through thematic units of study is a hallmark of effective PreK-3rd literacy instruction. To create a framework for addressing standards and both the skills- and knowledge-based competencies of reading, such thematic units allow for a systematically organized instructional plan based on multifaceted academic topics that lend themselves to big questions without easy answers. When a First Grade class studies Egypt, for example, the children can read about King Tut in books, then find the letter 'T' on the letter chart and talk about the /t/ sound and other words that start—and then end—with 'T'. They can draw and design pyramids in art, discuss how slaves stacked the heavy stones, and learn

about levers and pulleys. They can learn about Egyptian numerals in math, then find places in the classroom to post the Egyptian numerals (e.g., on the dials of clocks, over classroom door numbers), and they can even recreate Archimedes's displacement experiment in science. These thematic units are full of opportunities to develop oral language and vocabulary, apply skills and strategies to literature and informational trade books, process and practice writing modeled by a teacher, and create small-group book discussions—all while building skills and knowledge.^{vii}

Effective instruction integrates skills-based and knowledge-based instruction

Learning opportunities that promote both skill-building and language- and knowledge-building are another key feature of high-quality, PreK-3rd literacy instruction. These learning opportunities are supported by a coordinated approach to curriculum—one that provides the framework and resources teachers need to address both skills and knowledge-based instruction, always building and changing as children develop those skills. As the unit described above illustrates, instruction that promotes comprehensive literacy development embeds skills-based competency instruction in language-rich and content-rich units of study. In this way, classroom learning combines:

- purposeful, explicit opportunities for developing knowledge-based competencies, and
- systematic and explicit instruction that targets skills-based competencies.

Let's consider another example: A PreK classroom is studying the question/topic, "How are animals valuable to people?" Working to understand letters and their sounds (code-based skills) in an age-appropriate way makes sense for the young children in this classroom. During this unit, then, such "work" could look more like singing or reciting a poem about a farmer's prized pig in unison while the teacher points out the words on the chalkboard or white board.

Knowledge-based competencies should also be strategically and systematically built into everyday instruction—they represent a larger instructional task. Using the example above, building young children’s knowledge might begin with a discussion about the word *valuable*, including a definition and many examples to highlight how things can be worth a lot of money or things can have a lot of meaning to someone. Then, when discussing the poem about the farmer and his pig, the teacher could explain how the word *prized* in *prized pig* is similar to a word that surely all the children know, *prize*. Guiding the children as they move, unknowingly, from the noun to the adjective form of the word helps them begin

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to accumulate many layers of knowledge—that words can change meaning slightly; that they should listen for words they know inside other words; that a pig can, in fact, be prized by a farmer for a number of reasons. This activity can help them begin to internalize the new word and concept as they continue to build on what they already know, expanding their vocabulary and knowledge.

Effective instruction fosters a combination of direct instruction and inquiry-based learning

Children and educators alike need clear steps and quality materials to create a literacy-enriched learning environment that is, at once, structured, interactive, and engaging. Therefore, high-quality PreK-3rd literacy instruction is framed by an approach to curriculum that provides a plan for learning and teaching. This approach features direct, explicit developmentally sound instruction, but does not stop there. It should also provide a classroom arrangement plan with literacy-enriched learning centers, whether PreK or Third Grade, featuring a wide variety of books and visuals. All young children need to engage in structured learning tasks and routines that promote interactive play and inquiry.

What Structures Enable Teachers to Carry out Strong PreK-3rd Literacy Instruction?

Common Planning Time/Joint Professional Development

To keep children on a path to reading gains from one school year to the next, a plan for effective PreK-3rd literacy instruction must include formal communication and planning among teachers and across grades. Common planning time and joint professional development for PreK-3rd educators serve many purposes and provide many opportunities that both promote and capitalize on high-quality reading instruction for improved teaching and learning.

Cross-grade communication and coordination makes for smooth transitions from one year to the next and reduces variation in instructional experiences from one classroom to the next. This is one of the most valuable commodities in education.

Coordinated Curricula

It is a big task for teachers to both design and deliver cohesive, rigorous literacy instruction on a daily basis, especially instruction that promotes the skill-building and language- and knowledge-building needed for reading comprehension. It's also a big job for school leaders to enact a long-term plan for literacy instruction from early childhood through the upper elementary years. For these reasons, there are benefits to having coordinated curricula. Not the same curriculum each year, per se, but curricula that line up on the key features outlined above: developmentally responsive instructional strategies; content-based, thematic units of study; integrated code-based and knowledge-based instruction; and a combination of direct instruction and inquiry-based learning.

A coordinated approach to curricula not only attends to these cornerstones of quality literacy instruction, but also promotes coherence and consistency within and across classrooms and grade levels. For example, in a coordinated effort, students experience similar routines and learning tasks from one year to the next, to ease transitions and maximize teachers' instructional time. The coordinated approach to curriculum is also a tool for institutionalizing professional knowledge and effective practices across classrooms, programs, and settings. But this is only the case if teachers have the opportunity to come together to discuss their implementation and instructional planning, including sharing lesson plans and adjustments or discussing ways to refine or enhance the lesson with colleagues across the hall and up the stairs. In this way, it also provides a shared professional language for teachers to discuss and collaborate on instruction.

Shared Assessments

We know that effective instruction starts with effective assessment. Therefore, we must identify children’s strengths and weaknesses in order to provide instruction that will advance their literacy skills—language, reading, and writing. Currently, early screening is atypical; instead, many families and schools don’t fully understand a child needs intervention until state reading tests show failing or dismal results. Yet, there is every reason to identify PreK children at-risk for reading difficulties; just as a child’s phonological awareness skills at age four predict his later code-based skills (such as word reading accuracy and efficiency), a child’s vocabulary at age four is predictive of Third Grade reading comprehension ability.^{viii} And while some educators are concerned that assessing young children will do more harm than good, in fact, neglecting to regularly assess development means missed opportunities for remediation—the longer children experience difficulties, the less likely it is they will be able to overcome these difficulties and thrive as readers. Fortunately, enrichment activities and remediation look similar in the early years and are often fun for young children.^{ix}

Therefore, shared assessments are particularly important as part of strong PreK-3rd literacy instruction. For example, teachers often spend a great deal of time at the beginning of the year determining where students are academically and what supports they need. Shared assessments from one year to the next minimize the need to devote large amounts of time to determine student needs. A Kindergarten teacher using a shared assessment with a PreK teacher, for example, has a sense of where that student is on the first day of school, and knows what the next stage of instruction will be for the child. Assuming common planning time and joint professional development, she can then discuss the needs of this and other individual students; shared assessments are a valuable platform for these conversations. Finally, looking at trends in student data, based on the same assessments used over time with all children, sheds light on areas for instructional improvement. This information should then drive discussion during common planning time and focus joint professional development initiatives.

What Policies Enable Schools to Carry out Strong PreK-3rd Reading Instruction?

- **A public education system that begins with PreK.** Despite all of our knowledge about the importance of PreKindergarten for later academic success, our public education system in most states still only starts at Kindergarten. In order to give all children a stronger start and a higher quality education, school must start with PreK. It must include aligned and coordinated standards, assessment, curriculum, instruction, and professional development throughout the PreK-12 system. (For more information and policy recommendations regarding high-quality PreK-3rd education please see the FCD PreK-3rd Policy to Action Briefs: [The Case for Investing in PreK-3rd Education: Challenging Myths about School Reform](#), [PreK-3rd: Putting Full-Day Kindergarten in the Middle](#), [PreK-3rd: How Superintendents Lead Change](#), and [PreK-3rd: Principals as Crucial Instructional Leaders](#).)
- **PreK-3rd teacher certification & preparation.** In too many teacher preparation and certification programs, early childhood stops at Kindergarten, and elementary starts at First Grade. Yet early childhood is a developmental period that starts at birth and ends at eight or nine years old—around Third Grade. A good literacy teacher, whether PreK or Third Grade, is one who is sensitive to this developmental stage and understands each new stage in the context of the overall developmental period. She understands where a child has been as a reader and where he or she is headed. Therefore, teacher certification and preparation that focus on PreK-3rd as a developmental stage, will serve to strengthen reading instruction for all children. (The FCD Policy to Action Brief, [PreK-3rd: Teacher Quality Matters](#), offers further recommendations.)
- **School-Community-Family Partnerships.** Supporting children’s literacy development means creating strong partnerships. To that end, states, districts, and schools that are working hard on Third Grade reading outcomes are implementing policies and mechanisms to bring together many stakeholders, such as educators, community organizations, businesses, and families, to create shared pathways, opportunities, and mechanisms to promote children’s literacy development in all settings. (For more detailed information on creating strong community partnerships, please see, [Working Together to Build a Birth-to-College Approach to Public Education](#), by the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute & Ounce of Prevention Fund.)

Conclusion

High-quality PreK-3rd literacy instruction is imperative to promote all children's reading development, and especially critical in settings with high numbers of children at-risk for reading difficulties. Research tells us that in these settings, many academically vulnerable young children develop word-reading skills, but lack the language and knowledge needed to grasp the ideas presented on the printed page. When high-quality, coordinated PreK-3rd literacy instruction is in place, children are afforded new experiences and learning opportunities that expand their cognitive capacities, develop language and vocabulary, and prepare them to read advanced texts—all while developing reading skills and competencies that provide a sturdy foundation for school success and expanded life opportunities.

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