

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT PARTNERS

What Common Core State Standards Say (and **DON'T** Say) about Kindergarten

By Silas Kulkarni and David Liben

"The Standards should be recognized for what they are not as well as what they are."

-From the Common Core English Language Arts/Literacy Standards, page 6

What's Covered and What's Not

The Standards Cover

Outcomes
K-12
Math & ELA / Literacy
Academic goals
Goals for each grade
What students should learn

The Standards Don't Cover

Teaching methods or curricular choices
Pre-K or pre-school
Science or Social Studies content standards
Social-emotional goals
How to meet individual student needs
How students should learn



Key Terms for Common Core in the Early Grades



Foundational Skills – These skills refer to the basic building blocks of learning to read including letters, sounds, and print concepts (e.g. learning that English moves from left to right on a page or that spaces separate words). Foundational Skills are distinguished from comprehension skills such as finding the main idea, or retelling key details.



Developmentally appropriate – The term “developmentally appropriate practice” was developed by NAEYC (the National Association for the Education of Young Children) in the 1980’s as a synthesis of research and practice in early learning.¹ According to NAEYC, an organization which supports the Common Core, developmentally appropriate practice means, “All teaching practices should be appropriate to children’s age and developmental status, attuned to them as unique individuals, and responsive to the social and cultural contexts in which they live.” This means, “both meeting children where they are—which means that teachers must get to know them well—and enabling them to reach goals that are both challenging and achievable.”²



Emergent reader texts – “Emergent-reader texts” are phonetically controlled texts (i.e. “The cat sat on a hat...”) such as those used in many kindergarten programs or; 2) predictable text (i.e. “Ms. Wishy-Washy saw a mop. Ms. Wishy-Washy saw a broom...”) such as those used in many kindergarten, leveled readers.



Standards – Learning standards such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) describe **goals** for what students should know and be able to do in certain grades. Examples includes, “Recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet” (K.RF.1d), “Recognize and produce rhyming words” (K.RF.2a), and “With prompting and support, retell familiar stories, including key details” (K.RL.2). Standards define the **what** of student learning, **not the how**.



Curriculum – Curriculum are materials and approaches used to teach, including lesson plans, books and textbooks, and plans for activities. Examples include a series of games where children produce rhyming words such as those found in the book *Phonemic Awareness in Young Children: A Classroom Curriculum* by Marilyn Adams, traditional commercial textbooks such as Houghton Mifflin’s Kindergarten Reading Set (among hundreds of others), or teacher-authored lesson plans based on read-aloud books like *Good Night Moon*. The CCSS do not prescribe one specific curriculum and literally hundreds of curricula have been designed to help students meet the standards, some focusing on play, others on practice of skills, and some encouraging a mix.



Teaching methods - Teaching methods are the ways teachers engage with students and structure activities to help students learn. Examples include letting students independently organize a game, leading students in a song, asking students to write their letters, or reading aloud to students. The CCSS do not require or prohibit any teaching methods, leaving states, schools, and teachers to use their instructional expertise to help students meet standards. Curriculum and teaching methods together determine the **how** of education.



Play – “Play” refers to any activities such as make-believe, role plays, songs, games, riddles, rhymes, and physical play such as hand or body motions and dance. Play can be either an instructional method (i.e. phonics games) or an activity of value for its own sake. Play is an activity, and is distinct from a “play-based curriculum” (see below). The CCSS authors explicitly mention the value of play (see pg. 6, bullet 1, CCSS-ELA), but because play describes an educational **activity** rather than an educational **outcome**, the CCSS neither mandate nor prohibit play.

¹ DAP Frequently Asked Questions (n.d). Retrieved from: www.naeyc.org/dap/faq

² National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009). Key messages of the position statement. Retrieved from: <https://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/KeyMessages.pdf>

Key Terms for Common Core in the Early Grades



Play-based Curriculum – “Play-based curriculum” describes a category of programs for promoting young-children’s learning, such as Tools of the Mind or curriculum based on the Reggio Emilia philosophy. The term is often associated with pre-school and pre-kindergarten, where it is the most commonly-favored approach, but can also apply to kindergarten. Play-based programs typically emphasize self-directed student activities and student choice of activities. Play-based curriculum often focus on social-emotional learning and are typically contrasted with “academic curricula.” Academic programs can and frequently do incorporate play in the form of songs and games. Play-based curriculum are distinguished by consisting solely of child-directed play. Because the CCSS specifies **outcomes, not methods or materials**, neither approach is required nor prohibited by the CCSS. Many common programs and practices incorporate a mix of both approaches, to foster simultaneous growth of both cognitive and social-emotional skills.



Social-emotional Learning – Social-emotional learning refers to children’s development of skills and dispositions such as self-control, empathy, and emotional self-regulation. **Social-emotional learning is crucially important to children’s growth and development and is recognized as such by the CCSS authors** in the introduction to the ELA standards. At the same time, specific social-emotional learning goals, like goals for other academic subjects such as science or social studies, are not specified by the Standards and are left to the judgement of local educators and communities (see pg. 6, bullet 6, CCSS-ELA).



Read-aloud – “Read aloud” is the practice of a teacher (or other proficient reader) reading a book to students orally, while they listen and/or follow along visually. Read-aloud is widely practiced in schools and in homes with young children, allowing them to engage with texts and increase their vocabulary, knowledge of the world and oral comprehension before they can decode for themselves. Reading to young children is beneficial to development even with pre-verbal toddlers, and can be continued with children long after they have learned to decode as well. For instance reading Shakespeare aloud to older students can help them better comprehend even rich, advanced literature.



Text Complexity – “Text complexity” refers to the features of a text which make it more challenging for readers such as advanced vocabulary, complex syntax, or multiple layers of meaning and purpose. The CCSS specifies a three-part model for determining text complexity combining 1) quantitative measures (such as Flesch-Kincaid or Dale Chall measures) , 2) qualitative measures (i.e. teacher expert judgement), and 3) reader and task considerations (i.e. what teachers ask students to do with a text and the specific needs of those students). CCSS Anchor Standard for Reading 10 sets expectations for the complexity of texts students should be able to read in various grades, with quantitative measures beginning in 2nd grade (see CCSS Appendix A).

The Standards DO Say

✓ Students should begin learning to read in Kindergarten.

This means the standards expect students “to demonstrate increasing awareness and competence” in four research-based areas of reading development:

1. *Print concepts (K.RF.1) e.g. understanding that English is written from left to right.*
2. *Phonological awareness (K.RF.2) e.g. recognizing and producing rhyming words.*
3. *Phonics and word recognition (K.RF.3) e.g. producing the primary sound of consonants.*
4. *Fluency (K.RF.4) e.g. reading emergent reader texts.*

In addition, the Standards ask students to engage with stories, poems, and books through read-aloud, to promote vocabulary and knowledge growth, and develop comprehension.

✓ By the end of grade 3 students should be able to read appropriately complex text proficiently and independently.

The first point in the Standards where the requirement of “independently and proficiently” reading complex text appears, is the end of Grade 3 in 3.RL.10 & 3.RI.10. Prior to this point, the Standards emphasize a supported reading process, using terms including “emergent reader texts” (K.RF.4), “group reading activities” (K.RL.10), “With prompting and support” (1.RL.10), and “with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range” (2.RL.10). The Standards thus describe a progression of developing independence from grades K-3.

✓ Students, starting in the earliest grades should build knowledge and vocabulary through attention to science, social studies and other content areas.

Drawing on research on the role of knowledge and vocabulary in comprehension, the Standards ask that K-2 students have rich, structured conversations with an adult and each other in response to texts that have been read aloud (see pg. 33, CCSS-ELA). They should discuss the text out loud together (K.SL.1, 1.SL.1, 2.SL.1) comparing and contrasting with other books they have read (K.RI.9, 1.RI.9, 2.RI.9). The Standards encourage teachers to choose texts that will help students build their vocabularies and knowledge of the world (see pg. 33, CCSS-ELA).

✓ Teachers, schools, and states are free to choose teaching methods.

The Standards do not define pedagogy, require a particular curriculum or forbid any particular form of literacy instruction. Teachers are free to create lessons that help their particular students meet the Standards. The Standards state, “The Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach” (pg. 6, bullet 1, CCSS-ELA).

✓ Play is valuable.

The Standards state, “The use of play with young children is not specified by the Standards, but it is welcome as a valuable activity in its own right and as a way to help students meet the expectations of this document” (pg. 6, bullet 1, CCSS-ELA). In the words of lead Common Core writer Susan Pimentel, “The reason play is important to me is that this is the way I taught, and I saw it work.”

✓ Social-emotional learning is part of readiness for college and career-readiness.

The Standards say, “While the ELA and content area literacy components described herein are critical to college and career readiness, they do not define the whole of such readiness. Students require a wide ranging rigorous academic preparation and, particularly in the early grades, attention to such matters as social, emotional, and physical development and approaches to learning” (pg. 6, bullet 6, CCSS-ELA).

The Standards DON'T SAY

✗ Children must master the kindergarten foundational skills standards by the end of kindergarten.

The foundational standards include the following statement at the top of both pages addressing kindergarten: “Note: In kindergarten children are expected to demonstrate increasing awareness and competence in the areas that follow” (CCSS-ELA pg. 15 & 16). This note indicates an intentional distinction between the kindergarten standards and all other grade standards, acknowledging the transitional role of kindergarten and children’s gradually developing foundational skills.

✗ All children must learn at the same rate or in the same way.

The Standards call for differentiation to meet the needs of diverse learners, explaining, “Instruction should be differentiated: good readers will need much less practice with these concepts than struggling readers will. The point is to teach students what they need to learn and not what they already know—to discern when particular children or activities warrant more or less attention” (CCSS-ELA pg. 15).

✗ To use quantitative measures of text complexity for grades K or 1.

The chart in Appendix A listing quantitative measures of text complexity for each grade band, lists “N/A” for the K-1 band. The Standards acknowledge that “texts for kindergarten and grade 1 may not be appropriate for quantitative analysis, as they often contain difficult-to-assess features designed to aid early readers in acquiring written language. The Standards’ poetry and K–1 text exemplars in Appendix A of the Standards were placed into grade bands by expert teachers and children’s librarians drawing on classroom experience” (CCSS-ELA, Appendix A, pg. 8).

✗ Anything about preschool or pre-K.

The CCSS cover grades K-12 only and make no statement about what should be achieved before students enter compulsory schooling in kindergarten.