STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT PARTNERS

What Do the Common Core State Standards for ELA/Literacy Say About Kindergarten?

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MYTHS VS FACTS

MYTH : Research says that learning to read in kindergarten is harmful.

FACT: Learning to read in kindergarten is not harmful to children.

In the words of literary research expert Timothy Shanahan, "There are not now, and there never have been data showing any damage to kids from early language or literacy learning."[1] Indeed, all across the country, parents read to their children, and encourage them to learn their ABC's even before kindergarten. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 2/3 of children enter kindergarten being able to identify upper and lower case letters. Learning to read in kindergarten is also not new.[2] According to ***Basics of Developmentally Appropriate Practice: An Introduction for Teachers of Kindergarten,*** **"By the end of kindergarten...most children will be reading simple and predictable text."** (NAEYC pg. 104).[3] In the words of Colleen Rau, a reading intervention specialist in the Oakland school district, when she taught kindergarten eight years ago, "there was this same expectation around students learning all of their letters, sounds, and sight words and beginning to read early emergent text. That expectation has been around far longer than Common Core."[4] In numerous classrooms across the country, overwhelming majorities of students leave kindergarten with these skills every year and enjoy their early reading experiences.

REASON FOR MYTH: Most harm that critics are pointing to is not a result of being taught to read, but of being denied other valuable experiences, such as high-quality play experiences that promote social and emotional growth, or additional social-emotional supports such as those provided in intensive pre-k programs like the HighScopes Pre-K program. The Standards authors agree that focus on academic skills must not come at the expense of social-emotional learning and support for children and families; a healthy approach includes both these vital elements of education.

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>
> **-Timothy Shanahan**

MYTH : The K-2 CCSS authors did not consult any early childhood educators or experts.

FACT: The Standards writing, feedback, and revision processes included numerous early childhood educators and experts.

Susan Pimentel, lead writer of the CCSS-ELA began her career as a HeadStart pre-K teacher, before becoming a standards expert, and holds a degree in Early Childhood Education from Cornell University. Marilyn Jager Adams and Louisa Moats, the two primary contributors to the K-2 Foundational Skills Standards, are both nationally renowned experts in the acquisition of early literacy skills. Marilyn Adams is a research professor of Cognitive, Linguistic and Psychological Sciences at Brown University, with a focus on how young students learn to read. Her book, Beginning to Read, is one of the most widely cited, full-length discussions of early reading. In addition, national experts such as Dorothy Strickland (past president of the International Reading Association and nationally-respected writer on early childhood literacy), Barbara Foorman, and Gina Biancarosa contributed to the review and revision processes. After the release of first drafts, the Standards authors held several meetings and calls in Spring 2010 with members of the early childhood community. Among those who attended these meetings were representatives of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), The National Head Start Association, The United Negro College Fund, the High Scope Foundation (authors of the Perry Preschool studies), and the Alliance for Childhood. Feedback from these groups was collected and led to substantial revisions to the documents, for example, inclusion of statements about differentiation and social-emotional learning, as well as changing the grade levels of numerous skills, indicating the importance of prompting and support, and focusing on collaboration, communication, and use of new media.

REASON FOR MYTH: Some members of the early childhood community (particularly the group Alliance for Childhood now known as Defending the Early Years (DEY), the primary voice critiquing the K-3 CCSS standards) oppose the creation of any educational standards for students in grades K-3. Their feedback focused on a call "to suspend [the] current drafting of standards for children in kindergarten through grade three."[5] Though this group has made it a point to explain that their views were not reflected in the standards-writing process, their opposition to the existence of any standards for K-3 is not a form of feedback that could have been included in a process tasked with the writing of standards for grades K-3. Furthermore, though a real part of the community, DEY in no way represents the entire early childhood community. Two of the largest and most prominent early childhood education organizations, the **National Association for the Education of Young Children** (NAEYC) and the **National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education** (NAECS-SDE) issued a joint statement publically expressing their support for the Standards[6] in April 2010 and NAEYC reaffirmed their endorsement with a detailed defense in May 2015: ***Developmentally Appropriate Practice and the Common Core State Standards: Framing the Issues.***

MYTH : The Common Core requires children to master phonics and decoding by the end of kindergarten.

FACT: When it comes to kindergarten and decoding, "increasing awareness and competence," is expected, not mastery.

The Standards authors specifically stated, "In kindergarten, children are expected to demonstrate increasing awareness and competence in the areas that follow" (CCSS-ELA pg. 15 & 16), to indicate the fact that kindergarteners progress with learning to read at different rates.

Furthermore, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) state that kindergarten students should be able to, "Read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding" (K.RF.4). "Emergent-reader texts" mean either 1) phonetically controlled texts (i.e. "The cat sat on a hat.") such as those used in some kindergarten programs or; 2) predictable text (i.e. "Ms. Wishy-Washy saw a mop. Ms. Wishy-Washy saw a broom...) such as those currently used in the kindergarten leveled readers of the popular Fountas and Pinnell program and many others. Emergent-reader texts are the common beginning reading books where students practice the first steps of learning to read.

Foundational skills such as letter-sound patterns, handwriting, and word recognition, follow an incremental progression in Reading Foundational Skills Standards across grades K through 5. For example, in kindergarten, students learn the long and short forms of the five vowels (K.RF.3b); in 1st grade, students learn the tricky final "e" pattern of words like "home" (1.RF.3c); and in grade two, students begin to identify "inconsistent, but common" patterns like "tion" at the end of "information"(2.RF.3d & 2.RF.3e).

REASON FOR MYTH: When read out of context, standard K.RF.4 can be taken to mean that all students should be able to read by the end of kindergarten. Such an expectation would be extremely unrealistic for kindergarten. Beginning phonics strategies, however, are not unrealistic and are widely (and successfully) practiced. Understanding the definition of "emergent-reader texts" and the progression of foundational skills from kindergarten through 5th grade makes the actual expectation clear.

MYTH : The Common Core requires children to read and comprehend proficiently and independently by the end of kindergarten.

FACT: Fully independent reading comprehension is not required until the end of 3rd grade...

...when research indicates it is crucial for future student success in school (3.RL.10 & 3.RI.10).[7] The expectation of reading and comprehending grade-appropriate complex text "independently and proficiently" begins in 3rd grade (3.R.10), with prior grades emphasizing "group reading activities,"(K.RL.10) "with prompting and support," (1.R.10) and "with scaffolding as needed," (2.R.10). By the end of 2nd grade, students are expected to be reading and comprehending proficiently in the low end of the 2-3 grade band, while still emphasizing the need for "scaffolding and support as needed at the high end of the range" (2.R.10). Full independence and proficiency is expected at the completion of 3rd grade. Similar to the standards for reading foundational skills, the reading comprehension standards chart incremental and developing growth from kindergarten through 3rd grade.

REASON FOR MYTH: Many critics read the kindergarten standards out of context and without reference to the evolution and progression of the standards over grades K-3. Reading the Standards in context clarifies that the CCSS expect students to begin learning to read in kindergarten, not complete their journey. Almost all children are ready to begin their reading journey in kindergarten with exposure to beloved stories, fun poems, games with letters and sounds, and knowledge-rich read-aloud books.

MYTH : The Common Core requires all children to learn at the same rate.

FACT: The Standards specifically endorse differentiation and attention to students' individual needs...

...saying, "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).

REASON FOR MYTH: Some believe that the very idea of having standards by grade-level implies that everyone must learn in the same way and at the same pace during the year. Standards are end-of-grade goals for what students should know and be able to do in order to continue to grow in their competency in the following grades. All standards would be very unrealistic documents if they required all students to learn in exactly the same way and at the same rate. Instead, grade-level standards map out a learning trajectory and help educators recognize which students will need extra support to reach these goals.

MYTH : The Common Core requires holding students back who do not master reading by the end of kindergarten.

FACT: The CCSS do not require (and the CCSS authors in no way endorse) retaining students in kindergarten.

Research and experience clearly indicate that retention in such cases is harmful. In fact, as mentioned above, the Standards specifically indicate that incremental growth is expected with kindergarten foundational skills, not mastery, stating, "In kindergarten children are expected to demonstrate increasing awareness and competence in the areas that follow" (CCSS-ELA pg. 15 & 16). No statement anywhere in the CCSS should be construed to imply endorsement for the practice of holding children back in kindergarten.

REASON FOR MYTH: Some schools or districts may be engaging in this practice in a misguided implementation effort. The specific statement quoted above was intended to discourage such practices by clearly indicating the different nature of the Reading Foundational Standards for kindergarten.

MYTH : The goals specified in kindergarten by the Common Core can only be met through drill and worksheets.

FACT: The CCSS specifically exclude any requirements for teaching methods...

...stating, "The Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach." At the same time, the Standards explicitly recognize the value of play stating, **"[T]he 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 in this document"** (CCSS-ELA, bullet 1, pg. 6). Across the country, states, districts, schools, and teachers are choosing varied teaching methods to meet the Standards, including play-based methods which are completely compatible with Common Core goals for kindergarten students. As educators know, learning letters and sounds does not require drill & kill, but is actually best done through rhymes, riddles, songs, physical games and numerous other activities. In fact, Marilyn Adams, one of the key contributors to K-2 foundational skills standards, has written an entire book, *Phonemic Awareness in Young Children: A Classroom Curriculum*, filled with games and play activities that help students build the literacy skills called for by the Standards.

REASON FOR MYTH: Many people confuse the goals that make up the Standards with the teaching methods used to achieve them. This leads to the incorrect conclusion that if a skill is listed in the Standards, it should be rehearsed directly and repeatedly. This is a misinterpretation of the Standards, and at odds with the text of the Standards themselves, which differentiates between goals and the methods used to meet them.

> "The Standards define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach."

MYTH : Play-based programs and academic programs are incompatible.

FACT: Many of the most successful early-childhood programs include a mixture of academic and play-based instruction...

...and of teacher-led and student-led activities. The famous Montessori program, the Chicago Child-Parent Center, and the High/Scope Preschool Program (of the famed Perry Preschool studies) all include a combination of these components, as well as many other supports. For example, the High/Scope program includes both social-emotional and early literacy goals, such as vocabulary, phonological awareness, and alphabetic knowledge, and pursues these goals through a mixture of small-group and large-group time.[8-9] According to the program website, children "become readers and writers through a unique combination of child-initiated learning and teacher-guided instruction."[10] As the programs above and many others demonstrate, high-quality literacy instruction is fully compatible with child-directed play, hands-on learning, and social-emotional development.

REASON FOR MYTH: Advocates for an exclusively play-based approach often promote the Perry Preschool Study (and similar research) as evidence for their position, while ignoring its inclusion of key early literacy learning, and its additional social supports. Actually, these programs provide strong evidence for combining both social-emotional learning and academic learning – a combination fully compatible with the Standards. Some critics have mistakenly argued that the positive impacts of high-quality early childhood programs are due only, or primarily, to curricular choices while ignoring the powerful impact of additional supports for children and families; for example, the High/Scope Perry Preschool program included bi-weekly home visits, college-educated and certified teachers (highly uncommon in preschools when the Perry Preschool project was done) , and an 8-to-1 student-to-teacher ratio, features which are crucial to its success.[11] The importance of social and family supports is further reinforced in a recent piece by Jason Furman in the New York Times[12] showing long term positive outcomes similar to those found by the Perry Preschool Study, as well as increased test scores, from income, healthcare, and housing programs without any educational component. This ***does not and should not*** diminish the importance of play demonstrated by the Perry work, only the vital need for both social and academic support.

There are real trade-offs in use of time, and it is reasonable to be concerned about one type of learning crowding out other valuable learning experiences. We share these concerns and support calls for a balanced approach to kindergarten, which includes both child-directed play and teacher-led instruction, and which provides students and their families with both academic and social supports.

> ...children "become readers and writers through a unique combination of child-initiated learning and teacher-guided instruction."

MYTH : There is no benefit to beginning to learn to read in kindergarten.

FACT: As all early childhood teachers know, some students need more time and support to learn to read than others.

Phonological awareness (awareness of words and sounds), has been shown to be strongly predictive of later reading success and beneficial to learn in early childhood.[13] By delaying the introduction of phonological awareness, spelling/sound patterns, letter recognition, and other early reading skills, these students would have less time to learn these skills. Research by Connie Juel, shows that students who are not succeeding with reading by the end of 1st grade, will continue to struggle.[14] A large body of research shows that students who are not proficient readers by the end of 3rd grade have poor long-term academic outcomes including lower high school grades, graduation rates and college-attendance rates, and that these negative effects are much stronger for low-income and minority students.[7] By contrast research by Hanson and Farrell tracked students through high school and found large, positive, and lasting effects even at the end of high school, from learning to read in kindergarten.[15] Beginning to develop literacy skills in kindergarten helps children, especially low-income children, succeed with reading and avoid falling permanently behind.

REASON FOR MYTH: Many European countries, such as Finland, start reading instruction much later than the US. English, however, has one of the most irregular spelling-sound systems, while languages like Finnish are spelled very similarly to the way they sound, making them easier to learn quickly. It is true that some students can delay learning to read, with little to no consequence. Not all students, however, have this luxury. Ironically, the students who are most likely to succeed with delayed reading are those who possess beginning reading skills by the time they enter school: students from more educated families, usually upper-income students. There is no evidence that lower-income students have different developmental stages than upper-income students, but there is much evidence that many of these students need more language exposure in school to become successful readers.

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