



Indicator Explanation



CORE FUNCTION	EFFECTIVE PRACTICE	INDICATOR
Instruction	Provide rigorous evidence-based instruction	3B.11 Teachers in grades K-3 place a strong emphasis on students' reading skills as demonstrated in their curriculum and pacing guides and classroom walkthroughs.

Explanation: Reading instruction should start early, be evidence-based, and continued throughout the years of school—each grade building on what was learned in prior grades and reinforced. Evidence of a strong reading culture should be found in the curriculum, scheduling, and classroom observations.

Questions: Does your school have a quality, evidence-based reading curriculum? Are all teachers well-trained in the science of reading and teach each component of reading in a logical and sequential method? Does the school culture represent the importance of reading?

Many research sources agree that the building blocks of literacy and reading are phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, and the earlier these are taught, the better students perform as they progress through their schooling years.

Each of these components can be described as follows:

- **Phonemic awareness:** Knowledge of, and capacity to manipulate, the smallest distinct sounds (phonemes) in spoken words.
- **Phonics:** Learning and using the relationships between sounds and letter-symbols to sound out (decode) written words.
- **Fluency:** The ability to read accurately, quickly, and expressively. Fluent readers are able to focus on reading for meaning.
- **Vocabulary:** The words children need to know in order to comprehend and communicate. Oral vocabulary is the words children recognize or use in listening and speaking. Reading vocabulary is the words children recognize or use in reading and writing.
- **Comprehension:** Extracting and constructing meaning from written text using knowledge of words, concepts, facts, and ideas. (Hempenstall, 2016, p. 1)

While phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension can be explicitly taught, fluency is a matter of practice across time for students to become better and better at both speed and comprehension. Fluency cannot be attained, however, if the building blocks of phonemic awareness, phonics, and vocabulary have not been laid so that students are not struggling with pronunciation of words or with the meaning of words.

We also know that students who come from lower economic households have far fewer vocabulary words when starting school. “Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are five times more likely to have low literacy at school, perpetuating a cycle of low educational attainment and poverty. One in three disadvantaged children arrive at school with very poor language skills, and the gap between the language-rich and the language-poor grows over time” (Hempenstall, 2016, p. 1). While this seems a dire prediction, intention-



ally teaching vocabulary can close the gap and is especially important in the early grades. In 2003, Hart and Risley wrote about the language differences of a child from a professional family who is exposed to 42 million words by the time he or she reaching the age of four compared to a child from a poor family who is exposed to only 13 million words (Redding, Cavazos, Layland, Tywman, & Vuong, 2021). Redding et al. continue their argument on the importance of vocabulary by citing two other studies:

Marulis and Neuman (2010), reporting the results of a meta-analysis of the effects of vocabulary intervention on young children's word learning, called vocabulary "the heart of oral language comprehension" (p. 300). They marshalled studies to assert that vocabulary "sets the foundation for domain-specific knowledge and later reading comprehension" (p. 300), and cited Stahl and Nagy's (2006) report finding that "the size of children's vocabulary knowledge is strongly related to how well they will come to understand what they read" (p. 300). (Redding et al., 2021, p. 78)

How best to teach these foundational skills? A review of research on explicit instruction by Marchand-Martella, Martella, Modderman, Petersen, & Pan in 2013 found that "Research almost universally supports explicit instructional practices... Explicit instructional approaches are considered more effective and efficient as compared to discovery-based approaches... particularly when students are naïve or struggling learners" (p. 5). But what specifically is explicit instruction:

The term explicit instruction involves the teacher directly instructing the students in the content or skill to be learned, employing clear and unambiguous language. Teacher modeling, teacher guidance, and then students producing the relevant outcomes/answers with specific and immediate feedback, is followed by scheduled opportunities for practice. Student/teacher interaction is high, and their responses are many. Students are made aware of the objectives, and what is required of them. (Archer & Hughes, 2011 in Hempenstall, 2015, p. 31)

Rosenshine (2010) created the following list of instructional principles to help structure direct instruction:

1. Begin with a review of previous learning
2. Teach new material in small, incremental steps (students practice after each step)
3. Ask lots of questions and check for all students' understanding
4. Model
5. Use guided practice
6. Check again for all students' understanding
7. Obtain a high success rate by using multiple forms of assessing student understanding and engagement
8. Scaffold more difficult tasks
9. Allow time for independent practice—with teacher feedback
10. Do reviews at different intervals of time

The National Research Council (NRC) has extensively studied reading strategies and effective practices for improving reading performance in young students. Arguing that "most reading problems can be prevented by providing effective instruction and intervention in preschool and in the primary grades," the NRC outlines the following five classroom strategies:

1. Teach essential skills and strategies.
 - a. Effective reading teachers teach skills, strategies, and concepts.
2. Provide differentiated instruction based on assessment results and adapt instruction to meet students' needs.
 - a. Effective teachers recognize that one size does not fit all and are ready to adapt instruction—both content



and methods.

3. Provide explicit and systematic instruction with lots of practice—with and without teacher support and feedback, including cumulative practice over time.
 - a. Students should not have to infer what they are supposed to learn.
4. Provide opportunities to apply skills and strategies in reading and writing meaningful text with teacher support.
 - a. Students need to be taught what to do when they get to a “hard word.”
5. Do not just “cover” critical content; be sure students learn it—monitor student progress regularly and reteach as necessary.
 - a. Effective teachers adjust their teaching accordingly to try to accelerate student progress. (NCR as found in Hannover Research, 2014, p. 13–14)

Teaching literacy is not an easy task but is perhaps one of the most important we can tackle in a student’s learning journey. Ensuring all students have a strong grasp of all the elements of reading should not be taken for granted or taken lightly. Repetition in each grade to cement prior learning is essential. Building on a firm foundation will allow students to feel confident as they tackle new reading/literacy skills and find enjoyment in making reading a lifelong habit.

References

- Archer, A. L., & Hughes, C. A. (2011). *Explicit instruction: Effective and efficient teaching*. Guilford Press.
- Hanover Research. (2014, November). *Best practices in K-12 literacy models*. <http://www.hanoverresearch.com>
- Hart, B., & Risley, T. (2003). The early catastrophe: The 30 million word gap. *American Educator*, 27, 4–9.
- Hempenstall, K. (2016, March). *Read about it: Scientific evidence for effective teaching of reading*. <https://docslib.org/doc/111821/scientific-evidence-for-effective-teaching-of-reading>
- Marchand-Martella, N., Martella, R. C., Modderman, S. L., Petersen, H. M., & Pan, S. (2013). Key areas of effective adolescent literacy programs. *Education & Treatment of Children*, 36(1), 161–191.
- Marulis, L. M., & Neuman, S. B. (2010). The effects of vocabulary intervention on young children’s word learning: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 80(3), 300–335.
- Redding, S., Cavazos, L., Layland, A., Twyman, J., & Vuong, B. (2021). *Opportunity and performance: Equity for children from poverty*. Information Age.
- Rosenshain, B. (2010). *Principles of instruction*. International Academic of Education, UNESCO. International Bureau of Education. http://www.ibe.unesco.org/leadadmin/user_upload/Publications/Educational_Practices/EdPractices_21.pdf