



Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District

Instructional Office Newsletter

Phonics Is Only Part of Good Literacy Instruction

In this Education Week article, Heidi Anne Mesmer (Virginia Tech University) says there's strong research support for teaching four foundational reading skills in the early grades

- **Print concepts** – for example, print runs left to right, words are groups of letters separated by a space;

- **Phonological awareness** – being able to orally identify and manipulate the sound units of language, including the alphabetic principle: that symbols represent speech sounds (cat equals three symbols, three sounds);

- **Phonics and word recognition** – the correspondence between visual symbols (graphemes made up of letters) and speech sounds (phonemes); this includes analyzing multisyllabic words, which means teaching morphology through fifth grade;

- **Fluency** – being able to read connected text accurately, and with proper expression (volume, phrasing, smoothness, and pace), with little conscious effort, conveying and being able to focus on the meaning.

The bad news, says Mesmer, is that many schools aren't teaching all four in a thorough and balanced way, often putting too much emphasis on phonics. That prevents students from becoming proficient at automatically recognizing words and being able to devote most of their mental bandwidth to understanding complex ideas and vocabulary.

"No one can concentrate on Newton's laws, plot development, or electrical circuits if they are struggling to decode every fifth word," says Mesmer.

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IMPORTANT DATES

- March 3** Early Release (K-5 Parent Conferences/6-12 PD)
- March 5** Early Release (K-5 Parent Conferences/6-12 PD)
- March 8** Daylight Savings Time begins
- March 17** St. Patrick's Day
- March 19** Spring begins at 11:50pm

IMPORTANT NOTICE:

Central office is a **fragrance-free zone** so please be respectful and plan accordingly when you visit.

Due to one of our members at the CO being highly sensitive to any type of fragrance, we ask that staff visiting/meeting at the Administration building refrain from using any scented products. Fragrances from personal care products, air fresheners, laundry and other cleaning products have been associated with adversely affecting a person's health. We ask that we all work together to make the environment a safe and healthy workplace for everyone.



Thank you very much for your cooperation!

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“We are putting the cart before the horse if we drill letter/sounds without also teaching print concepts and the alphabetic principle... Can you imagine going to a job where you learn all about the different types of buttons, threads, fabrics, and zippers but no one tells you that you are manufacturing jeans? Yet that’s often how reading instruction can feel for children.

” “Simply put,” says Mesmer, “foundational skills cannot be separated. Print concepts and phonological awareness support phonics instruction, morphological instruction extends students’ word recognition, and fluency automatizes word reading.” She believes the schools that get the best (and the most equitable) results are following these precepts:

- **Teaching the foundational skills systematically** – This means a curriculum and materials that specify what is taught and in what sequence.

- **Balancing the four skills** – “These skills are complementary and need to be consistently taught, in response to development, through grade 5,” she says.

- **Being explicit about key concepts** – Mesmer recently tested more than 100 kindergarten students who knew about 90 percent of their letter/sounds but could not decode simple words. What was lacking was direct teaching of grapheme/phoneme relationships, word roots, and syllable patterns.

- **Using assessment information to differentiate** – Students entering kindergarten may know all their letter names or none. “Teachers must use simple diagnostic assessments that inform cumulative review and instruction, and often must use small-group instruction,” says Mesmer.

- **Using high-quality, aligned materials** – A recent RAND study found that only seven percent of elementary teachers were using at least one well-vetted set of ELA materials. EdReports.org has a tool that can zero in on the best materials.

- **Seeing the bigger picture** – Full literacy instruction includes vocabulary, world knowledge, comprehension, writing, and other Common Core standards.

“There Are Four Foundational Reading Skills. Why Do We Only Talk About Phonics?” by Heidi Anne Mesmer in Education Week, January 23, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3alfdPL>; Mesmer can be reached at hamesmer@vt.edu,

Increasing Joy in Primary-Grade Math Classes

In this Mathematics Teacher article, teacher educator Amy Noelle Parks (Michigan State University) says that after 30 years as an educator, her criterion for excellence in primary-grade mathematics classrooms is joy. This is not the same thing as fun, says Parks: she’s talking about “flow” – children being so immersed in meaningful classroom activities that they lose track of time. Parks suggests five strategies for maximizing joy and minimizing anxiety and other negative emotions in math classes:

- **Create space for play.** “Play is a powerful tool for reducing stress and for increasing opportunities for mathematical learning,” she says – as long as the materials are well chosen. Some possibilities: counting collections, wooden or Lego blocks, puzzles, and linear board games.



- **Allow children to make choices.** Children are empowered and more likely to enjoy classroom activities when they can make decisions on how to spend time, who to spend it with, and which materials to use.

- **Offer problems that include exploration, social interaction, and engaging materials.** A problem might be a question – If the giant in Jack in the Beanstalk is ten times as tall as a person, how tall is he? – or a counting challenge, or a brain teaser. Enjoyment is increased if students can share their answers with classmates without fear of making a mistake.





- **Relax a little about time on task.** “The occasional off-task moment will not significantly interfere with children’s ability to learn mathematics,” says Parks. Teachers snapping their fingers and ordering students engaging in chit-chat to get back to work will definitely not contribute to joyful learning.

- **Foster caring relationships.** “Creating a welcoming environment draws on some classic early childhood teaching practices,” says Parks, “– greeting children with a smile and by name, taking time to get to know each child, and helping children to name and handle their emotions.” Risk-taking and joy are also promoted by including children’s interests, experiences, and home languages and cultures.

In addition to these joy-promoting practices, Parks suggests that teachers make the following choices:

- Ask children to tackle a few deep tasks versus doing dozens of similar computation problems;
- Allow children to talk versus telling them to work in silence;
- Focus on growth over time versus achievement against a standard;
- Emphasize fluency over speed;
- Provide a variety of instructional settings versus the same routine every day;
- Incorporate art, music, and science into math lessons versus a siloed approach.

“Creating Joy in PK-Grade 2 Mathematics Classrooms” by Amy Noelle Parks in *Mathematics Teacher*, January 2020 (Vol. 113, #1, pp. 61-64), <https://bit.ly/38N36Px>; Parks can be reached at parksamy@msu.edu.

Four-Text Sets to Build Students’ Reading Power



In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Sara Lupo, Alicia Berry, Emma Thacker, Amanda Sawyer, and Joi Merritt (James Madison University) suggest the “Quad Text Set Framework” to meet the four challenges of elementary literacy instruction:

- **Building students’ content knowledge** – “Without knowledge,” say the authors, “learners struggle at every stage of the reading process, from decoding to fluency to making higher level inferences.”

- **Motivating students to read** – Teachers must tap students’ curiosity, and one way of doing that is developing a line of inquiry into an intriguing content topic.

- **Reading challenging texts** – “We cannot keep students who have been labeled as struggling from the benefits that challenging texts provide,” say the authors, “such as exposure to challenging concepts and ideas, rare and academic vocabulary, or complex syntax structures.”

Teachers need to judge texts by students’ background knowledge, the level of abstractness, language formality, and cohesiveness.

- **Reading accessible texts** – Not everything has to be hard, say the authors; students need to be exposed to a variety of texts and media and know how to navigate them.

The Quad Text Set Framework guides teachers in selecting four texts on a topic that together build content knowledge, motivate students, provide challenging material, and enhance skills in navigating different kinds of texts:

- **The target text** has challenging content-area text on the topic being studied.

- **An informational text** is easier and builds content knowledge.

- **A “hook” text** shows the relevance of the topic or its real-world application.

- **A visual text** (a picture book or video) builds knowledge visually.

The teacher decides on the best sequence of the four texts.

Here are examples of quad text sets in different subject areas:

A fourth-grade science unit on electricity:

- **Hook text:** Because You’ll Never Meet Me by Leah Thomas

- **Informational texts:** *What Happens When...?* by John Farndon and *Switch On, Switch Off* by Melvin Berger

- **Visual text:** A video explaining how electrical circuits work (*Explaining an Electrical Circuit*)

- **Target text:** *What Are Electrical Circuits?* by Ronald Monroe





A second-grade social studies unit on civil rights activists challenging unfair laws:

- **Hook text:** Interactive read aloud of Boycott Blues: How Rosa Parks Inspired a Nation by Andrea David Pinkney and Brian Pinkney

- **Visual text:** A video about Rosa Parks that includes words and pictures

- **Informational texts:** Civil Rights Activists: Rosa Parks from Newsela and *Here Is the Truth About What a Famous Black Bus Rider Did 60 Years Ago* from Newsela

- **Target text:** I Am Rosa Parks by Rosa Parks with Jim Haskins

A first-grade math unit on halves and quarters:

- **Hook text:** The Cookie Fiasco by Dan Santat

- **Visual text:** a BrainPop Jr. video, "Basic Parts of a Whole"

- **Informational text:** Give Me Half by Stuart Murphy

- **Target text:** Pizza Pizzazz! by Carol Losi "Rethinking Text Sets to Support Knowledge Building and Interdisciplinary Learning" by Sara Lupo, Alicia Berry, Emma Thacker, Amanda Sawyer, and Joi Merritt in *The Reading Teacher*, January/February 2020 (Vol. 73, #4, pp. 513-524), available for purchase at <https://bit.ly/2O4Nm2D>; Lupo can be reached at luposm@jmu.edu.

The Dolphin Way



MES

At MES, we just had a faculty meeting about Morning Meetings. The PBIS team presented many activities that could be incorporated into Morning Meeting that connects to Calmer Choice, intervention, the Dolphin Way, and literacy. Our goal is to incorporate some of these activities into our Morning Meeting and check in to see if it is making an impact on student behavior and academic success.



DYH

At the high school students have recently finished designing the new 2020 Shout Out. Deirdre Wallace was the winner of the contest and her design concept will be created by Ms. Endich's graphic design team as the new shout out for our acknowledgement system. Additionally we have almost completed our Dolphin Project where we are representing each member of the DYRHS community on a dolphin to be displayed in the school. We are planning a big bash for Teacher Appreciation Week where we plan on acknowledging our educators and showering them with goodies and prizes!

NHW

At Wixon, we have our Dolphin Way Nomination spreadsheet that is shared with the whole faculty. There is a link to it on the Wixon Daily News every day for easy access. Every morning, students are recognized on the announcements for demonstrating one or more of our core values. They also receive a certificate of recognition to take home with them. Teachers also recognize students at the end of each trimester who they feel demonstrate the Dolphin Way consistently in their classroom. We have an assembly for each team where the teachers recognize the students. Families of recognized students are invited and we have a little breakfast after the assembly.

SAE

Station Avenue Elementary School has made our primary PBIS theme compliments - giving and receiving them freely. We are working on displays, read alouds, and reinforcing common language from our staff to our students and encouraging our students to think about their language too! The "Our Words Matter" display in our hallway reinforces this by reminding everyone to use kind, thoughtful language when interacting with each other. We are also working to reinforce common area etiquette, focusing mostly on our student restrooms, as they tend to be an area of temporary freedom for our students and we are noticing trash not being put in receptacles, toilets not being flushed, and even some cases of minor graffiti. And lastly, since our data reveals aggression as a





slightly more prevalent behavior, we will address "personal space" - it may be addressed at an All School Meeting or in some other fashion with all students in our school. We are totally committed to curbing this behavior.

Educating for Full Civic Participation

In this Kappa Delta Pi Record article, Joel Westheimer (University of Ottawa) says schools have always tried to instill moral values, good behavior, and character in their students. But what exactly does that mean? For Westheimer, the question is personal: his parents were German Jews who escaped the Nazi Holocaust, but millions of others were not so fortunate. "How could such a highly educated, mature democracy descend into such unimaginable cruelty and darkness?" he asks. What did German schools teach about obedience, civic participation, and dissent? And how can today's schools help kids to "acquire the essential knowledge, dispositions, and skills for effective democratic citizenship to flourish?"

These questions are pertinent: a 2017 Pew poll showed that 22 percent of Americans favor a political system in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from Congress or the courts. Polls in other western democracies show a similar undercurrent, accompanied by disdain for the free press, civil liberties, and the courts and open hostility toward foreigners and ethnic "others." Researching schools' efforts to teach civic virtues and individual morality, Westheimer has found mediocre practices and a failure to distinguish among, and effectively prepare young people for, three kinds of citizenship:

- **Personally responsible citizen** – The key virtues here are honesty, responsibility, integrity, hard work, self-discipline, and compassion. A responsible citizen obeys laws, pays taxes, helps those in need (for example, contributing to a food drive), and lends a hand in times of crisis.

- **Participatory citizen** – Basic knowledge for participation (taught in schools and families) includes how government works at the local, state, national, and global level; the importance of voting; and the role of civic and religious organizations. The difference between this kind of citizenship and the one above is activism: "While the personally responsible citizen would contribute cans of food for the homeless," says



Westheimer, "the participatory citizen might organize the food drive." An active citizen is tuned into society-wide issues, economic and environmental concerns, and knows collective strategies for accomplishing things.



- **Social justice-oriented citizen** – The key at this level is critical thinking about fairness, equality, opportunity, and the root causes of injustice. "If participatory citizens are organizing the food drive and personally responsible citizens are donating food," says Westheimer, "social justice-oriented citizens are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover to address root causes of hunger (e.g., poverty, inequality, structural impediments to self-sufficiency)."

Westheimer's research over the last two decades has found that the third form of citizenship is least often addressed in schools, which focus mostly on volunteering, charity, obedience, and the three branches of government. That's necessary but not sufficient, he believes: "Education that teaches students to follow the rules, obey authority figures, be honest, help others in need, clean up after themselves, try their best, and be team players is rarely controversial. But without an analysis of power, politics, and one's role in local and global political and economic structures, students are unlikely to become effective citizens who can work with others toward improving the world."

How can schools do a more effective job getting students to think about the origins of major social problems and how they can be solved? asks Westheimer. "We need citizens who can think and act in ethically thoughtful ways. A well-functioning democratic society benefits from classroom practices that teach students to recognize ambiguity and conflict in factual content, to see human conditions and aspirations as complex and contested, and to embrace debate and deliberation as a cornerstone of democratic societies." He suggests the following steps for schools:





- **Teach students to ask questions.** Totalitarian societies have one top-down version of the truth and discourage dissent, even making it illegal. In democratic societies, questioning and constant rethinking of traditions are engines of progress. “Education reformers, school leaders, and parents should do everything possible to ensure that teachers and students have opportunities to ask these kinds of questions,” says Westheimer.

- **Expose students to multiple viewpoints.** Students might gather newspaper articles or textbook chapters from different states and countries and ask how they are different, how they are similar, and why. Teachers should get students thinking about how issues that seem trivial to them might be a big deal to others. “Critical empathy” is something teachers should work hard to instill, says Westheimer. “This is the kind of teaching in a globalized world that encourages future citizens to leverage their civic skills for the greater social good rather than for their own particular interests.”

- **Teach controversial issues.** Schools may think they’re doing this by covering slavery, Nazism, and laws that denied voting rights to women, but what about the #MeToo movement, women’s reproductive rights, misinformation campaigns using social media, and debates about what’s included in the school curriculum? “Engagement with contemporary controversies from a range of perspectives and using multiple sources of information is exactly what democratic participation requires,” says Westheimer. •

- **Focus on the local.** Civic education becomes much more immediate when students study and engage in projects in their immediate surroundings – school, neighborhood, town, state. A recent example of this was how students at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida responded to gun violence at their school. “Their ability to connect a very personal experience with the ways in which government, policy, and social and economic forces shape their lives,” says Westheimer, “allowed them to participate on a national scale and, no doubt, prepared them for a life of effective civic engagement.”



- **Be political.** Even when teachers are careful not to express their own views, some topics are controversial, with students feeling uncomfortable about the views expressed by classmates. “Democracy can be messy,” says Westheimer. “Rather than let fear of sanction and censorship dictate pedagogical choices, however, teachers should be supported and protected, encouraged to use political debates and controversy as teachable moments in civic discourse.”

- **Use teachable moments across the school.** Although these issues will be primarily addressed in civics and social studies classes, there are opportunities in other subject areas, assemblies, the cafeteria, and hallways. “How classrooms are set up, who gets to talk when, how adults conduct themselves, how decisions are made, how lessons are enacted – all these inevitably serve as lessons in citizenship, in how we live with one another in complex and diverse local, national, and global communities,” concludes Westheimer. “Whether teachers explicitly teach lessons in citizenship or not, students learn about community organizations, the distribution of power and resources, rights, responsibilities, and justice and injustice.”

“Can Education Transform the World?” by Joel Westheimer in Kappa Delta Pi Record, January-March 2020 (Vol. 56, #1, pp. 6-12), available for purchase <https://bit.ly/2ScpM5b>; Westheimer can be reached at joelwestheimer@mac.com.

Running Records: A Quick and “Surprisingly Fruitful” Diagnostic Tool

In this article in The Reading Teacher, Jennifer Barone (Glastonbury, Connecticut elementary reading teacher), Pamela Khairallah (literacy consultant), and Rachael Gabriel (University of Connecticut) say that data from running records are often used for compliance reporting – or not used at all (perhaps because of misconceptions about their purpose). “It is time,” they say, “to revive the purpose, remember the





practice, and reinvigorate the analysis of running records for ongoing instructional planning. In doing so, teachers will make the most of every instructional and planning minute to target instruction.”

One of six components of the Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement, running records are individually administered records of oral reading. As the student reads a short passage aloud, the teacher uses specific symbols to record the student’s use and integration of meaning, language structure, and visual information, as well as self-corrections, repetitions, and omissions. While running records can be used to assess students’ accuracy and reading level, Barone, Khairallah, and Gabriel believe their best use is as a diagnostic tool to help plan the most effective next steps. The authors describe two different teachers listening to the mistakes their students made while reading a Level G text. The correct line in the story was: *Then he fished and fished.*

- Student A read: *Then he found and found.*
- Student B read: *Then he fished a fish.*
- Student C read: *Then he fish and fish.*



One teacher heard these readings during individual running records. She was able to see that all three were successfully using first-letter sounds and were ready for instruction in cross-checking letters and syntactic information, scanning through words, and checking the middle and end parts while paying attention to the meaning of the story.

The second teacher heard these errors in a small reading group (she wasn’t using running records) and responded quite differently. She saw that fished was difficult for students and followed up by teaching inflectional endings and retaught the whole class a mini-lesson on vowel teams. She wasn’t able to see what students were able to do and the specific next steps that would be most helpful. This is quite common with teachers who lack the diagnostic information provided by running records: “isolated and



disjointed lessons that fail to support the development of strategic reading behaviors that transfer across texts.” Often these teachers adhere to the district pacing guide and move students up to the next level of reading difficulty without addressing reading problems that will continue to cause problems down the road.

The power of running records is that they quickly provide the kind of detailed diagnostic information that teachers can use to identify patterns and make instructional decisions as they work with small groups and the whole class. “This combination of specific, individualized reinforcement, immediate corrective feedback, and supervised practice,” say Barone, Khairallah, and Gabriel, “is the very definition of explicit instruction... This is the beginning of the sophisticated phonics work students must develop to match growing text complexity for reading and writing.” Data from running records may also point to the need for all-class or small-group instruction on a specific skill.

“As diagnostic teaching tools,” the authors conclude, “running records allow teachers to think like coaches who prepare their players for games rather than for excellence in isolated drills. For example, soccer coaches know that skill drills are needed to build soccer players. They also know that players need scrimmages and game situations to try out and get feedback on using the isolated skills they practice in real games. Similarly, we cannot teach reading skills in isolation and never provide opportunities to try them out in the game: the reading of rich, engaging texts... Coaches give on-the-spot feedback and tips, in their players’ zone of proximal development, just as teachers do with students. Even or especially when it feels as if doing one more thing will be overwhelming, taking a running record can make the planning and prompting you already do more focused, purposeful, and powerful.”

“Running Records Revisited: A Tool for Efficiency and Focus” by Jennifer Barone, Pamela Khairallah, and Rachael Gabriel in *The Reading Teacher*, January/February 2020 (Vol. 73, #4, pp. 525-530), available for purchase at <https://bit.ly/3705amk>; the authors can be reached at jlbarone22@gmail.com, pkhairallah@deligent.com, and rachael.gabriel@uconn.edu.

