

Why We Are Optimistic about Kindergarten English Language Arts Common Core State Standards

By Nellie Edge

Our Logo



*We designed this CCSS logo to reflect our vision of implementing
Common Core State Standards within a framework of:*

- Joyful, meaning-centered learning—rich in music, drama, Sign Language, and the arts
- An understanding that kindergarten learning is active and social
- Strong and respectful “Parents as Partners” connections
- A concern for the physical and emotional wellbeing of children and a commitment to imparting positive learning attitudes and beliefs that will help each child do well in school—and in life.

As educators we can choose to spoon-feed our children or we can develop self-regulated learners who are motivated to do quality work. We can choose to create a joyful learning community where kindness, responsibility, and caring are intrinsic parts of the learning process. Years later, children will carry the memories of splendid teachers who believed in them and taught them to work hard to reach their goals, teachers who instilled a passion for learning through wise, playful, and loving relationships.

We Value Clear Learning Outcomes and Meaning-Centered Curriculum

We believe new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for Kindergarten English Language Arts will produce a broader, more meaning-centered literacy curriculum that includes deep science explorations and engagement in high quality literature and nonfiction, thus building an intrinsic motivation for children to learn. **We value the emphasis on learning outcomes** rather than the very simplistic one-size-fits-all solutions that have dominated literacy instruction in some of our state schools. **We are pleased with an integrated literacy model that incorporates reading, writing, listening, and speaking.** We believe educators can teach these core skills within a learning community that **values creativity, self-regulation, and collaboration.** For all of these reasons, we view these standards as necessary guideposts and value the freedom to implement them with our best teaching wisdom.

These core standards are consistent with the full-day Quality Kindergarten Model our colleagues have developed and will continue to enhance. **We see learning as an integrated, interdisciplinary process** rather than a series of isolated subjects or skill development activities. Our aim has always been to create deep, authentic, engaging curriculum because all children benefit from rigorous—and joyful—learning.

Parents Deserve to Know What Rigorous Standards Look Like

CCSS is a valuable tool for parents who deserve and need to know where their children are academically and what knowledge and skills they will need to be successful. We believe respectful and supportive “Parents as Partners” connections multiply our teaching effectiveness and are one of the most important contributions kindergarten teachers make to our school communities. As we help families establish the nightly commitment to “sing, talk, and read” with their children, we are laying the foundation for long-term school success. Meaningful parent involvement is vital if all children are to be offered the opportunity to meet high academic standards.

We Know How to Grow Engaged and Purposeful Writers

We are pleased to see writing is finally getting the emphasis that wise kindergarten teachers have always known it should receive. We have learned that the best way to grow engaged writers is to give children authentic writing-to-read experiences right from the start; to grow as writers,

children need to be engaged in real-world writing with a purpose. **We value the recognition that kindergarten teachers are intentionally developing these reading and writing skills across disciplines throughout the day.**

We know how to build authentic and motivating writing experiences that children love: making lists, writing messages, learning to draw, and making their own books. We honor “kid writing” while encouraging children to also develop a core of words they can instantly read, write, and spell. We teach children to use phonics-based spelling in their “kid writing” to develop strong sound-symbol connections. At the same time we begin introducing high-frequency “heart words” in a multisensory, motivating way so that children are continually challenging themselves to reach the next level of mastery. Our approach provides high-quality “parallel activities” for students who are able to reach mastery of writing fundamentals with less practice and repetition. These children are writing and illustrating more sophisticated messages and books, and choosing online research projects to do at home and later share with their classmates.

We Systematically and Actively Build Voracious Vocabulary

We are also pleased to see the emphasis on rich vocabulary development, which we call our “voracious vocabulary learning!” We intentionally and systematically build future S.A.T. vocabulary in ways that playfully engage the heart and mind of the young child. One of our mottos is “Language play every day... Books and songs all day long!” We develop a sense of excitement about words and the sounds of language. Our consistent focus on voracious vocabulary development is a source of challenge and delight: Children see themselves as “**prolific writers**” and “**voracious readers**” who are excited about big, rich words. They enjoy being **veterinarians** in our literacy play centers, **meteorologists** announcing the weather, and **collectors** of new color words like “amber”, “maroon”, or “chartreuse”. They proudly announce, “Another alliterative title!”

Children Learn to Read, Choose to Read, and Love to Read!

Our children are all engaged in supportive shared, guided, and independent experiences—right from the start. They make personal connections with books and expect these books to make sense. We give them books that are worthy of being read and reread, thus engaging them in authentic literacy right from the first month of school. While recognizing the importance of multisensory ABC and phonics immersion and building mastery of foundational letter recognition and phonics skills, we applaud the beliefs embedded in the CCSS document that our children’s first experience with text should allow them to directly with the text “so they can begin make meaning for themselves.” We have proven that the most efficient and delightful way to build “experts” at ABC recognition and phonics skills is through a multisensory immersion approach that includes singing, signing, fingerspelling, and a strong “Parents as Partners” component. This approach is very respectful of English language learners and the diverse cultural backgrounds that our children bring to kindergarten.

We give children high-quality “Read and Sing” picture books that simultaneously build English language skills and reading fluency; reading familiar songs and rhymes develops children’s cultural understanding and the joy of reading. We search for quality books that include art and language worthy of children. We involve “Parents as Partners” in literacy to build strong literacy foundations with our **Read and Sing Book Club and Elephant and Piggie Book Club.**

We choose flexible literacy materials for differentiated learning. Most of our books are appropriate for even harder-to-accelerate students, as long as tutorial support is offered; each child has a personal connection with the print and has seen him or herself as one who **can** read and **likes** to read. “The aim is for students to understand that thinking and reading occur simultaneously.” We know how to develop readers who **love** books and **choose** to read. In our full-day Quality Kindergarten Model, we provide children with the individual support they need to prevent most reading failures. Acknowledging that kindergarten teachers and families are the ones who must build the strong literacy foundation will motivate school leaders to give the utmost respect and support for kindergarten teaching—**where high**

Common Core State Standards begin. We know how to develop skills and positive learning habits for future grades to build upon.

Children Memorize, Recite, Perform, and Read Poetic Language

We love the inclusion of poetry and rhyme in Common Core State Standards. We weave the memorable language of nursery rhymes, delightful poems and memorable songs with American Sign Language across the curriculum throughout the day. Children indeed need to memorize, recite, and perform language as a foundation for developing a love of the sounds of language. We are happy to see our fluency focus—“celebrating language”—validated again within the design of these core standards.

Oral language is still the foundation for building thoughtful readers, writers, and communicators. We recognize that oral language fluency precedes reading print fluently, yet skilled teaching can *simultaneously* develop both.

All Children Deserve High-Quality Preschool Experiences

As kindergarten teachers, we care for each child who enters our classrooms, particularly those who lack the self-regulation skills and language foundation needed to build an emotionally and academically solid foundation for learning. (Clearly, in a quality full-day kindergarten, we can meet more diverse needs; however, nationally and in Oregon there are many half-day kindergarten programs hosting thirty or more children. This practice is simply not consistent with the quality kindergartens needed to meet the high core standards.) Most of our schools do not have the option of providing our harder-to-accelerate children with another year in a language-intensive, structured, play-based program that focuses on self-regulation skills with a strong, respectful “Parents as Partners” commitment. However, there are quality early childhood models that have proven track records for narrowing the achievement gap during the critical early years. (We refer you to research performed by cognitive neurobiologist Adele Diamond at the University of British Columbia for one such example.) While it is not my intent to address all of the issues that surround poverty, it is most certainly beyond the time to provide high-quality early education services for our youngest citizens.

We are encouraged to see that Oregon is seriously addressing the issue of high-quality early learning. Our young children deserve to learn in environments that reflect an understanding of how the young child learns best. As kindergarten educators, we will continue to reach for the stars with the lives of our children: Quality early childhood experiences bring the stars a little closer.

We Value Professional Learning Communities

Finally, even in tight economic times like those we are all experiencing, we believe the new core standards necessitate a much greater emphasis on ongoing professional development for teachers and time to reflect and share through collaborative learning communities. Our **Kindergarten Cadre** groups have proved the power of teachers inspiring teachers in the pursuit of excellence. Higher standards and expectations for teachers must eventually lead to the elevation of our profession, a more worthy salary for teachers, and—once again—seeing teaching as “most honorable of professions.” We are cautiously optimistic that this focus will lead to strong mentoring systems for new kindergarten teachers, greater autonomy for the accomplished classroom teachers, and incentives to reward great teaching!

Great Nations Build Great Public Schools

In countries such as Finland, where excellence in education is highly valued, it is considered a patriotic calling to be a teacher. In the United States, we have a long, important road ahead **to revitalize the culture of teacher colleges and examine the culture of school! How can we support the best instincts of our teachers** in the light of how the young child's brain learns best? The new core standards, used wisely, can provide a framework which moves the United States forward. Our children do not have time to wait for us to make education of the young our most pressing national priority. **Great nations build great public schools, and that starts with empowered teachers!**

Our goal continues to be “Creating Schools Worthy of Children.”