Common Core Reading Standards Part I:
Close Reading, Literary Analysis, and Reading for Meaning

Overview The Big Picture of Reading

We read for information and to make meaning for our lives. We read for pleasure and for new ideas. We love being transported to a new world through reading, and seeing how ideas and people connect with and extend our own understandings. Reading gives us insights into others and our own lives. We're inspired and motivated from reading. We would be simple, more ignorant – in the sense of not having understanding or being informed – without reading.

Learning to read is essential. Common Core Standards raise the bar on reading ability expectations. Assessing ability to read grade level appropriate material with relative proficiency by third grade is not only fair, it's a requirement for a child's life. Learning goes on without the child when he or she lacks third grade reading ability. A child may catch up later, certainly, but much is lost when one is behind peers.

But reading instruction can't stop at third grade. The axiom that a teaching goal through third grade is teaching learning to read; at fourth grade children "read to learn" no longer holds under Common Core Standards. Teaching *how* to read now continues through all the grades, and across content areas. The Standards offer good guides.

Common Core Standards ask that we continue to help students learn *how* to read, at graduated higher and higher levels, through all grade levels. National Standards ask that we don't let some students slip behind. And reading means understanding text, and the complex features of text so that one gains analysis ability. With Standards guiding teaching and learning, students learn that the author has a point of view on the subject. Students learn to examine word choice to see how words convey a particular point of

view. With access to vast, varied readings on the internet, as a 21st century skill we want to help students be informed through reading, but also learn to be critical thinkers and know how to analyze point of view and purpose. This is so that a reader becomes sufficiently sophisticated to judge the writer's intent and the position the writer holds, not taking written information as objective truth. We don't want students easily accepting opinions. Assessing the intent and connotations, or associations, of the stated words is key to being able to determine the writer's slant that we're reading.

Teachers are now asked with Standards learning to develop learning activities that help all students read for close explicitly stated information, inference, central ideas, use of word choice for intent, use context clues for vocabulary development, evaluate argument and claims, compare texts, and read complex text proficiently. This area of how to read is so important that not only English language arts teachers, but also science and social studies teachers are also now asked to teach how to read for these Standards.

New Content Subject Expectations in Teaching Reading

No longer are students expected to read informational text content for the information, but now are asked to follow these Common Core reading guides of close reading, inference, main idea, and critical analysis of text, and read complex text. Often sixth grade middle school teachers in the content areas of science and social studies have bemoaned that fact that many students coming in from the elementary level can't read their content texts. Now these other subject teachers are asked to help shoulder the responsibility of teaching students *how* to read, and how to write. This can only help students. However, this is also of value to teachers. As Standards learning advances, teachers will find students coming in to their grade levels having been taught the same reading skills. In addition, students will advance in content understanding when science and social studies teachers teach the skills of how to read their content areas. We all bump students up to the next level in reading ability, reinforcing the Standards learning over the grade levels and across the disciplines. This prepares students to leave

our public schools with the ability to continue to learn on their own, and to be informed citizens, analyzing and critiquing text, not simply accepting what a writer says as truth.

This grade level Standards learning means that a teacher may have to work individually on focused reading areas with a child, and/or in small group learning with struggling students. While this individual reading instruction is the common teaching mode at the elementary level, now content area teachers and upper grade teachers are asked to teach individuals. We must ensure that students learn these reading abilities and understandings at each grade level, to help bring students to reading mastery. We can no longer sail through text that is beyond the reader's ability, but must bring the reader closer to comprehension.

Informational Text

Another key concept with the Reading Standards is that students read more informational text. The new PARCC tenth grade English test is 75% non-fiction text. This emphasis on informational text is so that students will be able to learn through their lives, to continue to learn in our rapidly changing world.

English teachers are fearful that they have to set aside beloved literature. But we don't have to drop great literature from which students not only learn to read and learn to love to read. We can add supplementary non-fiction that connects with text, such as historical informational readings on such periods as the Civil Rights movement. Students can read current news articles on current events and/or that connect with ideas of literature, and read film reviews, for "argument" analysis. Students can read non-fiction biographies from the range of subjects such as authors, athletes, and historical figures. We can provide student choice so that a child can select a biography subject whom he or she wishes to read about, to stimulate the love of reading. Biography subjects can be from the wonderful range of one's favorite athlete, film star, author, musician, scientist, or just a great book on one previously unknown, an Amelia Earhart or Langston Hughes, Steve Jobs.

Foundational Skills

Another key area of teaching children how to read is the early mastery of phonemic awareness, phonics and word de-coding,
so that a child grasps how to understand a word. Some children may come in to Kindergarten appearing to know how to read. But some are sight readers, knowing words from having been read to at home, which is a huge advantage to reading development. However, sight readers hit a wall at third grade when text becomes more challenging, and students haven't developed the phonics and de-coding skills. We have to catch sight readers early on, so that they learn phonics and can sound out new words. But when we see that younger children do know phonics and have early reading ability, we provide these children with "leveled" texts so that they can read texts at or above their independent reading level. Student interest plays a big role here. We know that students can read more complex text when they're intrigued by the topic. This develops their reading ability, helping to support the growth of all readers. It's not uncommon for teachers to purchase their own books for particular students, a particular class. We feel it's worth our money.

Many elementary schools use a reading technique in which books are strictly leveled by text complexity and students are grouped by where they are in reading development. This is an excellent approach, as long as each group is well served. But sometimes a more struggling reader is assigned to a teacher's aide, who may or may not be qualified to help this student move in reading development. The more qualified teacher should be the one who helps this child. In addition, direct instruction or other methods may be needed to suit a child's learning style.

Helping Special Education Students Learn to Read

Special education teachers often feel their students are underserved in "flexible grouping" teaching methods, when they know that their students may require one-on-

one direct instruction in reading that meets the child's reading needs. "Inclusion" can be a disservice to special needs students if their needs are not being met. In reviewing early grade level state test scores, a team of special education team chairs found that their students who had been provided the individualized direct reading instruction of skilled reading specialists performed better than their students who were in inclusion classes.

Teachers are at times impossibly stretched in a classroom with the many needs. A teacher can't always provide the individualized attention more struggling students need in a large class. But inclusion means all students are included in the learning, not just sitting in the classroom. At the upper grade levels, often regular education teachers now have classes with many special education students. While the teachers in one high school were proud of the fact that every student read the same texts, many struggling readers were lost with text far above their reading ability. This was loss of precious learning time for these needy students. The financial costs of providing specialized reading instruction to needy students is far outweighed by learning success. What is more important than unlocking the doorway to reading for non-readers, or helping students comprehend at a higher level?

One reading specialist was told by her daughter's school that her special needs child would never learn to read. Knowing well the early foundational skills, this teacher parent worked on her own with her daughter on phonics, rhyming words, word recognition, and moving on to comprehension. Her daughter is now a reader.

A special education teacher who was told her child wouldn't be able to read arranged determinedly to have one-on-one direct instruction three times a week with a special education Wilson reading program. Her daughter learned to break the code of reading. Small miracles that change a child's life can happen. We need more of these examples of individualize intervention.

A Book for Every Child

Fortunately, we're lucky in the English language arts area to have a multitude of readings to suit each child. There are now available high interest, easy reading books for all grade levels to support struggling readers. Differentiating learning in the ELA area is do-able. We needn't teach in "One size fits all" land.

Engaging Readers in the Text Ideas – the "Hook"

Even when we may not have materials that can match students' needs and interests, the particular angle we take on working with text can engage students. Teaching the challenging reading of The Scarlet Letter can engage students when they are outraged at the persecution of Hester Prynne while the weak males hide their culpability. We can't always predict what book will engage a class, or a child, and love it when a book does capture interest. This is the perfect teachable moment for higher level learning. By taking an idea that captures students, one can read complex text in a guided fashion to explore the ideas. A text students may not be able to read on their own becomes accessible with guided discussions and an idea that fascinates them.

Teacher Style and Flexibility

One third grade teacher with an excellent background in reading development always purchased her own books. She taught with her own teaching style, which was energetic, informed, knowledgeable, and dedicated to each child. She was a dynamic, expert teacher of reading. Her principal was a devoted reading expert herself, and permitted this teacher to teach as she wished and not follow the school's program. This was because the principal – a lover of reading -- saw the classes and also the results. Importantly, this teacher's success in reading instruction was confirmed with objective outside test scores. This independent teacher's test scores on all types of tests consistently outscored all others in the school, and the school's ELA state test scores always ranked higher than the other elementary schools in the district. Standards needn't inhibit individual style, especially when results are impressive.

However, another teacher in the same school was a graduate of an arts college. With a master's in literacy she had learned only one philosophy and practice of teaching reading. "I only know how to teach reading in this one way," she commented. But this teacher understood collaboration. State test score analysis showed that the school was not teaching students to read for explicitly stated information. The school reading specialist recommended purchase of a supplemental program of direct instruction on reading skills. This teacher learned how to supplement her reading instruction with direct instruction material. National standards ask us to be flexible to address student needs.

Tailoring Instruction to the Student

The expert reading specialist at this school always apologized to me when I would visit the school saw that she was pulling students out of classes to work individually with them on their reading development. This reading specialist had a range of books and materials in her room and was adept at matching learning with needs. She was a highly skilled professional. I kept telling her not to apologize. While "pullout" has been disparaged, it *can* be the best practice when a specialist has the expertise to target growth.

Co-Teaching

Our move toward "inclusion" needs to be with the caution that when more struggling students are included in a regular classroom these students should still be provided with appropriate learning support. We wonder why special needs students can be "discipline problems" when in the regular classroom. A good strategy is co-teaching, when a regular education English language arts teacher co-teaches with a special education teacher in smaller classes. While this is costly for a school, can we afford to not fund strong learning for struggling students? School day planning time for co-teaching is often considered the hurdle.

When I co-taught classes with a content teacher, time for planning was not an issue. We met as needed and as possible. We created our own planning time. We had a running

conversation through wanting to compare and exchange thoughts. Planning went smoothly. Teachers who work well together and can learn together and discuss well supersedes the school allocated time to meet. One department head scheduled regular lunch meetings with one group of teachers with whom he was otherwise unable to meet. Ideally planning time is built into a school schedule. But teachers learn to overcome hurdles. We can find the time when we must.

Extended Time on Learning

Response to Intervention (RTI) originally was initially required in order to catch students who may move into Special Education because they hadn't learned needed reading skills. Since it's hard to analyze problems definitively at early ages, students are given more time, to see if there is a disability that interferes with learning or if more intense and varied learning strategies bring more success with reading ability

Now RTI is recommended as a general practice. RTI is a three-tiered method in which struggling readers are taught in a regular education class, then also in a small group, and then individually. This is using the research that special education and other struggling students have been shown to learn when provided more time. To make RTI work, the learning must be consistent across the three tiers. When done with skilled teachers and consistency, this can do wonders for students' growth in reading development. Precision in targeting and addressing needs is needed. Again, this important three-tiered assistance shouldn't stop in elementary grades, but should be made available at all grade levels. Standards testing, with our individual student score reports, help inform instructional needs.

Losing students through lack of reading ability

Promoting reading for the child's next step

Developing students' ability to read is probably the single most important skill for growth and in many cases survival. Research tells us third grade reading ability

correlates with high school drop-out. Frustrated with school, and falling behind, the student simply leaves, cutting off future options, leaving a blank where one's future is meant to be. Starting with pre-school and kindergarten, children develop basic skills of text. They begin to learn the sound-letter combinations. Some quickly pick up reading skills, especially with strong home support, such as being read to by adults. Others learn only gradually. When the gap between readers and more struggling readers, or non-readers, grows, learning development slows. By middle school a student knows when he or she has been left behind. These are the students who often become discipline problems, acting out their frustration with school. In high school, a struggling student may leave school.

Teaching the skills of reading – at increasingly higher, more complex levels -- throughout a student's education is an underpinning of the Common Core Reading Standards.

In the past, and to some degree currently, children who attained reading proficiency with grade level text and above became the better students who easily accessed text. Reading skills – learning how to read text – have not always been systematically taught at fourth grade and higher. For children, those cracks widen between their own reading ability and that of their peers. Learning in school becomes hit or miss when students can't access text.

If students haven't learned to read proficiently by the fifth grade level, in moving on to middle school, learning goes on without them. "Remedial" help is playing catch-up and doesn't match the regular classroom work. Students fall further and further behind. The gap widens between what the student is able to do and what is expected in classes. The achievement gap between traditionally lower performing students and higher achieving students widens. State tests only document this.

In this sense, and others, Common Core grade level Reading Standards are our savior.