

A BALANCED APPROACH TO LITERACY

We believe that a balanced approach to literacy provides the best opportunity to develop the reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking skills necessary for academic success and personal satisfaction. At all levels this means:

- **exposure to excellent literature** (in all genres and representing a variety of cultural contexts) as the primary source of motivation to read
- **immersion in a literate environment** that emphasizes the importance of reading, writing, self-expression, and thoughtful discussion, and celebrates the joys and pleasures that come from these activities; such an environment reflects an understanding of the proximal nature of language learning, and, hence, promotes a positive attitude toward learners, eschews negative or stigmatizing practices, values and honors cultural differences, and at all times seeks to foster an atmosphere in which *all* learners can succeed
- **the modeling of literate behaviors by teachers**; that is, teachers demonstrating on a daily basis their love of books, stories, and storytelling; engaging students in passionate dialogue about literature; sharing their own writing and poetry with students; and demonstrating genuine, honest listening and responding skills
- **a comprehensive approach to reading** that emphasizes large blocks of time for students to read authentic texts of their own choosing; phonics and word study; the explicit study of effective comprehension strategies; and on-going dialogue with caring, interested teachers
- **a view of reading as an act of learning which involves, at all times, the construction of meaning**; a recognition that proficient readers integrate a number of strategies to enhance their understanding, including word recognition strategies, metacognition, inferential thinking, knowledge of text structure and story elements, visualization of sensory images, synthesis of new and prior information, and interpretation of author's tone, stance, and purpose
- **a heavy emphasis on writing in all genres for a variety of audiences and purposes**, and the promotion of authentic authorship experiences that include planning and organizing,

- revising, editing and publishing one's work
- **explicit skill and strategy instruction** in both reading and writing; a recognition that while some students learn inductively - through trial and error, discovery, experimentation - most students best acquire the knowledge and skills they need through explicit teaching
 - **appropriately challenging activities for all students**; a recognition that effective classrooms are those in which teachers differentiate instruction and each student works within his/her 'optimal zone of challenge' (what Vygotsky calls each learner's *zone of proximal development*); a recognition that teachers must scaffold instruction - and work to release responsibility for learning - appropriately for each student
 - **intrinsically motivating activities** that encourage inquiry, promote critical thinking, and foster independent learning
 - **interactive learning** that promotes the active use of language and thinking skills in collaborative projects
 - **assessment practices that both inform instruction and measure students' progress over time and in relation to specific standards**; a recognition that assessment is at the heart of effective classroom instruction, providing the means to evaluate both students' performance and the effectiveness of the educational program

In practical terms, this means:

1. **a large block of daily uninterrupted reading and writing time:**
2. K: 10 hours per week (minimum)
3. 1-2: 12.5 hours per week (minimum)
4. 3: 10 hours per week (minimum)
5. 4-5: 8 to 10 hours per week
6. 6-8: 8 to 9 hours per week including social studies time
7. **clear articulation of reading and writing goals to students and parents** - both on a global level (yearlong map of instructional units, syllabus and/or calendar) and on the level of the individual assignment or activity through the use of rubrics and clear explanations of purpose
8. **explicit reading instruction** in a variety of modes in every grade, continually engaging students at several distinct levels of

challenge: an *instructional level*, just at the edge of the student's ability at that point in time, a *challenge level* offering harder material accessible in some cases only aurally, and an *independent level* using easier material to work on fluency and expression and to practice comprehension strategies; specific instructional components at each grade level include

primary: interactive read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, and phonics / word study

intermediate interactive read aloud, shared reading, guided reading (including strategy lessons, book clubs and literature circles), independent reading, and word study

middle school: large and small group work focusing on comprehension strategies (both 'active reading' strategies and literary analysis), independent reading, interactive read aloud, and shared reading

9. **an emphasis on independent reading and the development of a lifelong reading habit;** this includes nightly reading by all students in grades 1 - 8 and accountability by teachers through reading logs and folders
10. **explicit writing instruction** that includes focused in all genres, and both written and oral feedback from teachers: *all grades:* authorship experiences that emphasize conferring, revising, editing, publishing and celebrating creative efforts; emphasis on placing control of the writing process in the hands of the writer
primary: shared writing, interactive writing, independent writing, guided writing around specific instructional needs and issues; emphasis on joyful expression, discovery, creative word play, inquiry, personal investigations
intermediate: focus lessons on a variety of rhetorical and stylistic issues including specific narrative and expository techniques, planning and organizing, rich language, elaboration; serious examination of sentence structure and sentence boundaries; emphasis on writing as a tool to enhance learning and thinking in all subject areas
middle school: focused lessons on organizing and structuring, economy and clarity, persuasion, fiction techniques; emphasis

on audience and purpose and specific forms: essay, report, memoir, letter, précis, dramatic script, short story; increased emphasis on reflective thinking, writing to learn, writing across the curriculum

11. **explicit teaching and testing of conventions of English**, including capitalization, punctuation, paragraphing, grammar and usage, and spelling
12. **assessment practices** that include
 - running records and system-wide instruments (primary); formal and informal reading inventories (intermediate and middle school)
 - skills inventories
 - a reading folder (should include log of all independent reading choices, small group book selections, reading responses, self-assessments and reflections, and, possibly, informal assessment data)
 - a writing folder (should include a table of contents, all drafts, assessment instruments such as rubrics and writing prompts, self-assessments and reflections)
 - parent-student-teacher conferences that focus on collections of student work (portfolios, reading/writing folders, etc.) and progress over time relative to standards

All of these emphases and practices conform to the recommendations of the *International Reading Association*, the *National Council of Teachers of English*, the *National Education Association*, and the *Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework (June 2001)*. Additionally, they reflect the recommendations of Newton's K-12 English Language Arts Review Committee, which completed its work in the fall of 2001.