

K-8 English Language Arts and Literacy Common Core Implementation

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Reaching beyond the national effort to define standards for college and career readiness, authors of the Massachusetts ELA Framework articulate a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the 21st century. They emphasize the importance of ensuring students' literacy development, as they become thoughtful individuals and reflective responsible citizens capable of making important contributions to society. In order to achieve this goal, the authors point to a number of critical literacy experiences that children need, both at home and in school, in order to develop to their highest potential.

The framework places a welcome emphasis on oral language. Children benefit from daily opportunities to engage in conversations with adults and other children. These conversations help children expand their background knowledge and interests, develop higher levels of language and vocabulary, and build effective communication skills. In addition, when children closely read and view a broad range of literary and informational texts, they learn to think critically about the information, to see similarities and differences among viewpoints and cultures, to develop a critical lens for thinking about information, and to form a rich knowledge and experience base from which to speak and write. These kinds of practices, coupled with robust classroom learning experiences across the disciplines, enable students to develop a rich engaging literate life.

K-5 Reading Standards for Literature, Informational Text, and Foundational Skills

Where we are:

Students at the elementary level read and respond to a variety of text types throughout their elementary years. Beginning in Kindergarten and Grade One, students read both literary and informational texts that address a broad array of questions, themes and content. Over the past two years, the literacy specialists, classroom teachers, and the ELA Coordinator have collaborated to design 4 Units of Study for Literary Text for each grade level that address specific standards from each section of the framework (reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and language). Additionally, these units include common assessments, such as:

- Explain the differences in the structures of poems, drama, prose.
- Using evidence from the text, compare and contrast how two characters interact in the story.
- Compare and contrast different stories in the same genre and how they address similar themes and topics.

In each unit of study at every grade, students learn to use evidence and reasoning to support claims about such concepts as character motivation and themes. Students learn that using strong evidence and clear reasoning helps them convey their opinions and ideas in convincing ways.

The ELA, Social Studies, and Science Coordinators regularly collaborate on the implementation of the MA ELA Framework. Over the past two years, literacy specialists and classroom teachers, with guidance from the coordinators, have developed units of study for informational text that integrate content goals and ELA standards. Each of these units includes informational texts at a variety of levels on the staircase of complexity, and students learn to read and evaluate texts in both digital and print formats.

Teachers have participated in 8-10 professional learning sessions over the past two years that have addressed all the components of the new framework. Sessions have included a careful review of the standards. Topics included in these professional learning sessions have been: Productive Talk, Close Reading of Complex Texts, Science Notebooks as a Tool for Learning, Claims Evidence and Reasoning CER, and Writing in Response to Reading.

Next Steps:

During the summer of 2013, literacy specialists working with groups of teachers will continue to finalize the reading units of study for each grade. They will identify opportunities within the units for student research.

Continue to vet resources and purchase appropriate materials.

K-5 Writing and Language Standards

Where we are:

The framework emphasizes three major forms of writing: narrative (including personal and imaginative), informational, and opinion/argument. As they advance through the grades, students at the elementary level write numerous personal narratives culminating in writing memoir in Grade 5. In the upper grades, students have opportunities to write imaginative narratives such as fiction stories, Tall Tales in Grade 4, and journals related to Social Studies units. Beginning in grades K and 1 and continuing throughout the grades, students write informative texts as part of their content area writing. As a component of their writing in science notebooks, students learn to make claims and support their claims with evidence and reasoning (CER). Students are learning how to apply their knowledge of CER to writing opinion pieces that address a wide range of texts and topics.

Next Steps:

Next year, professional learning sessions for elementary teachers and specialists will focus on the teaching of writing. Sessions will include a cycle for teaching each of the forms of writing every year, how to integrate the language standards into the

teaching of writing, and how to increase the volume of writing throughout the day. This summer, teams of teachers will work with literacy specialists to further examine the writing standards and realign units of study for writing to the new framework.

The ELA Coordinator and Director of English as a Second Language Programs will continue to collaborate on effective ways to integrate the Language Standards from the new ELA framework with the new WIDA English Language Development (ELD) Standards into the units of study.

Continue to vet resources and purchase appropriate materials.

6-8 Reading Standards for Literary Text, Speaking and Listening, Writing, and Language

Where we are:

Over the past 2 years, middle school English teachers have worked in Grade Level Department (GLD) meetings and in their Citywide grade level meetings to review and realign their practices in light of the new standards. At the middle schools, the English curriculum includes 4 units of study at each grade level that integrate the teaching of reading and writing, listening and speaking, as well as the language standards.

In the middle schools, students learn to integrate their reading, language, and writing skills into a meaningful whole. Students analyze and evaluate texts by examining the author's purpose, style, language choices, and point of view. Students use developing critical analysis skills to compare and contrast themes across various genres (i.e. historical fiction, poetry, drama) and to defend opinions about the quality of writing and the effectiveness of texts experienced in various modes (i.e. viewing, listening, reading). Through classroom discussions, students learn to formulate ideas and opinions and receive real-time feedback from peers about the strength of their ideas and opinions. Regular opportunities for conversation enable students to make their thinking visible and to practice using academic and domain-specific language to clarify and enhance their thinking and communication.

This year, English teachers are working in grade level teams to develop common assessments related to opinion/argument writing using claims evidence and reasoning (CER). Using the standards for reading, writing, and language, teachers have designed a common rubric for CER writing, several visual organizers for planning, administered a common assessment using literary texts, analyzed student work using the rubric, and calibrated the scoring of student work.

Next Steps:

Over the summer, teams of teachers and literacy coaches will continue to refine and align grade level units of study to the framework. This work will include a careful examination of the balance of reading and writing throughout the year. Increasing

the volume of both reading and writing is one of the important outcomes of the work.

Continue to vet resources and purchase appropriate materials.

6-8 Reading Standards for Informational Text (including Writing)

Where we are:

The new framework emphasizes coherence and integration and highlights the importance of every teacher being a teacher of literacy. In order to address these practices, the ELA, Social Studies, and Science Coordinators will continue to create a professional learning plan for their departments for the 2013-14 school year.

Next Steps:

Next year, teachers in the English, Social Studies and Science departments will participate in several joint professional development sessions. In these sessions, cross-disciplinary grade level teams will collaborate on integrating informational texts (both print and digital) into units within the disciplines, aligning expectations for opinion argument writing using the CER rubric developed by English teachers this year, and identifying ways to include productive talk in each of the disciplines on a consistent basis.

Continue to vet resources and purchase appropriate materials.

The key to any systemic, lasting change is ongoing, sustained professional learning for teachers. Working collaboratively with principals and other coordinators, it is our hope to offer teachers high-quality professional learning experiences that build their skill, confidence, and competence to craft 21st century learning experiences for all Newton students.

Works Cited

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2011) Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy, Incorporating the Common Core Standards, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/ela/0311.pdf>