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A Consumer's Guide to Evaluating a Core Reading Program Grades K-3: A Critical Elements Analysis March 2003

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The selection and adoption of an effective, research-based core reading program in the primary grades is a critical step in the development of an effective schoolwide reading initiative. The investment in identifying a core program that aligns with research and fits the needs of learners in your school will reap long-term benefits for children's reading acquisition and development.

A critical review of reading programs requires objective and in-depth analysis. For these reasons, we offer the following recommendations and procedures for analyzing critical elements of programs. First, we address questions regarding the importance and process of a core program. Following, we specify the criteria for program evaluation organized by grade level and reading dimensions. Further, we offer guidelines regarding instructional time, differentiated instruction, and assessment. We trust you will find these guidelines useful and usable in this significant professional process.

1. What is a core reading program?

A core reading program is the primary instructional tool that teachers use to teach children to learn to read and ensure they reach

reading levels that meet or exceed grade-level standards. A core program should address the instructional needs of the majority of students in a respective school or district.

Historically, core-reading programs have been referred to as basal reading programs in that they serve as the "base" for reading instruction. Adoption of a core does not imply that other materials and strategies are not used to provide a rich, comprehensive program of instruction. The core program, however, should serve as the primary reading program for the school and the expectation is that all teachers within and between the primary grades will use the core program as the base of reading instruction. Such programs may or may not be commercial textbook series.

2. Why adopt a core reading program?

In a recent document entitled "Teaching Reading is Rocket Science," Louisa Moats (1999) revealed and articulated the complexities of carefully designed and implemented reading instruction. Teaching reading is far more complex than most professionals and laypersons realize. The demands of the phonologic, alphabetic, semantic, and syntactic systems of written

language require a careful schedule and sequence of prioritized objectives, explicit strategies, and scaffolds that support students' initial learning and transfer of knowledge and skills to other contexts. The requirements of curriculum construction and instructional design that effectively move children through the "learning to read" stage to the "reading to learn" stage are simply too important to leave to the judgment of individuals. The better the core addresses instructional priorities, the less teachers will need to supplement and modify instruction for the majority of learners.

3. What process should be used to select a core reading program?

Ideally, every teacher involved in reading instruction would be involved in the review and selection of the core reading program. Realistically, a grade-level representative may be responsible for the initial review and reduce the "possible" options to a reasonable number. At minimum, we recommend that grade-level representatives use the criteria that follow and then share those findings with grade-level teams.

Schools often ask whether the adoption should be K-6 or whether a K-3/4-6 adoption is advisable. Ideally, there would be consensus across grades K-6; however, it is imperative to give priority to how children are taught to learn to read. Therefore, kindergarten and first grades are critical grades and should be weighted heavily in adoption decisions. This may entail a different adoption for grades 4-6.

4. What criteria should be used to select a core reading program?

A converging body of scientific evidence is available and accessible to guide the development of primary-grade reading programs. We know from research the critical skills and strategies that children must acquire in order to become successful readers by grade 3 (National Reading Panel, 2000, National Research Council, 1998; NICHD, 1996, Simmons & Kameenui, 1998). Following, we specify criteria for reviewing critical elements of reading organized by grade.

Stage I: Is There Trustworthy Evidence of Program Efficacy?
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Prior scientific studies of program efficacy should be a first-level criterion to identify the pool of possible core programs. Your review of programs should answer the following questions:

- _____ 1. Does the program have evidence of efficacy established through carefully designed experimental studies?
- _____ 2. Does the program reflect current and confirmed research in reading?
- _____ 3. Does the program provide explicit, systematic instruction in the primary grades (K-3) in the following dimensions:
- phonemic awareness (grades K-1)
 - phonics/decoding
 - vocabulary
 - comprehension (listening and reading)
- _____ 4. Was the program tested in schools and classrooms with similar demographic and learner profiles as your school?

If the answers to questions 1-4 are yes, you have evidence to indicate that if adopted and implemented faithfully, there is high probability the program will be effective.

If you can narrow your selection to programs with trustworthy evidence, proceed to Stage II for more comprehensive analysis.

Your review of programs may yield those that lack prior evidence of efficacy but that have components based on research. A lack of program efficacy should not exclude a program from consideration. Your analysis of critical elements, however, assumes greater importance.

A new generation of reading programs is currently finding its way into the market place; a generation of programs that holds great promise yet lack evidence of efficacy. New programs often do not have adequate levels of evidence because large-scale, longitudinal evidence is costly and difficult to obtain. If programs lack established program efficacy, evaluate the program carefully and thoroughly according to following elements described in this guide.

**Stage II: A Consumer's Guide to Selecting a Core Program:
A Critical Elements Analysis**

A key assumption of a core program is that it will (a) address all grade-level standards and (b) ensure that high priority standards are taught in sufficient depth, breadth, and quality that all learners will achieve or exceed expected levels of proficiency. All standards are not equally important. Our critical elements analysis focuses on those skills and strategies essential for early reading.

General Review Process

1. Scope of Review and Prioritization of Items

Review each critical element for each grade. Items within each critical element have been prioritized as either High Priority or Discretionary. High Priority items are considered essential to the review. Discretionary items should be reviewed but do not carry as much weight in the overall analysis.

2. Type of Review and Sampling Procedure

To gain a representative sample of the program, we recommend the following strategies:

- (a) Within lesson procedure (W) involves identifying the first day (lesson) in which a critical skill (e.g., letter sound correspondence, word reading) is introduced and following that skill over a sequence of 2-3 days. Then, repeating the process to document evidence at two other points in time (e.g., middle/end of program).

- (b) Scope and sequence procedure (SS) involves using the scope and sequence to identify the initial instruction on a skill and analyze how instruction progresses over time. Document progression in the evidence columns.

- (c) Skills trace procedure (ST) will be used for selected skills. (See attached description of the procedure.)

3. Documenting Evidence

On the review forms there is space to document specific information. Example information may include lesson number, particular skill/strategy introduced, etc.

4. Calculating Scores and Summarizing Findings

Criteria are calculated at the Critical Element level by grade and across Critical Elements by grade level. At the end of each critical element, tally the number of consistently, partially, and does not satisfy criterion scores. At the end of the analysis, summarize your tallies by High Priority and Discretionary items.

5. Grade Level Design Features Analysis

At the end of each grade, there are 4-6 overarching items to assess the design, coherence, and systematic nature of instruction across lessons in the program. These items are intended to provide a big picture analysis.

Use the following criteria for each critical element:

● = Element consistently meets/exceeds criterion.

◐ = Element partially meets/exceeds criterion.

○ = Element does not satisfy criterion.

When evaluating individual elements, slash (/) the respective circle that represents your rating (e.g., ●).

Type of Review

1. (*w*) = Within a sequence of lessons. A specified element is best analyzed by reviewing a particular lesson or a series of 2-3 successive lessons.
2. (*ss*) = Scope and sequence. A specified element is best analyzed by reviewing the program's scope and sequence.
3. (*st*) = Skills trace. A specified element is best analyzed by completing a skills trace over a series of 10 consecutive lessons.

CLASSIFICATION OF PROGRAM

Program Name: _____

Date of Publication: _____

Publisher: _____

Reviewer Code: _____

1. _____ The program meets the following criteria for a comprehensive/core program and will be evaluated using the Consumer's Guide.

_____ Includes comprehensive materials for grades K-3.

_____ Provides instruction in each of the critical elements.

_____ phonemic awareness

_____ phonics

_____ fluency

_____ vocabulary

_____ comprehension

2. _____ The program does not meet the following criteria for a comprehensive/core program and will be evaluated using the Consumer's Guide (select all that apply).

_____ Includes comprehensive materials for grades K-3.

_____ Provides instruction in each of the critical elements.

_____ phonemic awareness

_____ phonics

_____ fluency

_____ vocabulary

_____ comprehension

3. _____ The program meets criteria for a supplemental or intervention program and will be reviewed for that purpose.

_____ Provides targeted instruction on specific skill (select all that apply).

_____ phonemic awareness

_____ phonics

_____ fluency

_____ vocabulary

_____ comprehension

_____ Specify for which Grade/Age the program is appropriate.