Mass Literacy: The Four Shifts

The Mass Literacy Guide highlights early literacy practices which are **based in evidence** from a large body of research. Some evidence-based practices reflect a change from practices commonly used in today's classrooms. **This resource outlines four main shifts from outdated practices to evidence-based practices in early literacy.**

Shift #1: Provide explicit, systematic instruction in foundational skills to every child.

Common misconception: Reading develops naturally by exposing children to texts and language.

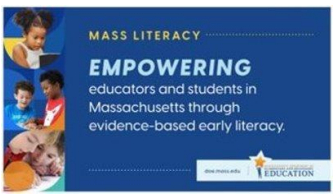
What we know: Learning to read requires a rewiring of the brain. Reading is not an innate ability and does not develop "naturally." Some children appear to "teach themselves to read." In fact, those children have developed phonological awareness and learned some sound-symbol correspondences, and they are able to use that knowledge to figure out many more words. Most children do not easily "self-teach" in this way and require explicit instruction to access the code that is written language. If not provided explicit instruction, they may struggle unnecessarily.

Common misconception: Only some students need phonics.

What we know: For young children, systematic phonics instruction (teaching letter-sound correspondences according to a purposeful, planned sequence) is well-established as more effective than implicit phonics (teaching letters and/or sounds as they happen to come up) or no phonics instruction at all. Because phonics instruction is brief, engaging, and active, it does no harm even to students who appear to be more advanced. Explicit and systematic phonics instruction is often called "essential for some, helpful for all, harmful for none." Learn more.

Common misconception: Good beginning readers use meaning, visual, and semantic cues to figure out unknown words.

What we know: Good beginning readers use the letters in a word to read it. Guessing or inferring the word based on "cues" such as context or pictures is a behavior of ineffective readers. A reader may infer a word's *meaning* based on context; however, a strong beginning



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reader looks at each letter in a word and uses phonic decoding to “get the word off the page.” Learn more.

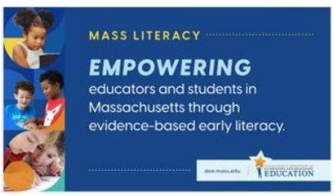
Common misconception: Students learn to read during independent reading time.

What we know: “Independent reading” usually refers to a period of time during which students select and read books of their choice, often within a designated “level” of difficulty. Once a child has secured basic decoding skills, they can rapidly gain reading fluency through independently and accurately reading text. This gain in fluency then supports growth in comprehension. However, independent reading does not spur fluency or comprehension before the child has secured basic decoding-- in other words, before they can get the words off the page.

Teachers may decide to provide independent reading time to students regardless of reading ability, because of the benefits to engagement and motivation. However, they should be aware that independent reading will not spur reading fluency for young children before they can decode the texts with high accuracy. Learn more.

Common misconception: Decodable texts harm reading motivation or comprehension.

What we know: When students are learning letter-sound correspondences and common spelling patterns, decodable texts are very useful because they are restricted to the few, simple spelling patterns that students have been taught to recognize and read. Decodable texts present children primarily with words they can successfully decode, allowing them to practice new reading skills with accuracy and comprehension. There is no evidence that using these texts impedes reading development or harms students in any way. As reading ability advances beyond the beginner level, students no longer need decodable texts and can move into less-controlled texts for reading practice. These should be texts that the student can read with accuracy. Learn more.



Common misconception: Some common words can't be decoded and must be memorized.

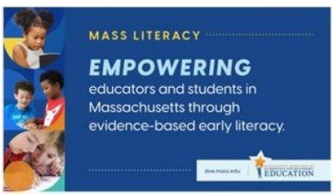
What we know: With all types of words, attending to the sounds and spelling patterns is necessary to develop automatic word recognition. **Sight words** refer to words that are so accurately and automatically decoded and understood that they are instantly recognized during reading, taking less than a fraction of a second to retrieve. They appear to be known by sight, but the brain is actually instantly retrieving their permanently unitized sound, spelling, and meaning. Sight words may be common or uncommon; regular or irregular. **Irregular words** have parts that do not follow typical spelling patterns. Most words do have at least some typically spelled sounds. Irregular words should still be taught based upon their sound-spelling correspondences, with the regular and irregular parts explicitly shown to students. **High-frequency words** are words that show up often in lots of different texts, making automatic recognition of them important for fluent reading. Most high-frequency words are regular or have just one irregular spelling pattern. High-frequency words should be taught using their sound-spelling correspondences, not memorized as wholes. Learn more.

Common misconception: Spelling words should be thematically related.

What we know: Spelling instruction and decoding instruction should be integrated and aligned to a shared scope and sequence. Decoding and encoding "pull on" a similar set of phonological and phonics skills. Observing students' encoding can reveal both phonological awareness needs and unmastered phonics skills, giving teachers useful and specific information about how to support students. Practicing phonic spelling also supports development of sight vocabulary through orthographic mapping. The common alternative of generic weekly spelling lists, often based on a theme or topic, misses the opportunity to accelerate phonics learning and promotes rote memorization. Learn more.

Common misconception: Students need a lot of direct instruction in fluency.

What we know: Several factors contribute to the development of fluency, so it cannot be "taught" as one distinct skill. First and foremost, students must have well-developed word decoding skills in order to develop reading fluency. Decoding skill develops best through explicit and systematic phonics instruction and practice (including instruction in high-frequency words). Once students develop decoding skills, they begin to store and automatically recognize many words through the orthographic mapping process, which allows for fluent reading. Research suggests that opportunities to practice reading a wide variety of text, as well as repeated oral readings of a text with feedback, are effective strategies for developing accurate, fluent reading at an appropriate rate. Students also benefit from hearing models of fluent reading to develop prosody (smoothness) and expression when they read.



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Shift #2: Build comprehension by engaging all students in discussion of complex, knowledge-rich text sets.

Common misconception: Comprehension instruction is about the strategy we're practicing, not the particular text we're reading.

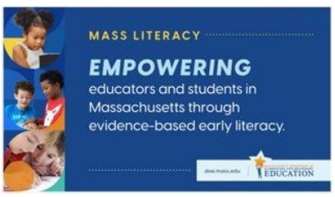
What we know: Comprehension abilities grow when students engage with reading, discussing, and *understanding* complex texts. Students must have opportunities to build knowledge and language comprehension by interacting with the ideas and language in complex text. For this reason, the texts chosen really matter. Using texts in related sets is a widely recognized strategy to build students' topical and conceptual knowledge. Text sets contain texts and multi-media related by a shared topic (e.g., amphibians, the Civil Rights Movement). Importantly, text sets put *texts* - and the rich world of ideas within them - at the center of instruction. The focus is not strategy instruction, but for students to understand the text and build knowledge. Learn more.

Common misconception: Choosing books with diverse characters and authors makes literacy instruction culturally responsive.

What we know: It is true that students must have access to texts that both reflect their identities and experiences (mirrors) as well as texts that open them up to new ideas and perspectives (windows). Representative texts help foster cultural competence—they can both affirm students' backgrounds and identities and foster their ability to understand and honor others' cultures. However, culturally responsive practice is even more than representative texts. Students should also have the opportunity to critique ideas and experiences represented in the text. Teachers can select or adapt text-based questions to open up these conversations about socio-political awareness. High expectations, individualized feedback and support, and attention to identifying and dismantling inequities in student outcomes are just some of the dimensions of culturally responsive practice. These practices advance equity. Learn more

Common misconception: We "teach the reader, not the text." Teaching comprehension strategies leads to reading comprehension.

What we know: Reading comprehension is not one "skill" but rather a state of understanding the text. Several skills contribute to reading comprehension including decoding, fluency, knowledge, and language comprehension. Research has shown that readers with good comprehension do use comprehension strategies, such as self-monitoring, questioning, inferring, and visualizing. Comprehension strategies are really *a means to an end*. They are not comprehension itself, but rather a *tool* to understand the meaning of the text. Also, evidence from classroom studies suggests that students benefit most from strategy instruction when they are able to read meaningful texts with accuracy and fluency. Learn more.



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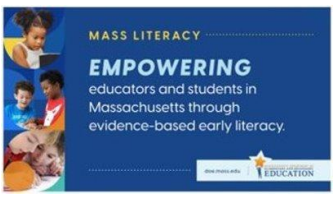
Common misconception: Students should work on comprehension in texts at their "instructional level."

What we know: In the early grades (preK-2) language comprehension ability often exceeds reading ability. In other words, children can understand a lot of language orally which they cannot read on their own-- yet. For this reason, when the focus is comprehension, students should not be restricted to texts they can read independently or even those that they can understand easily. Students can handle more complex language, information, and ideas than these texts offer. Simple texts are appropriate for practice with foundational reading skills—but comprehension work calls for complex, language-rich text, read aloud and discussed with teachers and classmates. Learn more.



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Shift #3: Use small-group reading time to target foundational skills, or to develop comprehension using complex text.

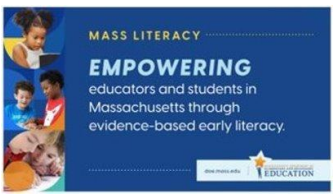
Common misconception: Reading with leveled text is the best use of small group time.

What we know: Leveled texts are not the optimal choice to support development of reading skill, especially in the youngest grades (preK-2). Texts at the lower levels on the "A-Z continuum" are purposefully simple so students can independently read them. These texts deny students access to the rich language and ideas in complex text, limiting development of knowledge and vocabulary. Furthermore, leveled text does not offer opportunities for applied practice with foundational skills such as decoding. Non-decodable, "predictable" leveled texts encourage guessing based on context or the beginning letters of a word rather than phonic decoding. This actually impedes reading development. Therefore, leveled texts at lower levels are not optimal for *either* foundational skills or comprehension growth.

The instructional activities for small group instruction, and the materials and texts used, should be *selected based on the students' learning goals*. When the focus is on foundational skills, decodable or connected text aligned to taught skills is required. When the focus is on development of language and comprehension, grade level complex text is the optimal choice. Leveled text may be an effective choice when the purpose is to build students' knowledge about a topic. Additionally, once students have mastered basic decoding skills, leveled text could be a choice for them for independent reading practice. Learn more here and here.

Common misconception: Leveling assessments provide the best data to inform instruction.

What we know: Assessment is the fuel for instruction. Teachers must use multiple types of assessment to yield a complete picture of students' strengths and needs. Universal screeners are particularly important as they identify or predict which students are at risk of future reading difficulties. This information allows teachers to provide students additional, targeted support to keep them on the right track. Appropriate universal screeners are reliable, valid, typically brief, and yield specific information about both foundational skills and language comprehension. Leveling assessments, on the other hand, do not provide a clear picture of what skills students have and what skills they need. Because of their subjective nature, they do not accurately identify or predict risk for reading difficulties. While it is always beneficial for teachers to listen to and observe students' reading, it is not necessary to restrict this observation to a leveling assessment that ends with an "instructional level." Students should not be limited to a low level of text and denied access to rich language and ideas. Learn more.



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Shift #4: Provide time on all components of the core literacy block, every day, to develop all aspects of literacy.

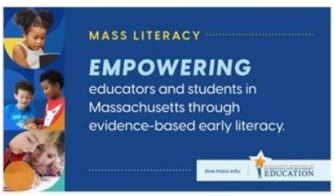
Common misconception: In grades K-3, phonics needs to be the focus.

What we know: To develop into successful readers, children must develop fluent word reading *and* language comprehension abilities throughout grades K-3. Thus, students need daily, systematic and explicit instruction in foundational skills, including phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency. Concurrently, they also need ongoing and daily access to rich complex text, explicit instruction in writing, and opportunities to develop oral language. Students need dedicated time in the core literacy block for each of the three main components: *foundational skills, engaging with complex text*, and *writing*. *Oral Language* is the bedrock for all of these components and differentiated instruction happens throughout all three. Learn more.

Common misconception: There is a specific minimum number of minutes that should be scheduled for the literacy block.

What we know: The classroom literacy block requires time for all components, including foundational skills, engaging with complex text, and writing, with oral language embedded throughout. The core literacy block may require 90-120 minutes (or more) per day, depending on the curriculum materials being used and the particular needs of the class. During the core literacy block, *all* students receive equitable access to grade-level instruction (frequently referred to as "tier 1") as well as differentiated, small-group instruction (which can include "tier 2" supports). Learn more.

Here's CO's list: https://www.cde.state.co.us/coloradoliteracy/sormythsmisconceptions



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