

Knowledge Matters Review Tool:

A Guide for Evaluating K-8 ELA Curriculum

This tool is for use by states, districts, and schools when examining an English language arts/literacy (ELA) curriculum to determine the degree to which it is “knowledge-building.” The tool is designed to be used as a plug-in for other evaluation instruments and rubrics, many of which mention knowledge-building but none of which have effectively illuminated in detail how this is accomplished in ELA curricula. We hope publishers will use this tool to guide improvements in their products as well.

Two important notes accompany this tool:

1. While it describes eight important dimensions of knowledge-building ELA curricula, this tool does not describe the absolutely essential foundational skills, such as systematic and structured phonics, phonemic awareness, spelling, and fluency, that are the very bedrock of any great ELA curriculum and crucial to students’ reading success. This is by design. Many review tools exist that do this well. None, however, deeply support educators in discerning an ELA curriculum’s strength in building the content knowledge¹ so vital to reading comprehension.
2. Building knowledge through content-rich ELA curricula should never be considered a substitute for strong history, social studies, and science instruction in the elementary grades. And, in the presence of high-quality curriculum and instruction in these disciplines, which will include opportunities to use and practice one’s literacy skills, we can imagine that time dedicated to English language arts might be brought back in-line with other disciplines.

Across each of the eight dimensions identified are a total of 26 separate criteria. All eight dimensions are important. Reviewers should note evidence of strong, moderate, or weak support for each of the criteria. While not all criteria within a dimension need to be uniformly strong, any dimension that is deemed predominately “weak” should be cause for concern. Obviously, the more strong ratings, the better.

¹ Note: Throughout this document, we have used the phrase “content knowledge” over “background knowledge” whenever possible. While recognizing that “background knowledge” is the more familiar term, we seek to underscore that curricula rich enough to support reading comprehension will focus not just on *any* knowledge, but specifically on important science, history, civics, geography, arts, and literary knowledge.

Prequel: Early Childhood Essentials²

Elementary classrooms are significantly impacted by the quality of a child’s PreK-2 experience. It is in these early years that read-aloud story books and informational texts can help students make sense of the words, phrases, and cadences of written language, which paves the way for comprehending the texts they will later read themselves. Acquiring word and content knowledge is a gradual and cumulative process that must begin in the earliest years of a child’s life. Educators can support this process by teaching children about the natural and social world and being intentional about efforts to grow vocabulary and other aspects of language through listening, speaking, and engaging in dialogue and discussions. With the addition of this dimension, we are inviting PreK educators into the knowledge-building curriculum “movement.”

Four fundamental, research-based attributes of curricula that help create rich learning environments rooted in building knowledge, language, and literacy skills for young children include (but are not limited to):³

STRONG	MODERATE	WEAK	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Routinely focusing content-rich read-alouds on science and social studies to expose young children, including children learning English, to the academic vocabulary, syntax, and content they need to thrive throughout their school years. Informational texts are crucial for emphasizing the development of content knowledge and vocabulary.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Typically organizing read-alouds from multiple genres bundled to build rich science and social studies knowledge. These texts are ordered deliberately such that vocabulary and concepts introduced in one are revisited and extended in another.

² Spring 2024 Update: Ever since releasing the Knowledge Matters Review Tool, we’ve been fussing about how to more strongly communicate the critical connection that exists between a child’s oral language development and their success in learning to read. With the (welcome!) increased attention to early childhood education, and recognizing that many who review curriculum for elementary classrooms are also in a position to support curricular decisions by early childhood programs, we have added a dimension to the Review Tool—what we’re calling “Early Childhood Essentials”—that identifies four fundamental criteria for PreK-2 curricula and serves as a bedrock for the other eight dimensions of the Knowledge Matters Review Tool.

³ There are, of course, many other features of an effective PreK-2 curriculum. For K-2 students, see the many criteria contained within the Knowledge Matters Review Tool. For PreK students, see the comprehensive recommendations from the National Association for the Education of Young Children.



<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Teaching words, phrases, and concepts essential for understanding the read-alouds bit by bit through multiple exposures as children listen to, interact, and play with oral language. Academic vocabulary about specific topics and terms used to describe them are taught in networks of associated words that overlap in meaning or are connected by key ideas.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Engaging children in individual and small group knowledge-building activities that enhance their read-aloud experiences. Creating frequent opportunities for highly interactive collaborative discussions focused on the content knowledge and related word meanings in the shared read-alouds not only promotes social learning but also prompts students to draw on their knowledge, use complex language and expression, and explain their thinking.
Notes			



1: Laser-like focus on what matters most for literacy

STRONG
MODERATE
WEAK

STRONG	MODERATE	WEAK	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Curriculum is driven by the integration of five literacy accelerators that have a formidable research base. They include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Securing solid foundational reading skills early on (preferably by grade 3, to greatly enhance the likelihood that students are fluent readers at every grade level thereafter); • Expanding students' vocabulary knowledge through a volume of reading, explicit instruction, and many opportunities to hear and use target words; • Growing students' general knowledge of the world so they have a trove of knowledge to reference when they read, write, and present; • Guiding students to marshal evidence and communicate it when speaking and writing about what the text they are reading is communicating; and • Building solid reading habits and stamina through the regular, close reading of challenging, content-rich texts to develop a standard of coherence—an expectation and ability to have what is read make sense.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Curriculum is designed to seamlessly integrate practices from ELA standards in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, as well as facility with language. The standards themselves are not the goal of daily instruction; instead, the goal of instruction is to develop students' ability to understand texts they encounter and to express that understanding in multiple ways. Standards mastery is the end result of, not the organizing force for, reading instruction.</p>



<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum includes the use of strategies in context and as needed: when students encounter challenging sections of text, encouraging students to engage in mental moves to support their comprehension. ⁴ As with standards, strategy instruction is not the goal of lessons but a means to build comprehension and knowledge.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Text selection shows evidence of curation. Lessons: 1) are well-paced, 2) dive deeply into content and the core texts, spending at least two or three weeks on a topic, 3) can reasonably be completed within the school year, and 4) avoid bulk and bloat by ensuring there is a strong rationale for each component of the curriculum.
Notes			

⁴ Sense-making strategies attend to text structure, common organizational structures, comprehension monitoring, inferencing, and others.



2: Communal close reading of content-rich, challenging texts

STRONG
MODERATE
WEAK

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum includes regular communal practice for all students with high-quality, complex texts that anchor each unit. These texts are at students' grade level, as defined by quantitative and qualitative analyses. ⁵ In K-2, interactive read-alouds that are two to three years above what children are able to read themselves are a staple. Read-alouds are interactive with specific instructional goals and continue to contribute to knowledge-building well into adolescence.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum provides repeated encounters with each challenging, content-rich complex text to allow students to grapple with high-quality, text-specific questions and build their understanding. ⁶ Discussions are a regular dimension of these sense-making encounters.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Culminating assignments regularly reflect what is essential for students to learn from the text(s), including the information contained within them; offer practice using more sophisticated vocabulary and syntax; and address several grade-level (or above) standards.
Notes			

⁵ The curriculum rejects the leveled-reader approach that denies many students access to rigorous texts in favor of providing universal student access to rigorous texts. See [here](#) for grade-level complexity chart in tandem with the content-knowledge demands of the text.

⁶ Lesson focus is expressly on students securing specific knowledge about the content and structure of the text, not on single skills or isolated standards (like "find the main idea" or "find the key details") that employ texts and topics as their vehicles for discrete skills attainment.



3: Systematic development of high-value academic language to support building knowledge

STRONG
MODERATE
WEAK

STRONG	MODERATE	WEAK	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum provides robust vocabulary and syntax routines both in context (through text-based questions and tasks) and out of context (through games, exercises, etc.). These routines are designed to strengthen verbal reasoning as well as knowledge of morphology.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Words chosen for extended study in context are generally 1) essential to understanding, 2) more abstract, 3) part of a semantic word family (words related by meaning or concept), and 4) likely to appear in other complex texts students will read.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum revisits newly learned words and phrases in multiple contexts, including encouraging students to use them in their discussions and speaking and writing activities.
Notes			



4: A volume of reading organized around conceptually coherent text sets to build knowledge

STRONG
MODERATE
WEAK

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum is intentionally designed to give students grounding in a diverse range of topics in history, social studies, science, the arts, and literature by providing enough time (at least two to three weeks) to explore topics to allow for knowledge and vocabulary growth. ⁷
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum provides a series of conceptually coherent text sets (or relies on full-length books) organized around topics of study available at various complexity levels, with less-complex texts supporting access to more-complex texts to build knowledge. These texts offer a range of different knowledge-building resources with a substantial number of nonfiction texts represented.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum expects students to regularly engage in a volume of reading of materials of their choice related to the topics being studied. The curriculum includes teacher and student scaffolds and structures, including lightweight student accountability (e.g., book talks, journals) to foster productive use of the reading time.
Notes			

⁷ Units or modules are largely focused on topics rather than broadly drawn themes.



5: Regular discussions grounded in texts and topics to build knowledge

STRONG
MODERATE
WEAK

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	The curriculum provides guidance on engaging learners in productive and sustained academic discussions through thought-provoking questions that develop both a literal and deep understanding of the texts and content being studied, including cultivating students' abstract reasoning and analytical thinking. When students answer questions, they are consistently required to provide evidence for their responses.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Collaboration is part and parcel of the curriculum, which establishes a relevance for the learning and seeks to build a community that processes, understands, and interprets content together.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Peer-to-peer discussions are threaded throughout instruction to make classrooms vibrant centers of intellectual exchange and co-learning.
Notes			



6: A volume of writing to build knowledge

STRONG
MODERATE
WEAK

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum includes frequent writing opportunities that are evidence-based and anchored in the content students are studying to extend and solidify their learning. Writing also includes regular use of short, focused research projects with teacher support appropriate to the grade level, again anchored in the assigned content.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum includes writing assignments that vary in purpose, audience, genre, length, and duration. Composition instruction is generally directly or indirectly linked to the curriculum content.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum includes explicit instruction in the fundamentals of writing, including sentence construction and the planning, drafting, and writing of paragraphs and essays, as well as grammar and usage instruction in the context of students' writing. This includes explicit instruction on how to convey knowledge through specific text genres and features.
Notes			



7: Targeted supports to ensure all students have access to challenging, grade-level content

STRONG	MODERATE	WEAK	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum provides the means to ensure all students work with and can meet grade-level standards. The curriculum provides both the systematic guidance and resources required for building in time and support for students reading below grade level, and/or students learning English, so that they can access the text and learn alongside peers.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum includes strong representation of authors and illustrators of color in the texts children read, abundant opportunities to read how people from a range of historically underrepresented social groups have contributed to knowledge, and guidance on how to implement the curriculum in a manner that promotes equity and elevates student assets.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum provides a range of supports designed to address results from informal and more formal assessments (gathered from observations, assignments, and test questions), and promotes timely and concrete feedback to students.
Notes			



8: Ease of enacting curriculum

STRONG	MODERATE	WEAK	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum is purposeful in its design, including many regular, predictable instructional routines that teachers and students can rely on from the moment the new program is enacted.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Curriculum is designed not only to advance student learning but also to help educators understand the “why” of included approaches and components. It incorporates educative dimensions (explanations designed explicitly to support teachers in effective implementation). Examples of such dimensions might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explanations of how program elements facilitate student learning; • Sample student responses; • Tips for effective feedback; • Models of exemplary practice; and • Discussions of why suggested pedagogical moves are useful.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Teacher-facing materials are clear and concrete about what program elements are essential for the core instruction and which are “nice to have” additional dimensions. This clarity extends to communicating high-level program dimensions for caregivers and community stakeholders.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Curriculum encourages professional learning that deals concretely with how the materials can be effectively implemented and supports ongoing and systematic work in teacher study groups and professional learning communities. (This is in contrast with one- or two-day “unpack the boxes and organize the materials” training sessions.) Professional learning should offer aligned sessions for teachers, coaches, and administrators.



Notes

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