Addressing the Reading Crisis
By Supporting Implementation of the Common Core State Standards

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The Crisis: 40 Years of Effort, Minimal Results

NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessments

* Significantly different ($p < .05$) from 2012.
Some Good News

Progress among lowest-performing students, especially among 9-year-olds:

*Significantly different (p < .05) from 2012.
Misconception #1

Learning to read is a natural process (like learning to speak) that does not require systematic decoding instruction.

Research shows that about 40% of students struggle with reading unless they receive systematic decoding instruction.

Misconception #2

Reading is a general skill that, once mastered, easily transfers from one text to another.

Research shows vocabulary and knowledge are critical to comprehension—as the Richmond community college students demonstrated.

Misconception #3

Comprehension comes from learning comprehension strategies (like finding the main idea).

Research shows 25 lessons in comprehension strategies are no more effective than 6 lessons.


Why? Strategies do help children focus, but their comprehension still depends chiefly on their knowledge.
Vocabulary Is Key

It’s learned bit by bit, through multiple exposures in multiple contexts.

Example: excrescence
Excrescence

- To calculate fuel efficiency, the aerospace engineers needed an accurate estimation of *excrescence* drag caused by the shape of plane’s cabin.

- *Excrescences* on the valves of the heart have been known to cause a stroke.

- The wart, a small *excrescence* on his skin, had made Jeremy self-conscious for years.

- At the far end of the meadow was what, at first glance, I thought a huge domed building, and then saw was an *excrescence* from the cliff itself.
Meaningful Differences in Opportunities to Learn Vocabulary

Young children differ in:

• the **numbers** of words heard
• the **richness** of the language heard
  (different words, multi-clause sentences, verb tenses, types of sentences)

Meaningful Differences

• **Number of words per hour** heard at age 3 was strongly related to the child’s rate of vocabulary growth.

• **Rate of vocabulary growth** at age 3 was strongly predictive of language development and reading comprehension in third grade.
Pop Quiz!

Who will better comprehend a text describing an inning of a baseball game: “good” readers with little knowledge of baseball, or “poor” readers with lots of knowledge of baseball?

“Good” and “poor” defined by standardized achievement tests (such tests use an assortment of passages on 10+ topics; they are not tied to content taught in class).
“Good” Readers Who didn’t know about baseball: 18 out of 40 Correct

“Poor” Readers Who knew about baseball: 27.5 out of 40 Correct

Why? All texts assume knowledge. The text about the baseball game will use the words shortstop, out, clutch hitter, unassisted triple play, etc.; it will not define these words.

Can’t You Just Look It Up?

Yes, if you already have some relevant knowledge.

Wikipedia’s explanation of the Supreme Court:

“The **Supreme Court of the United States** (first abbreviated as **SCOTUS** in 1879)\(^1\) was established pursuant to **Article III of the United States Constitution** in 1789 as the **highest federal court** in the **United States**. It has ultimate (and largely **discretionary**) **appellate jurisdiction** over all **federal courts**....”
Academic Vocabulary and Broad Knowledge Are Essential

The Common Core standards are designed to
• address common misperceptions.
• accelerate vocabulary and knowledge growth.
Common Core Standards

• Outline foundational skills in:
  – Print Concepts
  – Phonological Awareness
  – Phonics and Word Recognition
  – Fluency

• The foundational skills in the standards prevent educators from assuming reading is natural and require explicit, systematic decoding instruction.
Common Core Standards

“Having students listen to informational read-alouds in the early grades helps lay the necessary foundation for students’ reading and understanding of increasingly complex texts on their own in subsequent grades.” (PDF, p. 33)
At what age, on average, is students’ reading comprehension as strong as their listening comprehension?
Meta-analysis by Thomas Sticht (1984) shows that listening comprehension outpaces reading comprehension on most measures until children are 13 years old.
Written Language Uses Richer Vocabulary

Written language is far more formal and uses dramatically more vocabulary than spoken language.

- Analysis of written and spoken language shows that almost all spoken language is less sophisticated than the writing in children’s books.
- The only spoken language more sophisticated than children’s books was expert witness testimony in legal matters.

At home, in school, and at the library, read-alouds:

- are essential for young children.
- Are beneficial for older children, so long as the text is above their reading comprehension level (which will vary depending on their knowledge of the topic).
Common Core Standards

“To build a foundation for college and career readiness, students must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts.” (PDF, p. 10)
Common Core Standards

“Through extensive reading of stories, dramas, poems, and myths from diverse cultures and different time periods, students gain literary and cultural knowledge as well as familiarity with various text structures and elements.” (PDF, p. 10)
Common Core Standards

“By reading texts in history/social studies, science, and other disciplines, students build a foundation of knowledge in these fields that will also give them the background to be better readers in all content areas.”

(PDF, p. 10)
Common Core Standards

“Students can only gain this foundation when the curriculum is intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades.” (PDF, p. 10)
“Texts—within and across grade levels—need to be selected around topics or themes that systematically develop the knowledge base of students. Within a grade level, there should be an adequate number of titles on a single topic that would allow children to study that topic for a sustained period.” (PDF, p. 33)
Common Core Standards

“Word acquisition occurs up to four times faster...when students have become familiar with the domain of the discourse and encounter the word in different contexts.... Vocabulary development...occurs most effectively [when] domains become familiar to the student over several days or weeks.” (Appendix A, p. 33)
Excrescence

Vocabulary is learned through multiple exposures in multiple contexts.

By staying focused on a topic for two to three weeks, and using several texts on that topic, students receive the exposures they need to learn the vocabulary (and concepts) related to the selected topic.
New project at the University of Maine:
• Each Literacy To Go kit has three books, all on one topic, in a pizza box.
• Two children’s books, one fiction and one nonfiction, for parents to read aloud.
• One book for the parents to read so they can extend learning about the topic in conversations.
Text Sets

Topic-driven text sets are useful for parents, teachers, professors, and readers of all ages:

• Sets for youth should include at least 1 advanced text for an adult to read aloud.
• Sets can have fiction, nonfiction, poetry, etc.
• Sets should have a range of levels so novices can start with an introductory text and progress through more difficult texts.
• Caution: don’t broaden from a specific topic to a general theme. If vocabulary and concepts are not being repeated, learning will not be accelerated.